

A Plea for Acknowledgment: Reflections on Finding Human Reasons for Moral Action

John R. Wright
State University of New York at Stony Brook

I. Compassion Fatigue and the Dramatic Structure of Moral Agency

Journalists in the United States now speak of something called ‘compassion fatigue,’ by which they mean an exhaustion of their readers’ and viewers’ ability to respond emotionally to the concerns of people experiencing poverty, famine and disease, especially beyond the borders of the U.S.¹ This phenomenon is said to be a product of our time and to occur among the fortunate occupants of those social positions that are regularly called to moral action, rather than the initiators of calls for assistance. Although the term could obviously be recruited for morally dubious ends (e.g., said with a sigh by a wealthy miser as he declines to donate to a worthy charity), there can be little doubt that it corresponds to a phenomenon that is real and that is related to the present confluence of vast numbers of people populating the earth, unprecedented levels of communication, and very great global stratification. There is, I think, a genuine problem faced by moral agents with bounded capacities and time, who feel pulled in the direction of every apparently worthy plea and so despair about responding to any. Stanley Cavell, in his essay on *King Lear*, formulated this situation admirably:

We no longer know what is and is not news, what is and is not a significant fact of our present history, what is and is not relevant to one’s life. The newspaper tells me that everything is relevant, but I cannot really accept that because it would mean that I do not have one life, to which some things are relevant and some not. I cannot really deny it either because I do not know why things happen as they do and why I am not responsible for any or all of it. And so to the extent that I still have feeling to contend with, it is a generalized guilt, which only confirms my paralysis; or else I convert the disasters and sensations reported to me into topics of conversation, for mutual entertainment, which in turn irritates the guilt.²

Our extensive knowledge of suffering throughout the world imposes overwhelming moral demands that usually exceed our individual capacity for response; in the course of time, we may even fail to feel the generalized guilt this situation sometimes inspires in Cavell. A moral philosopher could respond somewhat coldly, but perhaps rightly, by saying that it is the domain of the psychologist to contend with the paralyzing guilt or apathy generated by not attending to demands that in any case could not be fulfilled. If we are meeting the moral demands that somehow impinge upon us, or at least meeting those demands that are within our capacity to meet, then

we are, under some moral conceptions, being rational, and there is nothing more to the story.

But I think there is a larger philosophical story to be told about this situation. The danger is that our apathy and fatigue may not be a mere psychological condition that simply needs treatment. It may be a sign that our collective sense of the ordinary and acceptable has become fundamentally out of order, so that there is no obvious standard to measure our apathy or moral sensitivity. In saying so, we need not imply that there actually is some real but neglected external standard against which we should measure this sense. Rather, there are some grounds for saying that we should be attuned to something (perhaps of our own making or choosing) that seems now shockingly ignored. One explanation of this predicament might be that our sense of the ordinary has been overwhelmed or 'colonized' by the media. Yet, this explanation implicates itself in the very problem that it attempts to diagnose; that is, it encourages us to maintain a theatrical relation to the world, viewing it as a stage unfolding before us. By placing responsibility for inaction on the media, this explanation encourages a relation to the world that may be more fundamental to our unresponsiveness.³ We are responsible for that relation, and so perhaps 'compassion fatigue' really is, in a deeper sense, morally dubious, insofar as it displaces blame for our unresponsiveness. Perhaps instead, it should signal to us a responsibility to create an environment in which moral response by finite agents is possible.

It is blameworthy to languish in inaction when we have knowledge of suffering, but our responsibility is not necessarily for any given moral duty or aggregate of overlooked duties. Rather, it is for our (possibly passive) contribution to a moral system that has failed to provide an occasion, or one might say, a *stage* for us to act on our own motives and reasons. So, on the one hand, our responsibility is for the work, in part aesthetic and in part political, involved in creating the preconditions for finite moral agents to bridge their motives into particular situations.⁴ On the other hand, given the existence of such preconditions, our task is to become conscious of that stage and the possibility of taking a place upon it. The work of theory in this regard is to bring us to this awareness and to overcome cognitive obstacles to reaching it.

