

A Pragmatic View of Thick Ethical Terms and Their Role in Public Policy Debate

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Abstract

Philosophers distinguish ‘thin’ ethical concepts like ‘right,’ which are purely evaluative, from ‘thick’ concepts like ‘courageous,’ which are descriptive and evaluative. Some philosophers (for example R. Hare) take the position that the descriptive content of a thick ethical term is logically independent from its evaluative content. On this account, one could without logical error assign a negative evaluation to a courageous act. Others (for instance, P. Foot) argue that there is a logical connection between the descriptive and value components of thick ethical terms. On their view, assigning a negative value to a courageous act would involve logical error. Although I believe, contrary to Hare, that there is a logical connection between the descriptive and evaluative components of thick terms, I argue that the connection is much weaker than is usually supposed by those taking Foot’s view. In addition, I outline an analysis of thick ethical terms that involves a large pragmatic component. I believe that the role of thick ethical terms in social and political theory has been underappreciated and that my pragmatic account of thick ethical terms will help clarify their importance in public policy debate, especially within the context of liberal democratic societies that do not presuppose a shared conception of the good.

Introduction

The moral sentiments have been at the heart of ethics from the beginning. On the philosophical side, the ancients held up justice, courage, temperance and prudence as the principal or cardinal virtues. The medievals identified faith, hope and charity as the principal theological virtues. Hume famously offers an expanded list of qualities useful or agreeable to ourselves or to others including: justice, fidelity, honour, veracity, allegiance, chastity, humanity, benevolence, lenity, generosity, gratitude, moderation, tenderness, friendship, industry, discretion, frugality, secrecy, order, perseverance, forethought, and judgment. This group includes virtues that are not distinctively moral, like frugality or perseverance, but Hume claimed that the entire list is indicative of personal merit. (Hume/Nidditch, *ECPM*, 1777/1975, 226/p. 277) These qualities are all positive, and hence deemed to be virtues. On the dark side, we find the seven deadly sins: gluttony, lust, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. To complicate matters, there has been much disagreement about the virtues and vices. Some sentiments prized during one era are condemned at another. Hume famously derides ‘celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues.’ (Hume/Nidditch, *ECPM*, 1777/1975, 219/p. 270) On the other hand, some still find a place for virtue in ‘respect for life from conception to natural death.’ (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, p. 5)

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the moral sentiments and hence the terms that are used to designate them. Those terms fall within a group simply called ‘ethical terms.’ Contemporary philosophers Philippa Foot (1959, 1979), Richard Hare (1981), Bernard Williams (1985, 1986), and Simon Blackburn (1984, 1986, 1998), distinguish ‘thick ethical terms’ from ‘thin ethical terms.’ Thin ethical terms, like ‘right and ‘wrong,’ are purely evaluative; that is, the mere fact that something is right (or that it is wrong) does not even hint at just *what* is right (or wrong). On the other hand, thick terms,

including the assortment already named, appear to contain both descriptive and evaluative components. For example, courageous people stand their ground in challenging circumstances. Indeed, the descriptive component of courage¹ is the disposition to stand fast in challenging circumstances, the evaluative component is positive. It is perhaps natural to think that courage is morally good, and that it is morally good because its descriptive component *entails* its goodness. That would mean that the connection between the descriptive and evaluative components of ‘courage’ is purely semantic. We would know that it is good to stand one’s ground in challenging circumstances from the very *meaning* of the words, but it is notoriously difficult to sort out the issues involved in this semantic claim.² Perhaps the crucial question, as Foot reminds us, is what to say about someone who appears to do the wrong thing from virtue. Foot reminds us that Thomas provocatively claimed that ‘it is better for a blind horse if it is slow.’ (Foot, 1979, p. 592)³ Thomas thought that the virtues could *produce* only good actions, but it is tempting to conclude from Thomas’s claim about the blind horse that we should say that courage is not always a virtue (or perhaps that it is not or does not function as a virtue in some who have that virtue). In a serial killer or even in a general who forces his soldiers to fight to the death in a hopeless cause something may appear to have gone terribly wrong in thinking of deadly acts as courageous or of the trait from which they emanate as a virtue. Foot herself explores the possibility that there may be times when courage does not function as a virtue and when a description of a bad act as courageous is at least strained. In the end Foot concedes that we feel ‘a certain discomfort’ when discussing the virtues. What is wrong, she ventures, ‘has something to do with a disparity between the moral ideals that may seem to be implied in our talk about the virtues, and the moral judgments that we actually make.’ (Foot, 1979, p. 592)

