

## The Insignificance of Choice

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**Abstract:** For sometime philosophers have sought a more satisfactory understanding of the mysteries of morality through a close analysis of its assumed kinship with practical rationality, via the psychological capacity of choice. It is the view of the present paper that no such understanding is possible by these means. The significance of morality has nothing to do with choice.

**Key words:** choice, morality, normativity, rationality, responsibility

### 1

Philosophers, and so too the common run of men, have long found it obvious to think of the notion of choice as bearing significantly on morality, particularly with reference to the proper extension of the moral domain and the appropriateness of the moral appraisal of agents in particular circumstances. Such significance is taken to stem from the twofold way we think of choice. There is, on the one hand, the capacity to *make* a choice; to be able to select among alternatives seems to be a prerequisite for being a denizen of the moral domain: only those with the capacity to choose count as moral *agents*, and only such agents are the proper objects of moral address. And on the other, the possibility of real alternatives in a given situation—the actual *having* of a choice—seems to play a particularly significant role in the justification of addressing morally an agent in that situation. That is, we think it inappropriate to evaluate morally an agent for having done what she had no choice but to do. And so choice is deemed crucial for the very viability of our moral discourse (and practice). Obvious as all of this happens to be, I find myself unmoved. I rather doubt that what sense we can make of our notion of choice is capable of bearing the burden that so many want our moral discourse to pose. And so I believe

that we shall have to look elsewhere to make sense of that discourse, if we choose to do so at all.

## 2

I shall begin by laying out in slightly more detail some ways we have come to think of choice as bearing on certain fundamental aspects of our moral practice. I have noted that we think of choice in two different, though related, senses: in terms of a psychological capacity for making choices and in terms of the circumstantial opportunity to exercise that capacity, what I referred to above as the ‘having’ of a choice. To say which of these senses is basic and which is derivative would not be to the point; both jointly contribute to fostering an atmosphere where moralized impulses are given free reign. Both, that is, play an integral role in making a central element of our moral discourse *just*.

A moral judgment that is quite commonly held by people—philosophers and non-philosophers alike—is that moral appraisal is fitting, or appropriate, only if the object of appraisal is (or can be attributed to something that is) *responsible* for being as it is. To be ‘responsible’ in this sense is to be something more than merely causally essential—what I shall refer to as ‘accountable’—for being a certain way.<sup>1</sup> It is to be such that one has it in one’s power to be different than one is if one were so disposed. I’ll illustrate this difference with an example.

The stereo in my living room, though quite able to play ‘standard issue’ Compact Discs direct from the manufacturer, is nonetheless unable to play CDs I have made myself; it cannot read the information that has been ‘burned’ onto them. The newer stereo in my study, however, can. Clearly, there is something about the technology of the older machine that is accountable for its inability to play these ‘homemade’ discs. In

speaking of accountability here, all that is meant is that there is something about the machine that is causally essential to the result in question. But though it is, in this instance at least, it would seem wholly appropriate to attribute accountability to the machine for the sound of silence in my living room it would be quite inappropriate to attribute responsibility to it: to claim, that is, that the machine did not do what it could have done if it had tried and is for that reason subject to moral criticism. In more colloquial terms, it is perfectly acceptable to say that stereo in my living room is no good for playing burned CDs, but completely unacceptable to say that it is wrong for not playing them and vow to use only the stereo in my study until it changes its tune and becomes more accepting of discs of humbler origin.

Stereos, even those out of step with the fashion of the times, are beyond reproach. Of course they are beyond repute as well; they simply are not proper objects of moral address. To be the proper object of such address is precisely to be such a thing that is, both generally and in the present instance, worthy of praise or blame, commendation or condemnation. It is, to put it succinctly, to be subject to criticism precisely (and only) because one is responsible for being what one is. Being responsible, as was said, is a matter of having the ability (what I referred to above as ‘power’) to alter oneself or one’s circumstances—to respond to them—when one is disposed to do so.<sup>2</sup> That stereos lack this ability and hence are not taken to be responsible for what they are and how they perform is not in question. Rather what is is just what this responsive ability involves and what things have it.

Perhaps a natural thing to say in response to the second question is suggested by the tenor of the discussion so far: animate things have this ability and inanimate ones do not. But though this seems perfectly plausible given that the ability to alter one’s state or

circumstances if one is so disposed would seem to apply to single-cell organisms, vegetation, and animals no less than humans, it sorely misses a basic point of talking about responsibility in the first place. The concept of responsibility is a part of our conceptual economy precisely to facilitate moral address; to *justify* the act of criticism. But what is it to justify moral criticism? One thing it might mean is to make such criticism *worthwhile*. Indeed, this is an important part of what was meant by saying that the ‘proper object’ of moral address is something that is ‘worthy’ of praise or blame. Hence withholding the attribution of responsibility to stereos can be seen as consequent on the judgment that criticizing it won’t get us anywhere. Blaming the machine for its failure to play the music we want to hear will have no influence on its future performance. But the same point applies to most living things as well: morally dressing-down the bumblebee is not going to keep it from stinging you. The questions concluding the previous paragraph, therefore, may well be recast as follows: what is worthwhile to praise and blame, and what about them makes it so?

Answers to these questions are immediately suggested by the pointlessness of criticizing inanimate and (so many) animate things alike: it is worthwhile to praise or blame something only if that praise or blame will have an effect on it.<sup>3</sup> The thought that naturally follows is that being the proper object of moral address is really a matter of being *responsive* to such address. So what can respond to moral criticism and why? Here would seem to be where the concept of responsibility earns its keep: being responsive in the sense in question is a matter of one’s disposition to alter oneself (or one’s circumstances) being itself capable of alteration *because* of moral criticism that has been directed at oneself.

