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*Published in:*

International Journal of Philosophy and Theology

*DOI:*

[10.1080/21692327.2024.2310028](https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2310028)

Published: 01/01/2023

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Voogt, A., & Schaafsma, P. (2023). Should moral commitments be articulated? An introduction, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, *84*(5), 303-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2310028>

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# Should moral commitments be articulated? An introduction

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To cite this article: Ariën Voogt & Petruschka Schaafsma (2023) Should moral commitments be articulated? An introduction, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 84:5, 303-308, DOI: [10.1080/21692327.2024.2310028](https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2310028)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2024.2310028>



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## Should moral commitments be articulated? An introduction

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### ABSTRACT

This Special Issue questions a basic assumption in thinking about morality: the idea that the explicit articulation of moral commitments that usually remain implicit is the basis par excellence for dialogue and rapprochement between people of opposing views. Nicholas Adams shows in the main article of this Special Issue that there is a paradox behind this assumption concerning ethics itself: articulating moral commitments may end up undermining them. It inherently stands in tension with forms of life as people actually inhabit them. Adams associates this basic paradox of ethics with the problem of forced articulation in particular discursive regimes, such as interreligious dialogue. The practice of Scriptural Reasoning is introduced as an alternative mode of dialogue that is less vulnerable to the distortions of articulation. The five response articles (by Petruschka Schaafsma, Ariën Voogt, Rob Compaijen, Dominique Gosewisch, and Sophia Höff) address aspects of Adams' challenge to articulation in relation to morality, rather than the setting of interreligious engagement. They point out the value of articulation in spite of its inherent imperfection, or constructively elaborate on how to deal with the paradox of ethics as analyzed by Adams. Finally, Adams responds by addressing the concerns of these replies.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 January 2024  
Accepted 22 January 2024

### KEYWORDS

Paradox of ethics;  
articulation; moral dialogue;  
common ground;  
interreligious dialogue;  
Nicholas Adams

A belief common to thinking about morality in the West is that it is beneficial to articulate our moral commitments, and to share and discuss them with others. While in daily life we are not usually aware of the moral beliefs that guide us, articulating them helps us to gain consciousness and understanding. Moral articulation benefits 'us' in general, that is, *ethicists*, whose job it is to think professionally about matters of morality in modern society, and to present if not solutions, then at least clarity in ethical debates. Yet also *moral communities* (including religious communities) benefit from articulating their tacitly held beliefs, and learn to negotiate their way of life under current societal conditions of plurality and public debate. And last but not least it benefits 'us' as a *society*, for the reason that moral dialogue fosters tolerance and mutual understanding, or because through dialogue we find common ground underneath the differences that seem to divide us.

This assumption is reflected in theory and practice in numerous ways. Within the discipline of ethics proper, we believe in the power of rational arguments, reflecting on moral intuitions, abstracting from day-to-day situations to arrive at generally applicable

norms, and finding ways to balance values. The possibility of ethics as such seems to be based on the condition of articulation and reflection. Would there be no conscious articulation of moral views, there could be no ethics.

The assumption also informs a dominant orientation regarding how to deal with moral disagreement in society. Considering the heavy polarization in Western societies on many hot-button issues, perhaps one way forward is to actively seek dialogue with those of the other camp, in order to find that we have much more in common than previously thought. If we see beyond our opinions on concrete issues, we may discover that our deepest values (concern for peace, human dignity, equality, general well-being) are actually aligned. Articulation enables dialogue, dialogue encourages understanding, and understanding leads to tolerance or even partial agreement. Hence we see numerous efforts by governments or academic institutions, by civil society and religious denominations, by schools and community centers, to 'promote dialogue', to 'build mutual understanding' and to 'seek common ground'.

This Special Issue explores a deep concern with the basic assumption underlying these attempts at moral articulation. What if articulation does not help but harm healthy moral life? What if there were reasons to resist the widespread demand for moral dialogue and finding common ground?