The goal of this paper is to relieve some of the discomfort that Foot detects as we contemplate the distance between moral ideals and the ‘moral judgments we actually make.’ It may appear that those with those pathological or obstinate tendencies will do less harm if they are timid, easily frightened, and put off from acting on murderous thoughts or making pointless sacrifices. It may be *better* for a blind horse to be slow or *better* for a no-surrender general to be timid, but we go much too far if we say that courage is not always a virtue or not a virtue in some people, or that it does not function as a virtue in some situations, or that a bad act can never be courageous, although it certainly is true that an act is never bad *because* it is courageous.

¹ To keep the syntax bearable, where it does no harm I shall ignore the distinction between the descriptive component of the term ‘courage’ and the descriptive content of courage, and the distinction between the *quality* designated by the descriptive content of ‘courage’ and the descriptive content of courage. The same goes for the other states or characteristics that Aristotle calls virtues and vices.

² One apparent complication can be dismissed immediately. Aristotle himself observes that at least in some cases what we call descriptive and evaluative components are semantically linked by entailment relations. Take murder, for example; it is always wrong, and that may suggest that the descriptive component of ‘murder’ entails its evaluative component. But that is not so, just as Aristotle insists. (Aristotle/McKeon, *NE*, 1107a 9-14/p. 959) A murder is a homicide that is wrong, and murder is always wrong, but it does not follow that the descriptive component of ‘murder’ entails that murder is wrong. Homicides that are wrong are not wrong because they are murders; rather they are murders because they are wrong. It is true that some people take the commandment not to kill literally and believe therefore that all homicides are wrong, but the basis for their belief that homicides are wrong is not semantic but rather the fact that the source that prohibits them is authoritative. Even the most literal-minded pacifist must concede that there is no contradiction in the claim that a certain homicide is not wrong.

³ Foot cites Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae Q. 58 a.4.

Descriptive and Evaluative Content

Some philosophers have concluded that the descriptive component of a thick ethical term never forces us, as a matter of logic, to assign a particular evaluation to it. On this theory, except for terms like ‘murder,’ which are defined by evaluative terms, every moral sentiment may without logical error be deemed good or bad. This means that in principle the medieval sins of gluttony, lust, greed, sloth and so forth might be deemed to be good. It also means that traits like courage, kindness or mercy may be deemed to be vicious. But can this be? Can it really be true that we can assign any value we please to an act or a trait?⁴

I agree that where a thick term is descriptive, like ‘stands fast in challenging circumstances,’ no *formal inconsistency* arises however we evaluate the acts it designates.⁵ Even so, the fact that there isn’t a formal inconsistency⁶ does not show that we can evaluate the act in any way we please without logical error. There is broader understanding of logical error beyond the reach of formal inconsistency. On my account, thick ethical terms are used primarily to connect descriptions with evaluations by a relation I shall call ‘a prima facie reason for.’⁷ What I am going to claim is:

Thesis 1: The fact that the descriptive component of a thick ethical term truly describes an act is a prima facie reason for evaluating the act positively (negatively), if the descriptive component is contained by an ethical term that

⁴This view, according to Foot involves two assumptions:

Assumption (1) is that some individual may, without logical error, base his beliefs about matters of value entirely on premises which no one else would recognize as giving any evidence at all.

Assumption (2) is that given the kind of statement which other people regard as evidence for an evaluative conclusion, he may refuse to draw the conclusion because *this* does not count as evidence for *him*. (Foot 1959, p. 366)

I think that Foot’s statement goes to the heart of the matter, but as it stands, it is perhaps not quite clear. The issue arises concerning the meanings of ‘evidence’ and ‘logical error.’ I do not think that ‘inconsistency’ can refer solely to formal inconsistency. As Foot herself explains, where there is formal inconsistency, for example, in the claim that murder is not wrong, it arises only because the term ‘murder’ is not purely descriptive; it is itself evaluative.

