

Liberating Moral Reflection

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Abstract. This paper argues that if we are to foster life-giving and liberating moral reflection, we must liberate moral reflection from contemporary confusions that prevent people from exploring moral issues effectively. More fully, contemporary awareness of the situatedness of human knowledge has cast doubts on our ability to step back reflectively from morally charged life situations to view them objectively. Conversely, acknowledging the situatedness of moral outlooks can seem to diminish our ability for moral reflection, leaving us open to charges of moral relativism. Hence, moral reflection has become problematic. The author argues that we can develop viable models of morality if we conceptualize moral reflection as an active process that involves the balancing of (1) efforts to step back from morally charged life situations to gain a critically reflective perspective with (2) focused attention on such situations in order to understand how they shape the ongoing unfolding of our lives.

Religious educators often value critical reflection. Many of us encourage our students to draw insight from their thoughts and feelings in reflecting on issues. But how aware are we of the ways in which critical reflection can be distorted? And how intentional are we about teaching people to reflect on life experiences and social issues?

This paper explores one aspect of critical reflection, namely moral reflection. It first describes and analyzes ways in which moral reflection can be corrupted. Then, an approach is proposed for teaching people how to reflect effectively on moral issues. The final section explores teaching moral reflection as an aspect of Christian religious education focused on fostering personal and social transformation.

When Moral Reflection Fails

Moral reflection involves a focused effort to try to understand the moral dimensions of a situation and to determine how the moral issues raised should be addressed. Three distortions of moral reflection are commonly found today.

The first of these is a failure to reflect on moral issues because of *moral insensitivity*. A instance of this distortion was reported by one of my students, Len (not his real name). When Len was a top executive in the sales division of an international corporation, he encountered what he describes as “one of the most significant moral issues of my professional business career.” Specifically, “after spending several months with the company” Len’s “moral awareness was heightened” when he “started to observe the absence of women and people of color” in the company’s sale force. Len decided to raise this issue at a sales management meeting. With the word “diversity” projected on a screen in front of them, Len asked the company’s sales leadership team, consisting of twenty white men, to comment on any diversity or lack of diversity in the group. Some of those present commented on the similarities in the educational and personal backgrounds among the twenty managers. When pressed to explore the issue more fully, one person responded that there was diversity in the group because “some people had their jackets on and some did not.” No one voiced concerns about a lack of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity. The company has a strict code of ethical conduct. Yet, Len discovered during that and follow up conversations that he was the first person to raise critically reflective questions about the company’s clearly discriminatory hiring practices.

A second common failure of moral reflection is due to *moral relativism*. Moral relativism, as commonly found today, is the belief that there are *no universal, objective, or conclusive moral standards* for determining what is morally right and wrong. From such a perspective, moral standards are constructed by persons and/or social groups to guide behavior, and those *standards can only be relative* to those persons and groups. In other words, moral relativists hold that there are no trans-situational/transcendent and universally-applicable moral norms or values. Beckwith and Koukl contend that moral relativism has become “the unofficial

creed of much of American culture” (Beckwith and Koukl 1998, 13). Those working with present-day youth and young adults are likely to encounter frequent expressions of moral relativism. (See for instance, DiGiacomo’s comment on encountering moral relativism as a high school teacher – DiGiacomo 2004, 34.)

Moral relativism is incoherent and self-refuting because it entails making the universal moral claim (thus affirming that we can make universal moral claims) that it is never possible to make universal moral (thus denying that we can make universal claims). Yet, in the past thirty years I have found increasing numbers of people who espouse moral relativism and who rarely if ever reflect critically on this stance. If challenged, people will often affirm that we can make the universal moral judgment that such things as rape, genocide, and harm producing cruelty to children are always morally wrong. However, in conversations about how we make moral judgments people often unreflectively contend that we should be tolerant and open-minded toward all moral outlooks since we can never evaluate any moral stance from a purely objective point of view – sometimes also asking: Who am I (or you) to judge others? (A discussion and evaluation of various forms of relativism is found in O’Grady 2002. Moral relativism is discussed in Barrow 2007, 90-98.)

Third, moral reflection is sometimes disrupted or distorted today by *moral confusion* – as illustrated, for instance, by my student Samantha (not her real name). Samantha is a young pastor who is committed to addressing socio-moral issues. During one class she talked about how she thought moral values can and should express the distilled wisdom of the *subjective* moral experiences of specific persons and communities. She spoke passionately about her own commitments as a person of faith and a feminist. She also discussed how our moral outlooks must be grounded in an intentional awareness of our specific life context in order to avoid being

morally insensitive. In another class session she took a contrasting stance. She discussed how she and her congregation were addressing the injustice of US immigration policies by appealing to the *objective* standard of basic human rights.

