Chapter 2  The Scope and Limits of Moral Argument

There are several different scales of values in the world, if not many: there is a scale for events near at hand and a scale for events at a distance; there is a scale for old societies and a scale for young ones; a scale for happy events, a scale for unfortunate ones. Glaringly, the divisions of the scales fail to coincide: they dazzle and hurt our eyes, and so that we do not feel the pain we wave aside all alien scales, judging them to be folly and delusion, and confidently judge the whole world according to our own domestic scale.


1 Preliminaries

There is no general agreement how the word ‘morality’ should be used. Some people think of morality as a set of rules laid down by God. Others think of it as a set of socially imposed rules with the function of reducing conflict in society. Others say it is a set of principles about how we ought to live that apply to everyone impartially, or which can be defended by appealing to the interests of people in general. These disagreements are a problem for anyone trying to say what moral beliefs are, but they will not be discussed here.

The question of what it means to say that a person 'ought' to do something is also one that will not be raised here. Much recent moral philosophy is devoted to this difficult problem, which still has no generally accepted solution. But I shall assume that we all, at some level, understand what is meant by saying that someone ought to do something. Perhaps that is all that the arguments of this book require, beyond the ruling out of one particularly narrow use of the word 'moral'. On this narrow view, morality is divorced from what we ought to do. A soldier may say that part of his morality is the command 'thou shalt not kill', but that moral considerations have to be subordinated to practical ones, such as the need to defend your country. But, as the word 'morality' is to be used here, where the soldier thinks that patriotism ought to take priority over not killing, it is not true that his morality forbids all killing.

2 Moral Disagreements

If a pacifist and a non-pacifist argue about the morality of war, it may be that their disagreement is essentially factual. The pacifist may say that wars always cause more misery than they prevent, so that no war is ever justified. The non-pacifist may agree that no war would be justified if all wars caused more misery than they prevented, but he may deny that this is true. Evidence, even if only of an inconclusive kind, can be cited in support of one view or the other.

But sometimes moral differences could survive the answering of all relevant factual questions. A pacifist and a non-pacifist might agree that some particular war was likely to cause less misery than it prevented, but still disagree about its morality. The pacifist might say that the reduction of misery does not justify the deliberate taking of human life. If he is asked why he thinks this, he may reply that the sanctity of life is an ultimate belief of his, capable of no further justification. He may then press the non-pacifist to say why he attaches such weight to reducing misery, and the non-pacifist may similarly have to reply that the undesirability of suffering is one of his ultimate beliefs.

Where two people hold different beliefs at the most fundamental level, it may be that no further argument is possible between them. I can defend my view that the avoidance of war is good, because I regard it as only an instrumental good: it is good as a means to things I regard as intrinsically good, such as
the avoidance of suffering. But I cannot defend my view that the avoidance of suffering is good. This is just because I think it good in itself, rather than good because it leads to something else that could be cited in its defence.

But it is possible that, in the argument between the pacifist and the non-pacifist, we have not yet reached the level of ultimate principles. The pacifist may claim that killing is always wrong because God has forbidden it. We may then, if we waive questions about how he knows that God exists or what God has forbidden, ask him why he believes that we ought to obey God. Perhaps it will be at this point that no further justification is forthcoming, and we realize that we have finally reached an ultimate belief: in this case that it is intrinsically good to obey God.

Similarly, the non-pacifist may provide reasons why he believes we ought to reduce suffering as much as possible. He may say that people always want to avoid suffering. We may then, if we waive questions about martyrs and masochists, ask him why we ought to satisfy universally held wants. If he can give no further reason, we have discovered something he believes to be intrinsically good.

We can often supply a chain of reasoning when challenged to defend a moral belief about what ought to be done. Any such chain of argument seems either to involve an infinite regress or else to end with an ultimate moral belief. Such a belief is ultimate in that what it tells us to do is not prescribed because it is instrumental to some further good. These ultimate beliefs are like the axioms of a system of geometry: the other beliefs of a moral system are derivable from the axioms, but the axioms themselves cannot be 'proved'.

Many of those who accept John Stuart Mill's claim that 'Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof' think that this is sufficient to establish the futility of argument in moral matters. It may seem that, since nothing could count as 'proving' one set of values to be 'true', it is as pointless to argue about morality as it would be to try to persuade someone by argument to prefer one colour to another.

