Moral philosophy and the 'real world'

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Notoriously, most philosophers write for other philosophers. Most philosophy books are designed for students of philosophy, students who can be assumed to have signed up and remained in the subject voluntarily, and therefore to have a certain interest in the subject and a certain understanding of the point of it all. In this paper I want to consider the philosopher's engagement with those who, living in the 'real world', have had neither interest in nor exposure to philosophy beyond the stereotypes of popular culture.[1] By 'engagement' I have in mind formal pedagogical encounters such as compulsory teaching sessions in professional schools (medical ethics, business ethics, philosophy of mind for psychologists), public discussions and television talk-shows where the speaker is introduced as a 'philosopher', but above all the informal conversations that a philosopher inevitably has with his family, neighbours, doctor, accountant, his child's teachers, his priest etc., where he is not so much teaching philosophy as *explaining* what the subject is. I'm hoping this is not of merely anthropological concern, but that this exploration can reveal something important about teaching the subject to philosophy students as well, even if for reasons of space it will have to be a bit polemical.

I'm taking the notion of 'real world' with as little metaphysical baggage as possible – suffice to contrast it with the artificial world of the Academy and its textbooks and seminar rooms. I'm talking about the sort of world where the vast majority of adults in the modern West spend their time: in desk jobs and factories, in shops and museums and pubs, in the worlds of hobbies and sports and music, and the world of their personal relationships with friends and families.

Every philosopher knows the situation. "What is it you do, then, boyo?" "I'm a lecturer at the university." "Really? What subject?" "Philosophy." "Oh. [*pause*] What's that all about, then?" For the full effect, the last line has to be delivered with a hint of Pinteresque menace. The philosopher then has to decide whether the question is sincere, and if so, how much the questioner can understand of what it's all about. (There is the underlying worry that the philosopher might not quite be able to justify the salary that he is receiving from the non-philosopher's taxes, of course.)[2]

I have always been embarrassed by these encounters, precisely because I felt unable to answer the questions – not only within the constraints of polite conversation, but even in principle. At the same time I was unable to ignore them either. Other academic subjects do not seem so vulnerable to the same embarrassment. After all, we all know enough of what physics and economics is about, and the physicist and economist can tell us roughly what the point of it all is. And when we enquire further into what exactly this physicist or economist are personally engaged in, we will probably come to a point where we are simply unable to understand. And that seems fine, to both parties. It's in the very nature of a legitimately technical specialisation that the layperson can acknowledge the authority of the expert, and the expert can move on from the encounter with a clean conscience.

But as a philosopher, and especially as a moral philosopher, I have never been comfortable with the idea of turning away lay enquiries by murmuring "you wouldn't understand," precisely because I consider moral philosophy to be *answerable* to the ordinary ethical problems that all of us are familiar with in our ordinary lives. By

'answerable', I mean more than merely consistent with or explanatory of – after all, any theory or generalisation in the social sciences has to be relatively consistent with the behaviour of individuals. But moral philosophy is *rooted* in the individual's pre-theoretical experience of a moral dilemma, of a moral conflict with another person, or of being the object of moral criticism by another person. Moreover, moral philosophy is rooted in the ordinary concepts and language deployed by non-philosophers in their spontaneous efforts to make sense of their moral problems. My technical language and idiom is a useful shorthand, but it has to be cashable into ordinary language if it is to do the job of capturing the ordinary situation. Sometimes a philosophy student will come to me and say "I've never done ethics;" and I remind them that *all of us* have 'done' ethics, in the sense that all of us have experienced and discussed moral dilemmas, moral conflict and moral criticism – that is the raw material that the moral philosopher has to work with, and to which his conclusions must be answerable.[3]

However, this conception of moral philosophy is controversial among Anglo-American moral philosophers.[4] For example, so-called non-cognitivists will claim that the objects of moral experience are not actually there. As John Mackie puts it in the infamous first words of his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), "there are no objective moral values." This is a philosopher who is rejecting what I am calling answerability. He is prepared to tell the non-philosophical individual, in the middle of his moral dilemma, that it is all an illusion, and that he, John Mackie, knows better what is actually going on. For me, Mackie is just being frivolous: the opening words undermine his entire philosophical project precisely because they would be rejected by any non-philosopher as patent nonsense – and such a rejection would be entirely legitimate because of the answerability to the real world.

