



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Weaving Faith into a Moral Life

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Radenović, Ljiljana. 2022. "Weaving Faith into a Moral Life." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (6): 1-6. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-6RF>.

Many philosophers have tried to define the moral thing to do in a challenging (either possible or fully imaginary) situation. Should we lie to the murderer about the whereabouts of his potential victim? Kant says: 'No, we should not!' Should a person abducted and tied to a terminally sick violinist be morally obliged to remain tied to him for nine months if that was the only way to save his life? Thompson's verdict is no! Should we pull a lever to divert a trolley so that it kills only one person instead of five? All of these questions and many more have been posed in an attempt to defend certain ethical principles despite the cost (Kant's argument against lying) or to demonstrate that a certain act is morally acceptable (Thompson's case for abortion) or to show the weaknesses of a particular ethics (the trolley thought experiment's exposure of utilitarianism)

The Abduction of the Famous Violinist

Among various moral thought experiments, the case of the abduction of the famous violinist has been my all-time favourite, as my moral intuition tells me the exact opposite of what the author (Thompson 1971) intended. The argument goes like this: Suppose you are abducted by a group of fans of a famous violinist. Due to some rare medical condition, you are the only one who can save him by being tied to him for nine months. So after abduction you wake up tied to him. The question Thompson poses is the following: Are you morally obliged to remain hooked to the violinist? Thompson's goal is to show how our moral intuition tells us that it is nice to stay, but we are not morally obliged to do so, and she moves on to apply the same conclusion to the case of abortion.

Whether the analogy with abortion is a good one has never been my main worry, but it has always struck me as strange that somebody would work with the assumption that our moral intuitions could tell us we were free to go. The question that has tormented me has not been the suitability of this argument for abortion but why my moral intuitions appear to be so different from Thompson's and those of her target audience.

In fact, for me, ethical thought experiments like this one never quite remain on a theoretical, abstract level, even though I am a trained philosopher and I should know better. I see the violinist clearly, see how we are stuck in this unfortunate situation, how we chat to pass the time, and how we quarrel. He gets on my nerves, I get on his. A drama starts writing itself, and by the end of it, there is no way I will unhook myself, walk away, and watch him die.

I may be accused at this point of letting my personality cloud my moral judgment. It may be argued that in order for us to grasp the right thing to do in this situation (or any other, for that matter), we must put aside who we are, our own sentiments, personal histories, faith, habits, and the like. But I believe this is exactly what we cannot do when we make moral judgments and moral decisions. Abstraction is sometimes an asset, but in ethics, it seems to be a hindrance. It is questionable whether conceivable situations abstracted from all the relevant details of life can say anything about our morality, about what we should do, how we ought to behave, or who we should aspire to be.

I have already offered a critique of popular contemporary ethical theories (<https://covidianaesthetics.substack.com/p/a-post-enlightenment-ethics-of-the-s-r> or <https://social-epistemology.com/2021/08/09/a-post-enlightenment-ethics-of-the-desert-fathers-ljiljana-radenovic/>). I have suggested that the ethics we should revive and nourish is that of the Desert Fathers, as theirs overcomes the shortcomings of abstracted ethical principles and deals with moral questions of particular people in particular circumstances. I feel it is time to say something more about the moral life of Christian communities at the time of the Desert Fathers. Getting to know the worries and dilemmas of these early Christians may show us the way to becoming better people and better Christians many centuries later. But first, I want to explore what it means to live a moral life.

On Living Morally

In his wonderful essay “Making Moral Decisions” Rowan Williams (2001) offers not only a particular take on Christian ethics and what such ethics consists of but more generally what it means to live morally. He argues that the way we decide what to do in challenging situations always represents an attempt to be in line with the truth of who we are. Reaching such truth cannot be done by simply following rules or principles. Furthermore, it’s rarely immediately obvious to us that our choice is/was the right one. Sometimes it takes years to realize that we did the right thing and that we had to do it if we were to remain true to ourselves.

But exactly what does this mean? Isn’t this insistence on “being true to oneself” unnecessary mysticism about our actions and just a place holder for what we, in fact, desire to do in a particular moment? If this is the case, our moral endeavour is subjective and relative. Still, anyone who has tried to justify morally bankrupt actions knows how hard it is to get a clean conscience via rationalization. So there is something very objective and palpable in the way we approach our moral deeds. Even the most sophisticated philosophers with all the skills needed to find the moral reasons why something ought to have been done can hardly be happy with what they deep down know to be immoral actions; their conscience may not let them off the hook no matter how many reasonable justifications they may have.

The sense of morality does not easily align with our desires, even if we try hard to make it fit. Williams (2001) notes that the Christian Saints had a discernment of what had to be done, and they did it because they had to stay truthful to what they believed in, not because they desired to do it. Great deeds in difficult times are not done out of desire, because they are easy, or because the truth we believe in is something subjective. Quite the contrary—what must be done feels harder than stone, and no matter what mental acrobatics we engage in, we cannot change it.

