

## **Intuition, Integrity, and the Point of Moral Argumentation**

1. *Introductory Comments.* In a recent lecture, we were talking about a theory in normative ethics of behavior. It was this:

GR: An act, A, is morally right iff in performing A, the agent of A treats others as he would like others to treat him.

After presenting and briefly discussing the theory, I went on to present an objection. It was based upon the imaginary case of Pete the Pervert. After telling the story, I presented an argument:

Argument against GR

1. If GR is true, then Pete's act is morally right.
2. It's not the case that Pete's act is morally right.
3. Therefore, it's not the case that GR is true. 1,2 MT

In the ensuing discussion, some students raised a question concerning this argument: 'Where did line (2) come from?. Some of you wondered if I have some other theory that implies that the act is wrong. If so, you wanted to know what that theory is, and what reason is there for thinking that it is correct. Some of you seemed to think that if I have no other theory, then it is not clear that there is any justification for belief in line (2). In that case, the argument seems worthless.

This is an important question that goes to the heart of what we are doing when we engage in argumentation of the sort illustrated in moral philosophy. It concerns the nature of the activity in which we are engaged. I want to discuss two possible interpretations of what we are trying to accomplish here.

2. *An Interpretation based on a Version of the Theory of Moral Intuition.* According to one traditional interpretation, what's happening here essentially involves "moral intuition". Let me try to explain this.

Most of us have the capacity to see the colors and shapes of objects in the external world. You open your eyes, and light reflected from the surface of the object is focussed on the light-sensitive cells on the back of your eyeball. Electrical impulses then travel to your brain, and you see the features of the object. In this way you come to know the colors and shapes of various objects around you. Let us say that the capacity to see in this way is based upon our possession of the "faculty of vision".

Some philosophers think that people have a special mental "faculty" or capacity that enables them to "see" the moral qualities of particular actions that they observe.<sup>1</sup> This faculty is thought to operate in something like the way in which vision operates, although of course it has nothing to do with light being reflected from the surfaces of objects. According to this

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<sup>1</sup> [need examples of particularist intuitionists here. I am not sure who this would be.]

version of the theory, the faculty does not enable people to see general moral principles; rather, it enables people to see the moral qualities of specific concrete act tokens. If someone gives you a complete description of some particular act, fully describing the circumstances, effects, all the relevant features of the participants, etc., then you may be able to “see” that the act is morally wrong, or right, or whatever it happens to be. Those who can do this are said to have the faculty of moral intuition.<sup>2</sup>

We should note that moral intuition is like vision in several important respects. For one thing, in some cases, features of the object being observed interfere with functioning of the faculty. In the case of vision, this could happen if the objects being observed are very small, or very far away, or shrouded in fog or mist or smoke. In such cases, you may fail to see them as they are. In the case of moral intuition, this could happen if the “objects” being observed were strange actions of a sort you had not previously encountered, or if the circumstances were so weird that you didn’t know what to think.

In other cases, features of the observer may interfere with the successful operation of the faculty. In the case of vision, this could happen if the observer has taken drugs, or if his eyes have been damaged, or if he is blind. In the case of moral intuition, it could happen if the observer were too deeply personally involved in some issue, or if he were a fanatic or a lunatic or if he has been brainwashed. And finally, some people are “morally blind”. They simply cannot “see” the moral features of any situation. Such people may be said to be lacking in conscience. They are “amoral”.

So, according to the theory of moral intuition, if your faculty of moral intuition is intact, and you are not subject to any distorting factors, and the circumstances are right for moral observation, you can intuit the moral properties of particular cases. That, allegedly, is what is supposed to happen in the case of the argument about Pete the Pervert. Those who see that (2) is true do this by employing their faculties of moral intuition. Those who don’t see that (2) is true are either morally blind, or victims of brainwashing, or otherwise morally impaired.

