The Role of Perspective in Ethics

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ABSTRACT. Most modern moral philosophy is what I call 'Impersonalist.' It claims, quite plausibly, that the particular identity of the moral agent has nothing to do with the rightness or bestness of a given course of action, with the overriding moral reasons supporting such an action, nor with the moral obligation placed upon the agent to perform it. In addition, the Impersonalist account assumes what I call a Humean model of practical reasoning, whereby perception, deliberation, decision, and action are all logically separate stages. I challenge both the alleged moral irrelevance of the agent and the logical separation of the reasoning stages by invoking Peter Winch's metaphor of a 'moral perspective': my perception *and* my deliberation are both shaped by the perspective from within which I experience – and must experience – the world. Different people have different moral perspectives, and so they will consider different moral options as available and different reasons as relevant when considering the same situation. This is relativism, but only a benign form, and I explain why.

KEYWORDS. moral disagreement, moral dilemmas, moral reasons, moral obligations, moral perception, practical reasoning, character and ethics, perspective

Most of recent Anglo-American moral philosophy is cognitivist: there is a singular right or best action *in* the situation before the agent, and there is a singular set of overriding moral reasons generated by (supervenient on) the situation in support of that right action, such that the reasons are there to be discovered by the would-be agent. In addition, this conception is impersonal, in that the agent's particular identity is irrelevant to the rightness of the action. In this way, it plausibly mirrors the universality of the law: theft is theft, whether committed by prince or pauper. There might be cases where specific generalisable features of the agent are relevant to the situation: so a trained and contracted lifeguard will have a different moral obligation at the beach than a non-swimmer.

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However, this is still an impersonal obligation in that it does not refer to the lifeguard's unique identity, but rather to his membership in a class (in this case of lifeguards) defined by the relevant feature – *any* trained and contracted lifeguard would have the same duty on that beach, regardless of whether he is otherwise a prince or pauper.

Underlying the above moral ontology is a Humean model of practical reasoning. The agent's perception is to be characterised as motivationally neutral, such that his observation of the complete situation does not commit him to any action beyond unthinking reflexes. In addition, his perception is imaginatively engaged, for he sees within the situation not only tables and chairs, but also 'sees' the moral reasons generated by the situation, and 'sees' the likely effects of his possible interventions. Throughout, the agent is passive in the sense that his deliberation about what to do is logically separate from (even if contemporaneous with) his perception. Deliberation then leads to decision and an attempt at action.

I will roll this cognitivism, impersonalism, and Humeanism into a single label 'Impersonalist,' and hope it will be uncontroversial to many moral philosophers. There are certainly debatable points about many of the details of the Impersonalist account, but I do not want to enter these. Instead I want to challenge the two central assumptions: that the process of deliberation and action is logically separate from perception, and that the specific identity of the agent is irrelevant to the rightness of the action. My challenge will lead to the *prima facie* startling conclusion that there is no singular realm of ethical truth in the sense assumed by Impersonalists. In the process of challenging these two assumptions, I will outline an alternative account, based on what Peter Winch calls the agent's unique moral 'perspective.'

1. Critique of the Humean model of practical reasoning

In the game of chess, it certainly seems to be the case that perception, deliberation, and action are quite distinct. I examine the chessboard carefully,

I consider the sundry legal moves available to me and evaluate them in the light of their imagined consequences for my game; one move will then emerge as the best (or least worst), and I act accordingly. But is perception really so passive? Let me talk about the first-personal *experience* of perception, as it were from the inside, rather than an observer's third-personal description of perception. If I know comfortably how to play chess and my purpose is to win the game before me, then the legal moves available to me will *strike* me from the arrangement of the pieces; I will not have to *deduce* what the legal moves are. As such the legal moves are there, objectively, in the situation before me, just as real as the pieces themselves. And the salient possibilities – indeed, the *invitations* – for action are there, objectively, in the situation before me. I do not conclude that I could move the piece in accordance with the imagined rule; rather, the legal move that I perceive in the situation already logically implies my acting by moving the piece.

