

## On The Virtue of Judging Others

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### Abstract

An other-directed moral judgement is contrasted with a moral evaluation of one's own behaviour; it is argued that having a capacity to make self-directed moral judgements is at the core of being within morality, while a lack of disposition on the part of a mature individual to judge others is indicative of the corresponding lack with regard to the self-directed evaluations. Our readiness to evaluate the behaviour of others measures the level of our commitment to a system of morality. Consistent nonjudgementalism subverts the interpersonal nature of moral values and points to a deeper issue – an unwillingness of a nonjudgementalist to apply moral categories to her own choices.

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The primary focus of this article is the role of other-directed moral judgements in a structure of personal moral commitment. I understand by the 'other-directed moral judgment' an evaluative pronouncement, i.e. an expression of blame or praise, made from the moral point of view and directed at persons other than oneself. "It was wrong for you to lie on the tax report," "They should never have pardoned that criminal," "She acted heroically during the emergency" – are all examples of typical other-directed moral evaluations. The other-directed judgement is contrasted here with a self-directed evaluation – a normative judgement directed at one's own actions, intentions or stable dispositions.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Self-Directed vs. Other-Directed Moral Judgements

An expression of blame or praise is normally a reaction to an event or a behaviour which has already occurred; it is not an attempt to prevent a specific act from happening (although it might have influence on future

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1. I will use the phrase "moral judgment" in a sense, which is most obvious in expressions such as "I don't want to be judged," "Who are you to judge me?" "Do not judge others," synonymous with "moral evaluation." "Moral judgment" in the narrow sense is usually identified with an imperative about what ought to be done in certain circumstances – a conclusion of a classical practical syllogism.

reoccurrence of the same action), nor is it an attempt to instruct an agent about how he or she should act. Not every instance of blaming or praising is an instance of *moral* evaluation; we often approve or disapprove of actions for reasons that have nothing to do with moral values, as, for example, when we blame a soccer player for missing a goal chance or frown upon a person who holds a fork in the wrong hand. A moral evaluative reaction is a special case of the more general tendency to make normative claims by reference to some system of values, but it is the one that I will be mostly concerned with in this paper.

Why should there be a need to draw a sharp distinction between self-directed and other-directed moral evaluations? In fact, both are the products of a more general capacity, which we might refer to as “moral thinking,” but I believe the directional distinction is theoretically important. Its full significance will be clarified further in the paper, but at this stage two points of difference between the two types of judgements can be highlighted. First, we are typically better situated to access our own motives and intentions, as well as all the relevant circumstances of the action, and thus a priori are in a privileged epistemological position to properly evaluate our own behaviour from the point of view of morality as compared with the attempts to evaluate behaviour of others. Secondly, and more importantly, making an accurate moral judgement about oneself (especially a negative one, e.g., “It was wrong for me to do X”) requires a peculiar mental posture – it requires a degree of alienation from one’s own interests, desires and preferences, as well as a capacity to look at oneself from a disinterested, objective perspective.<sup>2</sup> This is never the case when the object of moral criticism is another person. The other person’s desires and preferences are not ours; hence there is no comparable difficulty in morally condemning the actions stemming from those desires and preferences.<sup>3</sup>

This initial distinction can be further substantiated by the available empirical data coming from the studies of emotions. On a widely accepted view, our expressions of blame or praise involve not merely certain propositional attitudes (e.g. a belief that an action is right or

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2. How exactly the alienation in question should be described is a matter of debate. Kant’s proposal that the work of conscience (the faculty involved in self-regarding moral judgements) requires a bifurcation of personality into the *judge* (“the ideal person that reason creates for itself”) on the one hand, and the *accused*, who “stands trembling at the bar of a court,” on the other, is probably one of the most radical forms of alienation suggested. See *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 189.

3. The difficulty in question can also be spelled out as the problem of natural partiality towards ourselves, which inclines us to judge ourselves too mildly by comparison with the moral evaluations of others. See Fullinwider “On Moralism,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22.5 (2005): 105–120, at 109.

wrong), but a distinctive affective element as well.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, recent reports in moral psychology point to different sets of emotive states underlying each type of moral judgement.<sup>5</sup> The *self-conscious* emotions, such as guilt, shame and pride, are linked to self-assessment, while the *other-conscious* emotions normally precede (or accompany) our cognitive evaluations of others, and include such basic affective states as contempt, fear, disgust, anger and joy. Thus, for example, Roger Wertheimer maintains that our moral condemnation of others “is [usually] assaultive, expressing aggressive antipathy, anger, hatred, or disgust.”<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the intensity of these emotions might differ (I am normally less emotional when condemning King Lear’s daughters than when condemning my next-door neighbour, who abandoned his ailing parents), but in all cases the emotive element is nonetheless present.<sup>7</sup>

But many emotion-researchers maintain that some emotions are more fundamental or more basic than others, and should be treated differently.<sup>8</sup> The standard list of these ‘basic’ emotions includes anger, fear, disgust, contempt, surprise, happiness (joy) and sadness. Significantly, the list partly overlaps with the list of other-conscious emotions involved in judging others. All seven basic emotive reactions have well-documented cross-cultural facial expressions associated with each emotion, musculoskeletal responses such as flinching, and a series of other coordinated physiological changes. They have undisputed neural basis in the limbic system of the brain, the phylogenetically ancient portion of the cortex which surrounds the brain stem,<sup>9</sup> and their pancultural existence is usually explained by the various evolutionary advantages they give to an animal, who can

4. See Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” *Free Will*, ed. Derk Pereboom. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997, 119–142; Watson, “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil,” *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. Ferdinand Schoeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 256–286; Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994); Hurley and Macnamara, “Beyond Belief: Toard a Theory of Reactive Attitudes,” *Philosophical Papers* 39.4 (2010): 373–399.

