

7-1973

The finality of moral judgments: a reply to Mrs. Foot

Lawrence C. Becker
Hollins University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/philfac>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Becker, Lawrence C. "The Finality of Moral Judgments: A Reply to Mrs. Foot." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 82, no. 3, 1973, pp. 364–370. Hollins Digital Commons. Web.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lvilelle@hollins.edu, millerjc@hollins.edu.

THE FINALITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS: A REPLY TO MRS. FOOT¹

IN A recent article,² Philippa Foot has argued that, although people talk about the “binding force” and “inescapability” of morality—as contrasted with the “hypothetical” character of the rules of etiquette, club rules, and the like—it is very difficult to specify just what this could mean, other than that we simply have been *taught to feel* that we cannot escape from the demands of morality. “[P]erhaps it makes no sense,” she says, “to say that we ‘have to’ submit to the moral law, or that morality is ‘inescapable’ in some special way.”³ The supposed inescapability or binding force or categorical character of morality “may turn out to be merely the reflection of the way morality is taught”⁴—that is, a reflection of the “relative stringency of our moral teaching.”⁵ In fact, she holds, upon consideration of the failure of attempts to specify a special sense in which moral judgments (as opposed to rules of etiquette) must of necessity be “inescapable” or binding, “[t]he conclusion we should draw is that moral judgments have no better claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette. People may indeed follow either morality or etiquette without asking why they should do so, but equally well they may not. They may ask for reasons and may reasonably refuse to follow either if reasons are not to be found.”⁶

G. J. Warnock has recently taken a similar position:

It seems . . . possible to see in, say, aesthetic objects a value for themselves, not merely for their place in the lives of people in general, which . . . may sometimes be weighed *against* moral values, and by some may sometimes be regarded as of greater weight.

It is not possible to doubt, I believe, that such a “placing” of morality—some such subordination of the weight of moral reasons to others—does sometimes

¹ This paper was written while I was a Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am grateful to Philippa Foot and H. L. A. Hart for their comments on an earlier draft.

² “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” *Philosophical Review*, LXXXI (1972), 305-316.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 311-312.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

THE FINALITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS

occur; and though possibly there may be some way of arguing that such downgrading, so to speak, of moral considerations is "contrary to reason," I cannot for my own part see how such an argument would go.⁷

I want to argue, in opposition to both Foot and Warnock, that there are good grounds for holding that the "finality," "binding force," "inescapability," or "overridingness" of moral judgments is more than just a contingent fact about our moral education—that, indeed, it is "contrary to reason" to subordinate them to (or give them co-ordinate status with) other sorts of normative judgments. I will argue that the finality or inescapability of moral judgments follows necessarily from the "all things considered" aspect of any thoroughgoing defense of a moral judgment, as opposed to the markedly restricted character of a thoroughgoing defense of (say) rules of etiquette qua etiquette, judgments of prudence qua prudence, and so forth. This does not mean, of course, that people's attitudes about the overridingness of morality are products of contemplating the nature of moral reason-giving. It merely means that the sort of stringent moral teaching mentioned by Mrs. Foot is (at least in terms of a highly plausible concept of morality) rationally defensible—indeed, that any teaching to the contrary would be "contrary to reason."

Begin by considering some examples of the sorts raised by Mrs. Foot:

- (1) If you want to win the game, you'll have to take his rook.
—I don't see why.
Well, if you don't take it, then his rook captures your bishop, and. . . .
- (2) Forks are always placed to the left of the dinner plates.
—I don't see why.
Because that's the way it's done. Here's a book on etiquette.
- (3) If you want to read in the library, you'll have to leave those sticky cakes outside.
—I don't see why.
It's in the rules.

In so far as the dispute in (1) concerns only winning at chess, in (2) concerns only matters of etiquette, and in (3) concerns only the library's rules, a perfectly thoroughgoing reply to "I don't see why" can in each case be constructed along the lines suggested in the example. In (1), the reply will concern itself only with the rules and strategy of chess (with, perhaps, some assumptions about the opponent's weaknesses and strengths as a chess player). In (2), the reply will

⁷ G. J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London, 1971), p. 158.

focus on a description of the received practices of whatever group is held to be authoritative in matters of etiquette. In (3), the reply will turn on uncovering applicable library rules. In each case the reply will be made in a tightly circumscribed area of concern, and as long as that circumscription is not challenged ("Now see here, you're not just playing chess, you know; your little brother's feelings are involved"), an adequate reply, concluding with a judgment about what ought to be done, will be final.

