

# BUT I COULD BE WRONG

BY GEORGE SHER

## I. INTRODUCTION

My aim in this essay is to explore the implications of the fact that even our most deeply held moral beliefs have been profoundly affected by our upbringing and experience—that if any of us had had a sufficiently different upbringing and set of experiences, he almost certainly would now have a very different set of moral beliefs and very different habits of moral judgment. This fact, together with the associated proliferation of incompatible moral doctrines, is sometimes invoked in support of liberal policies of toleration and restraint, but the relevance of these considerations to individual moral deliberation has received less attention.<sup>1</sup> In Sections II through V, I shall argue that this combination of contingency and controversy poses a serious challenge to the authority of our moral judgments. In Section VI, I shall explore a promising way of responding to this challenge.

## II. THE CHALLENGE TO MY MORAL JUDGMENTS

In Chapter II of *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill observes that the person who uncritically accepts the opinion of “the world”

devolves upon his own world the responsibility of being in the right against the dissentient worlds of other people; and it never troubles him that mere accident has decided which of these numerous worlds is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which made him a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking.<sup>2</sup>

Along similar lines, John Rawls observes in *Political Liberalism* that the “burdens of judgment” that make moral disagreement inevitable include the fact that

<sup>1</sup> One work in which the issue is discussed did not come to my attention until after this essay was written; see Gerald Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), chap. 1.

<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978), 17.

to some extent (how great we cannot tell) the way we assess evidence and weight moral and political values is shaped by our total experience, our whole course of life up to now; and our total experiences must always differ.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their sketchiness, both passages appear to contain much truth. Moreover, the two passages are complementary in that Mill emphasizes the influence of contingent factors on the content of a person's most basic religious (and, by extension, moral and philosophical) convictions, while Rawls focuses more on the influence that contingent factors have on the inferences and judgments that a person makes *within* his basic framework. Thus, taken together, the two passages suggest that the influence of contingent factors on moral judgment is certainly extensive and may well be pervasive.

The principles that Mill and Rawls are defending in these passages are not the same: the passage from Mill appears in his famous defense of freedom of speech, while Rawls's point is that in a pluralistic society, a conception of justice must be defensible in terms accessible to all. However, each of these principles purports to provide a reason not to act in all the ways that initially appear to be called for by one's moral beliefs. This is why Mill and Rawls are both comfortable invoking a consideration—the influence of contingent factors on our moral beliefs—which, if taken seriously, is bound to undermine our confidence in the truth or rational defensibility of these moral beliefs.

But the same consideration that is so congenial to liberal principles that require us to distance ourselves from our moral beliefs in political contexts is decidedly uncongenial to our efforts to marshal these moral beliefs when we deliberate as individuals. My awareness that I would now have different moral convictions if I had had a different upbringing or different experiences may make it easier for me to put my moral beliefs out of play in the interest of allowing competing beliefs a fair hearing, or for the sake of arriving at terms of social cooperation acceptable to all. This same awareness, however, makes it correspondingly *harder* for me to act on my moral convictions when these conflict with the moral convictions of others. There is an obvious tension between my belief that my moral assessment of a situation is right while yours is wrong and my further belief that it is only an accident of fate that I assess the situation in my way rather than yours.

This tension raises questions about what I have reason to do in various practical interpersonal contexts. Perhaps most obviously, it raises such questions when I take myself to be morally justified in treating you in a way that you find morally objectionable—when, for example, I think I am not obligated to finance your dubious business venture despite our long

<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 56–57.

friendship, or when you demand attention that I feel I do not owe. The tension also muddies the waters when you and I disagree about something we must do together—when, for example, I want to give our failing student a retest but you worry about fairness to other students, or when we disagree about how much of our joint income we should donate to charity. It even raises doubts when I am contemplating taking some action that will not affect you at all, but of which you morally disapprove—when, for example, I am considering joining the Marines, contributing to a pro-choice candidate, or taking spectacular revenge on a hated rival, but you offer dissenting counsel.<sup>4</sup> In all of the aforementioned contexts, my awareness that I might well have taken a position like yours if my history had been sufficiently different will not sit well with my belief that I have more reason to act on my moral beliefs than I have to act on yours.<sup>5</sup>

