

## **Moral philosophy and psychoanalysis: a point of convergence**

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*Abstract.* People make moral judgments in response to actual or hypothetical situations. But should they ignore moral judgments made in some states of mind, such as when they are hesitant, frightened, or under the influence of a drug? John Rawls thinks that moral philosophers should ignore judgments made in such states, but I introduce a proposal according to which, if certain conditions are met, they should not. The proposal is loosely inspired by psychoanalysis.

People make moral judgments in response to actual and hypothetical situations. For example, if the government decides to tax all citizens who earn money except those who own castles, presumably many people will judge that this is unfair. Such moral judgments seem to be important. But should we pay attention to all the moral judgments people make, or only moral judgments made in certain states of mind? The answer to this question depends on whom “we” refers to. If we are psychoanalysts, the answer is yes. We are interested in dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, and more. They are clues to what is going on in the mind of a patient and what it cannot, in a conscious state, currently acknowledge. But what about if we are moral philosophers? The very influential John Rawls asserts that when doing moral philosophy, at least, we should not pay attention to all moral judgments. In this paper, I shall consider a way of challenging this assertion.

Rawls thinks that a moral philosopher should try to develop a coherent system of thought from their moral judgments. But he writes:

...in deciding which of our judgments to take into account we may

reliably select some and exclude others. For example, we may discard those judgments made with hesitation, or in which we have little confidence. Similarly, those given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain one way or the other can be left aside. All these judgments are likely to be erroneous or to be influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests. (1971: 47)

In this quotation, Rawls tells us to ignore moral judgments made in some states of mind, but he does not say which state of mind, or which states, we should take moral judgments from. His answer seems to be a sensible state of mind in which one feels a confidence in the judgment one is making. Henceforth I shall refer to this as a Rawlsian state and moral judgments taken from this state as Rawlsian judgments.

Below I shall make a concession to Rawls, though it strikes me as open to question. If a moral judgment is only ever made in a hesitant state of mind, then there is a significantly greater risk of error compared to Rawlsian judgments and so the judgment should be ignored. The same is true if a moral judgment is only ever made when frightened or only when upset, and so on. That is my concession.

However, does it follow that we should only pay attention to judgments made in a sensible, Rawlsian state of mind? What if some judgments are made in a variety of states of mind, but not in this one? For example, a moral philosopher makes a certain judgment when they are jesting, when they are upset, when they are frightened, and even when they are intoxicated, but not when they are in a Rawlsian state of mind. Here is a proposal I wish to consider: if there are enough such converges, then the philosopher should regard the risk of error as less. One might compare this to a set of dubious witnesses, unconnected with each other, reporting the same event. Owing to the convergence, we should regard the report as more likely to

be true. And an explanation for why the philosopher's judgment is not made in a Rawlsian state is the following: the philosopher is detecting something which their mind cannot at present acknowledge while in a Rawlsian state.

When Rawls considers a moral judgment which is made in some non-Rawlsian state but never in a Rawlsian state, he accords it a low probability. As far as I can see, he simply assumes that, if a judgment is not also made in a Rawlsian state, the state it was made in wholly determines whether it is to be accorded a low or high probability of being true – “That is a risky state to make judgments in, so the probability of that judgment's being true is low.” For example, if a moral judgment is made in a frightened state but never in a Rawlsian state, then he accords it a low probability of being true, exactly as he would if it were *only made* in a frightened state. He is not aware of the proposal that it should be accorded a higher probability if it is also made in various other non-Rawlsian states.

Even if Rawls were to be made aware of my proposal, would he have accepted the proposed role for convergence? I compared such convergences to a set of dubious witnesses, unconnected with each other, reporting the same event. However, even if the same judgment is made when a person is in various non-Rawlsian states, there is no reason to think of these states as unconnected with each other, and so the analogy is misleading. Rawls could have said, “There is something worth looking into here, but we cannot yet say that according to the best explanation for this convergence, the judgment is as likely to be true as the judgments I focus on, or more likely. Further investigation is required first.”

However, this is a moderation of the position expressed in *A Theory of Justice*. That book simply ignores judgments made in non-Rawlsian states, whereas now we have to be open to the possibility of including some such judgments in the future. It

depends on whether there are any moral judgments which the non-Rawlsian states converge on and the outcome of inquiry into why there is such convergence. A small door has appeared, which is currently locked.

It is difficult to find a key for this door, but it seems worthwhile, for we have no reason to believe that all the information necessary for us to produce an adequate moral philosophy is available from Rawlsian states. I personally do not think that dreams, slips of tongue, jokes, and judgments made in fearful states are something to be totally ignored in moral philosophy. Under certain conditions, rare ones perhaps, one has to pay attention to their content.

Finding a key for the door also seems worthwhile for those who wish to reconcile moral philosophy and psychoanalysis. An attempt to explain convergences between a person's non-Rawlsian states, an attempt which says that there is some important information to be extracted at the vertex – something which their mind is resistant to acknowledging in a Rawlsian state – is broadly psychoanalytic spirit.<sup>1</sup>

## References

- Freud, S. (translated by A.A. Brill), 1916. *Wit and its relation to the unconscious*. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.
- Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.

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<sup>1</sup> In his book *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud writes that he aims to “search for what is common to both wit and dreams.” (1916: 249) In this paper, I am not endorsing the detail of Freud's research, but I wish to acknowledge the connection.