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Commitment and reflection in moral life

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ABSTRACT

On the view that Nicholas Adams advocates in 'Alternatives to Moral Common Ground', ethics is complicit in undermining the commitments that constitute our moral lives, because by forcing us to articulate those commitments they lose their hold on us. In this paper I take Adams' views as a starting point to explore the idea that ethics might be complicit in undermining our moral lives. Aiming to shed light on the relation between reflection and commitment, I will do two things. First, I try to explain why ethics, as a reflective enterprise, undermines the unspoken hold our commitments have on us. Second, I will explore the idea that reflection is destructive in the sense that it falsifies our pre-reflective commitments.

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1. Introduction

Nicholas Adams confronts us with what he calls 'the paradox of ethics'. While our moral lives are largely shaped by commitments that we take for granted, ethics involves the demand of articulating those commitments. This, Adams observes, undermines the power they have over us. Paradoxically, therefore, ethics might be complicit in undermining our moral lives.

Adams' elaboration of this fascinating paradox involves two claims that I will consider in more detail in the present contribution. The first, descriptive claim is that the transition from being guided by our pre-reflective moral commitments to them losing their power over us is 'obscure', an 'occult [process] we do not understand'. The second, normative claim is that there is something problematic about the enterprise of ethics because, in urging people to articulate their pre-reflective moral commitments, it runs the risk of falsifying them. Considering these claims, I aim to develop some preliminary thoughts on what I consider to be one of the most fundamental questions in philosophy: how to understand the relation between commitment and reflection, and how to live it.¹

2. Losing my commitment

Why even think that ethics threatens to undermine the commitments that constitute our moral lives? I take Adams' answer seems to be something like the following. The commitments that constitute our moral lives tend to operate on an unconscious or

pre-reflective level: in everyday life, we are typically unconscious of what we find valuable, of how we believe we should respond to particular morally salient situations, and so forth. We become genuinely conscious of these taken-for-granted commitments when we face a challenge that involves them: for example, we encounter people with commitments that significantly differ from our own, or we stumble upon some inconsistency among our commitments that hinders us in responding adequately to a morally salient situation. Now, as soon as we have become genuinely conscious of our commitments, they become available for articulation: we can now give words to them and give reasons why we believe they are important. Moreover, being conscious of our commitments also means that they have become options for us: having our commitments before our eyes, we can now decide whether or not to endorse them. And this, finally, means that our commitments have lost their unspoken hold on us, their taken-for-granted power over us.

Adams regards this transition as ‘occult’ and ‘obscure’. Is it really this mysterious, however? I believe we can shed light on it by focusing on the role of reflection rather than articulation in this process.

Reflection, as I understand it here, is the capacity to turn our eyes to the elements of our own mental lives – our beliefs, desires, emotions, intentions, commitments and so forth – thereby becoming genuinely conscious of them. In everyday life, we look at the world, as it were, ‘through’ them, but in reflection we look directly *at* them, turning them into *objects of enquiry*.² This reflective distance between ourselves and them, makes them available for articulation. Articulation of our commitments becomes possible once they stand, as it were, ‘before our eyes’.

The profound change that is brought about by reflection, is described by Christine Korsgaard in her influential *The Sources of Normativity*:

[O]ur capacity to turn our attention on to our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them, and to call them into question. [...] I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn’t dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act? The reflective mind cannot settle for [...] desire, not just as such. It needs a *reason*. Otherwise, at least as long as it reflects, it cannot commit itself or go forward.³

Suppose that – focusing on emotion rather than desire – I envy my colleague. She has just told me that her latest article will be published in a top-tier journal that has repeatedly rejected my own work. Suppose, moreover, that, although I am in the grip of envy, I am capable of reflecting on it. I take a step back, look at my envy from the outside, and ask myself a question such as: why have I become envious upon hearing *this* colleague’s news, whereas I did not feel envy when a different colleague told me recently that his latest article will be published in the same journal too?

In doing this, in asking this reflective question, I have taken on a fundamentally different attitude towards my envy. Instead of being in envy’s grip – looking at the world through it, and being motivated by it – I have detached myself from it. This does not mean that I am no longer envious – I am, after all, still looking at it – but it does mean that, as long as (and to the extent that) I am reflecting on it, it has lost its motivational force for me. Now, the key question is: how can we explain this?

When I am in the grip of envy, I see my colleague as superior to myself, because she has been able to accomplish what I desperately want but do not seem to be able to accomplish. That is to say, when I am experiencing some emotion, my gaze is directed towards *the evaluative features (qua evaluative) of the world that the emotion is a response to*.⁴ When I am reflecting on my envy, however, I turn my gaze towards the envy itself and away from the evaluative feature of the world – my colleague’s superiority over me with regard to a good that I deeply value – that it is a response to. One might object that asking the reflective question ‘why have I become envious of this colleague but not of that colleague?’ does imply a look at the features of the world that my envy is a response to; after all, am I not inquiring about the relation between my envy *and this particular colleague telling me about having her article accepted by this top-tier journal*? Certainly, but the crucial point is that now – while reflecting – these features do not function in my experience *as* evaluative (hence the ‘*qua* evaluative features’ phrase I used above), *as* things that pain me because I take them to signal my inferiority.

