

Wiggins on Ethical Objectivity and ‘Des Cannibales’

ADAM ETINSON

Abstract

This short essay offers a commentary on Chapter 11 of David Wiggins’, *Ethics* (2006). The essay asks how we should interpret Wiggins’ defense of ethical ‘objectivity’ given his subjectivist metaethics. An interpretation is drawn from Sharon Street’s work on metaethical constructivism, of which Wiggins’ view is taken to be one variety.

1.

My graduate school experience began in the ‘Ryle Room.’ This was at Oxford University’s old philosophy headquarters, on Merton St. The long, rectangular room had a window at each end, and its walls were lined with photographs of local philosophical luminaries. The pictures had no names on them. I suppose it was just assumed that anyone who ended up in that room would probably know who the images were of. Or maybe the names were withheld to spark conversation.

In any event, I could identify none of the philosophers myself. And they generated no conversation that I can remember. But one autumn morning in my first term, Professor David Wiggins joined our first-year seminar to discuss the penultimate chapter of his recently published, *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on The Philosophy of Morality* (2006). And when he sat down more or less straight underneath his own portrait, I finally knew who one of the images was of.

It was an intimidating sight (like so much else in those years); a philosophy god had appeared before us. But Wiggins himself exuded a disarming humility, intellectual sincerity, and wry levity – qualities equally manifest in the chapter itself.

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Philosophy 97 2022

2.

Chapter 11 of Wiggins' *Ethics* was originally a lecture (the 2004 H.L.A. Hart Memorial Lecture) just as the subtitle of the book suggests. Its original title was, 'Objectivity in Ethics: Two Difficulties, Two Responses.'¹ And this nicely captures its content. The chapter offers a response to each of John L. Mackie's two famous arguments for 'error theory': the idea that ordinary moral judgments are all false because they purport to represent objective moral facts which categorically do not exist (Mackie, 1977, pp. 36–42).

The first argument starts from the fact of moral disagreement. If knowable objective moral truths (e.g., that torture is wrong) exist, then we should expect to see some evidence of this in our moral beliefs themselves.² The evidence need not be universal agreement on moral matters; ethical judgment may be biased and fallible. Still, our moral beliefs should be explicable, or at least partly so, as products of the general (even if imperfect) capacity to apprehend such truths. But, as Mackie argues, 'the actual variations in... moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values' (Ibid., p. 37).

The second argument concerns the metaphysical and epistemic peculiarity of objective moral 'facts.'

If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else. (Ibid., p. 38)

Better to dispense with such mysteries, and reconcile ourselves to the more probable *subjectivity* of ethical judgment, Mackie suggests.

¹ Before its publication in *Ethics*, the lecture was first published under its original title in *Ratio* 18 (2006), pp. 1–26.

² For the purposes of this discussion, like Wiggins, I use the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' interchangeably, though I am aware that the latter is sometimes seen as a subject (regarding, in particular, what we owe to others) *within* the former (which concerns the broader topic of how we ought to live, including with respect to prudential [i.e., non-moral] considerations).

Wiggins on Ethical Objectivity and ‘Des Cannibales’

One of the dialectical oddities of Wiggins’ chapter is that, on some level, it follows Mackie’s suggestion. Chapter 11 defends the possibility of objective truth in moral judgment, and thus denies ‘error theory.’ But Wiggins is himself a moral subjectivist. In *Ethics*, as elsewhere in his work, he develops a Humean theory of the nature and status of morality. Very roughly, this means he thinks that moral properties (e.g., pertaining to the goodness or rightness of *x*) are, in some fundamental way, the product of human attitudes (i.e., of how we tend to *feel*, and/or what we normally *think*, about *x*), rather than mind-independent features of the world.³ So, Wiggins’ defense of ethical ‘objectivity’ has to be read with special care. It is easy to become confused about what, exactly, he means by the term, just where he disagrees with Mackie, and whether he even disagrees with him at all.