Why, exactly, do these beliefs not sit well together? The answer, I think, is that my belief that I have more reason to act on my own moral beliefs than on yours appears to rest on a further belief that my own moral beliefs are somehow *better*—that they are truer, more defensible, more reasonable, or something similar. However, if I believe that it is only an accident of history that I hold my own moral beliefs rather than yours, then I must also believe that which of us has the better moral beliefs is also an accident of history. This of course does not mean that my belief that my own moral beliefs are better is wrong or baseless, but it does mean that I would have that same belief even if it *were* wrong or baseless. However, once I realize that I would have this belief whether or not it were true, I no longer seem entitled to use it in my practical deliberations.

### III. THE CHALLENGE NOT A FORM OF SKEPTICISM

As just presented, the problems raised by the contingent origins of our moral beliefs bear a striking similarity to certain familiar skeptical worries. There is, in particular, an obvious affinity between the claim advanced at the end of the preceding section—that we are not in a position to tell whether we hold our moral beliefs because they are defensible or true or merely because of our upbringing—and the standard skeptical claim that we are not in a position to tell whether we hold our empirical beliefs because they represent reality accurately or merely because they have been instilled in us by an evil demon or a mad scientist stimulating

<sup>4</sup> As these examples suggest, I take morality to encompass only a set of duties that we owe to others and, by extension, a set of virtues and vices connected to these duties. As so construed, the realm of the moral excludes many forms of value.

<sup>5</sup> Although the cases just mentioned all involve actual disagreement, essentially the same problem appears to arise in cases in which no one actually disagrees with me, but I know there is (or could be?) someone who *would* disagree if given the chance.

a brain in a vat. Thus, isn't the current problem merely a special case of a far more general skeptical challenge—a challenge whose force we all acknowledge, but with which we long ago learned to coexist?

There is both something right and something wrong about this suggestion. What is right is its premise that the current problem has the same abstract structure as a very common form of skepticism; what is wrong is its conclusion that we can therefore live with the current problem as easily as we can live with skepticism. In fact, for three reasons, the current problem is far more vexing and urgent.

First, unlike the standard skeptical hypotheses, the claim that each person's moral beliefs were shaped by his upbringing and life experiences has an obvious basis in fact. We have no evidence at all that any of our empirical beliefs were caused by an evil demon or a mad scientist; and even the hypothesis that I am now dreaming, though somewhat more realistic, is improbable in light of the low frequency with which experiences with all the marks of wakefulness—vividness, continuity, coherence, self-consciousness, and the rest—have in the past turned out to be dreams. Thus, the most that any skeptical hypothesis can show is that all of our beliefs about the world *might* have had causes that operate independently of the truth of what we believe. In stark contrast, however, the fact that people's moral beliefs vary systematically with their backgrounds and life experiences shows considerably more, for in becoming aware of this, I acquire a positive reason to suspect that when you and I disagree about what morality demands, my taking the position I do has less to do with the superiority of my moral insight than with the nature of the causes that have operated on me.

The second reason that the current problem is harder to live with than is general skepticism is that we have significant second-order reason to be confident in our shared empirical beliefs, but no corresponding second-order reason to be confident in our controversial moral beliefs. In the case of our shared empirical beliefs, the second-order reason for confidence is provided by the various background theories that imply the reliability, within broad limits, of the processes through which these beliefs were formed—physiological theories about the mechanisms through which our sensory receptors put us in contact with the world, biological theories that imply that reliable belief-forming mechanisms have survival value, and so on. Even if appealing to these theories begs the question against global skepticism, our acceptance of them still makes such skepticism easier to ignore by reinforcing the confidence that we feel in our empirical beliefs when we are not contemplating the skeptical challenge. By contrast, my acceptance of the same background theories does not similarly reinforce my confidence that my own moral beliefs are better than yours, for because the theories imply the reliability of belief-forming mechanisms that are common to all members of our species, they provide no basis for any distinctions *among* individuals. Indeed, if anything, my awareness that a

different upbringing and set of experiences would have caused me to acquire a different set of moral beliefs provides evidence that the processes through which I acquired my actual moral beliefs are probably *not* reliable.

