

## **A Place for Subjectivity in Moral Judgments and Moral Actions**

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In this paper, I try to determine a place for subjectivity regarding moral problems, specifically in making moral judgments and acting on them. This does not mean that I deny the necessity of some relevant objective grounds regarding moral matters. Rather, it means that, for purposes of teaching moral education (central among them that people will be enabled to learn how to govern themselves and how to exercise moral autonomy), it will not be sufficient to concentrate only on the objective aspects of moral matters. Furthermore, I contend that, if we take into account the cluster of subjective factors pertinent to the moral agent (or learner), some understanding of the common problem of gaps between one's moral judgments and moral actions can be generated. In this connection, I discuss Mordecai Nisan's concept of moral balance.

Dans cet article, je tente de déterminer une place pour la subjectivité en ce qui regarde les questions morales et, plus particulièrement, lorsqu'il est question de poser des jugements moraux et de s'y impliquer. Cela ne veut pas dire que je nie la nécessité de réalités objectives adéquates en ce qui regarde les affaires morales. Cela veut plutôt dire que, dans l'enseignant de la moralité — en retenant surtout que les personnes deviendront capables de se diriger moralement et d'exercer une autonomie morale — il ne sera pas suffisant de se concentrer seulement sur les aspects objectifs des réalités morales. Je crois de plus que si nous devons tenir compte d'un ensemble de facteurs subjectifs reliés à l'acteur moral (ou à l'apprenant), des compréhensions du problème de l'écart entre les jugements moraux et les actions morales émergeront. À partir de cela, je discuterai du concept de l'équilibre moral de Mordecai Nisan.

### *Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Moral Matters*

A list of moral values presupposed in Western education — and hence, considered for teaching in schools — usually includes the following fundamental principles: justice, freedom, beneficence, non-maleficence, and truthfulness, especially as they are "concerned with inter-personal, social morality." Morality, in this case, has to do with "rules and principles which

govern relations between people" (Hamm, 1989, p. 129). Discussion on "rules and principles which govern relations between people" could mean that discussion on the soundness of moral judgments, whether they are acceptable or not, is based primarily on objective grounds, among them factual matters, logic (or reason), and argumentations.

The validity of abstract moral rules and principles and their employment are not denied. What is questioned is the appropriateness or inappropriateness of employing them with certain kinds of moral problems. They are, for example, applicable insofar as they have to do with "the relation between judgments made by one and the same person and that person is in the position of a spectator." That is, "[my judgment] made by me as a spectator of another's situation commits me to other judgments, also made by me as a spectator" (Winch, 1972, p. 152). To employ abstract moral principles is to find out whether I, as a spectator, am consistent and intelligible in my judgments on *general moral matters*. As formal rules, they tend to indicate some kind of formal correctness by which our ways of thinking and talking about moral problems and judging them could be assessed. So one goes about acquiring knowledge about moral rules, moral principles, moral reasoning and how to employ them. As grounds for judging whether or not one's moral judgments are acceptable, they are independent of one's moral judgment and beyond it. To apply abstract moral rules, principles, to hypothetical or invented moral cases is to find out whether a set of objective criteria can be upheld because it functions well as a guide to making moral judgments, discriminating between judgments which are acceptable and those which are not.

For example, the statement "to find out what is the right thing ... to do" (Winch, 1972, p. 165) could mean that there could be some preestablished ways of judging "the right thing to do" which are extra to or independent of doing the right thing itself. It is no different, in some ways, from solving a mathematical or philosophic problem in the sense that answers are judged acceptable or not according to a set of preestablished objective criteria. Abstract moral principles or moral theories are necessary in developing a systematized, organized body of knowledge of moral philosophy and moral education, or in developing an abstract system of

thinking and talking about moral problems. They give an account of moral problems abstracted from our human perspectives, from our particular individual ways of talking and acting on moral problems. The question of relationship of moral judgments and actual moral actions does not arise except in an abstract way, for example, by assessing the logical consistency, coherence, and intelligibility of an abstract solution to the question, "Did the agent *think* he acted rightly?"

