

THE PARADOXICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORALITY AND MORAL WORTH

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Abstract: If the social environment were arranged so that most people in the West could, with relatively little effort, be morally good to a reasonable degree, would this be a good thing? I claim that it is not entirely obvious that we should say yes. This is no idle question: mainstream Western social morality today seems to be approaching the prospect for a morality that is not taxing. This question has substantial theoretical interest because exploring it will help us understand the paradoxical relationship between morality and moral worth.

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If the social environment were arranged so that most people in the West could, with relatively little effort, be morally good to a reasonable degree, would this be a good thing? This is no idle question, and it is not entirely obvious that we should say yes. Social morality in some Western countries today seems to be approaching a morality that is not taxing. This question has substantial theoretical interest because exploring it will help us understand the paradoxical relationship between morality and moral worth (construing “morality” in the narrow sense as a system of constraints and obligations regarding one’s behaviour towards others).

Much recent philosophical discussion on ethical and political matters attempts to limit normatively the demands that morality ought to make on individuals. I ask a very different question about the attitude we should take to a state of affairs in which there is no *need* for more than limited ethical demands.

Two Views of Morality

A most curious thing about common views of morality is their deep ambivalence: many people cherish morality as a basis for laudable moral behaviour, while many other people deprecate it.

Laudatory views hold moral behaviour to be the highest achievement of civilisation, the hallmark of humanity’s superiority over other species, the measure of one’s personal worth as compared to others, and the like. When people act morally, in particular when they follow the moral code

for its own sake, sacrificing self-interest, they are said to be most deserving of admiration. As in so much else that concerns morality, this idea finds its strongest expression in Kant (1986, 60), but the attitude is not limited to him or even to Kantian thought. Utilitarians, too, hold the widely shared view that true moral action bestows great value on people, particularly when they act morally in demanding situations (e.g., Kagan 1989, chap. 10).

It is important to note that while the elucidation of such value achievable by moral behaviour involves subjective components (for example, how the agent perceived her situation), we have to consider moral value as being to some extent objective. If any trivial moral conformity would grant one high moral value, then the issue I raise would make no sense. When we speak about high moral value as an achievement, we are referring to such matters as steeling oneself in order to do the morally good thing, even when there are very good self-interested reasons not to follow morality.

There are disagreements as to which of several versions of the laudatory point of view bestows the highest moral value. Some would take the detached objectivity of an impersonal “ideal observer” as the standard. Others esteem deep emotional involvement. Some see detachment from one’s own concerns as the mark of the truly moral, others the enlargement of the self that encompasses the concerns of others. Some focus on the rationality of truly moral deliberation, while others see morality as a matter for appropriate sentiments. Common to all these positions, however, is the view that when people act morally they are at their most admirable, and even that certain forms of value come into being *only* when people act in the light of moral concerns. Moral behaviour as I speak of it refers only to moral action performed for reasons that are morally estimable (according to whichever laudatory position one holds).

This laudatory view of moral behaviour has proved surprisingly flexible. We are well aware that a significant amount of moral behaviour reflects egoistic calculation, simple conformity, or even psychological pathology. Nevertheless, much moral behaviour resists cynical deflation. Many people have experienced encounters in which they acted morally (for example, not taking improper advantage of others’ weaknesses) not because they were afraid not to act thus but because not to act thus would have been wrong. One may rightfully view such instances as sources of pride and value. The more extreme the case, the clearer this becomes, both to the participants and to any observers. One cannot remain cynical in the face of the actions of those in Nazi-occupied Europe who, in a pervasive atmosphere of apathy, fear, or even sympathy with the Nazis, risked their lives to save complete strangers, under threat of terrible penalties and with no prospect of reward. Or think about those courageous Italian individuals, particularly in the south of the country, who have struggled

against the widespread influence of the Mafia, at obvious risk to their lives.

Elsewhere I argue that even the belief in hard determinism, which may seem to be the deadliest enemy of the possibility of moral value, cannot completely eradicate that possibility. Indeed, paradoxically, belief in hard determinism creates the potential for moral behaviour that in a certain respect is the purest and the most admirable (see Smilansky 1994a; Smilansky 2000, sec. 10.1).

