

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

Do Moral Questions Ask For Answers?

Benjamin De Mesel, KU Leuven

Consider two situations:

- 1 Alexander is a researcher. He is on his way back to his hotel, after a boring conference day in a city that he has never been to before. On the way, however, he gets lost. At a crossing, he comes to the conclusion that he must either go straight or turn left.
- 2 Jonathan is Alexander's colleague. On the way to his hotel, after the same boring conference day in a city that he also has never been to before, Jonathan comes to the conclusion that he must either leave his wife or abandon his work in cancer research.¹

Both Alexander and Jonathan face a problem about what they should do. Jonathan's, however, is a moral problem, while Alexander's is not. Suppose that both men come to the conclusion that they cannot solve their respective problems and that they need help. A normal thing for Alexander to do would be to approach a passer-by and ask: 'Excuse me, I am looking for the Chelsea Hotel. Should I go straight or turn left here?' If Alexander is lucky, the passer-by would answer something like: 'You have to turn left here. The hotel is on the right side of the street.' A normal response for Alexander would be to thank the passer-by, immediately take her advice and turn left. We will call this scenario 'S1'.

Suppose now that Jonathan approaches a passer-by and asks: 'Excuse me, I am looking for a happy life. Should I leave my wife or abandon my cancer research?'² And suppose that the passer-by answers: 'You should definitely leave your wife.' Suppose that Jonathan thanks the passer-by, immediately takes her advice and leaves his wife. We will call this scenario 'S2'. While S1 is a realistic scenario, S2 is obviously absurd. Jonathan's question, the passerby's answer and Jonathan's reaction are neither normal nor realistic. And

¹ The example is Rush Rhees's. Rhees discussed it with Wittgenstein (Rhees 1965, 22).

² Instead of a happy life, Jonathan might say that he is looking for a virtuous life, a moral life or a good life. He might also say that he wants to act rationally or dutifully, that he wants to do whatever has the best consequences or that he wants to treat people as ends in themselves, depending on what he takes to be fundamental matters of moral concern. Whatever he says here, the scenario remains absurd.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

surely, we would not say that Jonathan is lucky if the passer-by had answered in the way that she does in S2.

The question, then, is as follows: why do we think that Alexander's question, the passerby's answer and Alexander's reaction to it are normal, while we think that Jonathan's question, the passerby's answer and Jonathan's reaction are absurd? In the first two sections of this article, I will try to answer that question, drawing on insights from Gaita and Wittgenstein, and explain where the crucial differences between S1 and S2 lie. In the third, concluding section, I will argue that these differences indicate characteristics of moral questions that have been overlooked all too often. I will conclude by arguing that these characteristics suggest that moral questions often do not ask for answers in the way that other questions do.

1. Why Is S2 Absurd?

There are many different kinds of questions. For reasons of space and clarity, though, I will only be concerned here with questions of the following form: 'Should I do x or y?' As the examples of Alexander and Jonathan show, these questions can be non-moral as well as moral in nature. In a *broad sense* of 'answer', an answer is 'what is said, written or done as a reaction to a question' (Soanes and Stevenson 2006, 64). According to this definition, non-moral as well as moral questions of the form 'Should I do x or y', in so far that they ask for reactions, ask for answers.

Suppose that one of my children is very ill and I ask my wife: 'Should I visit Olivia in the hospital or should I go to the cinema?' She could have any number of reactions. For instance, she could say, 'How dare you even ask such a stupid question!' She could say nothing at all and just stare at me indignantly at me for daring to ask such a stupid question, or she could even slap me in the face. These reactions qualify as answers in a broad sense, but they do not qualify as answers in a narrow sense. I will clarify what I mean by the 'narrow sense' of an answer. An answer in the *narrow sense* is one in which the only possible answers to a question of the form 'Should I do x or y?' are as follows: 'You should do x', 'You should do y', 'You should not do x', 'You should not do y', 'You should do both' (if x and y are not mutually exclusive) and 'You shouldn't do either' (if x and y do not exhaust the options). It is clear that this is the kind of answer (especially in the form 'You should do x' or 'You should

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

do y') that Alexander is looking for. The absurdity of Jonathan's conversation leads one to doubt whether the same holds true for him.

This doubt, of course, does not of itself lead to the conclusion that the difference between S1 and S2 is due to the fact that Jonathan's question, *because* it is a moral question, does not ask for an answer in the narrow sense. Other differences between the situations may account for the absurd character of Jonathan's conversation. A difference suggesting itself is that it is highly likely that the passer-by in S1, whom we will call Ada, knows everything she has to know in order to give a satisfying answer to Alexander's question. She may very well be a local who knows the area, meaning that she may have all the factual knowledge that she needs to properly help Alexander. Therefore, it is reasonable for Alexander to immediately take her advice.

Things are different, though, in S2. We will assume that Ada does not know Jonathan and has never seen him before. She clearly lacks any knowledge about Jonathan and of Jonathan's situation. Does he have any children and how old are they? What is his relationship like with his wife? Does he have any colleagues who could continue his work if he decided to abandon it? Etc. One might think that, the more information that Ada has about Jonathan, the less absurd S2 would be and, consequently, the more appropriate it would be for Jonathan to accept a 'narrow' answer. Imagine, then, the following variation of S2:

Jonathan: Excuse me, I am looking for a happy life.³ Should I leave my wife or abandon my cancer research?

Ada: I'm very sorry, but I don't know you and your situation well enough to be able to answer your question.

Jonathan: I understand. Fortunately, I have been keeping a detailed diary throughout my life. I have kept all of my letters and a biography has even been written about me. There is a biography about my wife too, and her diaries have been published recently. I will make sure that you get all of the information you might possibly need.

³ One could argue that this opening sentence makes every scenario that highly absurd. Hence, it becomes difficult to show that S3 is any more or less absurd than S2. I would like to emphasize that even if the opening sentence of S2 and S3 were quite innocent (such as 'Excuse me, I would like to ask you something'), S3 would not be any less absurd than S2. The fact that Ada recognizes the need for more information does not as such affect the scenario's degree of absurdity.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

Ada: Very well. I will take some time to study everything and I will send you an e-mail when I'm ready.

A month later, Jonathan receives an e-mail from Ada, stating that she has studied everything and come to the following conclusion: 'You should definitely leave your wife'. Let this scenario be 'S3'. If Jonathan now were to leave his wife immediately, would that be less absurd than his reaction in S2?

