The Interchanges to Which Our Moral Utterances Belong

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Abstract:

Lars Hertzberg suggests that it is obvious that "getting clear about the sense of our moral utterances is a matter of getting clear about the nature of the interchanges to which they belong". The paper explores the significance of this through illustrations, drawn from Hertzberg's work, of the importance of paying proper attention to two ranges of variation in such interchanges: first, to the distinctions between first, second and third person contexts of discussion and, second, to those between tenses, between, for example, discussions of what she should *do* and of what she *should have done*. Hertzberg brings out the importance of these distinctions through critical discussion of themes in Williams, Winch and Anscombe. In an extended discussion of an example of his own, Hertzberg speaks of the temptation "to think that we could, in some sense, take part in the very same discussion that Horthy may have carried out with his advisers, or with his family, or with himself, in wrestling with the issue" of what he should have done. A parallel is drawn with philosophical treatments of fatalism, where differences in the practical relations in which individuals stand to particular actions tend to be overlooked.

Lars Hertzberg is best known for his work on Wittgenstein and the philosophy of mind and language. Some of what is most valuable in that work is closely related to a distinctive ethical dimension of it. What is, perhaps, less widely appreciated is the importance of his work on language for moral philosophy: an importance that is wonderfully illustrated in a series of fine papers explicitly on ethical themes.[1] That importance, as I understand it, is beautifully summed up in his remark:

[1] I am speaking, in particular, of "On Moral Necessity" (Hertzberg 1994), "Ethics as We Talk it", "Moral Escapism and Applied Ethics" and "Reasons to be Good?" (Hertzberg 2022).

> If the expression of moral requirements in a divine law context is set aside, however, it becomes obvious that getting clear about the sense of our moral utterances is a matter of getting clear about the nature of the interchanges to which they belong. (Hertzberg 2022: 156)

That "becomes obvious" is, it seems to me, a little optimistic in the current philosophical climate. However that may be, I do regret that I have not myself been clearer on this point a good while ago.

One way in which that "getting clear about the nature of our interchanges" is of crucial significance in ethics is in paying proper attention to the distinctions between first, second and third person contexts of discussion: discussion of what *I* should (must, ought to) do, what *you* should do, what *he* should do, what *we* should do and so on. Another is in the distinctions between tenses: between, for example, what she should *do* and what she *should have done*. These two contrasts combine, of course, in multiple variations. A standing temptation in moral philosophy, as in philosophy more generally, is to suppose that we should start by getting the present tense first person singular cases right and the other cases will then take care of themselves.

To forestall a possible misunderstanding of what I am suggesting here, I should note that I take there to be a crucial distinction between the "first person" / "third person" contrast and the "personal" / "impersonal" contrast. It might be argued, very plausibly I think, that mainstream moral philosophy is marked by a tendency to prioritize *impersonal* uses of moral language, and that opposition to this is a central strand in Lars's critique of it. My thought is that this emphasis on the impersonal – an emphasis that may be seen in a prioritizing of expressions such as "What should one do?" or "What is the right thing to do?" – may be as clear in discussion of *first* person uses of moral language as in discussion of second or third person uses.[2]

In philosophy more generally, an instance, familiar to readers of Wittgenstein, of the prioritizing of the present tense first person singular is the case of ascriptions of pain: Wittgenstein's recurring attention to the case of present tense self-ascription – "I am in pain" – indicating his sense of this as a key representative of a very general temptation. In moral philosophy the temptation is to suppose that thoughts or assertions of the form "I ought to help this man" are fundamental: that the senses of claims about what *another*

[2] I am grateful to Hugo Strandberg and to an anonymous reviewer for impressing on me the need for this important clarification.

should do or *should have done* are simply mirror images of – are to be grasped through – the first-person, present tense form. In ways that stand out clearly in some of Lars's work on ethics, the temptation is closely connected with a place given, in a familiar style of philosophy, to "ontology".

