

# Defining morality, applying standards and shaping attitudes

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# Defining morality, applying standards and shaping attitudes: replies to Copson, Hobbs and Kotzee

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I am grateful to Andrew Copson, Angie Hobbs and Ben Kotzee, both for their kind words about my book and for their close engagement with its arguments. In this brief rejoinder I will respond to just one of the criticisms made by each. In the cases of Copson and Kotzee, I am confident that the criticisms I have chosen are their principal ones. I am less confident of this in the case of Hobbs, whose objections are rather numerous. Most of them focus on the contractarian justification for subscription to basic moral standards that I defend in Chapter Five: similar objections have been raised by other critics and I have responded to them in some detail elsewhere (Hand, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). I have therefore selected Hobbs' final criticism, regarding the application of moral standards, for consideration here.

## Defining morality

Copson professes to 'agree completely' with my theory of moral education, but doubts that it will 'ever be realised in practice as an educational policy or curriculum'. He doubts this because he thinks I take sides in a war between naturalists and theists over 'what morality is'. On the naturalistic account, which Copson favours, morality is 'an organised attempt to reinforce our social impulses' and has 'its origin in our biology'; on the theistic account, morality 'consists of rules deriving from a source outside of humanity'. This is a dispute not about which kind of moral rule carries more weight, but about which kind of rule qualifies as moral at all. For the naturalist, even if a benevolent god were to show up and start issuing commands, we would have no moral obligation to comply with them; for the theist, by the same token, acting in accordance with our social impulses cannot be construed as obedience to morality. Any theory of moral education predicated on the assumption that one of these accounts of morality is correct is bound to be unacceptable to proponents of the other – and will thus be very difficult to put into practice in schools.

I agree with Copson that, if my theory assumed a naturalistic account of morality, the prospects of it being implemented in schools would be bleak. Happily, it assumes no such thing. The conception of morality on which my theory rests is, to use David Copp's terms, 'attitudinal' rather than 'material' (Copp, 1995). Material conceptions, which include the naturalistic and theistic accounts, distinguish moral standards by their 'content, rationale or function' (p.78). They are unpromising precisely because there is great variation in both the types of conduct people morally regulate and the reasons they advance for doing so. Nothing is gained by the attempt to exclude by definitional fiat those moral standards and justifications with which one disagrees. Attitudinal conceptions, by contrast, distinguish moral standards by the way in which people subscribe to them. On the attitudinal

conception I advocate, moral standards are those to which people's subscription is *universally-enlisting* and *penalty-endorsing*. It is plain that both the naturalist's subscription to standards grounded in human biology and the theist's subscription to standards grounded in divine revelation count as moral in this sense.

What has misled Copson into thinking I share his naturalistic account of morality is my contention that all children should be taught the problem-of-sociality justification for basic moral standards. The problem-of-sociality justification invokes contingent but permanent features of the human condition – rough equality, limited sympathy, moderate scarcity of resources – to show why it is necessary for members of human social groups to subscribe to conflict-averting and cooperation-sustaining standards of conduct. It is the sort of justification that would be very much at home in a naturalistic account of morality. But the role it plays in my theory is not definitional: I emphatically do *not* hold that standards are moral just to the extent that they ameliorate the problem of sociality. My claim, rather, is that the problem-of-sociality justification gives all human beings, whatever their religious views and whatever other justificatory theories they may find plausible, a decisively good reason to subscribe to basic moral standards. There is no impediment to teaching it in schools because we can all agree on *this* justification for *these* moral standards, while disagreeing sharply on other justifications for these and other moral standards. In particular, and contra Copson, my theory does not rule out appeals to divine authority in the moral sphere: perhaps we are justified in subscribing to prohibitions on stealing, cheating and lying *both* because these standards are needed to solve the problem of sociality *and* because God ordains them.

### **Applying standards**

Hobbs picks up on the distinction I draw at the start of the book between disagreements about the *application* of morality and disagreements about the *content* and *justification* of morality. She rightly takes me to be centrally concerned with disagreements of the latter kind, but she mistakes the reason for this: 'he wants to concentrate on the content and justification of morality rather than the applicability of standards to particular cases (such as issues to do with moral dilemmas and borderline cases) because he thinks such issues are often overplayed in moral theories and give a false impression that morality is always very difficult'. *That* is not the reason I focus on disagreements about content and justification. The reason is rather that disagreements about content and justification pose a far more serious threat than disagreements about application to the possibility of teaching children an authoritative moral code. Disagreement about whether the moral prohibition on theft applies to cases of borrowing-and-forgetting-to-return is much less fundamental, and much less inimical to directive moral education, than disagreement about whether and why theft is morally wrong.