No, one might say, because it would not be reasonable for Jonathan to trust Ada's judgment. Even if she proves in her e-mail that her knowledge of Jonathan's situation is impeccable, she may not know what to do with it, how to process the information. Even if we assume that she has all the knowledge that she needs about Jonathan, she may lack the proper moral expertise or moral knowledge, i.e. knowledge about how, starting from a heap of information, one can come to a reasonable moral judgment. If that accounted for the strangeness of the conversation above, though, we could dissolve this problem by simply stipulating that Ada is a distinguished professor of ethics with countless publications in *Ethics* and *The Philosophical Review*. Jonathan may have read and appreciated her most famous book and recognized her from her photograph on the back flap. When seeing her on the street, he decides to ask his question because he takes her not only to have ample knowledge of the history of ethics and of ethical theories, but also to know what is morally relevant in concrete, everyday cases, as attested to by the eloquent way in which she applies her theory to concrete, everyday examples in her masterly book. Now, even if it was the case that Ada was a professor of ethics, or an otherwise morally competent and wise person whose expertise and knowledge of the subject it would be most reasonable for Jonathan to trust, would it be reasonable for Jonathan, after receiving the e-mail, to immediately tell his wife that he is leaving her?

No, I would say, even if the answer is maximally reliable, exhibits an impressive knowledge of Jonathan's situation and shows a strong capacity for moral reasoning that Jonathan would have no reason for distrusting.⁴ Of course, a distinguished professor of ethics would not talk to Jonathan like Ada does in S3. Why not though, if the only thing that she needs to be able to answer Jonathan's question is some information or knowledge, some input for her ethical theories to generate an output in the form of a reliable moral judgment?

⁴ This is known as the problem of moral deference. See Hopkins 2007; Jones 1999; McGrath 2009.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

Apparently, what is at stake here is not the reliability of Ada's answer. If Jonathan is reasonable, he will not reject the answer or refrain from immediately acting upon it because the answer is unreliable or because he suspects it to be wrong. That is why making Ada a professor of ethics does not fundamentally change the situation.⁵

Apart from differences in *reliability of the passersby and of their answers*, apart from the possibility that they *lack factual or moral knowledge*, what could account for the absurd character of S2, while S1 seems perfectly normal? Another possible answer is this: Alexander's question is very easy, but Jonathan's is enormously difficult. Thus, it is this difference in *levels of difficulty or degrees of complexity* that explains the different ways in which we respond to S1 and S2. If that were true, changing Alexander's question into an enormously difficult non-moral question would make his conversation as unreal as Jonathan's in S2. Imagine, then, the following variation of S1.

Alexander: Excuse me, I am looking for ways to maximize my investments. Should I buy shares in company x or in company y?

Ada: You should buy shares in company x.

So far, this scenario is at least as strange as S2. The difficulty of the question makes it unreasonable for Alexander both to ask the question to a stranger and to trust her answer. Let us change the scenario, though, as we did with S2; that is, let us stipulate that Alexander recognizes Ada as a distinguished professor of economics. If, in this scenario, which we will call 'S4', Ada promises to take some time to study everything, and if Alexander, after a month, receives an e-mail containing the conclusion 'You should buy some shares in company x', would it be unreasonable for Alexander to immediately do so?

S4 suggests that it is neither the difficulty nor the complexity of the question that accounts for the absurdity of S2.⁶ Another option is to say that it is not so much the difficulty, but the *importance* of the questions that makes all the difference. Indeed, 'Should I go straight or turn left here?' is probably far less important for Alexander than 'Should I leave my wife or abandon my research?' is for Jonathan. The consequences of a wrong answer are probably far

⁵ Those who do not think of professors of ethics as paradigms of reliability when it comes to dealing with moral questions are free to change 'professor of ethics' by 'wise person'.

⁶ If some would object to this example that the stock market question is not difficult enough in comparison to Jonathan's question, they are free to make Alexander's question more difficult. It will not fundamentally change the contrast with S2.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

easier for Alexander to deal with than they would be for Jonathan. This does not necessarily have to be the case, though. Suppose that Alexander has just received a phone call from his wife, telling him that one of his children is seriously ill, that he must come home as soon as possible and that he can take a plane in an hour. Alexander has to go to his hotel to take his passport. His question now becomes very important, and Ada, seeing how nervous he is, may well understand that. However, that obviously would not incline her not to give a straightforward answer or to think about it longer. Also, it would be strange if Alexander did not take her advice immediately and turn left.

I conclude that the difference between S1 and S2 cannot be adequately explained by referring to:

- 1 The probable lack of factual and/or moral knowledge and/or reasoning capacities of the passer-by in S2 compared to S1 and, consequently, the probable unreliability of her narrow answer; that is, the probability of its being false, the chance of there being a better narrow answer;
- 2 The difficulty or complexity of the question in S2 compared to S1;
- 3 The importance of the question in S2 compared to S1.

If one of these factors, or all three together, were enough to explain the difference between our reactions to S1 and S2, there would be no reason to doubt that Jonathan's question asks for a narrow answer of the form 'You should do x', because many difficult (2) and important (3) questions, even if they cannot be adequately or reliably answered without extra information or knowledge (1), *do* ask for narrow answers. It would be normal for Alexander to be disappointed or dissatisfied if Ada did not give a narrow answer to his difficult and important question that required so much information ('Should I buy some shares in company x or y?'). If someone said to him 'I cannot help you', Alexander would be justified in thinking that his question had not been answered at all (on a narrow conception of 'answer') or at least that this was not the answer (a broad answer) that he was looking for. I will argue that this is not necessarily the case for Jonathan.

2. Why S2 Is Absurd

2.1 Jonathan's question

If not for the reasons mentioned above, why is S2 so absurd? Let us first focus on Jonathan's question: 'Should I leave my wife or abandon my research?' It seems as if, although the

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

question would be meaningful in certain contexts, we cannot make sense of that question within the context of S2, as if language had gone ‘on holiday’ here (Wittgenstein 2009, § 117 and § 38). The question seems to lack the typical surroundings and circumstances, the environment in which it would actually be used and is ‘at home’ (Wittgenstein 2009, § 116). What are these ‘typical surroundings and circumstances’ and do they indeed account for the absurdity of S2?

First, there is something inappropriate in Jonathan’s asking this question to a total stranger. If Jonathan has to ask it at all, it seems that it would be better to ask it to one of his friends, to somebody who he knows and who knows him. But is that not exactly the problem we compensated for in S3? If Jonathan was to provide Ada with his full biography, providing the stranger with every bit of information that she might possibly want about Jonathan, would we not have to admit that she *knows* Jonathan? I do not think so. The crucial difference here is between *knowing everything about* Jonathan and *knowing* Jonathan or *knowing* Jonathan *personally*, between knowing *what* he is and knowing *who* he is. Hannah Arendt writes:

The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or ‘character’ in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us. (1958, 181)

Here, Arendt captures the intuition that one can know everything about Jonathan but not know him, and that one can know Jonathan but not know everything about him.⁷ The former happens when one knows about Jonathan only through ‘vocabulary’, through knowledge of paradoxically impersonal personal properties or through the biography and the diaries we have been referring to in S3. The stranger that has read every bit of information about Jonathan still lacks something essential to say that she properly knows him; what she lacks, is a *shared history* with him. They have had no life together. They have not gone through things together, they have not seen each other living their lives. They have not shared any experiences, indeed, they have never even seen each other before.

