

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

Sam Fleischacker¹

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the role of moral philosophers in answering concrete moral conundrums. It proposes that the very stance we take up when we do moral philosophy — the theoretical, disengaged stance — encourages us in our tendency to self-deception rather than leading us honestly to confront the emotional obstacles that, often, block us from decent action. The proposal is defended by way of the astute account of self-deceit, and of the failings of moral philosophy, in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

KEY WORDS: Adam Smith, Self-Deceit, Moral Philosophy, Character, Applied Ethics.

پروفیسر گاہ علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرہنگی
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی

1. Professor of Philosophy, Philosophy Department, University of Illinois-Chicago, USA; fleischert@sbcglobal.net.

Introduction

My mother was diagnosed with lung cancer in January 2001, and given less than a year to live. In September, two months before she died, the cancer went to her brain. She did not lose all her cognitive faculties — sometimes she was very lucid — but she became confused enough that her power to make medical decisions passed to her designated legal representative for health care. Due to a mix-up at the hospital — not, unfortunately, an uncommon occurrence at hospitals in America — it was unclear at first whether my sister or I was my mother's representative, and that unclarity led to an angry argument between the two of us. The argument concerned whether my mother should be given a large enough dose of morphine to relieve the suffering she was then undergoing, at the cost of putting her into a virtual coma and almost certainly shortening her remaining life. My sister, with the rest of our family and the doctor behind her, was in favor of giving the morphine. I, with certain Jewish traditions behind me along with my mother's express concern over the past few months to live as long as possible, was opposed. On certain views of consent, my mother's declaration that she wanted to keep living would presumably settle the matter in favor of my view, but before she had gotten sick my mother had also declared, about other people who were prolonging their lives vainly, that she would never want to struggle on like that for a little extra life. So if one looks to the will of the patient, there was something to be said for both my sister's and my view of the situation. If one looks on the other hand to utilitarian considerations, or religious views of the end of life, one could again find arguments to support both giving the painkillers and not giving them. How, then, should my sister and I have resolved our disagreement?

I'm not going to answer that, at least right now. What I want to ask here is whether it is the job of moral philosophers to help us answer questions like this. And the answer I want to propose to *that* question — against, I think, the view of many of my colleagues — is “no.”

What is the point of doing moral philosophy? If you ask many contemporary moral philosophers, they will tell you that the moral philosopher can help settle difficult moral controversies. It is hard for ordinary folks to figure out whether abortion is right or not, whether the death penalty should be abolished, or what obligations we have to nonhuman animals: philosophers, it is said, can solve or at least shed important light on these controversies. In addition, we face new challenges in the modern day, which raise ethical questions no-one ever imagined before. Should we allow human cloning? Is there something sordid about cosmetic surgery? Philosophers, we are told, are better situated than other people to take up these new challenges from a moral point of view.

Now, to be sure, some moral philosophers are skeptical of these grand claims, and would be happy if philosophy could simply help ordinary people to think more clearly, or establish certain basic features of ethics, such as whether actions or character should be the main objects of moral evaluation. But even these philosophers often try to contribute to public debates over abortion or famine policy, or suggest that their favored philosophical approach should guide everyday moral deliberations.

I would like in this paper to propose that even the weakest versions of these ambitions for the place of moral philosophy in everyday life may be inappropriate — that moral philosophy tends to be *harmful* rather than helpful to the

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

settlement of real ethical questions. I will present this thesis, first, by laying out some themes from Adam Smith, which he took to challenge certain kinds of moral philosophy. I will then describe some of the implications I take Smith's criticisms to have for much of what we try to do today in moral philosophy, and I'll conclude by briefly sketching some alternative goals for the moral philosopher.

1. Adam Smith on Self-Deceit

To begin with, then, a passage from Smith. Consider first the rich analysis of the nature of self-deceit, and its importance, in part III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS):

When we are about to act, the eagerness of passion will seldom allow us to consider what we are doing, with the candour of an indifferent person. The violent emotions which at that time agitate us, discolour our views of things; even when we are endeavouring to place ourselves in the situation of another, and to regard the objects that interest us in the light in which they will naturally appear to him, the fury of our own passions constantly calls us back to our own place, where everything appears magnified and misrepresented by self-love. Of the manner in which those objects would appear to another ... we can obtain ... but instantaneous glimpses, which vanish in a moment, and which, even while they last, are not altogether just. We cannot even for that moment divest ourselves entirely of the heat and keenness with which our peculiar situation inspires us ... The passions, ... as ... Malebranche says, all justify themselves, and seem reasonable and proportioned to their objects, as long as we continue to feel them.