What is my aim in all this? Well, my hunch, though I don’t have anything like the space I would need to properly defend it here, is that Chapter 11 provides us with about as good a reply to Mackie’s ‘difficulties’ as we’re ever going to get. And so, as much for my own benefit as anyone else’s, I want to rehearse and hopefully clarify some of its key points. Among other things, this will mean discussing Wiggins’ adventurous engagement with Michel de Montaigne’s essay, ‘Des Cannibales,’ – a part of the chapter that (with some mixture of fascination and confusion) I’ve found myself drawn back to again and again over the years.

3.

Wiggins addresses Mackie’s second argument first. His response here is multi-faceted and complex. I cannot hope to cover all of it. But the crux of it, I think, shines through in the following three passages, which I am probably best-off quoting directly at length:

Is Mackie looking in the right place for truth and objectivity? Aren’t truth and objectivity best looked for in the difference between good and bad first-order [moral] thinking...? (Wiggins, 2006, p. 330)

If man is the measure, then how can man himself treat ethical judgments as objectively true or false? How can man treat an ethical assertion as recording how things are out there independently of him or her who makes the assertion? I reply: does ‘man is

³ For the clearest statement, see Wiggins (1998, pp. x-xx).

the measure' mean that it is a matter of stipulation what to say about (say) this or that action by NN? That is implausible and it does not follow from morality's being an invention. (Nor does it follow from morality's being an invention that just any invented ethos will count as a morality – or that one is just as good as another.) Or does 'man is the measure' mean that to discover or decide about the moral quality of this or that act or character must regard, either directly or indirectly, the nature of man or the expectations or aspirations of man? Does it mean that the act or character has to be measured on some *human* scale of values, the scale of values that human beings themselves have arrived at? That is more plausible, but it does not imply that, when we subject things to that scale, it is going to be up to us, who are human beings, which concept, whether *admirable* (say) or *execrable*, the action in question falls under. (Ibid., p. 335)

'All right,' someone may say... But do you want to allow sense to just any old supposed subject matter that someone may propose, however apparently vacuous or nonsensical? Answer: no, I don't. The candidate subject matter must have a point, however inward and imperfectly articulate this may be, and it must engage in a proper multiplicity of ways with things that we can find out about or pursue or care about in the rest of life. But the subject matter of ethics does manifestly do all these things... That is not all. If we think about this matter from the inside then we shall discover within us a wealth of further knowledge, however inexplicit, about the inner aim that animates the whole business, and regulates it critically. Morality is not just one among numerous possible ways of thinking about how we are impinged from without. It is our response to things which, in the light of certain distinctive unforsakeable concerns, matter distinctively. Our sense of how they matter and why they matter is something we come to understand progressively more exactly, moreover, as we join with others in the business of applying or refusing to apply one or another ethical predicate to that which we confront or look out upon in the ordinary business of work, survival, or participation in shared enterprises. Here is how, in the course of our exploration and colonization of the world, we arrive at our sense of what notions emerge from the crucible of shared experience as indispensable to us. Here is how we gain a more and more exact understanding of what considerateness, or callousness, or kindness, or brutality, or proportionality... amount to, and what they count for, in an act chosen or contemplated, in an action done, or in its outcome. (Ibid., p. 336)

Wiggins on Ethical Objectivity and ‘Des Cannibales’

The meticulous density, rhetorical power, and figurativeness of Wiggins’ prose make paraphrasing it difficult; hence the lengthy quotations. But as a reader there are still many questions to sort out. For example, how should we interpret Wiggins’ starting assertion that Mackie is looking for (ethical) truth and objectivity in the wrong place? What does he mean by this? Where *else* should Mackie have looked?