In any case, Hobbs raises the distinction in order to challenge it. Her thought seems to be that questions of application cannot be cleanly separated from questions of content and justification. As she puts it: 'a greater sensitivity to issues of context can in some cases help us *decide on* the standards'. Unfortunately, the only clue she gives as to what she has in mind here is that acceptance of the point would take us 'towards an Aristotelian ethics and

politics of flourishing'. It is, of course, a familiar claim of virtue ethicists that moral rules lead us astray by riding roughshod over the specificities and nuances of context. That is what prompts the virtue ethical turn away from standards of conduct and towards qualities of character. But it is hard to see how this claim might support a blurring of the distinction between the application and the justification of moral standards.

One way in which problems of application might bear on problems of justification is by casting doubt on the feasibility of moral regulation. To serve their purpose, moral standards must be reasonably unambiguous and straightforward to apply: what they require of those who subscribe to them must in most cases be obvious. If a proposed standard turns out to be very difficult to apply, because it is frequently hard to say whether a given action is of the prohibited or required type, then it ought to be rejected, whatever its *prima facie* plausibility as a means of averting conflict and sustaining cooperation. Robustly justified moral standards must hold up in practice as well as in principle: if this is what Hobbs means by saying that sensitivity to context can help us decide on moral standards, I do not disagree.

It is worth adding that, while I do have the reservation Hobbs notes about approaches to moral education that make wrestling with moral dilemmas its most salient feature, I certainly do not leave moral deliberation out of account. In Chapter Three of the book I argue explicitly that a secondary task of moral formation is improving children's thinking about the application of their standards:

It is therefore important that children and young people are given opportunities to think and talk about the application of their moral standards. They must acquire, in addition to moral intentions, feelings and habits, the ability to work through moral uncertainty and to cope with morally ambiguous situations. This cognitive aspect of moral formation is a necessary supplement to the central task of cultivating subscription to moral standards. (Hand, 2018a, p.36)

## **Shaping attitudes**

Kotzee complains that the threat to moral education I seek to defuse – the threat of indoctrination posed by teaching children to believe that moral standards are justified – is not the threat we should be most worried about. What should really worry us is the threat of miseducation posed by the practice of shaping children's attitudes. Kotzee accepts my distinction between the disservice done to children by bringing it about that they hold beliefs non-rationally and the disservice done to them 'by rewarding and punishing them for the wrong things, or in the wrong ways, or by modelling the wrong behaviours and reactions' (ibid., p.41); but he thinks it is the latter kind of disservice to which a theory of moral education should be most attentive.

What is puzzling about this is Kotzee's perception that my theory 'does not directly try to say anything about' the disservice that troubles him. That is simply not true. Moral formation – the cultivation in children of the conative, affective and behavioural dispositions that constitute subscription to moral standards – is integral to the account of

moral education I defend, and I am at pains to specify the conditions under which it is justified. Here's what I say:

John Wilson may be right that the unindoctrinated mind remains free 'however much our behaviour may be forced or our feelings conditioned' (Wilson et al., 1967, p.174), but conditioning feelings and habituating patterns of behaviour are still significant interventions in children's lives with a lasting effect on the kinds of adults they become. It is important for educators to be clear about the range of dispositions they are trying to cultivate in children and on what grounds. When it comes to the dispositions that constitute moral subscription, I suggest, the most defensible educational principle is that children should be brought to subscribe only to moral standards for which there is a sound justification, and should be provided with that justification as soon as they are capable of grasping it. (ibid., p.78)

I make no apology for giving priority to the threat of moral indoctrination: I agree with Wilson that indoctrination is the most harmful, and hardest to rectify, form of miseducation. But the shaping of moral attitudes plainly matters too, so it is important to be clear about the attitudes we are entitled to cultivate. Kotzee favours cultivating 'a love of charity', but if charity were just an optional component of flourishing human lives, it would be presumptuous to cultivate it in children. What my argument shows is that charity is not optional: there is a robustly justified moral requirement to help those in need, so moral educators are entitled to cultivate in children the intentions, feelings and habits involved in subscription to that standard. Kotzee is right, then, that 'what attitudes we have is not equal', but wrong to suppose that I sidestep this question: my theory furnishes moral educators with explicit guidance on which attitudes they may properly cultivate and how to go about it.

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