Given this, it is not surprising that bacteria and bumblebees are not properly subject to criticism. But our experience shows that some living things are, as any dog-owner and parent can attest. Given certain preconditions, such as effective conditioning and emotional attachment, moral criticism can be very effective in getting your dog or child to stop (or continue) behaving in a particular way, at least for the present. Indeed, given sufficient comprehension of the attitudes expressed in moral criticism, dogs and children have been known to become disposed to be such as to *elicit* praise and *preempt* blame. It may take considerable patience and hard work, but subjecting dogs and children to moral critique can prove quite worthwhile.

It remains to be answered, however, just what it is about dogs and children (and any other living thing capable of responding to moral criticism) that enables such responsiveness. What was just said about comprehension, however, goes some way towards addressing this issue. As moral criticism essentially involves the expression of complex patterns of attitudes, usually expressed by language or some other communicative means, responsiveness to such criticism requires a similarly (though perhaps not necessarily equally) complex capacity to recognize the attitudes being communicated and, in turn, to have that recognition itself influence, and be expressed by, subsequent behavior. What is required is a sufficiently sophisticated attitudinal aptitude that is combinable with the practical ability to effectively coordinate engagement with the environment. In simpler terms, what is required are capacities constitutive of choice.

Aristotle defined choice as ‘deliberate desire of things in our own power,’<sup>4</sup> and I shall make no attempt to better him. His characterization appears thoroughly useful: to choose is to select something that one could have (or do) after consideration of the alternatives. It hardly makes sense (and serves no obvious point), either to him or us, to

say that one *chooses* what one cannot have or what is not within one's 'power,' for what is not within one's power is thereby not among the alternatives from which one can choose. Nor are we anymore able (or willing) to see our way to saying that someone chooses something when she has not considered the alternatives and selected on the basis of that consideration. Moving on one's desire for *x* without regard for the fact that one could have *y* or *z* instead and why *x* is to be preferred hardly seems to be a case of *choosing x*. We might, perhaps, (if we so chose) attempt to extend our usage of this notion to encompass such examples but we would doubtless succeed only in rendering it discursively useless. But let's return to the present point, how the capacities involved in choice are what make for responsiveness to moral criticism.

The point, I suspect, is clear: to be disposed to alter oneself or one's situation in response to moral criticism requires that one be motivated (desire) to be or behave in a ways that one comprehends to be desired by the critic (on consideration of the alternatives). In turn, the effectiveness of the disposition to alter oneself, and thereby of the responsiveness to moral criticism, depends crucially on the ability to realize the alternative deemed appropriate, i.e., the ability to engage with an environment (including oneself) that actually presents the desired result *as* an alternative (something actually within one's power).

### 3

Two comments are worth making at this stage. First, the significance of the capacity to make choices for moral address is not dependent on the actual exercise of that capacity. As it happens, much of what we seek to alter (or maintain, for that matter), in ourselves or others, is not the result of choice. Indeed, part of the point of the moral criticism of

agents (creatures capable of choice) is to succeed, perhaps for the first time, in bringing the subject of criticism (that *for which* we criticize the object of address) under the auspice of choice, believing thereby to make the desired result more likely to obtain and easier to predict. Moreover, this contrast between what is chosen and what isn't (but could be) is itself quite significant to our moral discourse, particularly with respect to the typology of blameworthy agents. For instance, the akratic, at least in Aristotle's view, is distinguished in her wrongdoing by acting objectionably *against* choice, rather than from it, as the wicked do.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not one shares this view of the akratic, it is clear that though an agent has not acted as a result of choice—not acted intentionally, as it might be put—may well alter the nature of our criticism, it need not preclude it. In any event, an agent is open to criticism for what she does not because it was chosen but because it could have been.

Second, specifying the significance of choice as we have reminds us of the naturalness of the thought that it is not merely the psychological capacity to make a choice that renders moral address worthwhile but also the *having* of a choice. It is pointless, as we have seen, to engage in moral criticism with something for which the desired state of affairs is not legitimately an alternative, whether that impossibility is a result of some psychological/physical incapacity of the agent or of an unaccommodating environment. In either case, an effective response is not an option. But natural though this thought may be, one might nonetheless be led to think it open to question.

Imagine, if you will, that my daughter has joined a cult and, if such a state of affairs is not itself sufficiently odious, imagine further that members of the cult invariably perform acts that lead to their own or others' death, often both. What I might do in such a circumstance is criticize my daughter for deciding to associate with such objectionable

people, in the hopes of moving her to decide to quit. And, in keeping with the discussion so far, if I were to come subsequently to believe that she had been brainwashed by the cult leader, so that quitting was not actually a path she could choose to pursue, I might desist with the criticism due to its pointlessness and instead seek other means, if available, to disassociate her from the organization. But now imagine that my daughter admits to me that though being brainwashed is quite effective in preventing her from quitting, she would not quit the cult even if she could choose to do so, as she is now deeply in love with the cult's leader and intends to remain faithfully by her side, come what may. Chances are I might be moved once again to engage in some criticism of my daughter, whether it has influence on her or not.<sup>6</sup>

But why? What is the point of criticizing an agent in circumstances where she is not responsible, unable as she is to performatively respond to the criticism directed at her? The answer would surely be 'none' if the *only* point to moral criticism were to alter the agent (or her behavior) in some way. But that isn't its only point. As anyone who has ever engaged in moral criticism of someone whom that criticism cannot reach can attest, such criticism, though without hope of generating the desired—indeed, any—response, can still be immensely satisfying. Expressing the attitudes expressible by means of praise and blame serves rather effectively needs many of us so clearly have.<sup>7</sup>

Expressing an attitude can be quite satisfying. Such satisfaction is not to be confused, however, with the satisfaction one might experience in *having* the attitude. Indeed, the satisfaction that one might feel in expressing an attitude might well be the only satisfaction one gets with respect to it. This is perhaps most easily seen with regard to what might be called 'negative' attitudes, such as anger, frustration, disappointment, fear, and guilt, for which expressing, rather than 'sitting on,' or suppressing them, is often

the necessary first step in freeing oneself of them and the discomfort they involve. This, I think it fair to say, is why we often speak of expressing such emotions in terms of ‘discharging’ them. In any event, it simply is the case that it often feels *good* to express one’s frustrations, fears, and feelings of guilt, particularly to another, while it often feels *bad* to *be* frustrated, frightened, or guilty.