Let me develop the point by imagining a different chess context: not playing competitively but teaching it to someone who has never played it before. I start by identifying the pieces to him: this is the Queen, this is the Bishop, etc. So far, the pieces are *only* wooden figures, and the pupil can only differentiate them by size and shape. But to the extent that he can do so correctly, he and I already share something that the rest of the non-chess-playing public do not. Then I will place the figures on the board, one at a time, to describe their characteristic legal movements: here the bishop along the diagonal, here the knight one over and two up, etc. Once the pupil has learned these, we share a little more. But what we share is not knowledge, or at least, not *merely* knowledge. Rather, it is an active perceptual ability. For what the pupil is learning is not only how to recognise a piece as a bishop, but to recognise the squares around the bishop, mid-game, as future legal locations for the bishop. What I am doing, if I may use the word without begging too many questions at this point, is *expanding his perspective*.

Then I teach the notions of one piece obstructing another, one piece taking another, and of playing against an opponent (who brings – and may be assumed to bring – a similar knowledge and purpose to the encounter):

so begins another expansion of perspective. With some practice, it will no longer be a question of seeing a potentially legal move and then calculating that it is no longer possible because of an obstruction: rather, the improving player will not *see* the move at all. Moreover, as the player comes to appreciate the *strategic* advantages of one legal move over another, he won't see the stupid moves at all.[1]

Throughout, the non-chess-player will see the same chess board with the same figures, but will not see the legal moves or the strategically better moves: and in this sense he will not experience the same *situation* as the practiced player even though they are looking at the same board. As far as the non-player is concerned, it is just a chequered board with cute figurines on it, with no 'invitation' for him to move them in any particular direction. Importantly, if the chess-player and non-chess-player see different situations, it will not be because of some perceptual or cognitive defect or mistake by one of them; nor is it plausible to say that the chess player sees the 'full' or 'better' situation, for there are any number of *other* games which the chess-player does not know but which could involve legal moves being invited from the relevant cognoscenti.

In another context, of course, the chess-player, the non-chess-player, and the draughts-player would experience the same situation, as when they were all roommates, with the shared purpose of tidying up the room: in such a case, the chess board and its figures would become something to be tidied away, and this shared perspective is revealed in their communication about the chess board, with its shared understandings of appropriateness and error ("don't put it in the cupboard, there's no room, take it downstairs").

2. The moral, the non-moral, and the putative continuity between them

I want to move to my second challenge to the Impersonalist account of moral experience. Later I will draw the two challenges together using

the concept of the agent's moral perspective. The chess example we have been discussing has been full of non-moral problems. I want to consider an example from Raimond Gaita which presents the agent with moral and non-moral problems.[2] Again my focus will be on the first-personal *experience* of the problem, and of deliberation and decision in response to that problem.

Two mountaineering friends are atop a treacherous and poorly accessible mountain. One of them badly injures himself and can no longer walk, while a violent storm approaches. The fit mountaineer then faces two different sorts of decisions:

- The *moral* decision between the following two options: (i) to try to carry his friend down, with the strong risk of making slow progress, getting caught in the storm, and both dying in the attempt, and (ii) to abandon his friend to near-certain death and to save himself.
- The *non-moral* decision is, given either moral option, to decide which is the best (i.e. shortest, safest or fastest) route down the mountain.

In terms of the non-moral decision, the healthy mountaineer can look around himself, consult his maps and his memory, and make an educated or experienced guess as to the best route. The choice may be difficult because of the bad weather or the loss of the map etc.; throughout, however, it is at least clear that there *is* a best route, a correct answer, even though it may not be known until afterwards, if ever. Here the Impersonalist picture makes complete sense: when the mountaineer asks "on this evidence, what should I believe?," he is asking what *anyone* should believe in that situation.

It is tempting to see the moral choice in exactly the same way: there is a problem, there are possible options, there is a best option, there is the same kind of epistemic difficulty, there is deliberation and a rational choice, and if the choice does not match up with the correct answer, there will be an error. Both the moral and the non-moral choice have a particular psychological urgency to it because a man's life is at stake. In both cases, however, the psychological aspect is logically separate from the cognitive aspect. The claim that a moral problem is logically the same as

a non-moral problem I shall call the continuity thesis, and understand most Impersonalists as supporting it.

The continuity theorist would claim that I enter my own deliberation over both the moral and the non-moral dilemma as a *datum*: I'm the one who happens to find myself in the wrong place at the wrong time, and who has to deal with the problem. The problem is only contingently mine, and could have been anybody else's, or at least anybody else's in the relevant class of people (e.g. of lifeguards). As such, the problem does not really concern *me*, in the utterly unique sense of who I am and how I see the world; it concerns the shoes that I have filled. And once deliberation has generated the best apparent answer, I am merely the one who has to take the appropriate action, as if just following orders.