Even by themselves, these two reasons would suggest that the current problem is much harder to live with than is general skepticism. However, a third reason makes the case even more strongly. Simply put, the most serious obstacle to our bracketing the current problem in the same way we routinely bracket skepticism is that unlike the fabrications of the skeptic, the current challenge to our moral beliefs is directly relevant to action.

For, as is often remarked, the hypotheses that all of my beliefs are being orchestrated by an evil demon or a master neuromanipulator, or that I am now dreaming, have no obvious impact either on what I *ought* to do or on what I am *inclined* to do. Even if I were able to suspend my commonsense beliefs, my awareness that various types of experience have been regularly connected in the past might well justify my “acting” as if the world were exactly as it seemed;<sup>6</sup> and, in any case, suspending my commonsense beliefs in practical contexts is not a live option. As Hume famously observed, even if I find skepticism convincing in the isolation of my study, I will, as soon as I emerge, “find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life.”<sup>7</sup> When it comes time to act, our robust animal realism will always dominate.

But not so our corresponding tendency to *moral* realism, for although we standardly do proceed as though our moral convictions are in some sense true, our confidence in their truth is neither anchored in our animal nature (since nonhuman animals evidently do not share it) nor invulnerable to reflective challenge. Because this confidence is relatively superficial, we cannot assume that it would survive a compelling demonstration that it cannot be defended. There is, to be sure, a real question about what it would be rational for me to do if I did lose confidence in my own moral beliefs—I would, after all, have exactly the same grounds for doubt about your moral beliefs as I would about mine—but at a minimum, this loss of confidence would reopen many questions that my own moral beliefs were previously thought to settle. Because of this, the challenge to the authority of my moral judgments seems capable of destabilizing my practical deliberation in a way that general skepticism cannot.

<sup>6</sup> The point I am making here applies only to the form of skepticism that asserts that our current experiences (or beliefs about them) might have causes that have nothing to do with their truth. Only this form of skepticism has the same abstract structure as our current problem.

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), bk. I, sec. 7, p. 269.

## IV. THE INTERPLAY OF CONTROVERSY AND CONTINGENCY

As just presented, the challenge to the authority of my moral judgments has a dual focus, for it appears to rest both on a premise about moral disagreement and on a premise about the contingent origins of my moral beliefs and ways of assessing evidence and weighting competing values. (For brevity, I shall henceforth refer to the combination of a person's moral beliefs and his ways of assessing evidence and weighting values as his *moral outlook*.) Respectively, these premises are as follows:

- (1) I often disagree with others about what I morally ought to do.
- (2) The moral outlook that supports my current judgment about what I ought to do has been shaped by my upbringing and experiences; for (just about) any alternative judgment, there is some different upbringing and set of experiences that would have caused me to acquire a moral outlook that would in turn have supported this alternative judgment.

Because these premises are logically distinct—because it could be true that you and I disagree about what one of us ought to do but false that our backgrounds have shaped our moral outlooks, or true that our backgrounds have shaped our moral outlooks but false that we disagree—it is not entirely obvious how (1) and (2) fit together. Are they both doing real work in the argument challenging the authority of my moral judgments? If so, why are they both needed? If not, which is necessary and which superfluous?

One possible answer is that the argument does *not* require both (1) and (2), but that each provides an independent route to the argument's conclusion. On this account, the version of the argument that relies exclusively on (1) is simply that

- (A1) Because I am just another member of the human species (and because I am far from the smartest, the most clearheaded, or the best-informed member of that species), I have no special reason to regard my own moral judgments as being any better grounded, or any more likely to be true, than the moral judgments of any number of others who see things differently.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, the version that relies exclusively on (2) asserts that

- (A2) Because a different upbringing and set of experiences would have caused me to have a very different moral outlook, my

<sup>8</sup> Although this reasoning is seldom couched in singular terms, its collective counterpart appears to play a substantial role in supporting the cultural relativist's refusal to take sides when his own society's values conflict with those of other societies.

having the moral outlook that informs my specific moral judgments is unlikely to have much to do with that outlook's justifiability or truth.