These questions are at the heart of the main article of this Special Issue, authored by Nicholas Adams, 'Obstacles to Moral Articulation in Interreligious Engagement'. Adams is concerned with the hidden costs of articulation: articulating moral commitments may end up undermining them. This fundamental objection will initially make us philosophers and theologians uneasy. Resistance to moral dialogue and self-reflection seems a non-starter. What else, if not the intention to discuss moral views in an open and respectful way? Why not at least try to reflect upon our moral beliefs and to learn in dialogue with others – even if this is a difficult and fraught process, and always involves the risk of doing injustice to beliefs and lived experience?

Any possible uneasiness should not dissuade the reader from considering the account provided by Adams, and to take its concerns very seriously. Adams confronts us with a powerful expression of the 'paradox of ethics': the tenacity of moral commitments often comes from their being taken for granted – whereas ethics requires that they are precisely *not* taken for granted. Drawing on Hegel, Schelling and others, Adams argues moral grounds become available for articulation only when they are seen as options, rather than tacitly held truths. The result is that ethics – and here 'ethics' serves as a shorthand for the general demand for articulating and reflecting upon one's moral commitments – inherently stands in tension with moral beliefs and forms of life as people actually inhabit them. The desire to publicly state and discuss deep moral grounds runs the risk of falsifying them. Adams is particularly attentive to the ideological and social pressures behind the demand for articulation, and shows by way of the literary examples of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Sophocles' *Antigone* how it may have dramatic consequences.

Rather than arguing against dialogue and discourse as such, Adams' concern lies with particular discursive regimes that impose demands on articulation. One such example is interreligious dialogue. In many instances of interreligious dialogue, it is common that the bounds of what counts as acceptable discourse are strictly policed, in order to avoid offence and to facilitate finding common ground. It leads to a distorting practice where

there is a preference for abstract moral values over controversial theological issues; and where only some voices are heard, while others are excluded. There are alternatives to these discursive practices, however, and Adams introduces us to one particular example: Scriptural Reasoning. In Scriptural Reasoning, short texts from each religious tradition that is present in the group are studied and freely interpreted side-by-side, without explicit goal. In his reading of this practice, Adams opens the way to imagining modes of speech that may avoid the problems associated with the articulation of fundamental values. It may help us to conceive how we can deal with the paradox of ethics – without abandoning ethics and moral dialogue altogether.

The other pieces in this issue critically respond to the provocative analysis of Adams, particularly the fundamental issues concerning moral articulation, rather than the specific setting of interreligious engagement. Some responses further the debate by directly engaging with the issues of moral articulation and reflection; others productively connect Adams' concerns to other authors. Some enter debates in philosophical ethics and metaethics, others take a theological turn. The great variety of responses only shows the fecundity of the ideas and reflections offered by Adams.

The symposium format assumed by this Special Issue, where one main article is followed by several smaller responses, derives from the way the discussion unfolded between the authors contributing to this issue. The main article of Nicholas Adams originally served as a keynote lecture in the 2022 international conference 'Searching for moral common ground', organized by the Moral Compass Project group at the Protestant Theological University in The Netherlands. The discussion that ensued, both at the conference and over several meetings afterwards, was considered so fruitful and potentially interesting for a wider audience, that together with the editors of the International Journal of Philosophy and Theology we set out to convene a Special Issue around it. In light of the symposium format, the reader is encouraged to read the responses subsequent to the main article.

A theological contribution to the debate is offered by Petruschka Schaafsma, 'Interruption that liberates to love. On the positive potential of the "paradox of ethics"'. She first relates Adams' articulation of the paradox of ethics to the broader setting of the moral situation that we face in our societies, particularly those in the global North. Widespread moral relativism, cynicism, and polarization make it difficult to raise the question of what is right to do – in other words, to practice ethics. It seems mistaken to bet on ethical reflection or moral conversation as the solution to current challenges in our plural societies. This suspicion towards ethics seems to be reinforced by Adams' critical reflection on the possibilities of moral articulation. At the same time, our time faces moral issues of unprecedented magnitude, which cry out for moral deliberation and collective action. Is a more constructive use of ethics not possible? To address this issue, Schaafsma explores an ethics that places at its center the transcendent character of the good. Theology, she notes, is particularly well-equipped to provide material for such an ethics based on transcendence, as it assumes the good is not simply within human grasp, or a product of fancy or power dynamics, but something unconditional that comes to us from beyond the human frame.