3. *Problems for the Theory of Moral Intuition.* The theory of moral intuition is not very popular. One objection is this: whereas we can study the eyes, the optic nerves, the visual parts of the brain, etc., and thus come to understand how the visual faculty works, we cannot even begin to figure out how the moral faculty works. No one knows anything about the underlying neurological basis of its operation. It seems pretty mysterious. One wonders especially how moral qualities (assuming that they are not empirically observable) could be causally efficacious in anything like “perception”.

There are some important disanalogies between vision and moral intuition. One concerns the degree of consistency in the output of the alleged faculty. The vast majority of people with adequate vision agree about a huge range of cases. If you have for example a red square and a blue circle, and you ask a hundred sighted people to take a look, probably 99% of them will agree about the colors and shapes of the objects. But the operations of the alleged

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<sup>2</sup> I am here imagining a form of intuitionism that is “particularistic”. On this view we intuit the normative statuses of particular act tokens. According to a different form of intuitionism, the faculty of intuition is used to intuit the truth of general moral principles, such as the principle that all promises morally ought to be kept.

faculty of moral intuition are nowhere near so consistent. People knowing all the facts about e.g. abortion, euthanasia, pot smoking, vegetarianism, etc. disagree wildly about the rights and wrongs of these cases.

Another disanalogy is this. If you bring together people from different cultures, and ask them to look at a red square and a blue circle, they will most likely agree on what they are seeing. But people brought up in different cultures tend to have conflicting moral intuitions, and in many cases their intuitions seem to be strongly influenced by the moral views of their neighbors. For example, many years ago, lots of people thought they could just “see” that it is morally wrong for people of different races to marry. Each person thought that his moral intuition was revealing a truth. Now a lot of people claim to “see” that such marriages are perfectly OK. Similarly, years ago many people thought they could “see” that it is morally wrong for women to work or travel independently. Now many people say that no matter how hard they look, they just cannot “see” this any more. This suggests that the alleged faculty of moral intuition is really nothing more than cultural prejudice in fancy dress.

A defender of the theory of moral intuition might agree that many appeals to intuition are quite worthless. He might go on to say, however, that in those cases the person was really not using his intuition at all. He was just appealing to prejudice, or cultural bias. The defender might insist that when intuition works properly, it yields knowledge of moral facts.

But this generates an even deeper objection. There seems to be no way to distinguish between cases in which the alleged faculty is working correctly and cases in which we are appealing to nothing more than prejudice. The inner feelings of a person who is correctly intuiting the real moral properties of some act might be exactly the same as the inner feelings of someone who is thoroughly deceived about the moral qualities of the same act. If you can't tell whether your faculty is working correctly, then it's hard to see how its deliverances generate knowledge even in those cases where it does work correctly.

In light of these difficulties concerning the faculty of moral intuition, some may feel that the proposed explanation of what we are doing is implausible. They feel that it would be a big disappointment if success in ethics classes depends essentially on each student's possession of a faculty of moral intuition. The problem, as they see it, is that it is not clear that there is any such faculty. Even if the faculty exists, it's doubtful that it gives us genuine knowledge of the moral features of situations under its purview.

4. *A New Interpretation of What we are Doing Here.* According to a second interpretation our aim is not “proof” or “refutation”, and there is no appeal to moral intuition. On this second interpretation, ***the aim of the project is to help each individual to gain moral integrity.*** If we view our project in this way, we may take one of Aristotle's remarks as our motto. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle said:

‘... we are not conducting this inquiry in order [merely] to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it.’ (NE1103b26)

This view of our aim makes the overall project much more personal. It requires each student to reflect on his or her own values, to discover where there are internal conflicts in his or her value system, and to make such adjustments as are necessary for moral integrity.

The new approach is based on the concept of *moral integrity*. Moral integrity is fundamentally a matter of “wholeness”, or coherence among a person’s moral beliefs at different levels. In order to explain this, I have to give a little background.

We can begin by noting the difference between particular moral judgments (“PMJs”) and general moral principles (“GMPs”). A PMJ is a judgment made about a particular act token – though of course the act token may be an imaginary one. It is a judgment to the effect that the act is either morally right, or wrong, or obligatory. If expressed, it could be expressed by saying, ‘you should not have done that’, or ‘you must do this’, or ‘that act was right’. It does not include any attempt at justification, or the giving of reasons.