Moral criticism, particularly of the condemnatory kind, is the expression of attitudes such as anger, disappointment, resentment, repudiation, and remorse, negative attitudes all.<sup>8</sup> Expressing these attitudes often feels better than experiencing them and not expressing them. Hence we can see why someone might criticize, say, the policy of a politician, the fees charged by a professional, or the comportment of a parent, though such criticism may well prove ineffectual. But the expressive function of criticism is not always so obviously self-serving. Self-directed criticism, for instance, is often employed not for the sake of changing oneself but to make oneself feel *worse*. When confronted with (what one takes to be) an irremediable desire or attitude, particularly one that provides illicit pleasure, one may become convinced that the only saving grace available is that one may still castigate oneself and thereby *suffer*.<sup>9</sup>

Evincing a more deeply satisfying phenomenal experience is not all that expression of moral criticism achieves. Moral criticism also serves to solidify one’s ‘practical identity,’ one’s sense of self.<sup>10</sup> Through such criticism one can confirm, to oneself and others, what one stands for, what one will accept and what one forbids, which, often more incisively than anything else, tells the world who one is. For one who needs to show others—or remind oneself—what one is about, moral criticism can be invaluable.

Engaging in moral criticism, then, serves purposes beyond prodding the object of that criticism to choose to be in some sense different, and hence is not necessarily undermined

in situations where the criticized agent ‘could not do otherwise.’ Nonetheless, there is still a significant connection between such criticism and our thoughts about choice.

When my daughter tells me that she would remain in the cult even if she weren’t brainwashed, I am being told that if she *could* choose she *would* choose in a way I find objectionable. It is this belief, that an agent would choose in a certain way were it open to her to do so, that gives criticism a life that it would not otherwise have.

It is natural, or more likely, a naturalized practice, for the attitudes expressed by moral criticism to be elicited in response to the attitudes discerned in the agent so addressed.<sup>11</sup> This fits nicely with the idea, discussed above, that engaging in criticism is worthwhile only to the extent that the object of criticism can be understood as being (potentially, at least) responsive to such criticism. For this suggests that the interaction of which moral criticism is the backbone is itself a matter of the inter-responsiveness of attitudes. Hence the oddity of engaging in moral criticism of stereos or bumblebees is not only that there is no possibility of the desired attitudinal response but that the attitudes expressed by that criticism are not themselves in response to attitudes to which one objects.<sup>12</sup> But the naturalness of the conception of moral discourse being rooted in attitudinal interaction also helps to explain our intuitions in the case of my brainwashed daughter.

When I find that my daughter has been brainwashed and so cannot respond to my criticism by choosing to quit the cult I, rather naturally, find that my anger (or disappointment, resentment, or what have you) either dissipates or directs itself elsewhere, namely towards the attitudes of those persons accountable—and presumably responsible—for brainwashing her in the first place. The attitude initially found objectionable—an attitude of my daughter—is, on further review, believed to be either

non-existent or beyond her efforts to alter. But when I come to believe that the attitude in question *does* exist and, further, that *if* it were in her power to alter she wouldn't, my reactive attitude is refocused on what initially incited it. My repudiation is, once again, of my daughter's attitude, hence any criticism I engage in, even if only for the sake of my own benefit, will naturally be directed at her.

So here, too, where the agent does not properly *have* a choice, the capacity to *make* a choice is significant for rendering moral criticism fitting. It is fitting not, to be sure, in correctly attributing responsibility in the standard, indicative sense but rather in a more exceptional, *subjunctive* sense. This is why we do not find it objectionable when someone morally criticizes an agent that could not have done otherwise if she would not have done otherwise anyway. Indeed, it appears a perfectly natural thing to do.

#### 4

There is an objection to the foregoing that is of a fundamental nature. I announced at the commencement of section two that I would elaborate on some ways we have come to think of choice as significant for our moral discourse, particularly our engagement in moral criticism, the appraisal of agents by means of praise and blame. The objection is that, even if one were to grant that I have shown how choice plays a significant role in the practices I have discussed, I have not shown in any way that choice plays a significant role for any *moral* practice. This, so the objection continues, is because the practices I have discussed are not in any way moral. Taking the measure of this objection will be the focus of the remainder of this essay. To preview, however, what I shall say about this objection amounts to an elaboration of two claims. The first, on which I will spend little time, is the ready concession that there is an operative sense of 'moral' which is not

applicable to the practices I have been discussing. The second, which is my primary concern, is that choice is *not* significant to practices which are moral in the operative sense, insofar as we can understand that sense at all.

