On Knowing Right from Wrong

Lars Hertzberg

1. On moral ignorance

Suppose one of my actions has disastrous consequences. In some cases, people may say that I am not to blame; I had no way of knowing what would happen. They will say things like, “He could not have known that a child was hiding behind the car when he pulled out of the driveway”, or “He could have no idea that she would be hurt by his words because of her past history”. (I am speaking in the third person here rather than the first person because the agent might blame himself even if no one else would hold him accountable.) Could a similar appeal be made to moral ignorance? Might people say of me, for instance, that I had no way of knowing that one is not supposed to betray one’s friends, or that what I did constituted a betrayal? Is there, in fact, such a thing as ignorance specifically in matters of morality? Does calling somebody morally ignorant constitute an excuse, or is it in itself a form of blame? In this paper, I wish to look more closely at these questions as they play out in the context of a particular case. The case I shall be discussing is the charges for collaborating with the enemy that were directed at the English comic writer P. G. Wodehouse during the Second World War, and the claim made by his defenders that he did not know that he was doing anything wrong.

In the conclusion, I wish to discuss the teaching of ethics in light of the discussion of moral ignorance. A prominent feature of Western culture around the turn of the millennium has been the emphasis on the teaching of ethics, from grade school through graduate school, and on the formulation and inculcation of moral codes within various professions, government institutions and business corporations. I want to consider the significance of the way we think of moral ignorance for the way we conceive of the teaching of morality and the formulation of ethics codes.

2. The Wodehouse case

Wodehouse – the hugely productive and enormously popular writer and creator of the characters Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, among others – was living in France at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. He was captured by the advancing German forces, and, as a male citizen of an enemy country, was interned. After a year, he was released from the camp to Berlin and rightaway agreed to do some broadcasts for German radio, aimed at audiences in the United States (which at that time was not at war with Germany). The broadcasts caused an uproar especially when heard of in Britain, which at the time was suffering heavily under the German *Blitz*.

The radio talks did not contain any pro-German propaganda. They were light-hearted and harmless accounts of Wodehouse's experiences in the internment camp. What caused indignation was the sense that by agreeing to do the broadcasts, Wodehouse helped the Germans maintain a friendly façade which might be calculated to placate the Americans, who at the time were agonizing about whether to join the war – Wodehouse, it should be noted, had a huge following especially in the US. No doubt this was the effect the Germans were reckoning with. In particular people were indignant because they had the impression that Wodehouse had agreed to do the broadcasts in exchange for release from the internment camp (though it is true he would have been released in only a few months anyway on turning sixty). However, it seems clear that no deal was made. The Germans were evidently shrewd enough to realize that Wodehouse would have rejected any such deal, and they predicted correctly that he would volunteer to do the broadcasts if the idea was presented to him *after* his release from camp. After the war he explained, no doubt sincerely, that he had simply wanted to keep in touch with his American fans, who had been sending him letters and packages during his internment, and to convey the message that he had held up well in spite of the stressful conditions.

On the face of it, at least, Wodehouse's activities were dubious. What he was doing might be calculated to help discouraging a potential ally from coming to the aid of his own country, as well as undermine the resolve of his contrymen to defend themselves, all this while enjoying the hospitality of his country's enemies. (He was put up in the Berlin Adlon.) As a friend of Wodehouse's summed it up in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*:

> No broadcast from Berlin by a world famous Englishman, however “neutral” in tone, can serve as anything but an advertisement for Hitler … as a shining instance of Nazi consideration and humanity towards prisoners of war…[1]

A number of people expressed their indignation, among them his fellow writer, A. A. Milne, the creator of Winnie-the-Pooh, and the Irish dramatist Sean O’Casey. In Parliament, there were demands that Wodehouse should be put on trial for treason. The columnist Cassandra gave a radio talk which was particularly vehement. It began as follows:

> I have come to tell you tonight of the story of a rich man trying to make his last and greatest sale – that of his own country. It is a sombre story of self-respect, of honour and of decency being pawned to the Nazis for the price of a soft bed in a luxury hotel…. It is the record of P. G. Wodehouse ending forty years of money-making fun with with the worst joke he ever made in his life… The last laugh bought from him by that prince of innocent glee – Dr Paul Joseph Goebbels.[2]

On the other hand, a number of people felt that Cassandra had gone too far. Several well-known writers came to Wodehouse’s defence then or later, among them George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh and Dorothy Sayers. A general line of defence was that Wodehouse did not know what he was doing. The friend quoted above, having conceded the case against Wodehouse, continued:

> I have no hesitation in saying that he has not the slightest realisation of what he is doing. He is an easy-going and kindly man, cut off from public opinion here and with no one to advise him; and he probably agreed to broadcast because he saw no harm in the idea …

The question of Wodehouse’s ignorance is complex. For one thing, he had been cut off from news of the war ever since its very first months. Thus he had little idea of the desperate state of Britain, alone in resisting the Axis powers, with London under bombardment, etc, to say nothing of German atrocities or the concentration camps. However, in speaking of Wodehouse's failure to realize what he was doing, his friend evidently meant something more: that, being the sort of person he was, he was incapable of grasping the real significance of his actions (or should we say, was *capable of not grasping* their significance?). The impression one gets from reading about his life is that Wodehouse was in fact at one with the world he had created in his books: a fantasy world peopled by dotty aristocrats and eccentric butlers, a world in which there were no serious problems or true evil, no sickness, no poverty, no pain, no death observed at close range, a world, in short, of grown-up children, and in the middle of it all, the blundering but basically innocent Bertie Wooster, narrowly escaping one disaster after the other through the intervention of his laconical butler. As one commentator said: Wodehouse was his own Bertie Wooster.[3]

---

[1] Frances Donaldson, *P. G. Wodehouse: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), p. 232.
[2] Op. cit., p. 243.

These sentiments were echoed by others. Orwell argued that Wodehouse could not be convicted of anything worse than stupidity, and that he was incapable of understanding the nature of quislingism. He thought Wodehouse "cannot have realized that what he did would be damaging to British interests", due to his "complete lack – so far as one can judge from his printed works – of political awareness".[4]

Or, as the point was put, rather movingly, in a private letter by Wodehouse's stepdaughter:

> I almost believe he probably even thinks he's being rather clever with the Germans in being able to talk to his friends, as of course the context is

---

[3] One may get an impression of the atmosphere of Wodehouse's books from Oscar Wilde's play, "The Importance of Being Earnest". Readers seem to be divided between those who find Wodehouse's books great fun, harmless entertainment or trash. Wodehouse's true artistry, in my view, is in his sense of language. O'Casey, clearly no admirer of Wodehouse, wrote, in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*: "The harm done to England's cause and to England's dignity is not the poor man's babble in Berlin, but the acceptance of him by a childish part of the people and the academic government of Oxford, dead from the chin up, as a person of any importance whatsoever in English humorous literature… If England has any dignity left in the way of literature, she will forget forever the pitiful antics of English literature's performing flea." Quoted in Donaldson, op. cit., p. 235. O'Casey apparently thought Wodehouse merited condemnation, not for the broadcasts but for his literary work.

[4] George Orwell, "In Defence of P. G. Wodehouse" (1945), reprinted in Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Voluntary. 3 (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005). The quotation is from pp. 351 f.

> absolutely harmless… I … feel a bit like a mother with an idiot child that she any way loves better than all the rest…[5]

Wodehouse's biographer reminds us that the word "idiot" originates in a Greek word meaning private person.[6]

3. On not understanding the wrongness of betrayal

Setting aside the question of ignorance of the facts, there are, perhaps, two ways of construing the claim that Wodehouse did not know what he was doing. People could be taken to have been arguing either that he was not clear that his activity was a form of betrayal, or that he did not realize that betrayal was wrong. Of these, the former construal is the more plausible one, while I shall argue that the latter is a kind of philosopher's fantasy.

I shall start by talking about the fantasy. It consists in imagining that someone thinks that one can distinguish between understanding *what betrayal is* and understanding that *betrayal is wrong*: "of course," this person might argue, "one would have to learn, first, what betrayal is, and only then could one be taught principles concerning betrayal, for instance, the principle that betrayal is wrong or that one should not betray someone". A line of thought analogous to this is adopted in the article "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism", by Mark van Roojen, in the internet *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*[7]. His example concerns lying; he mentions, as an example of what he calls a moral judgment: "Lying is wrong". (His other example of a "moral judgment" is "It is wrong to tease the cat.") van Roojen speaks about this as something that people may either believe or not believe, thereby suggesting that one may come to understand what lying is, while retaining an open mind as to the attitude to be taken towards it. We may well imagine that the author would think of "Betrayal is wrong" as another such "moral belief". So the line of defence for Wodehouse that I am imagining would be that of arguing that Wodehouse was ignorant of the principle that betrayal is wrong (or that he did not share the “moral belief” that betrayal is wrong).

---

[5] Donaldson, op. cit., pp. 250 f.

[6] Op. cit., p. 163.

[7] Mark van Roojen, "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/moral-cognitivism/>. Accessed on 11 March, 2009.