None of these points commits me to a single or narrow account of moral worth: varied and complex views of what might constitute moral worth are plausible. The sole requirement, which seems to me undeniable, is that we focus on the sort of moral worth that may emerge only in morally challenging circumstances. When people overcome temptations, take great personal risks, and make significant sacrifices, all for the sake of morality, we consider these to be *prima facie* strong grounds for attributing moral worth to them. Whether one greatly values moral worth of the sort I describe (as the laudatory view does), that is our central view of moral worth and my focus here.

Deprecatory views of morality perceive morality as a burden, at best an unfortunate social necessity that obstructs the pursuit of more interesting and important matters. How good it would be if morality did not require sacrifices, if one's projects were not constantly interrupted by external moral requirements, if social needs that today make exacting moral demands could be met with only limited recourse to the demands of morality.

Whether we hold the laudatory or the deprecatory view of morality has widespread implications. If we consider morality the crown of humanity, we will see many issues differently from the way we would if we considered morality essentially a nuisance. A major difference between these two views will emerge as we consider whether ordering society so that our lives rarely demand taxing moral behaviour is morally valuable. At issue here is not the implausible notion that morality in the limited sense can simply wither away (Steven Lukes [1985] rejects this possibility convincingly) but rather that morality might become such that most people (as they currently are) would not find its constraints taxing.

Two Possible Moral Worlds

Let us delineate two possible moral worlds. The first is:

The Well-Arranged Minimal-Morality World. Assume that social arrangements and socialising processes could be directed in such a way that the burden that morality places on our behaviour is limited. Certain basic requirements of personal interaction, such as telling the truth, would remain, but an ordinary law-abiding person could be

considered perfectly decent if he or she were concerned only to a minimal degree with morality. No special manipulative or otherwise morally troubling effort would be involved in creating and maintaining this world. We are simply considering ordinary, run-of-the-mill attempts to make things better, for example, to improve living conditions that would otherwise cause misery and crime, and hence require moral intervention. Matters would be arranged so that, to the extent that moral demands depend on broad social circumstances, it would become fairly easy to be good.

Would this be a gain or a loss?

According to the deprecatory view of morality, this would be all to the good. Morality, after all, limits liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and sometimes it threatens life as well. If each of us could get by without imposing on other people too much, what more could we ask? This view regards moral behaviour as a mechanism for achieving certain purposes, such as furthering the preferences of all individuals. If such goals, external to morality, can be achieved at a limited price in terms of moral requirements, it would seem that only "moral fetishism" could find fault here. Worse still, to demand more than that of moral behaviour may indicate not only confusion between aims and means but perhaps even a morbid tendency to seek guilt, subservience, and self-mortification through morality. There are sound pragmatic reasons for people to develop respect for morality and appreciation for moral achievements, but these concerns should not distract our inquiry. Considered rationally, morality is a useful but obstructive instrument that imposes constraints, and it ought to be treated accordingly.

To those whose view of morality is more laudatory, the meaning of such developments, which seem completely compatible with the deprecatory view, would be more ambiguous. If people could really live their lives by sacrificing only very little for the sake of strictly moral concerns, a *loss* would be involved. For if in acting morally human beings achieve the heights of value, a life without moral concerns and sacrifices would become relatively shallow and petty, in some respects at least. Arranging things so as to require very little serious concern about morality could be seen as a threat to human beings' attaining true human nobility.

It has been argued that overemphasis on morality in the West has impaired the quality and development of many lives. Great benefits could therefore accrue by cutting loose from some of the strictures in common morality, in the direction, for example, of an ethics of virtue (e.g., Williams 1985, chap. 10). Admittedly, if one takes an extremely denigrating view along Nietzschean lines, for example, perhaps one can see no merit in either morality or moral behaviour. But if we dismiss such extreme views because they fail to consider the potentially great value at stake, which we noted earlier as being intuitively appealing, more

moderate criticism of morality would leave our issue intact. Even if one holds that common morality is constraining or otherwise harmful, I maintain that there is *a specific value that only moral behaviour provides*. Claims about common morality or its overall benefits do not need to be defended here. I rely only on the persuasive idea that value, even a sort of beauty, emerges from truly moral behaviour. This sort of value is specifically related to a particular way of being that relies on the familiar institution of morality, and thus it cannot be attained by imbuing life with additional content that is merely morally neutral.

