

Chapter 8

R. W. Beardsmore: Understanding Moral Judgement

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If we distinguish between Wittgenstein's substantive moral views, expressed in his early *Lecture on Ethics*,¹ and his more discriminating grammatical approach to logical issues that we find in the later works, we can say that R. W. Beardsmore² tried to bring this latter way of doing philosophy to ethics. One might even say that he tried to give ethics something like a Wittgensteinian moral epistemology. That would be misleading if it were thought to imply anything like a *theoretical system* for making moral discoveries or resolving moral problems. But if epistemological work includes conceptual clarity about the distinctions that we commonly observe when we are making moral judgements – but which we often forget when we reflect analytically on what we are doing – then it can be said that Beardsmore brought some epistemological light to the dark subject of moral judgement.

Contrary to the aspirations of many, Beardsmore tried to show that there is no such thing as an *ultimate, rational* ground of moral justification in ethics. Not that there are no arguments, but our arguments always rest on deep, often unspoken, moral commitments. These commitments involve our conceptions of value, and the place that they occupy in our thinking does not rest on evidentiary grounds. Thus, there are limits of sense to which the effort to justify our moral values can be taken; and the hope of finding some absolutely secure ground for moral judgement, something that transcends these values, lies beyond these limits. To see *why* such a ground does not exist is to see our moral judgements more clearly for what they are.

Accordingly, this 'groundlessness' does not in itself uncover a weakness in our thinking, as if it meant that *a ground were missing where one is required*. The requirement of an absolute ground secured by value-neutral and transcendent criteria has literally no sense in relation to ethics, and to construct such a value-neutral ground does nothing to secure the reasonableness of our fundamental moral commitments. We can and do make absolute ethical judgements *in one sense*, simply because the reasons that we give for our

moral views eventually come to an end in evaluative judgements on which we stand. Yet this end is not something that lies outside of evaluative thinking. It is a *moral* ground. And when we try to defend this ground in a way that objectively proves its absolute character, we simply reaffirm our most basic moral convictions.

I think that Beardsmore is right about the logically primitive or underived nature of our moral intuitions. And I think that this view is less objectionable than it might appear; for in developing these views, he does not endorse an easy relativism. Strange as it might sound, we can still say of our most fundamental judgements in ethics that they are both groundless and true. One might even say that they state ‘facts’, and that these facts make up the moral reality of our lives. Beardsmore himself did not speak in these ways; but such language is not out of place, and it tells us something about the antipathy between his views and moral relativism.

Much of what Beardsmore has to say on this score reflects conversations with his colleagues, particularly Peter Winch, D. Z. Phillips, and the colleague who influenced all of them, Rush Rhees. It also reflects, though less obviously, Wittgenstein’s notes *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein says nothing about ethical certainties in *On Certainty*, and Beardsmore seldom refers to this source in discussing ethics. Yet he does refer to these notes in an essay on censorship in works of art.³ There his point is that censorship depends on the presumed view that some people, namely the censors, are in a better position to judge a work of art than we are, and that *this* idea – that there are experts better able to judge works of art than we ourselves – is incoherent. Because the judgement of beauty is not grounded in the kind of knowledge that is accessible only to the learned, there are no experts whose knowledge of the history of art makes them better able to see beauty than those who lack such a learned background. Personal judgement rather than expertise is what matters. Beauty discloses itself to the self-involving engagement with artwork, not to the self-absenting deferral of judgement that belongs to ordinary cognition. And the same is true of moral judgements.

Experts, after all, cannot make our judgements *for us*, either in appraising the value of art or the moral value of our lives. We must make these decisions for ourselves. One might think that this fact alone might preclude ethical judgements from ever being certain in the sense in which non-evaluative factual claims can be certain. There is too much disagreement for that, as we simply

take our personal stands on different moral grounds. Yet there is another connection between the spirit of Wittgenstein's remarks and nature of ethical sureness; and this connection, along with the Beardsmore's remarks on groundlessness of basic moral convictions, is what I would like to chase down.

Moral Obligation and Moral Possibilities

Perhaps we should start further back, beginning with an example of the kind of absolute ground for moral judgement that Beardsmore denies. In 'Atheism and Morality,'⁴ he challenges the commonplace idea that there is a crucial link between the moral life and the belief in God. G. E. M. Anscombe had argued that the concept of a specifically *moral duty* is a holdover from an earlier time in which the notion of such obligation belonged to a theistic conception of an all-powerful God. Presumably, this conception of God entailed the notion of there being absolute sanctions, matters of eternal life and death, attached to his commandments, so that the concept of having a moral obligation to God depended on the sense of one's being utterly at the mercy of God. Thus, in an earlier age, theists, such as Jews, Stoics, and Christians, felt bound by moral law because they felt bound by the law's divine source, as they were no more able to escape the law's obligations than they were able to escape their interest in their own welfare. Today, however, people can quite easily escape theism in their views of the world, and so the concept of an absolute obligation no longer holds any real power. The sense of being divinely compelled by duty simply lingers as the needless afterglow of this earlier and once-religious way of thinking.⁵

This view, according to Beardsmore, vastly oversimplifies the possible relations between moral obligation and the belief in God.⁶ For one thing, Anscombe was undoubtedly being tendentious when she described the divine command theory as if it were completely outmoded, since this theory, or something very much like it, might well capture the thinking of many believers. Yet even if we agree that these believers hold outmoded and theologically primitive views, we can still trace other connections between religion and moral obligation; and we can do so without assuming that the concept of God functions as a power that frightens people into submission. More importantly, however, we can account for the sense of moral duty without presuming any connection to religion at all.

To take Beardsmore's example, people might feel that their identities as a trade unionist or a doctor impose certain obligations; and for this reason they might feel that they have no alternative other than to obey a picket line or to answer an emergency call. Such people might well treat such obligations as personal absolutes, if you will, since other possible courses of action are – *for them* – ruled out as moral possibilities. The trade unionist just *couldn't* cross a picket line, and the doctor just *couldn't* refuse an emergency call, and this might have nothing to do with the belief that these duties are imposed by God. The repugnance at the idea of crossing a picket line or refusing help comes from the way that committed unionists and committed doctors understand themselves. One might ask, of course, why there should be any such morally impossible actions for the unionist or the doctor since either could simply give up his profession. But Beardsmore points out that this objection could be as easily raised against those who feel absolutely obligated to do the will of God. Nothing compels a person to remain a believer anymore than anything compels a person to remain a unionist or a physician. The binding character of obligation that is often envisioned as a part of theism is no less dependent on remaining a believer than a doctor's sense of her medical obligations is dependent on her remaining a doctor. If there is anything to this objection, therefore, it cuts as strongly against the attempt to derive binding obligation from the idea of God as it does against the attempt to speak of binding obligations as being ingredient in a person's self-understanding.

Admittedly, it might be easier to imagine losing one's status as a trade unionist than losing one's identity as a believer. Being a trade unionist, after all, is dependent on certain forms of socio-economic organization, while being a believer is much less dependent on social and economic forms of organization. But Beardsmore's argument does not depend on the idea that the sources of moral obligation must be immune to change to be binding. For believers, once again, can cease to understand themselves in religious terms. Their faith can be crushed by the weight of personal tragedies, believers can wilt under the pressure of argumentative challenges to their belief systems, or they can simply grow into being different persons, no longer comfortable with themselves *as* believers. Once something like this happens, some things that were morally impossible for them can become not only possible but tempting. Beardsmore does not deny this. He simply says that some forms of behavior are simply ruled out as possible options *while one remains the person he understands himself to be*.

