

Moral Authority as Moral Skill:
An Exemplarist Theory of Practical Justification

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Abstract

How should we understand the question ‘Why be moral?’ Can we answer this question? If so, how? In this paper I develop an exemplarist theory of practical moral justification; that is, a theory of the justification of the *prima facie* moral things that we do, not the moral beliefs that we have. I take as my starting point that morality is, essentially, a set of *practices* in which all persons, in virtue of their being persons, participate. I argue that skillful practitioners of these various practices should be understood as moral authorities, and that the appeal to a moral authority for the purpose of one’s justifying one’s moral doings is necessarily justified for the appealer whenever she is practicing the same practice as the moral authority. This theory holds that moral authorities, so circumscribed, are Authoritative Exemplars, and as the appeal to their authority is necessarily justified they are able to provide a foundation for practical moral justifications, and thus rebutting the objection that all such justifications will run to regress. Among other things this account allows us to interpret the ‘Why be moral’ question as a question asking for more than can be had posed from a position of misunderstanding the nature of morality and practical moral justification. We cannot answer the ‘Why be moral?’ question any more than we can answer the ‘Why be human?’ question.

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General Audience Abstract

In moral philosophy, the study of questions and puzzles arising in broadly moral thought, one of the perennial questions is “Why be moral?” Since the time of Plato, various philosophers have given very different answers to this question. These answers range from “It is in your best interests to be moral” to “It would be irrational for you not to be moral” to “If you have to ask then we cannot convince you that you should be moral.” The most recent thought on this question has taken it to be a very important one; a question that must be answered if moral practice is to retain its sense and relevance to our lives. The question, in more precise terms, is taken to be a demand for a *justification* of the demands that morality places upon us all. Moreover, this demand for justification is taken to require not just some answer, but an answer that *any* person must accept. In this paper I argue that the question is simply a bad question, because what morality *is* is not a theoretical system of principles which we may or may not act in accordance with. Morality is something that we *do*; it is something that we *all* do and we cannot stop doing it. To justify *what we do*, I argue that we may appeal to moral authorities which can rightly serve as our exemplars, as moral authorities are those persons who are skilled at doing what we are doing.

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Section 1 Introduction

The question “Why should I be moral?” is almost as old as moral philosophy itself. It appears in Plato’s *Republic* in the mouths of Thrasymachus and Glaucon, and almost as notoriously in Hume’s *Enquiry* in the guise of the sensible knave. In the *Republic* the question put to Socrates is whether morality is, as he claims, intrinsically and instrumentally good; whether it is actually among the things “welcome not just for their own sakes, but also for their consequences,” such as intelligence, sight, and health.¹

Hume does not deal with the question in so great of detail as did Plato, but he also recognizes the difficulty of establishing the ‘goodness’ of morality. He entertains the idea of a sensible knave who, reminiscent of Plato’s example of the ring of Gyges, “it may perhaps be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.” Hume ‘confesses’ that “if a man think that this reasoning much requires an answer, it would be a little difficult to find any which will to him appear satisfactory and convincing. If his heart rebel not against such pernicious maxims, if he feel no reluctance to the thoughts of villainy or baseness, he has indeed lost a considerable motive to virtue [...].”²

For both Plato and Hume, the question “Why should I be moral?” seems to be a question of what reasons we have to respect the authority of morality.³ Why is it that we should be moral when the bezel of our ring is turned inwards and we could easily get away with immorality? What reason does the knave have to do what is right when it is inconvenient?

In contemporary moral philosophy, Christine Korsgaard has claimed that normative authority, of which moral authority is a particular kind, refers to the property of some normative standard’s being justified. When we ask why it is that we ought to act in accordance with the standard morality sets, we are asking what Korsgaard has called the “normative question,” which is, according to her, to ask what it is that justifies the claims that morality makes on us.⁴ As she says:

“If I claim that you ought to face death rather than do a certain wrong action, I had better be prepared to back that claim up with an account of what makes the action wrong which is powerful enough to show that something worth dying for is at stake. But really this demand on moral theory is always there. Even when the claims of morality are not so dramatic, they are pervasive in our expectations of ourselves and each other. So these claims must be justified. That is the normative question.”⁵

¹ Plato, *Republic*, 357c-358a. Translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1993. pp. 44-45.

² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Echo Library, Teddington. 2006. pp. 75-76.

³ This of course raises the question of what counts as a justificatory reason, the debate over justificatory internalism v. externalism, and the question of the necessity of the motivational force of reasons. I believe that the account I will be developing is compatible with a variety of internalist and externalist positions, so for the purposes of this paper I will not be defending any view of normative or justificatory reasons over another.

