

Precision of Expression

If the essay question is ‘What are the objections to distinguishing morally between killing and letting die?’ and the question you actually answer is ‘Is it ever morally acceptable to kill someone?’ what you say will be irrelevant to the question as surely as if you had produced an elegant and erudite essay on granite. Well, perhaps that is a bit hard! With a bit of luck you may, by chance, have said some things that have some bearing on the essay title (and if an examiner is in a generous mood, she may give you some credit for that.) For all that, you will not have done what the essay question asks you to do.

Some of you (I hope not too many!) may be beginning to wonder whether philosophers are not just a bunch of hopeless pedants. In response to such a concern I can only say that if you believe that the questions that you are considering in this degree are important ones – and you would not, I take it, be doing the degree at all if you did not believe that – they are questions that are worth thinking about *clearly*. Much needless dispute, and endless going round in circles, arises from a failure to be clear about the precise content of a question to which one is offering a firm answer of ‘Yes’ or No’.

Here is an exercise designed to illustrate the importance that precision of expression can have in discussion of philosophical issues. Imagine that Matilda and Martin make the following claims:

Matilda: ‘Values are absolute and objective. If something is wrong it is wrong whatever anyone may think about it.’

Martin: ‘What is right for me may be wrong for you. What is right in one society may be wrong in another.’

I guess they certainly sound as they are in sharp disagreement. But is it absolutely clear, on the basis of the above remarks, that they really do disagree? I would like you to think about this. Can you see a way of understanding what each says such that they do not really disagree at all? Please make a note of your answer.

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It is, perhaps, Martin’s remark that is potentially the most slippery. Phrases such as ‘right for me’ are loaded with just the kind of ambiguity that fuels futile, endless, and often heated, philosophical bickering. Does the phrase ‘what is right in one society’ mean the same as ‘what members of one society think is right’? If so, Martin’s second sentence comes to: ‘What members of one society think is right, members of another may think is wrong’ – a pretty uncontroversial claim, which is certainly not in conflict with what Matilda says.

That is one way we might take Martin’s remark. Here is another. His central thought could be that the correct way for people in a particular society to live depends, in part, on particular features of their circumstances. Now at one level that is obviously true. For example, it would be foolish to try to live in igloos on the equator. A more interesting, and relevant, case, however, would be this: someone might suggest that capital punishment is an acceptable form of deterrence in a society with massive social problems of a certain kind, but not in an

advanced western society in which the maintenance of reasonable social order is possible without it. In that sense: 'What is right in one society may be wrong in another.' Now if that is what Martin has in mind is it clear that Matilda disagrees? Well, she may do. When she says that values are 'absolute' she may be saying that there are certain practices – such as capital punishment – that are morally unacceptable in *any* context. On the other hand, it could be that she will readily agree that capital punishment is acceptable in some social contexts but not in others. The point on which she is insisting in the above remark may be that, to use her word, whether it is right or wrong in a particular context is an *objective* matter: much as it is an objective matter that it is foolish to try to live in an igloo on the equator but may be a reasonable idea at the North Pole. For example, capital punishment is, given the social conditions that now prevail in the United States, morally unacceptable – and that is so whether or not most Americans agree.

I have said: Martin may mean this, and Matilda may mean that. In fact, the chances are that neither is completely clear just *what* it is that he or she means. That is strongly suggested by their lack of precision in their choice of words. So long as they do not bother to spell their thoughts out more carefully – using examples, as I have, to illustrate what they mean – they may well manage to sustain indefinitely a passionate 'argument', in which both feel they are standing firm on a truth of fundamental importance. That can be fun. But it is not philosophy. (And I place the word 'argument' in scare quotes to indicate that what the word means there – roughly speaking: 'yelling at each other, with a good sprinkling of moral indignation' – is not what it means when it is said that argument is central to philosophy.)

It may be too much to hope that if everyone takes sufficient care in formulating the issues clearly we will all be able to agree in our answers to questions about whether values are 'absolute', 'objective', or whatever. But we can be quite sure that if we don't take that care we will have little prospect of getting anywhere.

Relevance again

That was a slight digression. (Note: digressions can be very confusing for the reader if they are not clearly marked as such. I hope that my sub-headings have helped to keep things reasonably clear in your mind.) I have been speaking of the need for precision and clarity in your own expression of your ideas. That is the other side of the fact that precision and clarity is required when reading what others have said; and one crucial instance of *that* is that when answering a philosophical question you must be absolutely clear in your own mind just what it is the question is asking. (Indeed, if you are really concerned to get things right, this is vital when answering *any* question; but it is generally rather easier to go wrong here when answering philosophical questions than when answering questions about the weather.)

