FOR AND AGAINST MORAL CONVERSATION-STOPPERS

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In this article I argue that although Daniel Dennett is right to hold that moral conversation-stoppers (considerations that tend to bring moral deliberation to an end) are practically helpful, there are also moral and philosophical benefits to be gained from developing a habit of being suspicious of them.

I. Introduction

Near the end of his excellent book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Daniel Dennett argues that it is helpful and important to have moral 'conversation-stoppers'. Examples of such conversation-stoppers include:

'But that would be murder'

'But he's doing it entirely out of greed'

'But that would be the just thing to do'

'But he acted out of compassion'

Conversation-stoppers function as compelling 'red line' considerations that effectively bring moral discussion or deliberation to an end. Dennett's point – highly condensed – is that they are practically helpful precisely because they prevent us from *ad nauseam* moral deliberations for which we are ill-equipped and have little time. We have moral problems to solve *on the go*, and moral conversation-stoppers allow for this.

Dennett makes a strong case. I agree with him that moral conversation-stoppers are practically helpful, even

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necessary. (This is the 'for' moral conversation-stoppers part of the article.) However, I am sure that Dennett would agree that in some cases this kind of 'rule worship' (as he calls it) can be a bad thing for various reasons. He is quite clear in stating that conversation-stoppers typically 'cannot withstand extended scrutiny' (Dennett 1995, 507). But he doesn't really make the case against conversation-stoppers in any developed way, and I think it deserves to be made.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the chief benefits of being suspicious of moral conversation-stoppers is that it helps one to develop philosophical acumen. There are moral benefits to be had as well. Of course, philosophy needs bedrock rules and 'red line' considerations to make progress, but just as deeply it needs – and is largely fuelled by – pushback against principles concretizing into dogma. To illustrate this, I'll focus on the shortcomings of a time-honoured moral conversation-stopper – the claim that greed is bad – as a springboard to discussing the dangers of excessive reliance on moral conversation-stoppers more generally, and the moral and philosophical benefits of avoiding that reliance.

II. Defining 'Greed'

That claim that *greed is bad* has excellent credentials as a moral conversation-stopper. It has been the object of nearly universal condemnation by moralists in virtually all cultures for millennia. But perhaps this is a bit too quick. Perhaps there are moral merits to being greedy. Before turning to that question, though, we have to get clear on what we mean by 'greed'.

If we wish to ask whether greed can ever be good in an open-minded way, then we cannot simply stipulate or entail in our definition that greed is always bad. Yet at the same time, the meaning of 'greed' should remain grounded in popular usage of the term, and this means that our definition must capture the fact that 'greed' at least typically

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connotes something uncomplimentary. With this in mind, I would like to propose the following definition:

> *Greed is excessive desire for objects for the purpose of selfish satisfaction.*

My hope is that this definition satisfies the balancing act called for above: it captures the generally uncomplimentary sense of 'greed', and yet it does not entail that greed is always a vice or that its products are always bad. It remains an open question whether it might be good in some ways.

Let me briefly expand on three parts of the proposed definition:

(1) Note that although greed is often associated with an excessive desire for tangible objects like money or possessions, it would be too restrictive to stipulate that greed only applies to them. We can also speak about persons having greed for intangible things such as honour or pleasure.

(2) There are certain characteristic actions associated with the 'excessive desire' involved in greed. Here I will mention only three of them, although I would expect there are others. So, if a person is greedy for something, one will often find that that person:

   a. Pursues it in an *all-encompassing* way;
   b. *Hoards* it when one gets it; and
   c. *Will take advantage of others* when necessary in order to get it.

(3) Note that there is something inherently *selfish* about greed: a person who is greedy for something wants that thing for himself or herself, not for anyone else.

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I have stressed these parts of my definition of greed to establish that I am not dealing with a sugar-coated understanding of greed. I am talking about the same trait that is widely considered so morally undesirable. Despite this, I wish to argue that greed can indeed be good and desirable, at least in the right circumstances.