In contrast, the question, "Did the agent act rightly?" focuses on the person who is confronted with a practical problem requiring an actual, particular decision to act: "to find out what is the right thing for me to do" (Winch, 1972, p. 165). Winch's interpretation on "to find out what is the right thing [for me] to do" is that

deciding what to do is ... itself a sort of finding out what is the right thing to do .... I think that deciding is an integral part of what we call "finding out what I ought to do" that I have emphasized the position of the agent in all this. (p. 165)

Indeed, Winch suggests that what one finds out in "finding something out," involved as it is with "deciding what one ought to do," is not abstract principles but could be something about oneself "that can be expressed only in terms of the moral ideas by consideration of which [one] arrives at [one's] decision" (p. 168). In other words, I find out the kind of person I am, my character and acts, by the moral ideas I employ in arriving at a decision to act, by the issues I raise, the alternatives I consider, etc. In turn, this leads to an understanding of what I must do. Conflating cognition and volition, the focus is on my person who is confronted with a concrete moral problem, who is making a moral judgment and a decision about whether to act or not to act on it.

For me to be engaged in a moral concern now suggests that there is something in this concern which is important to me (Winch, 1972, p. 155). It is already indicative of a moral perspective which could constitute my perspective. In other words, when people admit to a moral problem they have judged that it is so, indicating their moral perspective. It could, therefore, be difficult to examine their moral concern in detached

objectivity apart from their consideration of what it is about this concern that is important to them. It is similar to a situation where people find it difficult to give reasons for acting in a certain way. It is not that they do not have any reason but rather that their moral beliefs, a result of a lifetime of reflection and experience, are now so thoroughly embedded in their lives that it is most difficult to identify, specify, or isolate them from their total life perspective. To understand their moral judgments and actions more fully and in such a way that their comprehension may be internal to their morality, we have to know them more fully. Instead of asking for reasons or principles that would justify their moral actions or subsume them into "a higher synthesis or principle," what we should note is how people "not only show different priorities in judging between alternatives, but often differ in what they take the alternatives to be .... This is how it is where moral considerations are concerned" (Phillips, 1990, p. 225). These different moral possibilities are "examples of people making moral judgments ... showing us how different moral reactions and judgments can be" (pp. 225, 227). They do not need to be ordered or corrected according to some higher moral principles for "they are [now] examples of differences involved in what it means to make moral judgments" (p. 233). Similarly, Winch (1992) suggests that "[we] look at particular examples and see what we do want to say about them; there are no general rules which can determine in advance what we *must* say about them" (p. 182).

So, when I have exercised a moral judgment and acted it out in a given moral situation, my act could be examined for its particular features in order to figure out my reasoning, weighing, questioning of various alternatives, consequences, or uncertainties. How I go about these processes is very much dependent upon the kind of person that I am. Even so, my act is a moral act, an expression of my personal identity, whether someone else agrees or disagrees with it. This is as it should be since differences, alternatives, and uncertainties are characteristics of moral problems.

My relation to my moral perspective is "that [I am] this perspective," "that the agent *is* this perspective" (Winch, 1972, p. 178). My uniqueness

and particularity, all of me, constitute this perspective. There are, therefore, different perspectives constitutive of different moral agents. Hare (1965) puts it this way:

Since we cannot know everything about another actual person's concrete situation (including how it strikes him, which may make all the difference), it is nearly always presumptuous to suppose that another person's situation is exactly like one we have ourselves been in, or even like it in relevant particulars. (p. 49)

The inability of moral abstractions to capture the particularity of a situation, how it strikes a person (which could make all the difference), suggests that abstract moral principles and rules may not necessarily nor sufficiently apply to certain first-person moral problems. More important, giving due recognition to the particularities of a person and his or her situation, could lead us to some clues regarding the problem of gaps between a person's moral judgments and moral actions.