Because these two versions of the argument have such different structures—because (A1) turns on the fact that there is nothing special about me while (A2) turns on the very different fact that the process through which I acquired my moral outlook is unlikely to be reliable—we may be tempted to conclude that each version must be evaluated separately, and hence that the original combined appeal to (1) and (2) is a misbegotten hybrid.

But that temptation should be resisted; for by thus separating the appeals to (1) and (2), we would gravely weaken the case for the conclusion that they both seek to establish. The reason that separating them would have this effect is that (A1)'s appeal to (1) is vulnerable to an obvious objection that is best blocked by introducing (2), while (A2)'s appeal to (2) is similarly vulnerable to an obvious objection that is best blocked by introducing (1). To bring out the underlying synergy between (1) and (2), and thus to reconstruct the challenge to the authority of our moral judgments in its strongest form, we must look more closely at each of these simpler arguments.

To argument (A1), which asserts that I have no special reason to favor my own moral judgments over those of others who are no less intelligent and well-informed, the obvious rejoinder is that the grounds for favoring one moral judgment over another typically consist not of facts about the persons who make the judgments, but rather of evidence or arguments for and against the judgments themselves. There are, to be sure, some obvious counterexamples to this claim—we may indeed be justified in discounting someone's moral judgments if we have independent evidence that he is misinformed, confused, biased, or very stupid—but such cases are the exception rather than the rule. In the far more standard case, our reasoning runs just the other way: we infer that our interlocutor's thought processes must somehow have gone awry because we believe there are independent grounds for rejecting his conclusion. Thus, as long as the challenge to my own moral judgments extends no further than (1)'s claim that many others do not share them, I can resist it through the simple expedient of reminding myself of whichever considerations I take to make my own judgments more plausible than those of my interlocutors.

This rejoinder becomes problematic, however, as soon as we factor in (2)'s claim that my having the moral outlook that informs my moral judgment is itself an accident of my history; for the import of this claim is to cast doubt not only on my judgment itself, but also on whatever evidence or arguments I take to support it. If my upbringing and experiences had been sufficiently different, I would now share not only my interlocutor's conviction that I ought to abandon my grand plan to humiliate the rival who has tormented me for years, but also my interlocu-

tor's disdain for the moral arguments that I currently take to underwrite that plan. However, once I agree that I have been caused to accept these arguments by factors independent of their force, I can no longer confidently base my decision on my conviction that they *have* force.

Thus, argument (A1), which appeals to (1) alone, seems unlikely to succeed unless it is supplemented by (2). Conversely, argument (A2), which appeals to (2) alone, requires supplementation by (1). Argument (A2), it will be recalled, attempts to move from (2)'s claim that a different upbringing and set of experiences would have caused me to acquire a different moral outlook to the conclusion that my having the moral outlook I do (and, by extension, my reaching the moral judgments I do) probably has little to do with its (and their) justifiability or truth. However, as it stands, this argument is a non sequitur, since even if the upbringing and experiences that caused me to acquire my current moral outlook would have had this effect on me whether or not my current moral outlook was justifiable or true, it hardly follows that the social conditions that caused me to have that upbringing and those experiences would also have existed regardless of whether or not my current moral outlook was justifiable or true. For all that has yet been said, it may have been precisely the truth or justifiability of the various elements of my current moral outlook that caused them to work their way into the culture that in turn caused me to acquire that outlook.<sup>9</sup> Because this possibility remains open, it does not follow from the fact that a different upbringing and set of experiences would have caused me to acquire a different moral outlook that it is unreasonable for me to continue acting on the judgments that my actual moral outlook supports.

