

MORALISM  
A STUDY OF A VICE  
CRAIG TAYLOR

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## MORALISM

## Preface

This book is about moralism understood as a kind of vice. I use the term moralism very broadly to cover a class of defects of thought and understanding that apply not only to the practice of making moral judgements but to moral thought and moral theorizing more generally. Inevitably, then, the targets of the philosophical arguments and criticisms I develop in this book are many and varied, and admittedly not everything I have to say about moralism applies equally to all of those targets. So, to give just one example, a moral theory may be moralistic in the negative sense I intend without a particular proponent of that theory being an overt moralizer. All the same, the term moralism does, I think, serve to pick out particular related tendencies of thought as they occur in both specific moral judgements and moral theorizing more generally, and which serve to hinder our understanding of the kind of phenomena that moral judging and theorizing are both responses to. Or so I shall argue.

I cannot provide a detailed account of moralism as I understand it in this short preface; that is the aim of the book as a whole. My more limited aim is twofold: first, to say something about the particular issues and problems related to moralism that I shall examine in distinct chapters; and second, and in the context of introducing these issues and problems, to say something about the conception of moral thought that underlies my characterization of the vice of moralism. In particular in

relation to this second aim, I need to acknowledge at the outset that the conception of moral thought I outline in this book challenges certain ideas and assumptions that underlie much of contemporary moral philosophy, at least in the analytic tradition, as will start to become clear below.

To begin, Chapter 1 is in many ways what this preface is not: an extended introduction to the book, including an account of what is distinctive about moralism as opposed to some related ideas and vices. Much of this chapter may seem relatively uncontroversial. What is distinctive and challenging to much moral philosophy, in my account of moralism, only becomes really apparent in Chapter 2, where I argue that certain moral judgements are moralistic in so far as they are not informed by what I shall call certain *primitive* responses to people and situations in which moral judgement seems called for. A particular response I shall focus on is pity as it may accompany our judgement of another's moral transgressions. What, in particular, is distinctive and challenging in my argument is my claim that moral thought and judgement depends on an understanding of other human beings that is itself partly constituted by the kind of primitive responses I discuss.

To get a sense of the challenge, in talking of primitive responses I mean to highlight two aspects of such responses: first, that such responses are *immediate and unthinking* in the sense that they are not mediated by certain prior thoughts we might have about the particular human beings we are responding to. So in the case of pity, for example, it is not as if I first recognize that a person is suffering in a particular way and then respond to them in light of what I recognize. At the same time, however, to say that I respond in such cases immediately and without thinking is not to concede that such responses are merely mindless or instinctive. Rather, and this is their second aspect, such responses are, I shall argue, themselves a *form of recognition* of another's humanity. Thus in the case of pity, for example, I understand something of the nature of human suffering through my pity for another and, through that, an aspect of that other's humanity. The presence of such responses in conjunction with our judgements of another marks the distinction between moral judgements that involve an understanding of those we would judge and judgements that display a lack of such understanding and indicate not serious moral thought or reflection, but

mere moralism as I understand it. Of course, all this will require some explaining. However, what follows from my argument and is crucial for my account of moralism is that moral agency is not simply a matter of applying moral concepts, principles or theories in practical deliberations about how one morally ought to act, or ought to have acted, on some occasion. Beyond this, moral agency involves the kind of primitive responsiveness I have highlighted, a responsiveness that is itself an aspect of moral thought.

In Chapter 3 I continue to discuss the kind of primitive responsiveness I have outlined in Chapter 2, but my aim in this chapter is to consider moralism as it is involved in a person's *failure* to trust their own primitive responsiveness on certain occasions and specifically in relation to their experience of certain works of art that may be seen as morally problematic. A central claim of this chapter is that while it is only reasonable that our moral judgements of a given work of art should be based in part on the application of moral ideas and principles to it, what we also need to consider is how our responses to a given work of art may themselves lead us to reflect on, and perhaps to revise, those very moral ideas and principles. Again, my argument draws out how our primitive responses to people and situations that seem to call for moral judgement are an essential aspect of moral thought.

