MORAL AIMS

Essays on the Importance of Getting It Right and Practicing Morality with Others

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Because this is a collection of previously published essays, the reader might be curious about the point of taking them from their various publishing homes and giving them a single group home. So here is what moved me to do so.

One reason is the self-interested motive that I suspect is often at work in single-author collections of essays: the author has some essays that she thinks are quite good but that were published in venues that resulted in their being almost never read or read by a narrower audience than she hoped for. So she takes another stab at getting people to look at the work by packaging it with pieces that people have read and might want to read again, or at least have on their bookshelf. There are two essays in particular that I wanted to recover from obscurity. One is “Kant and Compliance with Conventionalized Injustice,” which I assume hardly anyone has seen. The essay is more timely now than when it was published in 1994, because it is a little exercise in doing non-ideal theory, and non-ideal theory is hot now in a way it wasn’t then. The other essay that I think is good and would like more people to read is “Moral Failure,” which I’ve now positioned as the lead chapter so it can’t be missed. There I am preoccupied with making a claim that I think bears thinking more about, namely that the social practice of morality really is morality and not just a sociological phenomenon.
A second motive is more philosophical. I have an ongoing interest, acquired from my father, in seeing what happens conceptually when essays that were written independently are brought into one volume and read together. This was the (or a) motive that led me put together *Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers*. I wanted to see what happens to our conception of feminist philosophy and to the idea that philosophy has no gender if we read, side by side, essays by moral philosophers who are all women but who aren’t all setting out to do feminist philosophy. Something similar is going on in this volume. I am an essayist by nature, and all of the chapters in this volume were written as independent, topical essays. The few essays that do have a steady readership, such as “Standing for Something” and “Changing One’s Heart,” are, I suspect, virtually always read as topical essays on integrity and forgiveness. As a result, the themes that I found myself continually returning to in the essays gathered in this book aren’t visible. Those themes, about which I’ll have more to say in the introduction, include the significance of the social practice of morality for what we say as moral theorists, the plurality of moral aims that agents are trying to realize and that sometimes come into tension, and the special difficulties that conventionalized wrongdoing poses. The essays that bookend this volume explore another theme: the opacity of what individuals are up to when they engage in what clearly appears to be wrongdoing. This is a book about those themes. The introduction, the organization of the essays, and the introductions to the four parts of the book are all designed to disrupt efforts to read these essays as independent topics.

I could not have written these essays without the emergence of feminist philosophy in the 1980s and ’90s and without the pioneering work of people like Annette Baier, Claudia Card, and especially Margaret Walker. Reading feminist philosophy taught me to pay attention to social norms and the difficulty of thinking clearly and acting well under conditions of dominance and subordination. It taught me to attend and be sympathetic to the vulnerabilities of moral persons and the moral binds they find themselves in. And above all, it taught me to do philosophy that is both deeply personal and begins from the question: What are moral philosophers not talking about? I suspect these essays also could not have been written without the work of Tom Hill, who taught me the
importance of having and displaying moral attitudes, and by extension, of paying closer attention to the interior lives of moral agents. The work of Bernard Williams figures prominently in chapters 2 and 5. My critical tone in those chapters does not adequately convey my deep admiration for his unique abilities to hone in on important, but neglected, moral phenomena and to think outside the philosophical box.

My thanks to Peter Ohlin, senior editor for philosophy at Oxford University Press. His continued supportive interest in my work and his patience with my extraordinarily slow pace have been much appreciated.
The chapters in this book were published in various venues between 1989 and 2004. Minor editorial changes have been made to the original published versions to ensure consistency of style throughout this book. There are a few new footnotes, and introductory thank-you notes to various audiences, institutions, and individuals have been removed, although footnote credits for specific points have been retained. I thank the following for permission to reprint the essays in this collection:


Chapter 4: “Common Decency” was originally written for a collection that I edited, Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Moral Philosophers (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 128–142.