Why is this? In Beardsmore's examples I think that we are to imagine people who identify themselves strongly with certain social or professional roles; and if this self-identification is strong enough, it carries with it limitations in behaviors that are consistent or inconsistent with their sense of who they are. Thus, people often say, 'I just couldn't do that,' when in fact it is perfectly imaginable *for us* to think of them doing that very thing. Yet *they* cannot think of themselves as performing the act in question because their sense of who they are is bound up with a certain form of self-understanding, a form in which their sense of selfhood resides. 'If I were to allow myself to do *that*, I would no longer be *me*! I would have to be a person that I am not.' That is why they cannot do the act in question. It is not so much a question of the act itself, much less of its physical or psychological possibility; the constraint comes from the fact that one cannot recognize himself or herself *in the imagined activity*. 'I can imagine others doing such a thing; but I cannot imagine *myself* behaving in such a fashion.' To do the morally impossible thing they would have to be untrue to themselves, dissolving a morally deep-running sense of who they are. The sense of being *bound* by some inviolable duties, then, is inextricably connected with the formation of this kind of moral selfhood. The way in which such an identity becomes bound up with moral considerations is characteristic of the most fundamental sort of moral commitment. It explains why some behaviors are morally unthinkable for people, given the way they have their identity bound up with moral self-conceptions.

The situation is no different with religious believers and their sense of obligation. To be a sincere believer, one must find one's sense of identity in a religious self-understanding; and the sense of inner integrity that results from this makes certain behaviors morally unthinkable. Such a religious form of understanding, no less than one's moral self-understanding, might be less vulnerable to change than one's occupational role; but this does not affect the logic of the matter. None of the ways in which we acquire our deepest sense of identity by investing ourselves in the principles by which we live proves invulnerable to the possibility of change, but none of them *needs* to be. The relevant sense of being limited in what one can imagine oneself doing depends on the extent of one's self-identification while it lasts; for while it lasts it carries with it the character of inviolable obligation.

Beardsmore does not go deeply into this business of self-identification, but he provides a further example. He says that he would not even consider the possibility of killing his infant daughters or selling his children into slavery. He knows, of course, that some people in various times and places have done just that, and he also admits that he would be hard pressed to justify the moral revulsion he feels at such an act, as if his attitude were a *choice*.

Perhaps my children are important to me, so that in a whole range of situations, I shall regard myself as facing obligations to protect them, help further their careers, help them out of financial difficulties. And perhaps there are societies in which female offspring are sometimes left to die, or where children are sometimes sold into slavery. But what of it? The fact that there are alternative ways of regarding one's children does nothing to show that these are alternatives for me or that I reached the values which I possess by selecting them from a range of alternatives.⁷

Here he might as well have simply said that he just *couldn't* sell his children into slavery or leave them out to die. He might simply say, 'My daughter is my *child!*', as if to underscore the horror of selling her. When people say such things, the necessity that constrains their action is not derived from a necessary *inference*, as if one had a logically compelling ground for selecting one and not another equally possible alternative. The necessity comes from the fact that all alternatives are *not* equally possible. Some are ruled out because they are unthinkable for us, given our evaluatively laden self-understanding as parents.

In this last case, the constraints of conscience have nothing to do with one's particular socio-economic identity, as one's social or occupational role matters little when it comes to caring for one's children. When one says, for example, "I just could not kill my children" (e.g., in response to the recent story in American news about a woman who did just that), one expresses a moral incapacity that is obviously not tied to one's job. For one can change one's identity in this socio-economic sense without having any effect on the moral unthinkableness of killing children. Killing children is *inhuman* precisely because it is *not* tied to particular social roles that we play, but is something that transcends the socially individuating ways that we forge an identity. Here our self-understanding is tied to general ethical values, and we simply cannot see how one could construe one's life in evaluative ways *unless* one recoiled in horror at the prospect of killing one's children.

For most of us, then, taking care of one's children has the characteristics of a moral absolute because no other alternatives are thinkable. Unlike those cases in which we are tempted to behave in ways that conflict with duty, there are no threatening or live alternatives here to do something else. Special reasons for taking care of one's children are therefore not required because they are not needed. The imagined ethical choices for which compelling criteria are required are obviated by the way in which ethical values help to form our identities and thus to constrain our choices. Before any of these could become anything more than empty, abstract possibilities, our self-concepts would have to be utterly transformed. We would have to come to new ways of thinking of ourselves, imagining new identities and new ways of being in the world. But without intelligible motives to make these imaginings tempting – motives that are not provided by the sheer fact that some people *have* sold their children into slavery – our commitment to the values that are wrapped up in our sense of ourselves will remain unchallenged.

This view of Beardsmore does not depend on an anthropological theory that anchors moral possibilities in a non-evaluative *biological* conception of what human beings are by nature. Obviously those who kill their children are human in this biological sense. They are not being humane, and our sense of what is humane and inhumane is anchored in a peculiarly *moral* sense. Virtually everything that we understand as moral criticism, conscientious reflection, struggling with moral issues, appreciating moral differences, and weighing our moral decisions involves this moral sense. It belongs to the way that we understand ourselves, not to our biology; and it includes some such limitations in what we find it morally possible to do. These limitations depend on acquiring a particular conscience, and not on non-moral grounds that are morally telling, nor on any other kind of logically prior ground that might make the correctness of our value system objectively determinable. Having an inwardly secure moral identity gives us a sense that amounts to what Wittgenstein might have described as ethical certainty, a sureness that forms an indispensable background for a sincerely moral life.⁸

Gratitude and Morality

For Beardsmore, then, the sense of moral obligation is or can be independent of justificatory grounds that lie outside of it; and this point applies as well to the relationship between morality and religion. Moral obligation need not be

derived from a religious outlook. Other ways of forming an identity out of self-understanding are more than enough to explain the constraints we feel as moral agents. Before he leaves this subject, however, he wonders whether there might be another way in which a person's obligations might owe their existence to religion. Perhaps the sense of being morally bound comes, not from being enthralled by religious conceptions of an absolute power, but from the *gratitude* that believers feel for being absolutely and unconditionally sustained by God and his love. Those who experience such a sense of gratitude naturally express it in their words and behavior. This expression is not simply a psychological need but a logical one as well, since those who do not express their gratitude *in any way* can not be said to feel it in the first place. An 'inner process [e.g., gratitude],' as Wittgenstein said, '[always] stands [logically] in need of outward criteria.'⁹ And the complete absence of any form of outward expression thus belies the claim that one is *in fact* grateful.

With this point in mind, we can illuminate one of the primary ethical injunctions of religion – that we treat our neighbors as ourselves. Those who accept this commandment can comply with it in two ways: either by trying to comply outwardly in their behavior, forcing themselves to check the various temptations to behave otherwise; or they can will their neighbor's good spontaneously, without having to override any negative impulses at all. Yet to be able to comply with the commandment in this second sense, they must have a heart that is naturally, without constraint, oriented to the good of the neighbor. Otherwise, they will have no choice but to struggle against themselves, fighting to overcome the self-regarding inclinations that come naturally to them. In other words, they will have to make an *effort* to remember the neighbor if they are to comply with the commandment at all. Yet that will leave them feeling hypocritical about themselves, as if their underlying motives were anything but loving. That seems to have been exactly Jesus's point when he criticized the scribes and Pharisees for 'cleaning only the outside of the cup and not the inside' (Mt. 23:25-26). The scribes and Pharisees had to force themselves to act in a loving manner, and as a result their behavior fell short of the ideal of spontaneity intended by the 'spirit' of the love commandment.