On the one hand, Samantha displays, at times, a postmodern awareness of the situatedness of all human knowing and doing. She recognizes how we can often understand the moral dimensions of life more fully by attending carefully to and learning from our life experiences. On the other hand, Samantha sometimes envisions moral reflection as a process of critical reflective distancing, that is, a stepping back from life in order to be as objective as possible. She recognizes the incoherence of moral relativism and that we must strive to transcend our particular loyalties if we are to make sound moral judgments and be effective advocates for social justice.

Yet, when Samantha was asked to examine the ways in which she goes back and forth between carefully attending to and stepping back from her specific life context, she was unable to articulate a coherent model of moral reflection. She was unable to reconcile an awareness of the situated, relative nature of all human knowing and doing with a desire to assess moral issues objectively. As a result, Samantha began to lose confidence in her ability to reflect critically on moral issues and fell into moral confusion.

Understanding Distortions of Moral Reflection

In trying to understand common ways in which moral reflection becomes distorted, we can *begin* by focusing on moral reflection as a process of critical reflective distancing. To be morally reflective we must be able to step back from life situations in order to gain a broader moral outlook. From such a perspective, the problem in Len's case is that his sales leadership

team is so embedded in the culture of their company that they are unable to view company practices from a critically distanced perspective.

However, if we focus only on critical reflective distancing we will not develop an adequate model of moral reflection. For instance, in Len's situation the problem is not just that the sales leadership team is unable to step back and gain critical distance from their work. It is that they fail to subject their company's practices to focused scrutiny. In contrast, while Len was recruited from outside, once he joined the company he examined established norms and practices carefully and developed a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which they are discriminatory and unjust. Overall, *if critical reflective distancing is to help us understand how we ought to respond to morally charged life situations, it must be grounded within and remain related or linked with moral awareness of the strengths and limitations of the moral outlooks and practices that are operative in specific life contexts.*

Our understanding of contemporary distortions of moral reflection can be further developed if we examine moral relativism more carefully. Even though it is a conceptually incoherent stance, *people are attracted to moral relativism because it is grounded in a genuine moral insight. We have a sense of morality because we have specific moral experiences* (such as experiences of encountering morally praiseworthy people or of morally wronging another and then regretting what we have done) and our lives are shaped by the moral contours of our social world (for instance, a person could have a heightened sensitivity to issues of social justice because she is part of a family that has worked to overcome the effects of racial, ethnic, or religious bigotry). Hence, as moral relativists rightly note, our moral perspectives are always relative to who we are and how we see the world from our specific vantage point in life.

However, we can move beyond moral relativism if we accept the *descriptive* claim that all moral praxis is relative to some specific life context and, at the same time, reject the *prescriptive* claim that moral standards can only be relative to the perspectives of specific persons and groups. More fully, moral relativists claim that because of our situatedness in specific life contexts we can never truly understand each other's moral outlooks, and that the most we can do is tolerate our moral differences. In critiquing moral relativism, we can note that it is always possible to compare moral perspectives and to judge that merits of these perspectives through such comparisons. That is, I can compare my own moral outlook with the moral perspectives of others. In the process, I can recognize ways in which others can explore the moral dimensions of life with greater insight than I can, and how in other ways I can evaluate moral issues better than they can. Hence, *while my moral outlook is always relative to my life context I can through comparison with other moral outlooks transcend, to some degree, the limitations of the situatedness of my moral outlook.*

Finally, we can gain a better understanding of distortions of moral reflection if we look again at Samantha's moral confusion. Specifically, the origin of Samantha's confusion is the binary, on/off, either/or, logic of her moral reflecting. She envisions moral perspectives as being either *objective* or *subjective*, either *critically reflective* or *situated, uncritical and limited*. From Samantha's perspective, we are either above the fray of life and looking at issues from a universally objective stance, or we are being swept along by life and lack a critically reflective perspective.

In order to avoid becoming morally confused, we must recognize that fruitful moral thought and action has a dialectical quality. It operates by a logic of both-and rather than either/or. In fact, in practice Samantha embraces a dialectical, both-and moral stance. Her

passion for social justice is fueled by her faith and her feminist outlook (her situated life perspective); and she also recognizes that her effectiveness as an advocate for social justice depends in part on her ability to present her moral intuitions and insights using the language of human rights (a trans-cultural/striving-to-be-as-objective-as-possible perspective). Thus, Samantha's moral praxis is both situated and striving to be objective. However, as soon as Samantha tries to understand the dynamics of moral reflection she begins to think in binary, either/or terms and is led into confusion.

We can understand the dialectical (both-and) nature of moral reflection more fully by exploring the reality that as finite human beings we are *both* limited *and* transcendent beings. Sometimes our embodied, situated perspectives limit our outlook on life (for example, when we are feeling fatigued by worry). Other times, within our embodied, situated lives we can experience what is of transcendent, universal value (for example, when we learn about the universal value of love through experiences of loving and being loved by our spouse and children or others within whom we share an intimate bond).