I think we can shed light on these matters by drawing on a distinction developed by Sharon Street in her work on constructivism in metaethics – of which I take *Wiggins’* position to be one variety.⁴ Consider a simple normative judgment: let’s imagine *A* believes that she has a reason to rescue *B*, a young child drowning in a nearby pond. There are different ways to think about the veracity of such a claim. According to an *external* understanding, truth here depends on whether the judgment meets some mind-independent standard of correctness, i.e., whether it correctly represents an ethical ‘fact’ of the external world. This understanding is attractive because it captures the apparent mind-independent character of presumed moral truths, such as the wrongness of slavery: the way in which they seem to hold regardless of what we think. This is also the kind of objectivity or truth that Mackie thinks is a chimera, because, as he sees it, there simply are no external ethical facts for our ethical judgments to correctly represent.

But there is another, *internal* way to think of the truth of *A*’s judgment. Here what matters is not whether her judgment correctly matches or represents some external ethical reality, but whether it follows from, fits, or survives scrutiny from the standpoint of her *other* (very much *mind-dependent*) normative judgments, commitments, or attitudes.⁵ So, for example, if we imagine that *A* values not just her own life and well-being, but also that of others – and she believes, in general, that human beings have very strong reasons to help one another when the costs of doing so are manageable –⁶ then it looks as if it’s going to turn out *true* that *A* has a reason to

⁴ See e.g., Street (2010; 2008; 2012). The distinction Street develops has obvious resonances with Bernard Williams’ famous distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ reasons (Williams, 1981, pp. 101–113).

⁵ Street’s definition of this notion is as follows: ‘According to *metaethical constructivism*, the fact that *X* is a reason to *Y* for agent *A* is constituted by the fact that the judgment that *X* is a reason to *Y* (for *A*) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of *A*’s other judgments about reasons.’ (Street, 2008, p. 223).

⁶ The obvious reference here, is to Peter Singer’s principled reasoning in ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’ (1971).

rescue *B*. In this case, her other practical judgments naturally support the conclusion that she has the relevant reason. If, however, *A* is an uncompromising egoist (or ‘amoralist’), holding nothing of value apart from her own comfort, happiness, and survival, then the internal support relation may well be lacking. In that case, it would *not* be true that she has any such other-oriented reason.

When Wiggins explains that the criteria for ethical objectivity and truth ought to be located ‘inside’ our everyday ethical commitments, by consulting their ‘inner [regulative] aim,’ or in the ‘difference between good and bad *first-order* [moral] thinking,’⁷ rather than (as Mackie presumes) in some outwardly-oriented representational standard of correctness, I think what he means to recommend is the adoption of some version of this second, *internal* way of appraising our ethical judgments about good and bad, right and wrong. When we assess the moral quality of some ‘act or character,’ this should be done by appeal to the ‘scale of values’ that we already accept – a scale of values that, in some sense, provides the last word on such matters.

One can see how this kind of test raises fewer metaphysical and epistemological eyebrows. Ethical judgments, commitments, and attitudes are at least *psychologically* real. And it does not seem all that mysterious to assume that such things can stand in relations of (partial or complete) consistency or inconsistency with one another; and that we can determine these relations through careful reflection. But can this really be a standard of ethical *objectivity*? If the correctness of *A*’s ethical judgments is a function of the set of values (i.e., normative judgments, commitments, and/or attitudes) that *A* already holds, have we not fallen into a kind of self-legitimizing relativism, according to which any moral belief *A* holds will be true/objective simply in virtue of *A* holding it? Is it even possible to make a cognitive *mistake*, or to think something ethically *untrue* – to reason or think *poorly* instead of (always, and necessarily) well – on a view that treats ethical judgments as *standards* of truth, rather than attempts to represent it? If not, it’s unclear how Wiggins’ outline of an accessible ethical objectivity presents a genuine alternative to Mackie’s forbidden fruit.

4.

Yes, it is possible to make mistakes, or to think badly or wrongly, on the sort of metaethical account Wiggins describes, as I understand it.

⁷ My emphasis.