What is wrong here is that the continuity theorist has been too distracted by some of the cognitivist *language* of those facing moral problems, and is not paying enough attention to the phenomenological *experience* of facing them. Specifically, when the agent talks about the 'best' or 'right' course of action, this has been understood as generating the same ontological commitments as the response to the navigational problem: a singular realm of moral facts waiting to be discovered by whoever fills the appropriate deliberative and perceptual roles.

Against this, I suggest that what is distinctive about the moral problem is the anguish involved in its recognition as a problem. In so far as someone contemplates the same set of circumstances but from the comfort of his study, then he contemplates a *different problem*, as different as the two situations faced by the chess-player and non-chess-player when looking at the same chessboard. For the mountaineer is not accidentally faced with the problem; rather, he is *in* it, it is *his* problem, and he cannot pass it on to anybody else at that moment. As Rush Rhees puts it, in a moral problem nobody can tell me what I ought to do, not because the subject is difficult, nor because it depends on something to which I alone have access, and not because of a shortage of good advice; "mainly it is that the question is not answered until I answer it."[3]

If I'm planning the mountaineering expedition from my study and I have trouble reading the map, I can consult a more experienced mountaineer or a technical manual, and I can follow his (its) advice even if I do not fully understand the reasons grounding it – indeed, I'd be a fool not to, given my recognition of the authority that informs his (its) advice. Of course I can also seek moral advice, and there may be plenty forthcoming. But I cannot abdicate the decision to someone else in a way that would shift responsibility and blame onto that person, as I could do onto the cartographer or mountain guide. After all, when I receive even the best advice I shall have a new problem about whether to *accept* that advice, and to make it *mine*.

It is this awareness of 'carrying the can' that gives the moral problem its distinctive anguish, an anguish that cannot be separated from the cognitive content. The anguish colours the content, and thereby makes it a different content than that contemplated in the safety of the philosophical seminar. Again, the Impersonalist will accept that there will be a psychological experience associated with the cognitively-construed problem, but will imagine the two to be logically separable. I am rejecting this logical separability. This is not to say that there is no point to discussing moral problems in the philosophy seminar – but they will not be the same problem as that faced by the mountaineer on the mountain. So I am not reducing morality to moral experience, but emphasising the distinction between different kinds of moral understanding of oneself and of the world.

3. Perspective

The metaphors of being struck by a situation, and of experiencing things within a perspective, I borrow from Peter Winch:

> If we wish to understand the moral character of a particular man and his act it is, often at any rate, not enough to notice that, for such and such reasons, he chooses a given course of action from among those

> he considers as alternatives. It may be at least as important to notice *what he considers the alternatives to be* and, what is closely connected, what are the reasons he considers it relevant to deploy in deciding between them. […] Let me express this point by saying that a situation, the issues which it raises and the kind of reason which is appropriate to a discussion of those issues, involve a certain perspective. (italics in original)[4]

The Impersonalist might not be troubled by this passage at all, and accuse it of triviality. It is certain that each of us have a perspective insofar as our sensory organs are located on different heads! But that cannot undermine an account of what the perspectives are perspectives *of*.

There is more to this passage than meets the eye, so let me unpack it slowly. The first thing to emphasise is that Winch is not merely interested in the agent's ultimate choice of action, but in the alternatives that the agent considered before choosing, and in the reasons he would give before and after choosing.[5] Unlike the chessboard, the situation does not generate a singular set of options and reasons, to be more or less surveyed by different agents of different sensitivities; instead, the agent's declared options and reasons *reveal his experience of the situation*, reveal his perspective. Indeed, some people might not see *any* alternative to the course of action they end up 'choosing.'

There are two problems that remain, both having to do with Winch's reluctance to share the Impersonalist's commitment to a singular right or best course of action *in* the situation. First, is Winch not therefore committed to some notion of relativity, so that an agent does what he considers right *for him*? Second, if an agent claims that he "has to" do something, does that not mean that he considers it right or best in *some* way?

