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THE UNRESOLVABILITY OF ETHICAL DISPUTES

BY JAMES R. FLYNN

I have long thought that the consequences of granting the unresolvability of certain ethical disputes (sometimes called ethical scepticism or subjectivism or relativism) have been generally under rated. In this paper, I intend to argue for the following thesis: if we grant we cannot make a case based on reason (whether logic or dialectic) or evidence (whether empirical or revelation or what have you) that our ideals are worthy of regard by those who do not share them, we have no right to *claim* that our ideals are worthy of regard by those who do not share them—which is to say we cannot claim that they are worthy of regard by all mankind. By “worthy of regard” I mean “worthy of being accepted or believed in”, which means that my thesis can also be put as follows: whenever we cannot resolve an ethical dispute, we have no right to tell our opponent in that dispute that he ought to accept our ideals. Moreover, I think I have a proof for my thesis, a proof that anyone who acts in violation of it can be convicted of a logical inconsistency.

Let me spell out the sort of dispute I have in mind as the most likely to be unresolvable, and here it is important to distinguish disputes *within* a set of basic ideals or first principles from disputes based on a conflict *between* differing ideals or principles. Usually the former are resolvable by way of empirical evidence, e.g., if two men share humane ideals and agree that the morality of capital punishment depends on whether it deters potential murderers (thereby saving lives), they can usually resolve their dispute by way of statistical evidence about whether capital punishment really deters potential murderers. But when we turn to the latter sort of dispute, e.g., disputes between humane men and those who hold non-humane ideals, these prove much more difficult to resolve. Imagine that a humane man is faced with an opponent with a punitive concept of justice who holds that murderers deserve to be punished with death whether this deters anyone or not—or an opponent with elitist ideals who would sacrifice thousands of “ordinary” men for the sake of one great cathedral—or an opponent with Social Darwinist ideals who would ruthlessly weed out the weak and unintelligent to make of mankind a work of art. We would certainly not give up on such opponents: some of them may have ideals that involve factual errors (e.g., racists), others may hold logically inconsistent beliefs, and others may not be willing to universalize their principles. Yet, when all is said and done, it may well be that a fair number of such disputes will prove to be unresolvable even in theory.¹

¹I want to take this opportunity to make another distinction, that between a dispute in which we find ourselves unable to present a case on behalf of our ideals that our opponent *should* accept (a dispute unresolvable in theory) and a dispute in which we are

The above should not be taken to commit me to the view that there are in fact ethical disputes (engendered by conflicting basic ideals) which are unresolvable. While most of today's thinkers would probably endorse such a view, there would be many dissenters, a fair number within the classical tradition and some among those who take the "good reasons" approach. In this paper, I do not wish to participate in that debate, rather I wish to focus on *what is at stake* in that debate. The question of the consequences entailed *if* certain ethical disputes are unresolvable should interest all thinkers, no matter where they stand on the issue of resolvability itself.

I

Whatever the present state of philosophical opinion, I fear that one thing is clear. Those who have become dominant in the English-speaking world, those thinkers who have been strongly influenced by British empiricism or linguistic analysis or the work of Wittgenstein, are virtually unanimous in rejecting my thesis. Therefore I shall give them a chance to attack it, even though, needless to say, no particular thinker will be fully satisfied by the remarks put forward on his behalf:

"You have grossly exaggerated the consequences of the unresolvability of ethical disputes. You seem merely to assume that if we cannot *argue* that our basic ideals are worthy of regard by those who do not accept them, we can make no claims to that effect. In other words, you ignore the possibility that we can use our basic ideals or first principles *themselves* to claim our ideals are worthy of regard by all mankind. And this possibility has ordinary usage on its side, a fact that emerges clearly if we analyse both the grammar of our moral assertions and the way in which we use them. The grammar of our moral assertions is categorical in character, that is, when we say an act is wrong, we do not mean to imply that it is wrong if the person who does it accepts that it is wrong—we mean to say it is wrong *flatly*. As for usage, when faced with an opponent whose basic ideals differ from our own, we do not let it go at that, do not say "Fair enough, you believe in a punitive or revenge ethic and I believe in humane behaviour"; rather we go on to condemn his basic ideals, to say "Well, you should not accept a code based on revenge". Certainly this last amounts to an assertion that our ideals (rather than his) are worthy of his regard, despite the fact he rejects them. To put the point in a sentence: we do not need to earn the right to claim that our moral principles are worthy of regard from all mankind; we do not need a justification of our basic ideals or a case for ethical truth or a case for objectivity as a prop."