When the action is over ..., and the passions which prompted it have subsided, we can enter more coolly

into the sentiments of the indifferent spectator. ... It is seldom, however, that [our judgments] are quite candid even in this case. ... The opinion which we entertain of our own character depends entirely on our judgments concerning our past conduct. It is so disagreeable to think ill of ourselves, that we often purposely turn away our view from those circumstances which might render that judgment unfavourable. He is a bold surgeon, they say, whose hand does not tremble when he performs an operation upon his own person; and he is often equally bold who does not hesitate to pull off the mysterious veil of self-delusion, which covers from his view the deformities of his own conduct. Rather than see our own behaviour under so disagreeable an aspect, we too often, foolishly and weakly, endeavour to exasperate anew those unjust passions which had formerly misled us; we endeavour by artifice to awaken our old hatreds, and irritate afresh our almost forgotten resentments: we even exert ourselves for this miserable purpose, and thus persevere in injustice, merely because we once were unjust, and because we are ashamed and afraid to see that we were so.

... This self-deceit, this fatal weakness of mankind, is the source of half the disorders of human life. (TMS [Smith 1976a], III.4.4,6; 157-8)

I'd like to draw attention to several details of this passage. First, note that Smith takes it to be a feature of *agency*, not an accidental human flaw, that our passions get overly heated. The "eagerness of passion" is what carries us forward into action at all. Cool, distant judges would not get themselves out of their chairs to *do* anything; like the angels in Wim Wenders' film, *Wings of Desire*; they would simply *observe* the world. So passion and the distortions that come with it, are features of agency, not something we could get rid of and still be able to act.

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

Second, as I've just indicated by talking of "distortions," the passions that move us affect how we *perceive* a situation, for Smith. The passions of self-love "magnify" and "misrepresent" all objects that concern ourselves, and make it difficult to see how those objects might "appear" to someone else, although we can catch "glimpses" of those appearances: perception language runs throughout the passage. Moreover, the passions *distort* our perceptions, and even though we know that, we cannot easily correct for that distortion. We might think we could stand beyond our passions, and then evaluate how they are distorting our perceptions, but Smith endorses Malebranche's claim that our passions all seem reasonable as long as we continue to feel them. So the passions distort our perception but we can't see how they distort it until we stop feeling the passions.

Smith captures here a very deep aspect of self-deceit: that we can be perfectly well aware that certain feelings are likely to distort our perceptions, yet nevertheless endorse the distorted perceptions for as long as we experience the feelings. To take a trivial example: my wife has a fast metabolism and gets cranky when she is hungry: she is therefore cranky before lunch and dinner almost every day. Now my wife *knows* this about herself, yet when she is in the cranky state, she regularly insists that she is annoyed by objective features of her environment and not just because she is hungry. *Occasionally*, I have seen her — and other people with similar physiologies — acknowledge that she is just hungry and should not think about whatever seems to be annoying her until she has eaten something, but most of the time her crankiness "justif[ies itself,] and seem[s] reasonable and proportioned to [its] objects, as long as [she] continue[s] to feel it."

A far more serious version of this phenomenon occurs in discussions of political subjects that arouse great passions, like the Israel/Palestine conflict, especially among people who feel involved in that conflict. The passions that such people feel about the conflict distort their ability even to read the facts fairly, let alone to take up the perspective of those on the other side. But if we now accept the first point I have drawn from our Smith passage — that passions are essential to agency, to our ability to act — we can see that the distortion in people's perceptions of issues like the Israel/Palestine conflict cannot be easily overcome. The effort to get beyond our own passions, even to be able to see the facts of a situation clearly, is itself a form of action, hence itself something that requires passion. But then trying to see beyond our own passions will truly be an effort to raise ourselves up by our own bootstraps, something we will do at best only momentarily, only enough to catch "an instantaneous glimpse" of the relevant facts, as Smith says, and not an "altogether just" one at that.

To return now to the passage from Smith: perhaps the most unusual feature of it is that Smith denies that we commonly see either the real facts of a situation, or our own true motivations, even *after* we act. "It is so disagreeable to think ill of ourselves," he says, that even after our actions are over "we often purposely turn away our view from those circumstances which might render [our] judgment [of our actions] unfavourable." Here Smith probes the darker aspects of human nature more deeply than practically any of his Enlightenment contemporaries. And his point about our retrospective judgment of our actions is rooted, I think, in a profound understanding of the *function* of self-judgment in our lives. Our opinion of ourselves depends on our past conduct. We know that we have no self other than the one that expresses itself in our actions, and we know that our past

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

selves largely determine what we are like now, that we do not simply start afresh every moment. So we have a deep stake in seeing our past selves as good. We are, mostly, what we were; if we were weak or contemptible people in the past, we are probably weak and contemptible now. But it is very difficult to get ourselves to do anything, it is difficult even to take actions to *improve* ourselves, if we must see ourselves as weak and contemptible. So instead of honestly facing our real motivations in the past, even if that might be the only way to improve ourselves, we attempt to re-evoke the passions that misled us into wrong action in the first place: we “irritate afresh our almost forgotten resentments.” We are “ashamed and afraid” to see what we were truly like in the past, lest we have to conclude that we are worse people, now, that we can bear to think. The word choice here seems to me exactly right. Shame is a feeling that other people despise us, a feeling of being naked or disgusting in other people’s eyes. If we have to see ourselves as acting on petty resentments, or greed, or lust, we will be ashamed of ourselves, first and foremost; we will feel we have lost the attractive persona that we need in order to interact with the people around us. In addition, we will be afraid: of punishment or retaliation, of the effort needed to make restitution for past wrongdoing and the danger that our victims will rebuff those efforts, of the effort needed to reform ourselves and the danger that we will not succeed. Since all these emotions are very painful, and since we fear we can do nothing about what is wrong with ourselves anyway, we distract our attention from a focus on our own characters and re-evoke instead the passions that led us into bad behavior in the first place. And if we succeed, those passions once again justify themselves, for as long as we feel them.