But it is commonplace to note that any finality possessed by technical oughts, prudential oughts, judgments of etiquette, and so forth is *conditional*. It is conditional upon the restriction of one's concerns to technique, prudence, etiquette, or whatever. When one "moves over" from any one of these areas to another, or to matters of morality, he often finds that the ought-statement at issue is no longer final—indeed, that it may have to be withdrawn as an appropriate prescription for conduct.

Moral oughts, on the other hand, are supposed to be unconditional: that is, it has been supposed that they do not need to be withdrawn as appropriate prescriptions for conduct, when one moves over to consider matters of etiquette or prudence. But how is one to show that such finality is a necessary feature of moral judgments—not just a contingent feature of our moral education? The most plausible argument to that end seems to me to be the following.

The first thing to notice is that attacks on the notion of the necessarily "binding" status of moral judgments presuppose (with some plausibility, to be sure, and some complicity from their opponents) that the moral point of view, moral reasons, moral justifications, and so on are quite *separate in kind* from nonmoral ones. Once that premise is accepted, any defender of the bindingness of moral judgments, or moral reasons for action, is faced with explaining *why* they are binding. And it is indeed hard to see, in the face of the sort of attack Mrs. Foot makes on the categorical imperative, for example, how one could defend the necessarily binding status of moral judgments as anything other than conventional. At best one might argue for the reasonableness of the convention.

But it may be that the error in all this lies not in the claim of inescapability or categoricity, but in the claim that moral judgments are merely one among several mutually exclusive (or at best just partially overlapping) types of prescriptions for conduct. It may be that when one moves from considering a game of chess in various non-moral contexts to considering it as a matter of moral concern, he has

THE FINALITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS

not moved over to yet another *kind* of concern (or to asking questions which are answerable only in terms of another *kind* of reasons—moral reasons). Rather, one may argue with equal plausibility that the introduction of the moral question simply *broadens* the inquiry. One may argue that justification in terms of etiquette or club rules or winning technique is not *irrelevant* to the moral justification, or separate from it, but merely not sufficient for it. What the demand for a moral justification of an act does is to “detach” the act from its connection with special or restricted assumptions about what sorts of considerations are relevant and ask for a justification of it no holds barred. If that is so, then a valid moral judgment is by definition overriding. Its action-guidance is “inescapable” or “binding” in the sense that there is nothing more to consider—nothing which might be introduced to enlarge the inquiry further and make the prescription subject to withdrawal.

Some such interpretation of moral judgments seems plausible, for we often say that judgments of expedience, effectiveness, etiquette, and so on are *relevant* toward a judgment about what we ought (morally) to do. They are relevant in so far as expedience, effectiveness, good manners, and so forth are valued, or are our duties, or exemplify virtuous conduct. Yet they are not in themselves *sufficient* to justify a course of conduct as moral, for there are usually “other things to consider.”

One will be reminded very quickly, no doubt, that in common speech one often opposes morality to prudence, morality to efficiency, morality to self-seeking, and so forth. But this need not mean that prudence, efficiency, and self-seeking are co-ordinate spheres with, rather than subordinate spheres within, morality. We often speak of the peculiar features of one species as laid against the rest of its genus. That does not mean that we think the species stands outside the genus. It is illuminating, in this connection, to focus on the naturalness of stating our moral objections to other sorts of prescriptions in terms of our demand for an enlargement of the issue:

“Yes, but you see you are only considering yourself. There are others to consider as well.”

“The trouble is that you think only in terms of efficiency. God knows that’s important, but you must realize that there is more to it.”

“It won’t do to tell me I should do something merely because it’s the law. The rule of law is important, but there is more to this moral crisis than that.”