Wiggins on Ethical Objectivity and 'Des Cannibales'

Mistakes of various interesting kinds are possible. This is because the test of internal support, fit, or scrutiny is, while focused on the subject, *not* entirely subjective. That is, the question of whether some target normative judgment (of *A*'s) fits with *A*'s other normative judgments is not (as Wiggins puts it) a matter of mere 'stipulation,' to be decided by subjective fiat. There is a fact of the matter regarding whether such fit obtains, does not, or obtains only partially or indeterminately. As Street notes:

When we ask whether the judgment that *X* is a reason to *Y* (for *A*) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of *A*'s other normative judgments, we are not asking what *A* or anyone else *thinks* withstands scrutiny from that standpoint. Rather, we are asking whether, as determined by the standards set by *A*'s other normative judgments in combination with the non-normative facts, the judgment that *X* is a reason to *Y* (for *A*) *does* withstand scrutiny from that standpoint. (Street, 2008, p. 231)

Even someone who keeps an unusually clear catalogue of their 'scale of values' can be mistaken about what follows from it. We all suffer slips of the mind, and may sometimes fail to draw a straightforward inference from our normative beliefs. For instance, coming across *B*, *A* might simply forget to apply her general ethical commitment (to help others when the costs are reasonable) to the particular case at hand – not realizing that *this* child is one that, by her own lights, she has reason to rescue.

Other possible errors are triggered by the misapprehension of some relevant non-ethical fact. For example, perhaps *A* wrongly assumes that there is a high likelihood that she will herself drown if she attempts to rescue *B*, and therefore concludes that she shouldn't do it, all things considered. She might believe this when all the while her 'scale of values,' in combination with the real objective risks, dictate the very opposite ethical conclusion.

For most of us, even if some of our ethical convictions are clear, many others remain murky, uncertain, strained, and inarticulate. And this opens the door to other errors, or failures of internal 'fit.' This is partly because uncertainty and vagueness make ethical reasoning more complex, indeterminate, and laborious, and thus more prone to 'slips of the mind,' lazy shortcuts, or botched inferences (or non-inferences) of the sort described just above. But it also means that we can fail to recognize values that, without quite knowing it, we do hold. It may only be after years of neglect, and a nagging, amorphous sense of guilt, that I finally realize how much I care about keeping up old friendships. Before this value became

‘explicit’ or ‘articulate’ (as Wiggins might put it) for me, I may well have *thought* my neglectful attitude accorded with my values, when in fact it did not.

So these are some ways in which ethical reasoning can go wrong, on the kind of metaethical view I am suggesting Wiggins endorses. The possibility of such failures – of the falsity of ethical judgments in general – gives some credence to the idea that this standard of correctness can, despite its *subject*-orientedness, undergird a form of *objectivity* or truth. It might not be the sort of objectivity Mackie was interested in, and dismissed as peculiar, but it is at least a functional alternative, one that can ground a good working interpretation of Wiggins’ assertion that Mackie looked for ethical objectivity in the wrong place.

5.

Still, we might wonder whether this alternative is functional enough. Even though it allows for ethical judgments to be false, on this account they are only ever so *relative* to (the other practical judgments of) an individual human mind – and this has some characteristically odd consequences. Consider again the question of whether *A* ought to rescue *B*. Perhaps *A*’s judgments are such that it comes out *true*, for *A*, that she ought to rescue *B*. But if *C* is an ethical egoist, then it will at the same time be *false*, for *C*, that *A* ought to rescue *B*. Both judgments will be equally correct, according to their relevant individualized standards. Indeed, on the current view, there may simply be no single correct, objective, or authoritative answer to this question, or any other ethical question for that matter.

One issue with this sort of relativism is that it threatens to strip morality, and moral discourse, of a shared subject matter. When *A* or *C* consider what *A* ought to do, they are not actually thinking about the same thing. At best, *A* produces a true practical judgment about what *A* ought to do *relative* to *A*’s standpoint, and *C* a true judgment about what *A* ought to do *relative* to *C*’s standpoint. And so on and so forth, for each evaluator. The trouble is, no one can genuinely agree or disagree about the matter in question, on this relativistic picture; they are each asking, and answering, a different question. Nor is it clear how or why anyone might engage in discussion or debate about ethical matters, if this is how evaluation works. If we are lucky, we achieve a certain truth or ‘objectivity,’ but an intensely private one that hardly seems deserving of the name (Street, 2008, p. 224).

