

Towards a Dialectical Ethics beyond Objectivism and Relativism

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THE ETHICS OF INTEGRITY

Mason's response to the problems attendant upon relativism is to posit *the ethics of integrity*, "constituted by respect for the dignity of our and each other's being, and by taking responsibility for the consequences of moral choices." Mason's main objection to relativism is that it leads to social, interpersonal, and personal consequences that are morally unacceptable. He cites an impressive list of theorists who are also unwilling to accept the human costs of relativism and who also reassert norms of truth and justice. Of course, this reluctance to accept its implications does not justify the conclusion that relativism is false, but it does warrant a second look at its arguments. Concerning those arguments, Mason's other objection to relativism is that it does not follow simply from the fact of persistent disagreement. He argues that truth cannot be reduced to warranted assertability: "the ontological cannot be reduced to the epistemological."

SUPPORT FOR THE ETHICS OF INTEGRITY

Mason's first claim in defense of his ethics is that it can be logically derived from a "postmodern intuitionist morality" consisting of these two beliefs: that we have a prerational, presocial moral capacity and that this innate capacity defines us as human beings. To begin with, I think it is unhelpful to refer to these two beliefs as postmodern. Even if a variety of postmodern theorists do affirm some form of moral intuitionism, it does not follow that moral intuitionism is a postmodern position in any non-trivial sense of the term. If postmodernism is understood primarily as the epistemological stance of incredulity towards grand narratives, then characterising either an ethics or a relativism as postmodern says nothing more than it has abandoned the hope for certainty. Burbules has persuasively argued that postmodernism should not be understood as directly opposing such modernist ideals as truth and justice.¹ Mason thus creates unnecessary problems when he uses *postmodern* as equivalent to "anything goes" relativism — problems such as presenting his ethics as both based upon *and* beyond postmodern ethics. I think it would be more accurate for Mason to say, using Bernstein's terms, that he seeks a non-foundational ethics that finds the middle ground between objectivism and radical relativism.²

Questions about terminology aside, I am not convinced that the ethics of integrity can be logically derived from the beliefs Mason describes. His key claim in this regard is that "underlying an intuitionist position is an assumed principle: that we respect the dignity of our and each other's being as a prerequisite for the confidence we place in our and in other's moral positions." I am not clear about how we could get from this confidence to an obligation to respect the dignity of being in part because Mason does not explain what either "respect for the dignity of our and each other's being" or "confidence in our moral positions" are supposed to mean. Nor does he elaborate how they are related to our moral capacity. Is the obligation

to respect the dignity of being the content of a moral intuition or a deductively-derived implication of a philosophical commitment to intuitionism as a moral theory? Mason does describe the principle of respect as leading to a motivation to “act morally” — that is, to take responsibility for one’s choices — but I find the connection between the principle and the motivation also unclear. The obscurity of this chain of derivations from intuition to principle to motivation is later evident in Mason’s paper when the moral motivation arising from the principle of respect for the dignity of being is associated with Kant’s “rational intuition” which is *contrasted* to the moral motivation arising from the solidarity associated with postmodern ethics. The obscurity of the concepts involved is evident when we are offered at least three different candidates for the “essence of humanity”: (a) our moral capacity, (b) our commitment to the principle of respect, and (c) our moral responsibility — not to mention our “rational capacity” which is later introduced as “a further distinguishing characteristic of humanity.” In sum, Mason must clarify these terms and their interrelationships before I could accept that or even understand how the ethics of integrity can be derived from an intuitive morality.

Mason’s second claim in defense of his ethics is that, in its dialectical embrace of objectivity and solidarity, it finds the middle ground between foundationalism and relativism. I do think it is possible to differentiate two kinds of moral motivation that are also two kinds of moral responsibility, one kind arising from attraction to a vision of one’s ideal self as a rational and hence impartial agent, the other from face-to-face encounters. And it is possible that these two motivations would pull us in different directions. However, I do not see that such tension is inevitable, in part because I do not believe that affirming the inherent dignity of persons presupposes a moral stance that represses particularity and difference. Nor do I see how discursive moral principles might be “wrought” by a tension between these two motivations, or how acknowledging the tension will provide for productive debate among incommensurable moral traditions.

In my view, the kind of discursive moral principles that could avoid the extremes of objectivism and relativism emerge from another kind of dialectic mentioned by Mason. This is the dialectical interaction among particular moral intuitions, general moral principles, and broader background beliefs that is often referred to as the search for wide reflective equilibrium (WRE). This dialectical process draws upon both our moral and our rational capacities. It can incorporate both deontological and consequential moral considerations. It can allow for demands for impartiality *and* for the recognition of morally-salient differences when all things are *not* equal. And, finally, it can aspire to truth, even while acknowledging that its criteria of warranted belief are socially constructed.³ If we understand this kind of dialectical enquiry as the answer to relativism, then postulated moral principles and associated ontological commitments will have to be justified as most closely approaching the ideal of wide reflective equilibrium. This expectation also applies to the dialectical method itself. In other words, we must justify the method of seeking WRE by showing how it is consistent with actual ethical practice *and* with a wider view of knowledge and the world that would make such practice intelligible.

This expectation that the search for WRE should be justified in its own terms translates into two specific tasks for a dialectical ethics. The first is to explain how a putative capacity for moral intuition is compatible with the fact of persistent moral disagreement. Such an explanation would need to show how particular moral judgments or codes can be wrong and how such mistakes can be recognized and corrected. The second task is to explain what moral intuitions are intuitions *of*. As Mason observes, “the crucial question has to do with the origins of our moral intuitions since they are assumed to be the basic data for moral reasoning.” He commits himself to some form of moral realism when he states that a minimum level of ontological commitment is critical to discussion about values. Yet Mason appears uncertain about the ontological status of the origins of our moral intuitions, as are many others who take them as the basic data of our moral reasoning.⁴ I suspect that this uncertainty is related to the view that the truth of factual judgments depends upon the way things are, while that of ethical or moral judgments depends upon the way things should be. In this view, factual judgments are *descriptive*, moral judgments *prescriptive*.⁵ Mason appears to presume such a distinction in differentiating epistemological and moral relativism. But is not the intuition that persons should be treated with respect also an intuition that they are inherently *worthy* of that respect? If so, then such intuitions would seem to tell us something about the way things are *as well as* the way they should be. This suggests that, to defend an ethics beyond objectivism and relativism in ethics, we need to reexamine the ontological assumptions underlying the descriptive-prescriptive distinction.

To conclude: I agree with Mason that we need a metaethical position that is neither absolutistic nor relativistic, one that will draw from deontological and consequential moral traditions and take moral intuitions seriously. To defend such a position will require a more careful explanation of persons, intuitions, emotions, motivations, and practical judgments than Mason provides.

1. Nicholas C. Burbules, “Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 1995 (1996): 39–48.

2. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 8–12.

3. Kenneth Strike and Jonas Soltis, *The Ethics of Teaching*, 2d. ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 17, 29–30, 73–78.

4. Regarding the problems facing “coherentist” approaches to non-foundational justification that bracket the moral realism issue, see Douglas Odegard, “Introduction,” in *Anti-foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*, ed. Evan Simpson (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987), 139.

5. Strike and Soltis, *Ethics of Teaching*, 5–6.