One striking example of Lars's highlighting of the importance of these distinctions is seen in his disentangling of the debate, instigated by Bernard Williams, over "internalism" and "externalism" about reasons. Lars remarks here:

> The participants in the internalism-externalism debate, among them Williams himself, tend to construe the issue in ontological terms: the question discussed is whether such-and-such a motive *exists* for this or that individual, rather than the various roles the giving of reasons may have in human intercourse. (Hertzberg 2022: 166)

It seems that, for some reason, it is, for almost all philosophers, a huge struggle to avoid thinking in "ontological terms": in this case, in terms of an "ontology of the ethical". Another, particularly telling, illustration of this is brought out in Lars's discussion of what are, superficially, quite striking differences in treatments of "moral necessity" by Winch and Anscombe. In drawing attention to "the fact that the central examples of modal utterances imagined by Miss Anscombe are in the second person, whereas those of Winch are in the first person singular", Lars does the important service of enabling us to recognise the insights of both. At the same time, Lars here draws attention to an uncharacteristic lack of sensitivity on Winch's part to the significance of contrasts between first and third person statements. This can, perhaps, be seen as a shadow of the temptations of ontology. We take our goal to be one of identifying something that *lies behind* – something that is *reflected in* – the language: in, for example, the various ways in which a language of "moral necessity" appears in our speech. We work, that is, with an image according to which exploring variations in the use of "x must do y" across different substitutions for "x" – "I", "you", "she" – and across different tenses – "is", "will", "was" – is in the service of locating "*moral necessity itself*". The difficulty in thinking straight here is closely related to what Lars speaks of as "the philosophical illusion that the sense of the words a person utters can be separated from the interchanges of which they are a part" (Hertzberg 2022: 150): the illusion that "the sense of things said or written [is] determined by the

meanings of the individual words and the syntax of the sentences they made up" (Hertzberg 2022: 160).

There is another point in Winch's work on ethics of which this might be said – though in this case in a significantly qualified way. In his much discussed paper on "universalizability" Winch remarks:

> [W]hen I think about the moral decisions and dilemmas of others, it seems to me that I am very often asking: "What would *I* think it right to do in such a situation?" That is, I am making a hypothetical agent's judgement of my own. (Winch 1972, 153–154)

Williams makes a more radical claim of the same form:

> [P]ractical deliberation is first-personal, radically so, and involves an *I* that must be more intimately the *I* of my desires than this [a Kantian / impartialist] account allows. … The *should* of practical reason has, like any other, a second and a third person, but these forms merely represent my perspective on your or his interests and rational calculations, the perspective of "if I were you". (Williams 1985: 61)

Now, the *contrast* between those remarks by Winch and Williams is in one way crucial: for Winch's interest is in what he suggests are *exceptions* to the general rule. That said, both provide, I believe, striking illustrations of a way in which philosophical discussions of ethics have failed to give proper attention to distinctions between first, second and third person ethical thought and talk: striking illustrations of, more specifically, the tendency to give a form of priority to first person examples in a way that is strongly reminiscent of something we might have supposed that we have left behind.[3]

I am not at all sure that when reflecting on what another should do I am *ever* asking "What would *I* think it right to do in such a situation?" One reason for doubt is this. If the first person reference – what "*I*" would think it right to do – is doing real work here, we will, it seems, be left with questions about what features of myself I am to carry over into the imagined scenario. As we can put the question: how much of my life as it in fact is do I need to build into my imaginings for it to be the case that I have imagined *myself* in the other's situation? One will, perhaps, have no trouble with such questions if one

[3] By "we" here I mean: "we" who are strongly influenced by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein writes: "If one has to imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own, this is none too easy a thing to do: for I have to imagine pain which I do not feel on the model of the pain which I do feel". (PI: § 302) Perhaps a relevant, if rough, analogue would be: "If one has to reflect on what someone else should do on the model of reflecting on what one(self) should do, this is none too easy a thing to do: for I have to imagine a decision that I do not make on the model of one that I do."

pictures the "I" in thoroughly Cartesian terms: as a featureless, ahistorical, core that happens for the moment to be clothed in a particular body, psychology, culture and history. But then, perhaps, I should find it clear that (in Winch's much discussed example of Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*[4]) if I were Captain Vere I would do exactly what Vere does. And so Winch's thought that he could not, in Vere's circumstances, have acted as Vere did would embody a confusion.[5]