To deal with these problems, let me take some more mundane, familiar example than that of the mountaineer's: the different attitudes to issues of courtesy, punctuality, tidiness, etc. Within certain limits, a variety of attitudes to such issues is tolerated as an expression of personality. But it is not an expression in the same way that a fashion accessory is; instead,

my attitude to tidiness is an expression of the way I experience order, or lack of it, in the world around me. It is an expression of what bothers me, and of what I feel compelled to do to rectify it. In other words, my perspective upon the dirty dishes involves the experience of an *objective demand* upon me, something that needs to be done to restore the equilibrium. Whereas the dishes do not bother you, my roommate, at all, and you would be happy to let them pile up another week or so.

Often what is called for here is a spirit of toleration and political compromise so that public space can be negotiated with a minimum of friction; what is sometimes very difficult is imaginative understanding – "*why* do the dishes not bother you? They're revolting!" Perhaps you might be able to adduce a causal explanation for my attitude (e.g. my strict upbringing), but it is important to realise that such an explanation, however acceptable even to me, may be phenomenologically irrelevant to my attitude *in medias res*: my parents died long ago, and all that is in the kitchen now is me and these revolting dishes. Clearly, however, I am not completely determined by my inheritance, nor is it beyond criticism. What it means is that at some point, e.g. when I left home, I *endorsed* such an attitude to tidiness, and such an endorsement will be revealed in the sort of reasons I give to explain (in the sense of justification, not causality) my annoyance at finding the dishes unwashed.[6]

The example of the dishes is useful not only as a less controversial demonstration of perspectives that could be considered weakly ethical, but it also introduces the important contribution of the individual's personality. In other words, perspective is not only defined by such things as purposes and conventions as described earlier, but by the radically individual components of who the person is, components that are only partially and gradually revealed to others.

The most important thing about such attitudes, however, is that it becomes absurd to speak of a singular correct attitude to take to dirty dishes, such that I would have a greater sensitivity than you to such an attitude. This would thus allow certain amount of benign relativism into

the account – but only a certain amount. Traditionally, the accusation of moral relativism involves *demoting* the putatively objective claim about the world to a mere expression of preference such as for wine over beer. There is nothing intrinsically better about wine, I just prefer it, and can give no further justificatory reasons for my preference. But my attitude toward dishes is not relativist in the same way. First, because I do not behave *as if* pernicious relativism were true; I do not shrug my shoulders and say "dirty dishes aren't my thing;" instead, I am upset by the dishes, and by what I see as your laziness in not washing them up. Second, it makes sense for one person to give reasons in an attempt to *persuade* another to change his attitudes towards tidiness in a way that it does not make sense with their attitude to wine. Despite the lack of any guarantee of success, I can still point out the implications of your slovenliness for your health, or for your marriageability. Third, there is no perspectiveless view in comparison to which the Impersonalist can demote my view as 'merely' relative. (I will return to this last point in the final section.)

Let me return to the stormy mountaintop, and imagine that there are three of us: me, the wounded friend, and another mountaineer. Imagine that I and the third mountaineer disagree about whether to abandon the friend or struggle down the mountain with him. My suggestion is that I and the third mountaineer, looking at the *same* injured man, nevertheless perceive different situations; not entirely different situations, of course, for we would still be able to refer to the same man when we meet many years later. But insofar as the meaning of the situation within each person's perspective is reflected in their practical response to it, then the situations perceived by each of us will be different.

Two qualifications here. First, 'response' is misleading, since it seems to be, by definition, a response *to* something, and this might imply some singular thing on the other side of a window. However, as we saw with the chess game or the dishes, this is too passive a picture, for the response is conditioned by the perspective; and what's more, my responses (plural)

partly comprise my perspective. Second, it could be objected that both I and the third mountaineer were both equally kind, *did* in fact perceive the same object (i.e. in the same way), and did experience the same inclination to help the injured man, but that the third mountaineer had other reasons to advocate abandoning the injured man: he wanted to maximise the chances of his own survival because he had a wife and children to look after. In the words of the Impersonalist debates on the subject, the third mountaineer had an overriding reason for abandoning the injured man. It could also be that the third mountaineer felt quite agonised at 'having' to resolve the dilemma the way he did. All this is possible, but all these details would have to be included in the *situation* faced by the third mountaineer. For the situation is not about this spatiotemporal location the third mountaineer stands before; it *includes* the reasons to ignore the injured man, which themselves refer to other obligations, other places, and to the past and future. And the mountaineer would have to decide as best he can; none of this supports the Impersonalist's claim that there must be a correct choice to be discovered, however.