To this end, Schaafsma draws on a text by the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel, which relates a Christian perspective on the good to an existential experience of interruption, which can lead to truth. The experience of the truth that

breaks down the normal course of our lives is, according to Jüngel, at odds with common ethical discourse that centers on value. Values are not only reflective abstractions from self-evident moral imperatives, values also claim objective validity whereas their validation depends on our subjective choice. As Schaafsma shows, Jüngel's approach to this ethical conundrum differs from Adams'. Jüngel agrees that ethics cannot restore the loss of moral self-evidence, but welcomes this as the chance for a renewal of life through an encounter with a truth beyond ourselves, a transcendent good. In a Christian sense, this truth is ultimately embodied in the person of Christ. An ethics based on the transcendence of the good humbles all our moral claims, while simultaneously making an unconditional demand. As Schaafsma argues, this view may help us to address the ethical conundrum in our societies today.

In 'The dialectic of articulation: a Hegelian response to Adams', Ariën Voogt analyses the dialogue between Adams and Hegel on the dialectic of articulation. They both see a dialectic between the implicit and the explicit, where articulation entails a distortion of formerly unquestioned commitments. In Hegel's philosophy this dialectic has a clear historical pertinence: the ethical life of a historical culture is strong as long as its customs are taken as self-evident. As Hegel argues in his famous reading of the *Antigone*, a crisis occurs once customary values are articulated and brought to consciousness. Voogt describes how this historical application of the dialectic of articulation leads to a sharp divergence between Hegel and Adams on the appraisal of this dialectic. For while in Hegel's teleological view, the downfall of a traditional culture generates a novel, more rational culture that takes its place, Adams holds strong reservations against such a triumphalist and Eurocentric narrative.

In his contribution Voogt adds another layer by considering Hegel's emphasis on the social need for rational articulation. Hegel argues that we humans are social and communicative creatures, and that if we refrain from expressing our beliefs, we relinquish the common realm of humanity. Voogt describes the dilemma that results: either we affirm rational reflection to the detriment of tenacious moral commitments, or we flee from dialogue and community to the isolation of privately held convictions. He sees Adams' example of Scriptural Reasoning as one attempt to address this challenge. It shows that there are other forms of dialogue beyond the modern regime of objective rationality, and that it is possible after all to combine strong moral commitments with an openness to dialogue among people with opposing beliefs. Voogt encourages us to take up the task of imagining forms of dialogue and expression that can better withstand the dialectic of articulation.

In 'Commitment and reflection in moral life', Rob Compaijen builds on the metaethical issues raised by Adams to investigate the potentially undermining effect that reflection has on moral commitments. Ethical reflection on our commitments requires that they stand before our eyes, Compaijen writes, turning those commitments into objects of inquiry instead of embodying them. In the line of Adams, Compaijen argues that ethical reflection is inherently disruptive to moral commitments. The central question of his contribution is, however, whether disruptive equals destructive. Compaijen invokes the widely adopted notion of reflective endorsement put forward by Christine Korsgaard, which sees such reflective scrutiny as morally productive. It reveals which of our commitments we are justifiably committed to, and which we ought to discard.

Compaijen raises critical concerns with respect to this optimistic idea of reflective endorsement, as it does not fully undo the undermining of commitments that was the effect of ethical reflection in the first place. What we end up reflectively endorsing might be a poor substitute of the initial, unreflected moral commitment. Yet Compaijen ends his reflections on the nature of reflection on a positive note. While a post-reflective return to tacitly held commitments may be impossible, a consciously adopted commitment may very well become a second nature in the process of habituation. Ethical reflection may be necessarily disruptive, it is not necessarily destructive.

In 'Perfect imperfection: articulation in moral formation', Dominique Gosewisch takes us to the domain of virtue ethics and moral development, which as she shows is particularly relevant for the debate on moral articulation. In her contribution, she draws on the burgeoning scientific study of moral exemplarity and emulation. The emulation of exemplars is more than imitation: it encompasses that the learner does not simply copy the behavior of the exemplar, but cognitively apprehends the deeper moral values lying behind outward actions, which the learner is then able to internalize. To foster emulation, pointing to the exemplar's embodiment of virtue is not enough, Gosewisch argues. The cognitive element of emulation requires that the learner is furnished with moral reasons and beliefs, which can either come from the exemplar or from other figures in the community. Explicit articulation is for this reason indispensable to moral learning and to a healthy moral life of a community.