## 5

To say that a practice, or a claim, or a judgment is *moral*, in the sense that will now concern me, is to say that it is *normative*. But the ease with which one can state ‘morality is essentially normative’ belies the tremendous difficulty awaiting anyone attempting to state just what this claim amounts to. The difficulty is so great in fact that some philosophers (and *many* non-philosophers) have been led to think that it doesn’t amount to anything at all. Yet while no attempt at a fully fleshed-out picture of what the normativity of morality involves has managed to rise to the level of a ‘received view,’ even an unsatisfying one, there seems sufficient agreement concerning fundamental bits of the skeleton. Hence characterization of the normative typically begins by emphasizing that it concerns what *ought to be* (or ‘should,’ or ‘supposed’ to be) rather than merely what ‘is.’<sup>13</sup> This seems to be the most basic normative notion and yet the hardest to hang any flesh on as it is also the most elusive. Just what it is to say what ought to be, as distinct from what is, or what you want to be, or what you believe to be, or what you believe could be, or will be, or what needs to be if things are to be the way you want them to be, is not obvious.<sup>14</sup> But helping to give it more substance is a second element, the idea of a ‘standard of correctness’ to which, for instance, objects of moral criticism are measured.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this idea, without introducing any real content, nevertheless combines with the enigmatic ought to enable the construction of the most basic moral formulae. From the perspective of morality *qua* normative, moral criticism

just is the expression of a judgment of how an object ‘measures up’ to the standard.

Praise is the expression of the judgment that an object satisfies the standard, and hence is as it ought to be, while blame expresses (the judgment of) an object’s failure to satisfy the standard, and hence to be not (entirely, at least) as it ought to be.

Familiarity with these two elements of the normative conception of morality alone would have sufficed to make clear that no such idea was being discussed when I spoke earlier of the ‘justness’ of ‘moral criticism,’ ‘moral address,’ ‘praise,’ ‘blame,’ ‘responsibility’ and the like. When I claimed that moral criticism was appropriate or justified only if the object of criticism was capable of choice—was an agent that could alter oneself or one’s behavior in response to that criticism—the ‘justification’ at issue was entirely pragmatic. What I was saying was that it was not worth the effort, because one’s aims would not be realized, to criticize something or someone that was incapable of responding to that criticism in the way desired. There was no implication that the object of criticism *ought*—whatever that actually means—to respond to such criticism at all, let alone in the way implied by that criticism. Nor was it implied that there was some standard, beyond the concerns of the critic, that the object was being measured against. Indeed, the entire discussion could have proceeded without any reference to ‘moral’ criticism at all: *any* kind of address of the object is worthwhile provided the object is an agent capable of responding to it in the way desired. Addressing the agent in terms of what is ‘right,’ ‘wrong,’ ‘good,’ or ‘bad’ matters not to the issue of responsibility as I have been discussing it.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, the more ‘expressive’ dimension of criticism I touched on has, at bottom, nothing to do with morality in the normative sense. To use ‘moral’ criticism to express one’s anger, disappointment, or repudiation (or happiness, pleasure, or identification)

implies nothing about what ‘ought’ or ‘ought not’ to be. Neither does improving one’s phenomenal state nor solidifying one’s practical identity need to be understood in terms of the critic’s attitude about what ought to be the case. Nor does the ‘naturalness’ of reactive attitudes in light of the attitudes of the objects of criticism suggest that the attitudes, either of the critic or the criticized, ought to be either as they are or different. Again, no standard beyond that of the critic’s own temper—by which she measures her own attitudes, not those of who she criticizes—is involved at all. My discussion of the significance of choice has not been a discussion of the significance of choice to *morality*.

## 6

Morality, insofar as it is normative, is not to be conflated with some pragmatic or expressive practice one may or may not engage in.<sup>17</sup> Morality is something different but as to what I can offer no answer. I rather doubt one is possible though I will not argue that here. My present concern is with what I take to be the constitutive inability of choice to help in the formation of an answer. A steady diet of choice will not put meat on the bones of morality.

Before stating why choice is unhelpful for making sense of morality it would be worthwhile to consider why one might think it is. This thought arises from two other pieces of the normative skeleton, the first of which is expressed, perhaps confusedly, in the slogan “‘ought’ implies ‘can’.” Without knowing to what the term ‘ought’ refers or means, it is rather hard to essay any claim about what it implies. Nevertheless, our earlier discussion of the pragmatics of critical address can shed useful light on the matter.

It was said that addressing something about its performance in a critical mode—the expressive function of that criticism aside—was only worthwhile if it could respond to

that critique. The ability to respond to critique was, in turn, analyzed in terms of the ability to alter oneself or one's situation in a manner sensitive to both the critique and the possibilities for such change. That ability was identified with choice, the ability to select from among alternatives in light of their comparative recognition. The pragmatic point is that the utility of such subtle attempts at behavior modification *presupposes* 'can.'<sup>18</sup> Non-agents—creatures incapable of choice—can't be modified by criticism.

Considerations not too dissimilar might be applicable in the case of morality.

What ought to be, *ex hypothesi*, is over and above what is. Hence moral criticism often involves a 'difference claim'—and necessarily so in the case of blame—with respect to reality. That is, to criticize something for failing to measure up to the standard of correctness necessarily involves the claim that how it is is not how it ought (entirely) to be. In this, as in other respects, normative claims are not unlike claims about what I, you, or someone else might *want* to be, for what anyone wants to be is never merely a matter of what is and might not be at all.<sup>19</sup> Now if the point of engaging in moral criticism as a mode of discourse isn't merely to convey the information of the object's current normative status but to possibly change it then the pragmatic principle would clearly apply. If you want to change the normative status of something through moral criticism then that thing had better be capable of choice.<sup>20</sup>

The second aspect of morality's normativity that leads to thoughts of choice concerns the special status afforded to the standard of correctness. Unlike almost all other standards, that of morality is such that one is *required* to be subject to it; the appropriateness of measuring one by it is not a matter of anyone's discretion. The regulative ideal that the standard embodies is not one that is possible to avoid. Yet the application of most (all?) non-moral standards, like the aptness of most non-moral

criticism, is a pragmatic affair. Consider, for instance, academic standards that measure the appropriateness of awarding a degree. Such standards enable us to rank students as better and worse, distinguishing who ‘measures up’ and who does not. But though these standards specify what is required of the students subject to them, the students themselves are not, in the most fundamental sense at least, required to subject themselves to the standard. Whether they do or not is for them to decide.