⁴ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1996. p. 10.

⁵ *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 13.

Korsgaard identifies four kinds of accounts that modern philosophers have given to the normative question: Voluntarism, Realism, Reflective Endorsement, and the Kantian Appeal to Autonomy, upon the latter of which she constructs her own account.⁶ Simon Blackburn has questioned whether we should accept that the question of moral authority is best understood in such an abstract sense as Korsgaard and others have envisioned it. Blackburn has suggested alternatively that “[p]eople ask why they must do some particular thing in all kinds of circumstance, and their concerns can only be addressed in appropriately different ways.” He continues, “So whence arises the illusion that there is such a thing as the normative question? The perspective from which it seems that there is one [...] is the perspective from which desires are free of normativity, in themselves alien to reason, and need taking up and certificating by some [...] source of ‘musts’.”⁷

Linda Radzik has argued that foundationalist accounts of normative authority (practical justification) are vulnerable to a regress objection because for any proposed foundation, some standard is required to justify the foundation, and a standard to justify that standard, and so on.⁸ The account I will be presenting is in agreement with Blackburn on the point that “the” question of normative authority is something of a red herring, and such questions should be understood instead as *a* question of the justification of *some* standard in *some* context. However, my account is as equally vulnerable to Radzik’s regress objection as Korsgaard’s and others. For whether or not the question “why should I be moral, period?” has an answer, on my account even normative questions of a Blackburnian cast (e.g. “why should I be moral here, now, with respect to this obligation?”) find their justificatory terminus in a form of foundationalism. The foundationalist theory of practical moral justification I put forward, which I call Moral Authority as Moral Skill, grounds practical moral justifications in exemplars.

I proceed as follows: In section two I address Radzik’s regress objection to foundational practical justification. I argue that Normativity Theorists can accept all of her objection’s presuppositions without accepting its negative conclusion. To do so requires the positing of a particular kind of standard, a standard that I argue may be made sense of by placing it in the person of an authoritative exemplar. In section three, drawing from Korsgaard’s normative adequacy conditions for a moral theory and Zagzebski’s Exemplarist moral theory, I enumerate six necessary criteria of normative adequacy for an exemplarist theory of practical moral justification. In section four I argue that the account I propose is able to satisfy five of these criteria. In section five I discuss what seem to be the greatest benefits and most serious objections

⁶ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁷ Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning*, Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1998. pp. 258-259.

⁸ Radzik’s alternative theory, Reflective Endorsement Coherentism (REC), argues that the standard “RE₁: One ought to accept norms that one would endorse upon reflection.” can be justified if one can claim “RE₂: I ought to accept the norms of reflection that I do” and RE₂ is said to be justified by RE₁. I will not be discussing her theory here, as I argue that foundationalist accounts have a way out of Radzik’s objection. Linda Radzik, “A Coherentist Theory of Normative Authority,” *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 6 No. 1. 2002. 21-42. p. 34.

to the account, several of which bear particularly on the question of whether the account can satisfy the final criterion of normative adequacy, Transparency. After arguing that it does, I conclude with some brief remarks in section six.

Section 2 The Regress Objection

“Standards of behavior, like beliefs,” Radzik says, “seem to be based on one another.”⁹ Just as there is a potential for regress in Epistemology, Radzik argues that:

“[t]he Normativity Theorist faces a similar problem when she tries to offer justifying reasons for subscribing to a standard. Standards are based on one another in some way. Therefore, there is the potential for regress. I accept standard N1. If you ask me why I accept N1, I will cite another standard, N2, as my reason. If you press me for a justification of N2, I will appeal to N3, and so on, potentially without end.”¹⁰

Radzik argues that the regress objection poses a genuine problem for the Normativity Theorists because they have good reason to accept the presuppositions implicit in the regress objection. These presuppositions are that:

- 1) “an agent must have access to her reasons in order to be justified.”
- 2) “the things that do the justificatory work (the justifiers) must themselves be justified.”
- 3) “infinite chains of reasons are not justificatory.”¹¹

As she says, presupposition 2 is analogous to a disease that requires that one be infected (with justification) in order to pass the disease (of justification) to another. The alternative, a disease that one only transmits without being infected, is analogous to a standard justified by a thing which need not itself be practically justified. Possible candidates for such justifiers that she considers are:

“a psychological fact (e.g., a desire, a set of goals, a second-order desire, pleasure or pain),” “social facts (e.g., a social contract, a system of social approval and disapproval), and counterfactual psychological or social states of affairs (e.g., a goal an agent would have if she had full information, a set of institutions that would be chosen by a society if every member had equal bargaining power).”¹²

Radzik adds that “[e]ven sui generis facts of value are possible candidates for the justifiers of standards,”¹³ but she dismisses these alternatives as solutions to the regress problem because, she argues, 2 is implied by S.