Yet all this might change if believers were moved by the welling-up of an internal sense of gratitude toward God. Then they might 'delight in the law', taking the requirement that one love one's neighbor as oneself as an opportunity to express thanksgiving. Think, for example, of those who feel incomparably blessed by a benefactor and who have no way of repaying this benefac-

tor. Their sense of being blessed results in a spontaneous upsurge of good will; but as there is no possibility to repay the benefactor, the gratitude they feel often turns its expression toward others, and repaying the neighbor stands in place of repaying God. This in fact is the form that gratitude toward God takes: one repays God in passing love and good will on toward others. Here there is no constraint, no felt obligation before an externally imposed standard of behavior. Instead of being duty-bound by an externally imposed commandment, those who feel grateful to God willingly pass on to their neighbors the love that they feel themselves to have received. This, I think, is largely what it means to delight in the law of God, or to obey divine commandments in spirit and truth, according to their intent.

Rather than involving himself in the theological elaboration of these last points, however, Beardsmore attempts only to show that the same connection between gratitude and ethical motivation can be found in the life of the atheist just as easily as it can be found in the life of the believer. The issue for him is whether or not all forms of gratitude for one's good fortune implicitly presume that there is a God. Most of us think that if we are grateful for the gifts that good fortune bestows, we must be grateful *to someone*; and so if these gifts do not come from earthly benefactors, then they must come from some other-worldly source. Hence, it might sound counter-intuitive to think of atheists as being grateful for the good fortune that is not a deliberate present from other people. True gratitude in such cases must be possible *only* for those who can answer the question, 'To whom are you grateful?' by saying, 'I am grateful to God.'

But is this necessarily so? Surely non-believers often do feel grateful for their good fortune, even when they have no persons to thank. In addressing himself to this issue, Raimond Gaita acknowledges that atheists in such circumstances might be filled with a sense of gratitude, but then he says that they need not be religious 'in the strict sense'. They need not speak of God or invoke his name in prayer, for example. But they remain *implicitly* religious, meaning that they might silently or wordlessly express thanks to a divine source of love. Yet why make this proviso? Why, as Beardsmore asks, need we attribute *any* kind of divine recognition to atheists who feel grateful? After a mountain climbing accident that he was fortunate enough to survive, Hank Williams, Jr. felt thankful – he even offered thanks. Yet there was no one in particular to whom these thanks were addressed.¹⁰

Not everyone, after all, looks for personal beings to thank; they thank their ‘lucky stars’ or they thank ‘heavens’ or they thank ‘goodness.’ Sometimes they simply thank ‘the day they were born.’ These ‘objects’ of thanksgiving simply hold the place that the question, ‘What do you thank?’ seems to anticipate. *Something*, we feel like saying, must be thanked simply because the verb ‘to thank’ takes an object. Yet this does not mean that those who express themselves by finding something to occupy this grammatical slot must believe in the existence of the placeholders they use. Sometimes we choose something to fill these syntactical slots only as a form of expression, so that the things that we thank serve only as vehicles for articulating our gratitude. When that is the role that the objects of our thanksgiving play, then any particular placeholder can be freely exchanged for any other. ‘Lucky stars’ will serve as well as ‘goodness.’ Neither bears any ontological implications.

Of course, some people really *do* believe in astrology and really *do* attribute their good fortune to the influence of the stars. But this obvious point should not blind us to the more subtle point that people often thank the peculiar objects that they do, not to indicate that they know what to thank, but to confess that they *do not know what to thank*. Their gratitude wells up within, as it were, without any convenient place to go. When that happens, it makes little difference whether we thank the day we were born or whether we thank goodness. It all comes to the same thing: we feel thankful. We even understand it when one can find *nothing* to thank. If one simply says, ‘Oh, I’m so grateful!’ and we ask, ‘To whom are you so grateful,’ we might well be told, ‘I don’t know; I’m just so fortunate.’ These words *too* count as an expression of gratitude.

So we need to be wary about assuming that there are or must be metaphysical presumptions beneath all expressions of gratitude. There are exceptions to the rule that one must believe in the existence of whatever it is that one thanks, and Beardsmore is right to point out that gratitude for one’s life can transform the spirit of moral motivation without being dependent on the belief in *God*.

Beardsmore alludes to another presumption that philosophers often make about gratitude (though he does not examine the point) – namely, that one can feel grateful only for what one regards as a *benefit*. But here too there are exceptions, as Patrick Fitzgerald has shown in a recent article on gratitude. Fitzgerald’s example is the Dalai Lama, who feels sincerely grateful to the Chinese, the very people who forced him to flee from his native Tibet. On the

level of common understanding, the Chinese invasion was indeed a harm. But on another and more important level, the Dalai Lama tells us that this harm represents an opportunity for spiritual enlightenment. Of course, we might say that this attitude is just a show of gratitude that papers over deep hostility; but this appears not to be the case. Nor can one say that the Dalai Lama thinks that the persecution of the Chinese will benefit the Tibetans by strengthening their Tibetan identity in resistance to the Chinese. He realizes full well that the Chinese takeover might be permanent and that a stronger Tibet might never emerge. In that sense they have been harmed. Yet he lets go of all resentment for this harm and gratefully accepts the difficulties that the Chinese have put in his way.¹¹

This last example, like the previous one, reminds us that we should not make hasty assumptions about what must obtain if we are to feel grateful. We need not be grateful to someone, nor must we think of ourselves as beneficiaries in any ordinary sense if we are to feel grateful. Both of these points imply that we need not believe in the existence of God to be grateful for our lives and to express our gratitude in a changed, more spontaneous, and more willing attitude toward our obligations. These reminders scarcely comprise a moral theory or anything like it, but they show us that the sense of obligation need not arise from the religious idea that God is the author of our moral sense. Neither gratitude nor good will *requires* such a religious support, and we do not need a generalized theory to see that this is the case. All that is required is some conceptual reminders about the surprising variety of sense that we find in moral discussion.

Moral Disagreements and Their Resolution

Suppose, then, we agree that atheists can feel gratitude for their lives without believing that there is a God to thank. More disturbing is that fact that the same situation that inspires gratitude in one person might not inspire gratitude in another. Believers, for example, often speak of God's love even in the midst of extreme suffering. For them 'all things work together for good' (Romans 8:29). Yet the very same sufferings that work together for good for believers drive others to bitter resignation.¹² What are we to make of such disagreements when gratitude is in order for some while it is unthinkable for others? Both reactions are natural in the sense that neither arises out of any sort of thought or reflection, and neither follows from any indispensable logical

ground. To that extent, there is no possibility of *resorting* to such grounds as a means of determining which of the two is ‘rational’. But that again is Beardsmore’s point: once we reach the primitive levels on which our reactions to events come naturally to us, the possibility of justifying these responses and the beliefs that reflect them comes to an end.

Beardsmore, unlike other philosophers, was willing to let such differences stand. Personally he might have felt more sympathy with those who speak of gratitude even in hard times; I don’t know, though I feel sure that he would not have blamed those who, in the midst of such trials, could find no gratitude at all in their hearts. In any case, he did not believe that philosophy could marshal any arguments that might decide which of these two primitive reactions was proper. For nothing in the way of rational *inference* lies behind our disagreements on this fundamental level. Beardsmore realized this early on, and in *Moral Reasoning* he drew a fundamental distinction between two different kinds of moral disagreement, one of which arises over a dispute about the consistency and thoroughness of our judgements, and the other of which arises out of a disagreement in the evaluative perspectives that we rely on in reaching judgements of the first sort. His discussion focuses almost entirely on the latter.

