

A Note on Paradoxes in Ethics

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August 9, 2006

The idea that there are intimate connections between Logic and Ethics might seem rather bizarre, but in fact there are several long-running problems in Ethics which will yield to logical insights. I have already written—albeit briefly—about how Logic takes with one hand by sharpening Hume’s puzzle about deriving an *ought* from an *is* in identifying this insight with an intuition of the interpolation lemma, while giving with the other by providing us with the theory of interpretations which allows us to think of *oughts* as **interpretable** as *is*’s. I have nothing to add to that for the moment, and here I shall be concerned with other issues in Logic and Ethics.

In this brief note I am concerned to indicate a known and named paradox which—it seems to me—lies at the heart of Ethics as well as in its place of origin. In doing this I am returning to ideas which first struck me when I was a philosophy undergraduate reading—*inter alia*—Carnap’s *Meaning and Necessity*, wherein I discovered Carnap’s *Paradox of the Name Relation*. Perhaps it will become clear—clearer perhaps to my readers than it is to me—why this appearance of Carnap’s paradox in this context suggests that there is a problem of ineffability in Ethics. This note is no more than a comment on work-in-progress, and I am grateful to Jürgis Skilters for this opportunity to float these ideas.

It has been said that Carnap’s paradox is no more than the failure of Leibniz’s law in intensional contexts, so its sudden manifestation in Ethics might tell us no more than that Ethics is a complicated business with lots of intensional entities. This is hardly news. However I suspect there may be more to it than that. In 1966 (when I was a first-year philosophy undergraduate) the Wilson Government in the U.K. announced that it would no longer distribute honours to civil servants and backbench members of parliament as a kind of supplementary pension at the end of a long career in public life. This prompted a cartoon in the now-defunct weekly magazine (*Punch*) with a suitably attired gentleman saying to his interlocutor “Frankly, if no honours are to be given for years of political service performed selflessly and with no thought of reward, I’ll just turn it in”.¹

¹Punch, Nov. 9 1966, p 706. The cartoonist is David Langdon. It is reprinted—slightly more accessibly—in my review of Barwise, J. and Moss, L. “Vicious Circles” *The Computer*

What is going on here? There is clearly *something* afoot, since otherwise there would be no humour. The point seems to be that there is something slightly paradoxical about virtue being its own reward. It is perfectly proper to reward people for good behaviour—indeed it could be argued that it would be improper not to—but the expectation of reward should not be the reason for engaging in the good behaviour. Where might this paradox lie? A moral action must be made in good faith. Might it be that there is no utterance satisfying Gricean conditions which means “I am in good faith” which is a truthful utterance? There does seem to be something odd about doing something simply in order to prove that you are in good faith: that something seems to be an oddness like the oddness of the menagerie of self-refuting expressions/utterances. If you say something that means that you are in good faith, then the Gricean conditions mean that you say it in order to make a certain impression, so you have an ulterior motive and in consequence your heart is not pure. . .

Another way of making the same point is to contrast Ethics with—say—Engineering. If you want to build a bridge, you consult a firm of civil engineers to obtain expert advice, and then act on it. This is entirely appropriate. However, someone who takes expert advice about what is *moral* is not exhibiting behaviour appropriate to being an authentic moral agent: they are exhibiting behaviour of someone who *strives to be* a moral agent, or who wishes to behave *as though* they were a moral agent. It's not enough to do the right thing, you have to do it because you know it is right. To do it on someone's say-so is not to act responsibly. Of course there may *be* moral experts—there are surely wiser and nobler people around than me—it's just that we can't make use of them the way we make use of expert engineers.

There is surely here a connection with Pascal's wager. There are two obvious points about Pascal's wager, but the observation that belief cannot be commanded is not the point of concern for us at the moment. The point is that even if belief could be commanded, the fact that the obtaining of belief was as a result of this calculation deprives it of its status as a moral act.

Someone who attempts to act morally by seeking expert advice may be making the same mistake as that made by the person who thinks that the purpose of a game is to win it. How is this a mistake? This too is a problem of reference. We play games because we enjoy them. To enjoy something, you have to do it properly. To play a game properly is to strive to do those things in virtue of which you win the game; *striving to do that in virtue of which you win* is not the same as *striving to win*. Striving to do that in virtue of which you win the game is an essential part of engaging correctly with the fiction; whether or not you are striving to win depends on your relations with the other player or on other matters outside the fiction.

To put it epigrammatically: the Punch cartoon suggests that there is a paradox. But there cannot be a paradox, because if there *is*, morality is incoherent. And that is a conclusion we are not prepared to accept. How is the paradox resolved and the concept of action-in-good-faith made coherent? Might this be

something to do with the concept of a person. No-one ever attributes good faith and authentic moral action to bodies corporate such as limited companies. They sponsor sporting events because it's useful to them, not because it's the right thing to do... isn't that what we believe? Is it the fact that these bodies corporate are not persons that make us reluctant to attribute pure motives to them?

When Alice, in *The Garden of Wild Flowers* (Chapter II of *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*) is seeking the Red Queen—whom she can see in the distance—the Rose advises her to set off in the opposite direction. Martin Gardner (in *The Annotated Alice*) suggests that this is “an obvious allusion to fact that forward and back are reversed in a mirror: walk towards a mirror, the image moves in the opposite direction” but I think he has missed a trick. I can't help feeling that Dodgson here has an apprehension of the situations where to achieve your goals you must approach them under a different description. This point is more commonly made about the search for *wisdom*... but that would take us too far!