

“Oh, Hull. Let’s go rafting!” Two Kinds of Moral Pluralism

Kenneth A. Strike
Syracuse University

I agree with most of what Martin Benjamin says about the nonfoundationalist character of moral reasoning. I have two concerns. First, in Benjamin’s discussion of pluralism and accommodation, he seems to have two different notions of pluralism. One is a pluralism of systems, worldviews, or comprehensive doctrines. I will call this a *pluralism of doctrines*. The second is a pluralism of competing principles: utility and respect, or justice and mercy. In this second case, a *pluralism of principles*, the problem is that people hold to norms that cannot be fully realized simultaneously. We all want to be both just and kind. Sometimes we cannot be both at once.

Respect and utility can be thought about in both ways. We might assert that both respect and utility have a claim on us, but sometimes we cannot fully realize them simultaneously — a pluralism of principles. However, respect and utility are also the core concepts of two systematic ethical theories, Kantianism and utilitarianism — a pluralism of doctrines.

My second concern is that while a pluralism of doctrines plays the major role in Benjamin’s discussion of moral disagreement, it plays no clear role in his account of wide reflective equilibrium (WRE).

I will begin with a modification of WRE. Consider a distinction between two classes of moral principles, “justificatory principles” and “domain-specific principles.” Respect is an example of the first; utility is another. Due process is an example of the second. Domain-specific principles tend to regulate certain areas of human life and are context-specific. We often appeal to justificatory principles to justify, explain, or interpret domain-specific principles. They apply more broadly.

An example: A weapon has been found in a student’s backpack. We are considering expelling the student. The student claims that the weapon is not his. We doubt his story. But we claim that before any action can be taken, we must give the student a fair chance to rebut the charge. We must respect his right to due process.

Why should the student get a hearing? “Respect,” some may say. Providing a hearing respects this individual as a person. It is how we avoid treating him as a means to our ends. Others may appeal to utility. Having a disciplinary system in which guilt must be proven and accusations may be tested is conducive to collective human happiness.

Arguments about domain-specific principles are likely to be arguments about policy and practice. How much process is due? What are its requirements? When we have answered these questions, we will have fleshed out the details of a certain practice — a hearing or a trial.

Arguments about justificatory principles, however, are often part of some philosophical project. What are persons? Why must they be respected? When we are

done addressing such questions, we will have begun to construct a philosophical theory. The categorical imperative may have appeared, and God, freedom, and immortality will be just behind.

As we begin to discuss respect and utility as philosophical projects, we turn them from principles in tension to doctrines in conflict. Benjamin does not give us a clear picture of the status of philosophical projects and theories such as these, although I suspect he dislikes them. Are they comparable to what he refers to as clusters of values (the Roman Republic or Christianity, for example)? Kantianism and utilitarianism do not seem to be just clusters. They are systems with high demands for coherence and consistency. Christianity (or any religion) falls somewhere between “clusters” and “systems.” The values of the Roman Republic need not, perhaps, cohere to the degree that philosophical theories should. Benjamin calls these clusters “worldviews.” This suggests that these clusters should, at least, cohere a bit. They offer a point of view from which lower-order commitments can be appraised. They are doctrines.

If ethical systems and worldviews have practical import, it is likely to be in interpreting domain-specific principles and addressing conflicts at the margins. Neither Kantians nor utilitarians are likely to believe that due process is at risk until they have put it on a firm philosophical base. Indeed, the opposite is more likely to be true. But they may understand its point differently and apply it differently in hard cases.

Suppose someone were to argue that, in the case of the student with the weapon, the standard of evidence used to determine guilt should be low because the cost of a mistake is high. If we suspend an innocent student, that student will undergo some undeserved harm, but if we free a guilty student, someone may end up dead. The safety of other students is the paramount concern. This is a utilitarian argument.

Kantians might reply that rights are rights. We may not violate them for the sake of utility. We might, with Benjamin, describe this interaction between justificatory and domain-specific principles as dialectical. But its shape suggests that we do not often believe that domain-specific principles stand or fall with our more abstract philosophical theories. Indeed, justificatory principles might be tested in terms of their ability to make sense of principles such as due process.

These comments suggest that domain-specific principles have a stand-alone character that justificatory principles do not once we have incorporated them into philosophical systems. We might think of them as analogous to low-order empirical laws. Paradigms may come and go, but once the inverse square law got on the books, it stayed there, even if different paradigms interpreted it differently. No theory that rejected it would be adequate. The evidential relationship between justificatory principles and domain-specific principles may be more bottom-up than top-down, more hypothetical deductive than deductive or dialectical.

For philosophers, justificatory principles have become deeply embedded in philosophical theory. Respect evokes Kantianism. Utility suggests utilitarianism, a competitor paradigm. If we want respect and utility as principles, but not Kantianism

and utilitarianism as systems, we shall have to say why we should avoid the urge to system build.

Suppose we view respect and utility more like domain-specific principles than pieces of competing paradigms. In some contexts, we want to talk about respect, in others utility. Sometimes we want to talk about care, sometimes about virtue. Sometimes we are unsure, and we become puzzled when these diverse conceptions are in tension.