This insight can, I think, be translated in terms of our moral commitments. Reflection on our moral commitments involves a fundamental change in our relation to them. We turn them into objects of enquiry; that is, we look at them in isolation of the evaluative features (*qua* evaluative) of the world that they are a response to. Sticking to one of Adams’ examples: if Cordelia, in *King Lear*, were to reflect on her love for her father, she would turn that love into an object. She would look at her *love* and not to that to which her love is a response: *her father’s lovability (qua lovability)*.

Contrary to what is suggested by Adams, then, the process in which our taken-for-granted commitments lose their grip on us is not ‘occult’ or ‘obscure’. We discover what is involved in this transition through an understanding of *reflection*, the mental activity that makes articulation possible.

3. Reflective endorsement?

As I mentioned in the introduction, Adams’ thoughts on these issues involves a second, normative claim: there is something problematic about ethics because, in urging people to articulate their pre-reflective moral commitments, it runs the risk of *falsifying* them. What Cordelia says when she is forced to make explicit her love for her father, Adams explains, falls far short of the love she has for him before articulating it.

This stimulating claim might instill in us a worry about ethics, if it is understood as a reflective enterprise. Reflection turns our pre-reflective moral commitments into objects of enquiry. This allows us to determine whether they are justified or not. Now, if our moral commitments are unjustified we can discard them, but if they are justified, we can recommit to them. Inspired by Adams’ argument, the worry we might have is this: *is what we (re)commit to after reflection a poor, falsified substitute of our initial moral commitments?*

Let me make this more tangible. Suppose that upon reading Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of pity, I realize that I have been naïvely committed to its value throughout my conscious life. This initiates a reflective process in which my commitment to pity becomes an object of inquiry. I ask: was I right in regarding pity as a valuable, perhaps even necessary, element of moral life? After all, Nietzsche argues that pity is nothing more than a desire to flee from oneself and an attempt to exert power over others. Now,

suppose that, after considering the matter carefully, I reach the conclusion that, despite Nietzsche's critique, my commitment to pity survives reflective scrutiny and, leaving the reflective standpoint behind, I recommit to it. The worry that Adams' analysis confronts us with, then, is this: is what I have (re)committed to a poor, falsified substitute of my initial commitment to pity?

In contemporary moral philosophy this kind of worry is typically not considered. This is, I think, because the discipline tends to have an optimistic view of reflection, not quite sensitive to its potentially destructive nature. The optimism with regard to reflection can be found among many moral philosophers, but it is given paradigmatic expression in Korsgaard's work. Elaborating what she calls the 'test of reflective endorsement', she writes:

[O]ur impulses must be able to withstand reflective scrutiny. We have reasons if they do. The normative word 'reason' refers to a kind of reflective success. If 'good' and 'right' are also taken to be intrinsically normative words, names for things that automatically give us reasons, then they too must refer to reflective success. And they do. Think of what they mean when we use them as *exclamations*. 'Good!' 'Right!' There they mean: I'm satisfied, I'm happy, I'm committed, you've convinced me, let's go. They mean the work of reflection is done.⁵

On this view of ethical reflection, if my propensity to pity survives reflective scrutiny, I can recommit myself to it with confidence. *What* I am committing to has remained unchanged throughout. The only change that occurred is a change in *status*: I am no longer naïvely committed to pity, my commitment is no longer to be seen as a prejudice, but now qualifies as justified. On this picture of ethical reflection, then, it seems that it is actually able to *strengthen* our moral commitments.

Bernard Williams has rightfully challenged the optimistic view on ethical reflection, in an argument that bears similarities to Adams' analysis. In his paper 'Persons, Character, and Morality',⁶ Williams discusses an example of the way in which ethical reflection can be falsifying. Imagine someone who is on a ship with his wife and numerous other people. Disaster strikes and several people, among whom is his wife, are fighting for their lives in the freezing water. Suppose now that our protagonist can only save one person. Although his commitment to his wife directly and forcefully motivates him to save her, moral philosophers might urge him to take a step back and reflect. So, let us imagine that, obeying them, he engages in reflection, and, moreover, that his impulse to save his wife survives reflective scrutiny. On Williams' view, something has changed rather dramatically. The justification the protagonist acquires through reflection, he famously writes, 'provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife *and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife*.'⁷ Engaging in ethical reflection, that is, has had a corrupting effect on this agent: what is decisive in his action is no longer just his commitment to his wife, but his commitment to the idea that in situations of this kind he is morally allowed to save her.