Wiggins on Ethical Objectivity and ‘Des Cannibales’

One way to mitigate this problem of alethic privacy is to adjust the view so that the truth of a normative judgment is a function of its fit with the standpoint of the *agent under evaluation* rather than that of the *evaluator*. Adopting what is sometimes called an ‘agent-based’ (as opposed to ‘assessor-based’) relativism would make it so that there *is* a single correct, true, or objective answer as to whether, once again, *A* ought to rescue *B*. The answer is set by the totality of normative judgments, commitments, and attitudes held by *A*: the person whose actions and character are in question. This is how Street herself interprets metaethical constructivism.⁸

But it’s not clear that we can help ourselves to this refinement in reconstructing Wiggins’ view. I see no sign that he endorses it. For one, the agent-oriented adjustment does not address the many instances in which evaluation focuses on *general* states of affairs, policies, dispositions, actions, ideas, principles, norms, and prescriptions – i.e., in which no *particular* agent is evaluated at all. But throughout *Ethics*, Wiggins is frequently concerned with exactly that kind of general evaluative reflection, where one considers, for example, ‘what considerateness, or callousness, or kindness, or brutality, or proportionality... amount to, and what they count for, in an act chosen or contemplated, in an action done, or in its outcome’ (Wiggins, 2006, p. 336). And when he writes, in the second quoted passage above, of assessing ‘this or that act or character’ in light of ‘some *human* scale of values,’ (Ibid., p. 335) there is no indication that this is supposed to (or must) be the specific scale of values accepted by the agent, if any, who’s action or character is in question.

If this is correct, then it looks as if Wiggins’ only way to make ethical truth absolute (or at least *absolutish*) – that is, to give ethics a shared subject matter – is to ensure that there is sufficient uniformity across the normative judgments of every (or nearly every) evaluator. If the human mind determines (its) reality, then human beings will only live in the same world if they determine reality in a

⁸ ‘On the constructivist account, in contrast, you and I and everyone else, including *A* herself, can all sensibly disagree about what reasons *A* has and be talking about the exact same thing, for there’s a common question that we’re all disagreeing about, namely what withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of *A*’s normative commitments. Thus, according to metaethical constructivism, facts about reasons are judgment-dependent in the sense that a person’s reasons depend on the reasons *she* judges herself to have, but they are *not* judgment-dependent in the sense of depending on the reasons *others* take her to have; the truth of ‘*X* is a reason to *Y* for agent *A*’ relativizes not to the speaker’s normative commitments, but rather to *A*’s.’ (Street, 2008, p. 224).

sufficiently similar way. But what reason is there to think, or hope, that this might be true in the domain of ethics?

One option is to follow a Kantian strategy here. That would mean arguing, as Christine Korsgaard famously does, that there are certain values or normative commitments shared by every valuing creature, as a matter of conceptual necessity (Korsgaard, 1996). Very roughly, on Korsgaard's view, anytime an agent takes something to be of value, and makes a choice based on this, they implicitly place some value on their own agency and humanity – a humanity they of course share with others.⁹ 'In this way, the value of humanity itself is implicit in every human choice' (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 122). If Korsgaard (or any such Kantian strategy) is correct, this would create an important strand of uniformity or agreement across the judgment sets of each ethical evaluator. So, if respect for the value of humanity favors *B*'s rescue, then the judgment that *A* ought to rescue *B* would presumably be true for *A*, *B*, *C*, and any other evaluator that cares to consider it, since *all* of them already take the value of humanity for granted, whether they know this or not.¹⁰ We would have, in other words, a kind of moral absolutism – a single correct, authoritative, or objective answer to ethical questions – within a subjectivist metaethical framework.