merely unable to present a case that he *actually would* accept (a dispute unresolvable in practice). After all, we might make a case on the basis of reason or evidence that ought to override our opponent's ideals and he might be too stupid to follow our reasoning, too blind to see the evidence, or just too stubborn to give in when he knows he is wrong. Just to be perfectly clear, it is our inability to resolve disputes in theory that I have in mind throughout this paper, that is, I certainly do *not* mean to say that our inability to win an opponent over in practice means we cannot claim our ideals are worthy of his regard.

In order to counter the above line of attack, I think it necessary to emphasize that the situation it describes, one man dedicated to a certain set of ideals and his opponent dedicated to another set, is by no means the only one in which we try to find some method of resolving a clash between conflicting sets of basic ideals. Another situation, and perhaps a more agonizing one, is when a man finds himself *torn from within* by conflicting ideals. Imagine that you read of a particularly horrible and senseless murder, perpetrated by someone without obvious psychological problems and whose background reveals no clearly extenuating circumstances. Assume you are not a hard determinist and do not accept the current nonsense that all crime is a disease and that therefore you feel free to allocate praise and blame. And then you find that, despite the fact you have always thought of yourself as thoroughly humane, you are overwhelmed with the sense that such a criminal deserves punishment purely as a matter of justice. In other words, you find yourself torn by a clash *between* the humane ideal of a criminal code based purely on considerations like deterrence of crime and reformation of the wrong-doer *and* the conviction that such a man ought to be punished whether such considerations dictate punishment or not.

Now if one has a rational or evidential method of resolving conflicts between basic ideals, some method of establishing ethical truth or which ideals are worthy of regard by all, one can use that method to resolve the conflict within oneself. For example, if Plato had been torn between Thrasymachus's Social Darwinist concept of justice and the (at least more) humane concept of the *Republic*, he could have called upon dialectic, could have ascended the divided line to view the perfect or just state of human society as revealed in the Form. But if a man has no rational or evidential method, if he has no method to tell him what he *should* believe, he has no choice but to ask himself what he *really does* believe. That is, lacking an *epistemological* method, he must fall back on a *psychological* method. When torn from within by humane ideals and a punitive ethic, he is left asking himself questions like: which set of ideals stirs me most?—or: given two men, one who lives by ideals A and the other by ideals B, which do I admire most?—or: which ideals am I most willing to use to pattern my life?—or: which do I wish to hand on to my children? Those questions are not put forward as the precise ones a man who lacks an epistemological method must ask—he may hit on something much more complex. My point is merely that such a man will have to espouse a psychological method of some sort, a method based on the precept “know thyself”.

The important thing about a psychological method is that it will give differing results when applied by different people. If *you* are the one torn between humane ideals and a revenge ethic, and if you ask yourself “Which ideals do I wish to hand on to my children?”, the answer may well be “I should loathe my children to believe in a revenge ethic, I want them to grow up to be humane”. And therefore you might conclude that, however

torn you seem to be, when it comes down to it, you really believe in humane ideals. On the other hand, imagine you are debating with an opponent over the morality of capital punishment and someone from the audience is moved by your words, someone approaches you who (being let us say from the Kentucky hill country) has always believed in a revenge ethic without question but now sees that it clashes with certain humane ideals which attract him. If *he* applies your psychological test, he may conclude that he really does believe in a revenge ethic, or at least believes it should take priority whenever it conflicts with humane ideals. Then to tell him that he ought to accept humane ideals is equivalent to telling him to ignore the *very method* you yourself espouse, espouse as the appropriate method for resolving a clash of ideals within oneself!

Perhaps the reader believes that in focusing on men who feel torn between conflicting basic ideals or first principles, I have singled out a small and insignificant portion of mankind. In my opinion, depending on the time and place, we may find ourselves surrounded by men torn between old ideals and new ones; look at the current American scene. But in any event, whether few or many, it is precisely these men, men in flux, that we are likely to sway in ideological debate. Plato did not think Thrasymachus had much chance of converting Cephalus, a man of the older generation fixed in his ideals, but he knew the youth of Greece were in flux and suspected that Adeimantus and Glaucon and Polemarchus were a different matter. Plato was also aware of an important truth: any clash of ideals held by opposing men can be duplicated *within* a given man. It was for this reason, among others, that he chose the dialogue as a format.