But whatever force this rejoinder has against (A2)'s appeal to (2) alone, the rejoinder becomes problematic as soon as we factor in (1)'s claim that people's moral judgments often differ; for if my socially inculcated moral outlook has led me to reach one conclusion about what I ought to do while yours has led you to reach another, then the social determinants of at least one of our moral outlooks *cannot* be indirectly traceable to the justifiability or truth of all of its operative elements. Even if I can reasonably believe that I was caused to acquire all the operative elements of my own moral outlook by social factors that owed their existence to the justifiability or truth of those elements as long as you and I agree that I may not torture or murder my hated rival, I can no longer reasonably believe this when you go on to condemn even the less extreme plan to humiliate my rival that I consider entirely appropriate. As soon as we disagree, I am forced to conclude

<sup>9</sup> The parallel is not exact, but something roughly akin to this appears to happen whenever children are taught history or arithmetic by rote. Although the children are not given any reasons for believing what they are taught (and although they would form different beliefs if given different material to memorize), the reason they are asked to memorize precisely this material is that there in fact *are* good reasons for accepting it.



that at least one of us must have been caused to acquire some operative element of his moral outlook by some aspect of his upbringing or experience that did *not* owe its existence to that element's truth or justifiability; and the problem, once again, is that I have no special reason to believe that that someone is you rather than me.

Thus, to give the challenge to the authority of my moral judgments the strongest possible run for its money, we cannot represent it as resting exclusively on either (1) or (2). Just as the version of the challenge that begins by appealing to (1) is unlikely to succeed without supplementation by (2), the version that begins by appealing to (2) is unlikely to succeed without supplementation by (1). Hence, no matter where we start, we will end by concluding that (1) and (2) work best when they work together.<sup>10</sup>

## V. THE ROLE OF REFLECTION

How well, though, *does* the combined appeal to (1) and (2) work? Must I really accept its corrosive implication that I often have no better reason to rely on my own moral judgments than on the judgments of those with whom I strongly disagree? Are (1) and (2) both firmly enough grounded to support this disturbing conclusion?

There is, I think, little point in contesting (1), for its claim that I often disagree with others about what I morally ought to do is all too obviously true. However, when we turn to (2)'s claim that I would now view my moral obligations differently if my upbringing and experiences had been

<sup>10</sup> As was pointed out by several contributors to this volume, the authority of my empirical beliefs faces a challenge analogous to that faced by my moral judgments. As is the case with moral judgments, I disagree with others about various empirical matters, and for (just about) any empirical belief that I reject but someone else accepts, there is some different upbringing and set of experiences that would have caused me to accept that empirical belief.

Because I have taken the fact that a different background would have caused me to weigh the evidence in a way that supports your moral judgment rather than mine to undermine the authority of my own moral judgment, I can hardly deny that the fact that a different background would have caused me to weigh the evidence in a way that supports your empirical belief rather than mine is similarly subversive of the authority of my own empirical belief. However, there are several things worth noting here. First, very few of my actual empirical beliefs *are* disputed by thoughtful, conscientious people who have simply weighed the evidence differently. Second, when an empirical disagreement *is* of this nature—when, for example, you and I disagree about what to make of the evidence about the causes of a phenomenon such as intergenerational poverty—considerable diffidence on both sides is indeed in order. It is worth noting, too, that if those with whom I disagree have not merely assessed the shared evidence differently but either lack or are unresponsive to evidence I have—if, for example, they are members of a prescientific society that attributes diseases to spirits rather than microorganisms, or are creationists—then the fact that I would have their beliefs if I had their background does *not* undermine the authority of my own beliefs. Here I can see that, and why, my own background is the more favored. Taken together, these considerations suggest that the combination of controversy and contingency poses far less of a threat to the authority of my empirical beliefs than it does to the authority of my moral judgments.

sufficiently different, the issue becomes more complicated. Briefly put, the complication is that although a person's upbringing and experiences clearly do cause him to acquire various moral beliefs and habits of judgment, these cannot be assumed to persist unaltered over time. No less than any other beliefs and habits, our moral beliefs and habits of moral judgment can be expected to evolve in response to various intellectual pressures.