This brings me to a second reason for my embarrassment by encounters with laypeople: I cannot claim to speak on behalf of the majority of academic moral philosophers. I have already mentioned John Mackie, who was widely esteemed by philosophers. But even those who oppose Mackie philosophically – so-called realists – go so far in metaphysical directions, e.g. about the nature of moral properties, that they have left the ordinary layperson far behind. Nothing is more typical of these 'technicians' than their obsession with some idealised conception of rational agency more appropriate to narrow legal reasoning than the full and diverse range of moral experience in the real world.

1. Losing touch with the real world

Despite his opening remark, at least Mackie claims in the rest of his book to take moral experience seriously insofar as he feels obliged to explain how we could be so thoroughly mistaken. No such efforts are apparent in David Benatar's 2006 book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. If we read this title without philosophical prejudice, it can only appear the work of a crack-pot. And yet it was published by Oxford University Press. The author is a professor at the University of Cape Town, which seems to be a small but serious department. According to the *Philosopher's Index*, Benatar has been publishing articles since 1997, so he is no novice, and must have had plenty of feedback on what he has written so far. Here is the book's central argument:[5]

> The central idea of this book is that coming into existence is always a serious harm. That idea will be defended at length, but the basic idea is quite simple: although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one if one had not come into existence. [...] Most people, under the influence of powerful biological dispositions towards optimism, find this conclusion intolerable. They are still indignant at the further implication that we should not create new people (p. 1)

What are we to make of this? I'm not asking what we are to make of the *philosophy*; the philosophy may be impeccable. I'm asking for all one's philosophical training to be set aside, just for a moment, to look at what he is

arguing in the clear light of day, precisely as the non-philosopher would do.

The book has been reviewed by at least three philosophers, and I suggest it reveals something of the sad state of the discipline to examine their reviews. Jean Kazez (2007) opens promisingly by saying that "it's hard not to react defensively to the nihilism" of the book, and closes with "I couldn't help but wonder what kind of a life [Benatar] lives. What's it like thinking that existence, your own and everyone else's, is regrettable?" But between these statements, Kazez reviews the book, and evidently considers it worth reviewing *politely* and *professionally*, and considers the central philosophical argument worth engaging with (though ultimately rejecting). Her tone suggests that her defensiveness is understandable, but she has successfully overcome it in order to fulfil her obligations to the guild. Her final question is meant to be rhetorical – she seems to consider the question irrelevant to her philosophical evaluation of the book. I believe, on the other hand, that her final question would have constituted enough of a review on its own.

Christopher Belshaw (2007) starts by making fun of Benatar's title as one of the oddest of the year, but then goes on, under a "charitable reading" to object in some detail to the main philosophical arguments. Once again, there seems to be no doubt in Belshaw's mind that the book deserves to be reviewed seriously. Even if he too ultimately rejects the central argument, it is important that he rejects it on its own terms.

Len Doyal (2007)[6] calls Benatar an "intriguing philosopher of pessimism," and goes the furthest of these three reviewers to argue against him, and thereby to legitimate him as worth arguing against. Doyal also concludes on the most upbeat note:

> One thing is clear. Whether you agree with his conclusions or not – and he accepts that few probably will – his arguments force one to examine deep seated presumptions about the value of life and the moral significance of human existence. I highly recommend it, noting that the beneficial soul searching that it can cause feels quite harmful at times. I am glad that I did not miss the experience!

Although the three reviewers are not persuaded by the arguments, none of them evidently consider Benatar to be a crack-pot: he is a legitimate member of the moral philosophical community, vetted by OUP, and as such deserves at least a "charitable reading". Even if he is wrong, this logic continues, his arguments force the "beneficial soul searching," (echoes here of Mill's defence of freedom of expression in *On Liberty*).[7] The strongest permissible reaction for a philosopher is simply not to read the book, or not to write about it, saying: "I'm interested in other questions."