Here are three essay titles on the subject of suicide:

- (i) 'If killing is wrong, then suicide is wrong: since the fact that in suicide one kills *oneself* is morally irrelevant.' Is this claim true?
- (ii) Can the moral issues of an act of self-killing be resolved by a consideration of its consequences?
- (iii) 'Suicide is always wrong even though it may sometimes be justified.' Discuss.

Someone might be tempted to think that these are basically just three different ways (with a few bells and whistles) of asking whether suicide is wrong. But if you wrote an essay on any of these titles on the assumption that *that* is what is being asked you would be going badly wrong. Each of the above essay titles is much more specific than that; and the way in which each is more specific is different. I would like you now to write a brief outline of what each essay title asks for, highlighting what is distinctive of that title by contrast with the others. You might aim to write 150-200 words on each of the titles; and you should expect this exercise to take a little time – perhaps around an hour. Do not look at my outlines below until you have produced your own.

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Here are my outlines of each:

(i) This title focuses on one particular form of objection to suicide. It does not ask whether suicide is right or wrong. It does not ask – at least, not directly – if there are reasons for thinking that suicide is sometimes morally acceptable. Nor does it call for a general discussion of the moral objections to suicide. It focuses, as I said, on a *particular* possible objection to suicide. To address that objection you will need to consider whether it can be said, in a quite general way, that killing is wrong. Might there be a need to distinguish between different cases of killing? (Killing in self-defence? Euthanasia?) If so, what would be the basis for saying suicide represents a special case? Is it made a special case by the fact that the one who is killed wants to die? Is it (differently) made a special case by the fact that the one who is doing the killing is also the one who is killed? In addressing these questions you may need to spend time on the question: what is it that is wrong with killing in the cases in which it is wrong? Once one has an answer to that question it may be clearer why suicide is a special case (if it is).

(ii) This title raises the question of whether it is the *consequences* of an act of self-killing that are decisive in settling the question of its morality. The focus of the question is a contrast between the *consequences* of an action and *the character of the act itself*. While it may be relevant to give a general indication of the likely consequences of a suicide you should not spend much time on this since the crucial question is: is there anything *other* than consequences that needs to be taken into account? Some people regard certain kinds of action as ‘intrinsically’ wrong: that is to say, wrong quite independently of their consequences. Others regard this idea as absurd; or even unintelligible. (Is the person’s death a ‘consequence’ of her act of suicide?) You will need to say something about that general dispute, and then to consider how it might apply in the case of suicide. (You might note that the essay title speaks of ‘self-killing’ rather than of ‘suicide’, and ask whether or not that is significant. Are all cases of ‘self-killing’ cases of ‘suicide’?)

(iii) The statement you are asked to discuss here includes the claim that: ‘Suicide is always wrong’. So it would be relevant in answering this question to present arguments for or against that claim. You should not, however, start work on that until you have got clear about the contrast, drawn in the title, between the idea of an action being ‘right or wrong’ and the idea of its being ‘justified or unjustified’. A question that will have to be central to an essay on this topic is: does it make sense to say, in a particular case, that what somebody did was *wrong*, but nevertheless *justified*? (If it seems to you obvious that it follows immediately from the fact that an action is wrong that it is unjustified it would be a mistake for you to tackle this essay. You will not be able to argue effectively against a suggestion – nor, of

course, *for* it – if it is simply a mystery to you why anyone might want to make such a suggestion.) It may be important here to draw a further distinction - that between a particular action being *justified* and its being *excusable* – in order to highlight that it is the first of these that is at issue. You might then give one or two quite detailed examples of cases in which few people would want to blame a person for killing, or attempting to kill, herself; and consider whether it would be wrong to blame her because what she did was excusable, because what she did was justified, or because what she did was right (or, if that is different, not wrong.)

Your outlines were almost certainly substantially different from mine. There is no single ‘correct’ answer to this exercise; and there are points that I have raised that you might be unlikely to raise in just that form prior to some study in this particular area of practical ethics. I hope, however, that you were able to bring out some significant differences between the essay titles; and that you can see, in general terms, the force of any points that I made that you did not.