This issue must be distinguished from a familiar one posed by a Kantian view of morality. Charges of absurdity have been levelled at Kantian morality by claiming that, to Kant, a moral action performed from inclination (for example, an act arising out of human sympathy) is not morally worthy, as it would be if a misanthrope were to perform the same act but to do so only out of respect for the moral law. My point differs from this charge against Kant. My interest is in the moral challenge or lack of challenge posed by the social *environment*, that is, by the extent to which human beings are exposed to social forces that demand moral behaviour. Neither does my point depend on the particularities of Kantian morality, for, as I argue above, very different views of morality hold that when human action manifests a moral point of view, this has a distinct appeal.

The second possible moral world is:

The Ill-Arranged Unnecessarily-Morally-Demanding World. Assume that within the bounds of morality it were legitimate to create situations that demand extreme moral endeavour for its own sake. One would need only to create more hardship, suffering, and injustice, all easy to arrange. Such unnecessary misery and evil would provide ample *opportunities* for moral behaviour to rectify it.

A sane morality would find any effort to create such a world unacceptable, even monstrous. Any desire to constrain or pressure people in order to elicit moral behaviour for its own sake is morally illegitimate. Even holders of a laudatory view of morality could not support such externally imposed unjustified difficulties. A man whose “life project” is the eradication of some form of evil should not add to this evil even if there is less and less evil around, even if his project is being threatened!

Envisaging this Ill-Arranged World lets us perceive the synergistic element of a combined position that we can begin to form. The great value of morality can be acknowledged when we separate the genuine idea from extreme ideas that demand sacrifices for the (supposed) sake of those who are doing the sacrificing. We can thus affirm the intrinsic value of much moral behaviour while criticising, for instance, those ideological

or religious positions that call for externally unjustified sacrifices, sacrifices for which no independent moral need exists in the real world. Such positions as those suffer from three faults:

The first is normative. Such positions impose upon people unnecessarily, abusing the good will of human beings and disrupting their lives without justifying the moral need for doing so. This criticism accords with a basic intuition behind the deprecatory view of morality. It asserts that oppressive moral demands in the absence of strict necessity must be precluded.

The second fault is empirical. Such positions naturally engender an increase (or at least prevent a decrease) in the evils that call for moral sacrifices. Unlike a broadly instrumental view of morality, such positions have a stake in the continuing existence of evil. Hence, their proponents will often fail to combat evil in good faith.

The third point is conceptual. Such positions threaten the purity of achieving moral value because they do not focus solely on the object of moral activity, that is, to relieve human suffering and injustice. Instead they tarnish moral value with other concerns that are self-oriented, not morality-oriented. There need be no objection to the personal satisfaction one gains from carrying out moral dictates. Morality welcomes the prospect of people who are happy to do good. But the value of moral behaviour requires that moral agents focus on tasks *beyond* the self. *These* are the tasks that require moral action.

The Reality of the Issue

Developments inherent in the Well-Arranged Minimal-Morality World might be seen as mere thought experiments that hardly need engage us; but this is not so. It is dangerous to generalize about long-term social developments, but one sees the major thrust of democratisation and modernisation as progressively limiting how demanding individual morality needs to be. Matters are certainly not irreversible: new and incurable epidemic diseases or the rise to power of fascist parties in certain Western countries cannot be ruled out. The threats of terrorism and war can alter the situation. But the trend is clear nonetheless. The establishment of democratically accountable government, the defence of human rights within the rule of law, the displacement of the multigenerational family by the welfare state, the advances in medicine and in crop development, the widespread abolition of conscript armies, and the general reduction of extreme poverty, persecution, and injustice—all these have decreased the role of oppressive moral demands in our lives as individuals, and they have largely eliminated the need for moral heroism. Obviously the potential for doing evil remains—people still molest children, for example. But in such societies as Denmark and New Zealand, say, one can generally get by without an undue burden of morality, both with respect to the contingencies of personal survival and in the need to confront social evils.