Chapter 7: “Responsibility & Reproach” originally appeared in Ethics 99 (January 1989): 389–406. © 1989 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

Chapter 8: “Emotional Work” was written for Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice, edited by Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin (Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 117–122. Reprinted courtesy of Indiana University Press. All rights reserved.

Chapter 9: “Changing One’s Heart” originally appeared in Ethics 103 (October 1992): 76–96. © 1992 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.
Introduction

The aim of normative theorizing is to establish principled ways of thinking about and reaching answers to normative questions. The most important normative question is, of course: “What ought I to do?” But there are other important normative questions as well. “When is blame warranted?” requires some account of the criteria for moral responsibility and for excuse from responsibility. Related to such questions about responsibility are normative questions about the reactive attitudes: “When is it appropriate to feel each of the self-directed reactive attitudes of shame, guilt, pride, and the like?” and “When are other-directed attitudes such as resentment and forgiveness warranted?” Normative theorizing should also help us to determine which character traits are virtues, which are vices, and in what those virtues and vices consist. In short, the task of normative theorizing is to give moral agents guidance, at the most general level, about what to do, what kind of people to become, how to feel about their own and others’ moral performance, and when to let themselves and others off the moral hook.

In addition to providing guidance, normative theorizing has a second, equally if not more important function: to enable moral agents to engage in critical moral reflection and thus to become autonomous from others’ opinions and shared social views on normative questions. One of the central moral tasks of agents is to “get it right”—to latch on to the correct normative principles and apply them correctly, to grasp what traits are really virtuous or vicious and not merely thought so, to figure out what they really should feel ashamed or guilty for rather than just what they are made to feel ashamed or guilty for. Normative theorizing, and the critical reflective point of view it supports, supply the necessary wedge between what is commonly taken to be so and what really is so.
In going about this work, how, at a most basic level, is the normative moral theorist thinking about morality? To answer that, suppose we begin by reflecting on the phrase “morality requires . . . ,” which appears often enough in moral theorizing. Thinking about what morality requires is like thinking about what justice requires. We are tempted in both cases to capitalize: it is Morality and Justice that require. The capitalization draws attention to the fact that we are not thinking about what people think morality or justice requires, nor are we thinking about culturally local standards. We are thinking about real or genuine, as opposed to supposed, moral requirements. The merely supposed moral requirements that provide the contrast might be those proposed by some moral theorist. Kant thought that morality requires exceptionless truth-telling, but (we think) he was wrong; morality does not require that. Or the merely supposed moral requirements might be those that a social group accepts as moral requirements. At one time in our not so distant past, women were thought to be under the moral obligation to take their husbands’ last name; this was a duty of love, loyalty, respect for husbandly authority. But people were wrong; morality does not require this of women who marry.

As these remarks suggest, one central conception of morality is brought into sharpest focus by contrasting moral requirements with what people have mistakenly supposed those requirements to be. That contrast might then naturally lead to two additional thoughts. First, the work of the normative moral theorist, as I suggested above, is to help us get it right—to latch onto what morality actually requires—as well as to help us see why morality requires these things, or to latch onto the correct justification of moral requirements. Successfully doing this work will establish when the various reactive attitudes—for example, of resentment, gratitude, and forgiveness—are appropriate and justified. It will also help to establish what actions are blameworthy, and thus when actually blaming other people is justified.

The second thought that the contrast between real and supposed moral requirements quickly leads to is that normative moral theorists can conduct their work only by going hypothetical. As the contrast between what morality actually requires and what people think it requires reminds us, there is no guarantee that the set of moral requirements the
normative moral theorist helps us to latch onto will match what real people, operating within a social practice of morality that they accept, will see as moral requirements. So the system of capital-M moral requirements will be, to varying degrees, hypothetical in the sense that we are imagining the moral norms that would effectively operate as requirements in a hypothetical social world that endorsed those norms.

