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# Michael Smith and the Daleks: Reason, Morality, and Contingency

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Smith has defended the rationalist's conceptual claim that moral requirements are categorical requirements of reason, arguing that no status short of this would make sense of our taking these requirements as seriously as we do. Against this I argue that Smith has failed to show either that our moral commitments would be undermined by possessing only an internal, contextual justification or that they need presuppose any expectation that rational agents must converge on their acceptance. His claim that this rationalistic understanding of metaethics is required for the intelligibility of moral disagreement is also found to be inadequately supported. It is further proposed that the rationalist's substantive claims – that there *are* such categorical requirements of reason and that our actual moral commitments are a case in point – are liable to disappointment; and that the conceptual claim is fatally undermined by reflection on how we might best respond to such disappointment.

## I

I will understand by *rationalism* the claim that moral requirements are categorical requirements of reason. It is a widely held and seems a reassuring view. Thus, in 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', Philippa Foot famously writes: 'We are apt to panic at the thought that we ourselves, or other people, might stop caring about the things we care about, and we feel that the categorical imperative gives us some control over the situation.'<sup>1</sup> Rationalism may seem to address this panic. But Foot can make no sense of it: the categorical imperative is an illusion and we do not need the control it purports to offer.

What inspires the panic, Foot makes clear, as does Kant, her immediate target,<sup>2</sup> is fear of a certain *contingency* in what is valuable. Foot does not think this fear should tempt us to the seeming security of rationalism. Thus the defenders of Leningrad would have been unlikely to worry much at any thought of the sheer contingency of their solidarity. Can't we, she asks, think of the moral community as like 'volunteers banded together to fight for liberty and truth and against inhumanity and oppression'?<sup>3</sup>

It is worth getting clearer about what the feared contingency involves. The thought that inspires panic is that, had we valued different

things (or if we came to), different things would be valuable. The worry does not arise for very strong forms of moral realism, but for those metaethical positions which see value as in some way *response-dependent* it becomes very real. However, such response-dependency is consistent with my insistence that torturing human babies for fun is wrong applying not just to the *actual* world but to *any* world – for it may be part of the substantive *content* of my moral judgement that this wrongness is not conditional on my responses. Even if all I am doing is voicing a response, that response may have wide-ranging *generality*. Such generality indeed typically distinguishes moral commitments from mere tastes: they apply to others as well as oneself, including one's own possible and future selves. If a side-effect of this medicine is that I lose my taste for Coca-Cola, I could not care less. If it will cause me to lose my aversion to betraying my friends, I care lots: to lose my aversion to betrayal is to become, by my own lights, contemptible. We *cannot* simply say that if we valued different things different things would be valuable. In particular our moral attitudes apply even where those attitudes are not to be found. Nothing stops my saying that social arrangements on Teflon B are unjust, though nobody on Teflon B may greatly care. Let us then say that our moral judgements possess *strong modal generality*.

We have nonetheless a form of *contingency* in so far as, although our judgements enjoy strong modal generality, they may also be, especially on accounts that stress their response dependency, what we might call *modally perspectival*. The generality they enjoy they get from us, here, now, in this world. It is our valuing as we do that gives our evaluative world its shape. And we might have valued very differently. It is in *this* sense that our values may be contingent.

## II

The claim that values *are* contingent in this sense is surely plausible. But Michael Smith, particularly in his paper 'Dispositional Theories of Value'<sup>4</sup> and, more recently, his book *The Moral Problem*<sup>5</sup> and his paper 'Internal Reasons',<sup>6</sup> has argued that this claim is false, at least in the case of moral values. A central part of his case moreover has been that such contingency would leave our values *undermined*.

For Smith, panic at the prospect of contingency is wholly justified. Our legitimate panic, he insists in the first of the works named, stems from the thought that if we stopped caring about morality, or had

<sup>1</sup> 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', repr. in her *Virtues and Vices*, Oxford, 1978, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous relevant passages in Kant but see especially pp. 59–63 of the *Groundwork* (second edition pagination).

<sup>3</sup> Foot, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol., lxiii (1989).