Again, Smith's psychology seems to me exactly right. I find it very difficult to live with an unpleasant picture of myself and therefore am extremely reluctant to spend much time examining possibly bad actions I have taken. Among my friends and acquaintances, even the most psychologically astute, quick with accurate and sharp judgments of other people's conduct, get defensive when any question is raised about their own behavior, and are hardly ever willing to admit that they have acted on a shabby or vicious sentiment. Indeed, this is true of many quite decent people. It is a mark of the best people I know that they can take a great deal of criticism, and are far more willing than others to apologize for things they have done, but even they usually have a significant area of their lives in which they won't brook criticism, and react angrily if they are so much as questioned¹.

We have begun to see how pervasive self-deceit might be, and I hope it now looks at least plausible when Smith says that "self-deceit ... is the source of half the disorders of human life." Still, this is an extremely strong statement. *Half* the disorders of human life come from self-deceit? Really? Can self-deceit be worse than greed, envy or cruelty? Surely not, but it is a mistake to understand self-deceit as on par with greed or cruelty. Rather, it is a structure that *enables* these other motives to do their harmful work. Few people set out to do something that they know is unacceptably greedy, or that merely satisfies their envy or cruelty. Rather, they tell themselves that they really deserve the money they are about

1. Butler 1855: p.459: "In some there is to be observed a general ignorance of themselves and wrong way of thinking and judging in everything relating to themselves — their fortune, reputation, everything in which the self can come in, and this perhaps attended with the rightest judgment in all other matters. In others this partiality is not so general, has not taken hold of the whole man, but is confined to some particular favourite passion, interest, or pursuit."

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

to cheat their employer out of, or that the injury they are about to inflict on someone is required by justice, or by the needs of a righteous cause¹. Self-deceit thus enables us to act on our worst motives without recognizing that that is what we are doing. It also enables us to cover over the real nature of what we have done, after it is over, so that we never come to reform our motivational structure properly, and proceed instead to do the same kind of thing in the future. In both these ways, it protects bad sentiments against the moral scrutiny that might otherwise lead us to abandon such sentiments, or at least refrain from acting on them. To some extent, it also provides its own motivation for bad action. Since drawing back “the mysterious veil of self-delusion” is so painful, since we protect ourselves so strongly against having that veil lifted, we tend to react fiercely against anyone who threatens to lift the veil, to confront us with our own shameful motivations. I don't know how much Smith is concerned with this third danger of self-deceit, but even the first two — the fact that self-deceit gives cover to our bad passions when we are on the verge of acting, and the fact that it blocks repentance after we have acted — are enough to make sense of why it might truly be “the source of half the disorders of human life.”

2. Smith on the Failings of Moral Philosophy

Smith has an interesting solution to the problem of self-deceit: he suggests that the function of moral rules is to preempt the kind of deliberation, case by particular case, that gives room to self-deceit. We “lay down to ourselves a general rule” that certain actions are always to be avoided, and this stops us from inflicting injuries even where we can come up

1. Smith gives examples, much along these lines, in the next few pages: of self-deceiving resentment on pp.160-61 (III.4.12) and of ideological (religious) self-deceit, leading to murder, on pp.176-7 (III.6.12)

with a clever justification for why the injury is, in this particular case, justifiable. Similarly, rules encourage us to be generous where we might otherwise come up with clever reasons why we needn't bother. I like this solution, and think it looks forward to what Kant wants us to do with his categorical imperative. But I don't want to dwell on that here. Instead, I want to turn to a different theme: what Smith says about self-deceit in connection with the work of moral philosophers.

Consider two further passages from TMS:

[T]he most sacred regard is due to [the rules of justice]. ... In the practice of the other virtues, our conduct should rather be directed by a certain idea of propriety ... than by any regard to a precise maxim or rule; and we should consider the end and foundation of the rule, more than the rule itself. But it is otherwise with regard to justice: the man who in that refines the least, and adheres with the most obstinate steadfastness to the general rules themselves, is the most commendable, and the most to be depended upon. Though the end of the rules of justice be, to hinder us from hurting our neighbour, it may frequently be a crime to violate them, though we pretend, with some pretext of reason, that this particular violation could do no hurt. A man often becomes a villain the moment he begins, even within his own heart, to chicanery in this manner. The moment he thinks of departing from the most staunch and positive adherence to ... those inviolable precepts ..., he is no longer to be trusted, and no man can say what degree of guilt he may not arrive at. The thief imagines he does no evil, when he steals from the rich ... The adulterer imagines he does no evil ... provided he covers his intrigue from the suspicion of the husband, and does not disturb the peace of the family. When once we begin to give way to such