This point is easy to underestimate as it may appear to be merely the familiar thought that many demands on behavior are conditional on the aims of agent. Provided a certain aim, there are certain things that one simply has to do in order to achieve it, and success or failure in doing them is therefore a measure the agent cannot avoid. But the agent who does not do them cannot be said to *fail* to do them if she has abandoned (or never had) the aim in question. But the pragmatic point with respect to standards goes deeper than this. An agent might well have aims distinct from, or superceding the aim that subjects him to a standard, pursuit of which lead him to behave in ways designed to be measured by the standard in a particular way, even as failing to meet it.

Indeed, even an agent’s only aim could be such that it subjects him to a standard the failing of which constitutes satisfying the aim. Consider an intrepid Romeo lusting after some wholesome and healthy co-ed. Believing that she will not welcome his advances under most circumstances, he comes up with a plan. He decides to enroll in a logic class that he is more than capable of passing and then proceeds to perform at a level such that he fails the midterm. This is precisely as he wants it to be since he is now required by the instructor to arrange sessions with the tenderly sympathetic tutor for the class (a veritable philosophical Florence Nightingale), none other than his healthy and wholesome prey.

Most standards have, to greater and lesser degrees, peripheral applicability to those subject to them. This is why it sounds so out of place to say of someone who has measured poorly with respect to one that she *ought* to have performed better, where this is not meant in the eliminable—and therefore non-normative—sense of expectation.<sup>21</sup> But there is one putatively non-moral standard that does not seem peripheral in this way. It, as morality is said to do, appears to impose a standard that all who could be measured by it necessarily are. This is the standard of rationality and measuring up to it is also frequently claimed to be an inescapable requirement. And what this standard measures, in its practical mode anyway, is just what morality measures.

Practical rationality, like morality, is concerned with action motivated in light of reasons, which is to say in light of reflection upon one's circumstances, the possible changes to them one could induce, and the relative preference, or evaluation one gives to their obtainment. That is to say it is concerned with choice.<sup>22</sup> Understanding (practical) rationality requires an understanding of choice, so it stands to reason that that other inescapable standard of correctness might find choice important too. In being central to rationality, choice holds out the promise of not simply giving moral criticism a pragmatic utility it would not otherwise have but of bringing the authority of the rational standard to the aid of the rather obscure authority of morality. Perhaps the very idea of what (morally) ought to be can be illuminated by the idea of what *rationally* ought to be. Indeed, maybe measuring up to the rational standard just is what the normativity of morality is all about.

One can see why this might be an attractive idea; it would certainly appear to simplify matters. For if the moral standard and the rational standard were one and the same, then being moral would be a matter of being rational and being (or doing) what ought not to

be—immorality—would be a violation of rationality; i.e., irrationality. Moreover, measurement by the moral standard would be unavoidable in a way that has intuitive coherence: insofar as one is an agent one is either rational or irrational; being arational is not an option. Whereas the student can avoid failing by the measurement of an academic standard by dropping out, the agent must always find himself registered for morality. Moral assessment, because it involves rational assessment, is inescapable; here no dropouts are allowed.

This idea, no doubt attractive to some, is difficult to maintain. Accounting for the normativity of morality in terms of rationality holds promise only insofar as we can hope to give an informative account of the normativity of the latter, and this we cannot do.

## 7

A choice is the determinate motivation—the *intention*—that usually follows in the wake of reasoning dependent on what the agent believes about her alternatives, about the possible consequences of any of them obtaining, about the purpose(s) of the choice situation, and of the relationships between all three.<sup>23</sup> Such reasoning tends to issue in a belief that selecting *this* alternative will (probably) satisfy the purpose of the choice situation.<sup>24</sup> Provided the motivation to satisfy that purpose is sufficiently strong, it will become determinate—the intention will be formed.<sup>25</sup> That is, a choice will be made.

Choosing something is always a matter of selecting something *for an explicit reason*. It is to *decide*; to be motivated in light of a reflective awareness of the possibilities. Aristotle, we will recall, defined it as “deliberate desire for things in our own power,”<sup>26</sup> what we desire as a *result of* deliberation. Choice, in other words, is *reasoned* desire. It is here that we can find the content behind his famous claim that ‘choice relates to the

means.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, his claim amounts to a conceptual truth: to choose something is always to choose it for the sake of something, as a means to some end, the limiting case being that of choosing something for its own sake, where the means and the end are one.

Some view this as a welcome fact about choice, for it suggests that the standard by which it is assessed—the standard of practical rationality—is precisely what they have claimed it to be, namely the instrumental standard. Reasoning about what to (choose to) do is reasoning about means to ends. The purpose of a choice situation is the end and the selected alternative is believed to be the (best) means to satisfy it. And this in turn helps explain why those who believe instrumentalism to be the (one and only) standard find other proposed standards of practical rationality so unconvincing.

Imagine I have a few desires I would like to have satisfied. One is to have another drink tonight and another is to wake up tomorrow refreshed and ready to philosophize, and a third is to keep my promise to myself to stick to my diet and not overload on alcohol (too many carbohydrates). As it happens, I have already gotten a taste for the bourbon and decide, after careful consideration of the alternatives, to have one more for the road (so to speak, of course). The inherent instrumentality of choice makes my choice perfectly rational. Insofar as I *chose* to have another drink, I did so for a reason, believing it to be the alternative open to me that best satisfied my purpose(s) for entering the choice situation. Whatever that purpose was, I came to believe that having another drink was the best way to achieve it. My choice, given my purpose and my beliefs, was, by instrumental standard, rational.