5. See, for example, Moll and de Oliveira-Souza, “The Cognitive Neuroscience of Moral Emotions,” *Moral Psychology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008): 1–18, at 2–3; and Eisenberg, “Emotion, Regulation, and Moral Development,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 (2000): 665–697.

6. Wertheimer, “Constraining Condemning,” *Ethics* 108(1998): 489–501, at 493.

7. Admittedly, this is not always the case. As we may recall, the player’s emotive reaction to Hecuba’s fictional misfortunes was much more intense than Hamlet’s response to the real-life atrocity – and much to Hamlet’s dismay.

8. See, for example, Ekman, “An Argument for Basic Emotions,” *Cognition and Emotion* 6 (1992): 169–200; Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Evans, *Emotion: The Science of Sentiment* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

9. See Zajonc, “Feeling and Thinking,” *American Psychologist* 35 (1980): 151–175; Damasio, “Descartes’ Error: Emotions, Reason, and the Human Brain,” (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994).

experience an emotion in question. For example, the descendents of *fearless* proto-humans, or those with indiscriminate eating habits (due to lack of feeling of *disgust*) are not among us today for obvious reasons.

An important point to observe about these basic emotions is that they require the bare minimum of cognitive involvement on the part of an agent. Their instances are largely immediate reflexive reactions to the perceived stimuli of the environment. Whatever cognitive processing is needed to appropriate the data of the senses, most of it occurs unconsciously. The basic emotive responses are largely independent of the conscious cognitive processes – they bypass the neural circuits of the outer (phylogenetically more recent) cortex responsible for the higher cognitive functions. The seven basic emotions can be compared and contrasted with the more complex, cognitively mediated emotive responses, such as jealousy, guilt, love, sympathy, envy and shame – the so-called “higher cognitive emotions.”<sup>10</sup> These non-basic emotive states are much more culturally dependent by comparison with the basic affects, both in terms of the manner of manifestation and their antecedent causes, and, admittedly, are also much less understood.

It is easy to notice that all self-conscious emotions (shame, guilt, et al.), which, according to this data, underlie most self-directed moral judgements, belong to this latter category of the evolutionary more recent, and more complex emotive states. Indeed, we require distinct types of emotive resources for each type of moral judgement. As Dennis Krebs observes in his account of the origin of the moral senses, “Passing judgment on oneself involves different psychological experiences from passing judgment on others. We do not normally feel guilty about things that other people do, and we do not feel a sense of righteous indignation about our own misdeeds.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the distinction between self- and other-directed moral evaluations may also be drawn at the level of the underlying types of emotive states – the types which have well-established generic differences.

## II. Other-Directed Moral Judgements and Moral Commitment

It appears, then, that while self-directed moral judgements might potentially be more accurate, they are in an important sense harder to make.

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10. Griffiths, *Op. cit.* An alternative labelling of the two kinds of emotive phenomena is used by Vetlesen in “Perception, Empathy, and Judgement: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance,” (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), who uses the term ‘feeling’ to refer to the ‘rawer’ basic emotions, and reserves the notion of emotion proper for the ‘higher’ emotional states. Damasio (*Op. cit.*) distinguishes between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ emotions which seem to be coextensive with these two categories.

11. Dennis Krebs, *The Origins of Morality* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011) 203.

A stable disposition to judge one's own choices from the moral point of view signifies a level of moral and intellectual development that goes beyond the mere capacity to detect a wrongdoing in others and to voice a disapproval about what other people do or fail to do. This common observation prompted a number of scholars to conclude that the other-directed moral judgements are more primitive from the evolutionary and developmental standpoints, and appear historically prior to the sincere moral appraisals directed at oneself. For example, Edward Westermarck, a Finnish social scientist, argued early on that self-directed moral evaluations are circuitously reached only "through a prior critique upon our fellow-men."<sup>12</sup> On his plausible analysis, moral self-criticism is essentially a reflected capacity – it appears as a further derivation from our natural disposition to pass judgement on others. Indeed, if our analysis of the emotional component in two types of judgements is correct, the capacity for other-directed moral judgement may exist without the capacity for self-directed moral judgement (e.g. in a young child), but not vice versa. This corresponds to a relation existing between basic and higher cognitive emotions – a creature exhibiting 'higher' emotive reactions *eo ipso* possesses the capacity for basic emotive states. Thus, a person capable of evaluating her own actions from the point of view of morality is always also capable of making similar judgements about the actions of others, even if she is perhaps more likely to be mistaken (due to ignorance of intentions, circumstances, etc.) in her estimation of the moral status of other people's choices.

