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RESUSCITATING ETHICS

One of the primary aims of contemporary ethical discourse is to illuminate the normative values that aid in the assessment of any act of a given agent. The agent, in this context, is understood as an individual, a group, a state, or a corporation providing that they have some identifiable autonomy. This paper presents a challenge to the kind of methodology in moral theory which focuses primarily on an agent-structured account of ethics for the assessment of an agent and their actions. It is a response to a collection of contemporary academic works on the issue of famine.

The two particularly influential lineages in moral theory which are structured by taking the agent as their dominant focus are Kantianism and Utilitarianism. The main characteristic of this kind of approach to ethics is the employment of a fundamental moral notion. This would be an ethical principle, like the categorical imperative in the case of Kant or the principle of utility for a Utilitarian, which is reducible to one or more propositions. The focus of critique here will be on those systems of ethics where the fundamental principle, or moral notion, is centered primarily around the moral agent. Through standardized criteria for judgement, the conventional moral theory will provide the structure to determine if an action will, or has, lived up to the standards of that notion. It is my claim that much of the motivational force of what has historically been included in the term 'ethics' is lost in the practice of codifying ethical standards. For the purposes of this essay, I will examine only a recent version of utilitarianism, that of Peter Unger, as a sophisticated example of this generally limited approach to ethics -- one which at least tries, but ultimately fails (due to its adherence to the Utilitarian model), to engender the motivation which one would expect from a subject matter of such importance to human existence.

Throughout this paper, I will argue for the need to shift the discussion of ethics towards a view that places the dynamics of communication at the center of its analysis. In this regard, I will be working with ideas from the recent work of Robert Gibbs' *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities*. The primary thesis of Gibbs' book is that ethics is fundamentally rooted in relationships, and that attentiveness to our perceptions, in particular those perceptions that facilitate communication with others, yields pragmatic responsibilities. By contrasting the features of this alternative account of ethics with conventional theories, I aim to draw out the substance of my own position -- that the import of ethical responsibility pivots around an attitude of intelligent receptivity which is itself the means for a meaningful life.

The Example

The examples of 'the pond' and 'the envelope' have been employed by contemporary ethicists (namely by Peter Singer in *Practical Ethics* and also by Peter Unger in *Living High and Letting Die*) in order to compare and contrast the moral differences between (a) responding to a child drowning in a pond, and (b) sending a donation in an envelope to save a child suffering from starvation in a foreign country. In the use of these examples there have been few references to the salient relationships between the suffering children and the moral agent. I consider this to be a major omission, one which, when included, should significantly alter the outcomes of the thought experiment and thereby send ripples of change through the ordinary practice of moral theorizing. So, to begin with, I will set up yet another version of this example that will hopefully serve as a touchstone for the rest of the discussion:

Let us suppose again a relatively affluent man walking across the university campus on his way to class. This time, rather than being a professor, he is a student. Let's call him Henry: a bright and fortunate student who has received ample scholarships to pay for all his expenses while studying, with extra money to spare. He is walking by the campus pond where he passes by an OXFAM table where an advocate sits collecting donations to help feed starving children in the poorest countries of the world. He notices the OXFAM booth, and his gaze catches the eye of the lady staffing the booth who is collecting donations by holding up OXFAM envelopes. Not long after he hears a scream and a splash from across the pond, which is of course the drowning child.

What happens is this: Henry runs, as he should, to save the child even though his penny loafers and his Rolex will get ruined in the process (the possibility of removing expensive accessories before jumping into the water is traditionally prohibited in this line of thought experiments). We judge this as good behavior, even though Henry walks by the OXFAM booth without donating.

The choices for the moral agent are limited to keep the discussion to a reasonable length. From the conventional point of view, Henry has four moral opportunities available to him. He could save the drowning child, donate to OXFAM and save several starving children, or both, or neither. However, by changing the underlying approach to ethics from an agent-centered view to a relation-centered view, Henry's moral situation becomes much more complex, even in this simple example.

