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Not Buying It: Opting out, Vaccination and Morality

Everything is optional for the neoliberal.

(Bonnie Honig)

Fighting the Last War

“Generals are always prepared to fight the last war”. This quote, usually attributed to Winston Churchill, has recently been invoked to explain how the breakout of COVID-19 was able to catch societies unprepared even after previous outbreaks of deadly diseases, such as SARS and Ebola (Bezruki & Moon, 2021). It was also due to the COVID-19 pandemic that I started thinking whether this quote might be pertinent to a different issue: the way that ethics teachers imagine the challenges that await them in the classroom. I will try to show that, just as the generals of old, we, ethics teachers, have been so focused on challenges from a different time that we have missed the fact that the nature and form of these challenges have changed, and that old strategies, however elaborate, might prove useless against the new enemy.

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In her 1983 article, “Naive relativism in the classroom”, Judith Andre writes of young ethics teachers who, although they put extra effort into preparing for their classes, soon find that they have been “anxious about the wrong things”. What awaits them in the classroom is not specific queries about fine conceptual distinctions, but questions such as “who’s to say what’s right or wrong” (Andre, 1983, p. 179)?

These questions are symptoms of what Andre calls “naive relativism”, which she describes as “an uncritical (and absolute) relativism”. In her article, she reports that the naïve relativist stance is taken for granted among her students, and that her attempts to confront it head on had proven to be counterproductive because students typically react to it “in a way reminiscent of G. E. Moore’s defence of common sense: any argument claiming to disprove such obvious truths had to be wrong” (Andre, 1983, p. 179).

Instead of this direct approach to debunking naive relativism, Andre offers something else: a way to analyse the slogans with which her students typically express their naive relativism: slogans such as “Let’s not impose our values on anyone”, “That’s a value judgement”, and “It might be wrong for me, but not for someone else”. In Andre’s opinion, it is the very vagueness and ambiguity of these slogans which makes them so attractive to her students. Because they are so vague, these slogans seem to capture considerations such as tolerance and open-mindedness that most people would recognize as relevant; however, at the same time, they tie in these considerations with strong relativist claims which would otherwise seem unpalatable to most. When these different claims are disentangled, Andre claims, the attractiveness of the slogans dissipates.

However, Andre embeds this tactic into a wider strategy which emphasizes the importance of offering reasons and arguments in favour of one’s position. The main problem with naive relativist slogans is, according to Andre, exactly the fact that they preclude reasonable discussion on ethical matters and once we realize how important the process of rational argumentation is for resolving ethical disagreements, we will understand why naive relativism is not a convincing position.

Simon Blackburn, writing 17 years after Andre, deals with a similar problem in his *Ethics: A Short Introduction* (2001). “The freshman relativist”, Blackburn writes, “is a nightmare figure of introductory classes in ethics”, and the reason she is a nightmare is the fact that her favourite phrase, “Well, that’s just your opinion”, is “a conversation-stopper rather than a move in the intended conversation”:

It is not a reason for or against the proffered opinion, nor is it an invitation for the speaker's reasons, nor any kind of persuasion that it is better to think something else. Anyone sincere is of course voicing their own opinion – that's a tautology (what else could they be doing?). But the opinion is put forward as something to be agreed with, or at any rate to be taken seriously or weighed for what it is by the audience. The speaker is saying, 'This is my opinion, and here are the reasons for it, and if you have reasons against it, we had better look at them'. If the opinion is to be rejected, the next move should be, 'No, you shouldn't think that because...' That is, an ethical conversation is not like 'I like ice-cream', 'I don't', where the difference doesn't matter. It is like 'Do this', 'Don't do this', where the difference is disagreement, and does matter. (Blackburn, 2001, p. 25)

In other words, just like Andre, Blackburn focuses on the importance and value of reasoned discussion on ethical matters. According to him, what the 'freshman relativist' does not understand is that the norms of ethical conversation require giving reasons for our opinions, and not just stating these opinions. The alternative to ethical debate is conflict and, most of the time, that is clearly the worse alternative:

Sometimes, indeed, ethical conversations need stopping. We are getting nowhere; we agree to differ. But not always. Sometimes we shouldn't stop, and sometimes we cannot risk stopping. If my wife thinks guests ought to be allowed to smoke, and I think they ought not, we had better talk it through and do what we can to persuade the other or find a compromise. The alternatives may be force or divorce, which are a lot worse. And in our practice, if not in our reflections, we all know this. The freshman relativists who say, 'Well, it's just an opinion', one moment, will demonstrate the most intense attachment to a particular opinion the next, when the issue is stopping hunting, or preventing vivisection, or permitting abortion – something they care about. (Blackburn, 2001, pp. 25–26)