Pursuant to this end, Cavell attempted to show that the inheritance of modern epistemology is implicated in our failure to be present on the stage of moral action. This development placed great emphasis on achieving a relation to the world through reason, unmediated by the divine. In establishing this relation, knowledge in the mode of certainty was taken to be essential.⁵ So, when faced with the immense suffering in the world, we may be tempted to rationalize our incapacity to remedy this suffering by appealing to its uncertainty. In particular, skepticism about other minds intervenes to make us wonder whether we can *really know* if anyone is in pain. For Cavell, this employment of reason emphasizes *knowledge*, especially in the form of

certainty, but has utterly neglected the importance of *acknowledgment*. Were it possible to know (to be certain) of the suffering of others, Cavell argues that it would nevertheless be insufficient. In order to act, I must enter a moral relation with the sufferer. I must acknowledge the pain; I must make myself present by revealing myself within the situation of those who suffer.⁶ And that task of self-revelation is a practical, not a theoretical difficulty. One must overcome the difficulty of presenting oneself as a separate and distinct being so as to respond to the situation from one's own singular position, while also acknowledging the impossibility of taking up the other's position.⁷ Hence, recognizing the importance of acknowledgment is itself difficult, but also essential to rendering our moral reflection compatible with our humanity, since we have only one life to which only some things can be relevant.

The need for acknowledgment points out the importance of what I would like to call the 'dramatic structure of moral agency.' With this term, I mean to pick out two aspects of our agency necessary for acknowledgment: our mutual separateness from one another and the fact that morality occurs on a limited 'stage' (or within a horizon) wherein we make ourselves mutually present to one another. The apathetic individual with a vast knowledge of suffering may have motives which could serve as the basis of altruistic reasons for action, but she has yet to step into an arena wherein those reasons and motives can come into play through the acknowledgment that makes some situation her own. Insofar as this part of our moral lives is hidden or forgotten, such irrationality in the ethical life of our society compromises us. We are unable to act on motives we have, and we are thereby put under a demand to bring about the conditions for our own moral realization. Here, I intend to engage in philosophical reflection as an attempt to bring about consciousness of the dramatic aspect of our ethical lives within the context of contemporary moral theory, thereby extending Cavell's reflections.

Much moral theory has concentrated on unearthing a motivational basis for moral action that applies to all human beings, whether they recognize it or not, so that failure to act on reasons that appeal to those motivations can be said to be a genuine failing, a lack of rationality. Most contributors to this project admit the validity of what Christine Korsgaard has termed the "internalism requirement," that is, the requirement that all genuine reasons for action be capable of motivating rational persons.⁸ Practical reasoning viewed through this now widely accepted requirement⁹ must make some appeal to the "subjective motivational set" of an agent, reasoning from that motivational structure to a given action.¹⁰ Internalists hold that we just cannot sensibly say of anyone that they have a reason to do some action in the absence of any possible connection between that reason and the motives of an agent. Among internalists, however, there is disagreement over whether there are unconditional principles of reason applying to action, drawing on motives universally

present among human beings and that can form the basis for morally substantive charges of irrationality across the boundaries of communities. Here, moral universalists such as Thomas Nagel and Korsgaard line up against anti-universalists like Richard Rorty and Bernard Williams.

Drawing on Rorty and Korsgaard, I will proceed to briefly sketch the antipodes of this debate. Both neglect to consider, I think, the dramatic structure of agency and consequently ignore an important *human* aspect of our moral lives. The internalism requirement is important to understanding the nature of moral deliberation, but must be supplemented. We must recognize that without the acknowledgment of an agent's position within some moral scene, 'irrationality' cannot be legitimately claimed of her but rather may apply to the critic, insofar as the latter has failed to raise a claim that is intelligible to the agent. Raising moral criticisms against someone is not a matter of criticizing the validity of practical syllogisms, regardless of the agent's situation, but rather a matter of personal confrontation in which the rationality of my criticisms is grounded in their relevance to the position of the agent and the legitimacy of my position in raising the criticisms.¹¹ If I receive moral criticism from a source that can claim moral intimacy with me and speak relevantly to my position, and if I act against the critic's advice without offering legitimate reasons (excuses, perhaps or at least anything that acknowledges the *relevance* of the criticism), then I can be deemed irrational. This grounds rationality on some very bare, but universal features of moral situations and agency within them; it is the universality of these features, not of motives, upon which we should rely in moral criticism.

We can also say that irrationality applies to the agent indirectly, for when she has failed to act on her own motives, it is the ethical life of the community in which she is complicit that has compromised her. It has prevented her from bringing her motives into relation with a situation that calls for action through acknowledgment. Indeed, it is only through taking into account the limitations of an ethical community that we can build a worldwide community in which acknowledgment and action is possible and demanded when suffering occurs among any people. It would require building a vast, complex stage, wherein we are able to engage in an array of exchanges, of criticism, actions, and excuses, among an increasingly large moral community. Obligation, as a real moral force that makes inescapable demands on us, must be produced through an enactment grounded in our collective and individual striving to be a form of life characterized by moral concerns. These cosmopolitan aspirations often drive us toward a perfectionism that neglects the conditions within which human moral action is possible. Theory must help to reconcile us with the conditions under which a finite human agent can act through such concerns. My thesis, then, is that a theory of motivation must account for the dramatic structure of agency, that is, for the importance of making ourselves present as separate and

singular moral agents within a scene in which moral motives can be brought into play. Our reasoning is grounded not only on our own desires, valuations, loyalties and commitments, but these in turn must be practically (dramatically) connected to a situation in which they can be expressed. So, we are responsible to each other for building and continuing a world in which morality is made possible by creating a stage on which we can introduce our moral motives and reasons in a such a way as to bring ourselves individually to respond to them.

