Abstraction, Idealization and Ideology in Ethics

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Although Burke, Bentham, Hegel and Marx do not often agree, all criticized certain ethical theories, in particular theories of rights, for being too abstract. The complaint is still popular. It was common in Existentialist and in Wittgensteinian writing that stressed the importance of cases and examples rather than principles for the moral life; it has been prominent in recent Hegelian and Aristotelian flavoured writing, which stresses the importance of the virtues; it is reiterated in discussions that stress the distinctiveness and particularity of moral vicissitudes and query the importance of ethical theory.¹ Recent critics of abstraction are opposed not only to theories of rights, and the Kantian notions with which these are linked, but also to consequentialist ethical theories.² The two ethical theories that are most influential in the English-speaking world now both stand accused of being too abstract.

On the surface this is a curious complaint. If we take abstract reasoning quite straightforwardly as reasoning which leaves out a great deal, three quite simple defences of abstract approaches to ethics might be offered. First, abstraction is, taken strictly, unavoidable in all reasoning: no use of language can be fully determinate. Second, abstraction is not always objected to in practical reasoning. Accountability and law are both very abstract types of practical reasoning, yet widely admired and practised, indeed highly rewarded. Third, only abstract principles are likely to have wide scope: if ethical principles are to be relevant to a wide range of situations or of agents, they surely not merely may but must be abstract.

If reasoning has to be abstract, is often admired for being abstract and apparently gains advantages by being abstract, why should ethical reasoning be persistently and fervently denounced for abstraction? I shall try to get a clearer view of a range of issues that lie behind the charge of abstraction, and to see whether anything can or should be done to answer the charge.

¹ Including MacIntyre (1981), Williams (1985) and Walzer (1983); also, in rather different idioms, Baier (1985b), Blum (1980) and Seidler (1986).
² Benthamite utilitarians, we shall see, can avoid the charge of abstraction, but at the cost of implausible assumptions.
Abstract Reasoning and Ideal Agents

Some complaints that ethical reasoning is too abstract object mainly to reliance on abstract views of agents. These complaints are the core of Hegelian and Marxian criticisms of ‘abstract individualism’; they resurface in recent objections to ‘deontological liberalism’. Abstract ethical and political theories, it is said, make assumptions about agency which are not satisfied by human agents. The theories fail because they ignore the social and historical features that are constitutive of human agency, and assume capacities for reasoning and choosing which human agents simply lack.

The target of this line of criticism is not, however, just abstraction. The objection is not just that much (too much) that is true of human agents is omitted in some accounts of agents, but that much (too much) that is false of human agents is added. Descriptions of agents in much post-enlightenment ethical and political theory are often idealized; they are satisfied only by hypothetical agents whose cognitive and volitional capacities human beings lack. We none of us have cardinal and interpersonally comparable utilities or complete and transitively ordered preferences or complete information. We lack both infallible powers of calculation and independence from the institutional and ideological context we inhabit. We certainly don’t have transparent self-knowledge or archangelic insight into others’ preferences.

Many supposed ‘models of man’ idealize in a second sense. They don’t merely posit agents with streamlined, super-normal cognitive and volitional capacities. (Perhaps there are theoretical uses for such idealizations.) They also treat enhanced versions of certain capacities as ideals for human action. Rational economic men, ideal moral spectators, utilitarian legislators and the legions of rational choosers are taken as standards for human economic or political or ethical action. We are to think of idealized agents and their flawless compliance with rational norms as admirable and super-human rather than as irrelevant to human choosing, let alone sub-human.

 Appeals to the choice procedure of hypothetical idealized agents can seem relevant and compelling if we concentrate on domains of life where we might want or admire enhanced cognitive or volitional capacities: shopping, for example. They are less convincing in areas of life where we don’t want those capacities overdeveloped or know that they won’t and perhaps can’t be highly developed. We would not admire medical ethics that posited ideal rational patients, or personal relationships designed for ideal rational friends and lovers.