Now imagine that someone, upon hearing of this tale, tells me that I have chosen *irrationally*. Assuming it is agreed that taking what I believe to be the means to my end *is* rational, an immediate response I might have to this person is that they are simply

confused.<sup>28</sup> But if the person were to persist, claiming to appeal to a rational standard that applies to *ends* rather than to means then my likely response will be that she is equivocating. Clearly the standard that applies to ends cannot be the same as that which applies to means if one is allowed to speak legitimately of choosing what one believes to be appropriate—i.e., rational—means to irrational ends.

Equivocation in the defense of reason is no vice, it might be said, but it nevertheless forces us to face the question of just what could possibly be meant by speaking of a rational standard for ends that involves not even a surreptitious appeal to some further end in light of which the former can be seen as means. We can, after all, always ask the question *why* when we are told that it is rationally necessary that our chosen ends be such that, say, they are optimal—their realization coheres with the (possible) satisfaction of the majority of our present desires. And what emboldens the instrumentalist about practical reason is that dissenters from his position seemed faced with the dilemma of either treating this question as legitimate or not. Conferring legitimacy buys into the requisite sort of answer, which is to claim that the end in question, coherence, say, or consistency, is the necessary (or best) means to some end we are assumed to have, such as to live as ‘unified’ a life as possible, or to increase the likelihood of realizing as many of the aims we in fact have. Such an answer obviously fails to escape from the instrumentalist orbit. If, on the other hand, they reject the question, preferring instead to claim that the pursuit of such an end is simply ‘constitutive’ of creatures like us (i.e., rational creatures), then they have buried the notion of a rational standard in obscurity.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, they have actually changed the subject, from a discussion of the appropriate means by which to assess human thought and behavior to an analysis of human nature. This is neither ethics nor a ‘theory of rationality’. This is metaphysics.

## 8

However pleased the instrumentalist about practical reason may be with this result, it must be unwelcome to those who seek to dispel the obscurity of the normativity of morality by its assimilation to the normativity of rationality. If pursuit of the *true* rational standard leads one into metaphysical speculation then it must be obscure indeed. And barely comprehensible. Imagine, for instance, being told that it is constitutive of human nature to have the goal of being motivationally consistent; to develop as coherent and unified a motivational set as possible.<sup>30</sup> On such a story, (human? rational?) agents measure up to the rational standard—flourish, as it might be said—if their natural propensity is actualized. Numerous questions immediately arise, however. Given the obvious failure of so many agents to flourish in this way begs the question of just how it was determined that *this* in fact is the standard.<sup>31</sup> Is this a feature that some very ‘successful’ agents have exhibited? Successful in what way? Getting what they want? And why is that so many of us *aren’t* flourishing in this way? If we could *wouldn’t* we, given that this is our ‘nature’?<sup>32</sup> Maybe we don’t flourish (in this sense) because we can’t.<sup>33</sup>

Whatever we may think about such an approach a standard of rationality, it is clear that it no longer has any significant connection with the capacity to choose. If the (practical) rational standard is in fact concerned with ends then it really isn’t measuring the choices an agent makes so much as measuring the agent herself. As a metaphysical account, about the ends that are ‘basic’ to human beings as such, the failure to have (any of) them suggests a problem of the most profound sort—such unfortunate souls were botched by Nature—not something that could be remedied by getting the agent to *choose*

to procure them.<sup>34</sup> Such a standard, then, is without pragmatic utility; criticizing an agent for not having them can do nothing to move her to obtain them. And though we might readily admit the metaphysical standard could still retain its ‘normative authority’, we are now left grasping for some content to the claim that an agent that does not have a requisite end nevertheless *ought* to have it.

## 9

The forgoing sought to show that attempting to avoid the conclusion that the practical rational standard is instrumental necessarily leads one into the dimly lit terrain of ‘the nature of things,’ where talk of how things ‘ought to be’ is not meant in terms of expectation yet is nonetheless intelligible.<sup>35</sup> But this might be thought to be looking at things the wrong way around. Agents without the goal picked out by the metaphysical-rational standard are beyond the pale. Rational address—and moral address if it is properly understood in these terms—is meant only for those who have the end. So constrained, we can make sense of such address because it *is* quite intelligible to talk about someone choosing means insufficient to some end (including an end (or ends) that all human beings by their nature have). Here is ‘failure’ for which the term ‘irrational’ intuitively fits. And here such address—criticism—has a point beyond merely conveying information: perhaps the agent can be moved to take care that in the future she chooses wisely, rather than poorly.

If we take this line of thinking seriously, and here I shall offer no reason not to, we will do well to notice the following. If the agent has an end but is not realizing it then that can only be due to her having false beliefs about what would be the appropriate means to it.<sup>36</sup> And *this* is not a failure of choice, per se, but of the fixation of belief.

This is a failure to measure up to the *theoretical* standard, not the practical. Indeed, by the standards of *instrumental* rationality, failing to achieve the end in such circumstances is precisely what would be expected. Only the very lucky or the instrumentally irrational could possibly take the appropriate means to their end while falsely believing what those means are.

