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## ‘MORAL THINKING’: RESPONSE TO CHAPTER 2

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What does it mean to say that our moral actions are ‘reasonable’? After unpacking the nature of ‘moral awareness’ in the first chapter of *Self, World, and Time*, O’Donovan takes up the nature of practical reason in the second. The chapter begins with David Hume; it ends with readers on their knees in prayer, and not only because O’Donovan carves out a difficult path between the two. On his account, self-conscious moral thinking (eventually) makes explicit the presupposition that gives it its urgent character, namely the relation of the self to God. But O’Donovan begins with the nature of practical reasoning, and it is about this that I have questions. While his treatment is both illuminating and provocative, I wonder whether by leaving the relationship between ‘values’ and other aspects of reality ambiguous, he leaves insufficient room for non-culpable mistakes in action and over-burdens moral reasoning by unnecessarily throwing the weight of the uniquely ‘moral’ on the self. I consider these questions in what follows, leaving aside O’Donovan’s stimulating section on prayer.

O’Donovan begins his account of moral reasoning by reframing the familiar question of how ‘is’ and ‘ought’ relate—or whether ‘values’ can be derived from ‘facts’. Hume is often credited with first raising the problem, which has become known as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. Yet on O’Donovan’s reading, Hume is troubled instead by how we move not from facts to values, but from values to obligations, or what ‘classical thinkers knew as the question of the good and the right’ (24).<sup>1</sup> By integrating ‘values’ into the very structure of reality, O’Donovan is able to argue that moral responsibility has a stake not only in willing correctly, but in understanding properly as well. As he strikingly puts it, ‘behind moral failure at every level lies... [some kind of] failure to keep our actions in tune with reality’ (25).

O’Donovan is clear that ‘World-description belongs...“on the ground floor” of practical reason.’ (11) But he leaves the question of how ‘values’ relate to other aspects of reality under-specified and unclear; by sidestepping the popular formulation of Hume’s ‘naturalistic fallacy’, O’Donovan’s

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time. Ethics as Theology 1: An Induction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 24. Subsequent page references in the text are to this work.

account eliminates—or at least seriously threatens—the possibility that ignorance in moral actions might be benign. O’Donovan writes: ‘Mistakes are not the high peaks of guilt, but neither do they lie on the plain of innocence.’ (25) It may be true that every moral failure has some mistake about reality behind it, but it does not follow that every moral action that has a mistake about reality behind it is a failure. O’Donovan grants that ‘we differentiate “mere” mistakes from bad intentions, vices of character, and so on, in an ascending scale of moral seriousness....’ (25). But the quotation marks around ‘mere’ leave an open question about whether O’Donovan thinks non-culpable mistakes can exist at all. Yet it seems clear that they do. A soldier who kills an allied spy who is embedded within an opposing army during a battle commits a serious ‘mistake’, which upon learning about he may strongly regret. However, such a mistake is neither negligent nor blameworthy—even if the mistake depends upon the soldier’s ignorance about certain aspects of reality. The possibility of blameless mistakes in action depends upon the agent’s assessment of the *morally salient* aspects of a situation (whatever those are), which is not necessarily equivalent to all the possible descriptions or facts about a situation. Without further specification of how values relate to the other aspects of reality, it seems as though the momentum of O’Donovan’s view leads to treating the soldier as culpable for the killing, even if not seriously so.

O’Donovan’s concern to integrate description into the task of moral reasoning leads him then to consider the path between the good and the right, a path that ‘practical reason’ leads us down. On his view, neither our desires nor our duties are self-evidently or transparently correct. Moral thinking cannot ignore them, as they provide ‘indications’ (28) of what is to be done, but neither is it exhausted by them. Instead, moral thinking involves ‘practical reasoning’. While goodness ‘is an aspect of what *is*’, and rightness ‘is what *is to be done*’, practical reasoning ‘correlates the actions we immediately project with the way things are’ (28).<sup>2</sup> That process of correlation is not unidirectional, however: it is ‘not deductive, but inductive’, as it ‘moves to and fro between the world of realities and the moment of action’ (30).

But O’Donovan’s account of practical reasoning suffers from the same ambiguity about the ‘way things are’ mentioned above. O’Donovan seems to oscillate between what might be called a substance ontology (in which reality consists of ‘things’) and a ‘states of affairs’ ontology. As he puts it, ‘The goodness of good things constitutes a reason why *certain* acts at *certain* times are right;...’ (29) It is because Bach’s music has certain intrinsic qualities, it seems, that we are right to listen to it under the

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<sup>2</sup> All italics in quotations are original.

right circumstances. Yet O'Donovan will later suggest that "The question "what am I to do?" means, "what am I to do *in this state of affairs?*"—and so always presumes an answer to the question "what state of affairs?"." (32) This is a much broader construal, which raises questions about how 'goodness' is an aspect of what 'is' and whether O'Donovan's association of it with 'things' is sufficient. The goodness (or lack thereof) of particular 'things' or substances like Bach's music or Shakespeare's plays may be part of our description of a particular 'state of affairs', but some goods that we grasp—like friendship or knowledge—are not attached to substances at all. Such goods are not necessarily grasped as aspects of 'what is'—or 'things', on O'Donovan's account—but as opportunities that can be enacted. One pursues friendship not because it is an aspect of what exists, but because it might yet come to be.<sup>3</sup>