II. Humanity, Motivations, and Reason

For some moral philosophers of the Kantian stripe, the concept of humanity holds a central role in any compelling justification of our obligation toward those who suffer, as well as providing grounds for the disapproval, as irrational, of one who inflicts suffering. By this view, our motivation to respond morally to the suffering of others is a necessary component of our identity as humans, specifically as an outgrowth of our capacity for practical reasoning. Korsgaard has recently argued that because we find ourselves subjectively put into a position to make reflective choices (whatever their metaphysical status), we *should* therefore be able to give an account of what would constitute moral reasons for action and how they bind us.¹² Appealing to subjective evidence of our reflective nature, she argues that if we are to endorse our identity as creatures given to reason practically, we must make decisions out of respect for that identity.

For her, then, a version of Kant's reflective test, by which we endorse or reject particular impulses in light of our identification with humanity, constitutes moral reasoning together with its motivational basis.¹³ We are properly moral on this view only when we act on the basis of reasons that recognize the worth of our human identity as something shared with all of humanity, and we are motivated to recognize that worth of our identity as beings with practical reasoning as a condition of making any choices at all. The need to value our human identity is therefore implied by the fact that we are beings who engage in practical reasoning. If we fail to reason on the basis of the true value of our humanity, she argues, we can value nothing else and so make no reflective choices. Philosophy, for Korsgaard, plays an important role in clarifying the logical grounds of moral reflection, through connecting our practical reasoning to these deep and inescapable features of our identity. Yet questions have been raised in a neo-Humean and pragmatist vein about the efficacy or even the possibility of such appeals, and whether morality needs to be defined through such objective, necessary qualities.

Richard Rorty has argued that Kant, though well intentioned, in fact sent moral philosophy off in the wrong direction, that is, by engaging in a self-defeating pursuit of purity in attempting to identify our capacity to be moral with necessary features of

our identity.¹⁴ For Rorty, this pursuit has led moral philosophers to ignore the important role of paying attention to the empirical details of other's lives that could motivate us to be moral where rational argumentation simply fails. If we would only allow ourselves to be talked out of the unnecessary pursuit of purity, we could recognize that finding ourselves to have a shared susceptibility to pain and humiliation is sufficient to produce the 'us' that should lead to a response. After all, we also find ourselves to be liberals, committed to reducing the amount of suffering. No appeal to a necessary shared property is needed or, indeed, desirable, since an appeal to humanity, especially as defined through an appeal to rationality as a special property of humans, asks us to identify with something remote and abstract (especially beyond the borders of post-Enlightenment Western cultures) and is therefore unlikely to yield moral progress.

Rorty suggests that 'because she is a human being' is a "weak, unconvincing explanation of a generous action," and so it would work better to appeal for motivation to an identity "smaller and more local than the human race."¹⁵ He directly echoes Hume's claim that "the imagination is more affected by what is particular than by what is general."¹⁶ For this reason, literature (and philosophy redefined as literature) can better assist in our efforts to be moral. Literary works do not give us reasons to care grounded on some necessary feature of our identity, but rather help us through their empirical descriptions to "attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves, as well as to the fact of its occurrence in areas we had not noticed it."¹⁷ Rorty finds Korsgaard's Kantian route, through the philosophical apparatus of a core self, unnecessary and cumbersome. This approach reflects, to Rorty, a misconception of philosophy rooted on the "Platonic urge to say that every moral sentiment . . . should be based on the recognition of an objective quality in the recipient."¹⁸

So, for Rorty, the attempt to ground morality on human nature fails insofar as what it asks of us is in fact beyond our human capacities.¹⁹ If morality itself hangs on the moral metaphysician's conception of humanity, then morality is out of reach. Of course, by his view we may no longer be able to call 'irrational' those who fail to ameliorate suffering, but that may be nothing more than a term of abuse, and in any case there are perhaps more effective appeals to be made. For Rorty, the fact that we may be more likely to come to the aid of a koala writhing in pain than a pig is not irrational; there just is no better ground than the reactions they happen to inspire in us. Moral progress as the extension of feelings of sympathy and reduction of pain, rather than 'the truth' of our moral nature, should be our concern.²⁰