One way of arguing against the Impersonalist here is to ask what the injured man himself would say in response to the third mountaineer's excuses. And the man may very well be persuaded – but he may not. And this essential unpredictability would not be reduced by the third mountaineer having discovered what he considered the 'correct' course of action.

4. The agent's point of view on his own actions

To summarise thus far, I am arguing against the Impersonalist's two assumptions about the nature of moral experience: (i) that there is a singular moral reality comprising a set of obligations, reasons and a best/right action, and that some agents can perceive this reality better than others, (ii) and that the business of perception is logically distinct

from the business of deliberation and decision. Instead, different agents bring – and cannot help bringing – different perspectives to the same situation, and this will colour their experience of that situation, of the obligations and reasons they experience, and of their deliberation and decision in response to the situation.[7] I concluded that this was a form of relativism, but a benign one precisely because agents do not behave as if relativism were true: their experience of moral obligations is of something very much objective.

The Impersonalist errs in preferring the third-personal (or ontological) description of what is going on. I am not denying the Impersonalist's description, but claiming that in an important way it is idle, it doesn't and can't do the work expected, since it is the agent who has to make the decision, based on *his* understanding of the situation. As such what I am offering is not a *refutation* of the Impersonalist account; rather, I am claiming that the perspectival account fits better with the reality of moral experience.

In this section I want to take this priority a little further by exploring the agent's point of view on his own actions. The fundamental point is that the *meaning* of the action will be radically different for its agent than for other observers. This is more than the presence of the agent's intentions: indeed, intentions are sometimes not even necessary for the agent to consider the act as *his*.

Consider Bernard Williams's famous example. A lorry-driver, who is sober, experienced, alert and careful, driving his recently-inspected vehicle below the speed limit, runs over a child dashing out in front of him. In one sense, an awful case of philosophically uncomplicated bad luck, with no thought of moral or legal responsibility ascribed to the driver. Nevertheless, after the collision:

> The driver will feel differently from any spectator, even a spectator next to him in the cab, except perhaps to the extent that the spectator takes on the thought that he himself might have prevented it, an agent's thought. Doubtless, and rightly, people will try, in comforting

> him, to move the driver from this state of feeling, move him indeed from where he is to something more like the place of a spectator, but it is important that this is seen as something that should need to be done, and indeed some doubt would be felt about a driver who too blandly or readily moved to that position. We feel […] that there is something special about his relation to this happening, something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault.[8]

Williams describes the driver as experiencing 'agent-regret,' and distinguishes this from: (i) regret, which is the sort of response one can feel for unfortunate events for which one bears no moral *or causal* responsibility, such as a destructive earthquake in a far-away country; (ii) remorse, which is the direct awareness of moral responsibility for having intentionally doing something wrong (or something that one feels that one *should have known* was wrong at the time). What is interesting in the above quotation is the shift between points of view that the driver is asked to undertake – not just to see the scene from another angle of vision, but from the position of a different *causal* relationship to the event as well, i.e. to see himself as an unimplicated spectator. This is a move that the Impersonalists would support because of their legalistic emphasis on informed intention as grounding moral responsibility; the Impersonalist would have to say that insofar as the man felt anything other than pure regret (i.e. not agent-regret), he would be irrational. It would be an understandably disturbing event, of course, but no more than it would have been for the spectators of the accident – the first-personal and the third-personal descriptions and experiences are the same.

But this is too simplistic, for the driver's anguish is not some detachable psychological reaction like disgust or vertigo that can and ought to be overcome: it is a direct awareness of what he has *done*. The thought is not so much the ontological question of whether he *is* morally responsible, nor the social question of whether he is in fact *held* responsible, for in both cases he is guiltless (assuming, again, an absence of culpable negligence); rather, it is the fact that he *holds himself* responsible, and this reaction is

entire intelligible and appropriate. To see how the Impersonalist oversimplifies the driver's experience, Williams considers the driver's reaction to the news that in fact the family was well-insured and could now look forward to a handsome compensation package; this would not lessen the tragedy at all, nor would it mitigate the driver's own felt need to offer some sort of reparation himself.

However, holding oneself responsible should not be seen as a deliberative decision, something preceded by "it would be best if…" or "I ought to…"; it would be more accurate to say that the driver *is held* responsible. But by what? Not by the law, not by the family, not by the spectators; instead, I suggest it is by something external to his will and yet internal to his perspective. And it would not be far-fetched to say that it was the *child* who holds the man responsible, in the sense that it is the child who haunts him after the event.