Along this line of thought, then, there are two groups of people, those who are aware of the principle, or hold the belief, that betrayal is wrong, and those who are not aware of that principle or do not hold that belief. What is being presupposed here is that both groups have a shared understanding of what betrayal *is*, of the significance of calling something a case of betrayal. They would be agreed, say, that something constituted a betrayal of one’s friend, or husband, or parents, but might disagree on whether it would be all right to go ahead and do it.

Do we really understand what is being said here? An important part of the way people use the word “betrayal” is to express blame, remorse, or refusal. People will say things like, “How could you have betrayed her?”, or “I can’t get over the fact that I betrayed my best friend!”, or “We can’t do that, it would be a betrayal of everything we hold dear.” On the view being considered here, we have to assume that these utterances are what philosophers sometimes call “elliptical”; i.e. the speaker is suppressing a premise, such as “*and* betrayal is wrong” or “*and* I believe that betrayal is wrong”. I find it hard to get my mind around this idea, however. If someone had been accused of betrayal and I wished to argue that what he did was all right, I would try to show that what he did was *not a case of betrayal* after all, rather than admit that it was a case of betrayal and then argue that there is nothing wrong about betrayal *as such*. (I might concede, say, that he had gone back on his promise, but that in the circumstances this was not a betrayal.) If someone considers it an open question whether something’s constituting a betrayal should count against it, I simply would not know what to say to him (though I am not sure what kind of situation this might be).[8]

---

[8] The word “betrayal” seems different from some other words which are also used to express blame, remorse or refusal, e.g. “lying”, “deception” or “murder”. These are different in that we can imagine occasions on which they are used *without* this force. Thus, “We’ll just lie to the KGB” or “Someone ought to have murdered Hitler” are not unintelligible remarks. On the other hand, “We’ll betray the KGB” or “Someone ought to have betrayed Hitler” are rather odd. They seem to presuppose endorsing the victim’s point of view (e.g. that Hitler’s trust in his subordinates was morally authoritative), and yet superseding it. Nevertheless, the point I am making applies to the former cases too. Perhaps we may say: we might find difficulty communicating with someone for whom these words do not normally carry this force.

Hence what was thought to be the starting point for teaching someone the principle "Betrayal is wrong" is in fact hard to imagine. I believe the "moral belief" jargon misleads us here. It makes it look as if one of the reasons a person might betray her friend, say, would be the fact that she did not ("happen to") share the belief that betrayal is wrong. The suggestion is that those who are ready to betray their friends and those who do not are, as it were, symmetrically related to – are equally lucid with regard to – the concept of betrayal. To my mind, in most cases it would be more realistic to assume that they are *not* symmetrically related: the reason a person might let her friends down is more likely to be her having blinded herself to the fact that that is what she is doing. Temptation has gotten the better of her. She is deceiving herself about her own actions. She does not *really* think that betrayal is all right; on the contrary, on one level she is actually aware that she is behaving like a louse.

Another possibility, of course, is that she does not care. She is indifferent to what others expect from her. We must assume her indifferent, too, to the way other people's actions affect her, apart from their practical consequences. Maybe we should imagine her utterly devoid of trust. All the same, she may be aware that others call certain actions betrayals and find them despicable, and she might adopt this usage in order not to stand out. But then the word "betrayal" would not, as it were, be part of her genuine vocabulary. Her use of the word, if she ever uses it, would be hypocritical: it would at most express a pretense at disapproval. This, then, does not make her someone who believes that betraying people is all right: rather she is someone who has no specific attitude towards betrayals.

Concerning the Wodehouse case, then, the problem was not that someone had forgotten to tell him that betraying his countrymen was wrong. We would not say that there was "no way he could have known" this. That would not be an intelligible description of his predicament.

4. A non-political animal?

The second way of construing the defence of Wodehouse, I suggested, was to argue that he was not aware that what he did was a betrayal. He never thought about it in that light. This suggestion, it seems, is closely connected with the claim that he had no political sense or that he had no interest in politics. Thus, one could imagine an argument to the effect that, while like every normal human being he must have understood the nature of betrayal, he simply lacked the overview or the understanding to be able to see that what he was doing was a form of betrayal. The fact that the issue was political made his conduct comprehensible, maybe even excusable. His being a non-political person made him immune to certain kinds of accusation.

When someone is said to have no political sense, what may be meant is that she is without guile: she lacks the talent for calculation that is often required to be able to carry one's point in a decision-making body, maybe she trusts that everybody will come round to her point of view once they hear her arguments. It may also mean that she believes that everybody else is open about their motives, that the reasons they advance in debates are the reasons that actually move them, etc. She neither engages in conspiracies nor suspects others of conspiring. If we were to encounter an extreme case of this, the person might seem to us like a kind of idiot, though not necessarily in a pejorative sense, nor in the Greek sense, but rather in the sense intended by Dostoyevsky in the title of his famous novel.