### *Moral Judgments and Moral Actions*

Moral education must refer "to how a person both thinks *and* behaves" (Straughan, 1988, p. 7). To be judged a moral person I must not only be capable of rendering sound moral judgments but I must also act in particular moral ways. There must be some congruence or consistency between my moral judgments and moral actions. This, however, is not often the case. I know and accept what I ought to do but the congruent action does not necessarily follow. On the contrary, my moral action could be the opposite of what I know I ought to do. This is not a case of my believing that my actions are proper but that I am mistaken about it. Nor does it stem from my lack of knowledge about my self or about morality. It is a case where I am aware of the prescribed moral point of view which I accept, and I am "fully cognizant that [my] behavior is improper [and that I am responsible for it]" (Nisan, 1990, p. 287). I deliberately fail to do that which is proper. Such a gap may be said to be a matter of moral weakness of moral agents. If it is a matter of weakness and strength, then a solution could be "a building up of a strong character" or "[to] increase one's will power" (Straughan, 1988, p. 10). Straughan argues that this cause-effect

and rather mechanistic explanation is not convincing. He suggests that cases of moral weakness are actual conflicts "or incompatibility between two different kinds of reason for action" (p. 11), namely, reasons that justify and reasons that motivate. So, I may fail to do what I know I ought to do simply because I do not want to. Whatever I want, I tend to do and to secure.

But motivational wants do not or cannot morally justify an act. To act on the basis of my wants is, therefore, to depart from what I know I ought to do, creating a gap between my judgments and my actions. It is as though I were not true to my moral judgments, saying one thing and acting on or doing something else. A particular kind of "self-deception or intellectual dishonesty," says Straughan, "appears to be involved in that the agent in forming his or her moral judgments failed to spell out the motivational reasons or factors which are influencing action" (p. 13). In not doing so, moral weakness is offered as an excuse: "[I] did not really choose to behave as I did" (p. 13).

While Straughan's advice is to be aware of these two logically distinct reasons and to be honest with one's inclinations and desires is sensible, it does not explain fully the gap phenomenon. Moreover, even if I take proper account of my motivational wants and spell them out, it does not follow that I will act according to my moral judgments, setting aside motivational wants. His suggestion of guarding against setting moral sights too high for a child to attain and, in effect, being realistic with our moral demands on the child, raises some questions (Straughan, 1988, p. 15). What are the bases for setting certain moral standards? How high or low should they be? Is attaining a moral standard, regardless of how high or low it is or how it is attained, the main goal of morality? Consider now an account of the gap phenomenon between moral judgments and moral actions provided by Mordecai Nisan (1990).<sup>1</sup>

### *Moral Balance Model*

If may be argued that a person's motivational wants, inclinations, desires, subjective preferences, feelings of guilt and of fear, etc., which may

be classed as non-moral considerations, are as necessary a part of the nature of human beings as their abstract knowledge of moral judgments and related matters could be. From this argument, it seems sensible to expect that these non-moral considerations could also be involved both in one's moral judgments and moral actions, in assessing "the way one ought to act" and "the way one chooses to act" (Nisan, 1990, p. 285). In taking account of my non-moral considerations I am trying to understand them, to give reasons for them in light of what I consider to be an acceptable abstract standard of moral perfection.

I try to make sense of these two distinct types of qualitatively different values, namely, those relative to my personal wants or inclinations and those relative to abstract moral considerations, both of which I perceive to be positive and legitimate. I try to balance them in the hope that my judgments and actions could be in accord with my personal identity, which includes, among other things, my "needs, goals, and plans ... my being a member of a certain family and nation, having a certain appearance, and indeed having certain attributes and weaknesses" as well as some moral values (pp. 300, 311). In other words, my personal identity is a complicated mixture of my motivational wants, my personal subjective preferences, tastes, desires, etc., and of some aspects of abstract moral values. In taking into account my personal identity, I am not trying to deceive myself by covering up my wants, as though I did not know that all along they weighed in some central ways in my choosing to do something, even if this deviated from what I know I ought to do. I recognize them for what they are and for their part in my decision to do what I want to do. No excuses are offered because they are part of my planned, deliberate, and reasoned way of thinking and acting on my moral problem based on my assessment of what is morally proper and legitimate for me, taking into account my personal identity. To deny participation of my personal non-moral considerations or interests in making my moral judgments is to say that I have achieved absolute moral perfection. While moral perfection is a logical possibility, and may be an actuality perhaps for a day or two, nonetheless, it is difficult to accept it to be the common state of affairs of most of us. Additionally, to deny participation of my personal non-moral

wants in my judgments and actions is to deny my personal identity or my right to preserve it (p. 310).

