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 idea of ethical instruction in light of the notion 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.

The present essay is part of two longer-range concerns: one is to get clear about the various roles of epistemic expressions in ethical discussion; the other is to get a better understanding of the sense in which one person's conscience may be a concern for

another, or, differently put, the sense in which one may turn to others for help in getting in touch with one's own conscience.

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, Britain, 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 help put the Americans at ease with regard to Germany; the Americans were at the time agonizing about whether to join the war, and 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 actual 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 countrymen 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:

---

[1] Frances Donaldson, *P. G. Wodehouse: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), p. 232.
[2] Op. cit., p. 243. The talk is a good illustration of the way indignation may bring about an unwillingness to reflect on a person's motives. Even Wodehouse's fiercest critics will hardly have believed in earnest that he decided to betray his country simply to be able to stay in the Berlin Aldon.

> 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 …

There are several aspects to the question of Wodehouse's ignorance. 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]

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

---

[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. According to O'Casey, Wodehouse merited condemnation, not for the broadcasts but for his literary work.

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

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 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 calling something a betrayal os speaking against the action". 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*[6]. His example concerns lying; he mentions, as an example of what he calls a moral judgment: "Lying is wrong". (His

---

[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.

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

[6] 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.

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”, along, say, with “Murder is wrong”, “Rape is wrong”, “Theft is wrong”, etc. 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).

The word “betrayal” is often used to express blame, remorse, or refusal. People will say things like, “How could you betray me like that?”, 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.” It is true that the word may also be applied in cases in which there are no practical consequences of calling something betrayal. Nevertheless, the idea that someone could share our understanding of what betrayal is but leave it open whether calling an action a case of betrayal would speak against it seems unintelligible to me. Hence what was thought to be the starting point for teaching someone the principle “Betrayal is wrong” is in fact hard to imagine. What misleads us here is the “moral belief” jargon. 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 are not are, as it were, symmetrically related to – are equally lucid with regard to – the concept of betrayal itself. I would suggest, on the contrary, that if someone, say, lets her friends, then this is because she has blinded herself to the character of her action, or else she is doing wrong with open eyes. Temptation has gotten the better of her. She does not *really* think that betrayal is all right; on the contrary, one would have to think that, on one level, she is aware of 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 express a mere 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, as it were, had forgotten to tell him that betraying his countrymen was wrong. Nor would we 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 of a private person[7] from which the modern use is dervied, 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.[8]

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

> [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.[9]

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.

---

[7] Wodehouse's biographer reminds us that the word "idiot" originates in a Greek word meaning private person. Op. cit., p. 163.

[8] 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 naïveté 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.

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

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. Even if we are convinced that the thought that his actions constituted a betrayal never entered his mind, we may think it *ought* to have. In arguing whether he could or could not have known what he was doing, one would not be discussing a psychological matter which is to be settled by objective methods; rather, one is either accusing or exonerating him. The idea of a cognitive limitation becomes misleading if we suppose it to mean that it constitutes a neutral condition that must be taken into account when someone’s actions are assessed. 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.

5. *On the idea of ethical guidelines*

Wodehouse’s predicament, though perhaps in an extreme form, is analogous to one that is familiar 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 is failing to try to find out about the circumstances in which some merchandise had been produced in itself the mark of a corrupt soul? We may imagine someone who is totally unsuspecting or neglectful in his approach to these matters, yet at the same time is 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?

When discussing questions like these, one may feel 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 simply to act on her present judgment without being judged to be reckless or morally blind? But these are the wrong questions to ask. Our responsibility has no pre-established

limit. It is a matter of being awake to the world that surrounds us. It is for us to decide. There is no such thing here as delegating one's responsibility to some external authority.

More specifically, our ethical responsiveness 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, the danger is that we come to regard it as external to ourselves. Part of what may lead us astray is that ethical worries are often voiced in the form of questions, as above. We need to realize that these are rhetorical questions.

The need to express moral worries as though they were real questions is expressive of a failure to acknowledge what it means to be a responsible agent, as if someone could tell us what we have to take account of and what we can safely ignore. we may be tempted to think that what matters is how well we do in a character assessment. This temptation, which is ubiquitous, involves a reversal of perspective: what truly matters, in your responsibility for the other, is not you but only the other.

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 moral ignorance. We spoke of two

ways of conceiving of this: one I called a philosopher's fantasy: the idea that someone might not know, for instance, that betrayal is wrong. The other 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 lines of 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, one will have to be taught a great deal about ethics in order not to be a lousy human being. But this analogy does not seem to work. If we take the notion of the removal of moral ignorance literally, 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. On this account 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 before this she did not face. The instruction, then, would not make people good: rather it would make them either good or bad.

Of course, this is not to be taken seriously as an objection to ethical instruction. It does not mean that what one is aiming at in introducing ethics courses, say, as part of professional training is necessarily pointless. Rather, the point is a *reductio ad absurdum* of a certain way of conceiving of what that instruction is about. Ethics courses do not aim 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.[10] 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.

---

[10] One might reflect on the relation between simply being good, and being a good something or other. The relation is evidently different with respect to different roles. It is hard to imagine someone who is a good human being but not a good father or mother, or vice versa. Again, in the case of a doctor or nurse or teacher, the relation is closer than in the case of an engineer or an artist.

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 if it is thought that one can improve a person's moral quality by means of ethical instruction. 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 this, again, 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 and complications.[11] 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]

[11] 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.

[12] I want to thank David Cockburn, Camilla Kronqvist, Merete Mazzarella and Hugo Strandberg for useful comments on an earlier version of this essay.