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

refinements, there is no enormity so gross of which we may not be capable. (TMS III.6.10; 175)

With regard to all ... matters [of ethics aside from justice], what would hold good in any one case would scarce do so exactly in any other ... Books of casuistry, therefore, are generally as useless as they are commonly tiresome. ... One, who is really anxious to do his duty, must be very weak, if he can imagine that he has much occasion for them; and with regard to one who is negligent of it, the style of those writings is not ... likely to awaken him to more attention. None of them tend to animate us to what is generous and noble. None of them tend to soften us to what is gentle and humane. Many of them, on the contrary, tend rather to teach us to chicanery with our consciences, and by their vain subtleties serve to authorize innumerable evasive refinements with regard to the most essential articles of our duty. (TMS VII.iv.34; 339-40)

These passages appear in widely separated parts of TMS but they are closely related both linguistically¹ and in argument. The first follows on the discussion of general rules and reminds us that, if the rules are to perform their role of checking self-deceit, we need to humble ourselves to them, not argue with them (“refine” them), even if we think we have a good reason for violating them. Once we start violating the rules, we will find violating them again easier and easier, until we are openly and irredeemably immersed in evil, and “there is no enormity so gross of which we may not be capable.”

The second passage suggests that certain kinds of books on ethics — books of casuistry — may *encourage* us in the dangerous process of “refinement” and “chicanery”: “One,

1. Note the words “refinement” and “chicanery” in both.

who is really anxious to do his duty,” says Smith, “must be very weak, if he can imagine that he has much occasion” for such books. They “tend rather to teach us to chicanery with our consciences” than to inspire us with a love for doing our duty. Note here that Smith suggests that a good book on ethics needs a certain kind of *style* more than a particular content, a style that “awakens” us to moral attention, or “animates” us with a passion for being noble or humane. He will end the paragraph by saying explicitly that “it is the principal use of books of morality to excite” in us morally useful emotions. Against the passions that lead us astray, or the self-deceit that clouds those passions, a useful book of morality will excite noble passions, or prick us into a self-examination that unravels some of the lies we have been telling ourselves.

Now we might think that Smith’s complaint about unhelpful books of morality is restricted to books of casuistry, but elsewhere he makes clear that that is not so. “[The writings of Swift and Lucian],” he says in his lectures on rhetoric, “together form a System of morality from whence more sound and just rules of life ... may be drawn than from most set systems of Morality.” Lucian especially, he tells us, “may be an excellent model to those whose particular business it is to teach morality, in opposition to a very different manner which prevails at present.” (LRBL [Smith 1983] i.v.125; p.51). He bestows similar praise on certain tragedians and novelists of his own day: “The poets and romance writers, who best paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship, and of all other private and domestic affections, Racine and Voltaire; Richardson, Maurivau, and Riccoboni; are, in such cases, much better instructors than Zeno, Chrysippus, or Epictetus.” (TMS III.3.14; 143) By contrast, “the metaphysical sophisms” that the Stoics use to support their views “can seldom serve any other purpose than to blow up the hard insensibility of a coxcomb to ten times its native

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

impertinence.” Here a metaphysical system, not casuistry, plays into the coxcomb’s vices; here *metaphysics* reinforces bad character traits. Similarly, when Smith notes in the *Wealth of Nations* that the education in moral philosophy so prized by the Greeks did not lead them to become particularly virtuous, while the Romans, who gave no such a role to philosophy, were rather better human beings, (WN [Smith 1976b] V.i.f.40; pp.774-6), it is moral philosophy as a whole, not just casuistry, that he is calling into question.

Plainly, for Smith moral philosophy has various moral dangers, even when it prescribes the right sorts of actions. It is not just that one might get hold of a bad moral philosophy; there are entire ways of thinking characteristic of philosophy that feed, rather than countering, our self-deceit, and that can therefore harm rather than help our ability to lead a virtuous life. One such way of thinking is casuistry, where we try to determine precisely what is required of us by virtues that are essentially imprecise: casuists attempt “to direct by precise rules what it belongs to feeling and sentiment only to judge of.” The false precision involved here allows us to think we have been virtuous when we have merely done the least that can possibly be expected of a person, and to pretend we have not been vicious when we have merely, by a hair’s breadth, fulfilled the letter of our duty. General rules have to aim for such a least common denominator, to mandate something that can be required of everyone in every situation, so an attempt to put, say, generosity or courage into a rule will inevitably result in a diminution of those virtues. And even the virtue of justice, which must be made precise for legal purposes, will be watered down for moral purposes if we have to limit truth-telling to not committing outright fraud or perjury, or limit honesty in business to not stealing.