A derivative status of self-regarding evaluations does not undermine their primary importance for human moral identity – a point that has been noted both by philosophers and social scientists. In popular accounts, the capacity for moral self-blame is usually attributed to a hypothetical mental structure called conscience, but since the term historically has too many connotations (including the religious ones), it would be best to minimize its use. Charles Darwin considered the moral sense to be primarily a faculty of self-regarding moral appraisal (i.e., the moral conscience in one sense of this word) and claimed that it is "of all the differences between man and the lower animals . . . by far the most important."<sup>13</sup> Various other social instincts, such as a need for affiliation, altruistic dispositions and feeling of sympathy, are simply precursors to morality, and are in some degree shared with other animals. But it is the crucial transition from feeling *bad* about one's actions to feeling *guilty*

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12. Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, Vol. 2. (London: Macmillan, 1906/1932) 123.

13. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1871/1981) 70.

that marks the origin of genuine moral sense. Darwin's attempt at an explanation of how exactly moral guilt originated from those basic social dispositions and simple emotions is hardly satisfying,<sup>14</sup> but his insight that the appearance of that mysterious "inward monitor" that would tell us that "it would have been better [from the point of view of morality] to have followed the one impulse rather than the other"<sup>15</sup> was a momentous event in human history, is still relevant today.

In his insistence on the importance of development of the moral sense Darwin was following, as he himself admits, a long-standing philosophical tradition which found its most prominent representative in Kant. According to Kant, all human beings, who are "morally alive," are naturally equipped with a moral feeling – "the susceptibility to feel pleasure or displeasure merely from being aware that our actions are consistent with or contrary to the law of duty." This, in turn, triggers the operation of conscience – "the infallible inner judge" – which pronounces an appropriate verdict on one's actions or motives.<sup>16</sup> Kant's insistence that moral feeling and pangs of conscience are human universals is apparently open to counterexamples of hardened criminals and sociopathic agents, who exhibit none of these propensities. Yet, Kant would simply deny that such individuals are relevant to his theory, since anyone "lacking in [moral] receptivity would be morally dead. . . and [his] humanity would dissolve into mere animality."<sup>17</sup> The Darwinian evolutionary development from lower animals to humans is not irreversible – at least as far as one's moral status is concerned. It is quite possible, on Kant's view, to forfeit one's humanity and to be "mixed irretrievably with the mass of other natural beings."<sup>18</sup>

Kant's emphasis on having moral feeling as a precondition for being human would exclude from the ranks of those in possession of "humanity" not only psychopaths, but also small children and mentally retarded individuals. This obviously seems too strong. It would be more appropriate to qualify the view by recognizing that moral competence is not an

14. In summary, Darwin argues that while selfish instincts might be much stronger, they are less persistent by comparison with the social (altruistic) instincts. Once selfish desires are satisfied, and thus lose their motivational pull (at least for a while), a person would be able to reflect on the neglected pro-social choices, encouraged by one's interest in the opinion of his fellows. This retroactive evaluation would bring the feelings of remorse and guilt, and might influence future choice (Op. cit.: 70–74).

15. Op. cit.: 73.

16. Kant, Op. cit.: 160–161.

17. Op. cit.: 161; This Kantian intuition is defended in our time by Jeffrie Murphy when he writes: "From the moral point of view, it is very implausible to regard [psychopaths] as persons at all. . . A psychopath is more profitably pictured as an *animal*" ("Moral Death: a Kantian Essay on Psychopathy," *Ethics* 82 (1972): 284–298, at 293–294.

18. Op. cit.: 161.

all-or-nothing matter, but rather comes in degrees.<sup>19</sup> Lessons from developmental psychology point to the gradual appearance of moral identity in a child over an extended period of time. Various structural stages of the process moral development have been identified by child psychologists with various degrees of specificity, but it is commonly agreed that the appearance of the capacity for self-evaluation signifies a major breakthrough in the moral evolution of a child.<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, for instance, points to this transition as signifying the approach of the Conventional level of moral development (the stage, which can first be identified with genuine moral awareness). In particular, at this stage, the child's reasons for doing right are "needing to be good *in one's own eyes* and those of others."<sup>21</sup> It is at this stage that one-first becomes concerned not only with praises or blames coming from external sources, but with the internal self-evaluation as well – a crucial step towards moral maturity in any individual.

The capacity for self-regarding judgements is thus at the core of moral competence. This specific capacity combined with a healthy *disposition* for occasional self-regarding judgements can be also seen as an important element in any further aspect of mature moral performance and moral evaluation.<sup>22</sup> It does not exhaust all that moral competence consists in (various other cognitive and emotive capacities are perhaps equally indispensable), but it constitutes one of the necessary conditions for being a mature moral agent.

We have noted, however, that, despite their primary standing on the list of indispensable features of moral thinking, the first-personal moral evaluations are in a certain sense derivative from our tendency to pass other-personal normative pronouncements, and are thus secondary both in terms of evolutionary development of the human mind and the normal stages of moral maturation of a child. A capacity and a disposition to

19. See Andrei Zavalij, "Toward a Three-Dimensional Model of Moral Domain," *Southwest Philosophical Studies* 31 (2009): 37–45.

20. Child psychologists observe that the transition from the behaviour motivated primarily by *fear of offence* ('basic' emotion) to the one motivated by a potential inner discomfort or feeling of guilt occurs between 7 and 9 years of age. See Jean Piaget, "The Moral Judgment of the Child," (Glencoe: Free Press, 1932/1965); Norman Bull, "Moral Judgment from Childhood to Adolescence," (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1969); Kohlberg, "Moral Stage and Moralization," *Moral Development and Behavior*, ed. T. Lickona (New York: Holt & Winston, 1976): 84–107.

