

1 I am going to argue for two claims. The first may seem banal, though
2 many contributions to this book will be making it seem less secure. And the
3 second may seem outrageous. I do not think that many of my co-authors
4 will endorse it. But I believe the banal and the outrageous are connected
5 here, so that when we understand both we are inclined to believe both.

6 *The gradations claim:* Some acts are worse than others, indeed some
7 are *much* worse than others, so that we have little slips of moral judge-
8 ment and horrendous evils. There is a continuous series of actions of
9 intermediate badness. We are tolerant of the minor wrongs, which may
10 vary the texture of life in worthwhile ways. But of each real atrocity we
11 cannot but wish that it had not occurred.

12 *The personality claim:* There are people who tend to do the right thing
13 under ordinary circumstances. That is, there are people who have a help-
14 ful and benevolent attitude to those with whom they regularly interact
15 and who deal with them in a fair and principled way. There are also peo-
16 ple who do the right thing – or what can be seen retrospectively to have
17 been the right thing – in extreme conditions, when there are radical con-
18 flicts between different people's interests and some people's suffering is
19 awful. These tend to be different people. The good citizens are rarely the
20 moral heroes, and vice versa. So the traditional image of the simply good
21 person is a myth. Such personalities are almost unknown in our species.

22 Neither of these claims entails the other. But there are connections
23 between them, and the purpose of this article is to bring them out.

25 9.1 Some distinctions

26
27 The quotation from James Madison at the head of this essay is false.
28 However well meaning and intelligent we were, we would need to
29 coordinate our actions, and this would not be something that we could
30 think out one-by-one. Some of the coordination would be arbitrary:
31 what side of the road to drive on. Some would go further than simple
32 coordinating convention: in classic prisoner's dilemma cases we would
33 need to have bound ourselves in advance lest self-interest lead to out-
34 comes no one would prefer. Suppose for example that you own a watch
35 that I want to have more than I want to keep my laptop, and you also
36 want to have my laptop more than you want to keep your watch. And
37 suppose these facts are known to both of us. Should I just then leave my
38 laptop where you can find it, assuming that you will leave your watch
39 where I can find it? Surely not: we have to set up some understanding
40 between us in advance. This understanding may be one-off, as is likely
41 in this case, or it may be based on a general set of expectations. Many

1 such expectations are the common property of humanity, but many
2 also are particular to a culture – for example those establishing and
3 refining a pre-legal concept of property. So most people will have some
4 inclination to do the intuitively cooperative thing in a wide range of
5 coordination problems, prisoner’s dilemmas and free-riding situations,
6 especially when the person or persons they would be cooperating with
7 are of a similar background. One reason that similarity of background,
8 and superficial signs of it, typically make people more cooperative is the
9 greater likelihood that the other will share an understanding of what
10 counts as cooperation and when it is called for. (The concept of the
11 intuitively cooperative action is not completely unproblematic. But it is
12 not the object of worry here.)

13 Many people are disposed to routine cooperation with many other
14 people. They’re good neighbours. Lend them your lawn mower and it
15 will come back in good shape. Cooperation is facilitated by empathy,
16 which I will characterise vaguely as the capacity to understand the
17 experiences and aims of another from that other person’s point of view.
18 (There is a lot more to say here, see the essays in Coplan and Goldie, **AQ1**
19 forthcoming.) Of course there is a lot of fine structure here, and varia-
20 tion between people who are good neighbours in different ways. This is
21 partly captured in the variety of virtue terms found in different cultures.
22 Very specific advice about how to treat others is contained in traditional
23 moral codes. Specific suggestions about the structure of the norms
24 that can be extracted from such codes are found in the works of moral
25 philosophers. Of course, these are often of great rigour and intellectual
26 complexity. It may be that some such philosophical theory is right. And
27 it may be that some moral code is the one that sufficiently thoughtful
28 people would adopt. The two claims are independent. For myself, I am
29 confident only of the more superficial facts that people need to
30 cooperate and that cooperation needs a certain mentality which is
31 found to a fair degree among most people. For many purposes that
32 is enough. (The game-theoretical tradition in moral philosophy,
33 from David Gauthier to Ken Binmore, develops this attitude in great
34 detail, but often in the end does not say more than I have in this
35 paragraph.)