But the deepest problem with casuistry also applies to other kinds of moral philosophy: that engaging in it provides us with an excuse not to think about ourselves and our personal failings — not, in particular, to think about our *emotional* failings, about the ugly passions that may be motivating us. Instead of worrying about what *I am* doing, or about to do, the philosopher invites me to think about what the whole world ought to do. Instead of just applying the appropriate rule to myself, the philosopher invites me to put myself in the place of one who invents moral rules¹. But this provides a great excuse for self-deceit. Instead of asking myself whether I have just vented my jealousy of a colleague by revealing his unsavory past, I can think about the purpose of norms against gossip, and whether that purpose might allow for me to tell the story I currently want to tell. Certain kinds of misconduct need to be well-known, I say to myself, so that people do not mistakenly trust those who have committed them. I thus see the norm against gossip as if I occupy a point beyond that norm; I theorize about it; I think about it from a disengaged position, in which I can forget about my own motivations. I can thereby skirt the fact that my actual motive for gossiping is jealousy, not the noble wish to help anyone. By thinking about what *people in general* should do, I get to avoid thinking about what *I am* doing. Herein lies the deepest temptation to immorality in moral philosophy. We might say: the philosophical stance lacks what traditional Christians call

1. In Kant's terms: I am invited to see myself as legislator rather than as subject, as the source of moral law rather than as subservient to it. For Kant, of course, I need to see myself, ultimately, as both legislator and subject, but Kant himself would probably not object to the claim that I should not see myself as legislator when immersed in a push towards action, and in danger therefore of using rationalization to cover over self-deceit and avoid the demands of morality. In any case, any marriage of Kantian ethics with Smith must make this move, as Smith himself does: suggesting that we come up with moral rules in reaction to other people's actions (TMS III.4.7) and then need simply to apply them to ourselves when we find ourselves in the situation in which we condemned or commended those others.

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

“sin-consciousness,” the awareness of how often even our supposedly well-meant theorizing about morals merely serves deeply selfish ends.

Smith indicates, as I have noted, that literature can do a rather better job than philosophy at “excit[ing]” morally useful passions in us. Swift’s wit is more likely to prick our vanities and humble our conceits than the writings of any philosopher; Racine, Voltaire and Richardson are the best teachers of love and friendship. The most obvious advantage literature has over philosophy in this regard is that it engages our emotions, rather than allowing us to ignore them. A more subtle advantage may be that it deals with specific circumstances rather than generalities, and it is specific circumstances that awaken our emotions. When we read a novel or see a play, we can’t so easily forget ourselves, and if the circumstances described in it resemble a situation in which we are currently enmeshed, we find the work discomfiting, and may come away uneasily pushed towards an action we have been resisting. When we read a work of moral philosophy, by contrast, we are likely to be at most annoyed by the writer if he contradicts our own views about how to act; we are very unlikely to feel moved to change our minds.

3. Applying Smith to Contemporary Moral Philosophy

Let us now bring what we have learned from Smith together with what goes on in current moral philosophy. There are some writers who work on agency and free will and meta-ethical topics like realism. To their credit, they don’t claim to help solve actual ethical problems. Nor do they. Then there are the grand political theorists — Rawls and Nozick and some Marxists and other radicals — who mostly offer us large visions unconnected to the details of contemporary politics, but occasionally use their ideas to support policies wildly out

of synch with what the majority of any current democracy is willing to accept¹. And then there are the “applied” ethicists, of whom the most famous at the moment is Peter Singer, known for his advocacy of a variety of quite ridiculous positions, one of which — that one should not spend large amounts of resources on the elderly and mentally unfit —he is also famous for grossly violating in his own life². But it is too easy to mock Singer. He is not an exception and he is far from the silliest or most morally obtuse of contemporary ethicists. Shelly Kagan has joined Singer in the call for extreme self-deprivation to alleviate world famine; Christine Korsgaard is said to have given a paper using Kant to condemn surprise birthday parties; and Judith Jarvis Thomson’s bizarre discussion of abortion has become a philosophical classic. For more intellectually sophisticated examinations of issues about the beginnings and ends of life, one could turn to Frances Kamm or Jeff McMahan, fast becoming the most respected applied ethicists in the mainstream American philosophical community, but it is hard for me to imagine that anyone actually faced with a question about whether to have an abortion or not, or to hasten the death of a loved one, would find much wisdom in the elaborate metaphysics for which Kamm and McMahan are known. Indeed, what Smith says about the Stoics applies directly to work like Kamm’s and McMahan’s: they offer us “metaphysical sophisms” which are likely to do nothing but feed the insensibility of people who are already finding it difficult to acknowledge their own real emotions, or to empathize adequately with the people who would be affected by their decisions. Far better, if you have a real moral quandary, to read a novel or see a play.

1. People like Dworkin or Nussbaum or Amartya Sen do write very sensible pieces on current issues, but almost always without drawing much on the philosophical views for which they are well known.