But this is not Wiggins' strategy. Wiggins is a follower of Hume, not Kant. And as such, he pins his hopes for the requisite intersubjective ethical agreement, not on transcendental arguments, but on *human nature*.¹¹ Perhaps, as Wiggins intimates in the second and third quoted passages in Section 3 above, our common humanity furnishes us with certain 'indispensable' or 'unforsakeable' ethical sensibilities, concerns, attitudes, and judgments, even if the rules of reason do not. And perhaps these can serve as a common benchmark against which ethical questions (or at least *enough* of them) will turn out to have absolute answers that hold for all (or at least *enough* of us) – questions and answers that can be the object of shared moral inquiry. It's an appealing idea, and hope. But is it a reasonable one?

⁹ See Street (2012) for a very helpful reconstruction of Korsgaard's argument.

¹⁰ Indeed, there would have to be some deeper sense in which, whatever *C* consciously thinks, *C* is *not* actually an ethical egoist on this view. Or, if *C* is, this would at least have to be in *tension* with her implicit commitment to the value of humanity.

¹¹ For more on Wiggins' favoring of Hume over Kant, see Wiggins (2006, Chs. 4–5).

6.

This is where Mackie’s first argument for error theory comes into play. It would be a problem for this Humean proposal if it turns out that *nurture* (or, rather, *culture*), and not *nature*, is the overwhelming determinant of the content of our ethical judgments, commitments, and attitudes. But that is exactly what Mackie’s argument implies. And who can deny the anthropological circus – the spectacular diversity of moral belief and practice both within and, in particular, across human cultures? How can we possibly square this fact with any suggested species-wide convergence on moral matters?

Wiggins’ solution comes in the form of a 16th century anecdote. In Michel de Montaigne’s well-known essay, ‘Des Cannibales,’¹² Wiggins thinks we can find evidence that culture is not always the ruling determinant of ethical judgment, and that cross-cultural moral disagreement is less stubborn and profound than it often seems. Montaigne’s essay introduces his French contemporaries to (what little he knows and has read of) the Tupinambá people, an indigenous group that were then only recently encountered by Europeans on the east coast of Brazil. In many ways, (pre-contact) Tupinambá and (Early Modern) French culture could not be more different, as Montaigne tells us:

... those [Brazilian] people have no trade of any kind, no acquaintance with writing, no knowledge of numbers, no terms for governor or political superior, no practice of subordination or of riches or poverty, no contracts, no inheritances, no divided estates, no occupation but leisure, no concern for kinship – except such as is common to them all – no clothing, no agriculture, no metals, no use of wine or corn. Among them you hear no words for treachery, lying, cheating, avarice, envy, backbiting or forgiveness... They spend the whole day dancing; the younger men go off hunting with bow and arrow. Meanwhile some of the women-folk are occupied in warming up their drink: that is their main task. In the morning, before their meal, one of their elders walks from one end of the building to the other, addressing the whole barnful of them by repeating one single phrase over and over again until he has made the rounds, their building being a good hundred yards long. He preaches two things only: bravery before their enemies and love for their wives (Montaigne, 1993, p. 234).

¹² For an English translation, see de Montaigne (1993, pp. 228–41).

Very different, and yet, as Wiggins points out, ‘the virtues that [the Tupinambá] do practice are instantly recognizable to us,’ as they would presumably also have been to Montaigne’s contemporaries: bravery in battle, spousal love, joie de vivre, trustiness, loyalty, and a contented freedom from materialistic obsession (Wiggins, 2006, pp. 339, 342). Unsurprisingly, some credit ‘Des Cannibales’ with having set the mold for the Enlightenment trope of the ‘noble savage.’¹³

But there is one looming aspect of Tupinambá culture that promises to establish its firm distance and ignobleness from the ethical standpoint of an Early Modern Frenchman: the practice of cannibalism. Not so fast, cautions Montaigne:

