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**Morality As A Mental State**

**By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.**

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INTRODUCTION

Moral values, rules, principles, and judgements are often thought of as beliefs or as true beliefs. Those who hold them to be true beliefs also annex to them a warrant or a justification (from the "real world"). Yet, it is far more reasonable to conceive of morality (ethics) as a state of mind, a mental state. It entails belief, but not necessarily true belief, or justification. As a mental state, morality cannot admit the "world" (right and wrong, evidence, goals, or results) into its logical formal definition. The world is never part of the definition of a mental state.

Another way of looking at it, though, is that morality cannot be defined in terms of goals and results – because these goals and results ARE morality itself. Such a definition would be tautological.

There is no guarantee that we know when we are in a certain mental state. Morality is no exception.

An analysis based on the schemata and arguments proposed by Timothy Williamson follows.

Moral Mental State – A Synopsis

Morality is the mental state that comprises a series of attitudes to propositions. There are four classes of moral propositions: "It is wrong to...", "It is right to...", "(You should) do this...", "(You should) not do this...". The most common moral state of mind is: one adheres to p. Adhering to p has a non-trivial analysis in the more basic terms of (a component of) believing and (a component of) knowing, to be conceptually and metaphysically analysed later. Its conceptual status is questionable because we need to decompose it to obtain the necessary and sufficient conditions for its possession (Peacocke, 1992). It may be a complex (secondary) concept.

See here for a more detailed analysis.

## Morality As A Mental State

Adhering to proposition  $p$  is not merely believing that  $p$  and knowing that  $p$  but also that something should be so, if and only if  $p$  (moral law).

Morality is not a factive attitude. One believes  $p$  to be true – but knows  $p$  to be contingently true (dependent on epoch, place, and culture). Since knowing is a factive attitude, the truth it relates to is the contingently true nature of moral propositions.

Morality relates objects to moral propositions and it is a mental state (for every  $p$ , having a moral mental relation to  $p$  is a mental state).

Adhering to  $p$  entails believing  $p$  (involves the mental state of belief). In other words, one cannot adhere without believing. Being in a moral mental state is both necessary and sufficient for adhering to  $p$ . Since no "truth" is involved – there is no non-mental component of adhering to  $p$ .

Adhering to  $p$  is a conjunction with each of the conjuncts (believing  $p$  and knowing  $p$ ) a necessary condition – and the conjunction is necessary and sufficient for adhering to  $p$ .

One doesn't always know if one adheres to  $p$ . Many moral rules are generated "on the fly", as a reaction to circumstances and moral dilemmas. It is possible to adhere to  $p$  falsely (and behave differently when faced with the harsh test of reality). A sceptic would say that for any moral proposition  $p$  – one is in the position to know that one doesn't believe  $p$ . Admittedly, it is possible for a moral agent to adhere to  $p$  without being in the position to know that one adheres to  $p$ , as we illustrated above. One can also fail to adhere to  $p$  without knowing that one fails to adhere to  $p$ . As Williamson says "transparency (to be in the position to know one's mental state) is false". Naturally, one knows one's mental state better than one knows other people's. There is an observational asymmetry involved. We have non-observational (privileged) access to our mental state and observational access to other people's mental states. Thus, we can say that we know our morality non-observationally (directly) – while we are only able to observe other people's morality.

One believes moral propositions and knows moral propositions. Whether the belief itself is rational or not, is debatable. But the moral mental state strongly imitates rational belief (which relies on reasoning). In other words, the moral mental state masquerades as a factive attitude, though it is not. The confusion arises from the normative nature of knowing and being rational. Normative elements exist in belief attributions, too, but, for some reason, are considered "outside the realm of belief". Belief, for instance, entails the grasping of mental content, its rational processing and manipulation, defeasible reaction to new information.

We will not go here into the distinction offered by Williamson between "believing truly" (not a mental state, according to him) and "believing". Suffice it to say that adhering to  $p$  is a mental state, metaphysically speaking – and that "adheres to  $p$ " is a (complex or secondary) mental concept. The structure of adheres to  $p$  is such that the non-mental concepts are the content clause of the attitude ascription and, thus do not render the concept thus expressed non-mental: adheres to (right and wrong, evidence, goals, or results).

Williamson's Mental State Operator calculus is applied.

Origin is essential when we strive to fully understand the relations between adhering that p and other moral concepts (right, wrong, justified, etc.). To be in the moral state requires the adoption of specific paths, causes, and behaviour modes. Moral justification and moral judgement are such paths.

### Knowing, Believing and their Conjunction

We said above that:

"Adhering to p is a conjunction with each of the conjuncts (believing p and knowing p) a necessary condition – and the conjunction is necessary and sufficient for adhering to p."

Williamson suggests that one believes p if and only if one has an attitude to proposition p indiscriminable from knowing p. Another idea is that to believe p is to treat p as if one knew p. Thus, knowing is central to believing though by no means does it account for the entire spectrum of belief (example: someone who chooses to believe in God even though he doesn't know if God exists). Knowledge does determine what is and is not appropriate to believe, though ("standard of appropriateness"). Evidence helps justify belief.

But knowing as a mental state is possible without having a concept of knowing. One can treat propositions in the same way one treats propositions that one knows – even if one lacks concept of knowing. It is possible (and practical) to rely on a proposition as a premise if one has a factive propositional attitude to it. In other words, to treat the proposition as though it is known and then to believe in it.

As Williamson says, "believing is a kind of a botched knowing". Knowledge is the aim of belief, its goal.

Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited" and the editor of mental health categories in The Open Directory, Suite101, and searcheurope.com.

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Narcissistic Personality Disorder on Suite101:

### **Whose Values Are They Anyway?**

**By Virginia Bola, PsyD**

#### **Whose Values Are They Anyway? by Virginia Bola, PsyD**

First there was the sight of Janet Jackson's pastie–adorned breast at the Superbowl, then Nicollet Sheridan's towel–dropping scene on Monday Night Football. A public outcry followed, deploring the obsessively sexual orientation of advertising, entertainment, and the media as a whole.

## Morality As A Mental State

As the debates rage, a core question must arise: if sex is known to sell anything, who is doing the buying?

Public Relations and marketing gurus give the public what they crave. If they don't, they are out of a job. How many new viewers will Desperate Housewives gain because of the uproar over their ad? Thousands? A million or two? And who enjoyed the gratuitous nudity? Those who "missed it" on Monday Night Football were able to indulge their curiosity as the tape was replayed and replayed ad nauseum. Who in America has not seen it by now? Surely only the sightless and the occasional hermit could have missed it.

So what does that say about the current state of U.S. morality? We are not all depraved, immoral, addicted to pornography, nor necessarily in favor of public sexual displays. We are simply curious people who are still in a reaction phase to a long history of sexual repression. After the strait jacket of the puritan period and the social constraints of the following 300 years, the pendulum is swinging as it always has. It makes a wide arc until slowly returning to the center.

Those who openly seek to legislate morality would do well to recall the disastrous social experiment of prohibition, imposed by a righteous and vocal minority, and its permanent legacy of crime, murder, and corruption.

Virginia Bola is a licensed clinical psychologist with deep interests in Social Psychology and politics. She has performed therapeutic services for more than 20 years and has studied the results of cultural forces and employment on the individual. The author of an interactive workbook, *The Wolf at the Door: An Unemployment Survival Manual*, and a monthly ezine, *The Worker's Edge*, she can be reached at <http://www.virginiabola.com>

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