We may not fully register this if we focus too exclusively on Mill's claim that "the same causes that made [someone] a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking," for this claim draws attention to a single aspect of what a person believes—the particular religion he accepts—that often *is* a direct result of his background. It is obviously impossible for someone who has only been exposed to one religion to become devout in another. However, the more pertinent question is whether a person who has only been exposed to a single religion may nevertheless come to reject some or all of its teachings; and to this further question, the answer is clearly "Yes."

For because any set of claims about religion (or, by extension, morality) can be subjected to rational scrutiny, people can and often do reject even the religious and moral doctrines to which they have been most relentlessly exposed. Even when someone has at first been nonrationally caused to acquire a certain religious or moral belief, it is open to him rationally to evaluate that belief at any later point. Of course, in so doing, he will rely on various ways of assessing evidence and weighting values, and it is likely that the ways he uses will themselves have been shaped by his experiences (and, we may add, by his culture). Still, no matter how far these influences extend—and, as Rawls notes about the influence of experience, this is something we cannot know—their introduction does not alter the basic point because any resulting ways of assessing evidence and weighting values can be rationally scrutinized in turn. Thus, properly understood, the moral outlook that we have been nonrationally caused to acquire is best viewed not as a permanent fixture of our thought, but rather as a starting point that we may hope successively to improve through ongoing critical reflection.

There is, of course, no guarantee that this hope will be realized. Despite my best efforts, it remains possible that my moral outlook has from the start been hopelessly compromised by some massive error, and that my lack of access to the source of error has systematically subverted all my ameliorative endeavors. However, this hypothesis, if backed by no positive argument, is no less speculative than is the hypothesis that all my experiences are caused by a scientist stimulating a brain in a vat. Thus, as long as I have no concrete reason to believe otherwise, it may well be reasonable for me to assume that my efforts to think through the arguments for and against my fundamental moral convictions, and to correct for the distortions, biases, and false beliefs that my upbringing and earlier

experiences have inevitably introduced, have on the whole made things better rather than worse.<sup>11</sup>

How, exactly, would the truth of this meliorist assumption bear on (2)'s claim that if I had had a sufficiently different upbringing and set of experiences, I would now judge my moral obligations differently? The answer, I think, is complicated. The truth of the meliorist assumption would not show that (2)'s claim is false, but would indeed lessen (2)'s sting. However, it would also leave intact the challenge to the authority of my moral judgments that (2) poses in conjunction with (1). Let me argue briefly for each of these three points in turn.

At first glance, the assumption that reflecting on one's moral outlook tends to improve it may indeed seem to tell against (2), for if this assumption is correct, then even two radically different moral outlooks can be expected eventually to converge if subjected to enough reflection. However, for at least two reasons, this way of arguing against (2) does not seem promising. First, even if we grant both that I would have reflected seriously on the alternative moral outlook that a given alternative history would have caused me to acquire and that I did reflect seriously on the moral outlook that my actual history caused me to acquire, there is no guarantee that the two starting points are close enough to allow anything approaching full convergence within my lifetime (or, *a fortiori*, now). In addition, at least some of the alternative histories that would have caused me to acquire a different moral outlook would also have caused me to be disinclined to engage in the kind of reflection that would be necessary to secure *any* degree of convergence. For both reasons, the assumption that reflecting on one's moral outlook generally improves it does not seem capable of supporting a refutation of (2).

Even if this is so, however, the assumption does make (2) more palatable, for as long as I can even partially overcome the nonrational origins of my moral outlook by critically reflecting on it, the fact that my moral outlook would now be different if my history had been different will not entirely undermine its credibility. Given the validating effects of critical reflection, I will, by virtue of engaging in it, at least partly transcend my moral outlook's merely contingent origins.

