

Fifty Years of Moral Philosophy

I would like to start by addressing students. You ought to know that if someone writes a reference for you with the word “diligent” on it, you’re likely sunk.

Nevertheless on this occasion I was unusually diligent. I made a list of the moral philosophers who have been to the Chapel Hill Colloquium. I found nearly eighty names, no doubt missing out some marginals, and perhaps including others whose credentials under one or other of the words “moral” or “philosopher” might be challenged.

Now, we know that Sarah Bernhardt could move audiences to tears by reading a telephone book. But I am no Bernhardt, so I simply took the beginning of the list and the end and a couple of samples from the middle.

Ackrill, Anderson, Annas and Baier

Darwall, Davidson, Donagan, and Dreier

Parfit, Pettit, Putnam, and Sherman

Williams Wilson Wolf ... and Barbara Herman

I tried to work Rawls in but just couldn’t think of a rhyme.

I apologise to those I didn’t mention, but the urgent moral questions that have been aired in our colloquium helped me. Hey, what’s the point of agent regret? And what’s so good about equality? Getting missed out is just bad luck—bad moral luck, in this case. We have to keep an open mind, as Nomy Arpaly once suggested. Nothing to get resentful about. I see as well that Bernard Williams once talked about resenting one’s own very existence, but speaking for myself I would much more have resented my own non-existence.

It’s galling to think what one missed. Right at the beginning, in 1967, Davidson & Harman (father; the daughter has also been here in her own right) talked about *Incontinence*. I suppose that like other philosophical problems this may have transformed itself somewhat for those who were here, and are now now fifty years older.

But I am here to add a wide-angle perspective on the subject. So I shall talk about other places from my own experience—as Doug Long said last night, because I can.

When I went up to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1962 the ghost of Wittgenstein still haunted the place. One reincarnation was the aptly-named Professor John Wisdom, who had what we used to call the “Wittgenstein slump” that belonged to all real pupils of Ludwig—stooped posture, hand vaguely clutching furrowed brow, slow speech, sepulchral tones. In my very first lecture Wisdom arrived, slumped on the lectern with his head in his hands for a while, and then in complete silence began to stalk around the room with both hands on the top of his head, palm forward, wiggling. After what seemed an eternity—enough time for us to wonder whether to call the paramedics—he dug up in a graveyard voice, and *molto lento*: “Suppose ... I’m ... a ... poacher ... with a silent dog-whistle What tells me whether I have a (con moto) malfunctioning whistle or a disobedient dog?”

I doubt if Wisdom knew the meaning of either the word “syllabus” or the words “administration” or “accountability”, but I have remembered that lecture and that question, which is an interesting one, for over fifty years.

We used to enjoy a similar tale about him being asked to address the prestigious meeting of the East Coast APA some time in the late fifties. Faced with a hotel ballroom full of several thousand philosophers Wisdom slouched in, clutched his head and eventually exhumed “I haven’t actually ... prepared a lecture ... Would anyone ... like to ask me ... a question?” After a stunned silence a bright Young Turk put up his hand and said: “ProfessorWisdomSirinYourOpinionSiristherecentattackontheanalyticssyntheticdistinctionbyWillardQuineofHarvardsigificantSir? After a suitable pause Wisdom dug up from the graveyard: “Quine Harvard analytic ... synthetic ... significant? Nooo Would anyone like to ask me another question?” The chronicles unhappily break off at this point.

Another philosopher I knew a little at this time was C.D. Broad, then Emeritus but in the kindly way of Trinity College still living in rooms—indeed the very rooms in which Newton first experimented with prisms—in College. Broad had a wonderful memory. He could recite yards of somewhat risqué verse (he once said without any apparent exaggeration that if the entire works of the librettist and poet W.S. Gilbert had been destroyed, he would be able to recreate them from memory). During his time in Trinity the distinguished classicist and poet A.E. Housman had been a Fellow, living on the staircase¹ in which I now

¹ Staircases in Oxbridge are like vertical dorms. They can contain very grand rooms for Fellows, or very tiny rooms for Students, at different levels. All have primitive plumbing. In

have a room. This was also where Wittgenstein had his famously austere lair. According to Broad the only recorded conversation between the misanthropic Wittgenstein and the misanthropic Housman occurred when one of them, I forget which, suffered a plumbing problem, and knocked at the other's door asking if he might, on this one occasion, as a special favour, use his lavatory. "No"—and the door shut. Thus the finest minds. Nevertheless Housman, if not Wittgenstein, had a fun side. Apparently one of his aversions was the Salvation Army, and so he was responsible for the verse:

*Hallelujah! was the only observation
That escaped Lieutenant-Colonel Mary Jane
As she stumbled from the platform of the station
And was cut in little pieces by the train!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Mary Jane the train ran through ya!
Let us gather up the pieces that remain*

Broad had the most balanced mind of anyone I ever knew. At the end of his Perrot lectures on psychical research, with which, like many thinkers of his generation, he had what now seems a bizarre fascination, he concludes about Life after Death, "On this matter, as on so many others, we can only wait and see. Or alternatively, which is no less likely, wait and not see." I think there is a philosophical moral there.