This can go even further: an agent could intelligibly hold himself responsible even without *any* causal responsibility, where this latter is understood strictly in terms of the inductive causal patterns by which we make sense of the interactions between inert objects in the world. I have two situations in mind: first, where the agent considers himself as being punished by God or by some vaguer notion of fate or fittingness ("what goes around comes around"): a parent of the child killed by the lorry could see the act as retribution for some previous hubris. Second, consider the importance of community identities: while modern Germans have no causal responsibility at all for the sins of their grandparents, it is intelligible for a modern German to continue to feel shame. Holding oneself responsible for the child's death or for the sins of one's father is a vivid expression of a sense of guilt, and it would be to misunderstand the nature of this guilt to remind the agent of the allegedly exculpating absence of intention, negligence, or normal causal responsibility.

And while the feeling of guilt or agent-regret is intimately linked to the judgement that one is in some way responsible, the relationship

between the two should not be seen as causal; rather, they are different aspects of a *single* experience, at the heart of which is a participative and not a spectatorial stance to the remembered world. In the case of the parent punished for his hubris, the hubris and the punishment are therefore conceptually linked; the seriousness of the hubristic act has been fully revealed by the nature of the punishment, and it becomes impossible to think of one without the other.[9]

Now of course the above phenomenology is not immune to Humean reduction: the parent's sense of guilt leads him to project (always the key Humean concept) divine significance upon the actions which are intrinsically meaningless; but again, there is no reason to think that such a description would or even ought to reassure *the agent*. This is because, as Michael Weston points out, the agent's thought "I am guilty" is not a further fact that the agent considers in deciding what to do, but indicates the sort of importance that *other* facts have for him, and indicates the perspective within which these facts become reasons for his actions now and later. "To feel guilt is to be able to say in morally pejorative terms what one has done."[10] The same thing works with the concept of 'care.' And insofar as the Impersonalist conception of moral responsibility, with its emphasis on common standards of rationality and inductive empirical causal laws, is unable to accommodate such a reaction, then it will always be incomplete.

Not only does the agent have a special relationship to his own actions, but this relationship may change the agent's conception of himself. To see this, let us consider another example similar to that of the lorry driver: Oedipus. Once again, the Impersonalist will probably conclude that Oedipus is blameless, for he never intended to marry his mother and kill his father, and indeed took steps to avoid the possibility after hearing the Oracle. It is true that blame would not be an appropriate response, either from the Chorus or from the spectators. However, the Impersonalist goes wrong in considering blameworthiness to be determined solely by the action and the intentions, and wrong in seeing other-

blame to be phenomenologically symmetrical to self-blame. For Oedipus's self-blame *is* intelligible, because he was the one who *did* the deeds. The degree of self-blame marks one difference between his case and that of the lorry-driver's.

But there are two other important differences. First, the lorry-driver, we assume (by his need for comfort), is never in any doubt, at least immediately following the event, about the full moral reality of what he has done. Oedipus did not have a clue; the truth dawned on him over time, and he was forced to rediscover the meaning of his past actions, and the meaning of what he had become, only gradually: "I killed a stranger" slowly becomes "I killed my father." In one sense, of course, the past is fixed and unchangeable; in another, the significance of a past event can certainly change for a particular individual over time.

Second and most important, however, Oedipus discovered that he had *become* something – an incestuous parricide. He did not just become aware of his causal involvement with horrible deeds, he *identified* with the deeds to such a degree that they transformed him, while the lorry-driver will probably be able to isolate the event without seeing himself as a murderer. As such, an action is not simply the logical result or causal consequence of deliberation, oozing forth from the agent's identity like lava from a volcano; instead, a person is at least partly constituted through his characteristic actions – "a man is *in* his actions as a bird is in flight."[11] When actions subsequently turn out to have a different significance than they first did (or than they were intended to have), this forces the revaluation of the agent's identity as necessarily reflected in those actions. Crucially, actions, once performed, are irrevocable, and hence the transformation is irrevocable. Here is Winch in another article:

> If a man tries to do something evil and fails, then he does not become what his success would have made him, and thereby the possibilities of moral assessment of him are different. […] He can later thank God he failed.[12]

5. Embodiment

One crucial condition for my entire discussion of the moral perspective so far is that every person is necessarily embodied in such a perspective. And although the perspective will change over time – never too quickly and never entirely – he cannot help but experience the world within it. In this final section I want to consider the implications of this fact.