Hence we have an antinomy in moral philosophy between a camp that insists on the need for arriving at philosophically justified reasons for action grounded in an essential characteristic of human agents and another, building justification for our already given practices, that thinks the attempt to determine this essential human

nature is just philosophical sophistry. Rorty, in spite of his avowed desire to sidestep the ‘see-saw’ battles that characterize philosophical debates, has furthered one more. He does this not only by advocating a substantive, traditional notion of human nature (Hume’s), but also by assuming that if there is no such thing as moral knowledge, as purveyed by the Kantian (or any other cognitivist), then there is no basis for charges of irrationality. By contrast, Cavell attempted in [The Claim of Reason](#) to give a characterization of moral discourse and practical reasoning that would not take their failure to produce an agreed upon answer by a quasi-scientific method as tantamount to an admission of irrationality. Moral practice, for Cavell, has a specific logic that includes the possibility of disagreement. In this conception, there is philosophical role for the concept of ‘humanity’ in our reflection about morality, but not necessarily one that figures directly as a source of reasons for action. This notion of humanity will not serve in the role that it holds for the Kantian, as holding objective features of our individual identity from which we can extrapolate an invariable rational morality. Still, unlike the Rorty’s pragmatist view, the conception of humanity offered here, which draws our attention to the universal, dramatic foundation of moral practice, *will* allow us to define the possibility that our moral system is irrational in a more substantive sense.

III. What Calls for Moral Philosophy?

In spite of their opposition, each of the views I have outlined above emerge from a common, though unrecognized ground in what it is that creates the impulse to assume a philosophical voice with regard to morality (and Rorty is undoubtedly still doing this, even if to call for an end to it as something distinct from literary attempts to incite moral progress). I hold that they are both expressing a way of responding to a type of alienation identified by Cavell as something that “occurs *within* moral systems.”²¹ That is, the philosophical search for the nature of motivation bespeaks a way of losing orientation within a moral system felt only by those who are not monsters or systematic amoralists and thus beyond the pale of all moral systems. This is the possibility of feeling the anxiety of “not knowing one’s way about,” when one cannot take up any of the reasons that are offered to us by our moral community. It is this anxiety, I am claiming, that pushes us toward moral philosophizing in hopes that it will push us forcefully back; the question ‘why not be cruel?’ is an outgrowth of that anxiety. The thought that we would not have a compelling reason to respond to cruelty or the suffering of another is a fear that we could find ourselves outside the influence of any claim of morality, and that others might be outside its compulsion as well. Rorty’s dismissal of this kind of question is just a different way of responding to it philosophically.

A moral community can, however, fail to offer reasons that make an appeal to *me*. And so, for all the good reasons that can be thought of to help in the case of an

act of brutality, say a rape occurring in a busy area, there are well known cases where cries do go unheeded. None of these reasons succeeds in motivating anyone; even though most people would respond that something must be done to help, passers-by take various psychological routes away from the arena of morality. The plea gets deflected, and this deflection neutralizes our attempt to charge them with immorality afterward, since that charge often fails to make any claim on anyone who has failed to hear the appeal of morality in the first place. This is true if some are among those who might have been motivated to act if called upon directly, and so had the motives, but rationalized themselves away from acting on them.

There is an alarm quite understandably felt about this type of situation. This alarm is about the limited power of morality, an alarm about the fact that the clarity and force of its appeal never seems bold *enough*. It does not single me out. It does not compel me to act with the kind of force that it seems like it *should* have. This situation can provoke alienation from our moral system of the ‘why be moral?’ kind. At least one source of our need for moral philosophy arises out of this sense of alienation from what Cavell calls the “profoundly haphazard accumulations” that constitute a moral system (not a philosophical moral system, but the moral systems that are constituted by our moral upbringing). It is in how they react to the anxiety of this alienation that the approaches I have outlined vary. Each in its own way attempts to overcome or to bring us back from this alienation. The Kantian approach will involve an attempt to explicate, systematize and thereby justify our moral intuitions, finding within them some reasons for action that are moral ‘no matter what.’ The Rortian will attempt to undercut the questions that arise out of this alienation. He attempts to return us to the moral reasons that just happen to be at our disposal at this historical juncture.