2. See Specter 1999.

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

Now one problem with the methods of contemporary ethics, which I shall not dwell on here, is that it often proceeds by way of appeal to our intuitions, and that it often makes that appeal by way of wildly unrealistic counterfactuals. That our intuitions might not be uniform is rarely discussed; that they might be culturally and religiously structured is usually not so much as mentioned; and I have rarely seen anyone raise the possibility that their reliability, as evidence of our deeply held moral beliefs, is put under especially great strain when we are asked to apply them to situations very remote from our experience. Jeff McMahan asks us who should properly count as “me” if I undergo a variety of brain-splitting or brain-merging procedures that are possible only in science fiction¹. But my intuitions about personal identity, and about the moral implications of personal identity, are shaped by my responses to the situations I encounter in my everyday life. Of course, that includes situations I read about in newspapers and history books, but even then there is no reason to suppose that I will so much as *have* an intuition, let alone an intuition I would want to rely on, about situations that occur only in fanciful science fiction scenarios². Moral intuitions are closely tied to moral feelings, and it is part of our biological makeup that we have intense feelings about situations we actually experience or think we are likely to experience, while our feelings weaken the more distant a situation is from us, and disappear when we consider situations we regard as virtually impossible. Only this explains why people tend to *laugh* at the scenarios philosophers dream up, in which mad

1. McMahan 2002, pp.20-23, 38, 56-61, 83.

2. There is also no reason to think that my intuitions are easily extendable from situations I have experienced to situations very distant from my experience: rather, intuitions, like perceptions, are likely to be indexed to highly concrete circumstances. A rational principle may range over a vast number of cases that are similar only in broad outline, but an intuition is not a principle, nor solely (primarily?) a product of reason.

scientists put our brains in a vat or torture millions of exact replicas of our bodies — why people tend to find these stories funny rather than frightening or tragic.

I promised not to dwell on this issue, however, and I am after larger game: I want to suggest, not that contemporary moral philosophy should drop its reliance on intuitions in favor of the kind of systematic argument to be found in Kantianism or utilitarianism, but that philosophical theorizing *of any kind* may often be the wrong way to go about addressing a real moral problem. Why? Well, consider the way we actually encounter moral problems in real life. In ethics classes, and ethics textbooks, we are usually told about people who face difficult conflicts between moral claims, each of which is *prima facie* decent and reasonable — the person who has to choose between killing one innocent person and letting many more innocent people die; the person who must either tell a lie or let someone know that she has a fatal disease; the claims, on a university administrator, of color-blind equality on the one hand and affirmative action for oppressed minorities on the other. Or we are asked to think about new situations, unprecedented in human history, for which the ethical norms are unclear: whether people should have babies by a surrogate, or engage in stem cell research, or be cloned. But these are not, I venture to say, the *typical* ethical quandaries in which most people find themselves. Most often, I have to engage in moral thinking when I am tempted to do something that part of me already considers to be wrong. I am tempted to save a few dollars by telling a ticket seller that my children are younger than they are, or by not reporting some income to the government tax office, or by overcharging my university for business expenses. Or I am tempted to have an affair, or to humiliate someone who has made me angry. In my own experience, these are the sorts of circumstances that most lead me to think about morality; I

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

have almost never encountered anything like the sorts of dilemmas and curious situations set up by ethics textbooks. (I've certainly never had to guide a runaway trolley car, blow up a fat man in the mouth of a cave, or decide whether to get myself cloned.) I suspect strongly that the same is true for my readers.

But the interesting thing about real ethical situations, as opposed to the ones in the ethics textbooks, is that I have very little doubt about what I ought to do in them. Faced with a choice between cheating or not cheating my government or my employer, or having and not having an affair, I don't have any real doubt about what the appropriate action is. I am not faced with two equally good moral claims, and the problem of finding an appropriate principle to settle the difference between them. Indeed, the most obvious reason why these kinds of situations don't crop up in ethics textbooks is that they seem philosophically uninteresting¹.

What I face instead, in these cases, is the question of *how to get myself to do* what I already know is the right thing to do. That means, above all, that I need to deal with the age-old struggle between conscience and temptation, the struggle against what religious Jews call "the evil desire" and religious Christians sometimes call "Satan." In that struggle it may be that philosophical thinking plays no role at all. But part of this struggle usually involves coming to grips with the ancient question, which is a philosophical one, about whether there might sometimes be good reason to suspend morality altogether, whether the best human life is always and necessarily the moral life. Faced with a strong temptation, I am often inclined to ask myself, at least for a moment, why I bother trying to be moral, whether I might not better, at least

1. It's interesting to note that Kant, for one, did not avoid cases like these. The cases in his *Groundwork* are almost all of this kind.

on this occasion, ignore morality. And there are a variety of not foolish reasons, from the critique of bourgeois morality made famous by Marx and Nietzsche, to Kierkegaard's religious reasons for going beyond ethics, to the arguments of rational egoists from Thrasymachus onwards, to suppose that morality might not, in fact, always be the best guide to a good human life.