III. Cracking the Conversation-Stopper

To start, let's table our talk of greed and think instead about bravery. Bravery has long been praised as a noble and desirable character trait, and perhaps deserves to be viewed as a moral conversation-stopper in its own right ('But he acted bravely!' 'Ah, then he must be praised for it.'). Throughout history, children have been taught by their parents to strive to be brave, and in some cultures – for example, Japanese culture influenced by *bushido* philosophy – bravery has even been raised to the status of one of the master virtues. Now consider a particular case. A soldier, crouched behind a burning vehicle, is under heavy fire from rebels. His companions are pinned down and several have been shot. If he doesn't do something immediately, they will be caught in rebel crossfire, and all of them will probably be killed. Realizing this, the soldier says a prayer, launches himself into the open, miraculously avoids getting shot, works his way forward to the rebel strongpoint, and throws in a grenade, neutralizing the rebels. After tending to the wounded, his companions come forward and vow that they have never seen such an act of astonishing bravery, and they swear that he will receive a medal for his actions. Most people would agree that the soldier acted bravely. But now consider the following two facts: the soldier is a Nazi storm trooper, and the rebels were starving Jews taking part in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. I imagine that your reaction to the scene I have just sketched may have changed from admiration to repulsion. But although our moral judgement of the

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situation may have changed, there seems little reason to change our judgement that the act was exceedingly brave. This example does not show that bravery is bad full stop, of course, but it does show that bravery, despite the history of laudation it has received, can be put to bad uses. And there is a clear sense in which most would agree that, morally speaking, it would have been better if the storm trooper had not been brave.

Let us now return to the case of greed. Imagine the case of a scientist working on a project. The scientist isn't especially interested in helping other people or advancing her discipline. She doesn't work with others and doesn't want to. She has made some minor advances in the past while working with others, but on each of these occasions she tried to take all of the praise. Her personal life has suffered as a result of her behaviour. She has ignored her family and friends so that she can devote herself to her projects. What drives her is a consuming greed for her own gain, for the fame and adulation that she will receive if she makes a scientific breakthrough. Now imagine that her research advances to the point where she believes that she is on the cusp of a major breakthrough. All that remains is a final test. She could easily find test subjects to aid her in this, but her overweening greed for fame leads her to make herself the test subject. With the Nobel Prize dancing in her imagination, she undertakes the final test alone – and it is a success. Later on, her colleagues discover what she has done. Every one of them feels a strong aversion to the greed for fame that drove her to do what she did. But now consider the following two facts: the final test involved injecting a human subject with a potentially fatal serum – an injection she took herself out of greed for fame – and the project the scientist was working on was a cure for a terrible illness. The cure is subsequently used to save many lives. The scientist goes on to win widespread adulation for her discovery. Her greed is satisfied. In this example, the zeal that characterizes the scientist's greed for fame is precisely the fuel that led her to a remarkable

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act of potential self-sacrifice. This example does not show that greed is good full stop, of course; but it does show that greed, despite the history of condemnation it has received, can be put to good uses. And there is a clear sense in which most would agree that, morally speaking, it was better in those circumstances for the scientist to have been greedy.

Now it might be objected that unrestrained greed on a large scale has many bad effects. I do not dispute that. My point is that greed does not always have these effects. Sometimes it can work for the good. And in *those* circumstances, at least, we have reason to hold that greed can in fact be good, at least if we hold that a cause having good consequences is a reason to judge the cause to be good in respect of its consequences.

A second objection might come forward at this point. It might be argued that what is good here is not the greed *per se*, but the results or outcomes of greed. According to this objection, it is not the greed that deserves our praise, but the good consequences of greedy behaviour. I think that this is quite correct. I have no problems with saying that, in these cases, greed is only *instrumentally* good – good *as a means to a desired end*, not as something intrinsically good. But note that even if greed is only sometimes instrumentally good, that is an important conclusion. It means that the countless moralists who have universally denounced greed as wrong, period, were mistaken. This complicates matters, and pushes against accepting statements such as 'that was motivated by pure greed' or 'you didn't know she's a greedy old bat?' as legitimate conversation-stoppers. If greed can sometimes be good, perhaps the conversation should go on.

IV. Moral Conversations: to Stop or not to Stop?

Agreeing with the analysis of greed given above has at least one practical effect: henceforth, stopping a moral

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conversation by referencing the presence of greed in a given situation is now not such a blithe affair leading to a summary judgement. It's more complicated than that. It might be a good conversation-stopper, but maybe not. It depends. We have to examine the case.