On my view, neither of these approaches adequately treats the alienation that calls for moral philosophy. The Rortian does not directly engage it, but rather objectivizes the skeptic by performing a genealogy of the pathologies of philosophical thought. The Kantian creates a philosophical edifice that does not address the source of alienation, but rather attempts to make the moral law appear to have such force as would be needed to resolve our questions. Yet both the pragmatist and Kantian views ignore the real human difficulty that, on my view, are the sources of these disconcerting questions. The task to be met is one of helping to preserve the integrity of our moral community and taking up a cognitive responsibility to ensure that we collectively make sense to ourselves morally. To ignore the depth of the moral skeptic’s dissatisfaction in either way that I have outlined is to evade a question posed to our moral system, and possibly to insist on a rationality that it lacks. If one is so troubled by the fact of sympathizing with koalas but not pigs or by the failure of bystanders to respond to violence that one cannot find oneself morally, among us, our failure to respond may mean a failure to constitute a moral community. It means we are not

acting in accordance with the moral position to which we have committed ourselves in attempting to form a moral community.

A different kind of approach is needed to these questions that call morality itself into question. Humanity should figure, I think, not in our reasons for action, but rather, in an appeal to recall us to the dimensions of our form of life, the human, as one within which morality is possible, and, in its own way, compelling. There is need for an acknowledgment of the practical conditions within which moral action occurs, and to mark when we should cease to say that we are living within the bounds of morality at all (as when suffering becomes an object of knowledge). The skeptic's questions can emerge from real difficulties (not just subjective obstinacy) in finding a way to be moral even with moral motives and a well reasoning mind. Yet such phenomena as moral conflict, anonymity and saturation with moral demands tempt us to repudiate any grounds for responding to the other at all, and not necessarily because it seems irrational from an egoistic perspective. Rather, one might fall into alienation because of the difficulties of disclosing oneself and taking up a position that would allow us to proceed to moral action.

Cavell has thereby drawn our attention to the importance of the philosophical task and method of 'putting everything before us' in Wittgenstein's sense of assembling reminders about what we say,²² insofar as this process encourages us to acknowledge the dimensions of our form of life. The philosophical task, as Cavell has put it, is to bring about an acknowledgment of "human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our own skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge [or, I would add here, action]."²³ This acknowledgment does not, however, come simply as the result of acquiring a philosophical knowledge of human limitations, but rather from repeated treatment of our attempts to overstep the boundaries of the human. While acting to situate the moral skeptic's concerns within the practical (I will say 'dramatic') domain that is their home, it also fights a temptation toward moral hyperbole, or as Cavell has called it a 'moralization of the moral,' which reacts to the powerlessness of morality with a dehumanizing exaggeration of its demands, extending some set of demands to 'make every issue a moral issue.'²⁴

But is it necessary that we recognize ourselves and the limitations that we come across as '*human*'? First, appealing to the '*human*' points out the natural basis of my finitude, yet without necessarily fixing a specific body of knowledge about what constitutes being a human. In this employment, what it means to be human will have to be decided in the light of my difficulty in reconciling myself with my humanity. Here, I am appealing to the human as defining a particular capacity for suffering and responding. This can be determined neither a priori nor through studying empirically a range within which humans normally fall with respect to these

capacities, for this already supposes that we know what the human is. This reconciliation can be defined therefore only without invoking a definitive criterion of the human. Cavell has even suggested “there [may be] no marks or features or criteria or rhetoric by means of which to tell the difference [between the human and non-human, e.g., the automaton]” and yet, he insists, “it does not follow that this difference is unknowable or undecidable.” Rather, “the difference is the basis of everything there is for human beings to know, or say decide (like deciding to live), and to decide on no basis beyond or beside or beneath ourselves.”²⁵ Cavell, in his characteristically opaque language, contends here that the content of humanity is something for us to decide in a manner parallel to, but not identical with, Hamlet’s existential choice. It is *like* deciding whether to be or not in the sense that the proper criterion for that decision is most uncertain; if we are asking this question it seems that we have already indicated that morality itself does not provide an adequate answer. The decision itself will lend a sense to what one decides, in that from Hamlet’s position one will have decided what it means to live. Likewise, in deciding to be human we must decide on what it means to be human, yet do so in a way that makes sense to other humans. Before this decision, we cannot know our way about, we have lost our orientation; the choice signals our attempt to re-enter the ordinary, human world, and to be comprehensible to others. The way we attempt to re-enter the ordinary endows it with a particular sense, possibly extending our sense of what it means to be human. Although grappling with suicide is not the necessary consequence of skeptical alienation, they do share a common isolation, in the form of being confronted with a decision that can be decided by no one else. Each of us who falls into a moment of skeptical alienation has to decide how to be human, and thus we each participate in redefining what that means. There is a decision to be made about the content of the human, but not an unbounded decision, insofar as I must acknowledge some limits of knowledge and action in order to define myself as human.