Of course, that is *not* the way to think of the "I". So what I have said does not, as such, cast doubt on the idea that there are crucial roles here for reflection on how things look from where the other is standing or for appeals to the idea of "What I would do if I were you". And my aim is not to cast doubt on that idea. It is, rather, to cast doubt on a kind of *priority* that we are, in philosophy, tempted to give to the first person. To adapt a remark that Lars makes in a related context: the verdict on whether I have, in a particular case, imagined myself in the same situation as yours is itself an exercise of moral judgment.[6] That is: my sense of what of myself I am to carry over in such imaginings is conditioned, case by case, by my sense of what are the morally significant features of the other's situation.[7] Reflection on what *I* would do only has a foothold in the light of some independent grasp of those features. To the extent that this is so, such reflection cannot play a foundational role of the kind that may be suggested in remarks by Williams and Winch quoted above.

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[4] England is at war. The scene is His Majesty's Ship. Billy Budd a crewman on board, prone to stuttering. John Claggart, the ship's master-at-arms, brings a malicious charge of mutiny against Budd to Captain Edward Vere. Billy hears the lying charge against him, but his stammer prevents him from responding to it. Budd strikes Claggart, and ends up killing him. Captain Vere believes Budd to be innocent, but must according to the law of mutiny sentence Budd to death.

[5] I should stress that I am not here denying that when thinking about what another should do, reflection on the question "What would I think it right to do in such a situation?" may sometimes make a significant contribution. My point is, rather, one about the character of the relation between the two questions. As one of the reviewers of this paper helpfully remarks: "Of course, this is a matter of utility not necessity. Winch would still be quite wrong to say that thinking about what another should do just is, essentially, thinking about what I should do." The same reviewer also writes: "I suspect Winch is confusing 'What would I think it right to do in such a situation?' when reflecting about what another should do, with the truism that if I think about what another should do then it is I who must do the thinking, and I in a rich sense (Winch I think talks about 'trailing our humanity' or some such expression) – not a deracinated Cartesian self or Kantian reasoner led by some impersonal rationality." See my earlier remarks about the personal / impersonal contrast.

[6] See Hertzberg 1994: 228.

[7] In another image, how we draw the line between "him" and "his situation" is so conditioned.

In a discussion that both has echoes of and marked differences from Winch's treatment of the example from Melville, Lars considers the dilemma faced by Admiral Horthy:

> Consider, for instance, the tragic choice faced by the Hungarian regent, Admiral Horthy, in 1944. In a bid to save his country from the ravages of war, he switched his allegiance from the German to the Allied side, declaring an armistice. However, the Germans, by kidnapping his son and threatening to kill him, pressured Horthy into cancelling the armistice and appointing a prime minister who was loyal to the Germans. Now suppose we raise the question whether it was right or wrong for Horthy to give in to the pressure. Should he not have put the suffering of his people above the life of his own son? But then again, how much can we really demand of a human being? His other son had fallen in the war. Should Horthy have been prepared to sacrifice his second son, especially in view of the fact that the armistice might not have held anyway, since a large part of the Hungarian officers were pro-Nazi and could be expected to refuse to lay down their arms? (2022: 149–50)

Lars then remarks:

> Now it is tempting to think that we could, in some sense, take part in the very same discussion that Horthy may have carried out with his advisers, or with his family, or with himself, in wrestling with the issue. Of course we may have the drawback of limited information, but, on the other hand, distance and disinterest might be thought to offer us the privilege of a clearer perspective on the "rights and wrongs" of the situation. If we could be provided with full knowledge of the facts as they were given to Horthy, we would be ideally situated to decide what he should have done. (2022: 150)

Consider the temptation Lars speaks of here: "to think that we could, in some sense, take part in the very same discussion that Horthy may have carried out with his advisers, or with his family, or with himself, in wrestling with the issue." A first response to this might be to wonder whether Lars can be right to suggest that there is any such temptation. For, we might think, since that discussion took place 80 years ago and all the participants in it are long dead it is *manifestly* out of the question that we might take part in the same discussion. This, however, may not quite settle the issue. For, to take another example, it might, with justice, be said that there is a sense in which subsequent generations *can* take part in the very same geometrical discussions in which Pythagoras and his colleagues engaged: for example, an ongoing discussion in which participants across generations are engaged in a search for proofs that only five convex regular polyhedra exist. But while this suggestion is plausible, the Horthy case is different. Horthy's reflections, along with his discussions with

his advisors and family and, perhaps, *their* discussions with each other, were directed towards answering Horthy's question "What should I do?" No question we might discuss today is directed towards answering *that* question.