21. Kohlberg, "The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice," (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 410 (my emphasis). References to Kohlberg and other moral rationalists should not be construed as my acceptance of an exclusively rationalistic approach to moral functioning.

22. The distinction between unwillingness to morally evaluate self and others and incapacity is important. The term *moral incompetence* applies only to the latter case, but a more serious charge of *amoralism* can be levelled against a person willfully refusing to ever assume a moral point of view.

blame others appear before the corresponding capacity to apply evaluative categories to oneself. Yet we should be careful not to conflate a capacity to express our *dislike* with the behaviour of others (which is indeed quite primitive), and the practice of *moral* condemnation, which implies much more than just an expression of a basic emotive reaction. At the very least, the latter practice presupposes the notions of moral responsibility, obligation, and the idea of proper sanctions for violation of certain duties – a rather complex set of moral concepts, which only appear at a relatively advanced level of intellectual development. I might abhor the fact that my recent acquaintance from East Asia eats fried caterpillars for lunch, but there is a long way from a mere expression of disgust to a genuine moral blame. Not until I accept the doctrine of the sacredness of all living beings, including insects, and our overriding obligation to respect their rights to life, can I issue a moral criticism on my oriental friend for violating this universal duty. Indeed, we may agree with Richard Joyce that, as the matter of common justificatory practice, “morally disapproving of one’s own actions provides a basis for corresponding *other*-directed moral judgments.”<sup>23</sup> I cannot consistently hold another person responsible for violation of a moral duty unless I acknowledge that I would be equally obligated to respect the moral requirement in question in similar circumstances. “If I were him, I would never take advantage of my position within a company for personal gain,” is a typical hypothetical construct which reflects a dependency of other-directed judgement on self-directed evaluations.

But the dependency goes both ways. If a readiness to evaluate the behaviour of others from the moral point of view implies one’s own commitment to certain moral values (at least at a verbal level for the purposes of justification), then a conspicuous lack of disposition on the part of a mature individual to morally evaluate others might be indicative of the corresponding lack with regard to the self-directed judgements, and, by extension, signify a *morally problematic* status of that person. The next section will address the problem of non-judgementalism – a consistent refusal to pass moral judgements on the behaviour of others. It will be argued that abstaining from moral blame of others affects the status of self-regarding evaluations, degrading our allegedly moral convictions to the level of conventional private norms.

### III. The Problem of Nonjudgementalism

It might appear that the problem of nonjudgementalism is spurious – if anything, it is the problem of the overly judgemental attitudes that needs

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23. Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006) 117.

to be addressed. Since judging others requires less of mental resources by comparison with the efforts required for self-evaluation, and, furthermore, it can be easily performed without an implied practical commitment “to mend one’s ways,” we are likely to encounter on an average day many more individuals who are willing to discuss the faults and failures of their neighbours than the ones who would seriously scrutinize over their own moral condition. The unduly concern with the behaviour of others and one’s readiness to voice negative evaluations on any occasion usually goes under the name of “judgmentalism” and is considered a vice in most quarters. It is a familiar human weakness, and there is no lack of popular literature which offers ways of ‘overcoming judgementalism’ or advocates a therapy for a more nonjudgemental and tolerant attitude towards the diverse world.<sup>24</sup>

I do not wish to deny that an overly judgemental posture on the part of an opinionated person may be indicative of a particular moral shortcoming, ranging from regrettable insensitivity to a more serious persistent flaw in one’s character. Hypocrisy, cynicism inflated feeling of self-righteousness, or even general misanthropy might all be involved in culpable cases of judgementalism. It is hardly controversial that sometimes we ought to keep our moral disapproval to ourselves and Linda Radzik does a good job exploring when it is appropriate to “mind our own business.”<sup>25</sup> It does not follow, though, that the opposite of judgementalism, namely, consistent nonjudgementalism, that is, a refusal to voice moral disapproval of the behaviour of wrongdoers, is a virtue, which should be praised or encouraged. On the contrary, I want to suggest that a person refusing to judge others no matter what, treats morality as a system of personal action-guiding rules, which is merely optional; in other words, she is not committed to morality in the way that morality itself requires.

A neutral posture with respect to the moral status of other individuals and their questionable actions is not always a sign of a commendable open-mindedness, but might point to a deeper issue – a corresponding unwillingness to apply moral categories to one’s own choices as well. It

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24. Brian Stewart’s recent editorial in one of the oldest Australian tabloids summarizes the prevalent opinion about the perils of judgementalism: “We’re not entitled to judge another, because we know little or nothing of their pain, disadvantages or misfortunes. . . Judgementalism is based upon pride, upon an arrogance which diminishes someone for not doing things the way we think they should be done. . . Judgementalism discredits one individual whilst seeking to obtain another’s concurrence [etc.]” (Brian Stewart, “Judgementalism – Making a Moral or Personal Judgment,” *The Maitland Mercury*, 16 October 2013); See also Caroline Simon, “Judgmentalism,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1986): 271–285.