We now get to the crux of the problem with moral philosophy. The arguments I have mentioned for throwing off the yoke of morality have all been made famous by philosophers, and that is no accident. Philosophy stands, by its very nature, at a certain remove from ordinary life, suspending what we take for granted. That stance is indeed a defining mark of what philosophy is, since the time of Socrates, and it is essential to the two main tasks that philosophers have generally set themselves: 1) seeking foundations for ordinary ways of talking and thinking, and 2) criticizing those ordinary practices. In order to provide either a theoretical foundation or a critique of ordinary practice, we need to suspend its hold upon us, set it at a distance from ourselves. But in the circumstances of moral temptation, the agent is not normally in need of a theoretical foundation for or critique of his ordinary norms and practices — *precisely* what the agent most needs is a greater emotional attachment to those norms and practices. And precisely what the agent most needs to avoid is any greater distance between himself and his ordinary morality. So if the situations that call for moral thought are most often ones in which, rather than facing two equally plausible moral claims, we face a temptation to throw off the yoke of morality altogether, and if philosophy lends itself to the development of intelligent views that make it seem reasonable to throw off that yoke, then philosophy may often come into our moral deliberations in the form of *an aid to the temptation to immorality*, rather

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

than an aid to the proper resolution of our quandaries. What we need to do, in these cases, is not difficult: the right path is a simple one, laid out in front of the philosopher as clearly as it is to any unphilosophical fool. The impulse to make the issue difficult is already part of the temptation not to do the right thing; our philosophical skills merely come in to help us justify what the fool already believes, rightly, we should *not* do. “A man often becomes a villain,” as Smith says, “the moment he begins, even within his own heart, to chicanery [with his conscience] in this manner.” It follows that we may make best use of philosophy, when tempted to “chicanery in this manner,” only to fend off the very temptation to do philosophy. What we philosophers can properly do with our philosophical skills is undermine the *bad* philosophies, or bad uses of philosophy, that tempt us — in Marxist or Nietzschean or rational egoist vein — away from the right path that even the fool could follow. We can use philosophy to fight philosophy. But that is the extent to which our moral deliberations, in many cases at least, require us to be philosophical.

We have come, now, close to a traditional project of moral philosophers. From Plato onwards, philosophers have often directed their moral writings above all to the refutation of what they considered to be bad moral philosophies elsewhere in their cultural milieu. There was no project more important to Plato — in the *Meno* and the *Apology* and the *Republic*, in the *Gorgias* and the *Theaetetus* — than refuting the relativism of the Sophists, and saving, in the face of their relativism, the rationality of being moral. Similarly, the main task in moral philosophy for Hutcheson and Smith, and a major one for Butler and Hume, was saving the rationality of being moral in the face of the egoism of Hobbes and Mandeville. Kant took the denial of free will to threaten the underpinnings of morals and his writings in moral

philosophy were devoted far more to showing why it is rational to believe in free will, and how freedom of the will entails morality, than to giving us any concrete guidance as to what, specifically, morality requires of us. The main task of good moral philosophy, for Plato and many of his successors, was to combat bad moral philosophy, to refute the Thrasymachus within us all. But that may mean, and I suggest it does mean, that philosophers need among other things to combat the inclination to suppose that moral issues are complicated — that it takes a philosopher to help us reach a wise resolution of situations we encounter in daily life.

At one point in the *Republic* Plato suggests a view somewhat like this, a view according to which the settling of ordinary moral controversies is not the business of philosophy. “It isn't worthwhile,” says Socrates to Adeimantus, to dictate specific laws about ordinary moral behavior to people who have a well-ordered soul: “most of these things ... they will ... easily find out for themselves.” (*Republic* 425 d-e). Indeed, to deal with ordinary moral behavior by way of specific rules and guidelines is to enter into an endless and fruitless process of trying to take care of the multifold symptoms of an illness without curing the illness itself (426a-b); those who think they can eventually settle all moral issues with rules for conduct, says Socrates, are “ignorant that they are really cutting off the heads of a Hydra” (426e). Only when the individual fundamentally restructures the relationship between reason and desire within himself can he possibly be virtuous. If he does that, he needs no further guidance to figure out the right way to act in most circumstances, and if he does not do that, no set of principles, no matter how good, will be enough to lead him to virtue.

I don't want to press an extreme version of this view. It may be that philosophers can help even virtuous people find

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

solutions to some complicated, confusing, or very new moral problems, that building a virtuous character within oneself will not enable one to solve all the moral issues one confronts. But I do think that the view I am attributing to Plato is far closer to the truth than the alternative view according to which it is the philosopher's job to offer solutions to difficult moral controversies. Decent character alone, it seems to me, may well be sufficient to enable most of us, most of the time, to act virtuously.

Conclusion: A Return to Where We Started

Let me conclude by returning to the question with which I opened. How, if the view I have been attributing to Plato is right, should my sister and I have solved the problem we faced as my mother was dying?

One response to that question might be that this is a *difficult* case in ethics, not the sort of clear case that I have been taking as paradigmatic. My sister and I did not know what we should do; we were not merely tempted away from what we already thought was right. So here, perhaps, philosophical thinking might be useful, if only to supply the general rules that people like my sister and I could then rely on. Indeed, practically any set of rules might be helpful in a situation like this, as a check on self-deceit, and that was in fact one reason why I preferred to turn to the dictates of the Jewish tradition, rather than my own reasoning, for a solution¹.