The difficulty arises when our values *are* our criteria for moral judgement and we differ in our understanding of what these values are. Wherever there are such differences in value, they affect what we consider good moral reasons to be; and thus it is difficult to see what sense there is in relying on the usual model of rational justification to resolve disagreements that result. And yet we do not want to say that our values are irrational. That is the nub of the problem. Only *some* moral disagreements can be settled by ironing out questions of consistency, or by bringing into the discussion some forgotten but relevant considerations, or by extending an evaluative perspective toward neglected topics. The remaining problems are more fundamental than these because they concern the moral and evaluative perspectives that define what counts as a good reason for moral judgement in the first place.

If I had to say what enters into these fundamental considerations of value, I would say that if they yield themselves to anything at all, it is to extra-philosophical, ordinary means of persuasion – to being struck, to being drawn out of oneself, to having the kind of moral instruction that helps to form our selfhood, so that the conscience that we develop cannot be dismissed without

the loss of selfhood that arises in its wake. A similar point can be made by saying that our views are shaped by relevant experiences together with pertinent discussions with others. The Department of Philosophy at Swansea was committed to philosophical discussion, and its Philosophical Society met regularly for decades. If after participating in this discussion a person changed his mind on an ethical issue, he might not have been convinced by a deductive argument. It is far more likely that he was impressed by the examples, the passionate presentations, and the general exchange that accompanied the issue. Changing one's mind as a result of reading, talking, experiencing, and considering the views of other in the light of one's own inward experience requires no excuse. It is an appropriate – and in that sense, a reasonable – way of examining and reexamining moral issues.

Beardsmore, however, discusses little of this, with one exception. The exception centers on the concept of primitive reactions, reactions that make it possible to learn any moral grammar. The notion of primitive reactions comes up in Wittgenstein, where he is thinking about how the rules of conceptual sense-making are to be followed. Superficially, we might think that we follow *other* rules that guide us in following the set of initial rules that differentiate between the meaningful and meaningless use of a term. On reflection, however, we realize that the procedure of citing rules – even if we were involved in teaching people how to make sense in what they say – could not continue indefinitely. Sooner or later people must simply come to understand, to get the point at issue, and to internalize the sense of the terms involved. This is a logical point, and Wittgenstein notes that the possibility of this sort of primitive understanding depends on there being a kind of spontaneity in our reactions to various situations. This agreement in our spontaneous reactions gives language an unpremeditated foundation out of which it can emerge, so that what people do when they follow the guidance of others is not endlessly subject to private variation. For we do agree, not just in being instructed but in the primitive reactions that make such instruction possible. Without it, we would not be able to learn.¹³

Wittgenstein's example is learning the use of the word 'pain.' Saying that sympathetic responses to others' pains arise spontaneously or primitively means that we have a common behavioral background against which we learn the peculiar uses of the word pain. We depend on this background, for example, how to recognize and conceptually identify pain in other people and in ourselves. Thus, for example, we naturally reach out to soothe the spot where

another has been hurt, we hold babies who are crying, we stop whatever we are doing when it is obvious that we are causing gratuitous pain, and so on. When we do these things, we do not *deliberate* about whether we should be doing them. We just do them, and this fact is important to our understanding of what pain is. In fact, were it not for this kind of agreement of practice in how we live, it is difficult to see how our understanding of responsibility to those in pain could ever have developed.

By the same token, when we as children are given a moral rule to follow (e.g., treat others with kindness), the spontaneous agreement in our sympathetic responses helps us to recognize the patterns of response that count as following this rule. The rule, as it were, blesses some of these responses so that we can see something of what the rule intends without the need for further instruction. In this way, our natural sympathetic tendencies assist us in understanding what we are to do in following the rule – that is, in understanding what kindness means – without having any explicit need for deliberation. On this behavioral level, then, we realize what instruction in the use of pain words means, and what the moral instruction about being kind to those in pain intends. Such unpremeditated agreement in adhering behaviorally to the norms of grammar goes hand in glove with what Wittgenstein called more generally an agreement in the form of our lives.¹⁴ This, he says, is the sort of agreement that lies at the bottom of every language-game and makes learning it possible.¹⁵

In short, the grammar that we are trying to elucidate floats on something that is not secured by inference. The condition which makes this possible is the fact that at some point those who are learning to apply concepts or to follow rules go on for themselves without the never-ending need for further instruction about how the initial instruction about rule-following is to be understood in practice. Our language is built on this primitive, behavioral capacity to grasp what proper understanding entails. For we did not have to be told how to act sympathetically. That behavior came to us without thought, and so it must, if it is to enable the higher order of conceptual learning to take place.

Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan can help to illustrate the large issue that I am driving at. Beardsmore does not mention this story in the essay before us, but the parable received so much attention at Swansea that it seems a logical choice for the purpose.¹⁶ The parable is a piece of moral instruction about following the love commandment, specifically, about how we are to

know who our neighbors are. Instead of answering this question directly by enunciating a criterion, Jesus tells the parable. And when he has finished describing the man who was robbed and left to suffer while pious Jews passed him by, he asks the lawyer in a pointed way, ‘Which of the three men proved to be the neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ Was it the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan? Had the lawyer not shared with the Samaritan the natural impulse to help those in need – to touch, as it were, the spot that hurts – the point of his question would have been lost. Presumably, the lawyer knew what it meant to help someone without having to think about it, but for some reason this reaction was blocked for the Priest and the Levite who passed the Samaritan by. Yet when he listens to the story, the lawyer – and presumably modern-day readers – is forced to admit that it was the Samaritan who knew who his ‘neighbors’ were. The neighbors are those who turn up needing our help. They do not belong to a group that has identifiable features that distinguish them as a class from non-neighbors. They are those that we are moved to help before any such classification takes place in our reasoning.

Remember that it was a lawyer, seeking to justify himself, who asked Jesus who our neighbors are. Evidently, he wanted an argument to specify just who counts and does not count as a neighbor. The response that Jesus gave him was pointed because it rejected the notion that moral behavior could be built on such definitions and on the inferences that follow from them, as if having that kind of guidance would enable us to work our way rationally to a better understanding of who our neighbors are. Understanding the principle of neighborly love, precisely because it does not begin with a restrictive definition of the neighbor, relies on a natural or instinctive response that *needs* no self-justification and that ultimately stems from a primitive response in us. That is why the example of the Samaritan carries such force even today; we do not need another rule (beyond the love commandment) to tell us whom we should care for. Here the foundation of moral understanding lies in a primitive response that is not a product of ratiocination but which, in fact, secures the understanding of the love commandment on the level of practice.¹⁷

Yet what about those who do not share the instinctive reactions of the Samaritan? Here there are two points that we need to separate. First, there is no *necessity* behind the primitive response of helpfulness, for we can easily imagine people for whom this spontaneous responsiveness is absent. The Jews who passed by the beaten man actually illustrate this point, since we might well imagine their reactions coming as naturally to them as the sympathetic reac-

tions of the Samaritan came to him. Perhaps their selfish pre-occupation needed to be rationalized because their uncaring reactions to the Samaritan went against *their* primitive instincts. Sometimes it is true that such selfish reactions require a rationalization because people do feel a *primitive* impulse to help the needy person and must give themselves a reason for not doing it. Thus, the priest might say, ‘If I touched the injured man, I would have to go through a lengthy process of ritually restoring my cleanliness as a priest.’ Yet such self-justifying is not always required to off-set a primitive tendency. Sometimes tending to ourselves alone comes completely naturally to us, being maintained apart from any sort of conceptual directives. Certainly Beardsmore would not have denied this. Yet if there are people who naturally think only of themselves – who lack the kind of conscience that is morally informed by primitive acts of kindness – it is difficult for the rest of us to think of them as being moral at all.