In Chapter 4 I turn from considering moralism as it occurs in specific moral judgements to consider moralism as it occurs in moral theorizing more generally. So I shall argue that certain impartialist moral theories distort our understanding of the varieties of value that contribute to a properly human life, partly because they discount the kind of primitive responsiveness I want to highlight. The argument of this chapter involves, in part, examining certain impartialist responses to the so-called problem of moral demandingness. These impartialist moral theories, I suggest, indicate a distorted conception of moral thought and are moralistic in the sense that they lead to morality overstepping its proper bounds or, as I shall put it, overweening in our lives.

In Chapter 5 I further expand on the ideas I have introduced in Chapter 2 concerning the place of certain primitive responses in moral thought. My specific concern in this chapter is to explore the ways in which certain works of literature may, through provoking the kind of primitive responsiveness I have been concerned with, contribute to



enriching moral thought and understanding, and so help us to avoid the dangers of moralism. An important claim defended in this chapter, which challenges more orthodox views in analytic moral philosophy, is that moral thought need not involve, or be seen merely as a means to, making explicit moral judgements. In Chapter 6, however, which is in some ways an extension of Chapter 5, I return specifically to what is involved in making moral judgements and argue that a certain class of moral judgements is essentially personal: that two agents in the same situation may make different moral judgements and both be correct. The argument of this chapter is a direct challenge to the claim, again taken for granted in much contemporary analytic moral philosophy, that moral judgements are always universalizable. Finally, in Chapter 7, which involves the practical application of the conception of moral thought I have developed throughout this book, I examine moralism in public debates, specifically as it features in certain public debates about the actions of political leaders on the world stage.

I am indebted to a number of people and institutions for help in writing this book. A good deal of it was written during a period of study leave from Flinders University and I am grateful to Flinders for this and for a small grant to relieve me of some teaching responsibilities. I am also grateful to the Australian Government and the Australian Academy of Humanities for an International Science Linkages–Humanities and Creative Arts Programme International Fellowship, which enabled me to visit the School of Philosophy at the University of East Anglia (UEA) to work on the book. While at UEA I benefited from insightful comments on early drafts of several chapters by various members of the School of Philosophy and particularly by David Cockburn (now at the University of Wales, Lampeter), Oskari Kuusela and Rupert Read. Drafts of the first six chapters of the book were later presented in an honours and postgraduate seminar at Rhodes University in South Africa and I am grateful to the students attending that seminar and particularly Chris Hartley, Douglas de Jager, Caryn Rippe and Gwendolyn Zorn for their many useful comments. During my time at Rhodes, Ward Jones, Tom Martin, Pedro Tabensky, Francis Williamson, Marius Vermaak, Sam Vice and several other members of the academic staff were extremely generous with their time, and I am grateful for the many insightful comments and other help they provided me with. All these



## PREFACE

people made me feel most welcome. In Australia I have benefited from comments on various draft chapters by Stephen Buckle, Tony Coady, Garrett Cullity, Raimond Gaita and especially Steven Tudor who commented on the first six chapters and Andrew Gleeson who provided me with extensive comments on the whole manuscript. Alice Crary and Rupert Read, acting as reviewers for *Acumen*, both provided extensive comments on the completed manuscript and I am very grateful to them. I am also grateful to Molly Murn for proofreading the completed manuscript. Finally, I would like to thank my partner Melinda Graefe for her constant support and encouragement. I cannot hope to adequately characterize that support or encouragement here; suffice it to say, I doubt this book would have been written without it.

Earlier versions of some of the arguments presented in this book have been published previously, although in all cases these arguments have been reworked and expanded. I am grateful to the relevant editors and publishers for permission to use material from the following publications: "Moralism and Morally Accountable Beings", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22(2) (2005), 153–60; "Winch on Moral Dilemma and Moral Modality", *Inquiry* 49(2) (2006), 148–57; "Art and Moralism", *Philosophy* 84(3) (2009), 341–53; "Literature, Moral Reflection and Ambiguity", *Philosophy* 86(1) (2011) 75–93.