These peoples have their wars against others further inland beyond their mountains; they go forth naked, with no other arms but their bows and their wooden swords sharpened to a point like the blades of our pig-stickers. Their steadfastness in battle is astonishing and always ends in killing and bloodshed: they do not even know the meaning of fear or flight. Each man brings back the head of the enemy he has slain and sets it as a trophy over the door of his dwelling. For a long period they treat captives well and provide them with all the comforts which they can devise; afterwards the master of each captive summons a great assembly of his acquaintances; he ties a rope to one of the arms of his prisoner and holds him by it, standing a few feet away for fear of being caught in the blows, and allows his dearest friend to hold the prisoner the same way by the other arm: then, before the whole assembly, they both hack at him with their swords and kill him. This done, they roast him and make a common meal of him, sending chunks of his flesh to absent friends. This is not as some think done for food – as the Scythians used to do in antiquity – but to symbolize ultimate revenge. As a proof of this, when they noted that the Portuguese who were allied to their enemies practised a different kind of execution on them when taken prisoner – which was to bury them up to the waist, to shoot showers of arrows at their exposed parts and then to hang them – they thought that these men from the Other World, who had scattered a knowledge of many a vice throughout their neighbourhood and who were greater masters than they were of every kind of revenge, which must be more severe than their own; so they began to abandon their ancient method and adopted that one. It does not sadden

¹³ See e.g., Ellingson (2001).

Wiggins on Ethical Objectivity and ‘Des Cannibales’

me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs: what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrongdoings we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbours – and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death (Montaigne, 1993, pp. 235–36).

So, it turns out that there is a cross-cultural moral divide here, but not the one Montaigne’s audience was expecting. Sure, Tupinambá cannibalism is strange and (indeed) morally condemnable, but on second thought not quite so condemnable as revenge practices that would have been all-too-familiar to Early Modern Europeans themselves, already plunged deep into the madness of religious wars. Who are the real barbarians?

7.

Wiggins draws an optimistic lesson from this story. By placing distant cultural practices within their meaningful context – by understanding Tupinambá cannibalism not as a local culinary preference, but (assuming Montaigne is correct) as a traditional way of marking honor and taking revenge in the aftermath of battle – we might find that they are pursued for familiar, or at least intelligible, reasons. In this case, these may not be reasons that Montaigne’s audience will endorse on reflection; indeed, he nowhere suggests they should. But any Early Modern European inclined to place humane limits on the pursuit of revenge, or to banish it altogether, should (as Montaigne argues) at least acknowledge that this is as urgent a domestic task as a Brazilian one. Not only this: attention to context allows us to see how culture can sometimes be the *product*, and not just the determinant, of human judgment, as the Tupinambá abandonment of cannibalism in favor of the more diabolical Portuguese alternative shows.

Wiggins summarizes his findings as follows:

Diversity of customs may or may not amount to disagreement – we must not confuse these things – and the better practice may or

may not be the familiar one. The first things to be attended to, though, are the local meanings of the acts that are in question, the reasons these meanings sustain for doing such acts and the other beliefs that come into play. Unless we pay heed to these things, we shall not see the good in that which is strange or the bad in that which is familiar... Despite the manifest differences in the ways in which different peoples (and different people) are introduced to morality and participate in it, there is a common core of morality, which finds its expression in a whole variety of different acts in a variety of different contexts. Montaigne's essay illustrates very well what such a core might comprise, the notions or ideas that Europeans and cannibals had in common, for instance. It also mentions ideas the cannibals did not recognize and ideas the cannibals had that Europeans were not fully prepared for. Here, though, it prepares us for the thought that his countrymen would benefit by taking seriously the native Brazilian idea of human beings as halves of one another; just as, the other way around, the Brazilians stand in need of the European idea of reparation/blood-price and an understanding of the self-renewing evil of vendetta... It is less clear, though, whether, on the level of *judgments* that may be critically agreed, the idea of a common core is the way forward for the objectivist eager to learn something from Montaigne. On the level of agreement in moral judgments themselves, maybe it is better to bracket the question of identifying verdicts that *already* command universal agreement. A better question is what verdicts can or *could*, on the basis of reasonable persuasion, command agreement. (Wiggins, 2006, pp. 347–48)