More importantly, finding extenuating nuance in one moral conversation-stopper will probably lead us to think that whether other popular moral conversation-stoppers have force will depend on the circumstances. Sticking for the moment to talk of vices, what about pride? Lust? Anger? Gluttony? Envy? Sloth? Perhaps these universal magnets for denunciation aren't always worthy of being denounced. If that is the case, that means that you cannot and ought not always summarily end a moral debate by noting the presence of one of these qualities. It means you have to see if the widely denigrated quality in question is actually bad in some way in that context. If greed can be good, then remaining dogmatic about the other qualities without actually thinking matters through seems too quick.

And what about virtues such as prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice? Certainly there is space to consider whether these qualities are always good. Some philosophers have written on these matters, and even one of the greatest moral philosophers – Immanuel Kant – has suggested that traits such as these are not good without qualification.

What about all of the moral conversation-stoppers that haven't yet been mentioned? All the actions and motives and commitments and desires and consequences and the like that are widely considered to be obviously morally good or bad, period? While in some cases it seems hard to imagine circumstances that would render the associated action, etc., morally good or acceptable, there are plenty of cases where a healthy scepticism about common moral claims now seems warranted. Loyalty is good – but always? Breaking promises is bad – but always? Honouring one's parents is good – but always? Deceiving people is bad – but always? Charity is good – but always? And so on and so forth.

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But why would anyone want to leap into this uncertainty in the first place if this is where it leads us? Certainly, it might make us more careful when it comes to judging moral matters – it might make us more attuned to circumstantial impacts and deepen our conceptual grasp on objects of moral judgement – but at what cost? The world becomes a great deal more complicated, and that seems unfortunate, especially given (as Dennett reminds us) that we are often called upon to make moral judgements quickly, and we can't be expected to navigate through the intricacies of philosophical analysis in relation to some morally significant act or motive or principle on the spot all the time. And after all, wouldn't the upshot of such analysis typically be simply that many things widely considered to be universally morally good or bad have exceptions in a few odd situations? If that's the case, then it might be a more reasonable move to continue to rely on the conventional wisdom about morality, safe in the assurance that we'll get it right the vast majority of the time. Keeping things simple doesn't mean being stupid. Sticking with relatively non-nuanced views on these moral matters might simply be an acknowledgment that we have limited time to figure these things out, and normally we'll get them right anyway. Why go to all the trouble?

These are excellent concerns, and I'll start, perhaps surprisingly, by agreeing with them. It's true: I doubt that philosophical analysis will lead us to judge that what we thought was entirely good is actually entirely bad, or vice versa. Greed usually *is* bad. Justice usually *is* good. If we rely on conventional moral judgements, I think we'll usually be in the right. And yes, absolutely, becoming more suspicious of putative moral conversation-stoppers will make the world a more complicated place, and will increase the demands of reflection upon us as we navigate through life. 'Damn straight!' will be replaced by 'Hold on a moment …' far more often. We'll probably invite concern from friends and loved ones who think these matters are all quite simple and are puzzled by our reserve, and we might not be as fun at parties.

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The counter to these concerns is that it is still worthwhile to get into the moral complexities of a given case when the situation warrants it and we have time to reflect. True, we won't be able to bring robust philosophical attention to bear on all moral conversation-stoppers – especially in situations requiring prompt attention – but that doesn't mean that there aren't situations in our lives when the matters at hand are very morally significant and complex and we have time to think them through. Most debates regarding the moral acceptability of political and public policies are like this. Consider same-sex marriage, euthanasia, the proper goals of education, which political candidate to support, stem cell research, tax reform, prison reform, immigration reform, abortion, environmental regulation, offshore drilling, welfare policies, gun ownership, foreign policies, law enforcement regulations, religious exemptions from law, healthcare policy ... the list goes on and on. These morally significant matters are complicated and we are not always under time pressure to restrict our moral deliberations. Sometimes we have time to hone our judgements and challenge potential moral conversation-stoppers. Why not use that time, especially when the practical importance of getting one's judgements *right* on these issues is so obvious?