This ambiguity comes to the fore when O'Donovan considers the possibility of 'things indifferent' (*adiaphora*) in moral reasoning, which he takes up in the context of identifying the locus for moral responsibility. Recognising that the term 'practical' frequently has non-moral connotations, O'Donovan suggests that moral thinking 'adds the question of how this action may determine the successful or unsuccessful living of a life' (33). That is, moral reasoning introduces 'the acting self' as a 'focus of attention' (33). The domain of the moral has an ineliminable self-referential dimension which happens in a 'moment of heightened moral sensibility' that we may 'perceive...immediately', in the sense that 'the fact affects us before we know how to express it' (33). In such a moment, the 'whole world (from the point of view of [our] own destiny) depends upon' our conduct (33). This 'moment of heightened moral sensibility' is akin to an intuition for O'Donovan, even though he thinks intuitionist or emotivist moral theories 'draw the wrong lesson from it' (34). But not everything impinges on the acting self this way. O'Donovan suggests that there are 'things and qualities within the world which...do not of themselves present a challenge to the human self and its living of a life'; these are 'things indifferent' (33). On his view, 'redness' or 'heaviness' only have moral relevance based on the 'practical conditions' in which they come before us. However, 'Moral qualities...are always and necessarily relevant to our agency.' (33)

<sup>3</sup> The language of goods as 'opportunities' is taken from John Finnis. To contrast his formulation of goods with O'Donovan's is illuminating. For Finnis, basic goods are concerned not only 'with what truly is, but also and essentially with what truly *is-to-be* in a sense that is not predictive but directive, normative, articulable from the outset in the language of normativity: should, ought, is-to-be-done'. John Finnis, 'Natural Law Theory: Its Past and Its Present', *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 57 (1992), 84.

There is unquestionably no moral difference between white or blue hydrangeas *as* hydrangeas; but it is not clear how *things* can be an answer to a 'practical question', which is a question about what one should *do* within a particular state of affairs. Whether we choose to plant blue or white hydrangeas may not matter—but planting either might, if our neighbour is deathly allergic to them or we know they have a profound dislike of them. We put moral questions to possible actions: is it right to plant hydrangeas or do we have other obligations that we should be attending to instead? There may indeed be 'things indifferent', but perhaps the more pertinent question for distinguishing between practical and moral reasoning is whether there are any possible morally indifferent actions in the state of affairs under consideration.

O'Donovan's ambiguities on how 'things' and 'states of affairs' relate to each other in the domain of practical reason, and on how moral values relate to other aspects of reality, seem to allow him to shift the emphasis of the 'moral' to how it determines the self. More clarity about ontology—about how the 'world' that we describe is composed—may enable us to identify the uniqueness of 'moral reasoning' by its shape, rather than by how it impinges upon the self. I wonder whether identifying the uniqueness of the moral with the self imposes too heavy a burden on moral reasoning. As noted, O'Donovan rejects intuitionist or emotivist moral theories. In their place, he suggests that we must 'give a thoughtful account of ourselves as those who entertain and pursue [a] project' in order to properly account for a moral undertaking (34). While O'Donovan suggests that such a movement does not 'provide additional or more decisive reasons for doing something' (33), it is still a heavy burden to place on moral thinking. Books are written to answer moral questions: must we write our autobiographies as well to discern the 'heightened seriousness' of a moral action? (33).

Additionally, it seems that we encounter moral values as those which make demands on *anyone* similarly situated, in addition to demands on our own selves as 'those who entertain and pursue [a] project' (34). In undertaking these demands we do what anyone ought to do in such a situation. That moral values make a demand on us as particular agents is consequent upon the fact that they make a demand at all. But this makes one wonder whether the moment of 'heightened seriousness' that demarcates the moral is constituted by the kind of individualised self-awareness that O'Donovan indicates, or whether, instead, it is determined by the agent's perception of moral qualities *vis-à-vis* other aspects of reality. If we have encountered that which anyone in the world would be obligated to do, why must we 'give a thoughtful account of ourselves as those who entertain and pursue [a] project' in order to give a full account of the moral

undertaking before us? Why is it not enough to say that we have found the right thing to do, the thing which anyone in the world ought do if they were in our shoes?

I want to suggest that, finally, our selves and our conception of a 'successful' life are themselves opaque, and our introspective faculties may after all be too limited to hold before ourselves such depths. While O'Donovan considers desires and duties too unstable to be the grounds for moral reasoning, this perception of 'heightened seriousness' seems to be no more stable a ground upon which to rest the uniqueness of moral experience. The self may be *less* translucent than the goods that present themselves to us in particular situations. We encounter goods about particular situations as alien and independent from us. The distance between the good and our selves makes them easier to apprehend than the more familiar, intimate, and frequently confused motivations and histories that make up our biographies. Is there a more difficult task than a fully truthful autobiography? I suspect there is within O'Donovan's undertaking a subtle gap between the theorist who provides such a broader narrative of the self within the moral life and the agent situated within a definite moral horizon. If anything, our experience of moral realities seems to be less architectonic and more fragmentary than our theorising about it—but given our frailty as creatures, these limitations are as they should be.