S: “the only thing that can practically justify a standard is another standard.”¹⁴

Radzik rightly says that Normativity Theorists are committed to S because they argue that anything that purportedly justifies a standard, such as a desire, social contract, counterfactual states of affairs, etc., will require justification, which is unobtainable without appealing to a standard.¹⁵ Radzik’s characterization of the Normativity Theorists’ commitment to S, and thus to 2, is that they must be so committed

⁹ Linda Radzik, “A Normative Regress Problem.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 1999, 35-47. p. 36.

¹⁰ “A Normative Regress Problem.” pp. 36-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

for the sake of consistency. Though I agree, this is true only on a particular reading of S, from which only a narrow reading of 2 follows.

There are two ways to understand “another standard” in S. In the narrow sense, we might be requiring that our other standard be a *new* standard such that the original standard is justified in light of it. In the more general sense the other standard is another thing such that it is a standard that justifies the original standard. These two senses are formulable in the following way:

N: For standard x to be practically justified there must be some standard y in virtue of which x is justified, where x and y are non-identical.¹⁶

G: For standard x to be practically justified there must be some standard in y virtue of which x is justified.

It is not plausible that the Normativity Theorist is committed to N for the reasons Radzik offers. She says that the Normativity Theorists have argued that:

“in order for goals, social contracts, etc. to have a role in the practical justification of moral standards, it must be the case that the goals or social contracts are themselves justified. In order for the goals or social contracts to be practically justified, it must be the case that “one ought to have goal G” or that “society ought to make contract C.” These “ought” claims state standards. It seems that, if the psychological or social fact is justified, there is always a standard relative to which it is justified.”¹⁷

If the Normativity Theorist is required for the sake of consistency to accept S, given the above characterization of her view, then it seems she is only required to accept G. If the Normativity Theorist’s commitment to S required her to accept N, then no standard could justify itself or be necessarily justified because by definition for any standard’s justification a disparate standard is needed to secure it. But on G such a case might obtain. Standard S1 might be practically justified by another standard S2 such that the content of these standards is the same, but where S2 is necessarily justified, in virtue not of its content but of its kind. The second presupposition of the regress objection would still follow from G, but we would need to re-interpret the requirement that “justifiers must be justified” as requiring that the content of those justifiers be justified, rather than that there be a justifier for every justifier.

I have argued that the Normativity Theorist is not committed to the narrower sense of S. However, while the Normativity Theorist who accepts G and denies N has made some room to address the regress objection, to do so is to allow for a certain kind of self-justified standard. The Normativity Theorist thus has good reason to accept G and deny N provided that we can give an account of how a standard could be practically self-justified in a manner allowed by G, yet distinct from a standard that is said to justify itself. In other words, we need to posit a kind of standard that is justified whenever it is appealed to that can serve as a justifier for a practical standard of a distinct kind which has the same content as the

¹⁶ Radzik’s coherentist theory of practical justification (REC) seems to employ this narrower understanding of S), as REC holds that the authority of standards is grounded in two separate standards with differing content that justify each other.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

original standard. Providing the explanation of how such a case as described above is possible is a central criterion for the account of Moral Authority as Moral Skill, and will be taken up again in section four. Before returning to this question there are other criteria particular to an exemplarist account, and more general criteria that any account of moral authority must satisfy, which will first be discussed.

Section 3

Criteria for a Theory of Exemplarist Moral Authority

For any theory to successfully answer the normative question(s), Korsgaard argues that it must satisfy three conditions, all of which “spring from the position from which the normative question arises, the first-personal position of the agent who demands a justification of the claims which morality makes upon him.”¹⁸ The first condition is that the theory actually address the questioner first-personally, and Korsgaard thinks that the latter two, that the theory be transparent and that it appeal to one’s sense of one’s identity, are entailed by the first. Transparency is the requirement that “a normative moral theory must be one that allows us to act in the full light of knowledge of what morality is and why we are susceptible to its influences, and at the same time to believe that our actions are justified and make sense.”¹⁹ Arguing for the necessity of the third condition, Korsgaard says that “if moral claims are ever worth dying for, then violating them must be [...] worse than death. And this means that they must issue in a deep way from our sense of who we are.”²⁰

It is not clear to me that we ever have a clear “sense of who we are,” but I accept the former two requirements and the third with some modification. It seems correct to say that just as a theory must be transparent it must not serve to alienate us from ourselves, but it is less clear that a theory must appeal to something like our sense of *individual* identity unless one is inclined to construct a Kantian account, as Korsgaard goes on to do. It is also unclear whether moral claims are ever worth dying for, so what would follow from this may be irrelevant. Thus I deem it acceptable to modify Korsgaard’s third criterion.