A GMP is a more abstract sort of statement. It is a statement to the effect that some whole class of actions—some type of behavior—is uniformly wrong, or right. Thus, if you were to say that lying is always morally wrong, or that promise-keeping is always morally obligatory, you would have expressed a GMP. The most general GMP would be something like GR. Such a thing purports to give necessary and sufficient conditions for the moral rightness of all acts. It’s as general as a GMP can get.

GMPs stand in several important relations to PMJs. One important relation is this: we often appeal to a GMP in an effort to justify or rationalize or explain a PMJ. Thus, for example, suppose that someone is thinking of cheating on her boyfriend. Suppose she has given the boyfriend solemn assurances that she would not do this. We say: ‘It would be morally wrong for you to cheat’. She asks for justification – why would it be wrong? We say, ‘It would be wrong because you promised. And it is always wrong to break a promise.’ Thus we appeal to a GMP (‘it’s always wrong to break a promise’) in our effort to justify our earlier PMJ (‘it would be wrong for you to cheat’).

Another important connection between GMPs and PMJs is this: each GMP logically implies (in conjunction with factual statements) indefinitely many PMJs. To see this, consider the GMP about the immorality of lying. It implies, for every possible lie, that the act of telling that lie would be morally wrong. Since there are indefinitely many possible lies, the general principle has indefinitely many particular implications.

The *acceptance* of a PMJ is not a mere matter of unconcerned belief. That is, to accept a PMJ a person has to do more than merely believe, in an offhand and unemotional way, that the PMJ is true. He has to “feel” the impact of the PMJ. So, for example, suppose that the woman mentioned in the previous paragraph goes ahead and cheats on her boyfriend. We say that her act was wrong. If we fully accept this PMJ, we are inclined to feel resentment or outrage or disgust or contempt for our (former?) friend; we are inclined to think that she owes someone an apology, or that she deserves some sort of sanction; we think less of her as a person.

Making use of the concepts of PMJs and GMPs and acceptance, we can now say something about moral integrity. I proceed by describing some ways in which a person may fail to have integrity.

Some people lack moral integrity because they don't accept any PMJs. Such a person would be amoral, or morally empty. We would naturally think that there is something seriously wrong with such a person. He fails to enter into an important realm of human activity.

A second way in which a person might be morally deficient is this: he accepts some PMJs, but he cannot provide any account of his basis for accepting these PMJs as opposed to others. If he says that he endorses a PMJ, and we ask him why he accepts it, he has no explanation. He says, 'I don't know; it just seems that way to me.' This is a defect in the person's value system. He makes value judgments but he cannot provide any explanation for those PMJs<sup>3</sup>.

Imagine a person who is not like this. Whenever he makes a PMJ, he is prepared to offer an explanation of his view by appeal to some GMP. So if he says that a particular act is wrong, and we ask him to justify his assertion, he has something to say in defense of his claim. He is prepared to mention some general principle about lying, or promise keeping, or whatever, and this GMP together with background facts about the case entails his PMJ. Nevertheless, this person might still be lacking moral integrity. This would be the case if the person in fact did not really accept the GMP. Thus, for example, suppose he already knew that the GMP had unacceptable implications concerning other cases. Then his appeal to the GMP cannot possibly explain his judgment in the case at hand. Just as you cannot explain a natural phenomenon by appeal to a law-like statement if that statement has unacceptable implications in other cases, so you cannot explain your acceptance of a PMJ by appeal to a GMP if that GMP has implications for other cases that you do not accept. Appeal to such a principle is simply irrelevant.

Another possible further defect is that he has not reflected deeply on these GMPs, and in fact, he would not accept the GMP if he realized its implications for other cases. In other words, he has appealed to a GMP that he would not endorse upon full reflection. In this case, the appeal to that particular GMP does not fully explain his PMJ. You cannot fully explain your endorsement of a PMJ by appeal to a GMP if you do not fully accept the GMP.