If all criticisms of abstraction in ethics were criticisms of idealizing conceptions of agency, we would know where to head in order to deal with them. Plenty of people have headed off in those directions. Rational choice theorists try to show how some of the stronger and less plausible assumptions about cognitive and volitional capacities can be weakened. Utilitarians acknowledge the approximate character of utilitarian calculation and the importance of ‘putting out to sea with the almanac already calculated’; plausibility is sought at the cost of softening the sharper and more radical implications of felicific calculation. Decision procedures which acknowledge uncertainty, partial information and the constraints of time are advocated. Maximin is preferred to maximizing. Some human rights theorists even emphasize the imperfection of human cognitive and volitional capacities and argue from these to ‘welfare’ rights. They point out that liberty rights are worthless without agency, that human agency is vulnerable to material and other deprivation, and conclude that liberty rights are not taken seriously unless there are also rights to have basic needs met.4

Abstract Reasoning and Formalism in Ethics

Ethical and political discussion can do without idealizing accounts of agency. This does not show that it could also do without abstraction in the strict sense.5 However, much criticism of abstraction in philosophical ethics suggests that abstraction itself might be dispensable. It is criticism not just of theories that rely on idealized views of agency but of the supposed formalism and emptiness of all practical reasoning that invokes principles or rules. The charge of empty formalism is most frequently levelled against Kant. Kant, it is said, proposes in the Categorical Imperative a formal test of principles of duty, which simply lacks determinate implications for action. Mill speaks for many when he alleges that Kant ‘when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality... fails almost grotesquely...’.6 The supposed failure of Kantian formalism is neatly summarized in Péguy’s acid quip ‘Le kantisme a les mains pures, mais il n’a pas de mains’.7 What is the point of ‘hands’ kept clean by grasping nothing?

However, objections to formalism are not directed only at Kant. All ethics of principles, and at present theories of human rights in particular, are often charged with formalism whether or not they make idealiz-

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5 Formalism and idealization are, however, linked. Principles that could be relevant both for idealized agents and for varying human agents would have to be particularly schematic and indeterminate.
6 Mill (1962), Utilitarianism, Ch.1.
ing assumptions about agency. Formalism is said to be both theoretically and ethically inadequate. A range of interconnected objections is repeatedly raised. I shall consider four of them. Two of these objections are mainly theoretical. It is said, first, that ethics of principle underdetermine decisions and offer no "algorithm for the difficult case" and, second, that we can never formulate plausible exceptionless or universal moral principles. The other two objections are ethical rather than theoretical. It is said, third, that thinking in terms of principles or rules can blunt moral and human sensibilities, lead to decisions that are taken 'by the book' and fail to consider context, and, fourth, that reliance on abstract, i.e. indeterminate principles, is self-undoing and self-defeating.

The two theoretical objections, which are closely connected, are, I think, true under their standard interpretation. They are also, I shall argue, quite insufficient under that interpretation to show that we either should or can avoid appealing to ethical principles or rules. The two ethical objections to abstraction are, I shall argue, unsatisfactory. Generalizations from in which principles or rules can be misused. I shall consider these objections in turn.

**Principles and Algorithms**

It is true that principles underdetermine decisions. This is hardly news for those who have advocated ethical theories that make principles or rules central. Kant, for example, insisted that we have no algorithm for judgment, since every application of a rule would itself need supplementing with further rules. Yet the reasons often given for rejecting reliance on principles or rules appear to be based on no more than the assumption that they would have to be algorithmic—i.e. that they must determine answers for all cases that fall under them and that particular decisions must be given by, and so be deducible from, rules.

If no principle or rule can determine every detail of its own application, even the most highly specified rule can be implemented in varied ways, so there can strictly be no algorithms of action. However, this move would be too easy a rebuttal of the view that ethical principles should be algorithms for action. There is a quite reasonable sense in which some rules of action can be algorithmic: there are algorithms for multiplying and for reaching a draw when playing noughts and crosses although these algorithms do not determine every move of every

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8 Baier (1985b) 226; the criticism is frequent.

9 Baier (1985b) 216–17; again the point is standard.

10 Kant (1929) A133/B172.
immaturity or bad faith.¹¹ Algorithmic rules for conduct, let alone life algorithms, are fabulous: they belong in the fairyland of felicific calculation.