36 Since people are often cooperative, in fact often go out of their way
37 to be helpful, it is noticeable when they are not. People can be selfish,
38 short-sighted, petty, uncharitable and unsympathetic. (The beginning
39 of a long list.) There is a vague line here between actions which though
40 uncooperative are within the permissible limits and those which evoke
41 explicit disapproval. In fact we have a variety of attitudes here, from

1 grumbling to condemnation, and depending on the society and on the
2 relation between the people different attitudes from this range will be
3 engaged. (Think of a man who refuses to lift a finger to help with house-
4 work.) Since cooperation is facilitated by empathy, uncooperativeness
5 is facilitated by its lack, by indifference, anomie or detachment. The
6 subtlest form of un-empathy is failure to attend carefully to another
7 person, which can coexist with kind intentions.

8 To fail as a good neighbour is not to be an enemy. Indifference to anothe-
9 er's good is not to want their harm. We do sometimes wish harm on others,
10 wanting them to fail or suffer. Sometimes this is the result of a basic human
11 trait of thinking of people as opponents, whose good must automatically
12 be bad for one. There are two kinds of archetypal enemies: members of
13 groups which are in conflict with one's own group, and individuals in
14 one's own group who are conspiring or manoeuvring to frustrate one's
15 ambitions. Simpleminded enmity usually mischaracterises the situation:
16 there are very few truly zero-sum situations. But it is one that we are easily
17 subject to. It would be a very rare person who did not take some satisfac-
18 tion in the downfall of someone who had opposed her plans for years,
19 even if that downfall was inconvenient in terms of current intentions.
20 Another motive for wanting harm to others is to bring them down to our
21 own level. It is pleasant to see a proud or powerful person slip on a banana
22 peel. The proud or powerful person does not have to be an enemy.

23 Cooperation, empathy, indifference, enmity are aspects of human
24 interaction. They involve one person's feelings or actions towards
25 another. Not everything that is an object of approval or disapproval is
26 like that. When someone slips on the ice, rather than on a banana peel
27 deliberately placed in his way, we say 'that's bad' (sometimes). People
28 get cancer or depression; their projects fail for bad luck or want of ideas;
29 well-intentioned people fail to agree and end up in disastrous conflict.
30 Bad things happen: plagues, famines and floods. We wish that these did
31 not happen. We regret their occurrence though no one does or should
32 feel remorse about them. It is as if fate or the gods treat us as enemies,
33 and this is how some people mistakenly think of them. Among the
34 causes of this attitude to disaster is a tendency to personify causation
35 and an inability to accept the reality of random processes.

36 Putting these distinctions together, we have small-scale everyday unde-
37 sirable, which divide into failures of cooperation and failures of luck, and
38 large-scale awful events, which divide into atrocities and disasters. Many
39 cases combine several elements of each, and the lines between them are
40 not sharp, but there are fundamentally different things going on. One
41 dimension of contrast is between lack of cooperation and malice, failure

1 to produce a potential good and production of actual harm. Another
2 dimension contrasts goods and harms produced by human agency and
3 those produced by chance or natural causes. On both dimensions there is
4 a range from minor misfortunes to enormous disasters or atrocities.

5 The English word 'evil' can disguise how different these dimensions
6 are. Epidemics are evils, and murderers are evil. But the microbes that
7 produce the epidemics are not evil and the evil actions of some evil
8 persons do not result in evils, because of their incompetence or the
9 compensating actions of others. I shall speak of disasters and of atrocities,
10 and of bad behaviour and misfortune. I shall avoid the word 'evil'
11 when it is important to be clear what kind of undesirable event is in
12 question. (I have done some work on unscrambling the concept of evil
13 and the quirks of the English word 'evil' in Morton 2004.)