Yet even if *this* is so, it will hardly follow that I have any more reason to rely on my own moral judgments than on the judgments of others with whom I strongly disagree; for because these disagreements take place within a society that prizes reflection (and because, as an academic, I tend to interact with the more reflective segment of my society), I cannot as-

<sup>11</sup> Race/class/gender theory can be read as an attempt to show that all past reflection on our moral beliefs and habits of judgment *has* been subverted by a massive error—namely, our ignorance of the fact that those beliefs and habits merely rationalize the power of the privileged. However, even if this claim were true, it would not show that reflection cannot improve matters, since the aim of advancing the claim is precisely to unmask what has previously been hidden.

sume that those with whom I disagree have been any less reflective than I. Given that they, too, may well have sought to transcend the merely historical origins of their moral outlooks, an appeal to the validating effects of my reflections will not resolve my problem, but will only reraise it at a higher level. When you and I disagree about what I ought to do—when, for example, my own conscientious reflection leaves me convinced that the revenge I am planning falls well within tolerable moral limits, while yours leaves you no less convinced that I really ought to resist my ugly, vengeful urges—I cannot reasonably assume that it is I rather than you who has successfully thought his way out of his causally induced errors.

And if I am tempted to think otherwise, I need only remind myself of how often such situations arise. If I am entitled to assume that you have been less successful than me in purging your thinking of causally induced error, then I must be entitled to make the same assumption about the great majority of others with whom I disagree—about vast numbers of intelligent and sophisticated vegetarians, pacifists, postmodernists, deconstructionists, gender feminists, pro-lifers, proponents of partial-birth abortion, neutralists, advocates of hate-speech codes, fundamentalists, libertines, rigorists, and egoists, to name just a few. But although it is certainly possible that I have been more successful in avoiding error than some of these others—this is likely on statistical grounds alone—it strains credulity to suppose that I have been more successful than all, or even most, of them. It would be something of a miracle if, out of all the disputants, it was just me who got it all right.

## VI. PRACTICAL SOLUTION TO THESE DOUBTS?

So what should I do? More precisely, how should I respond to the challenge to my ability to decide on rational grounds what I should do? I can see three main possibilities: first, to renew my quest for a convincing reason to believe that my own moral judgments are more likely to be true or justified than are those of the innumerable others with whom I disagree; second, to concede both that no such reason is likely to be forthcoming and that I therefore cannot rationally base my actions on my own moral judgments; and third, to acknowledge that no such reason is forthcoming but *deny* that this makes it irrational to base my actions on my own moral judgments. Unfortunately, of these three strategies, the first is pretty clearly doomed, while the second would commit me to a wholesale rejection of the moral point of view. Thus, if I am to avoid the twin pitfalls of futility and moral skepticism, I will probably have to implement some variant of the third strategy.

To do this, I will have to block the inference from “I have no good reason to believe that my own moral judgments are more likely to be justified or true than those of innumerable others who disagree with me”

to “I cannot rationally base my actions on my own moral judgments.” This in turn requires a demonstration that what makes it rational for me to base my actions on my own moral judgments is not simply the strength of my reasons for believing that these judgments are justified or true. More specifically, what I must show is that even when I realize that my own moral judgments are no more likely to be true or justified than are yours, it nevertheless remains rational for me to act on my own judgments simply because they *are* my own.

Can anything like this be shown? If so, it seems the argument would likely have to turn on certain features of practical reason itself. In particular, its pivotal premise seems likely to be that because no one can act rationally without basing his decisions on his *own* assessment of the reasons for and against the actions available to him, practical reason itself *requires* that I give pride of place to my own judgments. Although I can of course rationally discount any particular judgment that I take to be false or unjustified, the reason I can do this is that to discount a particular judgment is not to abdicate the task of judging; rather, it is only to allow one of my own judgments to trump another. Because acting rationally necessarily involves basing my decisions on the way *I* see things, I cannot entirely transcend my own outlook without moving decisively beyond the bounds of practical reason.

This much, I think, is clear enough. However, because not all reasons for acting are moral reasons—because, for example, I can also have reasons that are prudential, hedonistic, or aesthetic—the mere fact that practical reason requires that I base my actions on my own judgments about what I have reason to do is not sufficient to vindicate the rationality of acting on my own best *moral* judgments. To show that practical reason requires this, I must take the further step of arguing that even an attempt to transcend my own *moral* outlook would take me beyond the bounds of practical reason; and unlike the previous step, this one may seem problematic indeed.