If a shift from prudential concerns (or nonmoral concerns generally) to moral ones is an enlargement of the issue, and if it is in fact a shift to a completely *unrestricted* frame for inquiry—where we are to decide what is right *all things considered*—then it is easy to see how the notion of finality or overridingness is necessarily involved with the very concept of a moral judgment. If to accept the validity of a moral judgment is to accept that “when all is said and done,” when “everything is taken into account,” such and such ought to be done, then one has by definition ruled out any *grounds* for an objection. There will simply be an end to argument—no more to be said. The moral judgment, in so far as one is committed to accepting the prescriptions resulting from rational deliberation, will be inescapable. To reject it will be to reject rationality as a ground for deciding what to do.

Objection: But surely this line of argument creates a paradox. One is forced to say that an act’s being good manners, or a winning chess move, or in accord with library rules is both a moral and a nonmoral reason for doing it.

Reply: There is no paradox in saying that a very restricted sort of justification of an act is nonmoral if by “moral justification” one means precisely an *unrestricted* justification—an “all things considered” justification.

Objection: But now you have departed very far from what people ordinarily mean by “moral” as opposed to “nonmoral.” And surely what defenders of the overridingness of moral judgments have often wanted was simply to *rule out* considerations of expedience, etiquette, and so forth.

Reply: Some philosophers have indeed appeared to treat moral judgments in this way. But it is very difficult to see how the position could be defended successfully. Our ordinary practice in moral argument clearly insists on the relevance of these nonmoral matters. Indeed, even the most unbending deontologists admit the relevance of considering consequences in deciding what to do. They merely protest that such considerations are not always (or perhaps ever) decisive. In fact, a close look at moral disputes in general supports this view: that what is inevitably at issue—apart from flaws of logic—is some restriction on the scope of the reasons allowed to count toward deciding what one ought (morally) to do. The egoist restricts his attention to his own good. The altruist ignores some important facts

THE FINALITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS

about human psychology. Utilitarians are said to oversimplify. And so on. The sum of such objections can only mean that what we expect from a valid moral judgment is that it have taken *everything* into account—that it has not overlooked, or brushed aside pre-emptorily, any relevant sort of value, source of obligation, or virtue.

Objection: But to make this doctrine work, you have to hold that a thoroughgoing moral justification *always does* consider everything. Surely you cannot believe that this is so—that there are never any limits to what is considered relevant to moral arguments. Think of situations like “I *know* Emily Post wouldn’t approve, but etiquette hasn’t got anything to do with this. This is *serious*.”

Reply: Of course there are limits on what is considered relevant to the justification of a moral judgment. But these need not presuppose the exclusion *in principle* (from moral justifications) of any of the various nonmoral reasons which might be offered for doing something. Clearly there are purely logical limits of relevance in any attempt to offer reasons. When one says moral justifications are to consider everything, the universe of discourse is understood to be restricted to reasons relevant to action-guidance and to the particular actions (or virtues) in question. Further, we develop other criteria of relevance in day to day practice: for example, “For all practical purposes, we may ignore considerations of etiquette in life-and-death situations.” Such principles do not mean that considerations of etiquette (or whatever) are *irrelevant in principle* to the argument; they mean merely that their weight in determining a conclusion is, in certain cases, so minimal as to render their inclusion in the argument superfluous.

So again there is no reason to reject the view that moral arguments are precisely those which, in principle, are supposed to consider everything. Thus the finality of moral judgments (that is, their being the court from which there is no rational appeal) is explained. The function of moral education is not to get us to think of a special sort of reasons (moral reasons) as being overriding. Rather, the function of moral education is to get us away from thinking *only* of ourselves, *only* of others, *only* in terms of prudence or efficiency, *only* in terms of personal pride, and so on. And when we have “considered everything,” in so far as we feel bound to follow reason at all, we will feel bound unconditionally by the ought (the moral ought) we have reached. We will feel bound by it unconditionally, not because it has been arbitrarily drummed into our heads that a moral ought just *is* over-

LAWRENCE C. BECKER

riding, but because there are no further conditions upon which its validity could possibly depend. The finality of moral judgments lies not in the psychological strength of the hold they have on us, but from the fact that their justification is entered into no holds barred.

LAWRENCE C. BECKER

Hollins College