By “effectively operate as requirements,” I mean that it would generally be the case that individuals within that social world would do such things as address moral demands and complaints to each other; feel and express resentment, blame, guilt, and pressures of conscience; and offer excuses and justifications predicated on the acceptance of the legitimacy of those (correct) moral norms. Although we say “morality requires,” morality is not a person who can issue and enforce commands. Whatever moral requiring gets done will be done by people who require things of each other and of themselves, and whose requiring activities stand a good chance of uptake because the targets of those activities believe the demands are legitimate, or they at least find them intelligible. Thus talk about “moral requirements” makes most sense if we have in mind some social world where the requiring activity is to take place and receive uptake. If we think that what actual people are morally requiring of each other is misguided and want to talk about genuine moral requirements, then we will have to understand those requirements by thinking about the requiring activity and uptake of that activity that would hypothetically take place in a counterfactual social world.

The contrast between real and supposed moral requirements also encourages the moral theorist to go hypothetical in a different way. Suppose we think that morality is a system of rules that is endorsable by all because each has good reason to accept those rules. What we mean by “endorsable” and “having reason” cannot be what particular, socially located individuals find endorsable, nor can the good reasons be limited to the reasons that those particular, located individuals are presently capable of recognizing as reasons. Genuine moral requirements will have to be conceived as ones that are endorsable by all within a hypothetical social world populated by people who are capable of accessing the good reasons there are to endorse those requirements.
Going hypothetical is not the same as going ideal. One of the things we might be concerned with as moral theorists is what morality requires under nonideal conditions where people have misguided moral conceptions and wrongdoing is conventionalized. To figure that out, we will have to pay attention to facts about the actual social practice of morality and the larger social world in which it takes place—facts that will include the systematic failure to do what morality requires and systematic misconceptions that morality requires or permits something that in fact it forbids.

Despite the need to pay attention to social facts, answers to questions about what morality requires under nonideal conditions may still involve going hypothetical in both of the senses I just mentioned. Suppose, for example, you think that the best way to produce racial equality is through integration and that morality requires taking steps to bring about that integration. Given that racial segregation in social life is thoroughly normalized, and that a point of pursuing integration is to effect conditions under which people will be less able to sustain their prejudices, to think about integration as being morally required will involve thinking about a hypothetical social world where the requiring activities of agents was guided by just that imperative. And in thinking that this integration rule is justified, one would have to think about its endorsability in a hypothetical social world of people who are capable of accessing the good reasons for integration—reasons that many will have in the real social world only after integration is achieved.

So far, I’ve presented this conception of morality—as genuine rather than supposed morality—as the conception employed by normative moral theorists in order to do their work. But, of course, it isn’t just employed by moral theorists. It’s the conception that people use whenever they stand back from their own social practice of morality and look with a critical, reflective eye at what is actually being morally required (or permitted, or forbidden, or recommended) within that social practice.

1. Chapter 6, this volume, is an instance of nonideal theorizing that goes hypothetical in both senses.
A gap may then appear between what one’s fellows generally endorse as a correct moral norm and what one thinks the moral norm ought to be. Or at least a potential gap appears. One wonders, *Is this generally accepted moral norm really correct?* Appreciating the gap, or potential gap, between socially accepted moral norms and correct moral norms may then lead one to think about the whole of social morality in a particular way. Social morality isn’t *really* morality. It is a set of social norms that individuals in a social world generally regard and treat as moral requirements. Social norms, however, even when they coincide with the (genuine) requirements of morality, are still just that—social norms. *Morality* consists in the set of genuine moral requirements (permissions, prohibitions, recommendations), which may or may not also be embodied in the requirements of social norms.

To clarify this point: the features that make a norm a *social* moral norm differ from the features that make a norm a *genuine* moral prescription. Most significant, answers to normative questions within a social practice of morality get settled by achieving social agreement. And reaching that agreement will occur through social processes of moral dispute in which individuals stand up for their own views on moral matters without being entitled to claim authority to have settled the question, no matter how good their arguments are. In a social practice of morality, it is collectives of people that settle moral disputes, because what is to be established are shared understandings about what can morally be expected of fellow participants. Among the shared understandings are broad agreements on which moral matters are still reasonably under dispute and which may reasonably be taken to have been resolved. At one time in U.S. history, for example, the equality of the races was a matter of social dispute. Today it is not, even if some individuals continue to believe in racial inequality.