In fact only the very lucky could; instrumental irrationality is an incoherent notion. As the capacity to select the alternative one believes to best satisfy the purpose of the choice situation, choice is a mechanical psychological process that can't 'go wrong'.<sup>37</sup> In any given situation, agents either choose or they don't.<sup>38</sup> Presumably the instrumentalist about practical reason will not be pleased about *this* result because it shows that the instrumental 'standard,' if it measures anything at all, isn't measuring choice. Or, to put it somewhat differently, choice is such that it can't help but measure up to it. An inviolable standard, however, is no standard at all. If the practical standard of rationality concerns ends then its normativity—if it's normative—is quite obscure. But if the practical standard concerns means—that is, if it's instrumental—then it isn't normative.<sup>39</sup>

This was Hume's view. As his discussion of what counts as 'contrary to reason' clearly reveals, he thinks nothing does, at least not anything with practical import such as choice. As he puts it, 'a passion must be accompany'd with some false judgment, in order to its being unreasonable; and even then 'tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgment.'<sup>40</sup> For Hume, if anything counts as normative in the rational sphere it concerns belief, not choice. And it is this view, coupled of course with his conviction that morality is inherently practical, that leads him to deny that one does well to understand morality by assimilating it to rationality.

Hume's normative nihilism with respect to practical reason has at times been dismissed rather brusquely. It is often attributed to a question-begging construal of rationality as concerned with truth and falsehood.<sup>41</sup> Given this, of course it would seem plausible that reason (understood as a normative domain) is not concerned with the practical. But on the account presented here, where the non-normativity of practical reasoning is derived through the analysis of choice, limiting normative reasoning to the fixation of belief—assuming that *that* is normative—is actually the conclusion.

## 10

The thesis of this essay is that the obscurity of morality *qua* normative is not to be dispelled by attempting to see it in terms of some inescapable standard of correctness that applies to choice. Choice is a functional capacity that is constituted by the selection of an alternative the agent believes to (best) satisfy the purpose of a choice situation. As such, choice is, in these unfortunate terms, 'by its nature correct,' since not to select what one believes to be the best alternative is simply not to choose. If practical rationality concerns reasoning that issues in choice, then such reasoning is not normative.<sup>42</sup>

This is not to claim that every agent's belief as to what best satisfies the purpose of the choice situation is correct, i.e., true. No doubt many choices fail to deliver all that is hoped of them. But this 'failure,' such that it is, cannot to be understood as a failure of choice but rather of belief. If we are to allow that a mistake can be made, it has to be in the fixation of the agent's beliefs concerning the choice situation. If one maintains the hope of explaining morality by appeal to rationality then that rationality must be theoretical (and, of course, normative). What (morally) ought to be, on this picture,

would be that agents have certain true beliefs. Given the nature of choice, the rest would take care of itself.

Interestingly enough, this seems to be the very picture of morality that we find championed by the Socrates of *Protagoras*, compressed in his infamous claim that ‘no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad.’<sup>43</sup> Given that everyone does what they believe to be best, moral criticism—and moral education—is a matter of getting people to believe what is true. If what you believe is best *is* best then you will (attempt to) *do* what’s best: in this sense the Good and the True are one. If you find that idea rather hard to swallow then you just might be a normative nihilist *tout court* and then your task is to show that a normative standard for belief is no more coherent than that for choice.<sup>44</sup> If, on the other hand, you still hold hope for an understanding morality, then it is not theories of practical reason to which you must turn but rather epistemology.<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My use of the nomenclature is largely arbitrary. The notion I am intending to capture by ‘responsible’ many would claim could be, or indeed is, captured by ‘accountable’. Nothing of consequence turns on such terminological choices, so long as consistency is maintained. Two considerations that influence my usage are, first, the preponderance of ‘responsible’ and ‘responsibility’ in the philosophical literature and, second, its rhetorical suitability.

<sup>2</sup> A vexing question is whether the responsibility in question extends to the disposition to alter oneself or not. That is, in order for something to be responsible for itself, must its ability to alter itself when it is so disposed extend to the disposition to use that ability itself? The question appears to suggest a dilemma that threatens the cogency of the concept of responsibility: answering ‘yes’ seems to invite an infinite regress of abilities and substrata that employ them while answering ‘no’ seems to blur any real distinction between responsibility and accountability. This issue is the specter haunting every discussion of the nature and extent of responsibility, the current one being no exception. Though I do not deny this problem I do intend to ignore it henceforth.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed discussion of (some variations of) this idea, see Schlick (1939); Smart (1961); Dennett (1984); and Smiley (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle (1980): 1113a 11-12

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1151a 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Discussion of this type of example stems from Frankfurt (1969).

<sup>7</sup> See Strawson (1962).

<sup>8</sup> The points being made here are not peculiar to negative attitudes. Expressing ‘positive’ attitudes such as love, esteem, pride, happiness and the like often adds to the pleasure associated with the experience of those attitudes. Commendatory criticism, such as the expression of admiration and gratitude, is in this regard not fundamentally different than its condemnatory counterpart.

<sup>9</sup> For a rather forceful presentation of this idea, see Nietzsche (1998), III, 20, 101-03.

<sup>10</sup> This notion of ‘practical identity’ is developed at length in Korsgaard (1996), 101-ff.

<sup>11</sup> See Strawson (1962) for the seminal discussion of what he there calls ‘reactive attitudes.’

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in the case of stereotypes and bumblebees, the attitudes expressed by criticism are not responsive to attitudes at all.

<sup>13</sup> Not ‘merely’ because, assuming the coherence of normative description, the way things ought to be in any given situation may also be the way things are. That is, normative and non-normative descriptions are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>14</sup> This list could be extended indefinitely.

<sup>15</sup> Railton (2000), especially pp1-5, provides perhaps the most helpful account of this idea.

<sup>16</sup> Except to the degree that such terms can render criticism more useful than it would otherwise be.

<sup>17</sup> I am inclined to believe that the pragmatic and expressive practices I have discussed are necessary for certain creatures—i.e., humans—to engage in. This is not to believe them normative, however.