25. Radzik, “On Minding Your Own Business: Differentiating Accountability Relations within the Moral Community,” *Social Theory and Practice*, 37 (4), 2011: 574–598.

is plainly wrong, most would agree, no matter how tolerant one may be, to remain nonjudgemental when we encounter, for example, a child-molester, a rapist, a swindler, who takes advantage of the elderly or disabled people, an employer, who discriminates against his workers merely on the basis of their race or gender, and in many similar cases. Even if very few real-life individuals would be willing to extend their non-judgementalist approach that far as to include actions and characters mentioned above, it is often helpful to begin with the extreme cases first. Let us take a fictional character as our initial illustration. In Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a person named Lord Henry Wotton, an otherwise exemplary gentleman, exhibits an unusual attitude towards other people, an attitude that conspicuously lacks in moral dimension. On one occasion, he expresses the practical viewpoint that guides his judgements and actions throughout the novel in the following way:

I never approve, or disapprove, of anything now. It is an absurd attitude to take toward life. We are not sent into the world to air our moral prejudices. I never interfere with what charming people do. If a personality fascinates me, whatever mode of expression that personality selects is absolutely delightful to me.<sup>26</sup>

How should we understand such an attitude? We may safely assume that Lord Wotton's nonjudgementalism is not the result of moral incompetence at the level of moral concepts or his ignorance of the appropriate moral rules. It must then be attributed to his conscious unwillingness to look at the world from the moral point of view. Admittedly, one's flagrant refusal to apply moral categories while judging the actions of others can be attributed to two very different mindsets. First, it may be the case that Lord Wotton simply wants to avoid the reputation of a moralist in the pejorative meaning of this word, as referring to a person unduly concerned with the morals of others. In this case, his refusal to judge may be taken as evidence of a praiseworthy scrupulousness when it comes to pronouncing a final judgement on a certain person, since we are rarely in a position to know all the details of the relevant circumstances and have only an indirect access to the motives underlying another's behaviour. Clear recognition of one's own epistemic deficiencies entails that we hardly ever have a sufficient basis for judgement, which, combined with the (moral) desire to avoid an unjust, hasty verdict, may effectively block one's natural tendency to publicly evaluate the behaviour of others from the moral point of view.

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26. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Dolphin Books, 1890/1960) 84.

Yet, there is another less charitable interpretation of Lord Wotton's non-judgemental attitude, and the one which is perhaps more in line with Oscar Wilde's intentions. Throughout the novel, we observe Lord Wotton's cheerful moral indifference towards all kinds of morally dubious situations and characters, including Dorian Gray's irresponsible behaviour, which eventually drove a young girl Sibyl Vane to suicide. Nonetheless, he is not indiscriminate when it comes to accepting or rejecting people; he is clearly in command of strong evaluative language, and on a number of occasions applies rigid standards to various characters – except that his set of normative categories is notoriously lacking in the moral type. Lord Wotton's rejection of a moral stand when it comes to evaluating other individuals and their actions is a sign of rejecting morality wholesale, that is, rejecting the institute of morality altogether and substituting it with some alternative system of values (e.g. aesthetic values) – a position that is not uncommon at least in philosophical literature, and which is usually referred to as 'amoralism.'

A committed amoralist of the Lord Wotton's type is probably a rare creature in real life. A much more common character is the one who refuses to judge others out of respect for some other *prima facie* moral values, such as considerations of tolerance, a sympathetic concern for another person's feelings or an interest in promoting peaceful coexistence within a culturally diverse group.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, no one (except certain philosophers) wants to be seen as amoral, but people likewise dislike accusations of narrow-mindedness, which are almost inevitable when one's unambiguously stated moral evaluations on some controversial topics are voiced publicly. The prevalent public opinion in liberal states, with its strong emphasis on toleration and acceptance, often promotes an image of an exemplary citizen of a pluralistic society that comes in clear conflict with the very nature of moral commitment. The overriding requirement of 'being nice,' taught to all of us from very early age, tends to extend not only to manners of expression and basic rules of politeness, but, in many cases, implies a taboo on publicly disapproving actions, which clearly contradict the norms of morally acceptable behaviour 'in my family.' When successful, the social pressure creates a complacent individual with neither desire, nor the courage to confront the transgressor, no matter how obvious the moral violation might be. "I don't want to sound judgmental" is one of the most common justifications of moral

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27. A more sophisticated nonjudgementalist might even appeal to arguments for hard determinism as the main reason for refusing to blame or praise agents, who in the final analysis, could not have acted differently anyways. But this is not the most common justification of nonjudgementalism.

indifference. Robert Fullinwider nicely summarizes the intuitive problem with this kind of principled moral neutrality when he writes:

Nonjudgmentalism can reflect a thorough-going critical flabbiness. The nonjudgmentalist is unwilling or unable to apply any categories of assessment to the conduct of others. Such a promiscuous nonjudgmentalism that makes no distinction among people, or such an indiscriminate tolerance that makes no objection to anything, isn't humility and generosity in action; it is mindlessness.<sup>28</sup>