What would a non-philosopher make of this book? After all, Benatar is not just writing about philosophy for philosophers; for he claims that *no one* should have children, for example. For most other academic disciplines, indeed most other areas of analytic philosophy, lay opinion may be irrelevant, but I believe it is the key question for any genuine work on moral philosophy. And while Benatar obviously cannot be faulted for using technical language, how would Benatar cash out that language in ordinary language and persuade a sceptical bookstore visitor to buy the book? I can't see how it could be done. If a layperson were to disagree strenuously with Benatar's injunction not to have children, is there really something that the layperson has failed to understand? If one were then to mention Benatar's credentials (university professorship, prestigious publishing house), this would not push the non-philosophical reader to revise his judgement, but would instead bring both universities and academic publishers into (further) disrepute. Imagine if the three reviewers were at the stall alongside Benatar, how would they defend the book to the sceptical non-philosopher? Would they say something like: "yes, I accept it's a bit eccentric, but there are a lot of interesting points inside"? Doyal would have presumably reminded the non-philosopher of the importance of examining "deep-seated presumptions about the value of life." But what sort of presumptions could those be, and is it *really* so important and/or harmless to 'examine' them?

Benatar and (to a lesser extent) Doyal seem to be assuming, first, that the philosophers have understood something that is essentially inaccessible and inexplicable to non-philosophers, and second, that the philosopher's job is to boldly go where non-philosophers fear to tread. Both assumptions can and should be challenged. Benatar can only reach the conclusions that he does by stretching the meanings of common words such as 'harm' to absurd degrees, and by ignoring the contextual contributions to any correct understanding of the concept of harm. A particular individual can only understand a particular action as harmful within the context of an on-going human life, with all the background meanings that characterise that human life. If my wallet is stolen, that action is meaningfully harmful precisely because of our normal attitudes to personal possessions and to their non-consensual removal, and because the action is relatively harmful compared to the rest of my life at that moment.

An example of a harmful act, I contend, would be Benatar's book. The undergraduate philosophy students at the University of Cape Town, still trying to find themselves in their late teenage years, will be offered this sort of thinking as an example of mainstream intellectual respectability. I am not claiming that students will be inclined to take the book's conclusions literally seriously, and I am certainly not advocating banning it as incitement – instead, I am calling the author irresponsible for undermining some of the basic moral intuitions that allow these students to make sense of the world and of the moral choices they have to make in that world.

Would I be equally opposed to the placement of Descartes's scepticism on the philosophy syllabus? Indeed, would I censor *The Matrix*? Of course not, for the simple reason that scepticism about the external world is not possible to take seriously without going mad. It really is a harmless philosophical game. Besides, the whole point of Cartesian scepticism is the epistemological challenge – the scepticism is at best a temporary, pedagogical position. On the other hand, moral intuitions are in a state of flux in one's late teenage years, and there is so much facile relativism and moral frivolity in the media already, that this sort of book will have unpredictable and corrosive effects on teenagers (effects that would obviously be difficult to corroborate empirically – like arguments about the causal influence of violence on TV). And Benatar shows no sign of temporarily holding his sceptical views; he does not begin with the question "what is it about life that makes it so valuable?"

For this reason I have considerable sympathy for Aristotle's belief that ethics should not be taught to anyone before the age of 30. However, it is precisely because of the existence of books like Benatar's that responsible moral philosophers have to try to teach serious ethics to teenagers.

The key is the word 'serious'. Moral philosophy is different from all other areas of analytic philosophy, and all other disciplines in the Academy, in being very personal. In order to teach the subject properly, it cannot be a game. To use Raimond Gaita's expression (2004),[8] the teacher has to be able to stand behind his words, to be present in his words. In contrast, the philosopher of mathematics and the physicist need only *intellectually* endorse the propositions they utter in the classroom. Of course the question of honesty and integrity arise for all academic disciplines, and there will be some who espouse fashionable theories merely to get a leg up. But moral philosophy is not only about what one believes but about what one does and how one lives. It will not do, with Jean Kazez, to wonder what sort of person Benatar is as an amusing aside. Benatar is, quite simply, the sort of person who would write a book like this. The contents of the book discredit him as a serious moral philosopher, even without reading beyond the first page. But if I am to be judged by the company I keep, then his book also directly embarrasses me.

Inevitably my tone will strike many, perhaps most philosophers as at best hysterically *ad hominem* and at worst deeply reactionary. It comes too close, they will say, to condemning people for opinions of which I morally disapprove. This is partly true and partly false. It is false to think that I cannot accept disagreement on substantive moral questions, such as abortion and euthanasia – for clearly in both those divisive issues there are morally serious advocates on both sides. But I will condemn people – morally condemn them – for holding substantive moral positions which they do not and cannot personally stand behind.