Or so one might think. Here, however, the "temptation" of which Lars speaks will be felt. For we may be tempted to reply: "We *can* address the question 'What should Horthy have done?', and while that question differs in grammatical form from the one on Horthy's lips the difference is merely at the level of grammar, a reflection of a linguistic requirement that flows from our different temporal relation to Horthy's action."

Wittgenstein writes: "My own relation to my words is wholly different from other people's". (PI: p. 192)[8] We might, by the same token, say: "My own relation to my actions is wholly different from other people's".[9] With this, of course, my relation to the words and actions of others is wholly different from my relation to my own words and actions. We can add: my relation to the words and actions of others is very different in different cases. The last is a point highlighted by Lars when he writes:

> It seems to be quite generally assumed, both by moral philosophers and others, that the sense of a person's moral judgements are not dependent on her practical relation to the situation of which she is speaking. (Hertzberg 2022: 149)

In questioning this assumption, Lars is questioning a picture according to which when Horthy reflects on what he should do, his close friends reflect with him or in conversation amongst themselves on what he should do, we reflect on what he should have done and so on, there is a single question that they are all addressing – though the answer may have a different *significance* for each of us on account of our different temporal and personal relations to the situation.[10]

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[8] I suspect that Wittgenstein would, equally happily, express the point by saying: I do not *have* a relation to my own words – as I have a relation to the words of others.

[9] Indeed, we might suggest that the first is a particular instance of the second. We might also resist that suggestion on the grounds that there is an important distinction between someone's words and their deeds. This is not the place to pursue issues that arise here.

[10] I do not insist that there are *no* contexts in which it might be said, with justice, that they are all addressing the same question. I *do* suggest that in most philosophical contexts – at any rate, in those that are the focus of Lars's concerns – this is an unhelpful way of speaking. One reviewer of this paper suggests that it may be not so much the *question* that differs, but rather what it is to answer (or even think about) the question. While I find this suggestion helpful, I do have some reservations about the contrast appealed to.

It may be illuminating to consider another, closely related, philosophical discussion in which differences in the relations in which individuals stand to particular actions tends to be given, at best, a secondary place. In his classic treatment of fatalism, Aristotle imagines a naval commander considering the possibility of ordering engagement with the enemy tomorrow. His relation to the situation is such that his central question is "Should I order engagement with the enemy?" His question is whether a certain course of action is appropriate or inappropriate. Let us imagine he decides that he will not order engagement and announces to his subordinates: "There will be no battle tomorrow". We can place beside this an observer on shore, considering a possible engagement tomorrow in a spirit of predictive speculation: "Will there or won't there be a battle?" or "Will he or won't he issue the order to engage?" Imagine further that, based on her previous experience of the captain – experience of him, perhaps, as cautious and wise – the observer concludes, and reports to others: "There will be no battle tomorrow". Are we to say that the commander and observer were confronted with the same question and came, by their different routes, to the same conclusion?

On certain philosophical pictures – in particular, pictures that give central place to the notion of "truth conditions" in the theory of meaning – it will seem clear that both *are* addressing the same question: for it is the same circumstances – there being a sea battle (or there not being one) – that renders what each says true (or false). The same pictures, pressed a little further, will dictate that the position of the observer must take precedence over that of the commander in the sense that there is only a place for the commander's question "*Should* I order engagement with the enemy?" in so far as there is no answer to the question "*Will* there be a sea battle tomorrow?"[11] At the general – philosophical – level: "ontology" is fundamental in the sense that whether there is *ever* a place for questions of the form "What should I do?" is dependent on a general question of the form "Are there truths about the future?" or "Do future occurrences exist?" There is room for agency in gaps in ontology. Philosophical fatalism is the denial that there are any such gaps.