**Exceptionless Principles**

The second complaint that critics of abstraction commonly level against ethics of principles is closely connected to the first. It is that we can find no plausible exceptionless or universal ethical rules or principles. This is a more sweeping objection than the complaint that there are no algorithmic rules. Algorithmic rules would have to be exceptionless; but not all exceptionless rules are algorithmic, since some may fail to specify what is required or forbidden in each situation even in the broadest terms. ‘When in doubt do something’ is exceptionless, but not much of an algorithm. However, exceptionless rules can cut quite a lot of ice, even if they are not algorithms, provided they constrain action in significant ways. Kant’s Categorical Imperative, for example, requires that we reject action on principles that must have exceptions, although it does not purport to identify a correct act for each situation. It provides what Kant terms ‘negative instruction’. Many people think that theories of rights constrain action but provide no algorithms for action, let alone life algorithms. Even if we find the complaint that ethical rules provide no algorithms beside the point, the charge that there are no plausible exceptionless ethical rules or principles would tell against a wide range of theories that do not claim to offer algorithms for action but do propose exceptionless principles of action. Is the charge true? If so, must we or had we better do without ethical theories, principles or rules?

The claim that we can find no plausible exceptionless rules or principles is often put as an objection to setting aside context and circumstance in making decisions. Failure to take context and circumstance into account, it is said, makes a fetish of rules or principles. It leads to rigorism in ethics; in and out of utilitarian circles it amounts to superstitious rule worship. The objection of rigorism is often made plausible by pointing to examples (in life as well as in theory) of over-rigid reliance on certain rules.

Within a classical utilitarian context of debate, where we supposedly have access to algorithmic calculation about particular cases, the charge that adherence to exceptionless rules would be superstitious is well taken—unless the rules build in all the indicated exceptions, which makes the charge vacuous. Outside the classical utilitarian context it is not obvious what the critics of abstraction expect an ‘exceptionless’ rule to be. The objection is presumably not that we cannot state plausible ethical rules or principles that are formally universal. It is rather that these formulations are not complete. There may be exceptions even to principles that we take seriously such as ‘don’t lie’ or ‘don’t kill’. Why is this a deep criticism? That we understand such principles as qualified by *ceteris paribus* clauses is no reason to think that we do not take them seriously or that they do not constrain action. Principles and rules must be indeterminate, so cannot specify all the boundary conditions or all the details of their own application in varying contexts. We cannot deduce their applications. Why should it be a criticism that we cannot? What image do those who criticize the supposed lack of ‘exceptionless’ rules have of ethical principles or rules? Do they assume that any exceptionless rule or principle would have to be algorithmic? Do they expect ethical rules to tell them what to do, although they do not expect rules of language to tell them what to say?

The claim that there cannot be exceptionless rules would constitute a general criticism of ethics of principles only if ‘exceptionless’ rules and principles had to provide algorithms for action. However, we have seen that there is no reason for thinking that ethics of principles must consist of algorithms, and good reason to think that they cannot consist of algorithms, even in the broader sense in which there can be some algorithms of action. The criticism simply does not apply either to Kant’s ethics, or to recent theories of rights or of obligations, which stress the incompleteness of principles or rules, and deny that they are sufficient for making decisions. Advocates of ethical principles standardly deny they are or can be complete, and insist that they must be supplemented by procedures of deliberation if we are to apply (necessarily incomplete) principles to cases. The charge that advocates of ethics of principles fail to provide plausible exceptionless rules is implausible unless it is understood as the charge that they have failed to provide plausible exceptionless rules *from which decisions can be deduced*. That charge is true, but has little point, since those who advocate ethics of principle don’t claim to provide such principles.