Part of what those who thought Wodehouse lacked political sense had in mind was probably something like what I have just described. He had not reflected on the significance of the fact that his country was under attack by Germany, nor did not he suspect the Germans when they came with their friendly offer of a way for him to be in touch with his American audience. Whether one thinks about this as an exculpatory characteristic or not probably depends on where one's sympathies lie. Those who liked Wodehouse thought about his lack of political sense as part of what endeared him to them, whereas those who did not thought of it as simply an aspect of his inability or refusal to grow up.[9]

The latter view was expressed in a rather scathing letter to the editor by A. A. Milne:

---

[9] Shortly before the outbreak of war, Wodehouse is recorded to have said, in conversation: "What I can't see … is what difference it makes. If the Germans want to govern the world, why don't we just let them." This was probably another indication of his political naiveté rather than an expression of furtive Nazi sympathies. The same year he wrote in a letter: "Someone ought to get up in parliament and call Hitler a swine." Donaldson, op. cit., p. 163.

> [Wodehouse] has *encouraged in himself* a natural lack of interest in "politics" [note scare quotes] – "politics" being all the things that grown-ups talk about at dinner when one is hiding under the table.[10]

How are we to think about political innocence? Is guilelessness indeed a favourable character trait, or does it indicate a lack of guts, or a failure to be serious about matters of grave concern. As children we tend to be bored by politics, partly because we lack the overview to know what it is about, partly because we have not been given the responsibility of participating in political decision-making. For an adult to lack an interest in politics, as Milne is hinting, may be a mark of self-centredness or immaturity, a failure to face up to one's responsibilities.[11]

Wodehouse's predicament, though perhaps in an extreme form, is analogous to one that we may all be familiar with from our daily lives. Should I learn more about the human rights situation in Turkey before I decide to go there on vacation? Am I obliged to find out whether these cosmetics were tested on animals? Is it my responsibility to establish whether child labour was involved in producing this carpet? Discovering that my money had gone into the support of an exploitative system would probably make me feel guilty, but am I prepared to say that failing to make an effort to find out about the circumstances in which some merchandise had been produced is in itself the mark of a corrupt soul? It is easy to imagine someone who is totally unsuspecting in his approach to these matters, yet at the same time is uncommonly generous and thoughtful in his dealings with others. At least, if he is guilty, his fault is not one of an ethics of encounter. How is he to be judged?

In a case like this, as in the Wodehouse case, we could well imagine someone saying, "He could not know what the situation was" and someone else retorting "Of course he could have known". By saying one or the other the speaker would be expressing her attitude towards the man, she would be commenting on the significance of what he did in the context of his life as she understood it. On the other hand, we would not say, for instance, that Wodehouse *"had no way of knowing"* that his actions constituted aiding and abetting the enemy. *That* would indicate a different situation. Certainly the thought may never have entered his mind. Yet we might think it *ought* to have. In saying "He could know / could not know what he was doing", one would not be invoking a psychological fact which might be established by objective methods; rather, one is either exonerating or accusing him. The idea of a cognitive limitation becomes misleading if we suppose it to mean that it constitutes a neutral background against which the quality of a person's actions are to be measured. What someone takes note of or fails to take note of is an expression of the human being he or she is. In so far as the "cognitive" enters here, it is morally conditioned.

---

[10] Quoted in op. cit., p. 233. My italics.

[11] A political innocent is in some ways like the husband who never helps around the house because, unfortunately, he is so very impractical. Well, sometimes this may really be true and sometimes it simply means that he cannot be bothered. He may claim to have more important concerns on his mind. Whether we consider that a genuine justification or a sham will depend, of course, of what we think of those other concerns.

5. *On the idea of ethical guidelines*

When discussing the limits of responsibility in the previous section, I think one may have felt the need for a judgment or verdict: just how far is a person obliged to go, in her efforts to explore the circumstances and consequences of her actions? At what point is she entitled to give it a rest and simply act on her present judgment without risking being judged to be reckless or morally blind? If we do feel this need, however, I think it expresses an erroneous understanding of the sense in which we are responsible agents: what we are responsible for is not whether we come out with a clean record or not; our responsibility, in a sense, is without limits. It is a matter of being awake to the world that surrounds us. What we make of it depends on who we are. Our ethical responsiveness, accordingly, is not to be thought of as rooted in anything analogous to the legal system. When ethics is conceived of as a set of rules which can be conveyed in an ethics course or laid down in a code, however, it risks becoming a system that is designed to put limits on our responsibility.