The example shows that reflection can be falsifying. What we commit to after reflection can indeed be a poor, falsified substitute of what we were initially committed to. This is an important insight. It does not mean, however, that reflection is *necessarily*

corrupting in this sense. Having become acquainted with Nietzsche's critique of pity, I reflect on my initial commitment to it. Suppose that I establish that pity is a valuable response to another person's predicament as long as it expresses a genuine concern for the other's well-being, whereas it is inappropriate to the extent that it is a flight from myself and an attempt to exert power over the other. Having reached this conclusion, I leave the reflective standpoint behind and recommit to the value of pity. In doing so, I have not, it seems to me, committed to a falsification: what I am committed to is still *pity* and I have remained convinced that it is an appropriate and valuable response to another person's predicament. This is not to say that reflection has left everything as it was. After all, I have become aware of the possibility that some instances of what *seems* to be pity are actually inappropriate responses to another person's plight. Gaining this awareness, however, can hardly be deemed a *falsification*. It is more like a *purification* of my initial commitment.

While reflection, then, is not necessarily corrupting in this sense, it might be in another. This is suggested by Adams' intriguing remark that it is impossible to transmute possibilities back into necessities. What he means by that, I think, is this. Reflection, as we have seen in the previous section, turns an initial moral commitment into a possibility, into an option, into something that we might endorse. Even if reflection could vindicate it, however, that commitment can no longer be something that has a taken-for-granted hold on us.

I am not as confident as Adams that this is impossible. While reflection has profound impact on our commitments, it seems unreasonably rigid to deny that they can become 'necessities' for us again. Following Adams' line of thought, it seems that reflection creates a state of 'inhibition': we find ourselves confronted with our commitments as being nothing but options and can no longer *live* them in a spontaneous manner. Everyday experience suggests, however, that we are able to live after reflection: we are able to take up action, thought, emotion, (again) without continuously asking ourselves whether we are right in acting, thinking, or feeling like we do.

Consider athletes who have decided to make certain changes in their technique. At first they will feel inhibited in their performance. After all, they are now very conscious of what they need to be doing differently. Gradually, however, their newly adopted technique will become 'second nature', a 'necessity', to them and they will be able to perform without having to consider how to go about. Despite this now ingrained skill they will remain aware of things that were suboptimal in their performance.

Something analogous, I think, takes place in our moral lives. Reflection on my initial commitment to pity turns it into a possibility. If it is vindicated in the way that I described above, I will recommit to it. At first my experiences of pity will in all likelihood be 'inhibited', accompanied as they will be by the question of whether my response to the other's predicament is actually appropriate. Gradually, however, pity can become 'second nature', something that I will experience in an increasingly spontaneous way.⁸ This is, of course, how the virtue-ethical tradition has conceived of habituation: we cultivate character traits such that we increasingly learn to spontaneously know what to do or how to respond. This process is primarily one that should be thought of, I believe, in terms of imagination and role-modelling.⁹ That is, it is not chiefly a reflective process; it is not a matter of continuously asking ourselves what the right response would be to a morally

salient situation. It will, however, be open to reflection. Analogous to the athlete's awareness, my critical reflection on the value of pity will have instilled in me a sensitivity to the appropriateness of my responses. It is this sensitivity that distinguishes my post-reflective commitment to the value of pity from my pre-reflective commitment to it. Having that sensitivity, however, does not mean that we cannot sensibly describe pity as having become a necessity.

4. Conclusion

Adams' insightful analysis of the potentially damaging demand for articulation has inspired me to develop some thoughts regarding the relation between reflection and commitment in moral life. My discussion has suggested that while reflection on our commitments is always disruptive, it is not necessarily destructive. It is necessarily disruptive because it involves turning those commitments into objects, stepping back from actually embodying them. Reflection is not necessarily destructive, however, because it might actually vindicate those commitments.

Notes

1. I derive these terms from Bernard Williams, whose work is deeply sensitive to the "problem of reflection and commitment, or of an external view of one's beliefs as opposed to an internal involvement with them." See: Bernard Williams, 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline,' 192–193.
2. Adrian W. Moore, "Introduction," xviii.
3. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 93.
4. For this insight, I am indebted to Akeel Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value," 917–943.
5. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 93–94.
6. Bernard Williams, "Persons, character and morality," 17–18.
7. *Ibid.*, 18 (my italics).
8. One might worry that pity is an emotion and not, as these phrasings suggest, a virtue. However, like others working in emotion theory, I do think there is a deep distinction between emotions and virtues, since emotions can develop into character traits. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point. See for an influential account of, specifically, pity as a virtue: Brian Carr, "Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues," 411–429.
9. See for example: Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*.

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Notes on contributor

Rob Compaijen (1986) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Protestant Theological University. His research focuses on the role of detachment in ethics, paying special attention to the notion of objectivity and the (epistemological) role of affect in ethical life. He is also writing a book, in Dutch, on envy.

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