<sup>5</sup> Oxford, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, lv (1995).

never started, our caring would come to seem 'rationally optional', 'arbitrary', 'to be explained away rather than justified', to be explained, like loving Leningrad, in terms of the contingencies of our upbringing. If we came to see our moral commitments in this way we would rightly panic because we would no longer be able to take seriously the idea of *disapproving* of someone for failing to share them.<sup>7</sup>

Smith notes how moral attitudes of approval and disapproval contrast with ordinary cases of attachment, aversion and indifference, liking and disliking. Where the latter are concerned we are apt to think there is nothing *wrong* with those we differ from; they make no mistake. Perhaps we dislike them but what we merely like and dislike about such people is, he protests, arbitrary. We need not take seriously what we dislike about each other and would consider undoing our dislikes.

Smith concedes that something along the lines of the points made above about strong modal generality may help here to explain why I cannot simply consider undoing my dislike, and so to capture the difference between our concern for justice and a taste for Coca-Cola or – his example – a dislike of people who smile a lot. Accepting a rationalist theory would allow us, like Kant, sharply to distinguish the demands of morality from more ordinary desires, aversions, etc.; but rejecting such an account certainly does not deprive us of the ability to make the appropriate distinctions among the members of our respective motivational sets.

Given this concession, Smith's argument cannot simply be that we need his rationalist claim to distinguish between moral disapproval and mere liking. He needs to say rather more than this and what he says is that the foregoing does not remove the feeling of *arbitrariness*. In this world I dislike myself in another; in that other I dislike myself in this. 'How peculiar each of these attitudes seems, in the context of each other!'<sup>8</sup> It is more plausible to suppose my attitude explained by a belief that I am, in the actual world, possessed of a justification for caring for justice. For only thus can I explain my apparent ability to question why I have the attitudes I do in both worlds. So we do need the control Foot thinks we can dispense with. Only then can we say what we need in cases of disagreement – that someone is being insufficiently sensitive to the available reasons.

We plausibly already have what Smith is here demanding. There is actually far from nothing I can do to justify my interest in justice. But that is just the point – that there is actually far from nothing. For I

<sup>7</sup> 'Dispositional Theories of Value', 103.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

*actually* value many things. If I care about morality, as Foot understands it, what I care about is a *system* of hypothetical imperatives. And, given such system, it might realistically be hoped that some ingredient thereof – my interest in justice say – is open to justification in terms of others that make up its background. Within the system of values, interests and institutions we inhabit there is plenty for the justification of ethical and other claims to be.

But we have only the most tenuous foothold in that system when we ask for a justification that would speak not merely to us and those suitably like us but to any rational being. The only norms such a justification can presuppose are norms of rationality and here any rationalist faces his most fundamental difficulty. Either we construe 'rationality' relatively narrowly, counting as norms of reason little more than the thinnest constraints of consistency, in which case it is highly implausible that the desired justification of substantive moral claims can be made good; or we construe it relatively generously, in which case the outlook for such justification is less bleak but its starting point will have built into it too much in the way of morality to make the justification very powerful or interesting. On the latter, more generous reading, it may be that only those lucky enough to have been well brought up will qualify as rational beings and what looked like a strong Kantian claim would turn out to be a far more unassuming Aristotelian one.

But that there is no more ambitious and universal justification to be had of our evaluative commitments does not entail that they must enjoy no justification at all. What it may more plausibly entail is rather that all justification is internal, contextual justification, its efficacy conditional on the commitments we carry with us at the outset. This conditional efficacy does not debar us from taking our commitments seriously. Plausibly we take them as seriously as we do not because of their rational credentials but because they are so deeply and strongly felt.

Consider, after all, Romeo. It is rationally arbitrary that Romeo likes girls at all, never mind *that* girl, something to be explained rather than justified. But Romeo takes his feelings for Juliet very seriously indeed. And why shouldn't he? Get him to see that he is not rationally required to feel as he does and just watch his eminently sensible failure to care less. In other possible worlds where Romeo is homosexual or asexual his actual commitments may look strange to him, just as our own moral attitudes might seem peculiar from a suitably remote perspective. What else would we expect? Any perspective on the world looks strange from a remote perspective. Distant perspectives take us a long way from where we are at home. And when we are far from home things look strange to us.