I use the word 'embodiment' carefully – what I do not want to say is that the agent looks at the world through his perspective as if they were coloured glasses, or that he inhabits the perspective or that he is trapped in his perspective like some homunculus. The point of embodiment is that when I perceive the world from within my perspective, I do not perceive the world$_{me}$ through perspective$_{me}$; I perceive 'the world,' full stop. But my world will not be entirely the same as your world, as we discover during intractable moral disagreements. However bitter our disagreements, these disagreements only make sense against a background of deeply and widely shared moral agreement, which must be present for us to communicate about moral matters at all, and indeed to maintain our relationship. Society as a whole would break down if there were not widespread agreement on, for example, what constituted a good reason for dismissing someone from work.

One implication of necessary embodiment is that in morality there is ultimately *nothing else* but the moral perspectives of individuals.[13] And here I want to return to my earlier point about relativism. I suggested that the Impersonalist's accusation of relativism could not find purchase because there was *no* fully objective, perspectiveless account in comparison to which an embodied moral claim could be demoted as 'merely' relative.

Let me expand on this by considering the discussion between the two mountaineers again, whom I shall label the 'healthy' and the 'injured.' The Impersonalist will claim that throughout the discussion between them, there nevertheless exists a realm of singular moral facts about what ought to be done, about which precedents are relevant, about which reasons are

strong etc. My counter-argument begins with the simple thought that there is *nobody else* present on the mountain; above all, the Impersonalist is not there.[14] The healthy mountaineer is there, he experiences the situation, hears his injured friend's judgement and supporting reasons, considers the alleged precedents; and the injured mountaineer is there, he experiences the situation, hears his friend's judgement and supporting reasons, and considers the alleged precedents.

Now they might well agree in many other ethical judgements; for example, the healthy mountaineer might well agree about the abstract duties of friendship in normal conditions, and may well also agree that self-sacrifice is a foolish, romantic notion. But they cannot agree about what ought to be done here and now: the injured mountaineer wants his friend to run for it; the healthy mountaineer wants to attempt to carry the injured one down – in other words, they cannot agree what friendship requires at that moment, or rather, what *their* friendship requires. The point is that whichever way the disagreement heads, they remain alone to sort it out; and it will not be sorted out until one of them sorts it out. Each will appeal to standards and reasons that they experience as objective, just as each of them can in principle contact other friends or family members for support, but there is no guarantee of convergence in the sense the Impersonalist optimistically expects or at least hopes for; sometimes the best that can be hoped for, *even with the best will in the world and full information*, is a 'political' settlement, an agreement to disagree without persuasion. In this case, given the healthy mountaineer's greater power, he will probably have the final word.

It is worth stressing that the mountaineers can *talk* to each other, however – this fact is often ignored in the examples invoked by moral philosophy. Gaita himself does not tell us anything about the particular nature of the friendship of the two mountaineers, or about the understanding of each of the two mountaineers concerning each other and their friendship, but it seems the mountaineers do not *say* anything to each other. If the injured mountaineer were unconscious, this would be

inevitable; but if they were both conscious, what would the friends say to each other as the storm approached, with one lying crippled and immobile and frightened? Certainly, the injured man's words (be they "please don't leave me" or "get out of here, save yourself!") might not make the dilemma any easier for the healthy man to resolve, since there will *still* be the question of whether to heed the friend's demands, which will depend on the narrative gloss he chooses to place on them, ("does he mean it?," "is he in a fit state of mind?," etc.) and on how much he thinks through the implications ("how would I explain this to his wife?," "what if I abandon him and he miraculously survives – what would he think of me?"). However, the dilemma becomes infinitely richer and more particular, and the healthy man's decision infinitely *more personal*, because of it. The particularity of what a person says in a moment of crisis has an enormous power to surprise and reveal. For the injured man's words can only be properly understood by the healthy man in the context of his narrative understanding of their on-going relationship, and of his awareness that this relationship (at least in its present form) may well be about to end.