14 15 9.2 The continuity puzzle¹

16
17 Contrast small broken promises with minor rudeness. As an example of
18 the first think of missing an appointment which one has made personally
19 with an individual acquaintance in order to indulge a whim. And
20 as an example of the second think of an unnecessarily sharp remark on
21 someone's appearance, expressing a bad mood one happens to be in.
22 A small-scale failure of cooperation and a small-scale failure of good will.
23 We react differently to them. We may disapprove of both, but in different
24 ways. Liars and promise-breakers are doing wrong, and rude people are
25 just rude. We think of the person who has broken her promise as having
26 acted immorally. We think of the rude person as indulging a not very
27 attractive character trait, in a way that is within his rights even though it
28 may not reflect well on him. Our judgement in the first case is of the act,
29 and of the second of the person. Moreover our judgements of people's
30 personalities are typically not well focussed around a moral/non-moral
31 distinction: we are just inclined to like the person less.

32 Another way of putting it: you can do what you should with bad
33 grace, bruisingly, and you've still done what you should. But you cannot
34 cover your failure to do what you should with kindness or consideration
35 or respect. Of course this is not meant to suggest that it is
36 alright to be rude or insensitive, but just that judgements about this
37 have a different impact on our moral thinking than judgements about
38 small-scale obstructiveness or dishonesty. Politeness and consideration
39 in small matters is analogous to supererogation in more serious affairs,
40 valuable but not required. Suppressing your sharp retort is like falling
41 on a tiny grenade.

1 Now contrast big broken promises with serious cruelty. As an example
2 of the first think of reneging on an offer to buy a house, which one had
3 made only in order to prevent a sale to someone else. As an example of
4 the second think of grinding a lighted cigarette into someone's face as
5 a warning that one's threats should be taken seriously. A medium-scale
6 failure of cooperation and a medium-scale failure of good will. (If you
7 think that these are large-scale you don't know the world we live in.)
8 In these cases we do react to both with moral outrage. People should
9 not falsify expectations that they have deliberately created, and peo-
10 ple should not inflict serious pain on others. If anything, our sense of
11 wrong is greater in the second case. After all, if the offer was made in a
12 way that is not legally enforceable then the other person should have
13 known that there might be trouble, and economic agents often create
14 an illusory impression of their intentions in order to give themselves
15 freedom of manoeuvre.

16 To complete the pattern compare an enormous broken promise with
17 hideous cruelty. Think of the president of a country deciding not to
18 honour a mutual defence pact with a neighbouring country which had
19 got itself into a pointless and potentially catastrophic war. In this case
20 breaking one's promise may save many lives. Contrast this with the
21 actions of a sadistic killer, raping and murdering victims in part for the
22 pleasure of seeing their terror. There is absolutely no doubt about which
23 we condemn more, and have more revulsion for.

24 There is a general phenomenon here. When the stakes are low
25 we put more weight in our moral judgements, our opinions about
26 what people ought to or must do, on cooperation rather than on
27 goodwill or absence of malice. The higher the stakes get the lower
28 the importance of cooperation in comparison with goodwill. In
29 the extreme, when the numbers of people seriously affected are
30 high, or individuals are in danger of awful harm, almost noth-
31 ing matters except the intention to avoid suffering. This is not
32 an arbitrary asymmetry: the point of everyday social interaction
33 is that the cumulative effect of cooperation with respect to what
34 are normally small stakes is a general benefit. On the other hand
35 in extraordinary large-scale issues we have departed from the run-
36 of-the-mill profitable interaction and our focus instead is on risk-
37 management, on not losing too much.

38 There is a lot more to say about the pattern here, and it calls for more
39 work defining more carefully what the factors whose relative impor-
40 tance changes are, and what is involved in the contrast between lower
41 and higher stakes. I will not do any of this work here. I will assume that

1 there is a real phenomenon to explain, though it could do with more
2 description, and discuss its causes and consequences.