I take these last few sentences to be a sensible admission that, whatever human convergence there might be on moral matters, it is not going to be a simple function of anthropological arithmetic: gathering up the totality of human ethical judgments, subtracting all those subject to disagreement, and seeing what's left. When it comes to concrete ethical judgments (e.g., about whether *A* ought to rescue *B*), Wiggins thinks we are forced to think in terms of *possibility*, i.e., of what we find we all (or nearly all) *can* agree on, on the basis of fraught, though generous and sensitive ethical reflection.

Why assume this will yield much agreement at all? Well, there is the hopeful example from Montaigne, for one. But also, I take it that Wiggins thinks universal convergence on ethical judgments is reachable because, as he seems to suggest, we already *do* agree on some more primordial level: by sharing certain basic ethical instincts,

Wiggins on Ethical Objectivity and ‘Des Cannibales’

concerns, or sensibilities (empathy, solidarity, fairness, compassion, etc.) which characteristically *move* us to make some judgments over others.¹⁴ It is this ‘mass of stubborn potentiality’ (Ibid., p. 354) that represents the ‘calm ten fathoms down.’¹⁵

But what good can a possible or even likely ethical agreement do, on the metaethical account developed above, if we don’t in fact agree on specific verdicts and judgments? Not necessarily all that much, Wiggins admits. And so, ethical objectivism might best be understood as a kind of optimism or faith:

The objectivist’s faith is this: that, when or if participants try to follow through, when they recant what they must recant in order to persevere in this process [of ethical reflection], disagreement and conflict can diminish... The objectivist is not a prophet. He reflects gloomily perhaps that bad ideas (or bad acceptations) tend to drive out good. More cheerfully, he reflects that a new and practical preoccupation with the idea of [ethical] formation could counteract that vexatious tendency. It is up to us, though, to cultivate that preoccupation, up to us to hold on to what we do have, and up to us to subvert that which subverts it. But no predictions! (Ibid. pp. 353–45)

So, Wiggins’ defense of objectivity or truth in ethics cannot be completed from the armchair alone. We need to go out and actually engage with other humans, constructing intersubjective ethical agreement where it is lacking. Only in this way can we make ethical objectivity a meaningful possibility. Of course, this work can easily fail. Conversations are often unproductive. And bad ideas, sometimes very bad ones, can and do take hold. Still, in the meantime, we at least have a hopeful, metaphysically unpretentious, and to me instinctively promising way of taking a good part of the inevitability and force out of Mackie’s objections.

¹⁴ See e.g., Wiggins (2006, Ch. 9) on the instinct towards ‘solidarity’ and ‘reciprocity’.

¹⁵ Wiggins begins the chapter with an epigraph from a sonnet by William Empson:

*‘A more heartening fact about the cultures of man
Is their appalling stubbornness, the sea
Is always calm ten fathoms down. The gigantic
anthropological circus riotously
Holds open all its booths.*

8.

Later on in my graduate studies, I would often use the New College library, where Wiggins would sometimes also work. One day I found myself sitting next to him, starstruck again. At one point, we heard the sound of a helicopter flying outside. Wiggins looked out the window, and then turned to me and said, whimsically and in a deadpan voice: 'Weeding out the dissidents!'

It was a pretty good joke, I thought. Luckily, at that moment, we weren't living in a 1984-style authoritarian reality. But, as Wiggins notes, maybe we should be a bit 1984-ish about our own ethical judgments: ever on guard against something bad creeping in, subverting sensibilities that instinctively aim towards (and, in effect, construct) the good. Because the moral truth alone certainly won't save us.

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