Benatar may be an extreme example, but the same can be said about the absurd thought experiments that characterise contemporary utilitarian philosophy. This was the target of Elisabeth Anscombe's celebrated remark:

> But if someone really thinks, in advance, that it is open to question whether such an action as
> procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration –
> I do not want to argue with him: he shows a corrupt mind. (Anscombe 1958 p. 19)

Despite Anscombe's warnings, the modern utilitarian descendants of her opponents, like Peter Singer (1979) and John Harris (1985), have become hugely successful among non-philosophical readers. Although their approaches have been strongly criticised,[9] the point I want to focus on is this public involvement.

Benatar is not and cannot be serious about the ideas behind his book. Singer and Harris, however, seem to be genuinely serious, and also unlike Benatar, make concrete policy proposals. Rather than retreat into technical pastimes and ignore lay complaints about the uselessness of their work, they wade into the throng with their sleeves rolled up. In so doing they rely partly on their authority as academic philosophers. Indeed, in 1982 Stephen Toulmin published a famous article entitled 'How medicine saved the life of ethics'. His main thesis was that the young field of medical ethics rescued the allegedly moribund subject of ethics in philosophy departments, and provided new jobs for moral philosophers. Twenty-six years on, this is more true than ever. Moral philosophers are not only teaching undergraduate medical students, but business, engineering and science students as well. They now advise companies about how to make ethical investments. They serve as advisors in hospitals, and wear bleepers. They are all over the media. And they model themselves etymologically on physicists and economists by calling themselves not philosophers (for they might not have any philosophical training at all), but by the pompous neologism 'ethicists'. This is the third reason to be a embarrassed about being a moral philosopher.

A dentist can be taken as possessing true expertise in a technical discipline. When I, a non-dentist, visit him to complain about the pain in my jaw, then I am *bound* to accept his advice insofar as I want the pain to go away. If he suggests that the molar has to come out, I can decide that the pain is not that bad, but I cannot disagree with him about whether removing the molar will ease the pain. He can successfully explain the reasons in rudimentary, metaphorical terms, but beyond a certain point he can only say "look, I'm an expert on this, I've got the certificate on the wall; until you yourself become a dentist then you will just have to trust me that I know what I'm doing." None of this is possible with ethics. The prestigious moral philosopher, with several weighty tomes to his name, cannot turn aside criticism of his adultery or his embezzlement by saying "look, I'm an expert in this, I've got the certificate on the wall; until you yourself become a moral philosopher you will just have to trust me that I know what I'm doing." It's true that he may ignore my moral criticism. It's true that he may respond to it by saying that I don't know the full picture, and present me with relevant facts in an attempt to justify or excuse the adultery or the embezzlement. But ignoring or justifying or excusing is an avenue open to *any competent adult* under moral criticism: there is no distinction between expert and lay here. Hence, moral philosophers have no *special* expertise to solve other people's moral problems, although of course they have just as much authority to morally criticise other people's actions and attitudes as anybody does (although perhaps as articulate intellectuals they have a certain civic obligation). This illegitimate moral expertise is to be distinguished from the legitimate technical expertise that such philosophers may possess on a particular historical figure or on matters of moral metaphysics, or on matters of public policy.[10]

Unaware of the spuriousness of their authority, the ethicists too often come across as busybody preachers, and it should come as no surprise that such efforts can prompt ridicule and resentment, and occasionally offence. Peter Singer, for example, in the second edition of his *Practical Ethics*, has a long afterward entitled 'On being silenced in Germany'. Here he describes how a number of invitations to speak at German universities were overturned by the university authorities either at their own initiative or in response to protests. The controversy

stemmed from his arguments for the routine killing of neonates with severe enough disabilities. Now, my point in raising this is not to suggest that Singer is a crack-pot of the likes of Benatar, nor would I necessarily support any prohibition against him speaking. What is remarkable, however, is Singer's refusal to see that the German university authorities might possibly be justified in taking offence at his argument as it is phrased, precisely because of the context: the dark history of Germany's treatment of the handicapped during the Nazi regime. Refusing to even discuss the possibility of routine euthanasia becomes eminently understandable in this light, and not, as Singer suggests indignantly, a demonstration of cowardice and superstition. Indeed, even outside the specific German context, it is remarkable that Singer has not met someone who, just by the sheer force of their seriousness, intellect, education and compassion, has not persuaded him that such a refusal might be at the very least philosophically legitimate.[11]