I do not want to suggest that Jonathan can only ask this question of friends, people that he likes or people that he knows very well. What is minimally required is *some* shared history. For instance, it may be reasonable to ask a stranger whom one considers morally competent or wise for moral advice. Take the people asking Father Zosima for advice in Dostoevsky’s *The*

⁷ See, in this respect, also Wittgenstein 1992, 90.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

Brothers Karamazov. It would not be reasonable for them to take Zosima's advice unless he made some effort to get to know them. Of course, that is precisely what Zosima does. He talks to people, gets to know them personally and, as it befits the wise, is very good at getting to know people personally in a short period of time. A wise or morally competent person is not someone who is able to produce a correct moral judgment on the basis of impersonal information and moral theories. The need for a shared history and personal knowledge in Jonathan's case explains why it would be ridiculous and of no help to Jonathan to answer his question as follows: 'I'm very sorry, but I do not feel competent to answer your question. Maybe you should post your question on a specialized internet forum. Or take a subscription to *Ethics*.' Would it be equally stupid to advise Alexander to take a subscription to a distinguished financial magazine or to post his question on a specialized internet forum in order to see in which company he should invest his shares? The need for a shared history and personal knowledge further explains why we would reject the idea of a machine answering Jonathan's question: could we even imagine trusting a 'moral machine' with all the information about our lives and circumstances as input and a moral judgment as output? Compare this with the role played by computers in stock market advice or with the idea of a machine showing Alexander the way to his hotel. These machines exist, of course, and we trust them and act upon their 'advice' all the time. A moral GPS, by contrast, upon the advice of which it would be reasonable to act immediately, does not even figure in science-fiction.

2.2 *Mary's answer*

Let us take the need for a shared history and personal knowledge into account and stipulate that Jonathan asks his question to someone he knows and shares some history with; say, to his friend Mary. Why would it be inappropriate for Mary to answer 'You should definitely leave your wife'? First, there is something wrong with giving such a quick answer to Jonathan's question. Things are different for Alexander, particularly in the situation where his child is seriously ill. As to his question of whether to buy shares in company x or y, of course, Alexander may not expect such a quick answer. If he asks this question to a world-leading specialist who happens to know the companies very well, though, and if she stresses the word 'definitely' in saying that Alexander should *definitely* buy shares in company y, would it be unreasonable for Alexander to trust the answer and immediately act upon it? Of course, the economist may not happen to know the companies very well, and a quick answer may not be

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

forthcoming. The point is that there seems to be no equivalent notion of ‘happening to know’ in moral cases. What if Mary replied to Jonathan’s question as follows: ‘This is one moral question that I happen to know the answer to. You should definitely leave your wife’?

The quickness of the answer seems to be a problem in Jonathan’s case. If someone were to answer his question as quickly as Mary does, we would think that she had not seriously considered the question or thought it through. Indeed, this is a situation in which *seriously considering the question* is necessary.⁸ This is not because the question is particularly difficult. Computers can solve immensely difficult questions in less than a second and we have no problem with the fact that they do not seriously consider things. Computers simply cannot be said to seriously consider questions. This is one of the reasons why we would never seriously ask a computer a question like Jonathan’s and why we would never trust and act upon whatever answer that it provided to such a question. In order for Mary’s answer to be acceptable to Jonathan, Mary’s *attitude* is important. Jonathan has to believe that her attitude (something computers do not have) is marked not only by seriousness, but also by *engagement and commitment*, by a genuine *interest* in the question. Alexander, for sure, would not deplore the passerby’s or the economist’s having such an attitude, but he need not believe that they have it in order to trust and act upon their answers. On this point, I agree with Raimond Gaita:

We would not seek moral advice from someone whom we knew to be morally jaded. Being scientifically jaded, however, in the sense of one’s interest in science having ‘gone dead’ on one, is of itself no bar to a scientist’s authority to speak in his field, provided only that his memory is good and that he has not been jaded for too long, for if he had been, we would be doubtful whether he had sufficient energy or interest to keep up with his subject. (2004, 103)

The first problem with Mary’s answer is that its quickness seems to preclude a certain attitude that Jonathan’s question asks for. The second problem is that it is somehow too naked, too hard, too head-on, too straightforward, too direct and, indeed, too narrow. If Jonathan were asking for a narrow answer, then a maximally reliable narrow answer, given by someone who he knows and who knows him, someone who has all the knowledge and reasoning capacities that she needs, someone who is aware of the difficulty and importance of the question, someone who is interested and committed and has seriously considered the question, would be what he wanted. But even if Mary was someone like that and if she took her time to answer, Jonathan would not be satisfied with the naked answer. It would be

⁸ On the importance of seriousness in characterizations of the moral, see Gaita 2004, *passim*.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

perfectly reasonable for him to just ask: ‘How do you know that? Why would you say that?’ In other words, he would want to know Mary’s *reasons* for saying what she says: does she think his research would save many lives, that nobody could take it over from him, that his wife will find another man, that he will regret it if he does not leave her, etc. Does this ‘wanting to know the reasons’ distinguish Jonathan’s situation from Alexander’s? It would be strange if Alexander asked Ada why she thinks he should turn left, but would it not be normal if he would want to know the economist’s reasons for recommending that he buy shares in company x? If Alexander was curious or interested in economics, it certainly would. The point is, however, that Alexander does not have to be curious or interested in economics. Perhaps he just wants to know what he should do with his money. He does not need to be interested in the reasons; he could just as well say ‘I am not interested in her reasons. What counts is that her answer is right’.

