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Why were you initially drawn to normative ethics?

How does one explain an interest in ethics? In my case the interest has never been "intellectual" or "academic." I have never been drawn to metaethics. Rather, I have always been aware that there's a lot wrong in the world and I have wanted to do what I could to help put it right. I grew up in the American south during the years of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. That gave me a lot to think about. I still have a poster that I took off a telephone pole near where I lived in rural South Carolina that reads "Don't be half a man, join the Klan."

Although I have sought to contribute to the mitigation of some of the world's evils, I have also wanted to be sure that I know what I'm doing. Many of the most horrendous crimes in history have been done or instigated by people who were convinced that they were acting nobly, in accordance with the stern demands of morality. Much of the injustice I saw when I was young was done in the name of religion. (*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*) I had received routine indoctrination in the Presbyterian Church, which I attended regularly for Sunday school and church service throughout my childhood—albeit under duress, for I was never a believer. It's not that I was a precocious contrarian. I wasn't; I had an ordinary childhood, never read books, and was a very poor student. It's just that religion didn't make sense to me. Later on, when what Swift described on his tombstone as "savage indignation" drove me to political activism, I wanted to make sure that I didn't follow various religious zealots in making things worse through the complacent acceptance of meretricious beliefs.

The tendency to Swiftian indignation is one of many dispositions with which I'm burdened that, especially nowadays, are

found unattractive. I am "critical" and "judgmental," cynical and misanthropic. I become choleric when reading the newspaper, and indeed whenever I have to leave the house I'm barraged with little instances of the thoughtlessness, mean-spiritedness, selfishness, obtuseness, irrationality and cruelty. The national elections of 2004 didn't help.

It is these unappealing dispositions of temperament, combined with an aversion to crusading moralism based on delusion, that ultimately led me to philosophy, and to normative ethics.

I am not exempt from my own critical tendencies. When I was in junior high and high school, I spent as much of my time as I could killing birds with a shotgun. Eventually revulsion with myself and what I was doing overcame my unaccountable pleasure in this activity and I sold my shotgun and vowed never to go hunting again. Then I had one of my earliest philosophical thoughts: if I ought not to be killing animals in order to eat them, I ought not to be paying other people to kill them so that I could eat them. I decided to become a vegetarian, which I did when I went off to college and could exercise some control over what I ate. I have remained a vegetarian, though I now realize that there are arguments against eating meat that are much stronger than the one that initially persuaded me.

I went to college with the intention of majoring in studio art. But I immediately fell under the influence of an elderly, avuncular, and wise professor of English literature, and became an English major instead. This was well before the ascendancy of "theory" and cultural criticism in English departments; so I actually spent my time reading literature. The professor whom I venerated was a moralist in the sense that what he mainly looked for in literature was moral wisdom. And what he found he offered to his students.

The department in which I studied English was really a department of world literature. I became enamored with poets and novelists who traded in ideas: Lucretius, Shelly, Dr. Johnson, Voltaire, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Huxley, among others. Somehow I also discovered Bertrand Russell, who became my first hero. I read his book, *Has Man a Future?* and Linus Pauling's *No More War!*, both of which dealt with the threat of nuclear war. They had been published quite a bit earlier but the weapons had not gone away. These books left me fearful of the destructiveness of irrationality.

As I continued to study literature, I became increasingly impatient with ideas decorated in literary form. I wanted to be as sure as I could be that what I believed was defensible. I wanted

to examine the arguments. After completing my BA in English in the US, I therefore took up the study of philosophy at Oxford. I had, however, very little coursework or formal training – only four 8-week undergraduate courses in philosophy before going on to write my doctoral dissertation. My competence in philosophy is, as a consequence, lamentably narrow. But so are my interests in philosophy, so I've never seriously endeavored to remedy my deficiencies. (I recall my eventual dissertation supervisor, Bernard Williams, saying to me once that he didn't think that anyone could do ethics competently without a thorough grounding in logic. I nodded solemnly as if to register agreement, though I had never spent a minute studying logic and didn't even know what modus ponens was – in fact, I still don't, though I know it has something to do with p and q.)

When I was doing this remedial undergraduate work at Oxford, ordinary language philosophy was moribund but still had enough of a pulse to make most of what I was studying seem arid and unimportant. I was on the verge of bailing out of philosophy altogether when I was rescued by discovering the work of Jonathan Glover and Peter Singer. I knew when I read Glover's *Causing Death and Saving Lives* that the issues it addressed – the life-and-death issues, such as abortion, war, and capital punishment – were issues that mattered and were what I wanted to work on. And by and large that is what I have subsequently done.

Shortly after I began my dissertation work (initially under Glover, then under Derek Parfit, and finally, when I transferred from Oxford to Cambridge, under Williams), the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Ronald Reagan became president, and NATO revealed a plan to deploy nuclear-armed cruise missiles near where I was living. My wife and I became activists with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and I wrote a short book on British nuclear weapons policy, arguing the case for unilateral nuclear disarmament. At this point I discovered the political writings of Noam Chomsky and the scales fell from my eyes. (I retain quite a collection of scales, however, and they continue to fall with some regularity.) Chomsky enabled me to see, among many other things, that one of the most useful functions of nuclear weapons was to deter opposition to unjust military interventions in countries that the US was competing with the Soviet Union to control. While I continued to pursue my graduate work in philosophy, I wrote another book on the Reagan administration's foreign policy, which focused both on its nuclear weapons policies and its various inter-

ventions in the third world, primarily in Central America.