However, a question remains: Where does this truth about ourselves and the strong sense of what we ought to do come from? If we say that it comes from self-reflection, Williams argues we need to be careful about what we mean by self-reflection. If our minds and souls come into this world without any baggage, then we can reflect on the world or our human nature uninterrupted by who we “incidentally” are, our origins, the place we belong to, social

status, and the like. Self-reflection seen this way can constitute inquiry into a lone, independent mind. But as many have already noted, including Williams, our selves are already shaped by the place we were born into, the upbringing our parents gave us, our peers, the language we speak, the class we belong to, and so on.

The lone independent mind is a philosophical chimera. So when looking for the true self or the truly moral thing to do, we must find our way within the way of life that has already been given to us in our community, or as Williams puts it: “Self-discovery we have been thinking about in the process of making certain kinds of decision is also a discovery of the world that shapes us.” In a nutshell, who we are goes beyond us and is not some personal truth we can find in abstraction, separated from our world.

Williams argues that Christians are in the same position as everybody else when determining the moral thing to do. Christians do not have a ready-made recipe for behaving morally. They too need to find their way, discover their true selves within the world given to them, and discern which actions resonate with who they are. The only way they differ from others, atheists in particular, is that they deal with a reality that is not reducible to here and now. But this is not the same as saying Christians have direct access to moral truth. Now, aren't the Ten Commandments straightforward moral rules? Williams argues the Ten Commandments came to the people of Israel after their moral life and their ties to God had already been established: “The Law did not come into a vacuum, but crystallised what had begun to exist through the action of God” (6). Williams concludes that when prophets of the Old Testament pronounced God's judgment on individuals, they did not do so because these persons broke a particular rule or failed to behave according to some moral ideal. Instead, they condemned actions that broke the faith and the community.

Similarly, according to Williams, when Christians are trying to discern the moral thing to do, who they need to be, or how they should proceed in life, they are actually looking for the kind of action that will maintain and strengthen their ties to God. However, the answer to this question is neither universal nor intimately personal but is found in their particular Christian community. For instance, St. Paul's discussions on eating meat of the animals sacrificed to the pagan gods reflect the worries of the Christian community of the time. Will this action break the Christian's connection with God? The answer Paul gives does not come in the form of a strict rule, such as: “Do not eat such meat.” Of course that should be avoided, but he cautions that nobody should shun those who are less careful and feel morally superior for doing so. Meanwhile, those who break the rule should not go around bragging about it. More important than the practice of eating sacrificial meat (or not) is the need to take into account the situation of the other and sacrifice for the other, with the goal of building the Christian community, i.e. to build “the Body of Christ more securely” (7).

For Williams, moral disagreements among Christians about the moral thing to do in a particular situation come from the fact that Christianity, even though universal, grows out from and is shaped by and taught in specific local circumstances. It is not abstract. Different communities slowly develop certain ways of dealing with specific issues. So when we encounter a Christian community that resolves moral problems differently, we should not be

shocked. “No one learns their Christianity without a local accent” Williams says (9). But different accents do not mean simple relativism of faith and morals. Despite the differences, all Christians in all communities are struggling to strengthen their faith and connection to God through the practices and beliefs they deem good.

Williams moves on to explore the ways Christians can resolve disagreements over difficult moral issues, such as, for example, whether we as Christians should support nuclear weapons. Christians diverge on the issue, and both sides truly believe their way is the right way to build the body of Christ and is the true reading of God’s word. Williams worries about and tries to understand the borderline cases when it is really hard for us to recognize the other side as attempting to discern the word of God at all. He mentions slavery, torture, anti-Jewish laws embraced by the Church, and so on.

Letters from Barsanuphius and John

While Williams is interested in how we can come to terms with a Christian community in the past who has had substantially different (possibly repulsive) beliefs and values, I wish to revisit the past for a somewhat different, albeit related, purpose. The Christian community of 6th century Gaza had beliefs and values that seem very strange today but are nonetheless admirable and, in my view, are closer to the truth of our Christian faith than our moral intuitions. We learn about the life and worries of these ordinary Christians through the extensive correspondence between two holy men, Barsanuphius (simply called the Old Man) and John (the Other Old Man), and the laity.

Many people in the vicinity wrote to them for advice, and we are lucky enough to have their questions and the two holy men’s answers saved in two substantial volumes (*Barsanuphius and John, Letters, Volume 1 and 2*). In their letters, we indeed find morally incomprehensible things of the type that Williams is worried about: the acceptance of slavery is perhaps the most striking one. There is an exchange of letters between a devoted Christian of Gaza and the Old Man about what should be done with a runaway slave, how he should be punished, whether he should be taken back, and under which conditions (Letters 653, 654). But this is something found in all antiquity, not just in Christian communities of the early Byzantine era. If we go further back into the past, we find Aristotle offering a theory of a natural slave.