All of this has paved the way for the presentation of my proof, my proof that whenever we cannot resolve an ethical dispute, we have no right to claim our basic ideals are worthy of regard by our opponents. It has seven steps:

- (1) When we grant that certain ethical disputes are unresolvable, we mean that we have no case in reason (whether logic or dialectic) or evidence (whether empirical or revelation or what have you) that can show our opponent he ought to accept our ideals—we have no epistemological case.
- (2) Having no *epistemological* test to resolve a clash of basic ideals, we must choose a *psychological* test.
- (3) If one espouses a test as the proper way of establishing a result, and if someone else applies that test properly, it is logically inconsistent to tell him he should not accept the result.
- (4) If one espouses a psychological test (no matter which one) for resolving a clash of basic ideals, and if that test is applied properly by men, some of them will opt in favour of ideals other than one's own.
- (5) To tell these men that they ought to accept one's own ideals is to tell them this—that they ought not to accept the results of a test which one espouses and which they have properly applied.
- (6) Therefore, to tell them they ought to accept one's ideals is logically inconsistent.

- (7) Which is to say that when we grant certain ethical disputes are unresolvable, this entails giving up claims that our ideals are worthy of regard by all mankind.

II

Given the significance of my proof, it will certainly be attacked. Clearly the most crucial and controversial steps are propositions (2) and (3), and I imagine that my critics will concentrate their efforts on them.

For example, the intuitionist can elude my proof by denying proposition (2). He grants that he cannot make a case against his opponent in terms of reason or evidence, but he claims to have a non-evidential method of knowing that his ideals are "true" or valid for everyone (including his opponent). That is, although he concedes that he has no *public* epistemological method of weighing clashing ideals, he does not grant that he is forced to adopt a psychological test—rather he claims to have a *private* epistemological method. The fact that the intuitionist eludes my proof does not much disturb me, however, because of the extreme vulnerability of intuitionism to critique. I believe it safe to say that most of today's thinkers will feel that the philosophical price of enlisting under this banner is far too high.

As for a more tempting line of attack, a critic may argue that we feel bound to approve of the result of a method only if it is an epistemological one and not if it is a psychological one and that therefore my proposition (3) is false. In answer, my proposition (3) does not say we must "approve" of the result. To approve of the result is to accept it ourselves and of course we feel bound to do that only if the method is epistemological; e.g., if someone shows me that a theorem in geometry is demonstrable or if someone shows me an empirical hypothesis has evidence on its side, I feel bound to accept it. But my proposition (3) does not say anything about *my* accepting the result of my opponent's using a psychological method to resolve a clash of ideals—it merely says that it is inconsistent (if I endorse the method) for me to tell him *he* should not accept the result. It is not a matter of my accepting his (let us say) non-humane ideals on the basis of his application of a psychological method; it is a matter of granting that it is appropriate for him to accept his non-humane ideals on that basis.

The real difference between an epistemological and a psychological method is that we expect the former to bring unity of opinion, to reconcile opponents, and we expect the latter to allow for diversity, to leave opponents in some cases unreconciled. But this should not obscure the fact that if we endorse a method as appropriate *in certain circumstances*, then we must, whether the method be epistemological or psychological, grant that whoever uses it *in those circumstances* is logically correct in accepting the result it gives. We must keep in mind the essentials of what is going on here: I grant that when I am troubled by a clash of basic ideals, a certain method is the proper way to resolve the clash; another who is in the circumstances for which the method is granted to be appropriate (troubled by a clash of basic ideals)

uses the very method I endorse and uses it correctly. What if I then say to him, "Don't accept the non-humane ideals my method has given you, my humane ideals are the ones you should accept"? As we have seen, he is sure to reply: "You mean to claim that I should do something you would never do, just accept someone else's ideals, rather than use the method you yourself endorse? You mean to tell me that I should adopt a new method, "Just accept whatever I tell you to", in place of the other?"