The two books that I wrote while doing my graduate work were not philosophical but were primarily concerned with politics and policy. The one on Reagan was polemical in character and, unlike my philosophical work, was in many ways enjoyable to write. Both books were, again unlike philosophy, rather easy to write, and neither had any discernable impact on anything. Yet they were concerned with the issues that I thought really mattered. Without discouraging me from writing them, Parfit warned me that to the extent that they took time away from my philosophical work, they would hinder rather than advance my prospects for a career in philosophy, and in retrospect I believe he was right. But I have no regrets, or at any rate not many.

By the middle of the 1980s I had begun to write on the ethics of nuclear deterrence and international intervention in a more philosophical way. And all the while I continued to work on issues in which my interest had been kindled by reading Glover and Parfit, by studying with them, and by reading Singer: issues such as causing people to exist, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, the moral status of animals, killing in self-defense, conventional war, capital punishment, and so on.

I no longer go to rallies or on demonstrations and may never again write political tracts of the sort I wrote as a graduate student. I have ceased to be an activist, mainly because there has to be a division of labor and I'm certain that I can make a more substantial contribution by analyzing, criticizing, and formulating arguments than by waving placards and circulating petitions. Most people who write and debate about the most important moral and political issues are not, to put it as tactfully as I can, very skillful or careful in their reasoning. Having trained in philosophy, however inadequately, in order to be able to reason and argue with clarity and rigor, I am trying to get the arguments right with respect to some of these important issues. This has taken me deep into the territory of normative ethics. I have no illusion that my work will ever be as widely read or influential as that of Glover, Singer, and others who have inspired me to follow the path I have taken. But I continue to be motivated by the same concerns that initially led me into this curious vocation.

What example(s) from your work (or the work of others) illustrates the role that normative ethics ought to play in moral philosophy?

My hope is that all of my work does this, at least to some extent. Of course, normative ethics doesn't have only one role in moral philosophy, but one of its undoubted roles is to enable us to determine how to act permissibly and to live well and wisely. All of my work is aimed at this broad goal. How well it succeeds is for others to judge.

Normative ethics is often thought to lie between metaethics and practical ethics. It is thought to be concerned with how we should reason in a general way about issues in ethics: for example, what is the correct moral theory, and how do we determine what the best moral theory is? Those who think of normative ethics this way often refer to what I call practical ethics as "applied ethics," since they assume that once we have the right moral theory, we can resolve practical problems by simply applying the theory to the problems. According to this approach, theoretical normative ethics has priority over practical normative ethics: we have to get the theory right first in order then to resolve the practical problems. A majority of the most eminent thinkers in normative ethics work this way. They devote most of their efforts to working out and defending a moral theory – some version of contractualism, Kantianism, or consequentialism, or a theory of rights or virtues – and then, mainly in order to clarify the elements of the theory and to illustrate its power, explore some of its implications for a limited range of practical moral or political problems. Prestige in moral philosophy tends to be awarded to those who work this way rather than to those who work piecemeal on particular problems and issues.

I am, however, somewhat skeptical of this approach. I worry that it may be premature to think that we are in a position to develop a plausible moral theory. It is disconcerting, for example, to find people emerging from graduate school thinking that they already know the right moral theory and setting forth to refine it in original ways and to defend it against all comers. I worry that in normative ethics we don't really understand our basic material well enough yet. I therefore think of what I do as rather humble spade work in ethics that may better enable our successors to develop a more adequate moral theory than any on offer. I share the ambitions of systematic moral theory but am less optimistic than many about how far along we are in realizing those ambitions.

Of the work that has been done over the past 100 years, the book that best exemplifies the virtues that I admire in normative ethics is Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*. It neither explores, develops, nor applies a moral theory, but instead addresses a set of apparently unrelated issues and in the process produces a range of startling insights, shows that we have been mistaken about the foundations of some of our most deeply held beliefs, reveals other deep problems of which we had hitherto been unaware, opens up new areas of inquiry, and in the end demonstrates that what seemed to be disparate problems converge in supporting the view that impersonal reasons and values, which a great many moral theorists have denied altogether, are implicit in and presupposed by much of our common moral thought.

How do studies within scientific disciplines contribute to the development of normative ethics?