This last *sort* of difficulty arises when our primitive reactions differ, and it is not the sort of difficulty that arises out of reflection. It is a more fundamental kind of impasse that consists of differences in moral sensibility. This, again, is the kind of moral disagreement that captivated Beardsmore and his like-minded colleagues at Swansea. To express our disagreement with those whose self-interest outweighs any natural sympathies, we can call such people irrational if we like. But if we do, these words will not imply that we can reveal their irrationality in an argument that they would appreciate. We cannot show, for example, that they have made a mistake in a commonly accepted manner of reasoning. The commonly accepted manner of reasoning will doubtless presume some sort of fundamental sense of responsibility on the part of morally caring individuals – and yet this is precisely what morally unsympathetic people lack. For them, the standards at issue are not commonly accepted in their primitive reactions or in their explicit thinking.

The logical point here is important. Normally, the concept of making a mistake depends upon the possibility of knowing aright. Thus, mistakes in this sense of the word can be *shown* to be mistakes by being contrasted with what we know, on good grounds, to be true. Yet when the foundations of judgement are disrupted by primitive differences in the way we think, then mistakes cannot be identified in this way. What is correct and incorrect then becomes *objectively* indeterminable for the parties involved. In such cases, one side might well *call* the other side mistaken or irrational, but what could this mean when the *standards* of argument are themselves in dispute? We can label our

opponents as we like, but in cases such as those we are discussing, branding people as irrational or mistaken implies only that they do not believe what we believe. We hold certain beliefs – including moral principles – to be rational because they define what we mean by ‘rational’; and this agreement in what we take as rational is sustained by an agreement in practice in which we respond sympathetically to others. On that level, ‘rational’ people behave like this and ‘irrational’ ones like that. Good people (rational people) react in this way and not that way; they believe in the value of A rather than B. These are the norms by which we judge. But, of course, others may disagree and say the opposite. And then we are back where we started.

The point of all of this is something that Beardsmore understood very well, that every moral disagreement is not objectively solvable. Those who disagree with us about the most fundamental moral matters simply do not see them as we do, and we invite confusion if we think of this as a challenge to justify our fundamental intuitions on grounds of inference, as if that might show to everyone that we are right and they are wrong. This does not mean that moral judgements are arbitrary; it means the sureness that attends our moral sensibility does not depend on the classical ideal of justification on logical grounds. It has a different but not unreasonable or inappropriate source.

*Moral Relativism and Moral Choices*¹⁸

Beardsmore’s clarity on this last point – that is, on the fact that our fundamental values are not strictly derived from more basic rational grounds – does not *weaken* the hold that he has on his moral commitments. It is one thing to say that one’s basic values and moral commitments do not admit a justification on logical grounds, and quite another to say that one’s beliefs are unjustifiable in the pejorative sense of being arbitrary and unreasonable. To acknowledge the primitive or fundamental character of our evaluative orientation simply points out the logical fact that moral grounds are required for moral argument, and the evaluative commitments that represent the framework for our moral arguments do not proceed from a non-moral framework of thought. Such fundamental commitments lie too deep in our lives to admit the possibility of being treated as conjectures needing that kind of justification. Giving them up would leave us not only without a sense of how to reason morally, but would also leave us without an evaluative understanding of ourselves.

The confusion here between moral-grounds-to-stand-on and moral-stands-that-need-a-ground affects the very orientation that gives our reasoning its sense. If I doubted that we ought not to sell our children into slavery, for example, one would wonder what I would *not* doubt and what the values might be that I could appeal to. I could hardly cite prudential interests, such as the financial advantage, of selling my children. The barbarism of that owes itself not merely to appealing to money as a justification of selling my children, but to resorting to *any* self-interested, prudential, defense of my actions. If we tried to manufacture independent reasons for basic values that give our moral reasoning its guiding principles, we would distort the seriousness of moral judgement itself. We would imply that such moral truisms, as I've said before, were debatable moral options, whereas the adoption of such standards is anything but optional. We teach our children *what* to value in teaching them *how to understand* responsibility and ethical obligation. And we expect reasonable people to internalize, not just these basic principles, but their application in the moral thinking that they underwrite.

Yet if there is nothing that we can do to argue rationally for what we regard as moral truisms, what force can one's commitment to them have? Or is moral believing, on this level, arbitrary after all? I think that there is more here to Beardsmore's approach than meets the eye. One point I have already alluded to: we have no reason to think that such fundamental commitments are irrational or arbitrary unless we have come to this commitment as a choice that *should* have been justified against other alternatives. Let's say that we have learned that people in other cultures sometimes sell or abandon their children. Does their practice mean that we have chosen to protect our children from an array of equally possible moral options? This fact about others' practice – that they sometimes do leave their children out to die – does not create a demand for us to justify our moral attitude about protecting our children on logically prior grounds, much less on grounds that would be intelligible to them. It only seems to do so because it suggests that there is *for us* a range of moral alternatives here, and that we have come to our moral views by choosing from among these alternatives. Had we in fact chosen in this way, the question, 'On what basis did you choose?' would make sense; and the inability to answer this question would make us wonder whether our choices were governed by appropriate logical standards. The problem with this line of reasoning is *not* the view that rational choices are governed by rational criteria, but the view that our fundamental commitments, including the commitment we have to the value of our children, ever appeared on a menu of such choices. Instead of

needing to be justified in this way, this commitment is *more secure* as a moral judgement than such a view would imply.

That is why we are so bewildered in the face of those who kill their children, for then we find ourselves outside the limits of those disagreements that rational argument can manage. We do not understand what the grounds of their thinking could *possibly* be, and therefore we cannot see their behavior as a species of *moral* behavior at all. This, however, says nothing about the arbitrariness of our own behavior. We certainly need not confess that our moral ways of thinking and living are on a par with those who leave their children out to die. That again would suggest that the moral attitudes in question are the result of moral choices made from a range of equally possible alternatives. But this again is not the case, and the point bears repeating because the fear of moral relativism is lodged in this misunderstanding.

I do not know any of Beardsmore's work in which he discusses the way in which we acquire moral values or standards of judgement, though the need for such a discussion seems obvious here. Again, my own view is that our values are acquired by way of moral instruction, and that this instruction ultimately depends on certain primitive reactions, which are encouraged and commended in the communication of ethical concepts. Obviously, more might be said about this. Yet the sketchiness of this suggestion does not affect Beardsmore's point. When truly basic moral differences confront us, it is our inability to provide rational justifications for our moral commitments that reflects everything we know good moral sense to be. Were we to surrender to the thought that our fundamental values are arbitrary, we would thereby forfeit the very sense of moral deliberation. Some values must serve us as anchors to orient our understanding, and these anchors cannot be dislodged if we are to reason as we do. This means that we cannot frame certain morally impossible options as rational alternatives to begin with. The very idea of treating the wanton abandonment of children as a moral possibility is itself a kind of moral lapse, as if one had forgotten what it means to be moral. In such an atmosphere, no moral arguments can carry any weight.

