

On "My Moral Judgment"

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My comment on Malikail and Stewart's (1988) paper, "Moral Autonomy and Moral Training," shows that there are other possible meanings to the expression "my moral judgment" which do not necessarily reduce to either "judgment peculiar to me" or "judgment of personal taste." Additionally, I show that concentrating on the public aspects/features of moral judgments, while necessary, is not all there is to the making of sound moral judgments. The paper proposes to include the self of the person as a necessary condition for judging the soundness of a moral judgment.

Cet article est un commentaire sur celui de Malikail et Stewart: "Moral Autonomy and Moral Training." Ma réflexion poursuit un double but. D'abord, souligner le fait que l'expression "mon jugement moral" ne signifie pas nécessairement un jugement venant exclusivement de l'individu ou l'expression d'une préférence individuelle. Ensuite, rappeler que si les aspects publics ou objectifs du jugement moral doivent de toute évidence être pris en ligne de compte, ils ne peuvent pourtant pas, en eux-mêmes, fonder le jugement moral. Le jugement moral doit tenir en équilibre les facteurs subjectifs et privés et les données objectives et publiques d'une problématique.

I agree with Malikail and Stewart that moral matters are not matters of personal taste. For one's moral judgments to be given a serious hearing, public warrants must, of necessity, be shown.

Malikail and Stewart, however, seem to have overemphasized the centrality, if not sufficiency, of the public aspects of moral judgments. In doing so, it has led them to make some odd observations — for example, that the expression my moral judgment meaning "judgment peculiar to me" could in turn mean "judgment of personal taste" (Malikail and Stewart, 1988, p. 97). How they come to conclude that my moral judgment could be equivalent or even similar to "judgment of personal taste" is not shown, other than to say that "judgment peculiar to me" could mean "... a judgment of moral value that is thought to be unique" (Malikail and Stewart, 1988, p. 97). But surely even the latter statement does not necessarily reduce to "judgment of personal taste," as will be shown later. Their over-emphasis is somewhat relieved by an admission "... that the mode of moral reasoning may yield a judgment that is unique to the individual as, for example, in a judgment that leads to a particular act of heroism" (1988, p. 98). But such a relief is quickly diminished with a reminder "... that the judgment is 'moral' because of the public features of the premises used and of the reasoning from those premises" (1988, p. 98). This is done lest one be misled to think that the

uniqueness to the individual of his/her moral judgment contributes in any way to the moral character of the judgment.

In this brief comment, I will show that there are other possible meanings of the expression *my moral judgment* which do not necessarily mean "judgment peculiar to me" or "judgment of personal taste." I will then argue that there could be judgments of moral value which could be unique and could be argued to be moral because, along with other public criteria fulfilled, they are someone's moral judgment.

The expression *my moral judgment* could be translated to "my own moral judgment" or "moral judgment which is mine." In turn, "my own" could mean that a particular moral judgment was freely made in the absence of external pressures, coercions, etc., and independent of what others say. It is to say "I own my moral judgment" and I am, therefore, answerable to no one but myself for what I decide to do. No one but myself is to be blamed for consequences that arise because of what I do. The use of *own* here is in the sense of "admit," as in "owning up to one's wrong doing." It is to admit that the moral judgment is one's own.

In another sense, to own one's moral judgment is to acquire or possess it. What is acquired or possessed is external to the person acquiring it. What is internal to someone cannot be acquired. One's own moral judgment could mean that one has decided to choose, acquire, and adopt some rules, laws, principles, etc., existing outside of one's self or external to her/him. Having decided to adopt them, now one calls them "mine," "my own," or "one's own" in the sense of ownership.

To admit to one's moral judgment and to own it, which are two possible meanings of "my moral judgment," is to assert one's moral agency, to exercise one's right (assuming normalcy, rationality, etc.) to make one's judgment. It does not necessarily mean that one is claiming that one's moral judgment is a judgment and it is an acceptable moral judgment solely because one admits to or owns it. Malikail and Stewart are afraid that *my moral judgment* could lead to such a conclusion such that moral matters could be interpreted as matters of personal taste. They are, of course, correct in their concern but it does not necessarily derive from the meanings of *my moral judgment* shown above.

Indeed, if one of the meanings of *my (own) moral judgment* is that one has decided to choose, acquire, and adopt some rules external to one's self, then this implies alternatives. To choose and decide well on which alternative to take implies that there must be grounds to take into account in order to decide well, foremost of which is quality of one's reasoning. Surely, there must be reasons for thinking and deciding to do something. To engage in reasoning is to be rational, meaning to display "... the ability to and disposition to take due account both of relevant empirical facts and of logically necessary connections" (Gewirth, 1973, p. 42). So, this sense of *my moral judgment* is not a matter of personal taste, incapable of public assessment. It responds to public criteria, observing rules of evidence and of logic. On these grounds, it could be judged acceptable or not.