From experience in philosophical debate, I know that my critic will almost undoubtedly seize on the words "logically correct" in the above paragraph, that he will say something like the following: "Of course your opponent is logically correct to accept the results of a sensible method of resolving internal clashes between conflicting basic ideals or first principles. But there is nothing new in that. As soon as we conceded we could not use reason to make a case against his ideals, we conceded that there was nothing logically incoherent about his accepting those ideals (by definition). What you ignore is that despite the fact he is *logically correct*, we can still say he is *morally remiss* for holding his non-humane ideals. After all, despite our unresolved dispute, I retain a set of humane first principles; you agree to that but you continue to overlook its significance. For it means that it is quite in order for me to condemn his non-humane ideals and tell him that he ought (in a moral sense) to accept my first principles. Nothing in your proof takes away my right to do this, and therefore your whole thesis collapses. Despite my inability to make a case in disputes engendered by conflicting first principles, I have the right to claim that my basic ideals are worthy of regard (in a moral sense) by all mankind."

This objection brings me to what seems to me the most important point in this paper: *it is logically incoherent to claim that someone ought (in a moral sense) to accept a set of moral principles that are granted to be first principles.* We use the word 'ought' in a moral sense only when stating moral principles (only within the principles themselves). When we reach our first principles, our most basic principles or ideals, we have no more moral principles to state—the process of using 'ought' in a moral sense must stop. Therefore, it is logically incoherent to tell someone he ought (in a moral sense) to adopt our first principles. It is like granting that we make factual claims only in empirical hypotheses and then arguing that, when we say to someone, "You ought to accept this empirical hypothesis", we are using that assertion to state a factual claim. Actually, of course, we do not use empirical hypotheses to get someone to accept empirical hypotheses, we use the scientific method, an epistemological method.

I wish to avoid confusion here. There is *one sense* in which we can say that all mankind, including those who reject our basic ideals, ought (in a moral sense) to hold our first principles (and be guilty of no logical incoherence). We may be looking at our principles as causal factors in leading people to behave in a certain way; e.g., a man with humane principles is

likely to do humane actions. And since the very function of moral principles is to praise actions, and to praise whatever causal factors engender those actions, we can say that our first principles ought to be held by an opponent—insofar as they act *as causal factors*. But this exception merely supports my thesis: to praise our first principles in this way is not the same as telling someone he ought to adopt them *as first principles*. In other words, the only time we can heap moral praise on our first principles is when we stop treating them as *assertions of principle* and make them into *states of mind*, things that can be praised or blamed within some other substantive moral assertion. It is as if we stated an empirical hypothesis about an empirical hypothesis, e.g., “People who believe that the earth is flat will tend to be afraid of falling off”. The proposition ‘the earth is flat’ is no longer being treated as an empirical hypothesis, but as a causal factor within some other hypothesis. In effect, the only significance of the exception we have hit upon is that, if I want to avoid confusion, I must amend my key point as follows: it is logically incoherent to claim that someone ought (in a moral sense) to accept a set of first principles *which are being treated as first principles*.

My critic claims that I overlook the significance of the fact that we retain our moral principles despite our inability to make a case against an opponent. I reply that my critic and I agree that we retain our first principles, but disagree concerning what we can use them for. I hold: (1) We can use them to condemn the behaviour of an opponent who is non-humane—my principles give me good enough reason to try to put a stop to his behaviour, in extreme cases even by taking his life; (2) We can use them to condemn his first principles as causal factors productive of non-humane behaviour—my principles give me good reason to hope that his will be stamped out; (3) But we cannot use our first principles to tell an opponent that he ought (in a moral sense) to accept them.

It may seem that I give the game away when I grant that we can use our moral principles to assess our opponent’s behaviour. My critic may see an opening here and ask, “Is not accepting and rejecting beliefs part of human behaviour? And therefore can we not tell an opponent that he ought (in a moral sense) to accept our first principles, that he ought to believe in them?”. This objection can be answered by citing a well-established rule about moral assertions: it is logically incoherent to tell someone he *ought* to do something unless he *can* do it. Now to tell someone that he just ought to believe in certain first principles of morality, when he does not in fact believe in them, is to ask the impossible—which means we are guilty of logical incoherence if we tell an opponent he ought to believe in our first principles.²