Yet, this decision will not constitute the foundation for moral construction; that is, I will not emerge out of the decision about the human with the basis for rationally extrapolating a body of moral knowledge. Rather, I will emerge from it, if I do, with a sense of what remains in question, and in particular, the range of moral positions that I can take up. The Kantian conceals the difficulty and import of this decision behind an already decided notion of what defines humanity, in view of which we can then construct a ‘true’ moral system. This attempt bypasses a deeper responsibility: that each of us is dependent on each other for the maintenance or construction of a world in which our practices yield the possibility of recognizing ourselves in them as human. From there, philosophy may offer an invitation, laying out, as Wittgenstein did, so many ways in which we can presently take up our humanity, so many sketches of a human landscape where we might make a home.²⁶

Further, from this view it makes no sense to say, as Korsgaard does (not recognizing the sort of alienation I have spoken about) that we *ought* to take up our humanity by acting on the basis of our identity with the human as a moral imperative. As Rorty points out, what it means to be human within a given moral system is precisely the problem. To be a Muslim is to be something a Serb might like to consider sub-human.²⁷ In spite of the incredible barbarity that was wrought in order to fulfill that description by reducing the Muslims to an animal existence, Serbs effectively limit the extension of ‘human’ (as they hear it and use it, privately) to exclude Muslims. For a Serb to become alienated from such a moral community appears to us a positive development, and perhaps can be provoked in some by the fact that the capacity of this community to describe itself to us as ‘moral’ is compromised by their private construal of the human. Yet, to overcome alienation, to restore my intelligibility to myself as a moral being from *within* such a community, I must find a way of describing myself as human so that I can, at the same time, find a moral position that is my own. A plea to recognize my own humanity within such a moral community could only be offered by inventive artists and theorists who are able to find a mode of presenting the factual situation so that I am able to recognize an imaginative possibility of finding my humanity within it.²⁸ The possibility of acting within such a moral system may be crucial to social transformation, but for an alienated Serb, it is not likely to be brought about by being exhorted to respect an ‘ought’ that does not address that situation.

Acknowledging the role of skeptical alienation allows us to recognize that something may be drastically wrong with the moral system without invoking a (possibly non-existent) invariable standard. Through acknowledging the possibility of alienation, we also open the question of whether, among the possibilities open to me, there are any in this moral community through which I can affirm myself as a moral being. If the moral system in terms of which I am to frame my choice fails to allow that, then we can say that this moral system is irrational; moral existence within it may simply be impossible, as it likely was for some Germans in the Nazi era, as it may sometimes be in the United States. My commitments must then be to the political and aesthetic tasks that are required to redress that situation.

IV. Acknowledgment, Moral Criticism, and Reasons for Action

We must be reconciled with our human singularity and separation, and with the finitude of the scene within which morality occurs for human agents. It is a universal fact of human moral agency that it is carried out by singular individuals who are separate from one another insofar as no one can take up anyone else’s suffering and insofar as we are finite beings who must act within the limits of some scene. Each must respond to the other from her own position and so make herself present in her own singularity. One’s dramatic presence before another is a component of moral

agency usually regarded as of little philosophical interest. As a bare fact it certainly does not issue in the unconditional, universal moral imperatives that interest the Kantian. One may react to an acknowledged situation in a great variety of ways, including inaction. It also does not offer a recipe for moral progress, as the pragmatist desires. But the concept of acknowledgment does help us say something to how and where we offer moral criticism, and even about what can be considered a valid reason for action.

For one, moral criticism, unless offered by a moralizer, occurs within the context of a moral relationship. The moralizer offers criticisms without acknowledgment, criticisms that do not take my position into account and that claim an authority over me that has not been earned. Thus Korsgaard, for instance, could use the claimed philosophical insight into a priori features of human identity to leverage blanket criticisms. Yet Rorty points out that outside a post-Enlightenment European culture most people not only will not understand this view, but will be morally offended at the suggestion that one is obliged to treat people whom they do not think of as human as human. Rorty accuses the Kantian foundationalists of moralizing.²⁹ Still, Rorty suggests that we (inhabitants of post-Enlightenment cultures) simply regard these cultures as “deprived,” particularly of our advantaged moral upbringing. Through this condescension, he avoids the possibility of a moral relation, remaining at a comfortable distance from direct moral confrontation.³⁰ But moral criticism *is* possible, only it is just as difficult as establishing a personal relation in which such moral confrontation could be taken seriously, not simply as an affront. Granted, it may be the case that in order to find myself in the position of offering certain criticism, I as a member of a rich, post-Enlightenment society, would also have to undertake to bring about change in the material conditions of my interlocutor’s society that would make my remarks less irrelevant. But perhaps my remarks simply need to be made relevant in a way that a Dickens novel might not be.³¹