The authors concern with *my moral judgment* has to do with "my own" or "mine" used in the sense of one being the originator or source of one's moral judgment. *Own* here is akin to the expression "my own children," meaning I am the source of their origin. "My own" or "mine," in this sense, mean not to admit or to acquire but to originate one's moral judgments. One's explanations and justifications for one's moral judgment are acceptable, not because of some public criteria, but because they are created by one's own self. All criteria for judging whether a judgment is a moral judgment or whether it is acceptable or not resides in one's self alone. This is, surely, subjectivism in the extreme and problems relative to it are numerous — to mention only one, the impossibility of judging competing and conflicting moral judgments, in turn, suggesting that they are personal preferences or matters of taste.

On the other hand, to refer only and always to public criteria for the acceptance of one's moral judgments, which Malikail and Stewart seem to suggest, could indicate that soundness of one's moral judgments is solely due to their observance of public, objective criteria. This is only partly so. Moral judgments cannot be completely equated with or reduced to a set of public criteria. A judgment, be it a moral, aesthetic, political, or business judgment, always suggests that, somehow, not enough pieces of relevant information are available in order to determine what the right choice should be. One admits to an insufficiency of knowledge regarding an object, state of affairs, etc. that one is judging. Certitude, a necessary condition to knowing, is not always an accompanying condition to making judgments. Even so, one judges. A set of public criteria is not all there is to making moral judgments.

Moreover, acceptance of the utterance *my moral judgment* is not based solely on its linguistic/conceptual adequacy, unless this is the stated interest, but also on the person who so judges and in so doing brings to existence the reality of the utterance. That is, such an utterance does not exist in and by itself unless spoken by someone and this person must be taken into account when judging whether or not his/her judgment is acceptable. A mentally deranged individual could utter the phrase and we would hesitate to accept it seriously. On the other hand, a normal person could say "my moral judgment regarding capital punishment is based on what Mr. Jones has to say about it, considering his extensive and authoritative knowledge of the law, its history, and of religious practices and theology." This is acceptable. One's moral agency is not violated although one's decision on this matter is influenced and, perhaps, directed by someone else. Malikail and Stewart call this moral agency "in an extended sense" (1988, p. 99).

The view which is briefly presented in this paper attempts to observe public criteria and, at the same time, allow for the subjective participation of the person who makes the judgment, retaining that which is peculiar or unique to him/her, without necessarily making the judgment a matter of personal taste. It is not necessarily true that "the more a judgment has the characteristics of 'moral' the less exclusive and peculiar to the individual it will be" (Malikail and Stewart, 1988, p. 98).

To own, in the sense of adopt, is not simply to acquire something as a mere addition to one's accumulated pieces of information, for example, or as a part of an aggregate whole. One employs active reflection on which to adopt and follow. Having been reflected upon, actively adopted and claimed to be one's own, the rules, laws, etc., are worked over and related to the other qualities and aspects of one's mind. They now become an intrinsic part of one's concept of one's self or one's total frame of mind. An adopted rule, in this sense, affects all that a person is and, in turn, it is affected as it relates and combines with all of one's qualities, beliefs, convictions, etc. The law, rule, etc., is identifiable and isolatable, in the first instance, hence referred to as a public aspect or ground of one's moral judgments. But in its being adopted as one's own, certain unanalysable qualities could become part of it and which qualities could be said to be originated only or exclusively by this or that particular self. In the process of making a moral decision/judgment, its public features may become so much a part of the decision that they are difficult, if not impossible, to isolate and identify objectively. And all one can say is that the moral judgment belongs to that particular someone who owns it in a personal, unique way. *My moral judgment* is one's own in the sense that no one else will ever express it, have it in exactly the same way as this or that particular person. It is now this particular person's rule, law, etc. In its being assimilated it becomes an active part in and of this one self and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to isolate and identify in its complete objectivity.

The uniqueness of *my moral judgment* which is necessarily unanalysable, hence, without a public criteria, is attributed to the self who adopts it for one's own. The necessary uniqueness attached to a self, its thoughts, convictions, and feelings, in all their inexhaustible concreteness, those that constitute the particularity and singularity of one's self, does not lend itself to objective calculation or external description. Involving one's self in making a moral judgment could, therefore, appear as though a person claiming that his/her moral judgment is, indeed, a moral judgment, has stepped out of every known public criteria, invoking only one's personal taste or uniqueness. This is not necessarily so.