Things are certainly different for Jonathan here. The difference is quite similar to the one Wittgenstein points at in ‘A Lecture on Ethics’:

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said ‘Well, you play pretty badly’ and suppose I answered ‘I know, I’m playing badly but I don’t want to play any better,’ all the other man could say would be ‘Ah then that’s all right.’ But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said ‘You’re behaving like a beast’ and then I were to say ‘I know I behave badly, but then I don’t want to behave any better,’ could we then say ‘Ah, then that’s all right’? Certainly not; he would say ‘Well, you *ought* to want to behave better.’ (Wittgenstein 1993, 38-39)

Similarly, if Alexander was to say ‘I don’t want to know her reasons’, we could just say ‘Ah, then that’s all right’. We could not say the same for Jonathan, though, if he decided that he did not want to know Mary’s reasons. Reasons play a different role in Alexander’s and Jonathan’s respective cases. Drawing from Gaita, I would say that Jonathan is asking his question not only because he wants to find out what to do, but also because he wants to *achieve a deepened understanding of the meaning of the alternatives*: ‘A deepened understanding of the *meaning* of our actions [...] is a mark [...] of what we should understand by having arrived at a ‘right answer’ to a moral question’ (2004, 264). If Mary says that Jonathan should leave his wife because ‘You will save many lives’, then she is urging Jonathan to think of his leaving his wife as of something that saves lives. To leave his wife would not just have the saving of lives as a consequence, it would *mean* or *be* to save lives. Mary portrays the alternatives in a certain light so that Jonathan will understand them in a certain way. The more Jonathan finds that this way of putting things deepens his understanding of the situation, the more likely he is to think

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

that his question has been satisfactorily answered, even if no direct or straightforward answer is forthcoming. Imagine Mary saying things like ‘You will save many lives and you will regret it if you do not leave her. On the other hand, her life will be ruined and she may never forgive you’ without her giving a narrow answer. Compare this with her saying ‘You should definitely leave your wife’. Jonathan may well prefer the first kind of answer.⁹ That is, reasons or explanations and novel perspectives on the situation do not play a subordinate role in Jonathan’s case as they do in Alexander’s, where they serve as a kind of road leading to the final destination which is the narrow answer. The ultimate aim here is the narrow answer, and those who are curious may optionally ask ‘How did you get there?’¹⁰ Jonathan may not want Mary to bring him to a final destination. Instead, he wants her to show paths that he may take and that he may not have known or thought of.

In this context, we should discuss another possible answer to Jonathan’s question. In a realistic scenario, Mary could answer ‘Should I leave my wife or abandon my research?’ by asking why Jonathan believes that he has to either leave his wife or to abandon his research. She would thereby invite him to reconsider the situation and the way in which he frames it.¹¹ Are the two options really mutually exclusive, as Jonathan seems to think? Mary’s reaction to Jonathan’s question consists in challenging the very terms in which the question is asked (and the absurdity of S2 can be explained partly by referring to the fact that the passer-by straightforwardly and without hesitation accepts the terms of the question). This challenge may lead Jonathan to achieve a deepened understanding of the meaning of the alternatives (perhaps they are not mutually exclusive at all, perhaps they are not really alternatives,

⁹ An anonymous reviewer remarks that ‘whether Jonathan prefers ‘You will save many lives’ over ‘You should definitely leave your wife’ depends on whether or not he is someone who wants to make his own decisions and take responsibility for them, i.e. someone who values autonomy. Certainly, not everybody does.’ I agree and, as I will repeat in the third part of this article, I readily admit that there are cases in which a person is asking for a narrow answer. Indeed, there are situations in which it would be absurd to withhold a quick, straightforward moral judgment of the form ‘You should do x’. Far from claiming that the latter is always unwelcome in moral cases, my claim is that one cannot assume that it is always appropriate. It suffices for my purposes, then, to show that we can clearly imagine a situation in which and a person for whom such an answer would certainly not be appropriate. Therefore, we could simply stipulate that Jonathan values autonomy without harming the argument.

¹⁰ The idea that reasons and explanations are not optional in moral cases as they are in many non-moral cases (that the hierarchy between reasons and conclusions is different in moral and non-moral cases) is present in Williams’s famous remark that ‘anyone who is tempted to take up the idea of there being a theoretical science of ethics should be discouraged by reflecting on what would be involved in taking seriously the idea that there were experts in it. It would imply, for instance, that a student who had not followed the professor’s reasoning but had understood his moral conclusion might have some reason, on the strength of his professorial authority, to accept it [...] These Platonic implications are presumably not accepted by anyone’ (1995, 205).

¹¹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion. Diamond emphasizes that ‘in moral life we are not in general confronted with cases the description of which can be taken to be simply given’ (2002, 238). See also Diamond 1991 and Gaita 2004, 64-73.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

perhaps there are other options, etc.). It counts as a broad answer, but not as a narrow one. In the end, of course, Mary may give a narrow answer to Jonathan's question. As we have seen, 'You should do both' and 'You should do neither' qualify as narrow answers.¹² It is not my aim to argue that narrow answers are *never* appropriate. I only want to make a case for the much weaker claim that they are *not always* appropriate, that it should not be assumed that moral questions ask for narrow answers. The point here is that, if Jonathan wants to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of the alternatives, a broad answer is often enough. A narrow answer is not necessarily what Jonathan asks for.

The above considerations regarding the primacy of reasons and understanding above narrow answers in Jonathan's case suggest that Mary's narrow answer 'You should definitely leave your wife' indicates her misunderstanding of the kind of question Jonathan has asked her and of the kind of answer he is looking for. We have called Mary's answer not only too narrow and too naked, but also too hard and too direct. Giving ample explanations and providing reasons may help to compensate for the narrowness and the nakedness of the answer. Nevertheless, if Mary were to conclude the conversation with Jonathan with the words 'You should definitely leave your wife', her answer would still be too hard and too direct. While it could lead to a deepened understanding of the meaning of Jonathan's alternatives, it would still completely ignore the *delicacy* (rather than the importance or the difficulty) of the question. This is what makes the word 'definitely' so inappropriate, even insulting here. This is very different from what we said with respect to the economist's answer. Adding the word 'definitely' adds to the acceptability of the answer 'You should definitely buy shares in company x'. Alexander may think: 'Well, if she is so sure about it, I should buy these shares immediately'. Mary's stressing the word 'definitely', however, would make her answer rather less acceptable to Jonathan, who is likely to think that Mary simply

¹² One could argue that what accounts for our different reactions to S1 (normal) and S2 (absurd) has to do with the fact that Alexander's question in S1 presents two mutually exclusive options (one cannot both go straight and turn left), while the options presented in S2 are not mutually exclusive (one can be married and do research). Consider, in that regard, S4, where Alexander asks whether he should buy shares in company x or y. These options are not mutually exclusive (one can buy shares in company x and in company y). In a realistic scenario, the economist could ask him why he believes that he has to either buy shares in company x or in company y, and this question could lead Alexander to achieve a better understanding of these alternatives. However, such an understanding is optional (see p.10). If Alexander would say 'I don't want to achieve a better understanding of the alternatives, I just want the economist to tell me what I should do', we could say 'Ah, then that's all right'. By contrast, we expect Jonathan to want to achieve a better understanding of the alternatives. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, we could say that he *ought* to want that. Thus, the contrast between Alexander's and Jonathan's cases remains, even if one compares two scenarios in which the options are not mutually exclusive. Consequently, the difference between their cases cannot be adequately explained by referring to the fact that Alexander's options in S1 are mutually exclusive while Jonathan's in S2 are not.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

cannot be so entirely certain. He may even distrust her for her being so sure, thinking something like ‘If Mary is so sure, maybe she just *wants* me to leave my wife. After all, she has always been very fond of me.’ ‘Definitely’ thus emphasizes the harshness of Mary’s answer, but it would be wrong to believe that leaving ‘definitely’ out would be leaving the harshness out: ‘You should leave your wife’ may still be too strong, even between good friends (unless, of course, Jonathan’s case was very clear, but then it is difficult to understand why Jonathan would be struggling with the question in the first place).¹³