## III

By 'arbitrary', Smith means *rationaly arbitrary*. His worry is that we might have no reason at all for having the dispositions, desires and attitudes we do. But the fact that we have no reason for having the desires we do does not mean that, having those desires, we have no reason to pursue their objects. Thus, to take a simple example, I like beer. I have no reason for liking it; I just do. The taste can be explained but not justified. Given that I like beer I have reason, other things equal, to purchase it in preference to, say, wine, which I like less. But suppose it were argued: I have no reason for my taste and since my reason for so acting appeals to this taste I have no reason for my purchase. That is a strange and unconvincing argument (remember Romeo).

It would be similarly strange to argue that while we may have internal reason, given our actual inclinations, to care about justice or liberty, that should fail to count as a reason at all because we have no reason for having these inclinations rather than others.<sup>9</sup> There is no reason why that should undermine our ability to take seriously the justifications that presuppose such basic values as may have or require no such justification.

In the more recent writings mentioned above, Smith goes a long way towards acknowledging this. The wine and beer example is his own<sup>10</sup> and he sees no problem in acknowledging that what we have reason to do may be relative to *circumstances* involving our tastes that are, presumably, rationally arbitrary. The contingent attachments of Romeo's he would presumably wish thus to absorb into the category of circumstance. At first glance this may look like sleight of hand – arbitrary desires are allowed as rational influences so long as they are hived off into the category of circumstances. Some, after all, of what Smith hives off in this way consists in quite arbitrary desires of the agent, desires whose arbitrariness does not prevent their counting among the agent's reasons.

Smith, however, intends that we understand this manoeuvre in the light of a point about convergence. The claim is that all rational creatures, given ideal rationality, should converge in what reason commits them to. We do, he thinks, get convergence in the wine and beer case but it is convergence at the level of hypothetical desires.

This talk of hypothetical desires seems strained. I can certainly recognize that given her circumstances Juliet has reason to sleep with Romeo. But it sounds odd for me to say I hypothetically desire, con-

ditionally on occupying those circumstances, to do this myself. Much the readiest sense to be made of this is plausibly as an ungainly way of saying I recognize the force of Juliet's reason. But in fact more than this is involved. I can recognize the force of Iago's reason for plotting against Othello – he hates the man – but recognizing this I nonetheless do not endorse his so acting. Here, Smith would stress, I do not form the relevant hypothetical desire. Certainly I do not endorse Iago's machinations.

Hence the key disanalogy on Smith's account. We may expect rational agents to converge on the judgement that, if we preferred wine to beer, then we should choose it; whereas we cannot, he insists, expect rational agents to converge on, say, the judgement that if we thought it fine and noble to collect scalps then that is what we would have reason to do. Otherwise we would be landed with a relativization of the notion of rational support such that we would no longer find ourselves in genuine disagreement with scalp-hunters.<sup>11</sup>

It is not clear, however, that any relativization of rational support is at issue – that we cannot recognize the force of the scalp-hunter's or Iago's reasons. It is surely as harmless to acknowledge that, formally speaking, a belief that scalp-hunting is good supports a belief that a scalp-hunting trip is a good way to entertain visitors as it is to acknowledge that a belief that there are little green men on the moon supports a belief that the moon is a better place than is my office to look for little green men. What in each case we object to is precisely not the reasoning but what that reasoning starts from, and the inadequacies of its starting point are transmitted to its conclusion. The difference between the wine and beer case and the scalp-hunting case is just this: in so far as our talk of desirability enjoys strong modal generality it does not follow from the fact that your attitude to scalp-hunting supports some decision that I need endorse that decision even for worlds where, contrary to fact, I share your disagreeable attitude. This difference can be articulated without my having to suppose my attitude to scalp-hunting anything but contingent in the sense explained. We may say of the scalp-hunter's reason that it is a *bad* reason only in so far as 'bad' may well be glossed in terms of *moral* badness rather than *rational* inadequacy. This may be a reason only a bad person would have but it would nonetheless give rational support to such a person's actions – much as the belief that  $7+3=11$  gives rational support to the belief that  $7+3$  is prime. Someone who held the former belief would have a reason to adopt the latter, a reason we can all recognize – no relativism there. But that does not lead us to endorse the conclusion – for we think the supporting belief plain wrong.