⁵Even Kant’s Categorical Imperative (C.I.) cannot be read as a formula for assigning a value to a purely descriptive act or state *solely* on the basis of formal consistency. Suppose that someone adopts the principle of action, Maximin: Most for me; least for everyone else. According to C.I. this principle is wrong because it cannot be consistently *willed* to apply to everyone. To will Maximin consistently for everyone, one must be able to will consistently that everyone else adopt Maximin and therefore will that everyone else attempt to defeat one’s own attempt to use Maximin. But this does not show that Maximin itself involves a purely logical error in the sense of a formal inconsistency. One who adopts Maximin does not follow an inconsistent rule but rather follows a maxim of action that cannot be successfully employed if everyone else follows the same rule. The problem with a man who lives by Maximin, one is tempted to say, is that not that he is illogical but rather that he is evil. That is because it is evil to make an exception of oneself at the expense of others, but contrary to Kant, the evil does not appear to derive from a sort of inconsistency but rather from arrogance. Similarly acts of unprincipled and spontaneous love are not praiseworthy on account of a special sort of reasonableness but rather because of a special, precious sort of goodness.

⁶ By ‘formal inconsistency’ I mean a claim that entails a contradiction or, from a semantic point of view, a claim that is not satisfiable in any model.

⁷ This is evocative of W. Ross’s famous analysis of prima facie duties. (Ross, 1930, pp. 89-91.) There will of course be similarities between his view and my own. However, there is a distinction between prima facie *duties* or virtues and prima facie *reasons* for taking a positive view of an act or trait. Describing something as ‘prima facie’ suggests that closer reflection may very well change our view of it. But I am not suggesting that what is at stake is whether or not to change our mind about what is a virtue or a duty; I am suggesting that it is possible to change one’s mind about *what counts as a reason* for evaluating a character trait or an act in one way rather than another.

designates a virtue (and negatively if the descriptive component designates a vice).

Let's see how the thesis works by looking at a paradigmatic case. Suppose we correctly deem the commander of a division of soldiers to be courageous because he stands fast in challenging circumstances. According to Thesis 1, we have a *prima facie* reason to view his action positively. Suppose nevertheless that the battle is all but lost, and standing fast rather than surrendering is sheer stubbornness, a stubbornness borne of vanity, and further that standing fast will mean that all the commander's own soldiers will be pointlessly killed. How shall we describe this case? In particular, shall we say that courage is not a virtue in a stubborn commander? On the contrary, my view about how to describe the case is:

1. The commander is courageous, and acted courageously in standing fast, and his act is courageous
2. Courage is in this case and is always a virtue.
3. The facts:
 - (a) that the commander stood fast in challenging circumstances, and
 - (b) standing fast in challenging circumstances is the descriptive component of courage (which is always a virtue),together constitute a *prima facie* reason to take a positive view of the commander's act.
4. But even though there is a *prima facie* reason to take a positive view of the commander's act, his act should nevertheless be viewed negatively.

How is this possible? Let's take a look at the other aspect of the act; the commander's stubbornness.

- 1*. The commander is stubborn out of vanity, and acted stubbornly out of vanity, and his act is obstinate
- 2*. Vainglorious stubbornness (*viz.* stubbornness out of vanity) is in this case and is always a vice.
- 3*. The facts:
 - (a) that the commander refused to yield, even at the cost of incurring pointless sacrifice, and
 - (b) refusing to yield even at the cost of pointless sacrifice is the descriptive component of vainglorious stubbornness (which is always a vice),together constitute a *prima facie* reason to take a negative view of the commander's act.