F: An exemplarist theory of practical moral justification may only allow the conferral of justification to S insofar as the authority of the exemplar addresses S first-personally (No externalist justifications).

T: An exemplarist theory of practical moral justification must not undermine the apparent justificatory status of S’s appeal to the exemplar when S understands the theory. (Not de-motivational or self-defeating)

P: An exemplarist theory of practical moral justification must issue in a deep way from our practices, that is, the manner in which *we* participate when *we* play the moral game.²¹

Having applied these general criteria of normative adequacy to an exemplarist theory, we can turn to the question of criteria particular to exemplarist theories. Linda Zagzebski has developed an interesting normative virtue theory that she calls Exemplarism, “which is foundational in structure but which is grounded in exemplars of moral goodness, direct reference to which anchors all the moral concepts in the theory.”²² According to Exemplarism, moral exemplars are “identified directly through the emotion of

¹⁸ *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

²¹ If Korsgaard’s third criterion of normative adequacy is deliberately Kantian it should be admitted that my own is deliberately Sellarsian.

²² Linda Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Virtue Theory” *Metaphilosophy*, 2010. 41-57. p. 41.

admiration,”²³ and it is thus an empirical investigation that decides the question of exemplarity, and thus the question of who is good, and thus what is good.

For Zagzebski the feeling of admiration performs three functions in concert with reflection. The first function is to pick out moral exemplars, persons who are “paradigmatically good” and ground the meaningfulness of moral terms. The second function is to decide the meaning of moral terms (such as good, right, etc.) empirically. We may investigate our admiration of those whom are admired through self-reflection, but we may also investigate the admired themselves. Both of these activities are necessary on her view to decide when the moral terms are being applied correctly, but also to decide who is a moral exemplar (who is in fact good). The third function of admiration is to address the question of what Korsgaard called the normative adequacy of a moral theory. Admiration, Zagzebski suggests, is usually motivating for us because we, in admiring, express our interest in being like those whom we admire, to emulate exemplars.²⁴

For the purposes of developing an exemplarist account of moral authority, there are several reasons for which I think we should be unsatisfied with an “Admirationist” account. First, because Zagzebski’s account of Admiration is largely general and theoretical, pertaining to the meaning of moral terms rather than practical/normative justification, the theory may have problems coming from the former direction which impede its success on the latter count (e.g., one might object to the apparent circularity and arbitrariness of admiration/admirability-as-identifier-of-the-good, quite apart from admiration’s ability to justify or motivate). Secondly, it is doubtful that admiration is as sufficiently motivating as Zagzebski supposes, enough to satisfactorily answer Korsgaard’s criteria for normative adequacy.²⁵ Tolkien’s character Tom Bombadil, for example, seems admirable on account of his goodness but is not plausibly taken to be one whom we would feel compelled to emulate because of the way in which his goodness is manifested; he is not a skilled moral practitioner so much as a quasi-deific being seemingly incapable of vice. Finally, as Blackburn suggested earlier, there may be other ways to confer authority/justification even if admiration serves as Zagzebski thinks in picking out the Good. Perhaps one would prefer to construct an exemplarist account of authority on some other affection, such as Respect or Love, either of which might arguably be thought of as the ground of or a necessary condition for admiration.

²³ Zagzebski means to apply Kripke and Putnam’s theory of direct reference to ethical discourse. “Exemplarist Virtue Theory.” p. 41.

²⁴ Zagzebski notes that her suggestion, “that among the particular judgments that we may use in testing a theory are judgments about the identity of paradigmatically good persons,” “is an application in ethical discourse of a point made by Thomas Kuhn [...] about exemplars in scientific discourse.” Her view holds that some persons are good, and can thus serve as exemplars in helping to decide when the term ‘good’ is being properly applied or not, just as Kuhn thought that exemplars are used in scientific theory to pick out what we mean by scientific terms.

Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 2004. p. 41.

²⁵ This is to say that admiration alone, whether a useful tool for identifying “paradigmatically good persons” or not, is often insufficient to move us to action and to give us even defeasible reasons to act. Though Zagzebski allows that sometimes we admire persons whom we cannot emulate, we also admire persons whom we would not emulate.