I recognize an abstract moral standard of perfection, even admit to its being overriding and obligatory; nonetheless, I allow myself to deviate from it for some reasons. So my act may be considered a "deviation," "a temporary lapse," "an exception," from an abstract standard of moral perfection. But my act is not evil in that it is not in *complete opposition* to such a standard. This "planned allowance," says Nisan, "takes place in one's decision making, not in one's action, as though one slipped due to 'weakness of will'" (p. 293). In taking into account both my personal, subjective non-moral wants and some abstract, moral considerations, a conflict or tension could easily ensue. How this possible conflict could be resolved is described by Nisan's moral balance model.

### *Moral Balance and Resolution of Conflicts*

The central elements of Nisan's (1990) moral balance model are: a) the existence of the ideal moral judgment for a situation, perceived as objective, impersonal, and categorical; b) the moral weight of an action; c) overall moral balance; d) the wish to maintain a high moral balance; e) justification for choosing personal values over moral ones; and f) setting an acceptable, obligatory level of morality (pp. 298-300).

According to Nisan, my moral balance consists of my "positive moral acts and moral transgressions" (p. 307). It is "the total moral weight [positive or negative] of [my] morally significant acts undertaken by me over a given period of time" (p. 298). When I am faced with a moral decision, my moral balance, the sum of my morally significant actions, which is also my moral status or identity, is the basis for my deciding to do a good or bad deed in a given situation (p. 303). The level of my moral balance, whatever it is, is my personal standard of morality, a level of morality acceptable to me which I also consider to be personally obligatory. This level of morality or one's moral balance, as suggested earlier, is not free from some non-moral considerations, among them, for example, one's subjective preferences, tastes, inclinations, or wants. My moral balance is



a mixture of some accepted abstract moral standards and some subjective non-moral interests. My moral balance constitutes my personal identity.

To reconcile conflicting subjective, personal, non-moral interests and abstract moral standards, both of which are components of my identity, I refer to my moral balance or moral status. For example, if I have already performed several good deeds and for good reasons, I could, in a given moral situation, choose personal, subjective, non-moral values over abstract moral ones. In this case, I allow myself to deviate from an abstract moral standard, perhaps saying, "I am only human to do so." This one deviation judged from my moral balance (performance of many good deeds) is justifiable.

People who are actively involved in solving problems, helping the poor, etc., perceive themselves to possess a high moral balance in this regard. They could, therefore, allow themselves extra liberties in the area of personal morality. Nisan cites King David's affair with Bathseba, which led to Uriah's death, as an example of deviation in the light of his strong balance based on his solid contribution to his people. He allowed himself to yield to his personal wants in the area of personal morality, as though to balance his commitment to social morality. Having done more than enough good in this aspect, one bad deed in another area is legitimate. In touch with his personal identity which included some weaknesses, King David allowed himself "a break." But he did not relinquish his moral identity for he could have perceived this one intended act to be "an exception." Nisan's studies show that people who have done a succession of good deeds feel less obligated to do an additional good deed and will allow (themselves) more liberty to commit a transgression (p. 304).

If, however, one's personal identity is tied closely to one's personal, subjective, non-moral wants, and if one is desirous of exercising one's perceived right to preserve one's identity, then one's personal non-moral wants could figure significantly as factors in moral decisions and actions. Gaugin, suggests Nisan, allowed himself certain moral concessions in abandoning his family in order to devote himself completely to his painting. His work was crucial to his self-actualization. The following hypothesis

could be suggested: "The more a moral decision involves personal wants crucial to one's personal identity, the greater the moral concession that will be made, and this as a result of considered reasoning" (p. 310).