Let me elaborate on this a bit. For I do not want readers to think my

²There is another way in which I might seem to get into trouble by granting that we can condemn our opponent’s behaviour. If I meant this in the sense of granting that we could turn to him and say “*You ought to alter your behaviour*”, I might be guilty of a contradiction—for does it make sense to tell a man he ought to alter his

reply rests on the assumption that we are addressing someone who is inflexibly committed to his present principles, someone who is totally committed to (let us say) a revenge morality and finds a humane morality so repugnant that he could change his principles only if he exchanged his whole present psychological make-up for another. Undoubtedly there are such men, and to tell them they ought to accept humane ideals would be like telling an Englishman who enjoys only beef and beer that he ought to stop enjoying his present diet and enjoy eating grasshoppers instead. But I can hardly rest my reply on such examples, given that I have singled out men who find themselves in flux, men who are torn between conflicting sets of first principles, as especially significant.

Take a torn man, take our example of someone who finds himself torn between the conviction that a particularly heinous criminal deserves the death penalty (purely as a matter of justice) and the conviction that the criminal code should be purely humane (should only consider reformation and deterrence). Even such a man, a man in flux, a torn man, just cannot end his tension by deciding to pay heed to our admonition and accept humane ideals—for him to accept certain first principles he must really be convinced *into* believing in them (by a case) or really be convinced *that* he believes in them (by a psychological method). To tell such a man he ought to accept humane first principles is like saying “You ought to flip a coin” or “You ought to go out and count the lines on your front walk (even for humane, odd for revenge)”. We may flip a coin when in doubt as to which of two roads to take, even if a life is at stake; but no one can imagine himself doing this when it is a matter of fixating belief between two sets of moral principles. How different is it to be told to fixate belief on someone else’s say-so? But that is all that telling someone he ought to accept humane first principles comes down to *if* all reasons are at an end. We may indeed go to a friend for help when torn, but we expect discussion, not a dictum. I am assuming in all of this that the man torn is a mature moral agent.

The phrase ‘mature moral agent’ is important because I am likely to be told that we advise small children to accept our first principles as such (as principles to be believed in) purely on our say-so. In my opinion, this is a distortion of what goes on. We really command children to behave in a certain way and hope they will come to internalize corresponding moral principles. Moreover, children are *tabulae rasae* in regard to moral principles; it is not a matter of their fixating belief between competing sets of principles but a matter of developing any moral principles at all. And, finally, small children have no mature attitude to accepting moral principles, no notion of what such principles are and what is at stake in fixating belief.

It may be objected that a torn man may end up accepting humane first actions if we cannot (as I argue) tell him he ought to alter his ideals? That is why I have tried to make it clear (above) that we can condemn our opponent’s behaviour only in this sense: given that it is non-humane, we can say to ourselves “That is something I must not copy, must oppose, must try to eliminate, etc.”.

principles (and therefore, it makes sense to tell him he ought to) and that I have merely shown he cannot *accept advice* to accept humane first principles. But this is only a verbal quibble. Assume that we, on that basis, tell someone he ought to adopt humane first principles and he asks "Ought I to take your advice?". Having conceded that he *cannot* take our advice, we must concede that we are unable to tell him he *ought* to take it. To offer advice we are unable to tell a man he should take is incoherent. After all, a torn man could flip a coin (just to humour us) and could accept humane ideals (after using a psychological method), but he could not take our advice to *fixate belief* by flipping a coin.

My reply to this last objection might seem to contradict my reply to a previous one. A few pages ago, I said we could morally condemn an opponent's "state of mind", condemn his "belief" in his first principles as a causal factor productive of non-humane behaviour. And now I say we cannot tell him he ought to accept our principles. However, if readers have understood my replies, they will appreciate that to condemn his *beliefs* (as a causal factor) is quite distinct from telling him that he should *alter* his beliefs, that he should give up his own first principles and begin believing in mine. Indeed, we can now see, more clearly than before, what was meant when I said that we were no longer treating our first principles as first principles when we viewed them as causal factors. A first principle is something we weigh in terms of whether we believe in it or not, a causal factor is something we weigh in terms of its effects. To make a moral assertion about our first principles which converts them into causal factors is to take them completely out of the context of weighing them as things to be believed. Therefore, such an assertion can hardly constitute telling an opponent that he ought (in a moral sense) to alter his beliefs. And therefore, this line of debate, like the last, merely leads me to a final amendment of my key point: it is logically incoherent to claim that someone ought (in a moral sense) to accept a set of first principles which are being treated as first principles, *which is to say when they are being held up as something to be believed in or not.*