A particularly important instance of this sort of failure involves what we may call "role reversal cases".<sup>4</sup> Consider again the young woman who was thinking of cheating on her boyfriend. She might provisionally accept the GMP "It's OK for women to cheat on their boyfriends". But we could ask her to consider her views on the hypothetical situation in which **she** is the boyfriend, and her friend is cheating on her. If she were to reflect on this "role reversal case", she might see that she cannot accept the implications of her GMP for

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<sup>3</sup> When I speak of explanation here, I am not thinking of psychological, or sociological, or other empirical explanation of the fact that the PMJ is made. Rather, I am thinking of moral explanation by appeal to a GMP of the PMJ itself. Thus, for example, we could try to explain "your lie this morning was morally wrong" by claiming "All lies are morally wrong". We could not explain it by claiming, "I was brought up in a very religious home where lying was not permitted."

<sup>4</sup> R. M. Hare has discussed this procedure with insight and care in many places. A good discussion can be found in Chapter Six of *Moral Thinking*.

this case. As a result, we can see that she does not fully accept the principle. A person fully accepts a GMP only if she accepts, or would accept, its implications in all cases, both actual and merely hypothetical.

Finally we should mention potential conflicts. There are cases in which two distinct GMPs apply to the same possible situation. It might happen that these two GMPs have incompatible implications for some possible case. For example, consider a GMP prohibiting lying and a GMP requiring the preservation of innocent life. These could conflict in a case in which a person has to lie (e.g. to the Nazi at the door) in order to preserve an innocent life (e.g. the Jew in the attic). Suppose a person thinks he accepts both of these GMPs. In this case, he confronts a conflict of principle. Even if the principles have never given conflicting guidance in real life, they would conflict in the imagined situation. The person needs to adjust his value system so as to be prepared for this sort of case. He has to decide which is to take moral precedence in case of conflict. Otherwise, he is left with potentially conflicting principles.

On this basis we can define moral integrity:

D1: S is morally integrated =df. (a) S accepts some PMJs; (b) S can explain his acceptance of each PMJ by appeal to some GMP that S fully accepts; (c) there are no conflicts among the GMPs that S fully accepts.<sup>5</sup>

From the fact that a person has a very high degree of moral integrity it does not follow that the GMPs that he accepts are true, or that he has good evidence for them, or that he is otherwise epistemically justified in believing them.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is important to recognize that it is possible for a situation to arise in which two people have equally high degrees of moral integrity, although they endorse incompatible judgments and principles. Intellectual moral integrity is simply a matter of having a rich, reflective, and coherent moral scheme. A person with intellectual moral integrity can “justify” all of his particular moral claims by pointing out that his claims follow from general principles that he accepts upon full and careful consideration. This sort of justification is moral justification, not epistemic. So far as I can see, the fact that a person can *morally* justify his PMJs does not imply that he is *epistemically* justified in thinking those PMJs are true<sup>7</sup>.

This gives us the basis for a significantly different account of what we are doing when we engage in moral argumentation in ethics classes. Instead of thinking in terms of abstract

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, this concept of moral integrity is better understood as a concept of **the intellectual component** of moral integrity. The **practical component** involves being disposed to see to it that your actions are consistent with the requirements of your integrated value system. My thanks to Clay for reminding me of the distinction between intellectual integrity and practical integrity.

<sup>6</sup> This is where my concept of integrity differs from the Rawlsian concept of reflective equilibrium. In Sect. 87 of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls strongly suggests that reflective equilibrium is closely tied with some sort of epistemic justification. In his commentaries on Rawls, Norman Daniels has vigorously defended this interpretation. Regardless of the interpretation of Rawls, I want to emphasize the fact that I make no such expiemic claims for my concept of intellectual moral integrity. I am here utterly neutral on moral epistemology. I claim that a person is **morally** better off if integrated, not that he is **epistemically** better off (though he might be).