There is one more similarity in the way Andre and Blackburn picture the student-relativists: they are motivated by typical liberal concerns such as tolerance and personal liberty, and they are (both authors agree: to a certain extent, rightly) worried about dogmatism, cultural imperialism, and paternalism¹. It is exactly these concerns and worries which are considered legitimate

¹ For instance, Andre assures her students that her translations of relativist slogans "are ways of expressing tolerance and open-mindedness, and are consistent with a belief that objective moral principles are worth looking for" (Andre, 1983, p. 182), while Blackburn writes: "There is a very attractive side to relativism, which is its association with toleration of different ways of living. Nobody is comfortable now with the blanket colonial certainty that just our way of doing things is right, and that other people need forcing into those ways. It is good that the 19th-century alliance between the missionary and the police has more or less

in a liberal and multicultural society, that push students in the direction of relativism. The problem is, in Andre's and Blackburn's accounts, just in a kind of intellectual confusion which can be dealt with through argument and by explaining and demonstrating the value of argument and reasoned debate.

The pandemic, vaccination and morality

It has been ten years since I first read Andre's article, and ever since I have been assigning it as the first mandatory reading in my ethics course. In my experience, it has turned out to be highly effective: naïve relativism with its typical slogans did not appear in my students' remarks in the remainder of the course. "A job well done", I would congratulate myself every year – until 2021.

In 2021, we started the course the same way we always do: by reading Andre's article and analysing the naïve relativist slogans. We continued with reviewing the main theoretical positions in metaethics and normative ethics, and then we moved on to applied ethics. Appropriate to the moment (teach the moment!), I assigned them two popular articles by Alberto Giubilini on the ethics of vaccination (Giubilini, 2017; Giubilini & Jain, 2020). We went through his arguments together: the consequentialist one, that we have a duty to do things which prevent serious harm to others and at the same time come at a small price for ourselves; and the one based on fairness, that we have a duty to do our fair share in upholding valuable public goods, such as herd immunity.

And then, when the course was already coming to a close, I asked my students whether they had already been vaccinated or planned to be in the near future (in Serbia at that time, vaccines had already been widely available for months), and I was unpleasantly surprised to hear that most of them had neither been vaccinated, nor had any plans of doing so. They recited the well-known litany of reasons: they were simply not convinced that the vaccines were good enough, they would wait and see, etc. But what about the moral reasons for vaccination that we talked about in class? They did not find them convincing

vanished. A more pluralistic and relaxed appreciation of human diversity is often a welcome antidote to an embarrassing imperialism" (Blackburn, 2001, p. 17). To this we could add Peter Singer's slightly different portrait of a relativist (not necessarily a student, although implied to be one) whose "woolly relativist ideas" originate from Marxism (although "in a confused sort of way") and are "often dressed up as 'postmodernism'" (Singer, 2011, p. 6).

enough and remained sceptical. Just as with the vaccines, they were going to wait for a better reason to come along, although they were unable to answer what exactly that better one should look like.

In the weeks that followed, I became really curious about how my students saw the situation we were in, and the role of ethics in it. One of them told me that he would not get vaccinated because he still had not been given a strong enough argument; in the lack of such an argument, he had decided to stick with what he called “the default position” of not getting vaccinated. Another told me that he simply did not care about the pandemic, that he was interested in different things (I tried to be funny by paraphrasing Trotsky – it does not matter if you are interested in the pandemic, for it is interested in you! – but to no avail). Yet another told me that the moral reasons in favour of vaccination had no force for him, since he was not convinced by the theoretical positions they were based on, and he had decided to remain “a moral sceptic”.

It was then I started thinking that fighting naïve relativism was my “last war” and that preparing to fight it had left me unprepared to recognize the true nature of the current one. This was neither naïve nor freshmen relativism. My students did not claim that everyone is entitled to their opinion, or that all opinions are equally true: they simply chose not to play the morality game (just as they chose not to play the vaccination game). There was some similarity in their slogans to those used by Bernard Williams’ “amoralist”, who asks “Why is there anything that *I should, ought to do?*” (Williams, 1993, p. 3); however, while Williams imagines this figure as either an existentialist dwelling on the meaning of it all, or a wannabe Nietzschean Übermensch, convinced that he alone sees through the sham that is morality, my students uttered similar slogans in neither despair nor contempt, but quite matter-of-factly. Something else was going on, and it took a different set of texts to help me understand what exactly.

Exit, opt-out and public things

Albert O. Hirschman points out in his seminal book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970) that there are two basic ways that individuals react to dysfunction or failure in organizations and institutions: exit and voice. As Hirschman writes, these two types of reaction typically belong to “two different realms”: exit belongs primarily in the economic sphere, while voice is typically exercised

in political contexts. What this means is that when we grow dissatisfied with a brand, we typically do not write protest letters to the manufacturer; rather, we just stop buying this product. This is exit, and if there are enough similar decisions by other customers, it represents a signal and an incentive for producers to improve the quality of their products.

