

Act Types, Act Tokens, and the Sovereignty of Conscience

To be a rational being is to grapple with moral problems. Our pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of what is helpful to human life and the avoidance of what is harmful. As easy as that may sound, it involves the utmost of our diligence to achieve. Our happiness is not an individual pursuit, but a social one. I cannot be happy on my own, and my own happiness consists largely in the happiness of my loved ones. For this reason, moral enlightenment is a joint venture among us all, and it is all of our business how all of us are making out in the struggle to be happy.

This struggle for moral enlightenment largely involves the moral evaluation of acts. Talk about such can get confusing because the term ‘act’ is intrinsically ambiguous; it can refer either to act token or act type.

An act type is a general heading by which to categorize individual acts: homicide, stealing, helping, giving alms, engaging in sexual intercourse, lying, gambling, working out, etc. As such, act types are simple, and their evaluation is straightforward. Each act type can be objectively evaluated according to its intrinsic pros and cons apart from being confused with any other act type or real-world incidental detail that might mitigate, nullify, or exacerbate judgment.

An act token, in contrast, is the individual action embedded fully within a real-life context, liable to being categorized under multiple, perhaps even indefinitely many act types. In order to properly judge an act token would require not only judging it according to each of the act types under which it may fall, but also prioritizing those act types and weighing the pros and cons to make an overall moral evaluation, which is arguably a task that non one but the agents themselves are in a position to carry out. This is because real-life situations include not only external worldly factors, but internal factors of the agents’ life experience, along with the life experiences of those relevant to the choice to be made and with whom the agents relate.

From this emerges a thesis of the sovereignty of conscience: Whereas all persons are equally well qualified to judge act types, only the agent is in a position to knowledgeably judge act tokens. The best outsiders can do is make reasonable probabilistic inferences. This, when I deliberate, choose to act, and carry out my action, I am as a moral agent always doing so either in good conscience or bad conscience: good conscience if my choice was based on diligent, honest, truth-oriented deliberation, bad conscience if it was not. No one but God, if God exists, can knowledgeably judge my conscience to be bad or good on any occasion, but can only at best make reasonable probabilistic inferences about it.

To be sure, having a good conscience does not make one’s judgment correct; but mistakes made in good conscience are self-correcting. For an incorrect judgment eventually produces bad consequences, which will prompt reevaluation. Those of bad conscience, however, are not likely to respond in this manner, since they have bought into their self-deception and will be motivated to deny, ignore, or explain away the bad consequence as due to something other than their own incorrect choice. Alas, for those of bad conscience, the consequences will have to be severe to prompt reevaluation of deceived judgments, sometimes known as “hitting bottom”.

Thus, there is no such thing as a universal casuistry, or a moral theory capable of yielding a knowledgeable judgment by exterior application of the theory alone of all act tokens – or of any act token, for that matter. By “exterior application” I mean that the moral knowledge to be

gained of act tokens is to be gained in large part interiorly. It cannot even in principle be comprehensively “grasped” or predicted solely via the exterior modelling of theories. In other words, the conscience is not just a stand-in steward awaiting a comprehensive moral casuistry to replace it. In this sense, the conscience – everyone’s conscience – is irreplaceably sovereign.

This is no capitulation to relativism or subjectivism. Moral theory *is* capable of objective, universal judgments of act types. Of course, this task is an infinite one, and we are only equipped to progress toward knowledge in a finite manner. Doing so ad infinitum, we are capable of developing more and more refined moral vision. Since enterprises of knowing are social ones, we will, in the absence of setbacks caused by deceit, prejudice, or closed-mindedness, progress throughout history to greater moral awareness spanning over the distance of human history, passing on our gains to those who come after us.

To be sure, the conscience is not sovereign in the sense that it sets its own standards *ex nihilo*. The conscience does not invent morality; it discovers it. Each of us has obligations to ourselves and one another, paramount among which is to *be* conscientious: to deliberate diligently and honestly over our choices. The failure to do this is our only sin – against ourselves as well as others.

A critic may doubt all this, wondering why we should make such an exception for moral theory as opposed to all other kinds of theorizing. But there are no exceptions being made here. Theory, by its very nature, does not cover everything, but only covers data manifolds. Except for in specially tailored and limited artificial cases, data manifolds, either at any one time or ever, are never comprehensive of a field of inquiry, but are partial in nature. Their predictive value extends to observations yet to be made. But not even all possible observations completely constitute experience. As Martin Buber described it, experience is divided into the *Ich -Es* (I - it) and the *Ich-Du* (I -thou). Only the *Ich-Es* is subject to theorization. Albeit this may include all kinds of explanatory takes even on *Ich-Du*, or relationship experience, in its rawness it always lies past the ultimate reach of theory.

Theory, in short, is modelling, and modelling is a finite activity. But experience is infinite, therefore, although theory can grow and improve without limit, it will never comprehend its object. Although we can and do make models of infinite objects, e.g. the set of natural numbers, even these are finite models of something infinite in only a definite, countable number of aspects. The model becomes a sort of stand-in for the infinite object itself, which had already been grasped pre-theoretically, but only in a vague way, what Aristotle called the “rudimentary universal”. This use of theory as stand-in for the object is fine as long as we keep quite clear in our minds the thing for which the theory stands in. Moral theory can never stand in as a substitute for conscience in judging the acts – act tokens - of our experience.

We feel the impact of this point more regarding moral theory because that is where the stakes are highest. Whether our treatment of Pluto has led us to a more accurate understanding of the universe or not will never come back to haunt us. But getting moral theory wrong can and will haunt us. Misusing moral theory to try to make it be and do more than that for which it is fit is ruinous.

In short, theories are models, and therefore are about types, not tokens, or in Platonic terms, forms, not individuals. Theory is invaluable to us in coming to better and better understanding of things. But to do theory requires a constantly refreshed pre-theoretic awareness of the object of study. If we lose that, theory just floats off like a cloud into limbo.