What one has done in making a moral judgment is to be in touch with one's self, with one's totality of experiences in immediate feelings and in reflection, which may evade complete objectification. In calling it one's own, or "my moral judgment," it means that one's self is fully present in one's actions, judgment. To insist on dissecting one's actions, judgment, in order to judge the presence of public warrants, may be an impossibility. When Luther declared, "Here I stand," he was fully present in his act. Hence, it was uniquely his pronouncement. In order to understand and appreciate his declaration fully, one must know Luther in all his singularity and necessarily unique characteristics. So to own (in the senses of admit and ownership) *my moral judgment* could also be to insist that one's self, "auto," in all its fullness entered into such a judgment, hence, the judgment is one's own alone. (A creeping in of *own* in the sense of "originate" may be detected here, but to discuss it is not within the limits of this paper.) But this is not to say that, therefore, the judgment is of a personal taste and not necessarily a

moral judgment. Rather, one's self, in all its fluctuations and incompleteness of necessity participated in the making of one's own moral judgment or else it is not moral judgment even if public warrants are fulfilled. Now, the next step is to show whether or not *judgment peculiar to me and a judgment of moral value that is thought to be unique* could mean "judgments of personal taste."

Two meanings that could be drawn from the above expressions are: (1) that the judgment is peculiar/unique and (2) that the judgment is peculiar/unique to someone. Considering human individual differences, wide variations regarding acquaintance of things, of state of affairs, etc., it could be said that (2) could mean that "someone considers this judgment peculiar/unique to him/her." If someone considers it to be so, it could be because, among other reasons, one is not as knowledgeable as others to whom this same judgment could be a common sense, run of the mill stance. It is to say that each person could differ from others with regard to many things. There is nothing exciting or substantial about such an observation. To merit a hearing, one needs to expose one's grounds for considering the judgment peculiar, to give reasons why it is so, etc. Without them, sentence (2) could be taken to mean "judgments of personal taste," hence, there are no grounds external to the individual making the judgment and to which one could appeal for a standard of acceptability of the judgment. "I say so" and "it must be so" are not acceptable as a ground for making a moral judgment.

Consider the other sentence, *the judgment is peculiar/ unique*. When one says that something, an act or a thing, or whatever, is unique, one is not necessarily saying that it is a sole, single act or thing. It is all by itself and there is nothing to compare it with. While this sense could be secured from *unique*, meaning "one," common usage of *unique* informs us differently. It is not, for example, informative enough to say "that act is unique" or "that thing is unique." An added piece of information is provided in order to render the expression meaningful, thus, "a single/unique act of heroism" or "bravery." It is to judge the act in relation to other acts in a class of actions called "heroic" or "brave." Put in another way, *unique* does not simply say "one," but rather, and more commonly, "one of its kind." This suggests that it belongs to a certain kind, invoking membership category. It expresses the relation of a given act, or thing, to the other members of the category or sphere of human action to which it belongs. If it is unique, it is unique in that category or in another category. Therefore, there are publicly recognizable aspects to the term *unique*. An act, a thing, etc., is not unique in and by itself.

Similarly, to say that a moral judgment is unique is to say that within the category or class of moral actions, judgments, etc., that particular moral judgment by a particular person is unique, for example, it is outstanding, extraordinary, rare, supererogatory, etc. So, to say "that the moral judgment is peculiar/unique" is not to say that it is a matter of personal taste, but to admit its uniqueness within a class of moral judgments.

Admitting that there must be public warrants to a moral judgment is not also to admit that there must not remain any ineffable qualities that evade complete conceptual understanding which must be incorporated as necessary to making moral judgments. There must be some *unnamed qualities* which could only be said to belong to that or to this particular person. Such qualities must be grasped intuitively as particulars of the person who judges and cannot be subsumed under rules, generalizations, and abstractions. In short, they cannot be objectified.

The more a judgment takes on a *moral* quality, the more it becomes binding or regulating on us all. On the other hand, as a moral rule, law, etc., is adopted as one's own and practiced, it also increasingly becomes peculiarly or particularly "mine," for it takes in or fits with all of my innermost convictions, feelings, and emotions — or with my self in all its singularity. So, there remains a tension between the objective and subjective aspects of moral judgments, their public and private features, public warrants and innermost convictions. They must be kept alive, or else moral judgments could be reduced either to objective, cognitive, public warrants or to subjective, private, personal matters of taste. This must be resisted.

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