What is different in this re-worked example? First, and most obvious, I have combined the two scenarios ('the pond' and 'the envelope') into one, which was done to directly juxtapose the two opposing claims to action. I recognize that 'the envelope' and 'the pond' examples' claims to Henry's action are not in temporal conflict, i.e. Henry could always return to the OXFAM table to make a donation. However, by setting both claims in the same scenario I hope to make clear how different the relationships are in the two cases -- primarily because both Singer and Unger argued that morally there should be no significant differences.

The second alteration of the example is the inclusion of relevant perceptual features -- noticing the OXFAM sign, the eye contact, the envelopes, and also hearing the scream and the splash of the child, all of which are noticed by Henry, and which set up relationships between him and the parties in distress. The importance of these perceptual elements is that they are the environment -- or media -- in which ethics unfolds. And, by understanding, as we will, how ethics is born from the responsibilities implied in communication, we will attain a greater depth of understanding of the moral dynamics of the act under consideration.

The fact that these kinds of factors have not been relevantly considered in either Singer's or Unger's use of the example, nor much in the main schools of thought in Anglo-American moral philosophy, should give us pause to wonder why this is. The weakness of these accounts of ethics is that they place their primary focus, in various ways, on the agent, rather than on the relationship in which the agent is always ethically placed. By focusing in this way, this style of moral theory has effectively alienated the discussion of ethics from that which gives it importance -- the dynamics by which two or more beings intersect.

Peter Unger's sophisticated version of utilitarian theory tries to accommodate fluctuating elements of context (relationships) by including an account of flexible semantics -- an allowance of variable interpretations of moral terminology. However, his position is impeded by his adherance to the Utilitarian notion of moral value, and thus the rigidity that accompanies Utilitarianism, a theory that relies on a fundamental moral notion, i.e., the principle of utility. The fact that Unger is trying to (a) allow for flexible semantics and (b) relying on a utilitarian framework presents an incompatibility with

regard to his aims. No matter how much flexibility Unger allows in moral terminology, the context for their interpretation will have to be Utilitarian, and thus the flexibility he wants to allow for is severely limited within the confines of a Utilitarian programme. Given Unger's attempt to synthesize a principled theory with versatile criteria of meaning, I will limit my critique of conventional morality to Unger's theory -- the most promising of the doomed -- by contrasting his deficient use of variable semantics with Gibbs' more powerful utilization of semiotics set within a versatile ethical theory -- one that is centered on features of relationships rather than on the autonomous decisions of an agent bound by utilitarian constraints.

Semantics and Semiotics

Peter Unger, in his book *Living High and Letting Die*, concludes his utilitarian analysis of famine, and his insistence on a very demanding account of "liberationist" ethics, by appealing to a theory of a "selectively flexible semantics"(Unger, 162) that serves to explain why we are able to justify complacency, what he calls 'lenient' moral judgments. His theory hinges on the utilitarian claim that, in many cases, it is hard to be aware of what is morally most relevant, i.e., the demands of ethics (the primary values -- don't initiate or prolong the suffering of an innocent person), and that we are motivated (by our secondary values) to pay attention to this primary value -- the fundamental moral notion (Unger, 31). What is preventing our being aware of moral truth here is all kinds of contextual factors that lead to epistemic distortion -- proximity, proportion, social conditioning and so on. But primarily, awareness of what is crucial to morality is hindered by the tendency to generalize (from experience) with regard to moral notions. That is, when we are not fully clued into how we should act given our primary values (which should be independent from the context), we mistakenly apply contextual factors to define moral terms (which are often equivocal with non-moral terms) and thus make poor judgments. For example, if we make the judgement that Henry's saving the drowning child is good (because our primary values are not to prolong others suffering, in this case not to allow its prolongation) we have acted morally. However, when Henry passes by the OXFAM booth and we convince ourselves that not donating is also good (or at least not bad) because of proximity or other contextual distortions, we are equivocating two senses of "good" (moral and non-moral) which undermines the authority of the primary values. What we have done is devalued the second sense of "good" and interpreted it in terms of what is practically good, and hence good in a non-moral sense. If our judgement was not distorted in this way we would have seen how little real difference there is between the two calamities, and, what's more, that several children die every day of malnutrition, which he could have prevented.