The values of acceptance and tolerance, as praiseworthy as they might be, do not have an overriding status when it comes to grave moral (and legal) transgressions.<sup>29</sup> Part of what it means to have morality is to be willing to apply certain rules both to oneself and to anyone else in similar circumstances. A distinctive feature of a moral judgement is that it purports to transcend parochial conventions and to have a much stronger argumentative force than any prudential consideration. This universal quality of moral judgements, combined with the underlying assumption that there is no "opting out" of moral requirements, is what sets moral rules apart from conventional codes of behaviour, and we know now that this fundamental distinction is somehow intuitively recognized by children as young as three years of age – a phenomenon which has an impressive cross-cultural stability.<sup>30</sup> Consistent nonjudgmentalism, in effect, is a denial that moral prescriptions and prohibitions are fundamentally different, as far as their overall authority is concerned, from the cultural habits and conventional norms. An individual, who never blames moral transgressors (while recognizing similar type of actions wrong for himself), tacitly rejects one of the constitutive features of any system of morality – its interpersonal, universal application to all competent agents. If indeed, in the words of Bernard Williams, "blame is a characteristic reaction of the morality system itself,"<sup>31</sup> we cannot hope to preserve the

28. Fullinwider, op. cit.: 113.

29. What exactly does "grave moral transgression" mean depends, of course, on where we draw a line between tolerable and intolerable behaviour, between forbearance and acceptance. A reasonable position on the boundaries of justifiable tolerance is defended by Alon Harel in "The Boundaries of Justifiable Tolerance: A Liberal Perspective," *Toleration*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton University Press, 1996) 114–126; for a more detailed discussion of the problem see Hans Oberdiek, *Tolerance: Between Forbearance and Acceptance* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

30. Smetana, J. G. and J. L. Braeges. "The Development of Toddlers' Moral and Conventional Judgments," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 36 (1990): 329–346; Yau, J. and J. G. Smetana. "Conceptions of Moral, Social-conventional, and Personal Events among Chinese Preschoolers in Hong Kong," *Child Development* 74 (2003): 646–658. Joyce (2014, op. cit.) takes this data as important evidence in support of the view that our moral thinking is constrained by specialized innate mechanisms.

31. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985) 177.

system “just for ourselves” without taking a risk of publicly challenging the behaviour of others that we, given *our* standards, find immoral.<sup>32</sup>

“Nonjudgmentalism writ large,” writes Gary Watson, “amounts to nihilism, complacency, or a loss of moral nerve.”<sup>33</sup> The nihilism he mentions here refers to the intentional or unintentional rejection of morality as a specific system of values with fixed formal features distinct from any other non-moral normative structure. A person who elevates a particular moral value (e.g., tolerance, acceptance) over the structural requirements of the system that alone makes those values possible, in effect substitutes the moral system with a temporary simulacrum. Our being within morality presupposes that we are willing to extend the moral standards in an impartial manner, making no exceptions either for ourselves or the others. Morality cannot survive as a private business, as a personal game, we choose just for ourselves. Being human, as we have seen, commits one to a moral domain, and, as both Aristotle and Kant have argued,<sup>34</sup> willfully escaping the grip of morality, placing oneself beyond the moral point of view, threatens the very humanity of an individual. After all, to quote a memorable phrase by Bernard Williams, “the moral law is more exigent than the law of an actual liberal republic, because it allows no emigration.”<sup>35</sup>

We are all well aware of the hypocrisy involved in applying to others a more demanding moral code than the one we are willing to apply to ourselves. But indiscriminate tolerance towards the choices of others exhibits the opposite extreme – a refusal to hold others morally responsible when their behaviour clearly violates the standards that we acknowledge for ourselves. It should be seen as another aspect of the same vice of hypocrisy, but with graver consequences. “I believe doing X is morally wrong (and I would never do it myself), but it is your free choice, and I will not blame you if you decide doing X nonetheless” – is a classical creed of this type of reasoning. By refusing to apply the same moral standards to others that we apply to ourselves we not only

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32. I agree with Joyce that moral judgement as a mental phenomenon is dependent on moral judgement as a linguistic phenomenon; thus even a self-directed moral evaluation cannot be a wholly private mental event (Joyce, *op. cit.*: 75–82). Even more so, given the evolutionary function of other-directed moral judgement as a tool for resolving the conflict of selfish interests, it must essentially be communicative – a public manifestation of moral disapproval (or approval). Blaming the transgressor ‘in one’s heart’ will not count as a genuine other-directed moral appraisal.

33. Gary Watson, “Standing in Judgment,” *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, ed. Justin Coates and Neal Tognazzini (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 282–301, at 283.

34. For Aristotle, escaping morality amounts to escaping society altogether, and leading a solitary existence. Such a solitary person, for Aristotle, is hardly a human being anymore and “would be either a beast or a god” (*Politics*, 1253a28).

35. Williams, *op. cit.*: 178.

subvert the interpersonal nature of a moral judgement (as we have seen before), but we also put in question our earnestness about the moral values we claim to adhere to. A self-directed moral judgement always implies for a competent moral agent a corresponding other-directed evaluation, and the absence of the latter in the circumstances when such a judgement is clearly called for, is, indeed, a sign of moral complacency (to use Watson's term), an indication of a mindset which treats moral rules as optional.