So, we have a *prima facie* reason to take a positive view of the act and a *prima facie* reason to take a negative view. And, of course, I claim both are valid. That means that we have a *prima facie* reason to think of the act as virtuous and a *prima facie* reason for thinking of the same act as vicious. But which is it really? Neither, without qualification. Acts have virtuous (vicious) aspects or are, as is sometimes said, virtuous (vicious) 'under various descriptions.'⁸ Nor are people themselves virtuous or vicious without qualification. They are virtuous in some ways and vicious in others.⁹

⁸ I believe that Donald Davidson was the first to call our attention to the fact that there really isn't a neutral way of describing actions and events, that is, a way of describing them that does not already make a presupposition about what they are. To deal with this, Davidson suggested that we think of events and actions relative or under descriptions. (Davidson, 1967, p. 120)

⁹ Of course it is possible to imagine someone with all the virtues. Perhaps we should reserve the phrase 'completely virtuous' for them; perhaps we can say of others that they are 'virtuous for the most part' or 'virtuous on the whole.'

Prima Facie Reasons for Moral Evaluation

In discussing the virtues, Aristotle reminds us that ethics is the subject that teaches us how to deal rationally with anticipations of pain and pleasure. (Aristotle/McKeon, *NE*, 1104b8-1105a13/p. 953f.) In the case of courage, for example, we are dealing essentially with fear and confidence, which obviously involve anticipations of pain and pleasure. Courage is the mean between the extremes of (a) an excess of confidence and a deficiency of fear, and (b) a deficiency of confidence and an excess of fear. However, courage is also a disposition to perform certain acts, to wit, to stand fast in challenging circumstances. Striking the right balance when it comes to fear and confidence is what *enables* us to stand fast in challenging circumstances, but does it help us determine when it is in right to stand fast in challenging circumstances rather than to surrender? For that, Aristotle claims, we need *practical knowledge*, knowledge of what is *reasonable* in the circumstances. So, let us venture:

Thesis 2: If according to Thesis 1 there is a prima facie reason, R, for evaluating an act positively (negatively), then R sufficient for evaluating that act positively (negatively), if the act is reasonable (unreasonable) in the circumstances.¹⁰

The next question is obvious: How do we know just what is reasonable in the circumstances? Here again, Aristotle is at the ready. What is reasonable in the circumstances is known to us through instruction and habituation, that is, through moral training. (Aristotle/McKeon, *NE*, 1102a18-1103b2/p. 952) but Aristotle warns us not to expect too much in this matter from philosophy. Indeed, to demand a precise standard by which to judge every case is to insist upon more from ethics than it can bear. (Aristotle, *NE*, 1094b12-1094b28, p. 936) Moreover, we should expect to find that conceptions of reasonableness vary, perhaps significantly, from time to time and from place to place. That is why it is that people have been worried about conventionalism and relativism in Aristotle, although it is important to emphasize that variation in standards of reasonableness are tightly contained by his conception of the constancy of human nature defined as it is by the human *telos* or ‘final cause.’ But our reliance on reasonableness will not be supported by Aristotelian metaphysics and in particular by Aristotle’s conception of our final cause. As we shall see, our conception of reasonableness rather grows out of moral practice, which is why reasonableness for us is essentially pragmatic, and therefore why the present account of thick ethical terms and their role in argument is pragmatic.

A Pragmatic Approach to Moral Evaluation

I do not think that we should be too disappointed in the present account for not having developed an algorithm for moral evaluation if only because we find moral and legal argument to be essentially tentative, subject to amplification and revision. In the case of legal argument, we turn to *precedent* to define the reasonable. Precedent is the accumulated practical knowledge of the law. It sets the standards by which to determine whether or not an act was reasonable in the circumstances: Was the obstinate general’s no-surrender decision reasonable? What were his orders? Did his decision accord with military doctrine? Was it consistent with the code of military justice? Moral argument works in much like legal argument, but of course in moral argument our appeal to past practice extends far beyond

These and similar phrases support my claim by suggesting that we are not at all inclined to insist that a character must be described as virtuous or vicious without qualification.