The Universalizability Thesis: Another Illusion of Moral Reason

In a typescript entitled, 'People,' Beardsmore returns to the general theme of moral reasoning in a manner that is more exacting than anything that I have

said so far. His target, sometimes called ‘prescriptivism’, is the widely accepted view that moral and evaluative judgements presume a set of specific features that all good acts and valued things share. These features represent the morally *significant* aspects of things that are valued – i.e., the properties that are responsible for our positive or negative evaluations of the things that possess them. Thus, they are what make good things good or bad things bad, and they explain the generality of our judgements about whole classes of objects. Thus, if we behave morally in one way toward animals and another way toward human beings, there must be a morally significant difference between the two. This difference, moreover, must be *independently* specifiable. Something more than the fact that animals are animals and people are people, in other words, needs to be said to specify what people have and animals lack that accounts for our difference in the way that we treat them morally. Of course, one must first determine what the morally significant features of objects are, and on that point the defenders of this idea are notoriously uncertain. Yet Beardsmore does not focus his criticism on this point. Rather, he attacks the underlying idea that a selection of morally significant properties is essential to our evaluations in the first place.

To be more precise, the prescriptivist’s claim is that that the rationality of moral judgements depends on our being able to isolate one or another characteristic in terms of which differences in our moral judgements can be explained. A judgement is rational if one can cite a reason for it, and in the case of moral reasoning, the same principle must hold. People must have reasons for treating human beings in one way and animals in another, and these reasons are to be found in a set of properties that humans have and animals lack. Here the rationality of one’s judgements does not consist in the appropriateness of *what* one values; it consists in the rule-like procedure of subjecting one’s judgement to the principle that everything that possesses the same significant properties must be evaluatively treated in the same way. Beardsmore rejects this thesis. It is simply false that all of the moral judgements that we feel entitled to hold are the consequences of generalizing over the significant features of one class as opposed to another.¹⁹ This distorts the character of our moral judgements and *a fortiori* distorts the nature of moral reasoning. What can be said for these claims?

His arguments are all important contributions to moral philosophy. The first thing that he points out is the ‘breathtaking generality’ of trying to distinguish between humans and animals in a way that would justify the different ways in

which we treat each. For one thing, our treatment of both animals and humans is remarkably diverse. We do not treat our pets as we do other animals, or our family members as we do strangers, etc. Most of us think that it is permissible to eat some animals, at least under certain conditions, but we do not think it appropriate to eat all animals regardless of the circumstances. Most of us, for example, would not eat our pets. And if asked why we eat fish purchased at the market but not the cat who just died, it is enough to answer simply, 'The cat was our pet!' Here it is pointless to search for an *additional* justification by trying to isolate a feature that only our pets have and other animals do not.²⁰

When we look for a morally significant difference that characterizes a certain class of objects and that justifies us in treating this class in some special way, there is no guarantee that we will be able to find one. I may wonder what it is about human beings that renders them worthy of my respect for their life and interests, but it is a mistake to think that I must be able to satisfy my curiosity by isolating a morally significant feature that the whole class shares. I might say that human beings can return love, that they exercise free will, that they bear the burden of being conscious about their death, etc.; and yet there are human beings that lack these features without thereby forfeiting the moral respect that we owe them. There are those who live in persistent vegetative states, for example. Yet the fact that such people lack some or all of the qualities that I just mentioned does not mean that we owe them no respect. Here we respect people *despite* the fact that they lack the characteristic features that we might think determine our moral regard. When our efforts to apply the universalizability thesis keep failing us in this way, we can only say what we should have said to begin with: we respect people *as human beings*, not because they have some additional or special feature that can be singled out as the basis for our moral regard. This type of objection seems to plague all versions of the prescriptivist's thesis.

If, after all, the moral treatment of people is based on their having certain properties (other than the fact that they are human beings), then we might ask why we should treat *that* property as the reason for the discriminations that we make in our behavior toward them. Is there some *other* property which this first property must have (perhaps a more specific aspect of the property) in order for us to be able to say that our appraisal is rational in the sense of being governed by a consistent rule?

Indeed, it is quite obvious that if sometimes we respond to x but not to y because of some property z which x though not y possesses, then we must respond to z, but not the absence of z, without necessarily being able to identify any further characteristic to justify our responses. Otherwise we are led into an infinite regress of justifications for justifications, with the result that nothing is ever justified.²¹

As an illustration, Beardsmore rejects the demand to show that racism, for example, is irrational simply by proving that racists have violated the principle of universalizing moral judgements according to a certain property. That is not the way to articulate one's disagreement with racists. It misrepresents the logic involved. The defenders of the moral theory in question presume that racists *do* base their respect for certain people on the characteristics that white people have and that colored people lack. But then the racists do not extend their positive valuation of white people to individuals in the colored races who have the same features. Thus, if some members of colored races turn out to have the same morally significant characteristics as members of the white race – say, perseverance and industriousness – this does *not* change the racist's view. They still feel entitled to discriminate against all colored peoples. In general, since no property or set of properties will divide perfectly along racial lines, racists are bound to contradict themselves, approving of features found in the white race and not approving of colored individuals with the same features. Or they will disapprove of certain features found in the colored races but not disapprove of whites with the same characteristics. Racists, on this prescriptivist view, are precisely those who do *not* change their views when such inconsistencies are pointed out to them, and that is why their views should be rejected. These views are rejected not because they are *morally abhorrent*, but because racists are being *irrational in their inconsistent manner of thinking*.

As Beardsmore points out, this way of conceiving of the irrationality of racism implies that racists *would be* rational if they simply were consistent in universalizing over the racial features that they think are morally significant. The problem with this is that it deflects criticism away from the moral question about what is significant to begin with, as it says nothing about the moral appropriateness of the features that the racists supposedly generalize over. To take a simple example, consider those racists who think that what makes people worthy of moral respect is the color of their skin, and imagine that they consistently hold to this view. Here one cannot explain what is wrong with this by saying that racists do not think rationally because they are not consis-

tent in the generalizations they make. The objection to racism has to be based on the appropriateness of taking skin as the basis for the moral appraisal of human beings. But this is not an objection that prescriptivists are prepared to make. For their principle of moral reasoning does nothing to define what is or is not a worthy feature of moral discrimination. It says simply that a rational person must have an answer to the question, ‘Why do you value one race above another?’ And this requirement is satisfied by the response, ‘Because they (the favored races) have white skin.’ In short, the prescriptivist makes moral rationality dependent on consistency, not on what one is morally consistent about.

Beardsmore, therefore, simply rejects the claim that people are being irrational if they do not couch their judgements by universalizing over morally significant properties in the things that they value.

Of course, if I was desperate to show that the racist was *irrational*, then it might be necessary for me to try to make use of the universalizability principle in the manner of Peter Singer, but then why should anyone want to show that the racist is *irrational*. True, a central theme in Singer’s writing, and in the writings of those who share his general approach is the desire to show that certain sorts of moral viewpoints – racism, sexism, eating meat – are in some way irrational or conceptually confused. But, I, for myself, find this rather hard to fathom.²²

The reason why Beardsmore finds the efforts of people like Singer hard to fathom is not that he – Beardsmore – does not condemn racism. Quite the contrary. Beardsmore strongly condemns it – but he does not condemn it by saying that it is *irrational*, as if the racist had violated a formal rule of judgement. That is too weak to capture the *moral* sense of his rejection of racism.