The moral of the parable of the good samaritan is perhaps to be understood along these lines. The lawyer asking Jesus who his neighbour is, is in effect asking which of the people he encounters that he may safely ignore without risking a stain on his character. We could almost imagine him planning to draw up an ethics code for wayfarers. By his parable, Jesus wants to make us see that it is up to us to recognize someone as our neighbour through our actions.

If the Wodehouse case may teach us something, then, it is not by providing an opportunity for testing our skill in applying ethical standards to an individual case, like one of the test cases on which law students hone their legal skills. Rather, it provides an illustration of the kind of challenge a particular set of circumstances may pose to a particular individual.

This brings us to the question of ethical guidelines and the idea that they may be conveyed through a course, or summarized in a code. The underlying thought seems to be that the problem that needs to be dealt with is people's moral ignorance. We spoke of two forms of moral ignorance: one I called a philosopher's fantasy: not knowing, for instance, that betrayal is wrong. The other one was the failure to realize the significance of one's actions: say, not understanding that one was engaged in an act of betrayal. Could there be an ethics course or a professional code that could be counted on to forestall or diminish the risk of acting wrongly as a consequence of moral ignorance? How is it to achieve this task? We may be tempted to think about this teaching along the line sof applied knowledge or applied skills. Just as one will have to learn a great deal about electricity and the way it works in order not to be a lousy electrician, someone who is morally ignorant will be a lousy human being. But this analogy does not seem to work. If we take the notion at its words, the teaching does not remove a moral deficiency: it simply changes a person from someone who is *morally innocent* in some respect, to someone who is not. She has eaten, as it were, from the tree of knowledge: she now has a choice between doing right or doing wrong, a choice which she did not face before. The instruction, then, would not make people good: rather it would make them *good or bad*. We would, as it were, have extended her capacity for acting immorally, while of course hoping that she will choose the other course.

Of course, this is not to be taken seriously as an objection to ethical instruction. It does not necessarily mean that what one is aiming at in introducing ethics courses, say, as part of professional training is pointless. Rather, the point is a *reductio ad absurdum* of a certain way of conceiving of what that instruction is about. The aim of those courses must be understood differently from the way it usually is. They are not aimed at raising the moral quality of the students, rather they are aimed at deepening their awareness of their prospective tasks and the way they fit into some bigger pictures. Through these courses, doctors, lawyers and engineers are not necessarily to be turned into better human beings, but into better doctors, lawyers and engineers, by coming to reflect on various aspects of their work. Perhaps one could say that what happens in these courses, if they are good, is that one turns one's professional competence inside out, one comes to see the limitations and the difficulties of what that competence can achieve. What one is acquiring should not be thought of as a specialized skill; rather, one's attention is drawn to the things that tend to get overlooked in more conventional forms of professional training.

Actually, I should like to suggest that the moral goodness of doctors, lawyers and engineers is not really a matter of public concern: that is a question concerning which each one of us must ultimately confront herself. What is a public matter is the way they handle their professional responsibilities.The awareness of this fact is in danger of getting lost in the idea of improving a person's moral quality by the teaching of an ethics course. Of course, what is taught in these courses would be pointless if it did not make contact with what is good in each one of us. But that goes for all teaching, I believe. A good teacher will undoubtedly leave a mark on the character of her students; but again, this goes for *all* teachers, not just those who teach ethics courses.

Our moral shortcomings have a great many different sources. The Wodehouse incident was a case of an unusual temperament encountering an extreme situation: the world in which he suddenly found himself, we might say, was in a genre for which he had no affinity. Each temperament, each situation in life bound up with its own characteristic temptations: life may teach us, but it may also corrupt us. It is through our contacts with others that we learn about human life and about our own strenghts and weaknesses – for better or worse. The idea that there might be specialized courses designed to make us better persons seems to rest on the assumption that there is such a thing as moral knowledge that we could somehow distil from life and then convey in concentrated form to the students. This appears to be a wishful dream. I am not sure that having a diploma from a top-notch ethics institute, for instance – rather than guaranteeing immunity to temptation – might not constitute a temptation of its own peculiar kind, by reassuring us that we have command of the world with all its conflicts.[12] None of this, however, entails that more time should not be devoted to reflecting on life and its various problems on all levels of the educational system.

---

[12] The famous 60-page ethics code adopted by Enron, which all employees were obliged to read, might be an analogous case in point. – John Cook, in the chapter “Islandia and Despond”, in his book *Morality and Cultural Differences* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), paints an illuminating contrast between two ways of relating to moral thought along lines similar to those suggested here.