2.3 Jonathan’s reaction

What, then, is so strong, so harsh about Mary’s answer ‘You should leave your wife’? My suggestion is that the answer is too closed: it leaves Jonathan with no choice. It is as if Mary has already made the decision for Jonathan, and that is something Jonathan that he may not appreciate. If Jonathan is to be a morally responsible and autonomous person, he has to make the decision for himself.¹⁴ That is why his reaction to immediately leave his wife, irrespective of the content of the answer and irrespective of his interlocutor, has appeared absurd throughout this article. He may ask for advice, of course, but he has to seriously think about it before he can act upon it. In a notably relevant passage, Gaita writes:

If I seek your advice on which is the best route off the mountain, then the nature of what I do in asking for it, and what you do in giving it, is conditioned by the fact that I may hand the problem over to you completely (perhaps you are better at it, or perhaps I have lost my nerve), by the fact that I may consult manuals and by other such familiar facts. But if I must make a moral decision by Monday, I cannot come to you on Friday evening, plead that I have little time over the weekend to think about it, and ask you, a rational and informed agent and a professor of ethics to boot, to try to have a solution, or at least a range of options, no later than first thing on Monday morning. (2004, 103)

Alexander’s questions are questions which can be handed over to someone else: he is happy to immediately act upon the passerby’s and the economist’s answers. He hands the question over to somebody who knows more about it and he lets experts make the decision for him. Moreover, it does not really matter who answers the question, as long as it is an expert. If Ada does not know where Alexander’s hotel is, she may call her husband, ask him about it and

¹³ This does not mean that ‘You should (definitely) leave your wife’ is always too strong. I readily admit that there are cases in which such an answer would be appropriate and that, as a reviewer pointed out, ‘sometimes our friends know what would be right for us better than we do’.

¹⁴ For different views on this point, see Anscombe 1981; Driver 2006; Hertzberg 2002; Hopkins 2007; Jones 1999; Rhee 1999.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

pass on the answer to Alexander. If Ada the economist has no time to answer Alexander's question, she may refer him to a colleague or to an assistant. What if Mary were to approach another friend of Jonathan's, though, saying: 'Well, Jonathan has asked me this question, but I have no time, could you think about it instead?'

So Jonathan's question is Mary's to answer, but his decision is, as Gaita formulates it, '*non-accidentally and inescapably*' his (2004, 103). This is why an answer that comes too close to a decision, an answer that does not leave enough room for Jonathan to make his decision himself, like 'You should leave your wife', is unwelcome. It ignores the delicacy of the question, even if 'definitely' is nowhere to be found in the answer. It smells of arrogance, when Mary's response instead needs what Paul Johnston calls 'moral modesty', or the recognition that she cannot make the decision for Jonathan and that she should not tell Jonathan what to do (Johnston 1999, 87).¹⁵ This need for moral modesty, indeed, this *moral demand* for moral modesty is conspicuously absent in most moral philosophy.¹⁶

To say that Jonathan's decision is inescapably his to make is not to say that the content of Mary's response is of no importance, so long as she takes the question seriously, shows commitment, etc. After all, Jonathan is trying to find out what he should do. What Mary says may of course well have an important influence on Jonathan's decision, but what will influence Jonathan is not so much Mary's conclusion as her reasons. Things are precisely the other way round in Alexander's case. Mary's reasons may show Jonathan new ways of seeing his situation, ways of understanding what it would mean to decide this or that. They may point out things that Jonathan overlooked or somehow forgot to take into consideration. To say that Jonathan's decision is ultimately his, though, is to say that the weight of these considerations, their relevance for Jonathan's ultimate decision, are not for Mary to fix.¹⁷ If Mary tells him 'You will regret it if you do not leave her', this is something that Jonathan may

¹⁵ One should be recognize that Johnston's notion of moral modesty slightly differs from mine, but the differences are not important for our present purposes.

¹⁶ For example, Uri Leibowitz writes that 'General moral advice is a statement of the following form: *perform* action A if and/or only if ψ ' (2009, 350). Notable exceptions to the absence of a demand for moral modesty in moral philosophy can be found in Gaita 2004 ('It is sometimes presumptuous even to *think* that another person ought to do something, even though we are quite sure what we ought to do if we were in their situation', 92) and Phillips 1964: 'I do not propose to give positive advice. A man's life may be at stake whatever you do. I am prepared to clarify the issues involved as I see them, but you must draw your own moral conclusion.' Not only is it recognized here that the decision is to be made by the person who asks a moral question, there is also a clear commitment to clarification of the meaning of the alternatives. The moral advice offered here is reminiscent of what Wittgenstein says about Rhees's example (Rhees 1965, 22-23). It is not surprising, in this respect, that some of Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics seem to make a case for moral modesty (see, for example, Waismann 1965, 16 and Bouwsma 1986, 45). For a detailed discussion, see my ***

¹⁷ See, on this point, Rhees 1999, 50 and 89.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

decide to take into consideration. It may very well help him, but in no way does it amount to telling him what he should do. He might judge that it is true, but unimportant. However, if Mary was to say ‘You should leave her, because you will regret it if you don’t’, she would not be morally modest, because she would not be allowing Jonathan enough room to speak for himself. Things are different in Alexander’s case: presumably, Alexander expects the economist to fix the relative weight of different considerations, not just to point out everything that he should take into consideration. That does not mean that the economist would be entirely unhelpful in only doing the latter. It only means that Alexander may well feel that there is something lacking, that the economist could have done more to help him. Of course, it does not mean that Alexander would always be fully satisfied with a narrow answer either. He may very well want to know the economist’s reasons for advising as she does. But, as we have seen, the role of reasons seems to be different here from their role in Jonathan’s case. Asking for the economist’s reasons is an *option* for Alexander, and it would not be strange if he were not interested in them.