We can at least say that a theory of exemplarist moral authority and practical justification should exhibit a similar kind of grounding relationship as Kuhn's and Zagzebski's respective theories; notwithstanding the fact that in those theories exemplars serve in theoretical justifications rather than practical ones. Rather than defining our terms, appealing to an exemplar of moral authority must pick out standards as authoritative. That is to say that exemplars, as exemplars, must be able to make the standard authoritative for someone, whether we take this as providing justification or motivation or both.²⁶ This gives us a sketch of the fourth criterion for our theory:

G: The appeal to an exemplar grounds the authoritativeness of the relevant justified standard, providing justificatory and motivational force.

We should also recall from our earlier discussion of Radzik's objection that in taking advantage of the general interpretation of S (G) to avoid the regress, we must provide an account such that the appeal to an exemplar, where the standard to be justified is the same standard instantiated by that exemplar, does not itself require further justification. So our fifth criterion must be:

J: S's appeal to an exemplar-standard to justify S's practical-standard does not require further justification.

Outside of moral philosophy, the descriptor 'moral authority' is typically used in praise of people, or is refrained from being used to spite them, such as it has been used with some regularity in reference to Bernie Sanders and not at all in reference to Donald Trump. Beyond this somewhat trivial analysis of the use of the descriptor, it is largely indeterminate what the term is supposed to mean when applied to persons besides an endorsement of that person's behavior. Legitimate political authority--which we might think requires or entails a sense of moral authority--is often taken to be either a matter of justified coercion, or of the ability or right to obligate citizens.²⁷ Persons said to be morally skilled such as Jesus or Socrates or Gandalf, or said to have moral knowledge such as Mohammad or Confucius or Kant, are also said to be moral authorities (and of course these may overlap). We might even refer to cult leaders or sophists as having a kind of moral authority, inasmuch as they compel others to do as they wish.

The final criterion of this account will be that it enables us to talk of the "moral authority" of a person and the "moral authority" of a standard in a quasi-univocal sense. As an exemplarist account of practical moral justification, this criterion is necessary. Further, the satisfaction of this criterion will be a theoretical advantage this account has over competing accounts, as it will serve to clarify what would otherwise remain confused and conflicting meanings attached to the attribution of "moral authority" to persons. I shall call this criterion of the univocal or quasi-univocal meaning of the moral authority of persons and standards criterion U.

U: An exemplarist theory of practical justification must plausibly accommodate a univocal or quasi-univocal understanding of the moral authority of persons and of standards.

²⁶ See footnote 3.

²⁷ Tom Christiano, "Authority", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/authority/>>.

We now have the following six criteria that an exemplarist theory of moral authority and practical justification must satisfy:

F: An exemplarist theory of practical moral justification may only allow the conferral of justification to S insofar as the authority of the exemplar addresses S first-personally.

T: An exemplarist theory of practical moral justification must not undermine the apparent justificatory status of S's appeal to the exemplar when S understands the theory.

P: An exemplarist theory of practical moral justification must issue in a deep way from our practices, that is, the manner in which *we* participate when *we* play the moral game.

G: The appeal to an exemplar grounds the authoritativeness of the relevant justified standard, providing justificatory and motivational force.

J: S' appeal to an exemplar-standard to justify S' conceptual standard does not require additional justification.

U: An exemplarist theory of practical justification must plausibly accommodate a univocal or quasi-univocal understanding of the moral authority of persons and of standards.

Section 4

Moral Skill as Moral Authority

I now argue that moral authority understood as moral skill is able to meet all of our criteria. On this understanding morality is essentially an activity or practice, rather than a theoretical system of moral laws or principles. We say that morality is a kind of game, and that to have skill in the game is to be a moral authority. Of course to determine who is skilled will require a standard; in fact what will count as skill will depend upon who is considering the matter, because it will depend on how the activity in question is embodied by its participants. Whether you ask a professional BMX competitor, an endurance racer, an average cyclist or a circus clown about ‘bicycle skill’ will largely determine what kind of an answer you will get, and so too with fans or enthusiasts of those kinds of skill-employers. In the case of moral skill, just as with bicycle riding, what it is that is being taken to constitute right-action in the context of the activity depends upon how one participates in that activity.

Identifying the moral authority of persons with moral skill allows us to draw a distinction between persons with moral authority and authoritative exemplars. The distinction is that where the skill of one with respect to the instantiation of moral standards is a fact about that person’s activity given the context of a community of practitioners, whether or not one’s skill is recognized by another while that other is invested in the same game is the test of exemplarity. Exemplars are then those who are morally authoritative *for us*, rather than those who are authorities simpliciter. In this way our account is able to satisfy criteria F, P, and U. Recognizing the moral skill of someone speaks to her moral authority, but no justification can be conferred unless the moral context of that authority (the game) is the same moral context wherefrom the appellant appeals. This is to say that because to be an exemplar is to be an exemplar for someone, there is no external justification for exemplarity. E could only be an exemplar for S because S takes E to be skilled given the activity of morality as S practices it, whether or not anyone else recognizes that skill as a skill, though of course it is probable (and perhaps necessary) that a great many do.