I would like to be able to say something outrageous here, such as that ethics is an autonomous domain and that science has nothing to contribute to it whatsoever. But that's false and my answer has to be rather pedestrian. Science contributes to ethics in many ways but, perhaps paradoxically, the most important way may be that by presenting us with new problems and choices, it forces us to think more deeply about ethics than we had before. Our enhanced understanding of embryology and the development of surgical techniques that have enabled us to perform abortions with less risk to the pregnant woman than is involved in childbirth have compelled us to rethink many traditional beliefs about procreation and the value of human life. By showing that human nature is potentially radically malleable advances in genetics have challenged traditional normative methodologies that seek to ground ethics in some specific conception of human nature. Advances in agriculture, transportation, and mass communication have forced us to confront hitherto unappreciated questions about how much we may be required to sacrifice for those less fortunate than ourselves. Other advances in agriculture and nutritional science have made it possible for many of us to live fully healthy lives without eating meat and have therefore prompted us to reconsider traditional views about the moral status of animals. The invention of nuclear weapons has made it imperative to try to understand the importance of the continued existence of the human species. Further examples could be multiplied almost endlessly.

What do you consider the most neglected topics and/or contributions in normative ethics?

This is an easy question for me because one of the most unaccountably neglected topics in the history of ethics is the topic on which most of my own work now concentrates: the ethics of war. Compared to novelists, poets, historians, legal theorists, psychologists, economists, and even artists, philosophers have had almost nothing interesting to say about war. Yet this is hardly an insignificant topic, or one that fails to raise important and interesting ethical questions.

Historically, the literature on the ethics of war has been dominated by theological and juridical writers, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Vitoria, Suarez, Gentili, Grotius, Pufendorf, and Vattel. There is a little on war in Locke, Rousseau, and Sidgwick, and a bit more in Hobbes and Kant. Yet none of these philosophers ever engaged in sustained reflection on what is morally most conspicuous about war – namely, that it involves the mass killing of people of whom one has no personal knowledge at all. This neglect is really quite extraordinary, and to me very ba- ing. How can it be that from the Greeks on, philosophers have found that the mass slaughter of one group of people by another demands neither criticism nor justification? How can they have all been so complacent about this most barbaric of activities?

During and after the Second World War, in which at least 70 million people died, entire cities were intentionally bombed to rubble and their populations murdered, and attempts made at the extermination of entire human groups, what did moral philosophers say in their professional capacity? With one honorable exception – Elizabeth Anscombe, who argued on the basis of Catholic just war principles against Oxford's awarding an honorary degree to US president Truman, on the ground that he had ordered the terrorist mass murder of Japanese civilians – moral philosophers were entirely mute about these matters. They were agitated instead about such questions as whether moral propositions had a cognitive component or were merely expressions of approval or disapproval. I think that as moral theorists we should look back on this episode with shame at the dereliction of our forebears – though I stress that I refer only to professional dereliction, as some moral philosophers did fight and suffer in that war.

In the 1970s, the Vietnam War prompted a flurry of interest in the ethics of war, primarily, and for obvious reasons, among American philosophers. One significant work emerged: Michael Walzer's

Just and Unjust Wars, in 1977. During the 1980s a modest literature developed on ethical issues raised by the practice of nuclear deterrence, though for the most part these issues failed to engage the attention of major writers in ethics. The Gulf War produced a few philosophical papers and in the late 1990's the various Balkan wars and, perhaps, a lingering sense of shame over the genocide in Rwanda provoked a revival of interest in the theory of the just war, which has continued and grown more vigorous in response to the terrorists attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration's "war on terror," and the disastrous war in Iraq. Much of the recent literature focuses, again for obvious reasons, on the ethics of humanitarian intervention and preventive war, and it has benefited from a parallel stirring of interest among legal and political theorists in the international law of war. My own sense is that some of the work that is currently being done on the ethics of war is unprecedented in its sophistication, rigor, and attention to detail. It is rivaled only by the best passages in the work of Grotius and a few others, and I think it is not unreasonable to hope that contemporary theorists of normative ethics will soon produce a body of philosophical writing on war that will be significantly more illuminating than anything that has been written in the past.

What are the most important problems in normative ethics and what are the prospects for progress?

There are so many problems that are all so important that I really don't know how to rank them. Among the issues that I personally find most important are problems concerning causing people to exist, such as Parfit's Non-Identity Problem, and the problem of determining whether the distinction between doing and allowing, and the distinction between intended effects and foreseen but unintended effects, have moral significance, and if so, exactly what kind of significance. These problems are of tremendous theoretical and practical significance.

I am highly optimistic about the prospects for progress in normative ethics. It is evident to me that great progress has already been made since I entered the field in the early 1980s. Unlike many other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, which in recent years were seduced by bad French philosophy into a lot of silly "post-modern" theorizing that has exposed them to derision and reduced them to irrelevance, analytic philosophy is flourishing. Part of the reason why analytic philosophy generally is in such

a healthy state is that, as Jerry Fodor observed in a recent book review, philosophers no longer tend to have philosophies. We no longer devote our lives to developing comprehensive philosophical or ethical systems. We are individually narrower and more specialized, which enables us to focus more carefully and minutely on the problems we study, and as a consequence to produce work that is more rigorous and detailed. The result is that philosophy has become more of a collective endeavour than it was in the past, in the sense that different people are focusing selectively on problems that are elements or aspects of larger problems. When the results of the individual efforts are combined, we may achieve a collective product that exceeds in depth, intricacy, and sophistication what any individual could have produced by working on the larger problem in isolation.