Even though Utilitarian calculation technically disapproves of Henry's neglecting moral action by dismissing the OXFAM booth, Unger suprisingly condones the action by accounting for Henry's degree of accessibility to understanding his situation. Unger sets about re-evaluating moral judgement by justifying the ordinary misuse of moral terminology by explaining it in the light of a *multi-dimensional context-dependent semantics*: "So, when happily making a moral judgement with the words, "your behavior was good," ... we may select which of its ethical dimensions *count* (much) in reckoning how well your conduct conforms to morality" (Unger, 164).

The epistemic confusion is evident amongst those of us who are lenient towards an agent (in this case Henry) who neglects to send money that could save several children from starving. We would select a dimension of the context, let's say proximity, as a factor that actually limits ethical responsibility, and therefore judge the agent's action as "good." While Unger allows for this miscalculation by way of his flexible account of moral semantics, it is nonetheless still a misunderstanding (on the part of the appraiser) of Unger's strict utilitarianism. A proper "liberationist" judgement (in Unger's strict sense of morality) would see through the potentially distorting contextual factors and say that there is just as little excuse not to donate to OXFAM as

there is to neglect to save the drowning child.

The main concern that arises from Unger's use of selective "context-dependent semantics" (Unger, 162) is that it only seems to apply after the fact -- in the practice of assessment -- taking only the narrow confines of the actual decision of the agent. Because he does not consider the complex perceptions and interpretations of the agent which arise in relation to another being, Unger's standards for morality end up in conflict with his acknowledgement of the relevance of a contextual analysis in coming to a judgement of an action or an agent.

When the moral appraiser steps back from the situation and says with a lenient judgement, "your behavior was good," from Unger's viewpoint they have based their judgement on the use of the term "good" as it applies to the context, and not as a derivation of the "morality" of the primary values. It is here that the conflict becomes apparent. If the primary values are so fundamental to recognizing the nature of morality, where do the primary values get their priority? That is, how do we get this special concept "morality" which Unger claims is at the heart of our reasoned values? It seems that morality stated as an objective independent postulate (in this case, "don't initiate or prolong the suffering of an innocent person" (Unger, 31) loses its ability to change and adapt within a context. On the other hand, if the dictates of morality are taken as arbitrary and relative, then morality would be counterintuitively open to corruption and equivocation, and thus morality would fail to agree with or be able to explain the compellingness that is generally perceived to be a constituent of moral behavior.

If there is indeed some significant potency to which "morality" refers, as Unger relies on in his account, perhaps it can be accounted for in how the concept is *used*. For example, when the judgement of Henry is made, we are using the moral term "good." And when Unger writes about "values" and "morality," he is using these terms in a certain way. Yet, to say that morality is just the employment of moral terms would again weaken the importance of morality. Since traditional moral theories and arguments seem to fail to be compelling, especially with regard to morality's experienced motivational force, prescriptive theories can't be an adequate vehicle for moral discourse. So, we must look (amongst the multi-dimensional contexts and the semantically dependent concepts) for the dynamics of the relationship -- that which allows for the use of moral terms.

It is in this regard that Gibbs' account maintains the importance of semantic interpretation in morality yet he takes the discussion further -- into the realm of pragmatics (language in use). Gibbs recognizes what Unger does not: that "context dependent semantics" (Unger, 162) are actually in use in any given action, and that semantic interpretation is the epistemic factor that responsible action presupposes. For Gibbs, the very basis of a relationship is the exchange of signs, and those signs always serve to invoke a response in the attentive perceiver. ("Signs" is being used in the sense of *the actual medium of communication*, whether it be a word, a gesture, or what I have referred to in the example as "relevant perceptual features": the OXFAM sign, the scream and splash, etc.) In a relationship there is always an implication of responsibility -- a compellingness to respond to the sign of another person. Yet, even if our response to another's attempt to call on us is to ignore them, we are still responding *in some way*, and are therefore, as social beings, inevitably and pervasively bound in relationships that involve responsibility. Responsibility is not just the ability to respond but is the ability to meet the criteria for an appropriate response -- one which attempts to satisfy the request in a meaningful way. The criterion, then, for what is called ethical is determined by the nature of the relationship: what is asked for, and how that is interpreted.

