CHAPTER 16

The Great Moral Conflation

A clerk completes every form correctly. The procedure he follows does cruel work. He has broken no rule, and he has done something monstrous. Being correct and being good can come apart.

Compare three things you might say. A sunset is beautiful. A kind act is good. A word is spelled right. The sunset answers to your senses. The kind act answers to what a choice does to other people's feelings. The spelling answers to a standard: you check the word against a list. The chapter calls that third operation orthotic assessment, which means comparing a thing with a standard.

Moral philosophy, the chapter argues, has taken the third operation for the second. Call that the great moral conflation. Rules are tools for checking morality, and the major traditions have presented them as what morality is. The chapter sets out to show that morality is made of a certain response to others, and that rules borrow all their force from it. The charge is about structure, since a tradition conflates whether or not its authors looked beneath the rule.

Why morality is empathic

"Empathy" carries three meanings, and the chapter uses one. It is a response to what conduct does to another person's feelings, answerable to her actual condition. It is not catching her feeling, and it is not modelling her view.

The derivation runs on four premises. Two come from Chapter 14, which argued that an evaluation is a response with a direction, for or against. A verdict with no feeling in it is filing. That chapter also argued that an evaluation is the evaluation it is because of what it responds to.

The third premise is a split with no middle. Take any evaluation of conduct. Its object either takes in the felt condition of someone besides the evaluator, or it does not. The fourth premise says what the word "moral" marks, in two parts. Moral verdicts count for and against. And their subject matter is how conduct bears on others. The conclusion follows. A moral evaluation is a response whose object takes in how affected parties feel.

These arguments describe a mechanism, and they issue no command. A person the mechanism does not reach is described, and not refuted.

A critic must dig at the fourth premise. Drop its first half, and wrongness counts against nothing. Drop the second half, and two positions remain. The egoist makes morality a matter of the evaluator alone, which the chapter grants is coherent. It answers that the wrongness of cruelty then has nothing to do with the victim. The formalist makes morality conformity to a principle,

whatever the principle concerns. Then nothing marks morality off from etiquette or grammar.

The aesthete of cruelty finds a cruel act finely done, and asks why his verdict is not the moral one. The two responses take different objects, the chapter replies. His takes the act's shape, with the victim bracketed. He has answered whether the act is beautiful, and morality asks whether it is right. The chapter does not claim to compel him. It claims only that he is not right.

Rules as moral technologies

Moral life has two layers. Underneath are accumulated responses to what kinds of behaviour do to people. Above them are those responses set down as rules: do not steal, do not be cruel. The rules are compressed records, and their authority is borrowed from what they record.

For a requirement to bind you, it has to take hold of you. It can take hold in two ways. It can engage what matters to you, so that conforming carries a felt pull. Or it can arrive with a sanction behind it. A requirement that does neither sorts conduct and leaves you untouched.

The chapter claims there is no third way. Chapter 13 divided the mental into two dimensions, so a requirement present to you is either felt or mere content. Content on its own moves nobody.

Reasoning seems to offer a third way. "Believe what your evidence supports" appears to bind you with no sanction and no feeling involved. The chapter separates two things. Whether a conclusion follows is structural, and holds whether or not anyone feels it. The ought is another matter. Present a valid argument, and either a felt must pulls you toward the conclusion, or you merely file it as valid. The chapter accepts the cost for its own arguments. They move only a reader who cares whether they are sound. It adds that this concedes little. An unwilling reader escapes the pull, and no reader escapes the verdict on whether the argument is sound.

Rules protect people when nobody present is attending. They are indispensable at scale, and they can still be wrong. Where a protocol conflicts with the evaluation it was built to serve, the evaluation has priority.

The split also diagnoses failures. The psychopath has less of the evaluating capacity, with his rule-sense intact. The compliant official has let the upper layer displace the lower.

The survey of the traditions

In each major tradition one instrument is raised to the place of morality itself, and in each the borrowed force shows through somewhere.

Kant's test asks whether the rule you act on could be a law for everyone, and that is comparison with a standard. Moral worth, he held, belongs to action from duty and never to sympathy. He objected that feeling varies, while a law

must bind every rational being. The chapter grants the observation and refuses the inference. Nothing binds an agent whom nothing moves, so no foundation has the necessity Kant wanted. That reply uses a premise from Chapter 14: a reason is a pull on someone. A Kantian may refuse it and say a law can bind without pulling anyone, at a cost recorded there. Kant does admit one feeling, Achtung, respect for the moral law. The chapter keeps the feeling and moves its source: it is a felt pull aimed at the rule, and not at the people the rule protects.

T. M. Scanlon holds an act wrong when a principle allowing it could reasonably be rejected by anyone affected. The chapter credits the form first. It weighs each person's complaint on its own, and never a sum of complaints. The responses cannot supply that, because Chapter 15 returns no fact about weighing one person's feeling against another's. The form is still a test over what the act would do to people. Virtue ethics draws a thinner charge, because it attends to the foundation. On one reading, Aristotle's person of practical wisdom perceives a situation through cultivated response. The conflation enters when that person becomes a standard for everyone else. Care ethics, Iris Murdoch and early Confucianism need no relocation, because each puts the force in the response from the start.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection says fairness and rights concern how society is arranged, and not feelings. The chapter replies that unfairness is wrong because it causes resentment and exclusion. Here it bites a bullet in the open, making justice instrumental to how people feel. An arrangement with no emotional consequences for anyone would be just in the checking sense alone.

The second objection comes from authority itself. Derek Parfit and David Enoch hold that a requirement can bind whether or not any agent feels its pull. The chapter concedes that it cannot disprove this, and says it can place it. Such an authority belongs to no mental life, which makes it the empty posit Chapter 14 rejected. The disagreement turns on the premise behind the reply to Kant, which the book lists as contested.

The third objection concerns progress. If responses make morality, slavery became wrong only when sentiment shifted, and the abolitionist could not have been right first. The reply is that the verdict was fixed by the enslaved person's own response to her suffering, present all along. What was missing was uptake.

What the chapter claims

The chapter names three results, and grades all three *constructed*. That is the book's third rung, below *established* and the top mark of *self-vindicating*. It means the best account on offer, with rivals still standing.

The first result is that morality is constitutively empathic. It falls if Chapter 14's account of value falls. The second is the conflation itself. Its two halves carry different exposure. The claim that traditions misattribute a felt bindingness

holds even if empathy only detects moral value instead of making it. The stronger half, that rules codify a value responses constitute, rests on Chapter 14, though on a smaller part of it than it seems. A result there leaves the detecting reading one object with content, and on that object the verdict survives in substance. The third result is the two-layer analysis, with the diagnoses it supports. It falls with the argument about grip, and a third source of grip would overturn the division of the mental beneath it.

The book’s register of premises adds one row. The claim that “morality” names the practice governing how conduct affects others is graded *established* there, with the condition that it holds by either of two routes, whichever way a dispute in moral psychology is settled. The chapter concedes one circularity, in how the second route explains outer concerns such as loyalty and sanctity. There it uses the conflation thesis itself, so it convinces only a reader who already grants that codified standards get moralised. The word’s stable core is care and fairness.

Chapter 17 takes up the question this one leaves open: whether moral standards, once set down, can still be revised, or get fossilised into dogma.