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## ONE

# Moralism and related vices

Moralism, I shall argue, involves a distortion of moral thought, reflection and judgement about both people and events. So understood, moralism can be thought of as a kind of vice related specifically to moral thought and judgement. However, there are, as I shall outline, a number of vices that could be so described. Indeed, it may be argued that moralism is really a kind of blanket term used to signify a range of such vices or human tendencies. Certainly, moralism as a term of moral criticism is commonly used in this sort of way, and I have no desire to quibble with this common usage. But to concede, as I do, that moralism does not admit of a simple or uncontentious definition is not to say that we cannot understand moralism, which is to say, the range of human tendencies that “moralism” seems to cover, somewhat better. This book is partly about examining the complex of human tendencies that may be classified as kinds of moralism, and part of why that is important is to make clear and explicit certain distinct ways in which moral thought and judgement may themselves be distorted.

As will already be clear, in this context I am using the term “vice” very broadly. As I shall argue, moralism sometimes indicates certain kinds of defect in the ways in which we respond to others in our specific moral judgements. So in this sense one can think of moralism as indicating certain defects of character. But beyond this, I shall also argue, moralism can involve thinking about morality, including its place in

our lives, in the wrong kind of way, specifically in ways that discount the importance of other (non-moral) values. So moralism involves flaws indicated both by certain tendencies of judgement and action and by tendencies of moral thought more generally. To put the point in Aristotle's terms, moralism, as a defect of both action and thought, encompasses what he called both the moral (character) vices and intellectual vices.

One initial thought we might have about moralism as a vice is that it involves making extreme or excessive moral judgements about people and events that they are involved in, but particularly about particular people and their actions. But while that is a feature of moralism on many occasions, including some that I shall discuss, at other times it may simply be that a moral judgement, say, is inappropriate or uncalled for. Thus in some such cases, as we shall see, we might want to say that a person's moral judgement is unreasonable in the sense that it is wrong to make a judgement in the present case.<sup>1</sup> So morally judging another can be unreasonable even though the judgement is true: even though one is uttering a true proposition. As a first and rough approximation, let us say that to be accused of moralism is to be accused of an excessive or otherwise unreasonable tendency in one's moral thoughts and/or judgements about people or events. So described, moralism involves some kind of vice or failing.

I suggested above one way in which we may initially think of moralism, one according to which moralism involves a certain kind of failing. But one might have another opposing thought according to which moralism is no failing whatsoever. Moralism, we might say, is simply the practice of the moralist, so that to criticize someone for moralism really amounts to the rejection of morality. Of course to claim that someone is a moralist need not be, at least not obviously, to criticize them at all. The moralist *per se* is indeed simply one who makes moral judgements or simply engages in moral thought or reflection about, for example, people, their actions and society generally: a moral philosopher even. Moralism, to the extent that it is a vice, would seem to involve some distortion of the proper activity of the moralist. I am not convinced that the distinction between the moralist and those guilty of moralism can always be so clearly drawn, or that there is not always something faintly suspicious in the *desire*, say, to morally judge others.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, there is, I shall claim, an important distinction to be made between two kinds of people. First, there is the person who seeks to describe, understand and evaluate or judge the morally relevant features of situations, which we might think simply amounts to taking morality seriously. Second, there are those who resort in their public and private moral judgements of others, and perhaps even themselves,<sup>3</sup> to moralism, which we may take to be wrong and sometimes highly offensive. We might distinguish the two types by calling the second not a moralist but a mere moralizer. From here on when I refer to a moralizer as opposed to a moralist I shall mean only this latter type of person: the person guilty of moralism.

### Other moralisms

I have so far considered moralism in only the most ordinary senses of the word. However, moralism also has a number of distinct technical meanings in different fields, so in order to avoid any unnecessary confusion it is worth distinguishing moralism as a vice (as I shall understand it) from these other moralisms: from kinds of moralism that denote specific theoretical movements and ideas.