For example, we might recognize the skill with which a cult or religious leader, such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, conducts himself. We can recognize that given the demands, constraints, precepts, and values of Baghdadi’s moral system, Baghdadi is ‘skilled at morality.’ And of course we place that in scare-quotes precisely because *we* do not take Baghdadi’s activity to provide *us* with any justification, much less any motivation to emulate him; but we can recognize why others might feel compelled to do so. They take themselves to be playing the same game as Baghdadi, and recognize just as we can that Baghdadi is quite skilled in that game. Thus we can say that Baghdadi is a moral authority without committing ourselves to the standards he exemplifies.

To address whether our account meets the remaining criteria (G, J, and T) let us consider another analogy. Suppose that we are watching a game of chess being played between two novices, where each is

familiar enough with the rules of chess to play, but neither are skilled. Let us call these novices Black and White. Imagine that for her first move White elects to move her King's pawn forward two squares. If Black asks White why she thinks that the move was a good one, he would be asking her for a theoretical justification of the move (in the way that we might ask why x is a demand of morality). As each is a novice, White likely is unable to provide an answer. If on the other hand Black asks White why she moved the pawn (as we might ask why one should do x where x is moral), he would be asking her for a practical justification of the move. This she could answer.

She might say that she has seen many of Kasparov's Grandmaster-level games, and though she did not always understand why the master made every move he made, she does understand that he is a skilled chess player and that White's moving the King's pawn forward two squares to begin the game is a typical move of his. She may (speaking psychologically, not normatively) infer that the move is a good move, but she need not make this inference to justify her taking the move, that is, to appeal to the standard set by an exemplar, Kasparov, to justify a standard to which she has committed herself, namely opening the game of chess with Pawn-e4.

Would it make sense for Black to then ask White for a justification of the appeal to her exemplar Kasparov? Certainly the question is sensible, but it also admits of a trivial response, that White intends to play a game of chess. White should say to Black that she appeals to Kasparov simply because he is Kasparov; he is a skilled chess player, and moving as he tends to is justified insofar as one wishes, as Kasparov does, to win when they play chess, which is to say, to play chess. Just as it makes very little sense for Black to ask White why she checkmates him, it makes very little sense to ask her to justify why she moves as Kasparov does, between moves in the game as it were; and it makes no more sense to ask why we appeal to those we take to be morally skillful when we are trying to do what we take to be the morally skillful things. As Kasparov is skilled at chess, so are exemplars skilled at morality. This particular game may seem dis-analogous on account of the specificity and universality of the rules of chess, but even various Grandmasters may have different approaches or styles (openings, replies, end-game tactics, etc.) and appealing to any of them would seem equally proper, all else being equal, as we must say in the case of moral practice. Just as we can appeal to the standard of Kasparov's chess playing when we justify the taking of a move in that game, we can appeal to the standard one we recognize as an exemplar sets, because we take ourselves to be trying to do the same thing exemplars seem to us good at.

When White appeals to Kasparov's practical authority, his skill at the activity as she understands it, the standards Kasparov is found to hold are already taken as authoritative for White, precisely for the reason she appeals to Kasparov at all. Kasparov is skilled at chess (for White), and White wants to act skillfully with respect to chess, otherwise she would not be interested in practical justification at all. Thus our account accommodates itself to criterion G and J, because an exemplar would not be appealed to ex-

cept when one is interested in practical justification. The exemplar grounds the authoritativeness (justificatory and motivational force) of standards insofar as whenever and inasmuch as some exemplar is appealed to, motivational force is presupposed by the appeal, and justificatory force by the appealer. Recognizing an exemplar as an exemplar requires taking them to be skilled, which presupposes only the metric that the appealer already accepts. We only recognize skill when we recognize an activity to master, and we only ever appeal to persons with such skills when we take ourselves to be participating in that activity. As the appeal to an exemplar does not require justification (because it is already authoritative for the appealer) that appeal is able to put a stop to the 'why' question and we can say is able to ground (in a restricted sense) the standards that S is committed to. Thus the regress of practical justification is avoided. Our final criterion of Transparency will be taken up in the next section as it relates to some benefits of and objections to this account.