For the charge to seem plausible, ethics of principles have to be interpreted as philosophically backward. The results are often textually grotesque. For example, Kant’s cases of dutiful action in *Groundwork* are taken as deductions from rather than as illustrations of the Categorical Imperative. Kant did not see his examples in that way; and anybody who has looked at The Doctrine of Virtue, or read *Groundwork* with care, can see that Kant (although he held some rigid views) knows that principles of duty alone don’t and can’t tell us what to do. He could hardly think otherwise given his well-known insistence on the indeterminacy of judgment. Contemporary human rights theorists also

¹¹ Kant (1970), Sartre (1948).
assume that the interpretation and application of rights is an intricate and demanding business. Applied ethics is not a matter of deducing decisions from principles. It requires judgment and additional premises because rules are not algorithms, because the subsumption of cases under rules is not a mechanical operation, because we need to work out what it would take to institutionalize certain rights and to allocate corresponding obligations in various circumstances. The need for deliberation and casuistry—for procedures by which principles are applied to cases—is taken for granted by non-algorithmic utilitarians as well. Mill clearly holds that deliberation is needed to apply the principle of utility: although nobody would go to sea without the almanac already calculated, nobody would expect the almanac to make the skipper’s judgment redundant. Kant and Mill and their respective successors don’t disagree that principles and rules are necessary, that they are incomplete and that their application needs deliberation. Their disagreement is over the weight ethical reasoning should place on desire and preference.

**Sheltering Behind Rules**

The third and fourth criticisms of abstraction in the strict sense point to ethical rather than theoretical deficiencies in ethics of principles. Abstract ethical reasoning which relies on principles or rules can, it is said, blunt moral and human sensibilities, so lead to decisions that are taken ‘by the book’ and take too little account of context; it may also be self-undermining and self-defeating in deep ways. I believe that there is some, but only some, truth behind these claims. This limited truth may be misinterpreted as evidence that ethics of principles are committed to algorithmic rules, so are theoretically flawed.

Appeals to rules and principles have often been offered in supposed justification of wrongs. The standard examples of disastrous wrongs done by agents who appeal to rules or principles to justify their decisions are not examples of appeals to ethical principles. A classic twentieth century theme is that of officials who shelter behind rules, official rules and the authority of orders, and try to use these to ‘justify’ wrongdoing. These wrongs can be petty, or in the much-discussed case of Nazi bureaucrats ghastly. What do such cases tell us about ethics of principles? Only a little, I suggest. In the first place, both the rules to which bureaucratic wrong-doers usually appeal and the assumption that these rules outrank other principles of action may lack ethical weight. Secondly, all but the lowest level rules on which bureaucrats rely are far from algorithmic. Postal workers may not have discretion about how much postage to charge, but even junior Home Office officials have some discretion in the application of immigration law; while powerful officials—Eichmann, for example—are constrained but not determined by the policies they implement, and can reveal their commitment (or partial dissent) from the policy by the judgments they make about implementing it. Except in the smallest matters, following orders does not determine action closely; even in small matters it does not fully determine all aspects of action. Only if all rules were algorithmic could they make judgment redundant. Standard bureaucratic excuses such as ‘I was only applying the rules’ or ‘I was only carrying out orders’ are disingenuous; they rest on a pretence that all rules are algorithmic.

It is not only bureaucrats who try to shelter behind rules. Sometimes specifically ethical rules or principles are invoked in defence of ethically questionable action. Winch’s discussion of Ibsen’s character Mrs Solness\(^\text{12}\) dissects a case in which ethical principles are misused to ‘justify’ bad and offensive action. Such bogus justifications do not convince. To do so they would not only have to invoke ethical rules that have weight, but to offer reasons for relying on that particular rule or principle in this particular situation and for applying it in a specific way. Our experience is not much like that of ideal-typical petty bureaucrats. Situations do not come handily pre-classified for subsumption under one and only one ethical rule or principle, which prescribes quite determinate action. Before we apply rules we have to construe the situation we face; when we have done so we may find more than one pertinent rule, and every relevant rule will underdetermine action. Ethical rules and principles offer remarkably little shelter outside ideal-typical petty bureaucratic roles.

Still, rules and principles offer minimal shelter, and are often thought to offer rather more. The truth behind the claim that appeals to abstract principles are ethically blunting is, I think, that such appeals are mainly made by ethically blunt agents. Such agents assume (falsely) that problems and cases confront us uncontroversially as candidates for subsumption under one and only one rule or principle, which can determine fully what ought to be done.