So although Jonathan is clearly trying to find out what he should do, my conclusion is that we should not assume that he wants other people to tell him what he should do, even if he asks them what he should do. He may only want others to help him make a decision.¹⁸ That is why it would be better for Mary, after serious consideration, etc., to be morally modest, so that she can ultimately leave the decision up to Jonathan. Nevertheless, if she thinks that she should draw a conclusion, a good way to do it may be to speak for herself. She could considerably soften ‘You should leave your wife’ by saying ‘I would leave her’ or ‘If I were you, I would leave her’. Such an answer, evidently far more delicate than the rude ‘You should definitely leave your wife’, respects Jonathan’s moral autonomy, stresses that Mary can only speak for herself, but at the same time (if Mary has seriously considered etc.) is likely to help Jonathan in making his decision. Many other possibly helpful responses can be thought of, while in Alexander’s case it is quite clear that the most helpful responses will be of the narrow answer form ‘You should do x’. Suppose, for example, that Mary concludes her answer by saying ‘I am terribly sorry, but I really cannot help you with this. I see no solution. But let’s talk about it again soon.’ It is my contention that such an answer, which is also a recognition of Jonathan’s moral autonomy by someone who he knows and considers morally

¹⁸ Here, I agree with Rhees: ‘Often I should like to know what so and so would have done in my place. And I may find it helpful or believe I shall find it helpful if he will tell me. Helpful in coming to a decision. This is not the same as looking to him for the answer’ (1999, 69).

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

competent, may be the core of an ideal answer to his question. It shows that Mary understands the kind of question that Jonathan is asking her. She recognizes that the problem is delicate and fragile, that it requires a certain attitude and careful attention.

I do not want to suggest that in *every* case wherein a person asks for moral advice, it is appropriate for the advisor to tell the advisee that she sees no solution or to give a broad answer. In many cases, it would be paternalistic or even arrogant for an advisor to withhold her ideas about what a solution could look like. Again, I want to emphasize here what I wrote in the previous section (2.2): it is not my aim to argue that narrow answers are *never* appropriate, I only want to make a case for the much weaker claim that they are *not always* appropriate.

3. Moral Questions and Narrow Answers

We have seen that the difference between Jonathan's and Alexander's scenarios cannot be adequately explained by referring to a lack of knowledge or reasoning capacities of the passer-by, the probable unreliability of her narrow answer or the difficulty or importance of the question. Rather, a question such as Jonathan's, in contrast to Alexander's:

- 1 Is typically asked in a situation in which both parties in the conversation know each other personally, have a shared history;
- 2 Asks for serious consideration, engagement, commitment and interest;
- 3 Asks for an answer recognizing its delicacy;
- 4 Asks for an answer offering a deeper understanding of the meaning of the alternatives;
- 5 Asks for an answer recognizing that Jonathan's decision is non-accidentally and inescapably his.

These five characteristics are not exclusively tied to Jonathan's question. They are obviously present in many moral questions and we may assume that morally competent persons understand that they are. If Mary answers Jonathan's question by saying 'You should definitely leave your wife', she has misunderstood the kind of question that Jonathan has asked her and the kind of answer that Jonathan has asked her for.

One could object to my calling the five aforementioned points 'characteristics' of Jonathan's and similar questions. After all, they do not seem to characterize the question itself, but rather the situation in which it is asked. According to Wittgenstein, however, this

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

dichotomy is deeply mistaken. To take a question out of the home in which it has its life, to ask it outside a particular language-game in order to study it, as philosophers tend to do, is likely to produce seriously distorted and ultimately useless results. It is as if one wanted to study the behaviour of a mammal in a vacuum. If one wants to understand what a question means, one has to look at the situations in which it is being used. What characterizes a question is what typically happens before and after, its typical context or ‘surrounding’, the circumstances in which we use it, what occasions it and what inferences are being drawn from it, what its typical antecedents and consequences are, what we use it for and what we do with it, how one typically reacts or responds to it, etc.¹⁹ These are not external features, somehow added to the core meaning of the question. They determine what the question means and what kind of question it is in the first place. If one does not know the typical context of a question, what its antecedents and consequences are, how one typically responds to it, etc., one simply does not understand the question.

I do not claim that these five characteristics distinguish moral questions from other kinds of questions (even less that they do so unequivocally and sharply), that these characteristics make questions moral questions or that they account for ‘the’ specificity of moral questions. I simply do not think that a list of necessary and sufficient characteristics, conditions or requirements could ever do so.²⁰ The boundaries between moral and non-moral questions are blurred and I will let that be so. Rather, I have tried to explain why S2 is absurd compared to S1 by reference to some characteristics of the question in S2. The characteristics of Jonathan’s question allow us to say that *one cannot presuppose that moral questions of the form ‘Should I do x or y?’ ask for narrow answers, because broad answers will often do better in respecting the typical surrounding (partly reflected in these characteristics) of such*

¹⁹ See Wittgenstein 1969, 58, 103, 174; Wittgenstein 1978, 68-72; Wittgenstein 1980a, § 34, § 366, § 367, § 571, § 627, § 780, § 850, § 1003, § 1123; Wittgenstein 1980b, § 63, § 148, § 149, § 162, § 262, § 345, § 636, § 651, § 655.

²⁰ Driver 2006 shows that considerations of autonomy may require us not to give a narrow answer in moral as well as in non-moral cases. An anonymous reviewer suggests considering Alexander’s money question in this regard: could it not be that considerations of autonomy will, in certain circumstances, require the economist to give a broad answer here? The answer is yes. What this shows is precisely that the characteristics of moral questions are not to be thought of as necessary (because considerations of autonomy are not equally relevant in all moral cases and may be even irrelevant in some) or sufficient (because considerations of autonomy may well be relevant in non-moral cases too) conditions and that the boundaries between moral and non-moral questions are blurred (one could argue that, by taking Alexander’s autonomy into account, the advisor shows that she is sensitive to a moral aspect of what seemed to be a non-moral question). That does not, however, harm the overall argument. The fact that there are non-moral cases (or cases on the border between moral and non-moral) in which a broad answer is asked for does not weaken the point that it should not be assumed that moral questions ask for narrow answers.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

questions. As we have seen, broad answers have an advantage over narrow ones when it comes to, for example, offering a deeper understanding of the meaning of the alternatives or in recognizing Jonathan's moral autonomy. That is not to say that non-moral questions always ask for narrow answers, nor is it to say that moral questions never do.²¹ (I readily admit that there are cases in which a narrow answer is what is asked for, indeed, in which it would be absurd to withhold a quick, straightforward moral judgment of the form 'You should do x'.) It is to say, however, that the demand for a certain kind of answer, recognizing for example the delicacy of the question, is not a demand for politeness. It is not a demand to couch one's answer in softer terms to achieve a certain effect, not a demand to add something to or do something with the essentially narrow answer to make it more acceptable.²² And it is to say that it would be inconsiderate to simply assume the ideal answer to a moral question to be a narrow answer or that the ideal answer at its core was narrow answer. It suggests that, in many cases, such as Jonathan's, a narrow answer is simply not what is being asked for by a moral question. One may take this to be reflected in Wittgenstein's remarks that 'ethics cannot be expressed' and that 'men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted' (1981, 6.421 and 6.521). In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein takes bipolar propositions as his model for what can be said. Because the answers to moral questions often cannot be cast in the mold of this model, the mold of a bipolar narrow answer of the form 'You should (not) do x', they do not belong to what can be said. However, there are ways of showing what cannot be said, of showing one's interlocutor some possible ways of thinking about or perceiving the situation. According to a strictly limited notion of 'saying', such as the early Wittgenstein's, showing these ways does not