Things work differently in politics. When we are dissatisfied with social institutions, we do not simply leave them (many times, this is not an option, or at least not a simple or cheap one); instead, we try to influence and improve them through using our voice: we protest, we write letters to our representatives, we debate, we petition, we vote, we campaign, we run for office, etc. However, already at the time when Hirschman was writing his book, a change was under way: suggestions started appearing to relegate many of the previously political issues to the market domain, namely from the realm of voice to the realm of exit. Milton Friedman, whom Hirschman explicitly cites as an example of an economist with a “blind spot” for the value and virtues of voice, suggested the marketization of public schools as a recipe for mending their failures, justifying such a move by the efficiency and “directness” of the exit option, compared to expressing one’s views “through the cumbrous political channels” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 16). Hirschman wonders at this formulation, noting that “a person less well trained in economics might well naively suggest that the direct way of expressing views is to express them!”, adding, “what else is the political, and indeed the democratic, process than the digging, the use, and hopefully the slow improvement of these very channels” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 17)?

When it comes to public goods such as public schools, the problem with the exit strategy lies, according to Hirschman, in the fact that exactly those consumers who were most sensitive to a decline in quality and, at the same time, most capable of being “principal agents of voice” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 51), exit first, thereby depriving those who remain of their resources and capabilities and diminishing the chances of improving the situation through voice. However, since “the distinguishing characteristic public of these goods is not only that they can be consumed by everyone, but that there is no escape from consuming them” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 100), consumers who were considering exit may still make a rational decision to choose voice instead. Taking one’s child from a deteriorating public school may protect her from the direct but not from the indirect consequences of the failing public education system.

Political theorists Wendy Brown and Bonnie Honig wrote their books *Undoing the Demos* (2015) and *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (2017)

more than 40 years after Hirschman had written his, in a world which had already been so thoroughly transformed according to Friedman's plans that it is Hirschman's wonder at these plans that seems strange to the contemporary reader. Brown describes a world in which democracy has been hollowed out by decades of what she calls "neoliberalism's stealth revolution". All the institutions which used to constitute liberal democracies, she argues, seem to still be in place but, in actuality, they have been colonized and taken over by the logic of the market:

[N]eoliberalism, a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms, is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. These elements include vocabularies, principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, democratic imaginaries... The institutions and principles aimed at securing democracy, the cultures required to nourish it, the energies needed to animate it, and the citizens practicing, caring for or desiring it – all of these are challenged by neoliberalism's 'economization' of political life and of other heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities. (Brown, 2015, p. 17)

Bonnie Honig focuses on a specific aspect of this ubiquity of the neoliberal reason which hollows out democracy; this means *opting out*, which closely resembles Hirschman's exit option in situations which were previously considered fit for voice rather than exit. According to Honig, not only is opting out endangering the provision of public goods, but it is endangering the existence of *public things*, which she – borrowing in equal measure from psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott and political philosopher Hannah Arendt – conceptualizes as "sites of attachment and meaning that occasion the inaugurations, conflicts, and contestations that underwrite everyday citizenships and democratic sovereignties" (Honig, 2017, p. 6). Typical examples of public things, according to Honig, include schools, parks and libraries, but also sewage treatment plants, utility companies and public transportation systems. Honig writes:

Without public things, we have nothing or not much to deliberate about, constellate around, or agonistically contest. There is nothing to occasion the action in concert that is democracy's definitive trait... Public things are part of the 'holding environment' of democratic citizenship; they furnish the world of democratic life. They do not take care of our needs only. They also constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenship. (Honig, 2017, p. 5)

Without public things, Honig claims, democracy would be reduced to electoral and deliberative procedures, which are certainly important but cannot inspire the engagement and identification necessary for a vibrant democratic life.

In a later article, Honig further fleshes out her account of how opting out imposes not only an economic but also a symbolic cost on a democratic polity. It is not only that, by taking the private option instead of a public one, the more affluent are depriving the community “of their energies and contributions”, thereby making public institutions such as schools, hospitals and infrastructure harder and more costly to maintain. It is also that “the neoliberal corrective”, the opt out, deprives us of the “necessity and responsibility” of “living cheek by jowl with others, sharing classrooms, roads, and buses, paying for them together, complaining about them together, and sometimes even praising and enjoying them together” (Honig, 2021, p. 37).

Opting-out of vaccination, opting-out of morality

It would indeed be strange to find that neoliberal dominance over so many previously non-economic spheres has avoided the domain of ethics. And if it has not, what kind of challenge would it present to teaching ethics? I would venture to claim – exactly the kind I got from my students when I asked them about the moral reasons for vaccination.