A similar truth lies behind the claim that (ethical) principles and rules are self-defeating. Those who need to refer explicitly to rules in guiding their action often do so in blunt and insensitive ways, just as those who need to refer explicitly to rules of grammar often speak or write in blunt and insensitive ways. Some cite abstract principles yet distance themselves from actual situations; they pay lip-service to impeccable principles that never incommode them. Others undercut their own performance by excessive scrutiny of principles they take

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\(^{12}\) See Winch (1972) and discussion of his paper in Mendus (1983b).
themselves to follow. There are often strong reasons to sustain ways of life in which we neither parade nor perform explicit reasoning about matters like trust or kindness or spontaneity or the pursuit of happiness. Too much concentration on rules or principles can mar performance. This does not show that principles or rules cannot guide reasoning in these matters, but rather that they do so best when deeply absorbed and internalized, as the rules of a language must be deeply absorbed and internalized for effortless and precise speech. In both cases explicit focus on rules and principles may be self-defeating. Yet there are also cases where it is important to refer explicitly to rules and principles. These may include ‘hard’ cases, the education of children and cases where important principles are confused or flouted. Here the greater danger may lie in failure to formulate and follow rules and principles explicitly.

The Indispensability of Principles

Both the theoretical and the ethical criticisms of abstraction in ethics are unconvincing. They depend upon misconstruing principles or rules as precluding rather than requiring deliberation. The advocates of various sorts of ethics of principles do not claim that there are principles from which specific decisions or requirements can be deduced. They take ethical principles and rules as non-algorithmic, and assume that their application requires deliberation; yet they have been persistently read as taking a different view.

The important point about rules and principles is not that the morally insensitive try to exploit them for shelter, but that even the sensitive cannot dispense with them. Once we reject the view that rules and principles of action must be algorithmic we can see why any plausible view of reasoning about conduct must give principles and rules an important role. Although some critics of abstraction and theory in ethics suggest that deliberation could dispense with rules, and fall back on sensitive articulation of situations, this is as implausible as the thought that principles or rules by themselves could make decisions.

There are two reasons why articulations of situations alone are ethically inadequate. First, descriptions are neither unique to cases nor uncontroversial. Cases no more determine unique descriptions than rules pick out fully determinate actions. Reasons have to be given for preferring one rather than another description of a situation; and these reasons lead straight back to more general principles. Secondly, even if a certain description of a situation can be justified, it is by itself inert. It is only when we see situations of that sort as requiring action of this type that knowledge of some description becomes action guiding. Principles enable us to navigate among descriptions of situations. Fortunately we do not always have to keep our principles in the forefront of consciousness; we have much of the almanac not only calculated but in our bones. That we make our moves directly, intuitively, spontaneously no more shows that we do not need principles than the rapid inferences we draw without explicit laying out of arguments show that we don't rely on principles of inference. In each case reliance on principles has become ingrained—but not redundant—habit. Without these habits we would be wholly at sea.

‘Facts’ and Cases

Do these arguments show that the entire critique of abstraction (as opposed to idealization) in ethics has been groundless? It seems to me unlikely that so strong and persistent an intellectual current could be superficial. What then are the deeper sources of perennial concern about abstraction? I suggest that abstraction worries us not because some writers maintain that ethical reasoning requires only principles or rules, but because nearly all writers, whether or not they advocate ethical principles, have offered too meagre and cursory an account of deliberation. Perhaps the illusion that all the work in ethical debate is to be done by the major premise has arisen because we are unsure how the minor premise is to be identified and used.