In our moral lives, *we can sometimes make conclusive moral judgments*. We can determine, for instance, that a specific act is murder, or rape, or abuse and is, therefore, morally wrong. And in addressing complex moral issues we may have moments of transcendent clarity during which we discern how we should and can strive to realize what is morally good. Still, *there is no such thing as a totally objective, disembodied, unsituated moral point of view*. There are only specific persons, groups, and communities that construct moral perspectives from within specific life contexts. Even in making conclusive moral judgments we are bound by the limits of human finitude. At the same time, situated life experiences can provide insights that guide us in

making trans-situational/transcendent moral judgments. In our moral reflections we are always both limited and transcendent beings.

Moral reflection, at its best, involves the dialectical analysis of our thoughts, feelings, and reactions to life. It is a process of going back and forth between (1) attending carefully to our specific life experiences and (2) critically distanced analysis of the meaning of these experiences. The goal of moral reflection is understand the transcendent meaning and value of situated, embodied living – while at the same time striving to overcome, to the extent that we can, the limitations of our situated life perspectives – and also recognizing that we need to remain grounded within a specific life context if we are to avoid being morally insensitive to one or more aspects of life. In the next section I explore these dialectical dynamics of moral reflection more fully.

Fostering Moral Reflection

Through insights gained from research on morality and conversations with Len, Samantha, and many others over the years, I have found it helpful to think of moral reflection as a dialectical, two-step process that involves both *stepping back* and *stepping in* – both *critical distancing* and *narrative and relational analysis*. (For classic discussions of the importance of critical distancing in moral reflection see Firth 1952 and Baier 1965. Foundational explorations of the importance of narrative thinking in moral reflection are provided in McClendon 1986; the early work of Hauerwas, especially 1974, 1977, and 1981; and MacIntyre 2007, 204-205. Foundational analyses of how relationships are essential to our moral lives are found in Gilligan 1992, Noddings, 2002, and Brabeck, ed. 1989.)

In teaching people how to reflect on a morally charged life situation today, it is sometimes best to begin with the stepping back part of the process. Once people become aware

of a moral issue it can often be helpful to invite them to take a step back from the issue to try to develop a more inclusive perspective. Moreover, in an age in which people are often tempted to embrace narrow, self-enclosed, morally relativistic modes of thought, it can be important to remind people of the continuing relevance of critical reflective distancing.

T.H. White's novel *The Once and Future King* provides a useful image for conceptualizing this aspect of moral reflection. In the novel Merlin instructs the young King Arthur to imagine himself as a bird flying above the ground. Arthur learns to look at morally charged life situations from a broad and inclusive perspective; that is, *a bird's eye view*. However, in analyzing a situation from such a bird's eye view, our aim should be to raise critically reflective questions, not to offer a totally objective perspective. As already noted, our moral outlooks always remain bound by the specific context of our lives. Additionally, while a critically distanced stance can be a stance of critique (a perspective from which to question critically our own and others' moral views), in dialogical situations it should also be a kenotic stance (a place where we set our own views aside, as much as we are able to do so, in order to be genuinely open to others).

In teaching people the art of moral reflection, it is also important to emphasize that if we are to understand moral issues fully, we must develop a sense of how those issues *connect* with our *life story* or *narrative*. To begin, we should explore connections between our moral awareness and our moral reflections. (For instance, in order for Len to understand his situation fully he needs to ask himself: What past experiences and present commitments inform my moral outlook and lead me to be aware of a lack of diversity that others are overlooking?) Then, throughout a process of moral reflection there should be periodic efforts to balance critical distancing with careful attention to how possible responses to a situation are likely to affect our

ability to embody a sense of moral character or integrity in our personal and social lives and commitments.

Moreover, in order to develop our moral outlooks as fully as possible we must be able to formulate a sense of how a morally charged life situation shapes our ability to embody moral qualities such as honesty and fairness in our *relationships* with others. Hence, we should envision moral reflection as a process that goes beyond critical distancing in so far as it also involves a critical (with *critical* in this instance meaning intentional, carefully considered, and measured) appraisal of how a situation affects the moral dimensions of our relationships with our family, friends, co-workers, and others.

When our moral reflections are not grounded in an effort to consider the effects of an issue on our personal moral commitments and relationships, we are likely to become morally insensitive to one or more of the moral realities of our lives and world – as illustrated by the moral outlooks of the sales management team in Len’s story. Moreover, in dealing with instances of moral insensitivity it can sometimes be helpful to initiate moral reflection through stepping in rather than stepping back; that is, by asking people to begin by looking carefully at a moral issue in relation to the ways their personal and social lives are continuing to unfold and how they relate with others.