<sup>18</sup> I call such attempts subtle simply to distinguish them from cruder forms of modification, such as force.

<sup>19</sup> Given our linguistic habit to convey obliquely to others what we want (or what we believe others want, or what we believe will satisfy what others want, etc.) by ‘ought,’ it is not difficult to imagine oneself believing that what ought to be and what one wants to be are one and the same.

<sup>20</sup> See Williams (1981), pp119-ff.

<sup>21</sup> The standards employed in sports illustrate this point nicely. We have, for instance, standards that determine who is the most outstanding player for the year, but there is no suggestion that anyone *ought* to be such, where that is understood normatively.

<sup>22</sup> As I am understanding it here, a standard of practical reason measures choice, whereas, say, a standard of theoretical reason measures belief. If there is a rational standard that measures something else, say emotions, or desires, then that would be distinct from these two. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, talk of the ‘rational standard’ is to be understood as the practical standard.

<sup>23</sup> This description is, on certain occasions anyway, incomplete. Perhaps the most important element it leaves out is the relationship between the believed purpose of the choice situation and other purposes the agent might have. Depending what the agent believes about her alternatives and the possible consequences of their obtainment, these other purposes may or may not become relevant. Indeed, what the agent comes to believe about the alternatives (etc.) may enable one of those other purposes to *become* the purpose of the choice situation. This does not alter the characterization of choice in any fundamental way, however, and I will take it as read in what follows.

<sup>24</sup> To be more precise, a belief that this alternative will (probably) satisfy *sufficiently* or *best* the purpose of the choice situation. I will frequently simply say ‘best’.

<sup>25</sup> Hence the qualifier ‘usually’ in the first sentence of this paragraph. Much, perhaps most, of the time the motivation to satisfy the purpose of the choice situation is sufficiently strong, which often serves to explain *why* one faces the choice situation in the first place. But this needn’t always be the case, and nothing precludes the motivation to satisfy that purpose waning in light of the belief as to what alternative will best satisfy it. I take this to be a basic difference between my view of things and that of James Dreier as presented in Dreier (1997). In effect, I am responding affirmatively to his rather rhetorical comment at note 13: “Quite possibly the distinction between desiring and willing is important here.” (90). Indeed, I believe, it is. This basic difference, as will be seen, goes a long way.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle (1980), 1113a 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1111b 27.

<sup>28</sup> I am, at present, purposely putting aside the possibility that the charge of irrationality in this context is meant to indicate that what you believed to be the best means to your end was in fact not. I will return to this later.

<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, we can imagine someone saying that the pursuit of such an end is just a fact, presumably a non-natural one, not so much about creatures but about reality. Such an answer would, I take it, be no less obscure than one grounded in the idea of some creature’s nature. It may, in fact, be more obscure, if that is possible.

<sup>30</sup> This would seem rather like the view proposed in Smith (1994).

<sup>31</sup> This is not peculiar to the example used; this question can be raised with respect to any proposed account of our (ideally) rational nature.

<sup>32</sup> Given the undeniably formal nature of an end such as this, it would seem rather easy to satisfy it: pick a motivation, any motivation, and eradicate any and every motivation that is inconsistent with it. The result will be a consistent set.

<sup>33</sup> Or at least not without intense spiritual discipline: the suggestion under discussion sounds rather like a Western philosopher’s take on Buddhism.

<sup>34</sup> Imagine if one could so choose: the inherent instrumentality of choice entails that such a choice—that of basic ends—could only be made for the sake of something else. And so these ends would be means (they could not be chosen for their own sake, i.e., as ends in themselves, for that would imply that the chooser already *had* said ends: the motivation towards them would be ‘original’ rather than derived).

<sup>35</sup> Is the statement ‘an anencephalic *ought* to have had a brain’ normative? If not, why think the statement ‘an agent without the goal of coherence (or what have you) ought to’ is?

<sup>36</sup> Actually, it might be due to the (motivational) predominance of other ends the agent has, but what would make *this* situation ‘irrational’—or more to the point, what the content of such a claim would be—I cannot say.

<sup>37</sup> An agent that *chooses* not to select the alternative that best satisfies the choice situation has done so for a reason and has thereby abandoned the original purpose of the choice situation for another.

<sup>38</sup> Consider the discussion of choice offered by Boyle (this volume). Boyle offers three ‘distinct forms of choice’: motivations responsive to judgments of equal desirability of options, judgments that one option is more desirable than the others, and judgments that the options are incommensurable in desirability. The first and third forms of choice make incorrect choice incoherent. The second appears to do so as well, unless some sense can be made of the idea of reasoned desire for the less desirable option. I doubt very much that it can.

<sup>39</sup> For discussion of the inviolability of the instrumental standard entailing its non-normativity see Korsgaard (1997) and Finlay (2008). This, of course, is the result of distinguishing between choice and mere desire, a distinction that some (James Dreier, perhaps) are unwilling to draw. See note 25 above.

<sup>40</sup> Hume (1978), II. iii. 3. 416.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, the introduction Cullity, G, Gaut B (1997), pp6-7; and Broome (2001).

<sup>42</sup> As I have tried to show, if practical rationality concerns ends it is not clear what the claim that it is normative even amounts to.

<sup>43</sup> Plato (1992), 358c-d.

<sup>44</sup> In whose number I would include Protagoras, Hume, Nietzsche, James, Rorty, and the present author.

<sup>45</sup> My thanks to the following for helpful discussion and comments: Bernard Baumrin, Joseph Boyle, David Chan, Stephen Ellis, Stephen Finlay, Martin Harvey, Daniel Kaufman, Mark Sheehan, and David Shein.

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