<sup>9</sup> As Smith does. See 'Internal Reasons', 124.

<sup>10</sup> *The Moral Problem*, pp. 170 f.; also 'Internal Reasons', 122 f.

<sup>11</sup> See especially *The Moral Problem*, pp. 167 f.; 'Internal Reasons', 120 f.

Regarded in this light, the only relativity that need be involved in the notion of rational support is just the relativity to circumstance Smith views as harmless. In the wine-lover's circumstances there is reason to drink wine. In Iago's circumstances there is reason to plot. On both these judgements about rational support we may plausibly be optimistic about the prospects for convergence. But that optimism is consistent with saying that the case of Iago is distinguished by the fact that his *circumstances* involve character traits and attitudes which, albeit contingently, we find repellent. His circumstances render his actions *morally* objectionable but that is consistent with those actions' enjoyment of rational support.

## IV

What I disagree with the scalp-hunter about is *what should be done*. And the reality of that disagreement is no more hostage to any possibility of rationally directed convergence here than it is in the case where we disagree over whether the local art gallery should purchase a Turner or a Pollock (Smith himself clearly maintains that there is no prospect of convergence in such aesthetic matters).<sup>12</sup> Our aesthetic judgements may come from different places and there may be no prospect of rationally resolving our disagreement. But disagreement it nonetheless is.

A number of philosophers in the emotivist tradition from Stevenson to Harman<sup>13</sup> have taken such worries about disagreement and relativity to motivate a move towards expressivism; in which case this dimension of Smith's argument might invite a re-examination of his own case against expressivism.<sup>14</sup> This turns out to depend infelicitously on the supposition that the expressivist is committed to view the motivational force of moral commitments as somehow *indefeasible*. That is false. What the expressivist is committed to insisting on is a essential tie between moral commitment and *desire*, where desires are of course conceptually linked to motivation.<sup>15</sup> But the link between desire and motivation is not an indefeasible one. So the defeasibility of

<sup>12</sup> 'Dispositional Theories of Value', 98 f.

<sup>13</sup> Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, New Haven, 1944, ch. 1; Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Oxford, 1996, ch. 3.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. *The Moral Problem*, 5.5–5.7; 'Internalism's Wheel', *Ratio*, viii (1995), sect. 1.

<sup>15</sup> For an elaboration and defence of this commitment see my 'The Externalist and the Amoralist', forthcoming in *Philosophia*. I there argue in particular that the depressive, whom Smith takes to make particular trouble for the expressivist (*The Moral Problem*, pp. 135 f.) may be understood very much as Smith himself favours understanding the amoralist – as failing to make genuine moral (or otherwise practical) judgements.

the link between evaluation and motivation can be seen as simply inherited from the defeasibility of desire and need in no way rule out an expressivist understanding of evaluation. We frequently fail to do things we desire to do, as, notoriously, when we are akratic (but by no means only then).

## V

We may be reluctant to admit that moral failings are not failings of rationality. In *Spreading the Word*, addressing the question, 'Why is it that people want more than the projectivist gives them?', Simon Blackburn answers with reference to

the permanent chimera, the holy grail of moral philosophy, the knock-down argument that people who are nasty and unpleasant and motivated by the wrong things are above all unreasonable. They aren't just selfish or thoughtless or malignant or imprudent, but are reasoning badly, or out of touch with the facts. It must be an occupational hazard of philosophers to reduce all vices to this one. In reality the motivational grip of moral considerations is bound to depend on some desires which must simply be taken for granted, although they can also be encouraged and fostered.<sup>16</sup>

Smith cites this passage and responds:

The rationalist's idea is not that we need to *prop up* our terms of moral assessment with terms of rational assessment because the moral terms aren't enough by themselves. That idea is rather that, in order to understand why our terms of moral assessment are enough by themselves, we have to think of moral requirements as requirements of reason. To think otherwise is to suppose that the charge 'He is malignant!' is like the charge 'He is from Berlin!' or 'He constantly grins!' or 'He answers letters written to him in the third person in the first!' And that is plainly wrong.<sup>17</sup>

In fact it is far from plain that it is wrong. The charges 'He is from Berlin' and 'He answers letters written to him in the third person in the first' may well be effective. But how effective depends not just on the addressee's being rational, but on others things about her, such as her attitude to Berliners or to etiquette.