Since one's commitment to morality is a precarious condition and is always a matter of degree, we, first of all, increase our own moral fitness by voicing a moral disapproval of the wrongdoers, apart from any potential positive consequences that our expression of blame might have on the future choices of those we blame. On some occasions, my strong public disapproval of my son's behaviour might discourage him from repeating the experience, and thus would have an identifiable social value as well; on other occasions, a moral outrage aimed at hardened criminals, politicians, celebrities, distant strangers or people who passed away will have zero chances of altering their behaviour in the future. Yet my moral reaction will be no less rational in the second case than in the first.<sup>36</sup> The value of an other-directed evaluation is not limited to its practical usefulness for social improvement or potential individual non-moral benefits. As all teachers of literature know, young readers reinforce and clarify their own moral values by reacting appropriately to misdeeds or heroic acts of the fictional characters. Perhaps we can treat the distant subjects of our moral evaluations by analogy with the non-existing literary personages – they simply provide a convenient occasion for testing our moral intuitions, for keeping our moral senses on the alert. In this case the relative proximity of the judged (or even her reality) will be of secondary concern. A description of a morally puzzling situation with distant or fictional agents, and the reaction that it elicits from the reader, reveals the readiness of an individual to treat his or her action-guiding rules not just as personal prejudices, but as moral convictions with a much wider scope of application.

Judging others is both healthy and, in many cases, morally obligatory. "Blame that we direct at bad people is inseparable from our commitment to morality itself," writes George Sher in his recent insightful defense of

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36. The rationality of the other-directed evaluation of distant others and non-existing characters would be threatened by the views which identify the primary function of a moral blame as punishment of wrongdoers (e.g. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998)), as a self-interested ("fitness-enhancing") action (e.g., Lieberman, "Moral Sentiments Relating to Incest," *Moral Psychology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008): 165–190), or see it as a form of rational persuasion of the wrongdoer (Duff, *Trials and Punishments* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1991) 39–71).

a moral blame – a much demonized evaluative reaction.<sup>37</sup> If appeal to moral values has a strong motivational power when it comes to our own choices, we cannot limit the scope of application of those values to our case alone. A “promiscuous nonjudgmentalism,” in Fullinwider’s colorful phrase, adopted as a stable policy, leads to moral degradation. A growing moral indifference towards misdeeds of others reflects a growing reluctance to apply moral standards to one’s own behaviour. Habit, emotional fatigue, rationalizations of observed sufferings and injustices, combined with intellectual laziness can lead to a moral decline faster than one suspects. Since most of us are often guilty of remaining cold towards news of atrocities and crimes committed at a distant land towards foreign people, it is worth noticing that amoralism comes in degrees, and there is a fine line between being an immature member of a moral community and being a true outsider. In extreme cases, it might lead to radical amoralism of the Lord Wotton’s type, but there are plenty of steps in between and the danger of gradually slipping in that direction is always present. Being sensitive to moral transgressions, and, when need be, *judgemental* towards others, whether near or far away, is one of the ways of keeping one’s moral condition in optimal shape.

#### IV. Objections and Replies

Three objections to the main thesis should be addressed in the final section. The first objection deals with the alleged negative social consequences of judgementalism; the second objection questions the right of a person to assume the place of a moral judge; and the last objection questions the underlying motive of the one who judges others in order to reinforce his own commitment to moral values. Each of these criticisms deserves a much more extensive treatment, but, of necessity, only brief responses will be offered here.

The initial objection takes a historical perspective on the issue, and argues that judgementalism in the sense explained has always implied the position of moral superiority on the part of the judge, and did lead to moral imperialism with the well-known consequences of discrimination, persecution and forceful conversion. The intuitive force of this objection rests on the assumption that a person who finds it appropriate to voice her moral criticism of other people’s behaviour, will also find it appropriate to force her views on others. But we must keep in mind the difference between willingness to express a moral disapproval of someone’s

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37. Sher, *In Praise of Blame* (Oxford University Press, 2006) 115.

actions, and willingness to enforce our moral convictions on others or discriminate against them. An argument that justifies a practice of other-directed moral judgments does not logically entail an argument in support of forceful imposition of particular beliefs and values on our dissenting neighbours.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the perceived connection between these two arguments, and the obvious dangers implicit in the second one, is what prompts many people to advocate nonjudgementalism, which is often identified with political tolerance of diverse beliefs and practices. This is not the case. Tolerance as a practical non-discrimination policy against people of different moral convictions and idiosyncratic practices, adopted at a political and social level, is consistent with a personal policy of rebuking those we find immoral. As a moral agent I will disapprove of my neighbour's promiscuous lifestyle and let him know of it; as a government employee I should treat him in exactly the same manner as I would treat a moral saint, if he chanced to visit my office. An appropriate expression of blame does not necessarily entail the need for social avoidance either, as a form of pressure or as a kind of milder punishment of the wrongdoer. At least in certain cases, such as when the wrongdoer is a close relative or a friend, the attitude of acceptance might be consistent with our willingness to morally disapprove of the individual's behaviour.

Secondly, any advocate of judgementalism immediately faces the charges of insensitivity, presumptuousness and the inflated feeling of self-righteousness. "Who are you to judge me?" and "What gives you the right to judge others?" – are among the standard reactions to an attempt to issue a moral rebuke.<sup>39</sup> Linda Radzik observes that this is an interesting form of an ad hominem fallacy, when "rather than denying blameworthiness, the person criticized denies the interlocutor's standing to express blame."<sup>40</sup> The objection might be interpreted in at least two ways. On one interpretation, the objector denies that *anyone* qualifies as a moral expert (perhaps, because there is no such subject matter as morality and no moral facts), and thus denies the practice of moral evaluation altogether. On a more common reading, the objector refuses to acknowledge the authority of a particular person, who happens to express her moral criticism, but is not, in principle, unreceptive to moral

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38. This entailment is stated, for example, by Radzik when she writes that "expressions of moral anger will be justified only when coercion is justified" ("Moral Rebuke and Social Avoidance," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 48 (2014): 643–661, at 645).