It is not enough to suggest that the minor premise is just a matter of establishing ‘the facts’. Situations have no unique descriptions. What we see under one true description as an urgent crisis or problem, may appear under another as mere and trivial routine. Ways of reasoning that assume that ‘the facts’ of human situations can be uncontroversially stated are likely to be dominated by established and often by establishment views. Without a critical account of the selection of minor premises, ethical reasoning may avoid formalism only to become hostage to local ideology. This is not an idle worry. Writing in applied ethics has to work with some account of the topics to be handled. Neither the selection of topics nor their description is neutrally given. Could any of us demonstrate that contemporary applied ethics is more than the scholasticism of a liberal tradition? What explains the particular agenda of problems that dominates the literature at a given moment?13

Those who dispute the relevance of principles in ethical reasoning have also, it seems to me, failed to offer an adequate account of how we are to describe the situations we find. For example, a lot of Wittgen-
steinian and related writing on ethics suggests that examples carry the whole burden of ethical deliberation, and that the articulation of examples, although subtle, is possible because we can determine 'what we do want to say'. But what we want to say depends much on who we are, and how we understand the world. Outside closed circles there are real and deep controversies about the articulation of cases and examples; even well-established descriptions may be evasive, self-serving or ideologically contentious.

Of course, we may choose to retreat to closed circles, which we define by the possibility of agreeing on the articulation of cases and an agenda of ethical problems. This strategy is likely to push us not merely into relativism but into circles that are smaller than those we actually inhabit. Even within the confines of the Athenian polis—our best image of a moral community—there was dispute about the articulation of examples, and no guarantee that disputants could agree on cases. Does failing to return a knife to its frenzied owner count as failure to give each his due? Every articulation of a situation privileges certain categories and descriptions, and is incomplete and potentially controversial even among those who inhabit the same circles. Those who don't live in the same circles may find that disagreement amounts to mutual incomprehension.

This suggests that we need to think more about the means by which understanding, and perhaps agreement, can be sought, and less about the conditions under which they can be taken for granted. We might ask: what are the minimal assumptions we must make for there to be ways of seeking to come to a mutually comprehensible and perhaps agreed-upon account of the minor premises of ethical reasoning? What does deliberation require?

Relativism and Multilingualism

It is difficult to discuss this point without entering into debates about relativism. For present purposes I want to bracket conceptual relativism of the sort that would trap us in permanent conceptual and social isolation. I offer only gestural reasons for doing so.14

First, conceptual relativism suggests that we cannot even discuss matters with those in different traditions since we lack a common conceptual framework. The reality of ethical and political conflict, however, suggests that when we are in dispute we do not entirely

misunderstand. It is because we understand (pretty well) what the other lot mean and are up to that we are in furious dispute. Those who are separated by ethical and political disagreements are more like those who speak different languages. Multilingualism is possible even if perfect translation is not. If we can be ethically and socially as well as linguistically multilingual, we may find more than one way of articulating a situation so as to make it accessible. Many people, I suggest, are at least partly ethically multilingual.

The second reason for bracketing conceptual relativism is practical. If we do not bracket relativism, we have only two options for dealing with those whose ways of thought and life we do not understand. Either we can cut ourselves off and retreat to the cosiness of 'our' shared outlook; or we can impose our ways on others. If we are to have options other than quietism and imperialisms (violent or merely paternalistic) we must bet against relativism.

Betting Against Relativism

What would it be to bet against relativism? Rather than accepting that there is nothing rational to do in the face of deep misunderstanding and disagreements, we would have to look for ways to reach wider mutual comprehension and perhaps some resolution of disagreement. This search cannot be just a blind groping for minor premises that all will understand and perhaps accept. If it is to count as a bet against relativism it must be more than this: indeed it must be guided by principles.

There is a possibility—welcomed by some—that we can make no bets against relativism. It may be said, for example, that we can do no more than accept that the conversation of mankind will lead us and others to new perceptions and descriptions, which will sometimes permit wider understanding and agreement. If this is our situation we can draw no generally acceptable distinction between consciousness raising and consciousness lowering. While we will not be trapped in timeless conceptual capsules, the sense we come to make of others' ethical reasoning will depend on the way we drift with the tide of history. Since the conversation of mankind sometimes takes a distinctly nasty turn, we have reasons to balk at this moderated relativism.