. . . though I should certainly say of the Nazi treatment of the Jews that it was an evil abomination, I find it difficult to see what it would add to this if one were to say that the justifications given for it were confused. After all, I find the fairly common practice of torturing one’s political opponents in order to stamp out political opposition about as morally repulsive a practice as might be imagined; but confused or irrational? But as I say, I do not think that the principle of universalizability has any tendency to show that they are.²³

That is what Beardsmore objected to, the suggestion that racists or torturers were confused in using the universalizability thesis as a rule of reason. Far better to expose the rawness of moral disagreement on this level by saying that racists and torturers are morally repulsive irrespective of their ability to

apply such rules. Then at least it would be clear that the disagreement in question is a specifically *moral* disagreement, rather than a dispute about the consistency of their application of a general rule of reason.

I don't think that he would have complained if ordinary people (non-philosophers) wanted to use the word 'irrational' in describing racists or torturers, as long as *that were simply another way of expressing the extent of their disagreement*. But he would have rejected the further implication that such people can be shown to have made an error in judgement, as if this error were a false or inconsistent inference of some kind. The racist's ideas are deplorable, but it does no good to represent them as making that kind of error. All that the racists need to do to escape the charge of racism on the prescriptivist's view, after all, is to make skin color the property that *they see* as accounting for the different moral worth of people. Here there need be no inconsistency involved in applying that as a rigorous standard. Yet this result cannot be right. We should have said that their reasoning goes wrong from the start, not because it is inconsistent, but it consistently applies a morally repugnant view.

Moral Epistemology

Throughout his work in ethics, Beardsmore endeavored to show that we cannot be moral agents without entering into a certain form of moral understanding. To enter into this shared understanding – this grammar of moral sense – means internalizing the moral values that belong to it, so that one thinks and lives by this understanding of one's life. That is how we acquire our moral sensibility. Accepting the values enshrined in such a way of thinking becomes part of self-understanding, which in turn means that some behaviors are ruled out as morally impossible acts. That is why there is such a thing as people's moral integrity; they acquire a moral identity and a moral character, and that involves the acceptance of certain limits in what they see as morally possible and impossible acts. It is this acceptance of moral limits to one's behavior that makes a person moral in the deepest sense of the word, not their compliance with a formal rule of rationality or a generalized ideal of rational justification. Now I want to reach further by drawing out some of the hidden epistemological implications of this view.

I think that the general, grammatical, orientation of Beardsmore's ethics suggests that some of the concepts that have long been banished from moral philosophy, notably the concepts of truth and reality, can be brought back into it. Winch acknowledged the same point when he said that

We cannot deny the admissibility of such locutions as: 'It's a fact that my behavior was squalid.' We cannot deny that someone may, with perfect linguistic propriety, endorse my remark by saying: 'That's true,' or contest it with: 'That's not true.'²⁴

But Winch went on to say that it also seems quite natural to contrast the difference between these sorts of moral truths and empirical truths by saying that 'one judgement states a fact about the situation while the other expresses an attitude toward the facts of a situation.'²⁵ I think that Winch's remarks here are typical of the Wittgensteinians in the Swansea school. They all recognized the importance of making *distinctions* between the meanings of terms used in one context and the meanings of the same terms used in another setting, and the uses of the word 'truth' and 'fact' offer a case in point.

To clarify, we can take a convenient example provided by Raimond Gaita in *A Common Humanity*.²⁶ There he speaks of Australian officials who imposed forcible sterilization on Aboriginals in the early part of this century. In so doing, he says, those responsible failed to recognize the full humanity of the Aboriginal people. That is, they failed to see something *that was plainly before them*. It is difficult to disagree with Gaita's description here without appearing to be a racist. Can one say, for example, that the humanity of the Aboriginal people is *not* plain to us? Were the Australian officials *not* in fact insensitive to this reality when they recommended forcible sterilization? Perhaps one might object to using the word 'reality' in this connection without objecting to the spirit of Gaita's remarks. Yet the denial of these things – saying that there is no moral reality, no moral truth of the matter, and no human significance in the Aboriginals – is even more misleading. For it is entirely natural to speak in these ways, and were one to object to such remarks, we would wonder whether there were not ulterior motives (i.e., racist feelings) behind the complaints. Here, ironically, where we are least able to justify our moral judgements is where we are most likely to speak of truth and reality.

After all, when moral judgements are accepted as *givens* – i.e., as foundational elements in a moral outlook – the logical sense of these judgements is *expressed* by calling them moral truths, moral facts, or insights into moral re-

ality. Such judgements are expressed in this way for exactly the same reason that they are said to be rational, *not because* they can be justified as inferences from prior grounds but *because* they are constitutive of what we take good judgement in moral matters to be. The truths of morality, one might say, belong to what is *commonplace* in morality; and this includes the assertive expression of the basic moral values that serve us as standards. The reality that these truths disclose is simply the reality that one “sees” when one understands these values. This, of course, is not the sort of reality that one sees when one is simply describing the world; and the sense in which the moralist sees reality is decidedly not the same sense invoked in scientific contexts. Of course not! But these moral expressions *do* have grammatical sense nonetheless, and it is important to be clear about this fact.

Clarity on this last point is essential if one is to defend Beardsmore and the other Wittgensteinians at Swansea against the charge that they are relativists, non-cognitivist, and fideists – still a widely held view. In truth, the grammatical approach the Swansea philosophers took over from Wittgenstein exposes the crudity of these charges and forces one in the direction of more discriminating questions. To see what I mean, take the concept of a fact, something that most of us think that we understand. Generally, when we speak of facts, we attend to a sense of the word ‘fact’ that is particularly familiar to us, forgetting that there are actually several very different senses of the term. Thus, most of us would not remember that we speak of moral facts, simply because we have cognitive, descriptive, facts in mind, facts that have no essential personal significance for us. Yet as Winch notes and Gaita implies, in some contexts it makes perfectly good sense to speak of moral facts. By a moral fact, I mean something that can be relied on, and something that *is to be relied on* if one is to enter into moral reasoning. In this sense of the word, facts do not *contrast* with values but are value judgements themselves; and the judgement that Aboriginals are human beings deserving of respect is a good example. It is not a value-free natural description; it is an evaluative appraisal that frames the discussion of Aboriginal rights in a moral context. If Aboriginal peoples are to be treated morally, then we must start with the fact that they are entitled to moral respect as human beings. In expressing this point as a fact, we do not mean that it is a scientific fact. We mean that it is a rudimentary insight into something that lies plainly, reliably, before us.

In ‘On Not Worshipping the Facts’, an article published decades ago, J. R. Lucas pointed out that there was no *essential* connection between the concept

of a fact and the notion of an empirical finding.²⁷ An empirical finding, a piece of descriptive data, an observed result – all these are facts in a perfectly familiar sense of the word. Yet we might be so wedded to this sense of the word that we think of such empirical facts as the only facts that there are. Yet there are other senses in which we speak of facts where the context no longer involves descriptions, findings, or the reports of experiments and observations; and Lucas reminds us of these contexts. He asks us to remember that facts include anything that can be taken for granted, rather like Wittgenstein's certainties. In this sense, facts do not contrast with values but with hypotheses, contentions, or disputable claims. Facts are secure judgements, safe in normal contexts from the critical inquiry that applies to other judgements, and this applies whether we are discussing facts in a scientific context or not. As we approach our most certain moral convictions, where we cannot help but to feel that those who disagree with us are wrong, then we find ourselves speaking easily of moral facts and moral truths, just as Gaita did in condemning racism.