But this is to take too pessimistic a view. Even leaving aside the extent to which argument about facts can be relevant to questions about what ought to be done, there are various fruitful methods of argument about moral beliefs.

One method of arguing against a moral belief is to show that it depends on concepts that are blurred or incoherent. Someone who believes that homosexual acts are wicked because they are unnatural may be open to this kind of argument. If pressed to define 'unnatural' he may find it hard to provide a definition that includes homosexual acts without also including singing at the opera.

Another method of rational moral argument involves the exposure of logical inadequacies. This may take the form of showing that what are taken to be good reasons for holding a belief are not really so. (It is often said that human suffering matters more than animal suffering because we have rationality of a kind or degree that animals lack. But reflection about feeble-minded children may make us question this as a reason for thinking that animal suffering is less important.) Or it may take the form of exposing inconsistencies in someone's principles. If you disapprove of all abortions, I may ask you to give a reason. If you reply that to take human life is always wrong, I will ask if you are a complete pacifist. If you hold some non-pacifist views about war, you must either abandon or modify your principle that taking life is always wrong or else change your mind about pacifism. This (very crude) example shows how it is possible to apply legitimate pressure to the moral beliefs of anyone sufficiently rational to be disturbed by inconsistency.

And moral argument has a wider scope than the exposing of inconsistencies within someone's formulated principles. It often takes the form of showing someone that his beliefs have unnoticed consequences that he would find unacceptable. Some general principles used in support of abortion provide an equally good justification for infanticide. Someone who holds such a principle, but who cannot accept the consequent rightness of infanticide, is trapped in an inconsistency. The general
principle must be abandoned or modified or else the unpalatable consequence must be accepted. The pattern of argument here is similar to that used to link abortion and pacifism in the previous case. The difference is that there the inconsistency was between two beliefs already formulated and accepted, while here inconsistency is between an accepted principle and a moral response to a question not previously considered.

Moral beliefs can be undermined by our responses to their consequences. But our responses are themselves liable to modification, either by experience or by the development of imagination. Someone who accepts with equanimity that his patriotic principles commit him to supporting certain wars may find this consequence less acceptable if he ever experiences war as a soldier. It is a truism that we are able to accept the rightness of actions or policies often only because of a failure of imagination, and experience of their consequences often greatly changes our responses. Sometimes experience may not be needed. It can be enough to use some imagination, and often films or novels can help us to respond in a more sensitive or imaginative way. Someone who thinks that Stalin's labour camps were an acceptable consequence of a morally legitimate policy may not himself be able to experience such a camp, but the novels of Solzhenitsyn may modify his views about what is acceptable.

3 The Interplay Between Responses and General Beliefs

On the view so far outlined, moral principles are 'tested' by our responses that their consequences are acceptable or unacceptable. It may seem that, on such an account, our general moral beliefs do very little work, and exist as mere summaries of our particular responses. But our general beliefs need not be merely derivative from our responses: they can also function to modify and evaluate our responses. In the light of a general morality it is possible to regard a specific response as inad-
way. Taught as dogma and left uncriticized, they are no longer modified by experience and imagination in the direction of greater subtlety or sophistication. As a dead morality comes to be seen as rigid and crude, there is a natural temptation no longer to regard it as a morality in the sense under discussion. The word 'morality' comes no longer to be used to denote a set of beliefs about what ought to be done. Instead, it is used to denote a set of rules that can often rightly be ignored, like the rules of etiquette. Dead moralities encourage people to think in a way that allows them to say such things as 'I know it is morally wrong, but moral considerations ought to take second place to practical ones.'

A view not based in this way on dead moralities rejects claims of this kind, and thus rules out an important defence mechanism. For when someone, contrasting moral considerations with practical ones, gives priority to the latter, he is defending himself in two ways. He is defending his conduct against the criticism that it is immoral, by implying that it falls outside the scope or jurisdiction of morality. At the same time he is protecting his morality from being modified by his experience. He admits that his morality is impractical, with the insinuation that it is in the nature of a morality to be so. The soldier who thinks that killing is always morally wrong but often right in practice has a 'morality' and a way of life that are comfortably protected from each other.