[11] Hugo Strandberg has pointed out to me that, if I am right about this, we here have a tendency in philosophy to prioritize, in a problematic way, the third person case over the first person one: that is, a tendency that runs in the opposite direction to that which I spoke of in the opening paragraphs of this paper. I am grateful for this observation. (Even though it upsets my hopes for a really simple story of something that goes wrong in mainstream moral philosophy!)

In countering this picture, we may suggest that even if the commander *could* reflect on tomorrow's possible sea battle in the style of the observer – could stand back and ask, in the mode of enquiry, "Will there be a sea battle tomorrow?" – there is no necessity in his doing so, no sense in which this is demanded of him. Indeed, his doing so may involve, not intellectual honesty, but a serious dereliction of duty. Attempting to predict what he will do on the basis of his previous record in such matters may be *morally* excluded for the commander by the fact that he must *decide* whether there will be a battle.

I noted Lars's suggestion that the sense of a person's words depends on her practical relation to the situation of which she is speaking. I have spoken of two different "practical relations" in which one may stand to an individual's prospective action: that of the individual trying to decide what to do and that of an observer trying to predict what the other will do. We could add two other relations here. First, there is that of the historian trying to determine whether there *was* a battle on that day. One version of philosophical fatalism presents this case – one in which the judger's relation to the situation is such that there is no place for *decision* on his part – as standing in for *all* cases, no matter what their practical relation to the situation may be. But second, and perhaps more interesting, we could consider a familiar perspective that is notably absent from standard treatments of fatalism: that of another with whom the agent is potentially in conversation. While we can imagine such a person adopting an enquiring stance towards the agent, the stance that would normally be expected in *friendship* is different. Would the *possibility* of an observer making a well-grounded prediction (or, for that matter, of the historian looking back later) entail that the appropriate stance towards one's friends was one of disinterested enquiry? The answer, I take it, is clear. That it is totally predictable that, in the absence of my intervention, there will be a sea battle tomorrow does, in itself, nothing whatever to suggest that it would be inappropriate for me to attempt to reason with the commander, does nothing whatever to suggest that my question should be "Will he or won't he order one?" ("Will there be a battle or won't there?"), rather than "Should he or shouldn't he order one?"

Lars speaks of a temptation to "moral escapism", which he characterizes as a tendency "to flee responsibility, preferring to let the issues be resolved by an appeal to public opinion or to some form of moral consensus or moral expertise" (Hertzberg 2022: 144). He remarks that applied ethics, as widely practised, may involve such escapism in so far as it involves "the idea that I

may need recourse to expert knowledge in order to know what is the right thing to do". Fatalism is, I believe, often an expression of a closely related, though more radical, moral escapism.[12] It is more radical in the sense that in this case it is suggested that the expert knowledge of the scientist, the philosopher or the theologian may free me from the need to think for myself, not simply on the grounds that others can do the thinking for me, but in a way that undercuts all ethical reflection. For this expert knowledge may – by revealing that my reflections rest on the false assumption that what happens in the world is in any way down to me – reveal that all my struggles to determine what is the right thing to do are misplaced.[13]

The distorting role that the idea of "expert knowledge" plays in both forms of escapism might also be expressed in terms of what Lars speaks of as a "misleading ontology". I think he would be happy with the suggestion that one might equally speak, not of a *misleading* ontology, but of the idea that appeals to "*ontology*" have any place here. By "ontology" I mean here: the idea that the deliberations of those – the individual herself, the disinterested onlooker, and so on – who are differently related to the action in question (Horthy's cancelling of the armistice / Aristotle's sea battle) are *linked through* their all being attempts to investigate the same thing,[14] the differences between the character of their deliberations being merely a requirement imposed by their different, temporal and personal, perspectives on that thing. This is, I think, the confusion that Lars identifies in the temptation "to think that we could, in some sense, take part in the very same discussion that Horthy may have carried out with his advisers, or with his family, or with himself, in wrestling with the issue".

In his discussion of this temptation, Lars remarks:

[12] One way to highlight the connections between these forms of escapism might be to compare the relations between the questions "What will he do?" and "What *should* he do?" with those between the questions "What did he do?" and "What should he have done?"