²¹ Some may find it misleading that I have been assuming that moral questions, although they do not always ask for narrow answers, are to be thought of as real questions. The early Wittgenstein, for example, wrote that 'a question [can] only [exist] where there is an answer' (1981, 6.51), and he seems to use 'answer' in the sense of 'narrow answer'. Thus, one could say that a question is not *really* a question if it does not ask for a narrow answer, or that it is then 'only' a broad question. However, this is not really an objection to my view at all. If someone denied that moral questions are always real questions because they do not always ask for narrow answers, I would be happy to allow for the term 'request' or 'invitation' instead of 'question'. I would be equally happy with 'response' instead of 'broad answer'.

²² This is what Leibowitz suggests. Although he takes the general form of moral advice to be 'perform action A if and/or only if ψ ' or 'perform action A', he admits that 'we sometimes give/receive advice in different forms; e.g., 'think about the consequences', or 'if I were you, I would do A'. But strictly speaking, these forms of advice do not help us decide which action to perform; they could be helpful if they are understood as shorthand for something like the following: 'think about the consequences, and perform the action that you believe would lead to the best possible consequences'; and 'Perform action A if you want to perform that action that I would have performed if I were you'. So even if moral advice does not explicitly take the form: *perform* action A if and/or only if ψ , we should be able to restate it in this format' (2009, 350).

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

amount to saying anything. According to a narrow notion of ‘answer’, showing these ways is not answering the question, but dealing with it or treating it.²³ Barry Stroud writes: ‘Treating a question is not the same as answering it. Answering it might be the worst thing to do with it. I believe that happens in philosophy’ (2001, 42).

Why is it important to note that moral questions do not always ask for narrow answers? Because exactly this assumption marks most philosophical accounts of morality, for example many of those that presuppose the ideal answer to a moral question to be a moral judgment.²⁴ Some Wittgensteinian philosophers, such as Alice Crary, have convincingly shown that ‘moral philosophers generally agree in assuming that moral thought invariably comes in the form of moral judgments’ (2007, 1) and expressed ‘hostility to the fixation on moral judgments characteristic of recent work in ethics’ (2007, 3).²⁵ I agree with them on that point: a fixation on moral judgments is to be deplored, because it testifies to a misunderstanding of what many moral questions ask for. To be sure, there is no necessary connection between moral judgments and narrow answers. ‘You should think about it again carefully and take into account ...’ is a moral judgment, but not a narrow answer. Still, if only moral judgments are candidates for answers to moral questions, many broad answers that are not moral judgments (such as ‘I’m terribly sorry, but I cannot help you, let’s talk about it again soon’, ‘I don’t know what to say’, ‘Maybe you could see it like this’, ‘You will regret it if you do not leave her’ and ‘You will save many lives’) will simply not be taken into account. Thus, to focus on moral judgments is to unnecessarily narrow the range of possible answers to moral questions. It is not surprising, then, that many (but surely not all) of those who only

²³ In my view, then, the conflict between the early Wittgenstein’s ‘ethics cannot be expressed’ and the fact that the later Wittgenstein seems to allow for (or at least not to offer principled reasons against) moral language-games (see Wittgenstein 2009, § 77 and § 304) is not in the first place a conflict between views on ethics, but a conflict between understandings of ‘saying’ and ‘expressing’. *If* one limits what can be said or expressed to bipolar propositions (as Wittgenstein does in the *Tractatus*), if one uses ‘saying’ and ‘expressing’ in a limited technical sense, *then* ethics cannot be expressed. But *if* one broadens what can be said or expressed to what we take ‘saying’ and ‘expressing’ to mean in everyday use (§ 116), and if one takes the whole variety of language-games into account (§ 23), then ethics can be expressed. Thus, both the early and the later Wittgenstein would refuse to limit ethics to bipolar propositions, but neither the early nor the later Wittgenstein would claim that, if we understand ‘saying’ and ‘expressing’ as we do in everyday life, ethics cannot be expressed.

²⁴ Moral judgments are mostly understood as judgments that apply moral concepts to actions, persons or personal qualities (Crary 2007, 1), and that is how I use the term here. Although there is considerable disagreement over which concepts are moral, concepts like ‘right’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘wrong’, ‘duty’ as well as concepts for virtues and vices (‘courage’, ‘brutality’, ‘kindness’) are commonly taken to be such concepts. To morally judge is to tell somebody what would be right, good, bad, wrong, courageous, etc. for him/her to do, and therefore (if we assume that one has to do what is right, good or courageous and refrain from doing what is bad or wrong) to tell him/her what (s)he is obliged, should or ought to do.

²⁵ On this point, see also Diamond 1996 and 2002. For a detailed discussion, see my ***

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

take moral judgments into account, exemplify this narrowing tendency by further limiting the range of possible answers to narrow answers (see, for example, Gibbons 2010; Kieseewetter 2011; Leibowitz 2009; Thomson 2001).