The major significant exception to this trend concerns the plight of the so-called Third World. On this issue, such positions as extreme utilitarianism are exceedingly demanding even for people in the West. However, this extreme stand follows from the sense of the West's virtually limitless obligations to the Third World, including the belief that individuals in the West who are not poor must take up the obligations of other people who ought to contribute but do not.¹

Both positions can be disputed. Even if there were strong obligations to eliminate the plight of the poor in the Third World, these duties could in fact be met without overburdening individuals in the West. A limited increase in taxes by Western nations would suffice, thereby eliminating the need for great sacrifices by any given individual. Once the Third World issue is set aside, the practical relevance of the topic I am raising can be recognised.

My opening question as to the attitude to laudatory and deprecatory views of morality is significant, irrespective of the actual prospects for a society that requires only limited moral sacrifices. Moreover, what we will aim to elucidate regarding the basic logic of morality does not depend on actual situations. I do think, however, that one should acknowledge that the idea of a not very demanding ordinary morality is to some extent already relevant and, one hopes, will become only more so.

I make my point not only vis-à-vis such side issues as the significance of the decreasing role of charity in well-ordered societies but also with respect to the moral spectrum in general, to central aspects of the role of morality in our lives. Again, I speak primarily of ethical demands that broad social realities directly affect, not of the particularities of personal life or of individual situations where morality may be extremely demanding, regardless of the wider social picture.

Compare the very different choices that dissidents in the former Soviet Union and in Argentina under the generals faced with those that activists in the West face. Dedicated moral behaviour in the West is surely displayed in concern for local poverty, for Third World hunger, or for the environment. But there is no comparison in terms of the presence, weight, and unavoidability of the moral challenge, and dissidents in non-Western societies cannot be compared with activists in the West. Major ethical dilemmas, such as whether to protest stark evils by risking one's life and the livelihood of oneself and one's family, have by and large been real only to non-Westerners. And the friendships that emerged from a shared faith and the confrontation with evil and danger have scarcely any parallel in the West. Such opportunities for moral achievement that depend on challenges and dangers exist only on the margins of well-ordered societies. Typically this is

¹ The classic presentation of the demanding view is Singer 1972. L. Jonathan Cohen discusses the connection between what one ought to do and the inaction of others in Cohen 1981. Many recent discussions have followed those two paths.

so on the less well-ordered margins, for example, in the fight against organised crime. Paradoxically, in terms of the daily actuality of challenges that bring forth significant moral value, living in a well-ordered society such as we are considering is “bad moral luck.”

It is not only that under difficult conditions there is more scope for action above and beyond the ordinary line of duty. The whole moral field is thrown into flux, challenging facile distinctions between one’s duty and what lies outside it. Deliberating whether to betray friends when not to do so might mean entrapment and torture by the secret police, for instance, becomes a “natural” part of life. Hence, the challenge to remain or become moral is acute. My point, however, does not depend on such extreme situations. It is simply that when fear and suffering are limited, as is increasingly the case in the West, the ethical climate is likely to be milder. The moral environment makes fewer demands for high principles, commitment, and courage. One becomes adequately moral with ease. Life tends to become morally shallow, thereby affecting more general aspects of the development and maturation of personality.

We could anticipate that a world in which the special virtues would be brought forth would probably also be a world in which the corresponding vices would emerge more often. Situations that enable me to be especially altruistic also enable me to be especially selfish, and situations in which I could manifest courage are also those in which I could behave as a coward, too. But since we are interested here only in the potential for positive moral worth and the possibility of losing it in circumstances that are “too morally easy,” I do not pause to consider this.

Needs, Moral Requirements, and Moral Worth: The Basic Logic

Both the deprecatory view, which resents obtrusive moral demands, and the laudatory view, which celebrates moral worth, have intuitive appeal. One views the need for moral behaviour as a kind of nuisance, the other as a vital opportunity, but we can also make a case for seeing both of these opposing views of morality as to some extent present. They are, paradoxically, interwoven. Moral behaviour is the realm where people can be most admirable, where human value can be uniquely enhanced, but we can still view social morality as essentially instrumental, thereby aiming to limit its domain.