<sup>7</sup> Many passages in Ernest Sosa’s “Equilibrium in Coherence?” strongly suggest that he would endorse the view that I am here explicitly declining to endorse.

truth, proof, and intuition of moral fact, I propose that we think instead in terms of individualized acceptance, coherence, and moral integrity. More exactly, I suggest that we think of our activities in ethics classes as an effort undertaken by each student to help him- or herself to gain and increase moral integrity. Let's consider this in greater detail by reflecting again on the case of GR and Pete the Pervert.

When we were children, some of us may have learned The Golden Rule. It seemed pretty plausible. When attempting to defend particular moral judgments, we may have appealed to something like GR. As far as we knew, GR explained the PMJs we had made.

The case of Pete is designed to show the implications of GR in a sort of case that some of us may not previously have considered. It makes us see that GR has those implications, and it makes us consider those implications. If you are like me, you will immediately recognize that you cannot accept the implications of GR in the case of Pete. Thus, when you reflect on the implications of GR, you see that you don't fully accept it upon reflection. Thus, it cannot serve to explain your PMJs even in those cases where it has acceptable implications.

This suggests that we might rephrase the argument presented earlier.<sup>8</sup> Instead of formulating the argument in such a way as to emphasize the **truth** or **falsehood** of the principle, we might put it in terms of **acceptance**. We could do it this way:

1. If you fully accept GR, then you think that Pete's act is morally right.
2. But you don't think that Pete's act is morally right.
3. Therefore, you don't fully accept GR.

Suppose you want to have moral integrity. Suppose that up till now you thought you accepted GR. Now you see that GR has implications that you cannot accept in certain cases. Then you see that you really do not accept GR. As a result, your own appeals to GR in the past did not serve to explain your own PMJs. This follows from the fact that a person cannot really explain one of his PMJs by appeal to a GMP unless he fully accepts the GMP. So you currently are lacking moral integrity. You are endorsing PMJs that you cannot justify. If you want moral integrity, then you will need to find some other GMP – one whose implications you can accept. If you find such a principle, and you reflect on it, and you find that you can accept all of its implications, then you may gain moral integrity.

When you engage in this project, you may find that your former PMJs cannot all be explained by appeal to any coherent collection of GMPs. Perhaps some particularly attractive GMP explains all but a few of your PMJs. In this case, you may have to reconsider the recalcitrant PMJs. Perhaps you will decide to let them go so as to be able to endorse the otherwise powerful GMP. Thus, a revision of your PMJs may be the result of deeper reflection on the GMPs that might explain them.

This sort of procedure is not always necessary. Perhaps you will not have to alter any of your PMJs. If you can find an acceptable principle that explains all of your PMJs, then you can maintain those old PMJs, but explain them in a new way by appeal to a new GMP. It is

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<sup>8</sup> Further thanks to Clay for suggesting this point.

more likely, I suspect, that at least some of your old PMJs will have to be rejected in order to be consistent with a new GMP if you find one that otherwise seems good.

I propose, then, that we understand the function of this sort of moral argumentation in the following way: in our effort to enhance our moral integrity, we locate relatively plausible GMPs – preferably ones that some of us already believe. Ideally, we identify principles to which we are likely to appeal in efforts to explain our particular moral judgments. We then put these GMPs to the test by imagining their implications for difficult cases. We may be especially interested in “role reversal cases” since in these examples we put ourselves in the positions of others who might not like the implications of the principles. Each of us then checks to see if he or she can fully accept the implications of the principle for these hypothetical cases. If not, he or she then realizes that the proposed principle cannot figure in his or her own value system if that system is to become morally integrated. We then search for another principle that might serve to explain the PMJs we still want to endorse.

So, on this new interpretation of our activities here, the point of the argument cited above was not to prove that GR is false. Nor is there any appeal to moral intuition to defend line (2). Rather, the point is to guide you (individually) toward a realization that you do not believe all the implications of GR, and hence that you do not fully accept GR. Thus, you cannot appeal to GR in an effort to explain any of your PMJs. If you seek moral integrity, you will have to find some other GMP. That’s one of the things we try to do in courses in ethical theory.