First and most obviously there is legal moralism: the idea within the philosophy of law that a society's collective moral judgements and values can properly be supported by legal sanction even against acts that do not result in harm to others. While I shall not be concerned to examine legal moralism in this book, certain debates here appear to be somewhat relevant to some aspects of my distinct discussion of moralism. One such debate that I shall mention in a note in Chapter 3 is the famous debate in legal moralism between H. L. A. Hart and Lord Patrick Devlin. This debate focused on a British Government report, the Wolfenden Report, which recommended legalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults in private.<sup>4</sup> Second, more recently moralism has been understood in the field of aesthetics as the view that a moral defect in a work of art is, or at least can be, an aesthetic defect and that a moral merit is, or at least can be, an aesthetic merit. There are a range of positions we might hold here, depending on how extreme the claim is: for example, are moral defects always also



aesthetic defects, moral merits always aesthetic merits, or (with either or both merits and defects) only sometimes?<sup>5</sup>

An interesting question is to what extent we might see these moralisms as connected to moralism as I shall understand it, as a kind of vice. One might, for example, want to argue that the very idea that one might be justified – as Devlin thinks – in using the coercive power of the state simply in support of a society's moral values is itself an example of the vice of moralism. A point of connection between my account of moralism and Hart's response to Devlin's legal moralism is Hart's defence of reason or reflection and sympathetic understanding in moral judgement. Hart's arguments thus bear on some of what I shall have to say about moralism in the sense I am concerned with. Turning to moralism as a theory in aesthetics, one might think that aesthetic moralism really involves something like the moralization, again in the pejorative sense, of art: that is, the application of moral ideas and concepts to art where they do not apply. I shall consider how aesthetic moralism might lead to moralism in this sense in Chapter 4. While there may be a range of connections between these moralisms and the vice of moralism, they are not the subject of this book, although what I have to say about moralism as a vice may – in ways I have just flagged, for example – throw some light on debates in these quite distinct enquiries.

Another kind of moralism worth mentioning, but which I shall not discuss in this book, is moralism as it is used in Christian theology to indicate a kind of theological error or flaw. Thus the Protestant liberalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was charged with moralism in that its interpretation of Christ's teaching reduced the kingdom of God to the realm of liberal moral values. So, as Alister McGrath notes, Johannes Weiss, in his critique of Protestant liberalism, argues that "the idea of the 'kingdom of God' was understood by the liberal Protestants to mean the exercise of the moral life in society, or a supreme ethical ideal" (McGrath 1994: 369). What makes such an interpretation questionable, so the critique went, was the preaching of Jesus about the end of humankind in which the realm of merely human values will be overturned. Interestingly though, the kind of moralism associated with this critique bears some relation to what I shall argue in this book, for a central claim I shall make about moralism is that it involves seeing some things as moral matters when they really are not.

Thus we can say that the account of Protestant liberalism I have just sketched amounts, perhaps, to a reduction of religious values and ideals to moral ones in ways that fundamentally distort religious faith. This general aspect of moralism, which we might say involves an unreasonable moralization of human life and the variety of human values, will become clearer below when I consider a kind of moralism somewhat closer to my own project.

Moralism is also used by a range of other thinkers – although there are not actually many of them – to denote a particular kind of failing in a somewhat similar way to mine in this book. A particular philosopher whose account of moralism as a kind of failing is more directly related to some of what I want to say about moralism is Bernard Williams. Williams's account of moralism has been highly influential and I shall discuss his work on this and related subjects in some detail in Chapter 4. Williams's concern with moralism as he understands it is, in ways I shall explain, tied to his influential criticisms of what he calls the "morality system".<sup>6</sup> Williams's criticism is not of particular moral judgements but of impartialist moral theories as a whole (Kantian and Utilitarian theories being Williams's central target). Such theories are moralistic, Williams claims, in that they involve a failure to recognize that a complete or even adequate human life requires our acceptance of a space in human life outside the scope of morality's demands. Such moralism is manifest not only in the way in which we judge *others* but also in the way in which we judge *ourselves*. Williams's account of moralism fits into my overall account of moralism as a kind of distorted conception of moral thought and judgement: by its overweening, as I call it, in our lives. To say that morality overweens in our life is a *criticism* of impartial morality. When, following Williams, I criticize impartialist conceptions of moral thought and judgement as overweening I mean that they trespass into areas of human life where they have no authority. Thus the issue is not whether moral considerations always trump other non-moral considerations: the kind of impartialist who is my target in Chapter 4 may accept that sometimes moral values are outweighed by other values, but even so, morality may continue to overween in our life to the extent that morality sees its role as *allowing* that on some occasion other values may be weightier. The overweening is thus a matter, as I say, of the *scope* that morality presumes for its own authority: its



authority to weigh all values, moral and otherwise. All the same, as will become clear in Chapter 5, however, my account of moralism goes beyond Williams's.