That we must always interpret another's call makes semantics an active, relational, meaningful process. In other words, meaning is a semiotic event. Both parties share a history of interpreting and creating conventions for meaningful communication and therefore they both constantly use (and

abuse) these conventions to effect responses. In the case of ethics, moral terms can carry meaning depending on the context (as we saw in Unger), but phenomenologically, the motivation for ethical action is not given, like Unger wants to maintain, by access to "primary values." Rather, when we recognize that meeting another being requires communication, and that understanding how relationships challenge insularity and can therefore foster mutual understanding rather than combat, the drive for ethical action is seen to be already at work in the exigency to relate. Thus, the semiotic account of meaning as a practice pervades the relationship as a practice, and it is here that ethics regains its motivating force because, as social beings, we are constantly engaged in the practice of relating.

So, to apply an account like Gibbs' to our example, a judgement of Henry must be open to several layers of interpretation. The scream and splash of the child is pretty straight forward, and Henry can be pretty sure that it is a call of distress even though complete certainty is mitigated by the medium of an interpretable sign -- the scream. However, to interpret the complex demands ensuing from the OXFAM booth requires a deeper understanding of context and thus the judgement of Henry's action also has to take account of that depth. In this case the immediate "other" is not exactly the person in distress but is the OXFAM worker. The children who require compassionate donations for their survival are mediated by several layers of aid workers and advocates, and these factors are as relevant to Henry as if there were an impenetrable crowd between him and the pond. The complexity in this case is this: when the foreign aid relationship is thought of as a relation between the "us" of the affluent and the "them" of the poor, the lady at the table is still, for Henry, "us." Henry's relationship with the actual others (the starving children) is not calling for his response the way the drowning child is in her screaming. It is as though the call is muted. This does not mean that Henry is excused for not donating or that he is less responsible for the distant poor, but he is responsible beyond his means. In a sense Henry is called continually, especially as he becomes aware that many people die needlessly every day, which he could prevent with donations. Therefore, the judgement of Henry's neglect must look to his willingness to open himself to that infinity of ethical demand, for to ignore any part of it (at least in the sense of ignoring the awareness of it) is to ignore an ethical maturity. This kind of growth is that which is generated through an acceptance of relationships that diminish insularity.

Even though Henry walks by the OXFAM booth, he is affected in some way by perceiving the signs available to him via the display and the advocate, though the emergency of the situation is still not immediately available. He will likely have a more salient experience of third world poverty the more he reflects on his experience of the OXFAM booth situation, and even more so as he encounters other requests for donations. The judgement that looks only at whether or not he donated is missing a dimension of Henry's life that is relevantly ethical -- that he is changed by all his relationships in such a way that ethics is practically unavoidable, and ethical action is inexhaustible. Henry must decide how to respond each time he encounters a request for famine aid in relation to the experience of the OXFAM booth. His relationship to the situation includes not only a relation of affluent to poor, but of Henry to the advocate, Henry to his other experiences of famine, and Henry to all his previous ethical experience. It is therefore difficult to make a definitive judgement of another's complex ethical position. The judgement itself is likely to be an ethical response too, on the part of the appraiser, by responding to whoever requires that judgement. The point is that ethics is an ongoing activity that is coincident with sociality -- one that can either be recognized as a fundamental practice, acknowledged only to some degree of mediocrity, or ignored completely in denial of human growth.