When morality is seen as an instrument, its value is lowered from the high rank we customarily attribute to it, because this value exists only as a by-product of moral behaviour, the need for which we view ambiguously. The value of moral behaviour depends on the need for morality, but this need cannot consist in providing such value. The need for moral behaviour is externally motivated: it arises when we encounter actual human suffering and injustice. These in turn urge us to eliminate them as far as possible: they urge us to eliminate the circumstances responsible for

the suffering and injustice. But doing so would thereby reduce opportunities for achieving moral value. If there are needs that are truly best met by making moral demands, morality can generally make such demands. But the needs are the starting point. The inner logic of the institution of morality that this Janus-faced view proposes is broadly instrumental: it is geared towards *reducing to a minimum those situations that, by making people cope with a demanding morality, enable them to achieve value.*

This view in no way implies that morality is unimportant or disreputable, or that people who behave morally are not to be admired. Given the need for moral behaviour, those who meet this need are rightfully esteemed. Actually, it is the *very fact* that certain people meet real, external needs rather than seeking moral self-aggrandisement for its own sake that gives moral content to their action. But this view can coexist with the recognition that morality is inherently purposeful, and that attempts should be made to limit the need for moral action.

One might think that the need for moral education and development undermines my case, for does not morality demand that we pose challenges to young people in order to develop their moral capacities and inclinations? Morality allows us to nurture values in people: given the need for moral agents, we are allowed to attempt to “produce” them (only when they are young and within other limitations). But morality focuses on external needs that necessitate moral behaviour. We must not confuse the possibility of encouraging people to value ethical behaviour with the attempt to create ethical value for its own sake. Morality does not allow us to create gratuitous moral difficulties merely so that they can be overcome.

Back to the Well-Arranged Minimal-Morality World. If most people could become “secular saints” as the result of an improved arrangement of the moral environment, one could not legitimately resist such a change simply on the grounds that the environment would become too “easy,” too insufficiently challenging morally.

All mainstream moral positions would agree. With the utilitarian, concerned only with the consequences of human actions, this is obvious, while the reaction of a Kantian would be less obvious. However, though the Kantian is intrinsically concerned with the value of moral agents and only secondarily with the consequences of their actions, she has no reason to object. The autonomy or rationality of the agent is not infringed in the proposed improvement: the external demands that morality must make are simply reduced.²

We can agree with those who insist on limiting the social demands that morality can make on individuals to those necessitated by actual external needs. We can agree as well that efforts should be made to reduce as much as possible the imposition such social demands make on us by seeking

² Throughout this discussion I have avoided the idea of moral duties towards oneself and the inevitable complications this would involve.

arrangements that make unnecessary the harsher demands of morality. Neither of these conditions requires us to deny the great value of moral behaviour. In fact, in so far as external moral needs exist and are met because they exist, the purity of achieving moral value will be enhanced. This sensible position combines the strong points of the laudatory and the deprecatory views of morality.

But even if we find this amalgamation persuasive, we must not lose sight of the strangeness of the peculiar relationship of and interdependence among external needs, moral demands, and moral worth. External needs necessitate morality, and moral demands are capable of (indeed, are necessary for) conferring the value of being moral. Moral worth is contingent on conditions that morality is obliged to try to eliminate. The purpose of true morality is to eliminate certain conditions (suffering and injustice). Yet only if those conditions exist can they call forth the moral actions that uniquely confer moral value. Valuable moral behaviour ends up resembling one of those mythological animals that eats its own tail, thus putting an end to the very condition for its own existence.

The need for a morality that places demands on us, which must *in itself* be seen as dispensable, makes *possible* the creation of great intrinsic value, the value of moral behaviour. Great and perhaps unique value emerges from true moral behaviour, but the need for morality should be limited as much as possible. And so, paradoxically, the need for morality must be seen from one perspective as the consequence of an unfortunate social imperfection. This mountain of imperfection creates the opportunity to mine the gold of moral behaviour.³ But moral behaviour cannot be a self-justifying value, cannot exist for its own sake. This circumstance is an inherent source of its value. Admirable *moral action* is parasitic on independently existing moral needs, which, on the social level, *morality* should try to eliminate. One is tempted to say that if the evils that call forth admirable moral action did not exist, one would have to invent them, because only moral behaviour can bestow great value of the sort that concerns us. But proponents of morality could never accept this.⁴

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³ This theme has an analogue in the evaluation of lives, both morally and amorally. See Smilansky 1994b.

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