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

38

39

40

41

9.3 When people come into their own

You have two neighbours. The person on your right is a model neighbour, returning borrowed tools on time and in good condition, telling you of dangerous situations in the neighbourhood, catching your dog when it has got loose and sheltering your children when they come back from school and you are not there. The person on your left is far from ideal as a neighbour, occasionally taking tools from your garage without telling you, coming home singing loud happy songs late at night and putting out trash in an insecure way that stray dogs and ravens can get at. So you have more regular neighbourly commerce with the neighbour on the right. Then one year moral disaster strikes and the social fabric is torn. The country is governed by members of a majority who maintain their fragile hold on public opinion by suppression of a minority. You have defended the rights of the minority, but the situation has moved from political debate to physical action, and members of the minority and those who support them are being rounded up for no one knows what mistreatment. You fear for your safety and for the future of your country. You plan to disappear from public view and work in secret opposition. But you need a safe haven for your children, and you need it in a hurry. You could appeal to one of your neighbours. You realise that you know very little about them besides their superficial behaviour as neighbours and the fact that they are both of the majority group. Which one should you approach?

Here is a way you should *not* reason. 'The neighbour on the right has always been friendly and cooperative, so the evidence is that she is a good person, so she will take personal risks, if need be, to protect my children.' That is treacherous thinking for several reasons. In the first place the personal characteristics that sustain judgements of moral character in low-stakes cases are reactions to situations of a very limited variety. Social psychology tells us that human behaviour is less consistent from case to case than we tend to assume, even within a given social context, and inference from one context to a very different one is even more dubious. Moreover the fact that your neighbour on the right is cooperative in small everyday matters suggests that she may appreciate the goodwill of those around her, and be uncomfortable with the lack of it. Such a person is unlikely to stand up to the opinion of a majority. Cooperative people are often conformists, and indeed a preference

AQ2

1 for conformity makes many everyday interactions proceed much more
2 smoothly. So some of the possible causes of cooperative behaviour in
3 low-stakes situations are possible barriers to moral insight and moral
4 courage in high-stakes situations.

5 One might indeed reason in the opposite direction. 'My neighbour
6 on the left is nonconformist and independent-minded. He makes up
7 his own ideas about what to do, not particularly trying to please those
8 around him. So if either of the two neighbours is able to see through
9 the dominant public mood, it is more likely to be him.' Small-scale bad
10 behaviour is certainly no guarantee that someone will do the right thing
11 in a crisis, but some forms of bad behaviour – rebelliousness, lack of
12 deference, inappropriate reflectiveness, insubordination, cantankerous-
13 ness, a self-willed mentality – are correlated, roughly and weakly, with
14 resistance to large-scale atrocity. And since some of the characteristics
15 that foster small-scale good behaviour also foster spinelessness in the
16 face of atrocity, we have reasons at least to consider the bad neighbour
17 as a possible good resource in a crisis.

18 These considerations raise the startling possibility that there may
19 be no such thing as a good person, that is, a person who can be abso-
20 lutely counted on to do the right thing in all circumstances. Of course
21 such people must be very rare, on anyone's account, and of course any
22 account of moral competence will have to take account of the fact that
23 some situations are just too complicated for any real human being to
24 find the best response. (I have discussed such situations in Morton
25 [2007].) But the possibility being raised now is that there may be no
26 pattern of moral development that results in an agent very likely to sat-
27 isfy the requirements of morality throughout its range. Developing the
28 characteristics and skills that make one good in one kind of situation
29 may make one less good in others. (And this in turn suggests another
30 kind of startling possibility, that deeply embedded aspects of moral phi-
31 losophy may mislead us about the nature of moral life, in a way that
32 can interfere with vital shared aims. That is certainly not a topic for this
33 paper. But it would concur with remarks Bernard Williams makes in a
34 number of places. See particularly Williams (1972).)

35 Even if one does not appeal to the ideal of the morally good person,
36 one may think that some standard human virtues, such as honesty or
37 kindness, will operate in the same way at low and high stakes. Well,
38 this is just the kind of theory-based intuition that may or may not be
39 psychologically real. It is a particularly important instance of the cur-
40 rent debate over the psychological plausibility of virtue ethics, as found
41 in Doris (2002), Harman (1999) and Sreenivasan (2002).