A piece of unfinished business: there *are* occasions when we tell someone he ought to believe something even though he cannot; but on those occasions we are not using 'ought' in a moral sense. For example, we might tell a man who believes the earth is flat that he ought to believe it is round, even though we know that because of religious dogmatism he could never change his mind. But here, rather than using 'ought' in a moral sense, we are using it to say "That is what the scientific method shows". And it is exactly this sort of 'ought' (you ought to believe this because it has reason or evidence behind it) that we are forbidden to use if we grant we cannot call on reason or evidence to resolve a moral dispute. If we could make a case on behalf of our basic ideals, the situation would of course be different. In fact, if we could make a case which established a conclusion like "All men ought in a moral sense to accept our first principles" (presumably by

some end-run around the naturalistic fallacy), then we could even use the moral 'ought' without any logical incoherence. But that is not the situation we have been exploring; we have been exploring the possibility that no case can be made.

Well then, if the above objections are the only way (intuitionism aside) to dispute my proof, they serve only to provide me with a short-cut to establishing my thesis. Since each of them is logically incoherent, they merely take me at once to the heart of my thesis, that if we lack a case in reason or evidence, it is logically incoherent to claim that our opponents ought (whether in a moral sense or otherwise) to accept our basic ideals.

III

If my thesis is correct, it poses the problem of how to talk about the consequences of the unresolvability of certain ethical disputes. In a recent book,³ I suggested that if I cannot show opponents who reject my basic ideals that they should accept my ideals, and if they find themselves in a similar position, then we should *all* grant that our ideals have only *partisan validity*. That is, I should grant that my ideals, let us say humane ones, are worthy of regard only from myself and my partisans (those who actually share humane ideals) and each of my opponents should grant that his ideals, let us say Social Darwinist ones, are worthy of regard only from himself and his partisans (his fellow Social Darwinists).

However, H. O. Mounce, among others, has objected to this sort of terminology.⁴ He argues, if I understand him, that 'validity' is a term whose meaning is fixed by a certain setting, one in which people share a test of validity; and that to speak of "partisan validity" is merely to qualify its meaning in a radically different setting, one in which there is no shared test and in which the term should be given up entirely. I still believe my terminology can be rendered coherent and useful⁵ (after all, all humane men share a test, all Social Darwinists share a test, etc.), but I have chosen not to defend it, or even use it, in this paper. As for my reasons, we are confronted by two issues: the issue of the consequences of the unresolvability of ethical disputes, the question of whether this means we cannot tell an opponent he ought to accept our basic ideals; and the issue of how to talk once the above question is settled, that is, if we have no right to tell an opponent he ought to accept our basic ideals, how we should describe the status of our ideals. The first is the real issue philosophers must debate, while the second is quite secondary, and, I fear that the first is getting lost in our arguments about the second.

That is why I have scrupulously refrained from using my terminology throughout this paper in arguing for my thesis. Indeed, I have tried to

³James R. Flynn, *Humanism and Ideology* (London, 1973).

⁴In his review of *Humanism and Ideology*, in *Political Studies*, 1973, pp. 529-30.

⁵See *Humanism and Ideology*, particularly the Appendix.

adopt the sort of language Mounce might find acceptable ; e.g., I say if there is a test of validity, a man can look to it and be convinced *into* believing in certain ideals (as valid) or be convinced he *should* believe in certain ideals (as valid) ; and I say if there is no test, the best a man can do is convince himself *that* he believes in certain ideals or convince himself that he *really does* believe in certain ideals—the implication being that validity has gone out of the window and we are left saying merely “ Here I stand ”.⁶ It is true I still use sentences like “ In the absence of a case we cannot claim our ideals are *worthy of regard* by all mankind ”, but I have tried to eliminate any ambiguity here by making clear they mean no more than “ Given that certain ethical disputes are unresolvable, we cannot tell our opponents that they *ought to accept* our ideals ”. This seems to me an important step forward because the claim “ My ideals are worthy of regard by all mankind ” is genuinely ambiguous and it can be given a meaning which makes sense (even in the absence of a case). For example, we could use it to say “ My ideals are so worthy that I would think better of any and every man who came to accept them ”. But this last is of course different from my telling someone he ought to accept my ideals.