Do we expect 'He is malignant' to be an effective charge when addressed to someone merely in virtue of her rationality? It is highly implausible that any such expectation can be made good. Consider *daleks*.<sup>18</sup> What daleks care most about is conquering new territory and exterminating as many non-daleks as they possibly can. In pursuit

<sup>16</sup> *Spreading the Word*, Oxford, 1984, p. 222.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, 'Dispositional Theories of Value', 106 f.

<sup>18</sup> Daleks are pervasive icons of British popular culture but some non-British readers may need to be told they are malign, imperialistic aliens featuring heavily in the vintage BBC series *Dr Who*.

of these ends they show fantastic ingenuity and resourcefulness. Far from being irrational they are as rational as can be – that is what makes them so dangerous.

As concerns morality we certainly find ourselves in disagreement with daleks. Such disagreement is crucial *vis-à-vis* Smith's case for rationalism as we see when he argues as follows:

[I]f A says 'It is right to  $\phi$  in circumstances C' and B says 'It is not right to  $\phi$  in circumstances C' then we take it that A and B disagree; that at most one of their judgements is true. And this means in turn that we take it we can fault at least one of A's and B's judgements from the rational point of view, for it is false. But if this is right then it follows that ... we do in fact expect rational agents to do what they are morally required to do. For we can and do expect rational agents to judge truly; we expect them to converge in their judgements about what it is right to do. Our concept of a moral requirement thus turns out to be the concept of a categorical requirement of rationality.<sup>19</sup>

Would we expect daleks to do what they are morally required to do? I fear not. We may certainly, if we are internalists, agree that daleks can be expected to do what they themselves think right. But we have no immediate reason to expect that, were all parties to the disagreement subjected to some process of rational cognitive psychotherapy, they would converge on the same judgements about what was right. Certainly we do not need to suppose this simply to make sense of our disagreement.

What Smith is doing is too hastily identifying a disagreement over P with a belief that P is false and a belief that P is false with a belief that P can be faulted from 'the rational point of view'. But this is far too fast – one or other of these links requires a lot more argument as the following dilemma shows. If we operate with a relatively modest understanding of what it takes to make a given sort of statement truth-evaluable,<sup>20</sup> we will want to reject the step from the belief that something is false to the belief that it is rationally defective in ways that justify an expectation of rationally constrained convergence. If, for example, we buy into the sort of minimalist conception of truth advocated by Crispin Wright we will see little more to a given claim's being truth-evaluable than its having the surface syntax of an assertion and its being subject to at least a degree of normative discipline. On this view, the issue of truth simply comes apart from any expectation of convergence and Smith's second identification fails. If, on the other hand, we place rather more demanding conditions on a discourse being truth-apt, that step may be in the clear. But we can no longer assume without further argument that the mere possibility of dis-

<sup>19</sup> *The Moral Problem*, pp. 86 f.

<sup>20</sup> See Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.

agreement suffices for imputations of truth or falsity. On any such *immodest* conception of truth-aptness the expressivist option remains wide open and the first identification fails.

Smith has not then established his conceptual claim that, failing the truth of rationalism, moral reasons cannot be not reasons at all. The most he seems entitled to conclude is that, failing the truth of rationalism, moral reasons are not the sort of reasons he thinks they are. And that is just what the anti-Kantian opposition were saying all along.

## VI

What do we do with those who fall outside the space of values and commitments we share? Well perhaps we argue with them, try to persuade them to adopt better values. Much here depends on just how far outside they are: we can argue with them only if there is enough common ground for our arguments to get some purchase. But the prospects may often, in practice, be bleak. Arguments, as Aristotle observed, do not suffice to make men good.<sup>21</sup> We need also to rely, as Aristotle understood, on the very moral education whose contingency so troubles Smith. Where that has failed we may look to the police or the courts.