¹⁰ Of course here I use ‘unreasonable’ to mean something like contrary to what is reasonable, and not to mean something which is merely not reasonable because like a bodily urge, it is not subject to rational assessment.

legally established precedent. Which last-stands are widely thought to be heroic and which were deemed to be merely obstinate? What do the heroic ones have in common? How do they differ from the obstinate hold-outs? What did military heroes like John Churchill or Winston Churchill or Lord Nelson say about similar cases?

I believe that the present pragmatic approach helps us identify the underlying logic of moral argument in cases like these: Those *greedy* bankers had better explain taking big risks with funds guaranteed by the public treasury, and they had better explain those high fees and commissions. In other words, extreme acquisitive practices are a *prima facie* reason to take a negative view of aggressive banking practices, especially of those that do not conform to best practices that have been established over the years. Those who *refuse to serve their country in time of need and danger* are *prima facie* to be viewed negatively, and they better have a powerful argument for their claim that current requirements of service are unfaithful to the ideals of the homeland. The demand or even an appeal for *equal outcomes* may be viewed positively only in those who have made reasonable efforts to care for themselves. In each of these cases, our view of the act is determined by the character from which it was done and by its reasonableness according to current standards. And our theory of *prima facie* reasons for evaluations helps explain how moral argument puts people on the defensive by shifting the burden of proof to them.

I believe that Thesis 1 and Thesis 2 roughly describe the logic of thick ethical terms by locating the analysis of them clearly in the area of pragmatics. Evidence for my theory is its consequence that agents are correctly blamed for acting from a bad character even if their acts are reasonable, and that we are right to take a negative view of unreasonable acts even when they are enabled by virtue. *Praise is reserved for those who do what is reasonable from a virtuous character.* Specifically, courage is always and everywhere a virtue, but at times we are right to take a negative view of standing fast and of those who would stand fast no matter what; come whatever may.

Public Policy Debate and Conceptions of the Good

The next step is to ask exactly how a pragmatic view of thick ethical terms illuminates the structure of public policy debate.

As we have noted, there have been worries about conventionalism and relativism in Aristotle precisely because of his reliance upon his conception of reasonableness in determining what morality requires. Our contemporary conception of reasonableness is even more closely tied to culture than Aristotle's because we do not rely upon Aristotelian final causes in identifying the values that reason commends. The tendency to conventionalism is perhaps worrying, but if our view of the moral sentiments is correct, moral argument must be conventionalist at least to a degree. It is difficult to believe that what people praise and blame is completely independent of time and place, of the culture, society and political structure in which they live. In any case, all this has been leading up to our main project, which is to understand the proper role of thick ethical terms and thereby of the moral sentiments in public policy debate.

According to the pragmatic view of thick ethical terms presented here, public policy debate (whether formal or informal) will identify reasonable actions and then will *independently* identify praiseworthy motives. The no-surrender general's courage does not prove that his last stand was right; a financier's greed does not show that his underwriting was improper. As we have seen, we restrict our praise to those who do what is right from virtue. This may seem to be the end of the matter, but is not.

Public policy debate is conducted within a context that is defined by certain ground rules. For example, in a liberal, democratic society debate typically is focused on two issues: (1) the rights of individuals and how should they be protected and (2) what promotes the welfare of individuals and of society as a whole and, hence, how burdens and benefits should be distributed. To be sure, there is considerable disagreement about these liberal ‘ground rules.’

The *locus classicus* of the ground rules of liberal democratic society is Rawls. His famous view need not be rehearsed here, except to emphasize the key point, which is that his conception of justice attempts to be purely political. For Rawls the issue really is about the procedures that fully rational people can agree will determine decision-making about the protection of rights and the distribution of benefits and burdens. The hallmark of those procedures is that they will not anticipate a conception of the substantive good.¹¹ The society Rawls envisions will fairly distribute opportunity to realize whatever goods people seek, but it has nothing *a priori* to say about what that good is. (Rawls, 1971, pp. 11 – 20)