The moral status of David and Gaugin is perceived to be good. The deviation, or temporary lapse, from an abstract moral standard which they knew they ought to observe, is acceptable morally because it is based, not on some extraneous moral theories, but on their moral balance, on their actual state of morality and capacity to act morally. Accounting for both objective moral standards and personal non-moral wants, the resulting action is a compromise between them. Some moral considerations are observed to some extent. Their being obligatory is recognized. This is the justificatory aspect of the compromise. The presence of their personal wants provide the motivational reasons. Some of their personal wants are fulfilled and observance of some abstract moral rules or values are also made. In this way, their moral balance is not wholly evil, corrupt, and morally detestable; neither is it altogether holy, pure, righteous, and perfect. Moral matters are, after all, matters of degrees. Their level of morality may be termed "a reasonable morality" or "limited morality." People, says Nisan, seem "to set a limit to the privileges and demands of the moral viewpoint, a limit that derives from the perception of their personal rights" (p. 291).

Although personal identity, according to Nisan, is "the basis of moral compromise," (p. 302) this does not mean that there are no limits on what should be balanced and for what reasons. His studies, for example, show that moral concessions could be allowed due to "the amount [and level] of temptation present at the time the act was committed" and "the importance of the reason for the deviation" (pp. 299-300). A given behavior is less wrong if the personal want or value involved is important. Calling one's family while at work is acceptable (or less wrong) if one's family is in some kind of serious trouble; however, it is wrong if used to carry on a social conversation. One other general assumption of Nisan's moral balance model could also function as a limitation:

Acting according to what is right, is an important component of the individual's identity as well as a significant factor in self-evaluation. Assuming that people wish to preserve their identity and improve their self-image, it follows that they also wish to attain and maintain a high level of "morality," or a high moral balance. (p. 298)

Consider, now, an illustration of how to make sense of a moral decision based on Nisan's moral balance model.

*Captain "Starry" Vere — A Brief Illustration*

In Winch's (1972) discussion about Vere's moral judgment to convict Billy Budd, his interest was to show that in cases of this kind, first person moral judgments, moral principles, or rules (e.g., the rule of universalizability) do not necessarily apply. Captain Vere did what was the right thing for him to do in that situation and it was not logically necessary for him to add, "And anyone else in the same situation ought to act likewise." Indeed, says Winch, had he been in the same situation, he would have found it morally impossible to condemn Billy Budd, and this without appealing to considerations over and above those to which Vere appealed. Furthermore, this does not mean that Vere acted wrongly (p. 163). Winch's interest is also related to the broader question of whether we are right in understanding morality as a guide. My interest in Captain Vere's story is limited to making sense of his moral action by way of Nisan's moral balance concept.

From Melville's (1959) description of Vere, it would appear that his military values tended to constitute his all-inclusive judgment. Described as a "loyal sea commander," Vere uses such expressions as "clashing of military duty with moral scruple," "allegiance ... to the King," and "imperial [conscience] formulated in the code under which alone we officially proceed," which tend to suggest that his personal identity could be more in tune with abstract moral duties, obligations, etc. There are, however, hints that he was not *completely* devoid of any personal wants or interests which he tried with much effort to suppress but failed. For example, instead of giving a straightforward declaration of what the laws of the military were with regard to certain offenses and, with objective detachment

and dispatch, to proceed to pronounce Billy Budd guilty, Vere betrays his emotions in his lengthy speech. Obviously touched and moved by Billy Budd before him, he uses such words as "compassion," "scruples," "innocent before God," "private conscience," "warm hearts betray heads that should be cool," "tender kinswoman" and "tearful plea." He vacillates and balances the force of his words, now reminding us of his adherence to rules and regulations, now of his human feelings. He admits to some compassion and quickly adds "being mindful of paramount obligations." He asks, "Should our allegiance be to Nature?" and replies, "No, to the King." Instead of considering the case a strict military matter, a clear transgression of military rules, he portrays a situation in conflict, which is also suggestive of his own internal moral conflict. He tries to convince himself to consider his personal interests or wants, as though to remind himself of or to show others his humanity; however, he ends up upholding the "imperial code" and allowing the law to take its course. His attachment to abstract moral rules is simply too much to be overridden by his subjective feelings for Billy Budd. He remains to the end a "loyal sea commander," a military man.