9.4 The positive function of something

Humour is often malicious. The most interesting people often have an unkind streak. Leadership sometimes builds on egotism. If the human race consisted entirely of perfect neighbours and citizens, then life would be poorer for all, including the good citizens. Children's malice is a good example. Children delight in some misfortunes of some grown-ups. A stuck-up teacher sitting on a pin is a wonderful event. A policeman who takes a heavy tumble while running after a kid drawing graffiti is an object of delight. When the mayor cannot prevent herself farting while addressing the school, the event is a gift from the gods. The children's delight in these things is not kind and need not be innocent. They know that the mayor is mortally embarrassed, that the policeman may have broken a leg, and that the teacher's bottom may hurt for days. Still, they appreciate the nicely placed suffering. Just as they appreciate the naughty ones among them who frustrate the attempts of teachers and parents to make everything go smoothly and to get everyone to work and play peacefully together. (I take it that these remarks are in tune with those in Radford (1996), pp. 137–44.)

We are all children in this respect. We appreciate minor misdeeds. Especially, of course, when the pin is not in your own backside. The traditional attitude to this is that it shows an unregenerate pre-moral sensibility that must be suppressed in more serious matters, but which is usually too much trouble to prevent or entirely to weed out. That traditional attitude misses something vital, though. We do not just tolerate the childish appreciation of the naughty, we approve of it. We think there is something wrong with a child who does not share in it, and as parents and teachers we find ourselves in dilemmas, torn between our responsibility to maintain order and our desire that the children be properly human. We even encourage a certain level of inconsiderateness in children, for example in some sports, though we are biased as parents and teachers by our need to maintain order.

There is an obvious explanation of our undercurrent of approval of childish bad behaviour. We know that the characteristics that are revealed in it include traits of character that may be of vital importance when things get really serious. When bullies need to be stood up to, when institutional injustices need to be addressed, or when a few people stand against many, the grown-up naughty children may be just what we need. Or so I argued in the previous section. I would not describe this as a positive function of *evil*. But it is a positive function, a vital function, of a predisposition to awkward behaviour. And what

1 the real psychology is here, linking the maverick hero and the disobedi-
2 ent child, is and ought to be treated as a very open and very important
3 question.

4

5 **9.5 Real atrocity**

6

7 Awkward behaviour is nothing, on the scale of what people do to one
8 another. There is no need to list examples. One can accept what I have
9 been saying, without thinking that there is a positive function of *any-*
10 *thing like* real atrocity.

11 The crucial difference lies in a point I made above. Our comparative
12 tolerance of small-scale insensitivity to others' distress has a reason. In
13 fact it has two reasons. The one I have just been discussing, the func-
14 tion that difficult character can play in obstructing atrocity, is prob-
15 ably the smaller one in the formation of most common sense moral
16 mentalities, since unreflective common sense is willing to put up with
17 a certain amount of not too noticeable horror for the sake of a smooth
18 ride. A bigger reason is the shift in focus between smaller and larger
19 scales. Small-scale is where most human interaction happens, and we
20 count on it to produce the benefits of social life. So, to put it simplisti-
21 cally, maximising shared utility is the principal focus. At larger scales
22 we are concerned with larger, rarer, events and histories, with usually
23 unpredictable dangers and benefits. One focus of moral thinking then
24 is damage-limitation, disutility-minimisation. So we are intolerant of
25 large-scale cruelty and aggression just because at large scales minimising
26 just that is a major concern.

27 So, given a small breach of civility or kindness, even small-scale mal-
28 ice, conventional reaction can turn away, disapproving but choosing
29 to concentrate more on the main business of coordinated action. And
30 less conventional reaction can condone, thinking of potential benefits
31 of blocking complacency and too-easy authority. Neither will happen
32 with large-scale malice. We don't look away, and the harm is a major
33 concern. This does not mean that atrocities cannot have desirable
34 consequences, or that on occasion we are not forced to do or allow
35 awful things in order to prevent even worse. But that is different from
36 the kind of acceptance of small-scale bad behaviour that I have been
37 describing. It is like neither our tolerance of a rude but helpful colleague
38 nor our tacit encouragement of a cheeky child.