Section 5 Theoretical Advantages and Objections

Before addressing some of the more pressing objections to this account, particularly whether it satisfies the Transparency criterion (T), I will review some of its advantages. Firstly, on this view there being persons with moral authority presupposes only a moral practice and acting with skill with respect to it. Picking out a justification-conferring exemplar requires only a conception of skill and a commitment to practicing in a moral practice. Given the truth of the starting assumption that morality is essentially and fundamentally a necessary feature of human life, as it is an activity rather than a theoretical enterprise, any person is in a position to justify at least some of their moral doings.

Secondly, being a moral authority is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a moral exemplar. This view thus preserves intuitions many of us have that persons with moral authority do not necessarily obligate, motivate, or justify our doing of anything.

Thirdly, on this view the moral authority of persons is an empirical matter, inasmuch as we think we can measure and compare skill in other contextualized domains (e.g., bicycle-riding and chess-playing). This account is thus amenable to moral naturalism.

Fourthly, the practice of morality is significantly unlike other practices because our participation is, as I have said, constitutive of what it means to be a human being. We do not participate casually, though we might do so poorly. Thus on this account of moral authority the appeal to an exemplar is always defeasibly reason-giving and motivating, as one is always “committed” in the relevant sense to acting skillfully with respect to “morality” so understood. This allows us, as I have argued, to both rebut the regress objection to practical moral justification, and to explain why the “Why be moral” question is a pseudo-question.

The most pressing objection is that if morality is understood first and essentially as a practice and a kind of game then the account cannot be transparent, and the final criterion that the account must satisfy is left unmet. One might ask how this view would not under-motivate us when it suggests that our moral practices are *essentially* practices, only later (if ever) answerable to sound theoretical explanations and justifications.

First, one might ask, “Given that morality is a game, why should we play?” This objection misses the mark if the question being raised is the same question raised by Hume’s sensible knave. In the analogy with chess above, it would be akin to Black asking White why they should play chess. It is true that this view has nothing to say to address such a knave, but the knave is a fanciful example of one asking why they should participate as though he does not. We can’t give such persons reasons, at least not on this view, but we also need not supply them. For actual persons, always already in the midst of the game, it cannot be asked “why should I be moral” from the position of one who is not. What can be asked is “why

should I be moral now,” or “why should I be moral with respect to x?” Such questions are answerable to reasons internal to one’s participation in the activity. I have argued that such reasons are justifiable by appealing to the exemplarity of one with moral skill.

A more threatening way to read this objection is to shift the emphasis. One might ask, “Given that morality is *essentially* a game, why should we *continue* to play?” This gets to the heart of the argument that the view is, in fact, not transparent. My answer to this objection is simply that one really cannot help but to keep playing, and to ask why we should *continue* to play in fact presupposes that one is committed to continuing to play. Suppose that one comes to doubt “the point” of playing the morality game, and wishes to resolve to not play that game anymore. It would seem that he endorses a practical standard, namely to not play along with what he takes to be the game that he had been previously playing. Is he not simply playing a new game now, taking himself to be (for the moment) the only skillful practitioner and thus the only authority in this new game?

The former objector will protest that this reply, if successful, only addresses a portion of the Transparency criterion. Perhaps one cannot really remove oneself from the “game of morality” full-stop, but if one can come to doubt that the *particular* game that they are playing is worthwhile, then this may be sufficient grounds to doubt that the transparency criterion has been satisfied. On the contrary, I think that it is a point in favor of the transparency of the view that I allow that such a state of affairs may obtain. A view which held that it is not possible for one to rationally question whether the particular moral game that one were playing were worth the trouble should not be a view we endorse, as it is contrary to experience. Further and more importantly, it is not on account of the view itself that one’s motivations to continue to participate in the game can become undermined in this way, but rather is a product of a peculiar psychology. The knave is a *knave* after all.

A point related to this reply that some Normativity Theorists have raised is that it may seem that the more we scrutinize our practical justifications and submit them to analysis, the less authoritative and motivating those justifications become. One might thus conclude that practical moral authority and practical moral justification are not the same, even if they are closely (psychologically) related. Valerie Tiberius has raised this worry quite explicitly.²⁸ I think that this is a legitimate concern, and suspect that something is lost when we think of authority and practical justification (as Korsgaard does) as identical notions. What seems to be lost is the ‘affectatiousness’ of moral authority, the power that it has (or ought to have). I suspect that this sort of “theory-loss” is what lies behind the difficulty of any theory with some degree of substance to meet the transparency criterion. The account I have constructed seems intrinsically motivating, even if defeasibly so, given the necessary psychological conditions for appealing to a moral exemplar. Thus if the notions of justification and authority come apart, this view would survive the

²⁸ Valerie Tiberius, *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely With Our Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008.

schism. We can respond in a similar manner on the question of reasons-internalism v. reasons-externalism. This view is compatible with either picture because exemplars are both necessarily authoritative and, I have argued, able to confer practical justification inasmuch as they are appealed to.