To be sure, critics have complained that after all there is something that liberals can find to say about what is substantively good for human beings. Sen for one complains that people obviously have basic needs (sustenance, for example) in order to live a rational life. Beyond sustenance, there is a need for freedom, that is, the *capability* to realize the opportunities that a free society will guarantee. Rawls is not at a loss to deal with this sort of complaint. For Rawls questions about the distribution of goods will be settled by the political system established by the ground rules behind the veil of ignorance. Even so, Sen appears to set preconditions of justice that exclude outcomes that are logically possible for Rawls; for example, that one’s own incapacities, psychological or physical, will impair one’s abilities to take advantage of opportunities guaranteed by the just society. Broadly, Sen insists that opportunities are useless if individuals are incapable of taking advantage of them. (Sen, 1999, p. 53; 2002; pp. 46 - 52) Philosophers like Elizabeth Anderson go beyond Sen, insisting that protecting the *self-conception* of each individual is a necessary and proper constraint upon any scheme of social or political organization. (Anderson, 1999, p. 319) Despite all these differences, liberal democratic thinkers are pretty much united on the key point, which is that the liberal democratic society will not force its conception of the good upon its people, but will one way or another through public policy debate construct a conception of the good that derives from its people and is responsive to changing conceptions of the good by its people.

Public policy debate within liberal democratic societies is radically different from what we find in the competing systems of social and political organization. In theocratic societies the focus of debate is not likely to center on rights and welfare, but rather on God’s will and the roles that people should be required (or permitted) to play in realizing God’s will. Public discussion may naturally focus on the interpretation of sacred texts or teachings about God’s plan for humanity. In totalitarian states the debate will no doubt center on the ways in which the state can be best glorified, and on the roles that individuals should be required (or permitted) to play in its glorification. In communal states, like the ancient Greek city states, the debate will likely center on shared traditions, rituals, language, literature, visual icons, cherished victories and accomplishments. All of the non-liberal societies are defined by their objectives; that is, by what each believes must be accomplished to achieve its distinctive good. What counts as *reasonable* will therefore depend upon the core assumptions of a society about its objectives, that is, about its distinctive

¹¹ I am here contrasting ‘substantive’ with ‘procedural.’ It is logically possible for us to be satisfied that a good procedure has been followed in settling a complaint, but nonetheless insist that the settlement is not good. Inversely, we may be satisfied with the outcome of a procedure, but complain that the procedure was inherently defective.

if not unique good. Conventionalism is the doctrine that all these conceptions, liberal and non-liberal, are equally rational. Of course, I do not endorse conventionalism; I do not believe that one set of objectives is as rational as another. In my view there are compelling *reasons* for preferring liberal democratic societies to theocratic or totalitarian and communal societies, but I am trying to analyze the role of thick ethical terms in public policy debate, *wherever it takes place*, whatever its ground rules; that is to say, whatever it *deems* 'reasonable.' I shall emphasize issues concerning public policy debate within liberal democratic societies. This is not to say, however, that my analysis is limited to those societies. Any decent analysis of public policy debate should apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to others types of societies, however distasteful they may be. The reason for this is that a goal of analysis should be to identify criteria of adequacy for rational discussion that both liberal and non-liberal societies can accept. Those common criteria hold out the possibility of reconciling divergent ways of conceiving the good for human beings and for organizing social and political institutions.¹²

As we have seen, it is tempting to define the virtues as the dispositions to do what is deemed to be reasonable. This is especially pertinent to non-liberal societies. For them it is natural to say that the principal virtue is love of the good and the principal duty is to produce the good. What is right and praiseworthy will naturally tend to align and therefore appear to be logically joined by the substantive good. Indeed, it is just this tendency that accounts for the view that the evaluative component of thick ethical terms is logically dependent upon the descriptive components. After all if a virtue is *by definition* the disposition to do what is right, wrong *cannot* be done from virtue. But this, as we have seen is a mistake, and the mistake becomes obvious and crucial when we consider public policy debate within liberal democratic societies. That is because liberal democratic societies tend to be neutral on the question of what the good actually is, and therefore restrict their attention to the protection of rights and distribution of goods, *whatever they may be*. In liberal democratic societies the rights to be protected and the burdens and benefits to be shared are determined the *preferences* of their members. What is preferable is by definition more desirable than its alternatives, and what is desirable is determined by what is desired. As Mill, perhaps the first to articulate the liberal democratic vision, claims:

...the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people actually do desire it... No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.
(Mill/Troyer, *UTIL*, 1864/2003, p. 122)

Consider the form of liberalism that argues that the best economic system is one that more or less approximates free market capitalism. This form of liberalism presupposes that individuals will act in their economic self-interest, maximizing income and profit for themselves even at the expense of others. The justification for all this may be the thought that in the end the relentless pursuit of wealth will maximize the value of goods and services produced making it possible for everyone to enjoy a higher standard of

¹² I hope in subsequent work to show that *certain* structural elements of public policy debate are culturally invariant, which is arguably the basis on which prima facie antagonistic cultures can conduct discussions with a view to dealing with their differences in rational (and peaceful) ways. Section VI of this paper is a first step in that direction.

living. Or perhaps the justification is that the system protects the *right* of people to accumulate wealth without limit. In any case, this model presupposes that the desire for more and more will lead to behavior that will allow the free market to create more and more goods and services. And yet it is *logically possible* to approve of a system that maximizes wealth without approving of the acquisitiveness that the system presupposes. Liberal democratic societies are neutral on the conception of the good; indeed, for liberalism the good is what is desirable and what is desirable is determined by what is desired. This opens the gulf between what is deemed right or at least permissible and what is deemed to be virtuous. Mill himself proclaims as much about utilitarianism, but it can surely be attributed to competing forms of liberalism:

Utilitarians are quite aware that there are other desirable possessions and qualities besides virtue, and are perfectly willing to allow to all of them their full worth. They are also aware that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blamable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise. (Mill/Troyer, *UTIL*, 1864/2003, p. 211)

Recently Harrist and Richardson have devoted attention to this type of problem, which they identify as ‘the tension between the ethical poles of radical self-interest and significant commitment to others.’ (Harrist and Richardson, 2006, p.1) This public policy issue arises in connection with education. How are we to teach children to navigate the moral tempest created by conflicting values without appealing to a conception of the good? Harrist and Richardson conclude by echoing the lament of others, including Michael Sandel, who concludes that modern liberal society lacks a sense of community basically because it lacks a shared conception of the good. (Sandel, 1996, p. 6) In its most radical form, this complaint says that if the good is merely a matter of irrational (or perhaps just nonrational) existentialist commitment, there will not be a basis for preferring one policy to another. How can a society that attaches value to nothing except irrational or nonrational choice inspire loyalty or enthusiasm? But surely this objection to liberalism goes much too far. Even if one theorizes that all preferences are essentially irrational, one’s own preferences are after all one’s own, and the preferences of others, though admittedly no worse than one’s own, may be nonetheless mightily disagreeable.¹³

Those who are dissatisfied with the liberal vision of a morality may hope to provide their own vision of the good as a supplement to the basic governing principles of the liberal democratic state. Joanne Kuttner, for example, favors Catholic teaching. (Kuttner, 2006, p13f) She praises traits like fidelity, chastity, generosity, tolerance, respect for life from conception of natural death, care and compassion, service to those in need, equality, social justice, integrity, responsibility and community, all of which enjoy ecclesiastical blessing. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997 p. 5) These traits, however good they may be, are hardly liberal democratic values. Their claim on us derives not from what is deemed desirable because it is desired, but rather from what is inspired by the presumed ultimate authoritative source. Here is a venerable conception of the praiseworthy and the reasonable, but it is not one that can be expected to emerge from public policy debate within the liberal democratic polity.

¹³ Some liberals are more aggressive in their defense of liberalism, arguing that neutrality on the question of the substantive good is necessary to rational social and political schemes. See, for example, Allen Buchanan (2004, p. 130)

Criteria of Adequacy for Schemes of Moral Evaluation

Liberal democratic societies face a special challenge in public policy debate: It is to find a criterion for evaluating character traits that is *independent* of the rightness of acts. The fact that competing non-liberal societies do not face these challenges does not show that they are on firmer ground. Indeed, their value schemes are vulnerable to logical disruption, because they falsely believe that the value of actions and the traits from which they are done are logically dependent upon each other, joined by a substantive conception of the good that does not derive from people but rather is imposed upon them. But can liberal democratic societies do better? Can they reasonably hope that public policy debate will ultimately pair virtues with right acts?