There are a number of other philosophers as well who argue that moralism is a kind of moral failure in something like the way I shall argue in this book. I shall have occasion to refer to some of these philosophers in later chapters, as well as more immediately in the next two sections of this chapter, where I examine the similarities and differences between moralism and a range of other closely related failings.

### Moralism and hypocrisy

To begin, we need to distinguish moralism from hypocrisy. It is often suggested that one thing that is so offensive about moralism is that the moralizer condemns immorality in others while failing to acknowledge their own similar moral failings. This is indeed simple hypocrisy. However, the moralizer need not be a hypocrite; sometimes the moralizer's pronouncements and judgements will be inconsistent with their own conduct, but this need not be so. The politician who, while cheating on his wife, condemns those who fail to respect the covenant of marriage is a hypocrite; however, the Catholic priest who condemns this same infidelity may be a moralizer but he is not a hypocrite (assuming that priest is not, say, sleeping with one of his married parishioners).

One might think that moralism and hypocrisy are alike in that they are both vices related to the making of *moral* judgements. But one can be a hypocrite without advancing a moral judgement at all. Consider a person who publicly proclaims that a particular popular author is a low-minded philistine and not worth reading but secretly reads the said author enthusiastically. Such a person is surely a hypocrite, but their judgement is something like an aesthetic not a moral one. Looked at another way, we might want to say more generally that the hypocrite proclaims the higher (in some moral, aesthetic or other sense) but practises the lower, but this need not be so either. It is easy to imagine the reverse; say, where a man hides a fine aesthetic sensibility because he thinks that such a sensibility will be seen as unfitting for a man to possess. Or think, in a similar connection, of Nietzsche saying: "*The noblest*

*hypocrite*. Never to talk about oneself is a very noble piece of hypocrisy” (Nietzsche [1878] 1996: 181). In these cases there is a conflict between the beliefs or commitments a person presents to others and their actual lives and conduct, a conflict that involves an element of pretence,<sup>7</sup> and that is all that is necessary for the charge of hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, in a wide variety of cases there are illuminating similarities between hypocrisy and moralism. First, what both the moralist and the hypocrite claim may be true in one sense; that is, we might think that infidelity or adultery is a bad thing. This shows how moralism is distinct from, say, racism or sexism; unlike these vices moralism does not necessarily depend narrowly on any faulty beliefs a person may have, including about people in groups different from their own. I shall explore this idea further in Chapter 2. Second, what seems objectionable about both hypocrisy and moralism in the case of moral judgements is that, even granting that the judgements involved are true in the above sense, it is somehow unwarranted that the moralist or hypocrite should actually pronounce these judgements. A common objection to both the hypocrite and moralist, for example, is not that they get things wrong but that they are in no position to criticize or condemn.

Now at this point one might suggest that what is objectionable in the case of moralism is that the person making a negative moral judgement – either in public or in private – about another has no right to make this judgement. Robert Fullinwider (2006) defends an account of moralism along these lines. What the moralist fails to see, one might argue, is that it is only if one has a specific personal relationship to another, or occupies some cultural or institutional role in relation to them, that we are entitled to judge them in certain ways. To give some examples: two people in an intimate relationship have a special right to judge aspects of each other’s moral conduct; magistrates and judges have some right to judge our conduct in the public sphere to the extent that our conduct is both immoral and illegal; and professionals have a right sometimes to judge the moral conduct of their peers as it pertains to their professional lives.

However, while there is clearly a moral dimension to judgements dispensed by those within such relationships and occupying such roles, it is limited to what is morally required of a person in order to fulfil those relationships and roles. For example, if a member of the medical