We are often properly reluctant to acknowledge that all else fails, that anyone simply falls outside our communities of judgement.<sup>22</sup> It is a serious thing to acknowledge and we are loath to do so. So we optimistically persevere in offering reasons that pretend to a form of what Alan Gibbard calls 'contextual authority'<sup>23</sup> – authority derived from a context of shared values. Where this optimism is justified there is work to be done by appeals to reason. Rational moral discourse, like any discourse, is appropriate only where it is possible and to that extent the relevant discursive practices and the language in which they are embodied presuppose that possibility. That presupposition is contextual and neither requires nor can make good any pretensions to universality. When it fails, when we are left lecturing to daleks, our utterance becomes pointless but not unintelligible – by our lights what we say is true but that will not interest them.

If, with some people, our optimism is unfounded, there will be no justification of our use of force against them that will speak to them. But a problem of which Smith has recently made much, of distinguishing between justified and unjustified uses of coercive power,<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, X. 9.

<sup>22</sup> See Alan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Oxford, 1990, chs. 10–13.

<sup>23</sup> *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 174 ff.

<sup>24</sup> See 'Internalism's Wheel'.

need not trouble the arresting officer. What he does may not be justifiable to those arrested, but that is not, for a good policeman, the main issue. The issue is rather whether it can be justified to his superior and fellow-officers, to Parliament, the courts and the wider community, *to us*.

The justification of coercion often appeals not to its victim, but to us, the wider community. But suppose we ourselves were corrupted and altered? This fear, the fear that we might that we become, by our present lights, contemptible, that the moral perspective from which our present attitudes make sense might be lost to us, is not always idle fantasy but may signal real dangers (consider the point and content of such fictions as *Brave New World*). In the face of them we are indeed apt to panic and our panic may be entirely appropriate, but not in a way that should send us running to the categorical imperative. Goodness is indeed fragile but we do not well serve its cause by the pretence that it is less fragile than it is.<sup>25</sup> The disintegration of our communities of judgement is a real danger but faith in a spurious objectivity for our values cannot meet it. The compelling character of certain values, in so far as it cannot be laid at the door of our nature, is contingent upon a certain social and political order and on certain educational practices – the way we were brought up. If true the point is important but need not be subversive. If it is not reason that shores up our values but just politics and education, the proper moral is not that we may no longer take our values seriously but rather that politics and education should be taken very seriously indeed.

## VII

We do not, of course, expect daleks to do what they are morally required to do. We may say of them what devotees of etiquette may say of the incurably ill-bred – they are not ‘one of us’.<sup>26</sup> So alien would such beings be indeed that our notions of disapproval and blame may become intolerably strained. It must again be stressed, however, that none of this is because daleks are, in any non-question-begging sense, irrational. They are fantastic chess players, brilliant logicians, and pursue their gruesome ends with unrelenting ingenuity and forethought.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge, 1986, esp. ch. 13.

<sup>26</sup> On ‘one of us’ it is instructive to compare Smith’s ‘Dispositional Theories of Value’, 107 f., to Gibbard’s *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, p. 206. It is one thing to say, as Johnston does (‘Dispositional Theories of Value’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol., lviii (1989), 169 f.) that the *community* of our evaluative judgement is ideally inclusive, another to suggest that our values are discredited if the ideal somewhere fails.

Some may get very cross at my going on about daleks so much – they are after all creatures of a somewhat idle fantasy, great for scaring the kids but of dubious interest to mature moral reflection. The point is however precisely my own. Smith backs up his large claims about the power we must impute to reason by pointing to the role it plays in our actual ethical practices. Such considerations have little bearing on speculation about how we might deal with creatures such as daleks. We do not encounter such creatures and are not likely to. As Gibbard writes, ‘What matters chiefly is not what we can say to strange beings who are merely conceivable, but what we can say to each other.’<sup>27</sup> Smith’s perspective is very different. ‘So long,’ he writes, ‘as we can imagine some *hypothetical* rational creature to whom we cannot justify our moral beliefs, the search for moral reasons in support of them is in place. (Just think of the practice of moral theorizing.)’<sup>28</sup>

Smith seems to have argued himself into a position that commits him to seeing the amenability of daleks (say) to our own reasons for action as a condition for taking our own reasons seriously. And that is scarcely credible.