Responsibility

Within a relationship that gives rise to ethical demands, each person is responsible in a way that

Gibbs calls *asymmetric*: "I am responsible for others in a way that they are not responsible for me" (Gibbs, 4). This position is in contrast to conventional theories of justice which, owing to their focus on the agent rather than relations, invoke the idea of symmetrical responsibility that leads to theories of fundamental equality and human rights. However, because of the complex nature of relationships, which includes the relationship that people have with themselves and their history, leveling ethical standards is an unreasonable simplification in a metaethical analysis. Because every being acts and relates amidst completely distinct personal contexts, one cannot categorically expect everyone to abide by a single set of morals.

It is granted that the complicated demands faced by lawmakers and political governments often require a theory of symmetrical responsibility that ground concepts like 'equality' and 'rights,' which constitute a standard for collective social order. But it is debatable whether this is necessary, or even desirable, for those who design these 'rights' also wield the power to take them away. However, given the compromises that must be made in a secular pluralistic society, within an embedded state system, these concepts do play a practical role, and can be effective given that they are understood as a means for social order and not a fundamental law of nature. The term 'rights' already has the connotation of being absolute, yet with that sense of factuality given to an abstract conventionally constructed concept, there ensues a potential for abusing such a potent concept for other political aims. For example, when a government claims to defend "rights and freedoms" as a justification for violent defense against an opposing belief system, many relevant features of the complex relationships between the two parties can easily be overlooked. Given this, a "just war" cannot be ethically justifiable without a complete understanding of all the details of the situation, including the history and belief system of the enemy. The process of acquiring such an understanding, *if it is carried out with integrity*, would inevitably lead to understanding of the purported enemy's position. It is for this reason that diplomacy can never be ruled out as a possibility.

Ethical Integrity

There are basic aspects of a relationship that place immediate ethical constraints on unjustified action. For example, one of the most basic signs which is universal amongst human beings is the face. According to Emmanuel Levinas, the face, as it is perceived, forbids the killing of the other because it is the most naked and vulnerable statement of ourselves -- a signification which we all share (Levinas, 85-86). That does not mean it is impossible to kill another being, but that the meaning that is attributed to the face is said to be one of the deepest ethical reminders. If this is true, it would explain why it seems to be emotionally easier to direct a war from afar, or to fight from an aerial bomber than to fight face to face, why it is easier to allow distant children to suffer, and why many charity advertisements use the image of the face to provoke our sentiments and our donations. This is not to say that proximity is an excuse for complacency, for the face is only one of many factors that call for our attention.

What an agent-centered theory tends to overlook, by neglecting the importance of the relationship, is the potency of the attitude to accept and distinguish all the various elements that fill out an ethical relationship. By understanding that, as humans, we thrive on meaningfulness, we can work towards integrating the various aspects of our relationships by cultivating an intelligent and open attitude. Yet a balance has to be maintained. The extreme neglect of this kind of internal fidelity would likely result in a gradual psychological breakdown as actions continue to conflict with the coherency implied in the practice of communication. On the other hand, rigidity in the institution of a single purpose to the neglect of considering others' senses of integrity can be equally disastrous:

> [The] pretension to realize a single purpose can, as we know, be threatening enough to embalm what is already dead, as is the case in the Red Square, or to give life to a fable

by terror and massacre, as under the Third Reich. (Lyotard, 409)

In this light, the insularity of self-interest can be superseded only by ethical integrity with an attitude that allows for one's own basis for meaning -- the mind -- to intelligently and responsibly adapt within the context of a plurality of relationships.

In difficult ethical cases such as famine relief, a committed ethical being ought to be attentive to as much detail as possible. In our example, if Henry were interested in a meaningful life, he would simply respond to each call to the best of his ability and with the most sensitive interpretation. In the case of 'the envelope' example, there would have to be an attempt to understand the nature of the situation behind the plea for aid to effect an appropriate response. Perhaps donating in the short term, and in the long term, cultivating a better understanding of the depth of response that is elicited from acknowledging the extent of human suffering -- both of others and of ourselves.

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