I have said that just as the appeal to Kasparov's skill is justified when you're playing chess, so the appeal to exemplars is always already justified in the sense that you're merely picking out in the world where certain conditions for moral authority obtain in persons, given one's conception of moral practice and moral skill. Obviously, any such conception will vary across persons. We think that some persons are depraved, but it would seem that on this view their appeal to their exemplar of practical authority is as equally justification-conferring as anyone else's. Thus one might object that this view is too subjective. To this we can say a few things. First, this account is not as subjective as some competing accounts such as Radzik's Reflective Coherence Theory, but it is certainly relativistic. This account understands morality to be foremost a practical endeavor given shape and form by a community of practitioners. Practical justification is a separate matter from theoretical justification, (i.e. the justifying of actions rather than beliefs). Thus this view is relativistic, but it is also neutral with respect to normative ethics, so I deny that this objection has any real force.

The relativity-objector may push back here and say that if there are objective moral truths, then on this view persons might come to be rightly said to have committed justified acts that are wrong. It simply produces the wrong result, he might say. One might pick out a band of Conquistadors and illustrate in detail the "wrongness inherent" to their conquistador-community's values and exemplars, and insist that it is just too implausible that some Conquistador in search of practical moral justification should simply look to the example set by Cortez or whomever counts as skilled for him. What he should appeal to instead is something like a true moral principle. I freely admit that this view produces a curious result, supposing that there are moral truths which conflict with what we consider to be skilled moral practice, but the alternative seems to be that no descriptively moral action is practically justifiable if it is not also theoretically justifiable, and this seems to me as equally or even more implausible given the varieties of moral experience in the world.

One may suspect that this view either presupposes normative moral relativism, on the grounds that what counts as moral skill just is action in conformity with moral truth, or that it requires normative moral relativism in order for what we consider to be moral skill to be motivating and justification-conferring, as what we call moral skill just is action which we take to conform to moral truth. I deny each of these charges. It seems to me that those philosophers who deny that there is moral truth, much less objective moral truth, (e.g., non-cognitivists, error theorists, etc.) are as capable as anyone else at recognizing moral skill and appreciating the importance of striving for it themselves. One can recognize skill in chess without admitting that there are objective truths concerning the 'best move' to be taken on every

turn, skill in bicycle-riding without supposing that there is a uniquely correct way to ride, and so too with respect to morality.

Section 6 Concluding Remarks

I have taken as my starting point an understanding of morality as a practice that is constitutive of being a human being, and have argued that we should understand skillful practitioners of morality as persons with moral authority. I have argued that such persons may serve as authoritative exemplars, providing a foundation to practical moral justifications, which allows us to address several concerns.

We are able to respond to Radzik's regress objection by illustrating how practical justifications may terminate in appeals to skillful practitioners. The consequence of endorsing such a view is that our practical justifications are relativized to particular forms of descriptive moral practice. I have tried to soften this result by pointing out that this view is nonetheless far less subjective than Radzik's Reflective Endorsement Coherentism. On this view what might in theory be practically justified is restricted to what we *actually* do. It is not an "anything goes" sort of account.

If successful, this account also enables us to provide a quasi-univocal definition of the moral authority of persons and standards, which clears up our language on a subject not much discussed in moral philosophy.

Additionally, this account is insulated from the question of the proper understanding of the relationship of the authority of standards and their practical justification. Whether or not the practical justification of a standard is sufficient, necessary, or neither for that standard's authoritativeness or motivational force, understanding the moral authority of persons as moral skill allows us to account for both the motivational/reason-giving force of their authority and the capability of that authority to ground our practical moral justifications.

Finally, what a moral practice is and how exactly various moral practices are distinguished from each other and from other non-moral practices are three remaining questions that I have not the space here to address. These questions are very important for the viability of this account and, I think, for moral philosophy more generally. It will be far easier to distinguish moral practices from each other than it will be to separate them from non-moral practices, and what a moral practice is cannot be determined unless the latter distinction is drawn. I suspect that some if not many of our *prima facie* non-moral practices will actually turn out to be moral practices on an adequate accounting. It is my hope that this fact serves to reinforce the importance of doing moral philosophy in a time when many seem ready to give up the search for moral truth. I hope to continue my research into these matters, as it seems to me of paramount importance.

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