Just as one kind of scientific integrity consists in submitting one's theories to thorough testing, so one kind of moral integrity consists in refusing to isolate one's morality from one's conduct and experience. There are at least two kinds of bad faith that can arise here. The first, already mentioned, consists in holding 'moral' beliefs that one does not believe ought to be acted on and whose consequences as a result are not often experienced. The second consists in a deliberate filtering or distortion of experience, so that responses incompatible with accepted general beliefs do not arise. An opponent of voluntary euthanasia who refused to visit a geriatric ward out of fear of his beliefs being disrupted would be exhibiting this kind of bad faith, as would a supporter of it who refused to think about or meet the doctor asked to do the killing.

It can sometimes be right to avoid contact with people affected by your own actions, where this might generate a bias in favour of their interests relative to those of other people. (This factor seems to have influenced Mr Roy Jenkins, Home Secretary in 1974, when he had to decide whether to yield to a hunger strike by the Price sisters, I.R.A. members convicted of a violent crime, in support of their demand for transfer to a prison in Northern Ireland. Mr Jenkins said, 'I have not seen them myself. I considered this possibility, but rejected it firmly. I did not see the suffering of their victims in hospital. I do not think it right that I should see their hunger strike in prison. The person on whom the ultimate decision rests must, I am sure, stand back a little.' This seems quite legitimate for someone who has to weigh up the interests of the Price sisters and the interests of potential future victims of acts of violence similar to theirs.)

4 Why Have General Moral Beliefs?

Sometimes it is said that we can do without general moral beliefs and simply be guided by our intuitive responses. (D.H. Lawrence has been influential here.) Discussion of morality in general terms can be seen as something stale and second-hand. On this view, insights as to how we should live arise as we develop experimentally a way of life, and the making of generalizations is a derivative task for lovers of taxonomy and the legalistically inclined.

One argument for formulating general moral beliefs is that the alternative is very likely to involve a tacit inconsistency. To take again a crude example, it is characteristic of many people's responses in a political context that they believe that tax increases are a bad thing, but that more money should be spent on schools, hospitals, roads, defence and pensions. There is at least a surface inconsistency in these responses. Only thinking in gen-
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eral terms about priorities, as well as about how to put them into effect, will either remove the inconsistency or show it to be only apparent. (It is striking how many people mess up their lives by not thinking clearly and coherently about what they really value.)

Another argument appeals, not to consistency, but to autonomy. We do not reach adult life with open minds about morality. Whether or not we accept Freud's claims about the way the pressures of family relationships and sexual adjustment mould the super-ego, or Marx's claims about the crucial role of the economic system in determining the moral consciousness of society, only a naive person could deny the influence of social and personal pressures on moral responses. Many people's responses are simply the result either of childhood conditioning or of the views currently fashionable in their society. The first step away from being manipulated, and towards a more autonomous outlook, is to stand back from a set of responses and to think.

There is also the argument that there may be cases where intuitive reactions cannot be relied on for guidance. Sometimes we suspect that self-interest or emotional disturbance is distorting our responses. Someone asked by a doctor whether or not further efforts should be made to prolong the life of an old relation, painfully ill in a geriatric ward, may not trust his own responses. It may be hard to tell how much they are distorted by the fact that in the event of survival the relation would be a burden, or by fear of guilt if he agrees that treatment should stop. It is helpful, in deciding whether to trust a response, to see whether or not it fits in with general beliefs worked out when free from such pressures.

Sometimes people do not have a single, clear intuitive response by which to be guided. Some babies with gross abnormalities are allowed to die when their lives could be saved. For someone who accepts that this is justified, it may be hard to know where to draw a line. How serious an abnormality makes it better for a person not to live? Many of us have no clear intuitive answer to such a question. If we were doctors or surgeons having to make such choices we would often be quite uncertain what we ought to do. In such cases, we could only fall back on general beliefs about the sorts of factors that ought to be considered. Such beliefs will not always give clear guidance. But for someone who has neither intuitive answers nor any relevant general beliefs, there is no basis whatever on which to decide.

5 Degrees of Guidance

There are at least two reasons why general moral beliefs may give inadequate guidance in a particular case. It may be that not all the facts are clear: we may not know how senile the old person will be if he lives, or how much the abnormal baby will come to be able to have a relationship with other people. Another reason is that cases vary so much that beliefs formulated in very general terms may not immediately generate a decision in a complicated situation.

Those who doubt the value of such general beliefs often think that moral beliefs must either be crude and inflexible or else of a cumbersome complexity similar to tax law. But these are not the only alternatives. It is possible to have a moral system whose outlines are sketched in, but whose detailed applications were only worked out in advance where often needed. (A surgeon may give more detailed thought in advance to abortion or euthanasia than to moral questions about censorship.) The more detailed guidance a moral system gives, the more complex it is likely to be. On the other hand, the less it is worked out in detail, the more likely it is to entail unnoticed unacceptable consequences.