[13] The phrase "in the world" may here, as elsewhere, be an expression of some awkwardness: in this case, an awkwardness over the question of whether my struggles to determine what is the right thing to do are themselves subject to the fatalist's reasoning.

[14] I highlight "*linked through*" in order to stress that there is no denial that, in a completely straightforward sense, all of these people *are* "speaking of the same thing". The point is, rather, that the truth in that is dependent on – lies in – other ways in which their reflections or discussions are related: in, for example, the way in which we accept that the commander's expression of his decision "I will order engagement tomorrow" is contradicted by the observer's prediction "He will not order engagement tomorrow" or the historian's declaration "He did not order engagement".

> I should like to question this assumption. It is not at all clear how the comments *we* might make about Horthy's decision are related to whatever was morally serious in *his* situation. There seems to be no axis (no ontology of the ethical) along which the subject matter of the deliberations and responses of Horthy and those around him could be construed as essentially "the same" as that of the sort of discussion we might be carrying out today, say, in the philosophy seminar room. There were certain pressures that were internal to whatever those involved in the action were doing in speaking, and in the light of which their words were intelligible, and Horthy's action came to have the significance it had in relation to those pressures. On the other hand, whatever pressures are relevant to the sort of discussion that might be carried out today, they would not be those to which Horthy was subject. This is not to deny that such a discussion could have its own ethical importance. However, it would be a misunderstanding of what we would be doing to suppose that as an end result of our explorations, we might find ourselves with something we could tell *Horthy*, a misunderstanding to which *we* might be tempted by arrogance, and which is underpinned by the philosophical illusion that the sense of the words a person utters can be separated from the interchanges of which they are a part. In offering to play the expert from the sidelines, what we would succeed in doing, at most, would be to set out what the stakes were for someone in Horthy's position. (Hertzberg 2022: 150)

Lars's central target in this paper is an idea of "moral expertise" that informs much discussion in "applied ethics". One might, however, take the considerations that he raises in the above passage to amount, if sound, to a critique of *all* talk of what someone "should have done". After all, it might seem clear that in all cases in which we discuss what another "should have done" there were "certain pressures that were internal to whatever those involved in the action" were doing, thinking or saying: pressures that were quite different from any that we, disinterested onlookers, are under whether our discussion is in the seminar room or anywhere else. Of course, the pressures that *Horthy* was under were of a particularly extreme form; a fact that may rightly make us particularly wary of passing any judgement on him or his decision. That said, don't considerations of the kind Lars mentions have very general application? Might we not say of all cases in which we reflect on what someone *has* done that it would be a misunderstanding to suppose that as an end result of our explorations we might find ourselves with something we could *tell* the other? Whether the other is dead or still alive, whatever dialogues we may carry on with them in our imagination, it is, after the event, too late for "telling".

There is one point here that needs to be mentioned in order to be set to one side. Even in cases in which someone asks for advice about what to do, there is, in the moral sphere, a sense in which there is rarely, if ever, a place for "telling her what to do". Thus, Lars remarks that:

> moral seriousness, at least in one sense of the word, is precisely characterized by the recognition that there are some issues with respect to which I cannot hand over ultimate responsibility to anyone else. (Hertzberg 2022: 144)[15]

Certainly I might say to someone who is about to pocket a £10 note she has seen another drop "You ought to give it back". But this "telling" is not that of "giving a piece of information". And while something akin to such "telling" may be an essential stage in moral development, to the degree that the other takes my words in *that* spirit – in the spirit of my being better informed in these matters – there is a lack of a "seriousness" that is part of moral maturity. This, it should be stressed, is not on account of any fact of the form: "There are no 'right' answers to moral questions". That it is not might be highlighted by noting that there are analogues of the point about "moral seriousness" in other spheres: for example, in mathematics and, perhaps even more clearly, in philosophy. For example, while acknowledging that a certain individual, being a particularly fine philosopher, is almost certainly right on some matter, philosophical seriousness involves a recognition that I cannot hand over to her ultimate responsibility for some view. So far as these considerations go, in the sense in which moral reflection is necessarily first personal so is philosophy.[16]