By contrast, moral philosophers and participants in a social practice who take up a critically reflective point of view “settle” disputes by making up their individual minds about what views are best supported by reasons. Of course it may be critical to consider what views would be endorsable by all (not just by oneself) in a hypothetical world of people who have access to the good reasons for endorsement. Even so, it is the goodness of the reasons, not the fact of actual agreement, that is doing
the work. From a critical point of view, what settles a normative question is not social agreement but the correctness of the justificatory argument. It is this fundamental difference in how moral questions are settled that makes social moral norms distinctively different from genuine moral prescriptions, even when the two have the same content.

To summarize this first conception of morality: we reach it by taking up a critical, reflective point of view where our concern is with getting it right—that is, with latching on to those moral rules that would be the focus of the requiring activities of persons in a hypothetical social world populated by hypothetical agents who are capable of accessing the reasons there are for everyone’s endorsing just this set of rules, where those rules differ in kind from social norms.

None of the remarks so far have been meant to be controversial. Indeed, they might have the air of the obvious. The questions that interests me are: “What is the relation of the actual social practice of morality to the capital-M conception of morality just sketched?” and “To what extent is reflection on the content of the social practice of morality a proper part of the work of a normative moral theorist?”

By “social practice of morality,” I have in mind a number of things. Most obviously, a collection of people who “practice” morality together will develop what Margaret Walker calls shared moral understandings about what the moral norms are, how they are to be applied, what excuses are acceptable, who counts as a responsible agent, and the like. A social practice of morality settles the same range of questions that moral philosophers aim to settle when they engage in normative theorizing or that individuals aim to settle when they take up a critical, reflective point of view. A social practice of morality will also involve its participants in various requiring activities, such as demanding, blaming, shaming, and exhorting.

In thinking about the relation of the actual social practice of morality to capital-M morality, the first thing one might note is that there is a danger of exaggerating the extent to which the critical, reflective point of view, which aims to latch onto genuine morality, escapes the point of

view of the social practitioner of morality and thus escapes dependence on the available shared moral understandings. Our efforts to get it right are always limited by, and draw on, the resources provided by socially available concepts and methods of moral reasoning. The concepts of moral obligation and the moral equality of persons haven’t always been around, nor have consequentialist and Kantian methods of moral reasoning. If we think that our predecessors were limited in their critical, reflective thought by the unavailability of these concepts and methods, we should also think that we, too, may be similarly limited in our efforts to get it right by the unavailability of concepts and methods that our successors may have. In addition, moral philosophers’ appeal to intuitions—something that it is virtually impossible to imagine doing entirely without—is at bottom an appeal to shared moral understandings that have emerged from a social practice of morality. So here, again, critical, reflective thinking will not be entirely freed from ties to the social practice of morality. All of this is just to say that knowledge is always socially situated, even when we are trying our best to escape that social situatedness and gain critical purchase on what we think we know, and that social consensus on some elements of morality will be important to the conduct of critical reflection.

There is an accompanying danger, too, of exaggerating the extent to which critique is not part of the social practice of morality. While there would not be a social practice of morality were there not broad consensus on what the moral norms are and the reasons for endorsing them, social practices of morality are also sites of contest and negotiation over the acceptability of particular norms, conceptions of the virtues, standards of accountability, and so on. This will be particularly so in complex societies where individuals move among a variety of social practices of morality—work, family, religion, and so on—and in societies that acknowledge diversity of moral view and value the open exchange of ideas. A critical moral point of view is relevant not only to practitioners’ decisions about when to contest elements of social morality in an effort to

4. Margaret Urban Walker pointed this out in Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics (New York: Routledge, 1998), 66–68. The advent of experimental philosophy has brought the point to prominence among philosophers.