39 Still, one may think that we can have another kind of approval of
40 larger evils, based on the consequences that sometimes flow from them.
41 Many of the essays in this collection discuss this point, and I am not

PROOF

Adam Morton 137

1 going to engage directly with it. Here is a thought-experiment, however,
2 that connects these attitudes with the issues I have been discussing.

3 A war is about to break out that will result in the deaths of many
4 people and the ruin of many lives, all pointlessly. You have the power
5 to stop it, by one simple action. But this simple action will prevent your
6 only child from having the only child she will ever be able to have.
7 Assume that the details can be told so that the action really is avail-
8 able to you, really will have this consequence, and really is the only
9 thing you can do to prevent the war. In effect, you would be sacrificing
10 your potential grandchild to prevent the deaths of many actual people.
11 Should you do it?

12 Of course: I take it that the choice is not even controversial, even
13 though it might be difficult to make. You should do it even if you are
14 sure that human history will go on in its usual way, with other wars and
15 the ruination of other lives. Otherwise you will have counted the lives
16 of these many people for less than that of one (who doesn't yet exist).

17 Now suppose that you do not take the action. And suppose that people
18 are bemoaning the war and its effects. Can you say 'well, it wasn't that
19 bad; after all, if it hadn't happened my grandchild would not exist'? Of
20 course not. You cannot wish away the existence of someone you love,
21 and to that extent you have some sort of gladness that you did not do
22 the simple act. But you should still think you should have done it; you
23 should feel guilty for not having done it, complicit in many deaths. And
24 if you think there is a god who did not perform such a simple act, you
25 may be glad that he did not, because your grandchild then exists, but
26 that should not block you from thinking that the god did wrong, that
27 he was a morally inferior god for allowing the war to happen.

28 (I take myself here to be arguing against the attitude expressed in the
29 quotation from Robert Adams at the head of this paper. It is curious that
30 Adams takes himself to be arguing against Camus in the quotation also
31 above, although Camus is in favour of single happy days, as both Adams
32 and I are, though, being nearer to my view and against something that
33 is similar but not the same as Adams' view, he does not think that this
34 does or would justify past oppression. I suspect Adams has been misled
35 by the translation.)

36 I said that you have 'some sort of gladness' that you did not do the
37 act. It is hard to find the right words for the attitude in question. It
38 is not acceptance or approval or any delight. It is an attitude one can
39 have to the holocaust or the destruction of Hiroshima or the murder of
40 a neighbour. The core of the attitude is something very weak, simply
41 the recognition that something good came of the event. This is much

1 weaker than the attitude one can have to the cheeky child, the neigh-
2 bour on the left or the insensitive colleague. In those cases one can take
3 it as a good thing that they are the way they are. The difference in our
4 attitudes goes deep, and is rooted in deeply engrained asymmetries in
5 our attitudes to human interactions at larger and smaller scales.²
6

7 **Notes**
8

- 9 1. Some readers may take this section as a digression. They may think that the
10 main claims of the paper would be better supported with an empirical argu-
11 ment. Empirical data would be welcome! But I also think that an analysis of
12 our attitudes to good and bad behaviour is needed, and this section is my
13 attempt to supply grounds for what I realise will seem wrong to some. The
14 argument is not as powerful as I hope eventually to make it.
15 2. I have been discussing related topics with Jennifer Welchman and Wes Cooper
16 for several years. I am grateful to Wes and to Justin Julea for comments on
17 a draft of this chapter. I also profited from discussions of an ancestor of it at
18 Western Ontario and Oxford.
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41

QUERY FORM

BOOK TITLE:	PF-Tabensky
CHAPTER NO:	Chapter-9

PROOF

Queries and / or remarks

Query No.	Query / remark	Response
AQ1	Please update this reference.	
AQ2	Do you mean <for no apparent reason>?	