But what kinds of reasons can be offered within such a moral relation? Cavell suggests that there are two types of reasons with which we may confront another morally. One he labels a ‘basis of care,’ which addresses what one ‘ought’ to do given one’s engagements, and the other he calls a ‘ground of commitment,’ which addresses what one ‘must’ do given an agent’s explicit undertakings, the implications of what she does, and what she is responsible for.³² Both types of reasons work against the temptation to view moral advice out of its proper context, because both are grounded on the moral ‘scene’ that we occupy. A statement of what we *must* or *ought* to do only makes sense, as Cavell points out, against a background of something we *are* doing, but running the risk of doing “badly, inappropriately, thoughtlessly, tactlessly, self-defeatingly, etc.”³³ Claims of ‘ought’ and ‘must’ are

situated within a context, but make different appeals within it. Drawing a parallel with chess, Cavell points out that ‘you ought to castle now’ does not depend on ‘if you want to win, then you ought to castle’ as a major premise; in other words, that the advice is not the conclusion of an inference, but gains its sense from the basis of care, that is, my engagement within the game; the claim amounts to a mode of presenting that scene, and its rationality depends on the degree to which I am present in it with you (aware of the game and in a position to offer advice about it). In light of this, one could imagine ‘because he really needs it’ serving as a reason that appeals to the basis of care in backing up the suggestion ‘you ought to return the money to him’ but only if, e.g., the money was given as a gift and the giver unexpectedly fell on hard times. The rationality of making an ‘ought’ claim rests on its being addressed to genuine alternatives within the agent’s moral scene (hardship of friends weighed against one’s own need of money). That ‘you ought to keep your promises’ is what calls for a reason here, and appealing to the ‘basis of care’ addresses elements in that scene that define it as a moral scene. On the other hand, if one friend has made a loan to another, then I might confront the borrower with the claim that he *must* return the money, on the basis that ‘promises are kept.’ In other words, that is just what it means to borrow money.³⁴ Here, the obligation is not a moral truth that comes from some objective feature of our identity, but from the normativity of ordinary language and what we describe ourselves as doing (only certain things count as promising). What is threatened should we deny without some offer of excuses what we ‘must do’ is not only the retribution of our community (for some practices at least), but moral isolation due to one’s unintelligibility as a moral agent within that community.

The theoretical foundation provided by these kinds of reason makes appeal to the necessity of acknowledging the moral ‘scene’ of the agent as well as her separateness and singularity, features of moral agency that I have labeled its ‘dramatic structure.’ It is the fact that I hold a particular position within a possibly ambiguous or complex state of affairs that I may be intelligibly confronted with what I ought or must do.³⁵ Contra the Kantian, only within the bounds of such engagements and in view of a confrontation that occurs within a moral relation can we make normative assertions and charges of irrationality (unintelligibility). Presumably, mutual intelligibility about such activities as promising does not end at the boundaries of our community, so that confrontation across cultures is not unimaginable or even improbable. Thus, recognizing the dramatic structure of agency and its role in offering criticism, we can find a type of unity that does not require appeal to an abstract human identity in order to ground charges of irrationality. Rather, we must recognize that such charges can only legitimately arise within the human, i.e., dramatic, context of moral action.

The dramatic structure of agency, like the internalism requirement, thereby sets limits to what one can legitimately (rationally) exhort another to do, but sets further restrictions on the content of moral criticism than does either branch of internalism I have outlined. Specifically, by anchoring moral criticism on an acknowledgment of the agent's basis of care and ground of commitment, it says that not just any motive I have can always be operative. The appeal to motives I have, but upon which I presently see no hope of acting, through an unconditional 'ought' claim is moralizing and possibly, as Rorty suggests, damaging or insulting to its addressee. But that is not to suggest that claims cannot be formulated which address the agent's position and reveal a new approach from that position into the situation. In fact, the rationality of the moral criticism depends on it. This view also contrasts with Rorty's approach, which does better in taking into account the position of agents, but in the end only counts moral criticism as working or not. Taking account of the dramatic structure of agency, we still have a theoretical basis for assessing moral criticism that appeals to universal features of moral action.