Insofar as there are such givens in morality, then, these same givens – moral certainties, true insights, whatever one wants to call them – can be meaningfully described as facts. Thus, I take it for granted that we ought not to leave our female infants out to die. To regard this as a morally impossible option is, in effect, to say that we have no doubts about this at all; it can be accepted as the common coinage of what we take as ethical discussion. In that sense it is a fact, an obviously true judgement that can be presumed as belonging to the unquestioned presuppositions of moral discussion. For such facts as these ordinarily need not even be mentioned, for who among us, among those who know what we know about morality, would not agree? It seems clear that there must be such moral facts simply because there must be some common ground in judgements for moral thinking to proceed. For us, and for all those with whom we can have a moral discussion, this common ground is actually interwoven with the understanding of particular moral concepts and moral values. Yet none of this means that these facts can somehow be *shown* to be facts in the sense in which they might be empirically confirmed or derived from anything that is more certain. It means only that when it comes to the question of their epistemological grounds, such facts are immediately secure because they are bound up with the role that they play in what we know as moral reasoning. If someone does not accept such a claim as a moral fact, the framework of moral thinking for those who do accept this fact comes unglued and one is at a loss to treat the disagreement in a morally reasonable way.

Admittedly, there might be such disagreements. Sometimes people do challenge our moral certainties. But when this happens, the logical *nature* of our disagreements changes into a difficulty that can no longer be straightforwardly negotiated by reason. We might think that such disagreements should in principle be subject to some form of objective and rational determination; but the mere fact that we can imagine such disagreements does not mean that they must be subject to justification on rational grounds.

The same goes for the concept of reality, which we also commonly use in connection with moral insight. Obviously, this reality does not consist in what we see empirically or of what we discover objectively or impersonally about the world around us. It consists in what we come to see as our moral vision opens up. Thus, when we speak of the realities of the moral world, we mean that moral judgements are incumbent on us as human beings, who are trying to find our way in the life that surrounds us. Here again we have to resist the temptation to think of reality solely in terms of empirical reality, as if there were no other realities to be met with in human experience. We do not first have to resolve the question ‘Is there a moral reality out there?’ *as a descriptive issue* before we can know that these moral realities exist. Our confidence that there is a moral reality depends entirely on entering another, non-descriptive and non-empirical dimension of understanding, which we discover only in coming to understand the point of evaluative considerations. As we learned to follow the ways in which moral concepts are used in making moral judgements, we grew into the grammar of moral discourse; and as a result, we find ourselves with moral commitments that we cannot imagine being without. And our confidence in speaking of moral realities is simply the other side of these same moral convictions.

What none of this means, of course, is that moral judgement is anything like empirical, objective, or purely descriptive judgement. Only the words – ‘reality,’ ‘fact,’ ‘truth,’ ‘seeing what is the case’ – are the same; whereas their place in our discourse reveals a grammatical sense quite unlike the uniform meaning that one might expect. The fact that such terms are used in a variety of different contexts suggests only that there are judgements to be made in these contexts. But it does not tell us what these judgements are like, how they are to be made, or anything else about the distinctive epistemology that lies behind their usage. That remains for grammatical studies to clarify.

Nevertheless, the fact that there is some sense of ‘reality,’ of ‘truth,’ and of ‘facts’ to be made out by such grammatical studies gives us a *prima facie* reason for thinking that moral judgement is far from being an arbitrary choice. It is anchored in facts in the same sense that any framework of judgement is anchored in its own certainties; and being anchored in such certainties, it is, in a sense, anchored in reality.

As I said at the outset, then, some moral issues can be appropriately framed as contentions that rest on the moral arguments that we can give for them, but this feature of rationality does not hold for all moral issues. The more confident claims that we make cannot be justified in the ordinary sense at all, and thus are not objective in the sense of being independently subject to rational determination. Our most basic value commitments belong to this class, and our certainty about them is, in the end, of a piece with the certainty that moral judgements are incumbent upon us. None of these judgements are made apart from a sense of what moral thinking is, and that means that none are made apart from a background of moral convictions about moral realities.

In the end, this view of moral judgement, which is roughly that of Dick Beardsmore, simply means that moral judgements are *different* from other judgements, not that moral judgements are arbitrary, inappropriate, or unrealistic. We do not always agree in the most basic of our moral convictions, but that does not mean that they are unreasonable if we cannot subject them to an independent, rationally telling, means of justification. This line of argument grows out of Wittgenstein, but it runs contrary to many over-simplified misconceptions of where Wittgenstein’s philosophy actually leads.

NOTES

¹ *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74, January, 1965, pp. 3-12.

² R. W. Beardsmore was born in 1944. He taught at University College of North Wales, Bangor from 1968 to 1987. He then taught at University College, Swansea, serving as Head of Department from 1992 until his death in 1997.

³ ‘The Censorship of Works of Art,’ in *Philosophy and Fiction*, ed. Peter LaMarque (Aberdeen, 1983), esp. pp. 93-95, 100-102.

⁴ In *Religion and Morality*, ed. by D. Z. Phillips (New York, 1996), pp. 235-49.

⁵ ‘Modern Moral Philosophy,’ *The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, Vol. III (Oxford, 1981), p. 30.

⁶ Peter Winch also argues against Anscombe on this very issue, but his primary point is that moral sensitivity to particular people is a backdrop to understanding what it means to love God, and not the reverse. See *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 159-166.

⁷ ‘Atheism and Morality,’ p. 238.

⁸ Though Wittgenstein does not discuss moral examples in *On Certainty*, he might have – as long as such certainties were such that we would have to have a special reason to doubt them, that their truth is ordinarily beyond dispute, and that there is therefore no reason even to formulate them in most ethical disputes. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York, 1972).

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1953), para. 580.

¹⁰ Gaita’s remarks are found in *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London, 1991), pp. 214-15. They are taken up by Beardsmore in ‘Atheism and Morality,’ *Religion and Morality*, pp. 243-44.

¹¹ Patrick Fitzgerald, “Gratitude and Justice,” *Ethics* 109, (October 1998), 119-53, esp. p. 124ff. Beardsmore notes the same attitude among Christians, when, at the end of his essay, he notes that they are expected to be grateful for bad fortune as well as for good fortune. ‘Atheism and Morality,’ in *Religion and Morality*, p. 248.

¹² See also Rush Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Cambridge, 1997), ch.13.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. By G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley, 1970), para. 540ff.

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, para. 358; *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 241.

¹⁵ See *On Certainty*, para. 110, 204, 474.

¹⁶ See for example, Peter Winch, ‘*Eine Einstellung zur Seele*’ and ‘Who is My Neighbour?’ in *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford, 1987), chs. 10 and 11, pp. 140 – 166; D. Z. Phillips, ‘My Neighbor and My Neighbors’ in *Interventions in Ethics* (SUNY Press, 1992), ch. 17, pp. 229-50; Lars Hertzberg, ‘On Being Neighborly’ in *The Possibilities of Sense* (London, 2002), pp. 24-38.

¹⁷ Winch argues somewhat differently for a similar conclusion. He suggests that neighbor love begins in particular reactions to individuals, and only then is generalized into a commandment such as the one Jesus cites. See ‘Who is My Neighbor?’ in *Trying to Make Sense*.

¹⁸ In comparison to the account to follow, Winch gives a quite different, but nonetheless Wittgensteinian, answer to moral relativism. See *Trying to Make Sense*, chs. 12 and 13.

¹⁹ Winch argues for much the same conclusion in *Trying to Make Sense*, pp. 169 f., 175-76.

²⁰ Typescript entitled ‘People,’ pp. 5-6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*, pp. 169.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (London, 2000).

²⁷ J. R. Lucas, 'On Not Worshipping the Facts,' *Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1958), pp. 144-56.

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