In addition, the value of developing a more discriminating sense of the force and applicability of various putative moral conversation-stoppers through philosophical investigation is not limited to matters of broader political and public policy. There are countless situations in our everyday lives that call for moral judgement, and it's important to get these right, too. Relying on conventional moral conversation-stoppers might lead to accurate judgements in some of these cases, but not all. Personal relations are complex. Your sister-in-law might accuse your close friend of lying, and she might be right. But does that mean your friend should be denigrated for it? Your employer might praise a co-worker for his loyalty. But does that mean that your co-worker is to be praised? You might find that you are

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envious of someone else. But does that mean that you must be in the wrong? In a not inconsiderable number of these cases there will be no serious time pressure, and in these cases an increased awareness of the possibility of moral complexity can certainly help. Seeing the world in shades of grey may help us to see the world as it really is, and be able to judge accordingly, and *correctly.* In short, being suspicious of moral conversation-stoppers can have many beneficial effects, notably including the development of greater philosophical acumen and, in many cases, increased chances of making better moral judgements.

A final concern arises at this point. Don't we all do this anyway? Especially in relation to the 'everyday life' situations described above, don't we tend to recognize the existence of exceptions that inform our moral judgements? Don't we already often call foul when others seek to bring a moral conversation-stopper to bear? Plenty of people who say that stealing is wrong are more than ready to agree that stealing can be morally acceptable if it is done on a small scale, in order to save lives, from someone who wouldn't notice the theft anyway. We discriminate like this all the time. So what is the gain from being exhorted to work through these moral matters with philosophical rigour, if we do this anyway? Isn't this a waste of time?

In response, I would say that it *would* be a waste of time if we could be assured that our judgements about what is or is not a proper exception or circumstantial modifying influence in a given case are reliable. The problem is that so often they are not. Unsurprisingly, we tend to favour 'exceptions' or 'influences' that reflect biases operating beneath the level of conscious thought. Most of these biases revolve around initiating or sustaining some form of self-interest. We are evolutionarily primed to tend to favour our 'inner circles' – be they familial, religious, ethnic, national, racial, or whatever. If an act of greed negatively affects *us*, we are far more likely to judge it to be bad. But is it? Not necessarily. If an act of loyalty positively affects *us*, we are far more likely to judge it to be good. But is it?

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Not necessarily. Perhaps we show greater objectivity when it comes to making moral judgements about hypothetical scenarios temporally and spatially far removed from our current situations. Just about everyone can agree that stealing from the shopkeeper to keep your family alive is morally acceptable, especially if the shopkeeper won't notice the theft. But that's a hypothetical situation, a thought experiment. What if that stolen bread was to have gone to *your* hungry family? Is the matter still so easy to judge? The worry is that in this and many other cases, our inherent biases, largely focused on self-interest, will impede our ability to make objective moral judgements by systematically making us more likely to favour actions and outcomes that favour those interests, whether those interests be perceived or subconscious. So we have to be on our guard, even – perhaps especially – against ourselves. Developing a habit of being suspicious of proffered moral conversation-stoppers can serve as an effective counter to this ubiquitous tendency. It helps to foster philosophical shrewdness and attention to detail, and increases our chances of judging moral matters rightly.

V. Final Comments

Here at the article's close I'll return to my earlier agreement with Dennett. He's right: given the way we are and the world in which we live, moral conversation-stoppers are practically helpful, even necessary. But as the analysis of greed showed, excessive 'rule-worship' can have detrimental effects insofar as it can lead one to make incorrect moral judgements. It can also have adverse opportunity costs insofar as it can lead to a loss of philosophical acumen. Counteracting this requires being suspicious about moral conversation-stoppers and developing the philosophical skills to inquire responsibly about the moral matters at hand when one can. Developing these skills involves having an increased sensitivity to the complexity of

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moral matters, an associated scepticism about the idea that moral judgements are always black and white, a willingness to challenge the moral status quo when appropriate, a humility about one's knee-jerk moral intuitions, a willingness to investigate further, an aspiration to be as objective as possible, and a conviction that being a morally responsible person demands all of this. Of course, sustained, full-throttle scepticism of moral conversation-stoppers is hardly possible, so I don't want to be misunderstood as advocating that. If excessive reliance on moral conversation-stoppers is morally and philosophically undesirable, and if a policy of robust, sustained scepticism of the same is impossible, the only reasonable prescription would be to employ moral conversation-stoppers while remaining vigilant for circumstances in which scepticism seems merited, and to develop the philosophical skills that allow us to move beyond mere scepticism to profitable analysis.

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