I have been speaking of the possibility of moral relations across moral communities since the possibility for genuine moral criticism across these has been taken to turn on the existence of unconditional moral imperatives that have a grounding on universal features of human psychology. Through appealing to the dramatic structure of moral agency, we see the possibility of an appeal to a universal feature of human moral life that does not claim special philosophical insight into human psychology. Without attention to this structure, our conception of moral demands on the individual is importantly distorted, dehumanized, and it is not surprising that 'compassion fatigue' would be the result. If our motivations are always enacted within the horizon of some moral scene, then our attempts at provoking moral action can only succeed in the form of dramatic confrontation with its specific logic. By being attentive to that logic we stand a better chance of rendering our moral life more compatible with our humanity, while if we depart from that logic, we still have a critical vocabulary at hand to redress our failings.

Notes

1 For a critical review of the involvement of the media in creating this syndrome, see Susan D. Moeller [Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death](#) (New York: Routledge, 1998).

2 "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear" in [Must We Mean What We Say](#) 348. Hereafter cited as "Avoidance."

3 "Avoidance" 333.

4 By calling this task partly 'aesthetic' I do not mean to suggest moral action must be beautiful, but rather that we may need to work to address a situation narratively or symbolically to ourselves so we can build a connection between our individual history and that situation.

5 "Avoidance" 346ff.

6 "Knowing and Acknowledging" in [Must We Mean What We Say](#), op. cit. 263.

7 Cavell's claim here is complex, and, as I understand it, he has carried it through later works of criticism and philosophy. It is certainly present in [The Claim of Reason](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) Chs. XI and XIII, as well as [Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), Ch. III.

8 "Skepticism about Practical Reason" in [Creating a Kingdom of Ends](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 317.

9 The only strong advocates for externalism seem to be J. S. Mill and G. E. Moore, and the latter has been characterized as having a somewhat accidental externalism, for lack of examining the motivational basis of morality, see Nagel, [The Possibility of Altruism](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 8.

10 The term 'subjective motivational set' comes from Bernard Williams. See "Internal and External Reasons" in [Moral Luck](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 102. It includes not only desires, but also "dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects . . . embodying commitments of the agent." The subjective motivational set is by no means purely egoistic for Williams.

11 [The Claim of Reason](#) (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) 323.

12 See Christine Korsgaard, [The Sources of Normativity](#) ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ch. 1.

13 Ibid, Ch. 3.

14 [Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 197.

15 [Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity](#) 191.

16 [Treatise of Human Nature](#) 3.3.1.13.

17 [Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity](#) 95.

18 [Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature](#) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) 191.

19 [Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity](#) 198.

20 See "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" in [Truth and Progress](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) esp. 180ff.

21 "Must We Mean What We Say" in [Must We Mean What We Say](#) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) 26.

22 [Philosophical Investigations 3rd edition](#), trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953) §126.

23 Stanley Cavell, [Must We Mean What We Say?](#) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) 57.

24 [Claim of Reason](#) 269.

25 "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" in [In Quest of the Ordinary](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 158.

26 On this point see also Naomi Scheman "Mapping the Rough Ground" in [Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

27 The anxiety and ambivalence involved in actually carrying through with describing someone who is manifestly human as non-human is not noted by Rorty; see Cavell's discussion of slavery in [The Claim of Reason](#), 376-378.

28 This usage of 'mode of presentation' is suggested by Cavell, who takes the term from Frege. See [The Claim of Reason](#), 318.

29 "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" 178.

30 Ibid. 180.

31 I am suggesting that there is a possibility of literary moralizing, or "throwing books at people" that perhaps applies to Rorty's moral stance.

32 [The Claim of Reason](#) 325-326. In gesturing toward these two types of reason without developing them, Cavell makes, I think, even more improbable demands on his readers than he is typically known for, especially given the importance of he is addressing within the philosophical literature. He says, “What I would regard as providing a theoretical foundation for morality -- what, in other words, I would take to show the rationality of moral judgment -- would be to explain what makes each of these sources of reasons the reasons they are. I cannot here fully carry out the task that Cavell suggests can be supported by these types of reasons, but I would like to briefly examine how the dramatic structure of agency brings forward the types of reasons that Cavell marks out, and how, in light of that structure, they might serve for a ‘theoretical foundation for morality.’”

33 “Must We Mean What We Say,” 27.

34 [The Claim of Reason](#) 320.

35 Further, Cavell pointed out long ago that we need an account of what marks the bounds of one action and what makes something we do part of an action in progress. I suspect there is a further aspect of what I have termed the dramatic structure of agency that is involved here, viz., that the continuity of an action is defined through the readiness of others to say that something we do is a continuation of an activity in which we were previously engaged. But this may be the subject of a confrontation. I may need to be reminded or convinced of the continuity of my actions, if I have, say, long ago borrowed a book or some money, you might say “you ought to return it [nbow]” and if I hesitate, “but you must return it eventually.”