But of course this is not to say that Jewish law provided the *right* set of rules for this kind of situation; it is not at all clear what the right set of rules might be. As I said in the beginning of this article, Kantians, utilitarians, and religious ethicists

1. I also preferred to turn to an outside advisor — my rabbi, in this case — because I did not trust myself to come to a decent and properly unselfish solution on my own.

may well disagree among themselves about a case like this. Many people will therefore wind up, like my sister and I, with no clear sense of what they ought to do. The question I have been meaning to raise here is whether, even in the absence of a clear sense about what to do, there remains something to be said about *how* one should decide what to do. And to that question Plato seems to tell us, at least in the middle of the *Republic*, that we simply need to make sure that our reason controls our desires, and not vice versa. Then the right decision — a good decision, at least; a decent decision — will come forth of its own. It follows — disturbingly, on some views of ethics — that *both* my sister's way of handling the situation *and* my own could have been right.

And I want to close by suggesting that that is indeed the case, that indeed both my sister's and my proposed resolution of the situation could have been a decent, ethically appropriate one, as long as we came to it out of the right sorts of motivations and with the right attention to the dangers and costs entailed by our respective positions. It would clearly be wrong to shorten a loved one's life out of impatience with the length of the dying process, to say nothing of a crass desire to lay hands on her possessions. It would be equally wrong to insist on keeping the loved one alive out of one's own fear of death, or desire to be with her a little longer. Both my sister and I needed to attend primarily to the wishes of our mother, difficult as it may have been to figure out exactly what those were. We also needed to attend, however, to the strain that keeping our mother alive had on the rest of our family — while making sure that we considered that strain as much as possible in an unselfish way (from the stance of what Smith calls "the impartial spectator") rather than reacting out of the feelings imposed by the strain. As long as we considered all the issues in this way, I suggest, both my sister's and my way of deciding the matter could deserve ethical approval.

Self-Deceit and Moral Philosophy

Does this mean that neither my sister's nor my view was absolutely "right"? I don't know what to say about that. I do know that I have no idea what the absolutely right decision, if any, was in this situation, and that individuals, families, and whole societies can structure what seem to me equally decent ways of living around both types of approach to these cases. The cases do not occur in a vacuum, after all — they are interconnected with other cases, and part of a network of attitudes, practices, and institutions. Within these networks, an attitude or practice that tends too much towards one extreme, or runs too much risk of one sort of danger, will tend to be compensated, elsewhere, by attitudes and practices that run in the opposite direction. Thus in a society or family that generally believes in living only as long as life is worthwhile, people are at the same time likely to be careful to make sure that the alternative to a large dose of morphine really is the continuation of great pain, and that the patient really has at some point consented to the morphine. And in a society or family where people believe in extending life as long as possible, there are at the same time likely to be practices making sure that this extension of life is not carried to ridiculous extremes, that some way of making for a relatively painless death is permitted in cases in which the alternative is an existence of nothing but pain. In those branches of my own Jewish tradition, for instance, in which it is permitted to shorten life in order to reduce pain, the question of whether the patient has consented to such measures is of great importance, while in those branches that forbid any measure that shortens life, there are yet loopholes of one sort or another to allow one, in extreme circumstances, to avoid extending an excruciatingly painful life.

So I am not worried that an emphasis on what kinds of people we should be may lead to radically different ways of solving important moral problems. As long as the people

involved in a difficult situation are thoughtful, kind, honest, and courageous, their different solutions can all fit into decent ways of living. This is not relativism. I may not know what, absolutely, was the right thing to do in my mother's case, but I do think that the *way* of coming to a decision I am recommending is absolutely right, while making that decision in a purely selfish way would have been absolutely wrong. I am urging an absolute ethic of character, while avoiding an absolute ethic of action: the right way to go, I think, for anyone impressed by the moral philosophy of Adam Smith. And the first, and perhaps most important, element of any ethic of character is a way of coming to grips with the problem of self-deceit: the source of half the evils in human life, and a threat to decent character that each of us faces daily.

References

- Butler, Joseph. (1855) Sermon X ("Self-Deceit"), in *The Analogy of Religion to the Constitution and Course of Nature*; also, *Fifteen Sermons*. Ed. Joseph Angus. London: The Religious Tract Society.
- McMahan, Jeff. (2002) *The Ethics of Killing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plato. (1968). *The Republic*. Trans. A. Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Smith, Adam. (1976a) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)*. Ed. DD Raphael and AL Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam. (1976b) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Ed. RH Campbell, AS Skinner, and WB Todd. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam. (1983) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*. Ed. JC Bryce. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Specter, Michael. (1999) "The Dangerous Philosopher." *The New Yorker*.



پښتو ښکته ځاښه علوم انساني و مطالعات فرهنگي
پرتال جامع علوم انساني