The fact that moral questions do not always ask for narrow answers is difficult (but not necessarily impossible) to deal with for moral theories. Most moral theories start from the fact that ‘there is’ a moral question, for instance the question ‘Should Jonathan do x or y?’, regardless of whether someone actually asks the question. They do not take into account the concrete dialogical or conversational situation in which the question is asked and has to be answered.²⁶ Given the that characteristics we mentioned, which are all tied precisely to this situation (they all refer to a dialogical situation and to the parties in that situation), this means that they do not understand the questions that they are trying to answer. Theorists then assume that questions such as Jonathan’s require a narrow answer, like Alexander’s questions do. Consequently, their dealing with Jonathan’s question yields either:

- 1 An answer of the kind ‘Jonathan should do x’, ‘Jonathan should do y’, ‘Jonathan should not do x’, ‘Jonathan should not do y’, ‘Jonathan should do both’ or ‘Jonathan should not do either’;
- 2 The conclusion that the right narrow answer has not yet been found;
- 3 The conclusion that there is no such determinate answer, that Jonathan faces a moral dilemma, meaning that Jonathan’s doing x would be equally right or wrong as his doing y.²⁷

In all cases, the ideal of a narrow answer is presupposed. The disagreement between moral theories is a disagreement over the content of our narrow answer, not a disagreement over the question of whether we should (try to) narrowly answer the question at all. The second case, in which no such answer has been found, is then seen by theorists as a failure on their part, while it is often thought to count against moral theories if they yield many conclusions of the third kind.²⁸ The problem, though, is not that no narrow answer is forthcoming, the problem is not that Jonathan’s is a genuine dilemma, the problem is not that there are situations in which

²⁶ For example, theories claiming to provide a decision procedure often do not distinguish between the person who asks a moral question and has to make a decision (Jonathan) and the person who is asked to answer the question (Mary). The latter is offered a decision procedure, but she is not the one who has to make the decision. For Wittgenstein’s insistence on the essentially relational character of ethical reflection, see Christensen 2011.

²⁷ For a useful overview of literature on moral dilemmas, see McConnell 2014.

²⁸ This is why ‘ethicists as diverse as Kant, Mill, and Ross have assumed that an adequate moral theory should not allow for the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas’ (McConnell 2014).

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

both answers are wrong, the problem is not the ‘lack’ of a determinate answer. The problem is that the theorist’s ideal of a narrow answer, of a moral judgment, does not correspond to what both Jonathan and Mary, people actually dealing with a moral question, could reasonably regard as a good, appropriate, indeed as an ideal answer to Jonathan’s question.

Some theorists may claim that there is no problem here; that the theorist is simply not looking for an answer that Jonathan and Mary could reasonably regard as good or appropriate. Of course, theorists have the right not to care about Jonathan and Mary, but it is difficult to see how, if they do not care, moral theory can claim to describe morality and/or offer practical guidance, which is what most moral theories do.²⁹ A description of morality involving a distorted notion of what a moral question is can hardly be called a good description. Practical guidance in the form of a narrow answer is bad practical guidance if a narrow answer is not appropriate in practice. I agree with Bernard Gert that ‘any moral system that is proposed by philosophers will be judged by how closely that system coincides with the moral intuitions that thoughtful people have’ (2005, 380) and with Uri Leibowitz (although he has a different notion of moral advice than mine) that ‘If *S* is good moral advice, our moral theory should be able to explain this fact’ (2009, 352). If one accepts that, then there certainly *is* a problem if the theorist’s ideal of a narrow answer does not correspond to what Jonathan and Mary could reasonably regard as a good answer to Jonathan’s question.

The problem is that the theorist tends to misunderstand the question. His assumption that the question asks for a narrow answer may encourage Mary, if she studies moral theories, to be morally arrogant. Gert’s notion of moral arrogance differs from mine, but it holds equally for my notion of moral arrogance that ‘the ethical theories they [moral theorists] are putting forward might sometimes encourage those who read their theories to exhibit moral arrogance’ (Gert 2005, 368). A first step towards moral modesty would be to take the first sentence of G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* seriously:

It appears to me that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer. (1993, 33)

²⁹ For an overview of literature on this dual role of moral theories, see Leibowitz 2009.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1981). Authority in Morals. In G. E. M. Anscombe, *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (pp. 43-50). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bouwsma, O. K. (1986). *Wittgenstein. Conversations 1949-1951*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Christensen, A. (2011). 'A Glorious Sun and a Bad Person'. *Wittgenstein, Ethical Reflection and the Other. Philosophia* 39 (2), 207-223.
- Crary, A. (2007). *Beyond Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Diamond, C. (1991) Missing the Adventure. Reply to Martha Nussbaum. In C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge (MA) (pp. 309-318): MIT Press.
- Diamond, C. (1996). Wittgenstein, Mathematics, and Ethics. Resisting the Attractions of Realism. In H. Sluga & D. Stern (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*. Cambridge (pp. 226-260): Cambridge University Press.
- Diamond, C. (2002). What if x isn't the number of sheep? Wittgenstein and Thought-Experiments in Ethics. *Philosophical Papers* 31 (3), 227-250.
- Driver, J. (2006). Autonomy and the Asymmetry Problem for Moral Expertise. *Philosophical Studies* 128 (3), 619-644.
- Gaita, R. (2004). *Good and Evil. An Absolute Conception*. London: Routledge.
- Gert, B. (2005). Moral Arrogance and Moral Theories. In E. Sosa and E. Villanueva (Eds.), *In Normativity* (pp. 368-385). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gibbons, J. (2010). Things That Make Things Reasonable. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81 (2), 335-361.
- Hertzberg, L. (2002). Moral Escapism and Applied Ethics. *Philosophical Papers* 31 (3), 251-270.
- Hopkins, R. (2007). What Is Wrong with Moral Testimony? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (1), 611-634.
- Johnston, P. (1999). *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy. Ethics after Wittgenstein*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, K. (1999). Second-Hand Moral Knowledge. *The Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2), 55-78.
- Kiesewetter, B. (2011). 'Ought' and the Perspective of the Agent. *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 5 (3), 1-24.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

- Leibowitz, U. (2009). Moral Advice and Moral Theory. *Philosophical Studies* 146 (3), 349-359.
- McConnell, T. (2014). Moral Dilemmas. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition).
- McGrath, S. (2009). The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference. *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (1), 321-344.
- Moore, G. E. (1993). *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, D. Z. (1964). The Possibilities of Moral Advice. *Analysis* 25 (2), 37-41.
- Rhees, R. (1965). Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics. *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1), 17-26.
- Rhees, R. (1999). *Moral Questions*. Basingstoke: MacMillan Press.
- Soanes, C., & Stevenson, A. (Eds.) (2006). *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stroud, B. (2001). What Is Philosophy? In C. P. Ragland and Sarah Heidt (Eds.), *What Is Philosophy?* (pp. 25-46) New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Thomson, J. (2001). *Goodness & Advice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Waismann, F. (1965). Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein. *The Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1), 12-16.
- Williams, B. (1995) *Making Sense of Humanity. And Other Philosophical Papers 1982-1993*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *The Blue and Brown Books. Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1978). *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1980a). *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology. Volume 1*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1980b). *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology. Volume 2*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1981). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1992) *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology. Volume 2*. Oxford: Blackwell.

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 43/1 (2015), 43-61. The final publication is available at Springer via <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-014-9565-3>. Please cite the published version only.]

Wittgenstein, L. (1993). A Lecture on Ethics. In L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951* (pp. 37-44). Indianapolis: Hackett.

Wittgenstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.