Let us say that a system of values is *incoherent* if they tend to undermine each other when put into practice. Surely, we can say with confidence that policies should aim for *coherence*. Therefore, a society that values beneficence will not do well to adopt economic policies that depend upon the cultivation of acquisitive dispositions. A society that values human life will not do well to train its military leaders to sacrifice its soldiers out of pride. A society that values human dignity will do well to discourage or prohibit degrading pornographic images. A society that values concern for the greater good will do well to discourage consuming for the joy of consuming.¹⁴ These examples suggest that standard of *coherence* is more stringent than it may first appear. Even so, *coherence* alone is unlikely to glue right actions to virtuous motives without a substantive conception of the good.

Let us say that a system of values has *integrity* if and only if it rejects unprincipled exceptions. Obviously a society with integrity will inculcate the disposition to act from principle. This requirement not only rules out purely arbitrary behavior but it also rules out impulsive behavior. One can neither act from principle nor have the disposition to act from principle if one is ready to do whatever feels good at the moment. Integrity is a constraint upon public policy.

Let us say that a system of values is *adaptable* only if it can in principle accommodate changing circumstances affecting the relations among people. For example, increasing life spans and improvements in medical technology will likely increase the freedom to engage in behaviors that might at one time have been dangerous and reasonably constrained. A system that values freedom but restricts it unnecessarily, perhaps merely out of habit or tradition, is obviously in danger of incoherence, at once praising and unnecessarily restricting freedom at the same time. Every reasonable system of values will be adaptable.

Let us say that a system of values is *compulsive* if it mechanically rejects challenges to the values that it has established and that it is *responsive* if it patiently considers challenges to its values. Mechanically rejecting challenges is unreasonable, and a society that rejects what is reasonable is obviously incapable

¹⁴ An extreme version of this view is advanced by Singer who argues: ‘Everyone has a duty not to spend money on luxuries or frills, and to use the savings due to abstinence to help those in dire need.’ This follows from his demanding Principle of Sacrifice, which enjoins us to prevent evil when it does not involve morally significant sacrifices. (Singer, 1972, p. 235) Richard Miller argues against Singer, claiming that his principle has merit but that its demand goes too far. Appealing to a Hume-style principle of ‘sympathy,’ Miller argues that sympathy will provide what I have called a ‘prima facie’ reason to ‘transfer [goods] that goes far beyond current aid [to impoverished nations], even if it falls short of prohibiting luxuries and frills’ that is required by Singer’s demanding principle of sacrifice. (Miller, 2004, pp. 359, 383) This is an excellent illustration of how public policy debate will go in the liberal democratic context.

of identifying what is right. Closed, totalitarian societies mechanically reject challenges to established values and are therefore incapable of adapting to changing circumstances.

The values of coherence, integrity, responsiveness and adaptability inform and structure public policy debate about what is worth pursuing and worth avoiding. I want to call them ‘moral meta-values.’ I certainly do not claim that my list of moral meta-values is complete. However, I think that they show how it is possible for public policy debate to be intelligently and fruitfully undertaken without presupposing substantive conceptions of the good.¹⁵ Furthermore, those debates will not only involve ways to protect rights and maximize welfare (or something like that), but they will also include debates about moral education, which involve the attempt to pair reasonable actions with laudable traits. The goal of public policy debate in a liberal democratic society and the ground rules under which it is conducted are not meant to reveal eternal moral truths (even if there are any), but rather to assemble structures of mutually reinforcing moral values without vainly defining their connections into existence by presupposing conceptions of the good that most are likely to reject.

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¹⁵ It is another thing to show that the moral meta-values should also constrain public policy debate in non-liberal societies; that is to say, that non-liberal societies can be justly criticized on the ground of unreasonableness if they do not allow their public policy debates to be constrained by moral meta-values. This greater challenge and larger project is obviously beyond the scope of this paper.

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