2. Being philosophically open to the other

Let me summarise this rather dispiriting first half of the paper, then. I claimed to be embarrassed by my encounters with non-philosophers for three reasons. First, because I was unable to explain what my discipline was all about, and yet I felt I owed the non-philosophers such an explanation since I was answerable to them. Second, I was embarrassed by being associated with the excesses of the 'technicians', epitomised by a recent book by David Benatar. Third, I was embarrassed by the excesses of the crusading 'ethicists' like Harris and Singer. (The fourth reason I will leave until the final section.) But with all the embarrassment, what is left over? What are moral philosophers supposed to do, exactly, if they are to remain answerable to non-philosophers and are meant to avoid excessive technicality and ethicism? It's really hard to say, and to be entirely honest I haven't come up with an answer yet. Perhaps the very search for an answer to this question is part of what constitutes the discipline as I understand it. In the remainder of the paper I'm going to adumbrate a tentative and unoriginal suggestion, but then close by describing a glaring limitation to it.

The tentative unoriginal suggestion is that the moral philosopher is seeking wisdom. And wisdom may be minimally defined, in the light of the foregoing discussion, as striving to understand one's own life, others' lives, and the relationships between us, in full moral seriousness, and in full humility.

The first condition is to remain *open* to non-philosophers. This is not just a matter of social politeness or instrumental schmoozing or happy-clappy universal love. Nor is it a matter of detachedly observing these exotic human creatures in action, in order to gather empirical material for a psychological study or for a novel. Rather, it is about remaining *philosophically* open to non-philosophers, and to their lives, to the reality of the value of their lives, to the possibility of being surprised by them however well one thinks one knows them. Philosophical openness also means being conscious of and striving to avoid, as far as possible, the misleading implications of the language of 'us' and 'them', by accepting that the philosopher is himself one of them, himself equally susceptible to moral dilemma and conflict and criticism, himself equally in need of moral advice and understanding. Philosophical openness involves the rejection of science fictional and absurdly schematic examples (such as the famous trolley problem[12]) from moral philosophy, in favour of plausible, richly detailed examples about real people in the real world; it involves a rejection of the complacent optimism that guides too many philosophical searches for an arbitrarily reductionist resolution to tragic conflict. Philosophical openness involves a direct challenge to the Cartesian ego as the best logical place to begin an (analytic) philosophical enquiry, and a challenge to the autonomous rational mind which the Western liberal tradition has always tried to protect and support. In saying this I am not only alluding to the philosophical arguments of the so-called communitarians (Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor), but above all to the ordinary familiar experience of being struck or moved or angered or enthralled by another human being: *that* has to be the starting point. Finally, philosophical openness involves critical engagement and moral seriousness and risks on both sides; it should not be confused with a blanket non-judgementalism or with fawning hero-worship. Philosophical openness is therefore consistent with the philosopher's impatience at lazy thinking and at insincere allegiance to pop-philosophical theories such as relativism.

But if the philosophically open philosopher and the non-philosopher are on the same plane, if neither is an expert, then again it may be asked, what does the moral philosopher then have to *offer* the rest of society? If he is not engaged in a technical subject with the goal of advancing technical knowledge, if he is not preaching advice to the unlearned, then what is his distinct philosophical training *for*? Certainly he is striving to understand himself and others, but does this lead to anything that he can then offer or dispense – if not expertise, then at least wisdom?

The question then becomes: is wisdom enough of a *thing*, that can be acquired and then distributed to the unwise? I suggest not. Instead, it is something that is invoked and revealed during an encounter with another person to whom one is being philosophically open. Most of wisdom consists in what I have described above: standing behind one's words, being morally serious in one's enquiries, being humble about the limits of one's understanding and of what can be understood (humility is to be contrasted to the putative expert's desire to 'master' a discipline). Moral philosophy, if done properly, involves the cultivation of this sort of attitude. There is of course no guarantee that the moral philosopher will find it to any degree. And moral philosophy, of whatever stripe, is certainly not the only path to wisdom. Rather it is suitable for a certain temperament, one which likes things as explicit as possible, even when the explicitness can only apply to the limits of explicitness. One paradoxical thing about wisdom is that one cannot really recognise when one has it: with the possible exception of Friedrich Nietzsche, the wise person will not be able to say sincerely and seriously "I am wise" in the way that he may authoritatively declare "I am knowledgeable about X" or "I have expertise in Y." This is because of the humility that is essentially a part of wisdom, and as such it was not entirely disingenuous of Socrates to claim that he knew nothing (in *The Apology*, among other places), while confidently and critically engaging his opponents.