## VIII

Smith distinguishes between what he calls the rationalist’s *substantive* and his *conceptual* claim. The arguments I have criticized are intended only to support the conceptual claim that part of what we understand by a moral requirement is a requirement of reason, not the substantive claim that there are moral requirements so understood. This is unsatisfying and not only because the history of attempts to back up the substantive claim is so chequered. For by securing only the conceptual claim, we are left with two hostages to fortune reflection on which will, I will close by suggesting, render the conceptual claim itself less plausible.

First there is the danger that the substantive claim turn out to be false. If the conceptual claim were true the upshot of this would be, as Smith notes, that we would have to accept an error theory of morality somewhat along the lines of Mackie’s. Considering this possibility seriously brings us into territory that has already been admirably delineated by Blackburn in his 1985 paper ‘Errors and the Phenomenology of Value’.<sup>29</sup> If we came to be convinced that we had been mistaken in supposing our moral attitudes to be objective requirements of reason, we would not be likely simply to *dispense* with them. Our

<sup>27</sup> *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, p. 201.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, ‘Dispositional Theories of Value’, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Repr. in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford, 1993.

attitude to justice or to aggravated murder is plausibly just not up for grabs in this way any more than is Romeo's attitude to Juliet. We would continue to punish murderers and favour just over unjust regimes because these are things we care about so much. What we more plausibly would do is reconstrue these attitudes in terms of, in Blackburn's words, 'some lesser, purged commitments that can be held without making metaphysical mistakes.'<sup>30</sup> Blackburn labels this reconstructed substitute for moralizing 'shmoralizing'. He invites us to consider what this shmoralizing might look like and suggests a plausible answer – that it would look exactly like moralizing. If that answer is right, of course, it is curtains for the error theorist. And it is curtains for the error theorist precisely because it is curtains for the realist's, and *a fortiori* the rationalist's, conceptual claim. If our practice would be unaffected by our despairing of the substantive claim the conceptual claim is unsupported.

The second hostage to fortune is less familiar but is, in effect, a generalization of the Euthyphro Dilemma. In terms of Williams's splendid formulation, if we seek to pass the moral buck onto how the world is,<sup>31</sup> we run the real and avoidable risk that the world may let us down. The security of our values may be threatened, on a rationalist story, not just by the possibility that the rationalist may be wrong but that he may be right in alarming ways. If all initial sets of values can be expected rationally to converge on a single set, some such sets must presumably end up a vast distance from where they started. And the possibility will be real that our own values are a case in point. The rationalist must insist that there can be an argument between ourselves and daleks, say. But until his promissory note is cashed he cannot guarantee that daleks will not win it.

Suppose they did. Consider a very simple-minded moral realist. This simple-minded realist believes that there are moral sentences written in the sky and it is by their agreement with these that our moral commitments gain their authority. To show the simple-minded realist that he is wrong we need to invite him to imagine discovering that there are indeed such heavenly sentences but that they say surprising and unwelcome things. Perhaps they call upon us to be like daleks. One response to learning this would be to change our substantive moral commitments accordingly. Another, and far more natural, would be simply to say that, in that case, the sentences in the sky had ceased to interest us. The latter response eliminates entirely any plausibility this story may have had about where the authority of morality comes from and leaves us to look for different sources of authority closer

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>31</sup> *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge, 1972, p. 47.

to home. Smith is not a simple-minded realist and the story he tells is already closer to home, but he must confront a like possibility, the possibility that the truth about morality, as constituted by the categorical requirements of reason, turns out to be something awful. That is not a possibility we can seriously entertain. We plausibly secure our right to rule that out in advance only at the cost of recognizing a certain contingency to that right. If we try to entertain this possibility, what we will find ourselves saying is surely: so much the worse for the categorical requirements of reason. If such requirements and our responses came apart in this way we would rightly feel we had no further interest in the former. And that is surely a reason to doubt that we are very interested in them now. Or that we ought to be.<sup>32</sup>

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