Of course, there is more to the past than a morally reprehensible way of life. It cannot be overstated how misleading and risky it is to presuppose linear moral progress and take for granted that we are a tolerant, advanced society that has moved away from barbaric practices. This is certainly not what Williams holds—but we often do so either explicitly or implicitly. There are many ways to undermine this modern bias of ours, but reading history properly is the most fruitful. Peter Brown (1997) challenged a widely accepted claim that the period of late antiquity was a period of great religious intolerance, for instance. He argued that despite intellectual debates and fierce letter exchanges between highly educated Christians and their pagan adversaries, tolerance on the ground was well maintained: it was structural, depended on traditional codes of behaviour, and was tied to tax collection. But tolerance was also preached and can be found in internal Christian teachings.

In the 6th century, Gaza was multicultural by all standards (populated by Christians, Jews, pagans, Samaritans), and questions of coexistence were often raised. In one of the letters to the Old Man, a layperson asks if he should help his Jewish neighbour and let him use his winepress. The Old Man replies:

If, when God sends rain, it rains in your field but not in that of the Jew, then do not press his wine. If, however, God is kind and loving to all and sends rain upon the just as well as upon the unjust, then why do you prefer to be inhumane rather than compassionate; for he says: “Be merciful, even as your Father in heaven is merciful” (Letter 686).

Besides being struck by things we disapprove of, we are left with another overwhelming impression when we dive into the way of life of this long-past Christian community: their faith was an immanent part of and an ever-present feature in their daily lives. It was a force that directly shaped their worries and dilemmas. To what extent their faith shaped their lives and decisions is something that seems foreign to many of us in the 21st century, even if we are devoted Christians. In other words, for them, the moral thing to do was inseparable from their faith and did not depend on the calculation of happiness or rational principles that often in our case turn out to be nothing more than rationalizations.

For people of 6th century Gaza, moral dilemmas emerged from and were actively driven by their faith. A series of questions on almsgiving addressed to the Old Man illustrate this. Laypersons ask the Old Man how to distribute alms, who should handle the process and how, how to get used to giving things away if you do not enjoy it, whether to give to the poor things of less importance, and the like. Two of the more striking questions are found in letters 620 and 648. In the former we find a Christ-loving person asking the Old Man: “If someone is asked to give alms but has nothing to give, is that person obliged to borrow in order to give?” (Letter 620). The worry itself would never cross our modern minds, even if we are Christian. It shows to what extent these early Christians thought that giving alms, i.e. helping those less fortunate, was a substantial, even necessary part of a Christian life. Helping others was not optional. It was an imperative taken very seriously. The Old Man’s answer is not surprising: he advises the man not to borrow money in order to give. Still the very question tells us how our own Christian faith and what this faith means to us has changed since 6th century Gaza. For us, helping is a morally praiseworthy personal choice not an obligation.

Letter 648 has a similarly sobering effect. Here we find a man who is not certain if it is good to sell land to the Church or if he should present it as a gift. The situation is complicated by the fact that it is not his own land but land belonging to his nephews, and he is only in charge of it. “I am seized, however, by two thoughts,” he says; “One thought tells me that I should give it to them at no cost, since it will be used as a sacred place; another thought tells me to keep the charge entrusted to me by those who asked me to negotiate a price. So I do not know on which side to lean. For I fear God; but I also think that it would be a sin to harm my nephews”. The Old Man advises him to sell it at a discount.

None of these questions would come naturally to us today, even if we have faith in God and are Christians. We are accustomed to theological discussions. We are used to reconsidering our relationship with God when we are in a contemplative mood. We pray and go to church on regular basis, but we keep faith in a separate compartment of the soul far away from our daily moral and practical decisions. We are not guided or driven by it, and we do not ask ourselves (most of the time) whether and to what extent a particular decision brings a gift to the body of Christ, to use Williams's words.

Living One's Faith

We might echo Tolstoy and argue that this kind of alienation of faith from our daily lives and moral decisions is an illness of intellectuals—they are the ones who have a dead academic faith, if they have it at all. In contrast, the poor *live* their faith. “The whole life of the believers from our class [intellectuals] was in opposition to their faith,” says Tolstoy, “while the whole life of the believers from the working people was a confirmation of that meaning of life which was the substance of their faith” (66). But in the broken communities of the increasingly secular world, even ordinary people whose faith Tolstoy admired cease to keep it alive.

So the question for us as contemporary Christians is not simply how to make sense of different moral choices within Christian communities or how to overcome the differences among them. The question is more fundamental: How do we bring our faith back to life so that it shapes and drives our core moral dilemmas as it did for Christians in 6th century Gaza?

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