6 Is It Futile to Propose Moral Beliefs?

It is sometimes said that it is pointless to argue for a set of moral beliefs. It may be claimed that, in morality, any formulated proposal must either reflect a way of life which already
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has an independent existence or else must be a mere pipe dream. The view that moral proposals must be either superfluous or else powerless seems to underlie some famous remarks made by Hegel. He said:

One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it. As the thought of the world, it appears only when actuality is already there cut and dried after its process of formation has been completed. The teaching of the concept, which is also history's inescapable lesson, is that it is only when actuality is mature that the ideal first appears over against the real and that the ideal apprehends this same real world in its substance and builds it up for itself into the shape of an intellectual realm. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.1

It is no doubt true that a person's moral views are influenced by the historical period and by the society in which he lives. But it is possible to develop new beliefs that are not mere reflections of practices already in existence, perhaps as a result of critical thought about existing beliefs and practices. Hegel himself was sceptical of the value of working out such new beliefs. He said:

Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy is too its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overlap his own age, jump over Rhodes. If this theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his own opinions, an insubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built.

But this scepticism of Hegel's seems to rest on the dubious assumption that new ideas about how the world ought to be cannot influence what in fact happens. And, even if it were true

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general beliefs may, in the situation that actually exists, support the same policy, we can only bring out their disagreements by asking them to imagine a rather altered situation. And the point of these imaginary cases is not only to make it clear what general beliefs someone holds, but also to provide tests of their acceptability. A man who thinks that capital punishment is wrong because the state never has the right to take a citizen’s life may be asked whether he would still think this if ten potential murder victims were saved by each execution. Such a case functions as a test of whether he really finds the consequences of his belief acceptable.

The use of hypothetical cases in this way is not a new method in ethics. Consider this passage from the introduction to the Republic.

‘That’s fair enough, Cephalus,’ I said, ‘but are we really to say that doing right consists simply and solely in truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed? Are those not actions that can be sometimes right and sometimes wrong? For instance, if one borrowed a weapon from a friend who subsequently went out of his mind and then asked for it back, surely it would be generally agreed that one ought not to return it, and that it would not be right to do so, or to consent to tell the strict truth to a madman?’

‘That is true,’ he replied.

‘Well then,’ I said, ‘telling the truth and returning what we have borrowed is not the definition of doing right.’

But of course the antiquity or prestige of those who first used a method of thinking are only of historical interest and in no way count as defences of it. The objection to the use of hypothetical cases in ethics seems to be that there is something ‘unreal’ or artificial about such a procedure. The legitimate defence against this criticism can take the form of saying that the artificiality involved is one that has been fruitful in other fields. In a scientific experiment, the influence of all factors not being studied is, as far as possible, ‘artificially’ eliminated. A defence of experimental method has its parallel in the case for arguing about ethics by means of asking for responses to deliberately simplified imaginary situations. The imaginary cases discussed in this book are not ones which are merely conceivable, but satisfy the stronger requirement that our present knowledge does not show them to be factually impossible.

8 The Possibility of Disagreement

Various ways in which rational argument about moral principles resembles scientific inquiry have been stressed here. The purpose has been to make clearer the relatively rarely understood methods of one inquiry by comparing them with the more commonly understood procedures of the other. The aim has not been to borrow the prestige of science. No claim is made that moral argument can establish general principles which any rational and informed person must accept. The testing of a coherent set of moral beliefs comes in one’s responses. Since different people often have different responses, not everyone will agree as to when a general belief has been undermined. There is always the possibility, and sometimes the reality, of ultimate disagreement. There would be little point in public discussion and argument if people’s responses hardly ever coincided about anything. But, although that state of moral anarchy does not exist, different people’s responses do vary more fundamentally and more frequently than is often recognized. It would be possible for someone to accept all the arguments put forward in the rest of this book and yet legitimately to reject many of the conclusions because they do not accept the premises.

Sometimes I shall argue against certain beliefs that they are incoherent, or else that reasons thought to support them do not really do so. Such claims can in principle be objectively established or refuted. At other times I shall argue that the consequences of some beliefs are morally unacceptable. I do not want to pretend that this sort of claim has any kind of ‘objectivity’.