TOWARDS A RATIONALIST APPROACH TO ETHICS

Dan Strimpel

Dan Strimpel makes a plea for calm in ethical debate.

Why do ethical debates, even among friends, so often become intolerably emotional? Many people have learned, rather pragmatically, that they are better off staying away from politics at social occasions because they are likely to get dragged deeper and deeper into an intensely personal dispute and never come to some mutually agreeable resolution. In discussions over ethical questions, often including issues of politics and morality, the topic in question might be over who should die and who should live, or who should pay money and who should receive money, for instance. The nature of these topics seems to imply that where there is direct contradiction, at most one person can be the ethical one, and the other must be malicious, or perhaps just gullible in the face of sinister forces. When things reach a personal level, that is, when someone is defending their character and integrity, the nature of the discussion has irreversibly changed, and the chance of a beneficial outcome dramatically reduced. For what point is there in rational argument if one's character and goodwill are in question? Anything one says, no matter how reasonable, will be regarded with suspicion. When one person, befuddled at his opponent's blindness in the face of apparently self-evident logic, seeks to explain this stubbornness by assuming some sinister motive, such as ignorance or charlatanism on his opponent's part, the other person will either respond in kind, or frantically search for a way out. Needless to say, this attitude is particularly divisive between friends who previously enjoyed tossing ideas around, for suddenly one side of the friendship might find itself facing an ultimatum: 'Either agree with my view about X, or lose some of my friendship and my respect indefinitely.' This boils down to a choice between a commitment to rationality and a commitment to the friendship, but not both. Either way, something important is lost.

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Another reason for arguments to become emotional and anti-rational is a sense of urgency. Someone who strongly holds an opinion on some ethical issue is likely to feel that they are on a crusade against some evil that is causing innocent suffering and feel that there is no time to calmly and coolly discuss the situation from a rational standpoint. Instead, they must round up followers and fight the good fight, come what may. Unfortunately, this approach also leaves little room for criticism and reflection. What point is there in enlisting followers and going on a crusade if one hasn't thought clearly about the issue one is crusading for? Indeed, the psychological empowerment of feeling that one is fighting for a righteous cause is never a substitute for explicit rational arguments describing why one's cause is, in actuality, righteous. Should a person conflate the two, they risk going on the wrong crusade which would, intentions aside, have heinously *immoral* consequences.

I therefore submit that a person who wishes to adopt a rational approach to morality ought to learn how to dispassionately discuss pressing moral issues, maintaining respect for an opponent's character and goodwill *even if* there is disagreement on a life or death question. Both partners in dialogue must maintain a humble spirit of discovery if they wish to improve their understanding of the situation and hence converge further upon a just solution. This is how the rationalist is able to consistently improve his moral theories over time, and conversely, why the anti-rationalist will remain entrenched with stale ideology.

But some people will be quick to cry out that that kind of relationship is impossible. One cannot both believe strongly in one's convictions and remain calm and dispassionate in the face of flagrant opposition, they will say. But this claim is rendered completely untenable by the cultural phenomenon of science. Scientists frequently emphatically disagree with their academic opponents on important scientific issues but respect them for who they are because both share a belief in the scientific method and the personal integrity that it requires. In contrast, a person's explicit views on morality or politics are

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thought to be a manifestation of their character. Hence if two people systematically disagree on moral questions, they must also reject each other's characters and motives and integrity and indeed reject each other entirely so as to cleanse themselves of each other's nefarious presence. But this is wrong for the same reason that it's wrong for science. Even if my adversary believes in Fascism or Stalinism, this is not, in itself, proof that he has bad motives. Indeed, he may be amenable to a much more productive and rational discussion than someone whose political beliefs are very closely in line with mine, and his friendship would be infinitely more valuable to me.

In the context of the above example, it is worth noting that one ought to discriminate carefully when choosing who to discuss something as charged as politics with, since it only takes one to turn to character assassination before the other will have to totally change his tactics. Rational discussion cannot proceed if only one side embraces it. Therefore, the fact that someone who believes in fascism in modern Western society in 2005 is not likely to hold the rationalistic worldview that is a prerequisite for productive discussion rightly induces skepticism as regards potential friendship. Rational argument requires that rare synthesis of mutual trust and respect but explicit disagreement. This was hard enough to cultivate in science where it still routinely comes under attack, but in the realm of ethics and morality, the vision of a pervading rationalism lies further in the future.

Cultivating relationships that embrace rationalism is not some inconsequential issue of personal choice. It answers a central and time-honored epistemological question, the question of how to create a social environment that is conducive to the growth of knowledge, and applies just as much to whole societies as it does between individuals.

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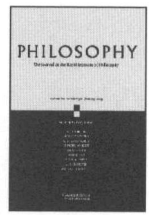
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