This conception of wisdom, and of moral philosophy as having essentially to do with wisdom, has two important corollaries, described eloquently by Raimond Gaita (2004 p. 265 *ff.*). First, it is essential to wisdom that it requires time to achieve, and moreover time within the context of an individual human life. It is not an accident that there are no child geniuses in moral philosophy. This time requirement is not contingent on the cognitive powers of human minds, in the way that knowledge and expertise is. While a mastery of kung fu can be 'poured' into the mental receptacle of Keanu Reaves in less than a minute (in the film *The Matrix*), this would not be possible for wisdom, since it has to be 'earned' through experience, it has to be ground and burned into the skin. Second, a wise person can sometimes be described as having "something to say." But this 'something' is often not going to be very original or bold or brilliant. Indeed, one sign of a wise person is not that he says wise things, but that in his presence and under his compassionate attention one is oneself more inclined to say wise things. Usually, the 'something' consists in revealing what a particular person has *made* of a fact that is generally known, as well as what a person made of himself through that fact – for the two processes are interdependent. This gives the wise person a special kind of personal authority that no amount of specialised knowledge or expertise can provide.

3. The limits of moral philosophy

Joyce Carol Oates wrote a short story called 'The Undesirable Table' (1996). It concerns a group of middle-class friends who gather at a favourite restaurant one evening. Unfortunately the restaurant is quite full and the only table available is the 'undesirable' one. Finding another restaurant would be time-consuming and risky, but more importantly, none of the guests wants to accept the undesirability as a reason for them to look elsewhere. For although we are never told or shown explicitly, the undesirability (and Oates repeats the word with increasingly ironic effect) has to do, we can guess, with the presence of a beggar outside and directly in front of a large bay window next to the table. The dinner party is ruined, despite the best efforts of all involved to ignore the white elephant and stick to their middle-class topics of conversation.

The story is strikingly uncomfortable on two levels. First of all, because of the familiar awkwardness of being forced into close proximity with a beggar and not knowing what to do or say; second, because of the familiar

awkwardness of being *seen* by one's friends wondering what to do or say after being forced into close proximity with a beggar. Exactly this sort of awkwardness reveals mettle. It would be too easy to blame the diners for their privilege and indifference, but Oates is careful to make them attractively ordinary middle-class figures, and certainly she could expect the bulk of her readership to identify with them sufficiently to share the embarrassment without condemning any of them.

I believe the story well illustrates the stark limits of philosophy, and indeed of wisdom – and it is by gesturing toward these limits that I want to conclude this paper, lest the previous section give the incorrect impression that the wise philosopher can conquer all. It's very well avoiding the excesses of technicality and ethicism by focusing on wisdom in the philosopher's encounters with non-philosophers. But what of those non-philosophers who are somehow *unfortunate*: the homeless, the ill, the desperate, the damaged, the senile, the self-loathing – those people who are in one way or another beyond the language of philosophical enquiry and its implicit optimism. For this is my fourth reason to be embarrassed to be a moral philosopher: I do not know how to deal with encounters with these sorts of people, and I am certainly no better equipped than the diners in Oates's story. Notice that I do *not* say that I am embarrassed by the encounters per se; only at my impotence within these encounters, precisely because I believe that my moral philosophy, if it is to be worth anything at all, should also be answerable to these – *especially* to these – non-philosophers as well.

Note that the encounter with the beggar need not be especially embarrassing for those moral philosophers whom I have been calling technicians. However they deal with the situation, their philosophy is already immune to the real world anyway. But for the moral philosopher who seeks wisdom, who is embarked on a deeply personal attempt to make sense of the world and of others and of his place among them, the encounter is embarrassing and it is revealing to examine why. Here before him sits a man, shabby and dirty, his hand outstretched. It is obvious what he wants; it is obvious what he needs. It is obvious that I can part with a tenner without much of a dent in my comfortable life. It is obvious that "there but for the grace of God go I." In sum, *there is no good reason* not to give him the money. Or rather, lest I be accused over an excessive rationalism, there is no reason that *I* can give *him* for not giving him the money if he asked me for a reason: I am answerable to him far more than to some idealised 'fellow human being' or 'rational mind'.