Philosophers are tempted to deal with such puzzlement by constructing philosophical theories that locate these conceptions in a larger picture. Perhaps we should not. Theory construction of this sort easily distorts moral experience. We try to make things fit. If we grant that there is a plurality of principles that people have developed to speak to certain kinds of situations and that work well in certain contexts and less well in others, we might better conclude that we should deal with the tensions among them by striking balances rather than by constructing theories. Respect or utility? Both. Sometimes more of one, sometimes more of the other. I think Benjamin might agree with this. If so, it explains why WRE seems to contain ethical principles but not ethical theories. At the same time, this move raises issues regarding what Benjamin has said about pluralism.

The kind of pluralism I have just recommended, a pluralism of principles, maintains that there can be tension between different moral principles or conceptions which, nevertheless, continue to have a claim on us. But this is not a pluralism of doctrines, and it is not the kind of pluralism on which Benjamin bases his account of moral disagreement. Benjamin roots moral disagreement in a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines, of worldviews, and of moral paradigms.

Note that even if we lack compelling grounds to choose among these “moral paradigms,” choosing is what is called for since these different worldviews are inconsistent, perhaps incommensurable. The difficulties in choosing among them are reasons we should respect the choices of those whose doctrines differ from our own. It is to understand that when we disagree with others about religion or moral traditions, we should not delude ourselves that reason will soon drive our competitors from the field. But these other religions, traditions, and philosophies are still competitors. We cannot coherently give simultaneous authority to the claims of multiple worldviews in our own lives.

This kind of pluralism should be distinguished from a pluralism of principles, all of which have a claim on us, but which may compete in the particular case. To be faced, for example, with a choice between justice and mercy is not like being faced with a choice between Kantianism and utilitarianism or Christianity and Islam. We are not asked to choose one in favor of the other. We are asked to reflect on which is appropriate when or on how they can be balanced in particular contexts.

Let me say this in a more orderly way:

- A pluralism of doctrines is likely to be expressed as a disagreement between individuals or groups. You have your doctrine, I have mine. My

comprehensive doctrine may ally me with like-minded others and against those who ascribe to your doctrine.

- A pluralism of principles lives within each of us. I am committed to both justice and mercy. So are you. Sometimes we cannot have both.
- A pluralism of doctrines takes the view that when one comprehensive doctrine conflicts with another, at least one must be (in some measure) wrong. The problem is that reason cannot resolve the dispute to the satisfaction of all. This, however, leaves us with an unresolved disagreement, not a world of multiple truths.
- A pluralism of principles does not concern positions that are inconsistent. It concerns commitments that produce conflicting demands in particular circumstances. This is not a failure of reason. There is no contradiction of positions that reason cannot, at the moment and perhaps never, resolve. There is a solution to be sought and reason can aid it. But it need not take the form of resolving a contradiction.
- A pluralism of doctrine requires what Benjamin calls accommodation. We must each give a bit. A pluralism of principle requires striking a balance.

This discussion raises some issues for Benjamin. First, he needs to provide an account of the place of moral theory construction in WRE. If WRE involves moral principles, but not moral doctrines, then we need an account of why we should not be Kantians and utilitarians while it is acceptable to have worldviews and comprehensive doctrines of other sorts. And he owes us an account of how worldviews and comprehensive doctrines function in WRE. Second, we need an account of how we are to deal with a pluralism of principle as well as a pluralism of doctrine. That is, we need an account of how we go about striking a balance as well as an account of seeking an accommodation.

Let me turn to Neurath's ship. I think this picture suggests two philosophical points. One is that there are no foundations. We must rebuild our ship at sea. But another is the shape of what we must reconstruct. It is a ship. Some parts are far more central to the ship than are others. We can fix a broken spar, and we can repair the hull, but the hull is what holds it all together. We can replace it only with great difficulty. Transposed into ethics, the ship can be viewed not only as a metaphor for nonfoundationalism; it can also be viewed as a metaphor for the shape of a moral theory. Moral theories are much like scientific theories or mathematical theories. They have parts that are axiom-like or paradigm-like. The dialectics of moral reasoning run up and down a chain of inference from theory to case with principles lying somewhere in the middle. The metaphor of the ship seduces us into thinking of moral reasoning in this way because, while it undercuts foundationalism, it retains the traditional picture of the parts of a theory. It is more hypothetical deductive than dialectical.

We should consider another kind of craft. Perhaps the organization of moral conceptions is a bit more like a raft than a ship. We are not trying to construct an

edifice to support the details of our reflections. We are trying to get some parts that have been collected here and there to hang together well enough to be river-worthy. Moreover, rafts, unlike ships, are mostly swept along. To be sure, some pieces of the raft may be more important than others, and it is nice if it hangs together. Clustering is all right, but there is no hull. And we are not setting out on a voyage of our own choosing. We are mostly being swept along with the current and trying to avoid the rocks and the eddies.

I would draw three conclusions that I think have some instructional application. The first is that there is a good deal of moral reflection that can be done that need not raise argument to the level of moral theory. Sometimes in public space it is a virtue to keep our moral paradigms at home. Second, we need to practice the art of striking a balance as well as that of compromise. Third, we should acknowledge our finitude. Sometimes we are swept along, and the best we can do is steer enough to avoid the rocks and sandbars and stay afloat.

So, to antifoundationalist accounts of moral reasoning, I say “Amen.” To viewing moral reasoning as significantly dependent on philosophical theory construction, I think perhaps we should say, “Oh, Hull. Let’s go rafting.”