Returning to Lars's remarks about Horthy, I asked whether it might be that the considerations that Lars raises here amount, if sound, to a critique of *all* talk of what someone "should have done". In speaking of discussions of what Horthy should have done Lars mentions specifically discussion "in the philosophy seminar room". The reference is, of course, to a certain *style* of discussion, a certain spirit in which we may discuss "what someone should have done". We might think of the spirit as one in which what is prized above all is logical consistency. But there are other spirits that we might find equally suspect, if in different ways: a spirit of moral indignation or superiority, for example. *What* spirits we might find particularly troublesome may depend on

[15] I am not certain what to make of Lars's qualification "some issues". Perhaps this should be read: "some issues i.e. the moral ones". Or perhaps I am missing a qualification that is required *within* the moral sphere.
[16] And perhaps mathematics: at least in so far as there is something right in the idea that one only grasps the sense of a claim in mathematics to the extent that one grasps its proof.

details of the case discussed. Perhaps one relevant factor in the Horthy example is the distance, in both time and circumstance, from our lives today. But I want to say a little about another possibly relevant factor: the position in Horthy's dilemma of the threat to his son.

In a passage quoted earlier Lars writes:

> Now suppose we raise the question whether it was right or wrong for Horthy to give in to the pressure. Should he not have put the suffering of his people above the life of his own son? But then again, how much can we really demand of a human being? (Hertzberg 2022, 150)

While Lars is here speaking in a voice of which he will go on to raise serious doubts, there is, I think, a slide in this passage on which Lars does not explicitly remark. In the second sentence the life of Horthy's son is presented as a consideration to be weighed in the moral balance (with the suggestion that it should surely have been outweighed by the suffering of his people). In the third sentence it is presented as a factor that may *undercut* such weighing: undercut our reflection on "whether it was right or wrong" for Horthy to act as he did. We can add that *this* might itself be taken in different ways. We might think of the threat to his son's life as a pressure on Horthy that renders it unreasonable to "demand" that he lives up to the standards of morality. Alternatively, we might think of it as raising a doubt about whether *those* standards are the only one's that are appropriately in play here.

Pursuing this last line, we can imagine that the question Horthy puts to himself is not of the form "What does morality demand of me in this situation?" but, rather, of the form "What am I to do?" Such a difference in formulation *could* be indicative of a difference between one who cares about the demands of morality and one who cares only about his own survival, wealth or whatever. But that it need not be this may be brought out by the question: is the weight that Horthy's son carries in his thinking that of a *moral* consideration? That there is room for doubt about this is clear from reflection on the contrast between what we can assume was Horthy's attitude and that of another father who, perhaps caring little for his son, is moved by a firm conviction that fathers have a special duty to protect their sons from harm.

One might then say: one who loves another is one who is moved by demands other than those of morality; and, as most of us suppose, acceptably so. One might add: the weight that this boy's life carries for the one who loves him is of a kind that it *cannot* carry for disinterested onlookers. And so the

question "What am I to do?" that Horthy asks himself is not one that is captured in a third-person formulation "What should he do?" It is not one that could be captured in a question asked by anyone who does not stand to Horthy's son in a way akin to that in which Horthy does; for there are considerations that are central to Horthy's thinking that cannot weigh in *that* way in the thinking of one who does not love this boy.[17]

The place that Horthy's *son* has in his thinking may – one might hope will – have in the thinking of concerned onlookers an *analogue* in the form of Horthy's *love* for his son. If our relation to Horthy is such that we are able to, and feel that we must, try to help him reach a decision his love will play a role in our thinking that it does not – perhaps cannot – play in his.[18] Perhaps the role will be primarily that of a *constraint* on what we say to him and with what force. If our relation to Horthy is that of one looking back 50 years or more after the event, perhaps Horthy's love for his son will feature primarily as grounds for doubting that we have any business asking the question "Was Admiral Horthy right or wrong to act as he did in 1944 under pressure from Germany?"