Overall, in teaching people how to address moral issues it can be helpful to encourage them to think of *moral reflection as a kind of two-step dance*: a dance involving a sometimes delicate balancing of stepping back (critical distancing) and stepping in (utilizing narrative and relational skills or critical attending). Additionally, just as there are many dance steps and styles, there are many ways to construct models of moral reflection – that is, many ways of combining the dynamics of critical distancing and utilizing narrative and relational analysis. Still, we can

evaluate all models of moral reflection in terms of how well they enable us to avoid the pitfalls of moral insensitivity, moral relativism, and moral confusion; and how well they can lead us to be as objective as we can be while remaining grounded within specific life contexts.

Within the field of religious education there are many notable efforts to show how religious education can foster personal and social transformation, and most of these include an emphasis of teaching people to reflect critically on moral concerns. (See for example O’Hare, ed. 1983; Schipani 1988; Boys, ed. 1989, Moore, ed. 1989; and Moran 2011.) However, many of these efforts are marred in one way or another by a failure to address possible distortions of moral reflection. To illustrate this point, in the next section I discuss one of the most significant models of religious education for social transformation.

Fostering Liberating Moral Reflection

Few people have explored the intersection of religious education and a concern for social justice as insightfully as Daniel Schipani. Schipani has drawn attention to the indispensable role of the church’s educational ministry in efforts to spark the transformation of society. His approach to religious education is summarized in “Education for Social Transformation” (Schipani 1997). In brief, Schipani proposes “human emergence in the light of the Reign of God” as the goal of education for social transformation (Schipani 1997, 26). He offers a problem-posing model of education by means of which people can be guided to *see* and assess the conditions that keep persons and society from developing fully, *judge* how best to respond to these conditions, and then *act* as agents of social transformation seeking the fuller realization of God’s Reign through efforts to promote human flourishing.

One of the strengths of Schipani’s approach is that he shows how a Christian moral perspective can be grounded in the specific, situated life contexts of persons and communities of

Christian faith, yet also address questions about the transcendent and universal value of human life. Schipani notes that moral analysis is not undertaken from a neutral stance (that is, a purely objective perspective). He argues that Christians can and should begin socio-moral analysis from the situated perspective of our faith traditions and communities, focusing especially on a scriptural understanding of God's special care for the poor and oppressed. Working from this situated perspective, Schipani explores how Christians can be educated to become more fully committed to seeking justice for all people, especially the suffering and oppressed.

Despite the compelling vision of religious education for social justice that he articulates, Schipani perpetuates a distortion of moral reflection that is frequently found today in religiously-based approaches to morality. Specifically, Schipani describes Christian moral reflection as "seeing with the vision of God" (Schipani 1997, 30). Although he nuances his approach in some passages, Schipani suggests that those of us who are Christians can be as objective as we possibly can be if we distance ourselves from our own life contexts and strive to reflect on issues from the perspective of God. However, following Schipani's suggestion and striving to leave our own life perspective behind so that we can see as God sees could lead us to become blind to the ways our specific life perspectives both ground and limit our moral outlook, especially blinding us to our limitations. Additionally, such an approach could lead us to become morally insensitive to others: What need is there to consider the perspectives of others when one sees the world as God sees it?

Schipani could develop a better model by linking moral reflection to his goal of educating for "human emergence in the light of the Reign of God." (For accounts of how the Reign of God can serve as a hermeneutic guide for Christian living, see Caputo 1997 and Caputo 2007.) From a Christian perspective, God's Reign, God's Peace and Justice, has already been established but

its fullness is yet to come. In fostering religious education for social transformation, we should raise the question: How can we attend carefully to our lives and relationships with others in order to discern how God's Reign is already present in our midst? We must also step back from life and ask: How are we being called and enabled to welcome and work to bring about the fuller realization of God's Peace and Justice? Additionally, our stepping back from life should be balanced by careful attention to our lives as we ask: How can we discern where we are not aware of God's presence because of sin or our own limitations? Focusing on this question can lead us to greater humility and a recognition that we can never see the world as God sees it.

Overall, religious education for social transformation should foster two modes of liberating moral reflection. On the one hand, it should foster critical visioning, that is, ongoing critical distancing or stepping back aimed at developing a greater openness to God's creative and liberating Spirit that can guide us in striving to envision the fuller realization of God's Reign in our midst. On other hand, it should foster critical attending, that is, a stepping into life and a critical scrutiny of how God's Reign is and is not already realized in the world, is and is not already realized in the church, and is and is not realized in our own lives. When the church engages in critical visioning without critical attending it tends either (1) to lack a realistic and authentically critical social perspective or (2) to become overly negative about the world (as it overstresses the negative aspects of the world) and hypocritical (as it overstresses the positive aspects of the church and becomes blind to its own faults and limitations). However, we can ask: what becomes possible when we strive to balance critical visioning and critical attending motivated by a commitment to seeking greater social justice in the church and in the world?

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