For because my moral outlook encompasses only a small fraction of what I believe, want, and aim at, simply disregarding it would hardly leave me with nothing, or too little, upon which to base my practical decisions. Even if I were to set aside every one of my moral beliefs, I could still choose one action over another on any number of further grounds—for example, because the chosen action would be fun, because it would advance the aims of some person I care about, or because it is required for the completion of some project I have undertaken. Thus, given my awareness that my own moral judgments are no more likely to be true or justified than are the moral judgments of any number of others, isn't it indeed rational for me to set moral considerations aside and make my decisions exclusively on other grounds?

The answer, I think, is that this is *not* rational, for if I were to do it, I would merely be discounting one set of practical judgments in favor of another whose members are no less compromised by the now-familiar

combination of controversy and contingency. Although a full defense of this final claim is beyond my scope, I shall end this section with a brief sketch of the argument for it.

The first thing that needs to be said is that just as the great majority of my *moral* judgments would be contested by various persons who are no less reflective than I, so too would the great majority of my *nonmoral* practical judgments. Indeed, the latter disagreements seem if anything to be even more wide-ranging, since they encompass both disagreements about which *sorts* of nonmoral considerations are relevant to the decision at hand—for example, disagreements about whether I should make the decision mainly on hedonistic, prudential, aesthetic, or affectional grounds—and disagreements about what each type of consideration gives me reason to do. Although some such disagreements obviously turn on different understandings of the facts of a given situation, many others do not. Also, while many endorse the metaprinciple that what I ought to do depends on my *own* weighting of the competing nonmoral considerations, there are also many who reject this metaprinciple. Thus, all in all, my nonmoral practical judgments are sure to be every bit as controversial as my moral judgments.

Moreover, second, my having the beliefs and habits of thought that combine to support the relevant practical judgments seems equally contingent in both the moral and nonmoral cases. Just as it is true that if I had had a sufficiently different upbringing and set of experiences, I would now hold your view rather than mine about what I *morally* ought to do, so too is it true that if I had had a sufficiently different upbringing and set of experiences, I would now hold your view rather than mine about what I have *nonmoral* reason to do. Our attitudes about the value of culture, work, friendship, planning, and much else are no less accidents of our upbringing and experiences, and are no less influential in shaping our judgments about how to live, than are our beliefs about virtue and vice and what we owe to each other.

Thus, in the end, my moral and nonmoral judgments about what I ought to do—or, better, the moral and nonmoral components of my integrated judgments about what, all things considered, I ought to do—seem likely to stand or fall together. Either it is rational for me to set both components of my own practical judgments aside or it is not rational for me to set either of them aside. If I were to set both components aside, I would indeed lack any basis upon which to make reasoned decisions about what to do. Hence, given the inescapability of my commitment to acting for reasons, my tentative conclusion is that practical rationality precludes my setting either of the components aside.

## VII. CONCLUSION

My main contention in this essay has been that given the degree to which merely contingent factors appear to have shaped our moral out-

looks, there is a serious question about whether I ever have good grounds for believing that I am right and you are wrong when you and I disagree about what I ought to do. However, I have also suggested that even if I never *do* have good grounds for believing this, it may nevertheless often remain rational for me to base my actions on my own moral judgments rather than yours. When they are combined, these claims have the paradoxical implication that it is often rational for me to act on the basis of moral judgments the objective likelihood of whose truth or justifiability I have good reason to regard as quite low. This implication casts (fresh) doubt on our ability to integrate our reasons for believing and for acting—that is, on our ability to square the demands of theoretical and practical reason. It also suggests that the price we pay for being clear-eyed moral agents may be a disconcerting awareness of a certain inescapable form of bad faith. Whether these are the only conclusions that the paradoxical implication warrants, or whether, in addition, it provides a platform for some further thrust by the moral skeptic, is a question I will not attempt to answer here.

*Philosophy, Rice University*