39. Notably, there is no corresponding resistance to the cases of overt moral *praise*. "Who are you to praise me?" is not something we would expect to hear from the object of our commendation.

40. Radzik, "On the Virtue of Minding Our Own Business," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 46 (2012): 173–182, at 173.

admonishing coming from the more appropriate source. The first interpretation raises major metaethical issues, which cannot be addressed here; it will be enough to mention that the author assumes the truth of some form of moral realism and cognitivism, with the implication that moral judgements admit of a truth value.<sup>41</sup> The second reading, however, does reflect a legitimate worry about the status of a moral judge. Is it sufficient to have general moral competence about what is right and wrong in order to qualify as a moral judge, or does one have to actually possess the virtues that one is trying to impart on others? If I don't do as I preach, do I have the right to preach?

It was mentioned earlier, that a vice of hypocrisy is clearly involved in cases when we hold others responsible to a more demanding set of moral obligations than the one we are willing to apply to ourselves. But my primary concern is not with the hypocritical moralizers – there is hardly a need to reiterate all what is wrong with such an attitude. I am rather trying to highlight the danger of not being demanding enough when a moral reaction is called for and thus giving in to opposite extreme – the vice of moral complacency. However, impoverished our own stock of virtues might be, there are some standards and some values that constrain our behaviour and influence the decision-making process. I fall short from the ideal of a universal love, and it will be fruitful neither to the outsiders, nor to my own character, to blame my neighbour for failing to aspire to it. But I should not hesitate to criticize this same neighbour for neglecting his parents or children, as long as I can claim the relevant moral values as genuinely my own. The interpersonal nature of moral obligation, as a principle that impartially applies to all agents in similar circumstances, is what gives one the formal right to use his own moral standards to evaluate the behaviour of others. To be sure, the considerations of sensitivity and appropriateness of an other-directed moral judgement in particular circumstances cannot be ignored (including the well-known difficulties in identifying the right time and the right place for a moral rebuke), but they cannot have an overriding power in all cases.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, it might be objected that if our primary motivation for voicing a moral judgement is our own self-improvement, we are merely using other

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41. Lord Wotton's radical non-judgementalism can be seen as a consequence of his skepticism about the reality of moral facts – only “moral prejudices” are real. A plausible defense of moral realism is presented, for example, by Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: a Defence* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2003).

42. I have no disagreement with Linda Radzik's general thesis that “sometimes we must keep our disapproval to ourselves” (2014, op. cit.: 643), although we are likely to diverge in our understanding of the proper scope of the word “sometimes.” The view defended in this paper narrows down the range of the morally relevant situations when it is appropriate to “mind one's own business.”

people and their flaws as means for enhancing our moral sensitivity. The objection is serious, but it can be successfully addressed in two steps. First of all, there is no doubt that one can criticize others for the wrong reasons. Indeed, there are countless ways in which our healthy tendency to express moral disapproval of others can be abused – we might blame others for a sheer pleasure of seeing them hurt, or just in order to raise our reputation in the eyes of the onlookers, or to delight in an ensuing scandal. Running around the village each morning loudly rebuking every observed violation of the moral code as a kind of a daily moral exercise is just one of the possible perversions among many others.

But if we exclude the obviously selfish and illicit reasons, what exactly are we trying to achieve by criticizing others from the moral point of view? Several plausible answers come to mind: (i) we are trying to convince the wrongdoer to stop whatever he is doing now, or to amend his behaviour in the future, (ii) we are trying to inflict a milder form of just punishment on the wrongdoer by making him feel ashamed of his misdeed, (iii) we are trying to help the victim of the observed injustice by publicly blaming the transgressor. Each one of these motives is clearly a moral motive, and as long as we act in accordance with one or all of them we are acting for a noble reason. But it also turns out that we contribute to a habit of acting virtuously, reinforce our moral commitment, and thus, indirectly, benefit ourselves in the long run. This is hardly objectionable. The fact that judging others is healthy for the judge does not imply that self-improvement becomes our only concern when we deliberate whether to express our disapproval or not. In normal cases, the external non-selfish benefits are also on the agenda.

Yet, admittedly, none of the three reasons mentioned would be applicable in those cases when we judge a distant or a non-existing other. I cannot reasonably expect that my favourite Hollywood star will get her act together as a result of moral criticism that I have voiced to my colleagues in private setting. It was suggested, nonetheless, that even in those cases it would be rational, and, indeed, at times required to express a moral disapproval or to bestow an appropriate moral praise. The rationality of the practice rests both on the constitutive features of the moral point of view, which often demands such a reaction, but also on the legitimate interest in reinforcing one's own moral commitment. In this context it would be odd to accuse a morally conscious person of using Julius Caesar, Anna Karenina or Tom Cruise merely as means for self-improvement, and failing to respect them as ends in themselves. Whether our justified criticism of real or fictional characters results in any significant change in the world, one's willingness to pass other-directed moral evaluation in the appropriate circumstances still remains one of the most conspicuous signs of a mature moral agent.