If we balk, one consolation that may be offered us is the claim that all change will at least enlarge horizons, since the tradition retains a comprehension of its past formations. We can understand the Athenians, even if they would have found us baffling. There is a worrying ethnocentrism—specifically Eurocentrism—in assuming that there is only one tradition. Even when we are talking about pasts that are

14 For good reasons: a full consideration of the topic has to give an account of how one may, without begging questions, discuss with those who allege that there are barriers that prevent any discussion.
ancestors to our own present there is an implausible optimism in assuming that transitions always happen without loss—it may merely be that when loss is quite general we no longer experience it as such. The present categories of any tradition are always the categories of therewriters of its history. Historicized relativism substitutes ethnocentrism and optimism for strategies for bridging non-comprehension.

If we are to take seriously the thought that others may not understand our very articulation of situations or, where they understand, may think them pointless or evil, what can we do? Which principles must we follow if we bet against relativism? How can we work towards rather than assume acceptable minor premises? I shall do no more here than gesture towards lines of inquiry that require accounts of practical reasoning to address questions of ideology.

First, in practical reasoning that is not predicated on relativism we must accept that others may not share our views of situations and problems and that we may have to discuss and mediate disagreements. Our first task may be to enable communication. If so the most fundamental of ethical principles may be those by which we question our own and others’ perceptions of situations and seek strategies for securing mutual communication, and where possible some agreement on the appropriate minor premises for ethical reasoning.

The beginning of a bet against relativism may be action on principles of tolerating and mediating discursive differences. Such toleration could not be mere indifference to others’ views and voices. It would rather be a matter of straining to follow the terms of others’ discourse and to grasp their starting points. Such moves towards multilingualism might fail if others were deeply alien and separated from us by impassable conceptual gulls. There is no guarantee that all bets succeed. However, there is no reason to be sure that this bet must fail: there is little evidence of impassable conceptual barriers between human beings who have not suffered traumatic breakdown.

The principles required to guide a quest for mutual accessibility can be thought of as requiring strategies of decentring: we seek to enlarge our horizons and understand other standpoints. However, trying to communicate with others whom we initially cannot understand needs more than a shift of our own horizon. A shift of horizons would not constitute a bet against relativism if it were only a conversion, during which our own former starting point dropped below the new horizon. Attaining multilingualism is not a matter of forgetting one’s native tongue. The objective of building understanding between those who do

not share terms of discourse requires a strategy of seeking to grasp both perspectives, not the loss or suppression of some original bearings.

The strategy of seeking multilingualism could be analysed in Kant’s terms as a matter of acting on three principles. Those who seek to enlarge their horizon must preserve their own view or voice; they must seek to share others’ views; they must strain to render consistent the constantly revised set of views to which action on the first two principles of the strategy may lead. If such a strategy works—there is no guarantee that it will always do so—those who transform their understanding may become essentially multilingual, and may find their views of the problems they confront and their possibilities for action changed.

But won’t multilinguals suffer schizophrenia? Enlarged horizons, in the sense just explained, don’t guarantee an integrated viewpoint or a clear basis for action. It is a myth that horizons fuse. Perhaps multilingualism can lead to a sort of breakdown and moral paralysis, or to extreme fragmentation of moral life. However, multilingualism need not disable. It might be continuous with the experience of ‘monolinguals’, who also find that their one language allows multiple and dissonant possibilities for describing situations. Even within the horizons we grow up with we experience conceptual and ethical fusions. Enlarged horizons do not offer our first glimpse of ethical conflict. However, if we are looking only for strategies for seeking, and not for algorithms for scrutinizing, the minor premises to which we are initially drawn, we do not need a guarantee that every use of a principle of seeking to bridge disagreement about particular situations will bear fruit. We need only to bet that it is not ruled out that a strategy of acting on such principles can work for at least some cases. The strategies to which I have gestured are slender weapons for confronting entrenched ideologies and dominant articulations of the problems to be addressed. Leaning on these strategies may be the best we can do if we refuse to be relativists or to rely uncritically upon some locally entrenched account of ‘the facts’.

15 This brief discussion draws mainly on Kant’s account of shifting horizons and of the sensus communis in the First and Third Critiques and in his Logic and on Gadamer’s rather different use of the metaphor of the horizon.


17 For recent discussion of the significance of such fragmentation of ethical discourse see above all MacIntyre (1981).
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