In those far-off days, people smoked, and drank. The reason no two eyewitnesses can agree on what actually happened during the famous episode of Popper, Wittgenstein, and the poker (a reason that historians have failed to notice) is that nobody could actually see across the room because of the smoke. Indeed, a motive for me to continue with philosophy was an early visit to the Moral Sciences Club when a mature man—actually, Myles Burnyeat— (I was eighteen; he might have been twenty) in front of me, intent upon the argument, absent-mindedly refreshed his pipe, shook the not quite spent match, and put the box back in his pocket, which promptly burst into flame. Without at all diverting his attention from the argument, he absent-mindedly flapped at it until others put it out. What a

1962 they only had piped cold water, and heating that gave out when it was cold, which that winter, it was.

subject, I thought, to demand such intensity! Drinking at lunchtime was also quite normal. When I first went to Melbourne, in 1975, the convention was for most of the philosophers at our convivial lunch table to bring a bottle of wine. I thought it very unjust after that to be described by an Australian friend as the philosopher who put the “pist” into epistemology, since I found it already triumphant. We have become more austere.

And so the years rolled by. I went to Oxford, mainly as a potential philosopher of science. But there was a lot of moral philosophy, none of which interested me much, although since I had to teach it I began to respect some of the Big Names. Political philosophy too was a closed book—in fact it had been doubted whether there was such a thing, but with Rawls all that changed. Rawls also propelled the rise and rise of Kantianism in moral philosophy, although it never really took off in my time in the Oxford of Philippa Foot and other Aristotelians. I had always been an ethical expressivist, since reading first Hume and then F.P. Ramsey on singular case probabilities. Expressivism in Oxford was, however, associated almost exclusively with R.M. Hare, and held in some contempt by the rising generation of Williams, Wiggins, and McDowell. So I took some pleasure in setting about developing its resources, as an exercise in the philosophy of language rather than ethics itself. But it continued to be looked down on as very wicked. In self-defence about this time I formulated a theory that the more high-falutin a person’s moral philosophy the worse they behaved (the Roman Catholic philosophers in Oxford at the time gave credence to this). I got a nice additional confirmation this year when having to find referees for three candidates for a Junior Research Fellowship. One had written on perception. I asked two eminent academics, and both said they would do it. The second candidate had written on expressivism, and the same thing happened. The third had written on trust and promises, and I had to ask eight people in the field before I found two to agree. It reminds me of a conversation reported between Bernard Williams and David Pears. Williams opined that moral philosophers tended to write about things that they were good at. Pears shot back: “Oh, no Bernard, quite the opposite. After all, I write about irrationality, and you write about social justice.”

Whether it is due to the work of moral philosophers or not, the ethical climate in philosophy has certainly improved over the last fifty years. In the sixties the default in any discussion was a kind of insane aggression and the aim was to annihilate anybody who disagreed with you about anything. The Moral Sciences Club had a convention of there

being a rather daunting minute's silence at the end of any paper, during which the audience gathered its ammunition. On one occasion a speaker had talked about whether trying to do something counted as acting. At the end of the minute, John Wisdom (again) broke the silence by asking (basso profundo): "Would Professor X mind telling us what he has just said?" This was, I think, the rudest thing I ever heard in response to a paper. As it happened it resulted in Richard Braithwaite, a large man, jumping up and saying "Well, look here, he's saying that if I try to push over this wall,"—here he leaned heavily against the study wall—"I am not really doing anything," impervious to the obvious fact that he was seriously damaging the priceless seventeenth-century panelling.

Wisdom was not a hero to everyone. I remember a Moral Sciences Club photograph some time in the late sixties when we were all assembled with Broad sitting proudly in the middle of the front row. Then Wisdom appeared, late, scuttling across the large lawn of King's College. Broad waited until he was just in earshot and then said loudly to no one in particular, "Ah I see Wisdom's arriving. Now I know what it will be like at the resurrection of the dead."

We are all much better behaved now. I am sure this is partly due to the vastly increased proportion of women both as students and in the profession, and it is wholly welcome, even if it is going to leave some poor speaker in fifty years time without a fund of anecdotes to tell. It is not that women invariably behave better—Elizabeth Anscombe is a counterexample— but that their presence makes macho behaviour appear boorish, as it is. Anscombe once got her come-uppance when she fluted (she had a beautiful voice) at some speaker, "I didn't understand a single word," and met the quick return, "Which word, Madam?" When he was told she had been elected as Wisdom's successor, Broad, to whom women, Oxford, Wittgensteinianism and Catholicism were all equally rebarbative, drew himself to his full height and simply said: "Ah. She may call herself Miss Anscombe, but in the eyes of her God she is plain Mrs Geach," thereby bringing down quite a number of birds with one barrel.

While all these great events were taking place, I am sure moral philosophy was steaming ahead merrily. Unfortunately I seem to have run out of time, so I shall have to leave the audience to find out for themselves where it has arrived.