In Nisan's moral balance model, Vere could be interpreted to have a high moral balance regarding military values. It would not, therefore, be a surprise if he allowed himself to deviate from the standard military rules. Having observed them for so long, observances which would constitute the sum of his morally sound and significant acts, he might have made an exception for the sake of Billy, who is "innocent before God." But why could he not do it?

Aware that he was before an audience who showed much compassion for Billy Budd, Captain Vere had to be sympathetic to him; hence, his emotional speech. At the same time, he was expected, as a military leader, to set an example of military decorum of the highest order. Had he given in to his "private conscience," overriding military rules, or been overcome with emotion, he would have fallen short of expected military leadership.

It appears, however, that, in terms of Nisan's moral balance model, whatever Captain Vere decided to do would have been acceptable in the

sense that it would indicate his moral balance or status/identity, which was the basis of his decision. Considering, for example, that he had served the military well and for so long, to give in to his feelings for Billy and free him from the charges would have been considered an exception from his total moral behavior and not a total relinquishment of his moral identity. Taking into account his past morally significant acts, freeing Billy Budd would not have constituted a gross moral digression. On the contrary, it could be said that Captain Vere was only human and could, therefore, err at one time or another. This would not necessarily lower his own level of morality but rather affirm his personal identity.

When, however, he thinks of his future in the military, its moral values are his central considerations. Per Nisan's model, it is assumed that people wish to preserve their identity and improve their self-image and, for Captain Vere, it is his image as a military man, "a loyal sea commander." To maintain a high moral balance in this regard would be foremost to him. If his judgment were to be considered excessive, not taking into account mitigating circumstances, it could be argued on grounds that his military values and his personal identity were closely associated with each other. Observation of military rules was crucial to the preservation of his personal identity, the two having become one. His military values were not only obligatory and overriding but they constituted his all-inclusive judgment. It is a condition similar to that of Gaugin's, cited earlier.

His judgment to convict Billy Budd may be viewed by others as inhumane and cruel, with no feelings for another human being who, in the first instance, was a victim of cruel treatment by Sergeant Claggart. But according to Nisan's moral balance model, his judgment was indicative of his moral status or identity as a military man, whose heart is not allowed to rule his head. To give in to what others felt was due to Billy Budd would have meant denying or being false to his moral identity. One of Nisan's moral balance model's assumptions, supported by empirical pieces of evidence, is that "identity and self-evaluation are a function of the extent to which individuals satisfy and actualize their personal [wants]" (p. 300).

The vacillation that was clearly portrayed by Captain Vere in his coming to a decision and in his action meant that he weighed certain factors, certain objective moral principles, certain personal wants, and assessed them. But all these would not necessarily determine his making a decision on how moral he should be, or how high or low his level of morality should be. To make these determinative of his actions is also to confer on them a certain objective standard of moral correctness or perfection. But deciding on moral matters is a personal decision, based primarily on one's choice. "When setting an acceptable level of morality and deciding whether or not and how much to compromise, one cannot refer to any objective standard. These are decisions that no one else can make" (Nisan, 1990, p. 310). To question another person's level of morality is to question his or her personal identity. But on what grounds could this be done? We could, of course, differ with Captain Vere in our judgment regarding Billy Budd's action but this is not to say that we are, therefore, at a higher level of morality than Captain Vere was. It is to say that our moral balance is quite different from his, given our individual personal identities, and had we been in the same situation we "would have found it morally impossible to condemn Billy Budd and this without appealing to considerations over and above those to which Vere appealed" (Winch, 1972, p. 163). In short, Captain Vere's judgment showed him to be the kind of person that he was; hence, he chose to act in the way he did, guided by his perceived moral status which was set forth by his moral/personal identity. He was not grossly and altogether immoral and neither was he morally perfect. But, then, who is?