Let us return to my thesis. Although I believe it is correct, there are one or two things that trouble me.

The first of these is how few of those whose opinions command respect I have been able to convince. The stumbling block is something touched on before, the categorical character of moral language. As to what this is all about, they emphasize that a value proposition which is hypothetical in character merely says “ If you accept that X is valuable, you should do this to get it ” ; while a moral proposition, being categorical in character, says “ You ought to accept (and act on) a certain ideal ” without any qualification about whether the person addressed really does accept the ideal in question or whether he has any reason to do so. As the reader knows by now, all I can say is that our right to assert a moral proposition of this sort cannot be taken for granted—such an assertion amounts to telling someone he should *fixate belief*, and to me this makes all the difference. That is to say, our right to make certain moral assertions is debatable, and therefore I am pleased that thinkers have begun to discuss whether or not we have the right to make categorical assertions *unless* we can give reasons. Clearly, I would side with those who say we must be able to give reasons, at least as far as propositions about accepting ideals are concerned.

If I am told that moral assertions are incorrigibly categorical and that categorical grammar just does not allow for any qualification about telling someone he ought to fixate belief, this seems to be simply an evasion. These contentions do nothing to refute the arguments for my thesis, they do nothing to undermine my proof. And if my thesis stands, they would merely lead us to the conclusion that (in the absence of a case) we should have to give up moral assertions ! Not that I feel driven to that conclusion, for I

⁶See the last two paragraphs of Mounce’s review, particularly the passage in which he suggests that in the absence of a test of validity “ we merely affirm where we stand ”.

do not believe these contentions give a correct account of categorical grammar, or if they do I would deny that such a grammar was an incorrigible facet of moral assertions, and so forth.

A second thing troubles me much more deeply. Sometimes I feel that in arguing so vigorously for my thesis, I have obscured my main purpose in arguing for it, showing that the consequences of the unresolvability of ethical disputes are more serious than is generally believed. It may well be that if I were mistaken, the consequences of unresolvability would loom *even larger*! Indeed, I have sometimes been tempted to give up my thesis, just so that I could say something like: "Granted we can tell our opponent he ought to accept our basic ideals or first principles, where does that leave us? Look at the tension it creates, it leads us to say things completely out of touch with the reality of how a sensible man will deal with a clash of basic ideals". In other words, imagine that a critic could refute my thesis. Even so, the above tension would remain and therefore, telling our opponent he ought to accept our ideals would be highly artificial. Telling him this would merely pose the problem of just what in the world we are doing: we cannot be suggesting a method for dealing with his problem (being torn between conflicting ideals), for that would be a travesty; we cannot be giving advice on how to fixate belief, for it is pointless to give advice no sensible man can take; we cannot be making a moral assertion of the usual sort, for what is said violates the rule governing the use of 'ought' and 'can'. There seems to be nothing left of the right to use the sentence 'You ought to accept our basic ideals' but the smile. In a sense, the main purpose of this article will have been achieved if, at its end, *no one cares* whether we have such a right or not.

And yet, I cannot entirely free myself of the thought that whenever we actually exercise that right, actually tell an opponent he ought to accept our basic ideals, we put ourselves in what is considered to be the paradigm of a vulnerable position in ethics. We are in effect telling our opponent: "Don't do as I do (don't use my method for resolving a clash), just do as I say (just accept my basic ideals)".

Perhaps the last section of this article has been a bit confusing. What it comes down to is this. I do believe that the question of whether we have the right to tell our opponent he ought to accept our ideals (in the absence of a case) is the real issue philosophers must debate; and I do believe that my thesis on this issue (that we must give a negative answer) is correct. However, my primary concern is to convince thinkers that the consequences of the unresolvability of ethical disputes are grave—and I believe that *this* may emerge more clearly in debating our question than in agreeing on an answer. And finally, if it came to a choice, a choice between convincing thinkers of my thesis and convincing them they have underestimated the consequences of unresolvability, I would choose the latter without hesitation.

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