There are of course plenty of *post hoc* rationalisations for not giving him the money: maybe I worry that he would only spend it on booze; maybe I'd prefer to donate it to the shelter for the homeless, in the belief that it will be spent more effectively than dubiously motivated piecemeal donations; maybe I would rather spend it on a more worthy project, such as my children and their glorious future; maybe I feel that the homeless person is responsible for his fate and does not deserve rescue. But none of these rationalisations seem to suffice, for otherwise the dominant emotion would not be embarrassment but regret. Ultimately, I think my refusal to give the tenner amounts to a worry that I have no good reason to refuse a tenner to the *next* homeless person I meet, and the next, and the next, until I had turned myself into an impoverished saint; any threshold short of that can only be arbitrary. My refusal to pay money thereby becomes a refusal to pay attention, and I walk on by the other side like the priest and the Levite before me.

It is important to note that this paper is not arguing for a change in social policy, in order for the state to look after the homeless better. After all, I do not *care* enough about the beggar to resign from academic philosophy and work for a charity, nor am I arguing that other philosophers do so. And I certainly believe in the elitist project of supporting universities with public money that could otherwise have been spent on shelters for the homeless. Instead, I worry that my inchoate philosophical understanding of the world does not allow at all for the brute existence of the unfortunate and of their legitimate claims on me. Perhaps David Benatar would take the beggar's existence as support for his thesis. Perhaps John Mackie would take my inaction as support for his. Philosophy and wisdom, or at least such philosophy and wisdom as I have managed to acquire to date, are paralysed before the cruelty of fate; for what use is my philosophy and wisdom to the beggar? What use is my philosophical openness? Any moral philosopher who does not acknowledge this crucial fourth reason to be

embarrassed will be lost to the real world.[13]

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Endnotes
1   Clearly I am talking about those countries such as the UK that do not teach philosophy as a compulsory subject at secondary school.
2   Philosophers at private universities do not have this particular problem, since they are paid by students freely choosing the subject. But there is a lingering risk of the subject being seen as a scam.
3   Perhaps literature is another discipline vulnerable to a similar kind of embarrassment as the one I am describing, not only because the literature professor does not seem to offer much that is inaccessible to a reasonably educated amateur reading group, but also because literature is answerable to the real world in the way I am describing.
4   I should say that I am directing most of my remarks at Anglo-American philosophers, only because that is the tradition I am most familiar with. I suspect that many so-called Continental philosophers, moral or otherwise, would have more sympathy with my criticisms.
5   taken from the 'search inside' function on the Amazon website. I won't be paying money for this book.
6   Benatar himself responded to the review in 'Grim news from the original position: a reply to Professor Doyal', in the same volume.
7   "If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error." (Book II, Mill 1859)
8   Most of this piece has been inspired by Gaita's discussion of what it means to take moral philosophy seriously.
9   See Gaita, *op. cit*. For an articulate attack on the utilitarian bioethics, see Anne Maclean (1993).
10   This point about public policy is worth expanding. A moral philosopher can achieve legitimate expertise, I argue, in the policy discussions surrounding, say, euthanasia. He is someone who knows about different policies in different countries, including the evaluations of those policies; he is someone familiar with the relevant law; most importantly he is someone familiar with the relevant arguments (in academic journals and elsewhere) advanced in favour of this or that policy. However, I argue that no matter how well-informed such a policy expert is, he cannot claim any expertise in ruling on the matter of whether *this* patient ought – morally ought – to be allowed to kill himself.
11   The same question could be asked of Richard Dawkins. Has the author of *The God Delusion* (2007) never met

a religious believer, someone he admired enough intellectually and liked emotionally, someone who might persuade him, just for a moment, to refrain from dismissing that person's entire religiously underpinned worldview as massively deluded? And if he has met such a person, can he *really* look him in the eye and call him massively deluded? Could he ever cultivate a friendship with such a person?

12 A runaway train trolley approaches a set of points; down one line it will kill a famous violinist, down the other it will kill five children. Which way should I switch the points? See Philippa Foot (1977).

13 My thanks to Andrea Kenkmann and Brendan Larvor for some very valuable criticism of earlier drafts.

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