Nisan's moral balance model is a description of how we go about making a moral judgment and choosing to act in a certain way. Taking into account some abstract moral principles, rules, etc., and some of our personal wants, we try to figure out the extent to which these factors, which are both positive and legitimate, have to be taken into account when one chooses to act. Setting our own level of morality, based on our moral balance or identity, also suggests that this is the level that we judge we can achieve at this time. We will be short of some ideal abstract standards of morality and this is to be expected, but we may not be always short of our own standard of morality.

### *Personal Identity in Moral Matters*

If my personal identity, which is also my present moral balance or status, is the basis of my decision to act, then no one can act on my behalf. Only I know my actual current moral status, below which I should not fall, and my capacities to act morally. Only I am in a position to decide how and in what way I am to act, such that it is commensurate with my morality, limited though it be, but arguable to be a reasonable one. I am responsible for my action for it is I, constitutive of my personal identity, who act. My personal identity is a complex and complicated mixture of both personal wants and abstract moral values. My personal wants motivate or enable me to act. But if my act is to be considered a moral one, I cannot act solely on the basis of my wants. I must compromise my wants with some abstract moral rules, principles, etc., such that my wants are not wholly and entirely in conflict with abstract moral judgments and they, in turn, are not completely privileged and overriding. In this way, others who disagree with me can still judge my moral act to be a morally reasonable one, to some extent. I am, in short, not a totally despicable moral agent, grossly immoral, and completely without any redeeming grace. My moral actions, whatever they are, are expressions of who I am which, in turn, indicates my moral balance or personal identity.

To acknowledge the necessity and centrality of my personal identity in making moral judgments and in deciding on my actions is to give due recognition to subjectivity in moral matters. It is this subjectivity, particular to an individual person, which individuates him or her from every other individual and is the basis of his or her moral decisions. In responding to the question, "How ought I to act on my moral problem?" I refer to my personal identity or moral balance. If I have a clear understanding of who I am, what my moral capacities are at a given moment in my life, then I also know how to particularize and to make concrete abstract moral rules that are appropriate to my moral assessment of myself. In this way, my moral knowledge does not remain in a detached, objective, abstract state. It can now enter into my flesh and blood, or be incarnated, so to speak, into my personal identity, which, as the basis for my moral decisions, also tends to enable or motivate me to learn how to self-govern myself,

exercising moral autonomy. This would not likely occur if moral studies always and only concentrate on objective, abstract moral considerations. Moral education does not merely aim for learners to know something but for them, eventually, to appropriate as their own that which they have come to know and accept. But to the question of how we actually embody in our lives what we know and accept, what we believe in, such that what we think, say, and do achieve complete congruency or consistency, we only have hints and suggestions. A definitive, objective, and convincing answer has evaded us for now, and perhaps will evade us forever.

*Conclusion: Objectivity and Educational Concerns in Moral Matters*

To study moral theories and moral problems, their central characteristics, and ways of dealing with and solving them is to know or acquire some knowledge about this area of study. Teachers invent hypothetical cases to illustrate the logic of moral discourse, such as moral reasoning, assessing, and judging. The actual cases that may be used are not necessarily the personal problems of those who are studying them. Whatever the decision to act and the action taken are in these cases, they are judged acceptable or not within the parameters of the logic of moral discourse, observing logical consistency, intelligibility, and rationality. For example, in making moral judgments, it must be the case that observance and attention to some relevant public, objective warrants must be made. Otherwise, our judgment may not be accepted as such because it has no supporting grounds or, in worse cases, it may not be a moral judgment at all. The latter presupposes knowledge of what constitutes a moral judgment and how it is distinguished from other kinds of judgment. Anyone who is in this area of study is, therefore, expected to know and to apply certain logical requirements when talking, assessing, and judging a moral problem and its proposed solution. The language in this undertaking is, therefore, objective. The focus is on acquiring abstract knowledge of the subject matter.

But restricting our interest in moral matters to abstractions, those that are embodied in our knowledge of moral reasoning, moral principles and rules, justification, etc., could create some problematic situations.