Lars suggests that the moral arrogance that may be expressed in such questions is "underpinned by the philosophical illusion that the sense of the words a person utters can be separated from the interchanges of which they are a part". I would suspect that there are relations running in the other direction too: that is, from a moral arrogance to which we are (almost) all prone to the philosophical hankering after ontology and the related illusions about language.[19] That aside, the particular grounds that I have offered for doubting that we have any business asking such questions of Horthy's actions do not, in themselves, provide reason to suppose more generally – in cases that do not have the distinctive features of Horthy's situation – that there is something

[17] A closer third-person mirror of the first-person articulation would be "What is/was he to do?" This wording helpfully softens suggestions of *moral* assessment. I am not certain what would be representative uses of it, nor what suggestions might be implicit in its use on particular occasions.

[18] The way in which Horthy's love for his son may feature in his reflections on what to do is well captured in a remark Lars makes about another example: "while his words express his perspective they are not about his perspective". (Hertzberg 1994: 222)

[19] In an observation highly pertinent at this point Lars writes: "what gives issues in moral philosophy their peculiar depth is the fact that they are grounded in [a] symbiosis of moral and philosophical temptation". (Hertzberg 2022: 145)

amiss with questions of the form "What should he have done?"[20] Nevertheless, it may alert us to the *possibility* of more general doubts.

Anscombe writes:

> One can imagine the existence of a people whose language did not include the expression of a wish that things had been otherwise. It would be possible to formulate the wish in their language by using their expression for wishing and their past tense; yet it might be that to them this sounded incomprehensible, or like mere bad grammar. If such people existed they would seem to be psychologically very different from ourselves. (Anscombe 1981: 116)

Anscombe's imaginary case is closely related to another: a people for whom reflection on what I or another should have done sounded incomprehensible, or like mere bad grammar. Is such a case imaginable? It cannot, at any rate, be ruled out on the grounds that: "We cannot imagine a people in whose lives there was no place for the first-person, present tense question 'What should I do?', nor a people who lack a past tense." Whatever is to be said for *those* claims, it does not follow that we cannot imagine a people for whom questions of the form "What should I *have done*?" or "What should *he* have done?" sound incomprehensible. At least, it does not follow immediately that this is so, does not follow on the grounds that there must be general principles for the construction of third person or past tense statements on the basis of first-person, present tense ones.[21] Nor, from the fact, if it is a fact, that we cannot

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[20] I have focused on one feature that is relevant to our relation to Horthy's actions: the place that his son has in his thinking. There may be others: the extremity of his situation, its distance from anything of which we may have had experience, our historical distance from it. In other cases, radical differences in the moral culture in which the individual under discussion lives may have a significant bearing on our relation to their actions.

[21] In relation to *tense* the following two statements represent the options as conceived in much recent work in the philosophy of time:

> To say that Whitrow's lecture is past is to say that *it has been the case* that Whitrow is lecturing. To say that Scott's lecture is future is to say that *it will be the case that* Scott is lecturing. But to say that my lecture is present is just to say that *I am lecturing* – flat, no prefixes. The pastness of an event, that is to say its having taken place, is not the same thing as the event itself; nor is its futurity; but the presentness of an event *is* just the event. The presentness of my lecturing, for instance, is just my lecturing. (Prior 1972: 321)

> […] what can be asserted significantly of the present can be asserted significantly of other times also, and can be true or false of those times in the same sense in which it is true or false of the present. [T]he sense of an assertion about what is the case at a certain time does not change with the tense of the assertion; the tense merely indicates a relation between the time of utterance and the time of what is being talked about. (Nagel 1970: 61)

imagine a human society in which there is no such thing as expressions of remorse of the form "I shouldn't have done that" does it follow in an immediate way that we cannot imagine a human society in which there is no such thing as expressions of moral indignation of the form "He shouldn't have done that".[22]

One way in which this may be important lies in the fact that it may alert us to the possibility that some of the ways in which we are prone to raising such questions are morally suspect. Perhaps there *are* ways in which questions about what I or she "should have done" are inescapably part of any life at all like ours. But we need to be wary of the temptation that may arise in our moralizing moods – and, perhaps closely related to this, we philosophers need to be wary of it in our ontologizing ones – to assume that this marks a possibility with quite general application.[23]

[22] Though see remarks on such matters in Strawson 1968. For a contrasting view see Browne 1992.

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Some of the ideas presented in this paper are developed in more detail in two other papers (Cockburn 2019a, Cockburn 2019b).

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