

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.'¹ 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,² 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'?³

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'⁴ and, more recently, his book *The Moral Problem*⁵ and his paper 'Internal Reasons',⁶ 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

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

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

³ Foot, p. 167.

⁴ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol., lxiii (1989).

⁵ Oxford, 1994.

⁶ *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.⁷

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!'⁸ 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

⁷ 'Dispositional Theories of Value', 103.

⁸ *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.⁹ 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 own¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.

⁹ As Smith does. See 'Internal Reasons', 124.

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

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