To appeal to certain abstract moral principles to determine the correctness of moral acts would require reasons and justifications for accepting these principles which, in turn, would require another set of reasons and justifications for accepting these reasons, leading to an infinite regress. Even without this problem, to appeal to such principles would tend to suggest that these abstractions function as absolute standards, determiners for correctness of moral judgments regardless of their differences. It is as though moral matters are now centrally and substantially objective matters. A person's judgment on a particular social moral problem, whether it is his or her problem or not, would be just as good as my judgment about it if both of us are equally rational and we both meet a set of objective criteria. Indeed, someone's judgment on my moral problem could be better than mine if that person is an expert in my particular problem.

Knowledge of abstract moral principles or standards tends to develop an absoluteness, an immutability about them, even a kind of moral rigidity which, in turn, suggests a standard of perfection. To a standard of moral perfection one could give an intellectual assent but no one is expected to achieve it, either in some or all of our practical dealings at any time of our lives. It could function as an ideal, to inspire us in our efforts to be more and more sensitive to moral matters, more and more desirous of acting morally. But ideals, like the stars, will always evade our reach. To emphasize achievement of an abstract standard of moral perfection could be most discouraging, perhaps, to most of us.

An abstract standard is applicable to a wide range of cases, given their similarities. As it is, however, it does not apply to any one particular moral act but to moral acts (of some kind) in general. This means that the standard exists on its own. If one wishes, one could refer to it for guidance. Or it could become everybody's standard, hence, nobody's personal standard. It is not my standard, let alone my standard of perfection, because there is not much in it with which I, my personal identity, could identify. Consequently, I may not be motivated to meet its moral demands.

Abstract moral knowledge, employed as a basis for judging acceptability or not of my personal moral limitations, would tend to minimize the meaningfulness of my decision based on my personal, moral identity. But my moral problems are personal and intimate to me. My moral decisions, whatever they are, could affect my person and the quality of my life either positively or negatively. So my decision must be meaningful in the sense that my personal wants are satisfied and my respect for my identity is preserved, even only to some extent. The meaningfulness of my act is internal to the concerns of my personal identity. My act is commendable and should be applauded because it is a significant expression of my personal identity. It is true or authentic of me. The unique and incommensurable which are necessary elements of every human being and of every human being confronted with a concrete moral situation are appropriately accounted for. What is a personal, private matter for me to contend with, inviting me to explore more deeply into my moral commitments and personal subjective inclinations and desires, must not be turned routinely into a matter of objective and abstract consideration. To do this is to strip my moral judgment and action of everything that says something of my person's subjective worth.

To establish my own personal standard of moral status means that I must take into account all that is in me that is relevant to the making of such a standard. This means

treating a person justly involves treating with seriousness his [or her] own conception of himself [or herself], his [or her] own commitments and cares, his [or her] own understanding of his [or her] situation and of what the situation demands of him [or her]. (Gaita, 1990, p. 144)

It strongly suggests that I would desire not only to maintain or respect it, but, in all sincerity, strive to fulfill it. There could, of course, be times when I may not achieve my own standard and I would know why. But since it is closely identified with my personal identity, fulfilling it would be crucial to my perception and respect of who I am. In that standard is my personal identity. The question of a gap between my moral judgments and

moral actions is considerably reduced, if not eliminated, even if only from time to time.

In sum, to take seriously our learners' personal identity and its development is also to recognize and accept their subjectivities, inclinations, desires, and wants. For moral education, this means that achievement of an abstract standard of moral perfection cannot be its stated and expected goal. Rather, it means that one of the central goals of moral education is to enable students to learn to develop their own form of reasonable morality, limited perhaps, but nonetheless arguable and sensible. Learning to exercise their moral autonomy can enhance their self-esteem and well-being. More importantly, students' particular form of morality is borne out of their struggles and experiences in making sense of their moral encounters in the world. It is an expression of their personal identity, and hence, also of their subjectivity.

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Note: 1. It is not my intention in this paper to critique Nisan's concept of "moral balance" or to raise questions about some of his ideas. "Moral balancing" is presented as a way of understanding what appears to be a lack of consistency between a person's moral judgment and his or her moral action.

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