If the healthy mountaineer then makes a run for it, and survives, then he remains alone in the knowledge of having abandoned a friend. In terms of his navigational problem of finding the shortest route off the mountain, he can later check the maps. But in terms of his moral problem, there are no maps and there are no experts to consult. Again, there may be plenty of advice, usually to reassure him that nothing else could have been done. But there is an essential impotence to such advice, and it would not be surprising if the mountaineer, like Oedipus and the lorry-driver, came to a point of rejecting advice and seeking only pity.[15]

NOTES

1. This marks the essential difference between human and computer chess players. The computer's strength is the ability to quickly consider the point values (which have to be stipulated) of *all* legal moves, counter-moves, counter-counter-moves, etc., and to recognise the best in

terms of the greatest point-score over the long term. The notions of Aristotelian judgement and of an experienced perspective do not enter the programming at all.

2. Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 103.

3. Rush Rhees, *Mortal Questions*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (London: Macmillan, 1999) 75.

4. Peter Winch, "Moral Integrity," in: *Ethics and Action*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 178.

5. It will be clear that I am assuming the truth of Bernard Williams's "reasons internalism." Williams argues, persuasively in my view, that there are no external reasons, that is, no reasons that would be a reason *for* a given agent to _ whether or not he (i) knows about the reason or (ii) accepts the reason. Instead, a reason can only function as a reason if it finds purchase in the agent's "subjective motivational set." The only exception to this would be reasons which did not find purchase because of the agent's inferential error or ignorance of certain relevant facts. See Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in: *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981).

6. This point about the idleness of causal explanations in ethics can be extended to a broad criticism of attempts to ground ethics in some aetiological story, for example, one based on evolutionary advantage or social purpose. It may well be the case that social co-operation within ethical rules makes the species stronger; it may well also be the case that widespread compliance with ethical norms is to everybody's benefit. But neither of these putative facts is of any use to me, here and now, agonising over whether to abandon my injured friend on the mountainside.

7. A sub-thesis would then distinguish the situation *qua* arrangement of physical objects at a single point in space and time, from the situation *qua* source of moral problems, reasons and obligations for *this* particular agent.

8. Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in: *Moral Luck*, 28.

9. Consider an example, this time involving formal punishment, from another paper by Peter Winch. Winch contrasts three kinds of prisoners and their respective attitudes to their crimes and their futures upon release. The first regrets a prudential mistake, and vows to be more careful next time; the second concludes that the police are getting too good, and plans to go straight; the third, however, considers his jail sentence *condign*. The first two prisoners both make the same sort of cost-benefit analysis about the future, albeit with different conclusions, and we might imagine an argument between them having the shape of an argument between economists. Neither prisoner sees any but the most contingent (albeit consistent) link between their crime and their sentence, and their sentence is just something that *happens* to them. Only the third prisoner, says Winch, is being punished in the full sense of the word. For him, "the connection between the nature of the crime and his sojourn in gaol is an internal one. I mean that, for him, thinking about his prison sentence *is* a way of thinking about his crime" (Peter Winch, "Ethical Reward and Punishment," in: *Ethics and Action*, 218).

10. Michael Weston, *Morality and the Self*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 55.

11. This double metaphor is from Roy Holland, "Good and Evil in Action," in: *Against Empiricism*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980) 115.

12. Peter Winch, "Trying," in: *Ethics and Action*, 141. The notion of becoming is more complicated with concepts that can be legitimately applied to a much wider range of actions than concepts like 'incest'; I have in mind vice concepts. Most of us can lead complex lives and still

manage to avoid accidental incest, but perhaps only a saint can avoid occasional thoughts of cowardice or miserliness. However, when I come to accept that a given action was cowardly, it will be a separate question as to whether I have become a coward in the process; perhaps it was a momentary slip, which will reinforce my bravery next time; alternatively, of course, it might reveal that I have been a coward all along. Throughout, the emphasis is on retrospective revaluation: I thought I was fleeing into safety but I now see that I was fleeing into cowardice. How these revelations and revaluations affect my present choices, and affect my determination to *make up* for my cowardice, will be a point of similarity between the coward and the lorry-driver.

13. There may be cultural or community or club perspectives, but these are *derivative* from the individual perspective, for it is only the individual who can *act*.

14. This is to be contrasted to, for example, an argument between Galileo and his friend about the truth of heliocentrism. Looking back on that argument, we can feel confident that we *could* be in the room with them, and that we could step in to support Galileo.

15. My thanks to Carolyn Wilde for her generous assistance in developing the ideas in this paper.