A central concern in her contribution is the idea that in the process of moral development, articulation is inherently imperfect and partial. For effective moral exemplars, we should not first look to saints only, but also to real people close to us, who express how they live out their values in the messiness of daily life. The imperfect expression of exemplars in fact helps, not harms, the learner's discernment and internalization of the deeper moral truths behind the partial expressions and outward forms. As Gosewisch argues, healthy moral growth is not blind conformity to unquestioned moral principles, but proceeds by way of critical discernment of the moral models the learner is offered. Articulation, precisely when it is imperfect and partial, and when it is embedded in the dynamic between learner and exemplar, does not undermine moral habituation, but actually encourages it.

The mysterious nature of language and linguistic articulation hovers in the background of Adams' account, and in 'Thinking with Walter Benjamin on language and Scriptural Reasoning', Sophia Höff deepens the reflection on language by drawing on Walter Benjamin. As Höff describes, in his essays Benjamin points to the inherent limitations of all linguistic articulation. Finite human language is essentially deficient compared to the divine language of God's word. Divine language is for us inaccessible, except through what Benjamin calls 'involuntary memory', which is activated by various linguistic modes, most notably by stories and by sacred texts. Whereas human language remains deficient, some linguistic expressions can thus reconnect us to the original fullness of God's language, though only in an oblique way.

This line of thought Höff brings into dialogue with Adams' example of Scriptural Reasoning. Scriptural reasoning is also concerned with divine scripture, and starts from the conviction that all direct utterance is finite and particular. The goal of the reasoning is therefore not the production of mutual agreement or truth through objective statements. Still, shining through the interpretations offered in a session of Scriptural Reasoning can

be the transcendent light of the divine word. Höff raises the question why the practice of Scriptural Reasoning should only be restricted to sacred texts. Yet beyond questioning the distinction between profane and sacred texts, Höff's contribution draws attention to a shift in the function of language that Adams and Benjamin both hint at: from a medium for the expression of true statements to an indirect medium for the glimmering of an inexpressible truth.

In the last article, Nicholas Adams offers a final reply to all the contributions. He gathers the various threads that run through the responses, and develops his own thoughts elicited by the arguments and concerns that the contributions have raised. He observes that most responses engage with his diagnosis of the problem of articulation, rather than with proposed solutions. Adams elaborates on the nature and scope of his diagnosis, making certain qualifications to the claim of the destructive aspects of moral articulation. It is not so much articulation in general that he takes issue with, he clarifies. Many forms of articulation are beneficial and indispensable, as some of the responses show. The problem mostly concerns the demand to articulate moral grounds, which are resistant to reflection; a demand, moreover, which Adams specifically associates with the realm of interreligious engagement, instead of dialogical practices in general. Adams points to the fact that many responses leave out an explicit discussion of the uneven distribution of the costs of articulation, which tend to fall on the shoulders of minority groups. He draws his reply to a close by offering the suggestion that further discussion might focus on this aspect of articulation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Ariën Voogt* is PhD student in Philosophical Theology at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands and is part of the Moral Compass Project. He writes his dissertation on the tension between pantheism and personhood in Classical German Philosophy. His broader research interests lie in philosophy of religion and philosophy of secularization, specifically regarding the relation between Christianity and modern (secular) thought, and also philosophy of the person and philosophy of (digital) technology. He is co-founder of non-profit Algorithm Audit, working on the responsible use of AI. His recent publications include 'Agamben on Secularization as a Signature' (in this journal) and 'Hegel on What Cannot Be Said: an Interpretation of the Ineffable in the Phenomenology's "Sense-Certainty"' (*Hegel Bulletin*).

*Petruschka Schaafsma* is Professor of Theological Ethics at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands. She runs a research program in the field of ethics and theology on the meaning of family, with special attention for the aspects of givenness and dependence (*Family and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2023). She is project leader of the Moral Compass Project which explores the potential of views of divine law for current morality (*The Transcendent Character of the Good*, Routledge 2022).

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