Andre’s and Blackburn’s belief that rational discussion is more attractive than the alternatives, and that its importance and value can be demonstrated to the student-relativist, assumes that its alternative is conflict, or at least a deep break in the relationship with significant others (in Blackburn’s example – force or divorce). But the neoliberal reason would posit another option: exit. Rather than a figure of a sensitive liberal and multiculturalist, I would argue, we now encounter the figure of a dissatisfied consumer who signals her dissatisfaction not through argument but through opting out. Blackburn is certainly right when he says that ethical conversation is unlike expressing different views on whether we like ice-cream, but only insofar as we cannot exit ethics just as easily as we leave one brand of ice-cream for another, and the effect of neoliberal reason is exactly that this (just like so many other opt-outs) comes to seem like an available and even attractive option.

I believe my students were not choosing conflict or state of nature over reasoned debate: they were signalling dissatisfaction with the offer – of vaccines, but also of moral reasons – and expecting those in charge of these two domains to receive the signal and do something about it. In Honig’s terms,

they were opting out and choosing the private option, but from what, and in favour of what else? Opting out of the public school system means leaving it for the private option of charter schools or home schooling; opting out of the public transportation system means choosing the option of private transportation; but what was the public thing my students were opting out of, and what was the private option they were choosing instead?

One obvious and, I believe, entirely correct answer would be that they were opting out of vaccination itself, or the good of collective or herd immunity, or more broadly, public health, together with a functioning public health system – hospitals, medical staff, resources, etc. In general, by opting out of vaccination, the vaccine sceptics are undermining public health and increasing the costs of sustaining it. Indeed, if anything suits the description of a public thing as a *holding environment* “that makes life and not just survival possible”, it is the public health system, a place that connects so many people in their most important moments in life – birth, death, injury, sickness, loss.

And in favour of what are vaccines being refused? Often, it is in favour of different kinds of private solutions: the magic of vitamin supplements, the power of “natural immunity”, or one of the numerous miracle cures advertised through social media. What they all have in common is that they do not require “acting in concert” but are instead promoted as solutions anyone can apply for themselves. Through promoting these kinds of opt-outs from the public health system, symbolic damage is being incurred, as less and less people identify and engage with the public health system as a public thing that underwrites and enables democratic life and political contestation.²

² From this perspective, it should come as no surprise that the lowest levels of vaccination against COVID-19 in Europe are being reported in Eastern Europe, for as Kristen Ghodsee and Mitchell A. Orenstein have recently argued (Ghodsee & Orenstein, 2021b), the post-communist transition has been a disaster for many citizens in Eastern European countries, and this disaster has in turn produced deep distrust in public institutions, but also in fellow citizens. My country, Serbia, is an especially extreme example of this: 85 percent of people believe that you cannot really trust people (Ghodsee & Orenstein, 2021a, p. 145), while only 25 percent believe democracy to be “preferable to any other form of government”. (To this, it should probably be added that, during the 1990s, transition in Serbia also went hand in hand with the civil war and the violent breakup of the Yugoslav Federation). To put this in Honig’s terms, the post-communist transition did not just impoverish huge numbers of people and produce more inequality than ever before, but it has also endangered the existence and permanence of public things through privatization and thus the possibility to act in concert, which is essential not only for democracy but also for collective efforts such as vaccination.

However, there is, more controversially, another candidate for a public thing: morality itself. How could we interpret such a possibility? I would argue for the following interpretation. To claim that morality is a public thing – in some ways quite like public transportation, or the school system, or public utility companies – would mean to claim that it is not self-sustaining, but that it is something that requires our everyday participation: not just in the sense of acting in accordance with its norms, but also in the sense that we engage in different ways of sustaining it and nourishing it through our contributions to moral life, moral reasoning (not necessarily theoretic or academic, but also common and practical) and moral education.³

The biggest problem of such an account would be coming to terms with the *thingness* of morality, for morality seems to lack the *object permanence* that Honig, following Winnicott (but also Arendt), ascribes to public things. Instead, it might seem more akin to the formal procedures that Honig sees as necessary but insufficient to sustain democracy. But is this really so? To answer this question, we have to more closely examine Honig's examples of public things, as well as her thoughts on the thingness and object permanence of public things.

First, although it seems that all her examples are examples of *objects*, on closer inspection this quickly turns out to be wrong. Although parks, schools and libraries seem to confirm this assumption, examples such as transportation systems, governments, and the military (Honig, 2017, p. 15) all seem to contradict it to a lesser or greater degree. Transportation systems certainly operate with objects (buses, trams, trains), but all these objects seem to be replaceable: a transportation system is *primarily* a social arrangement, not a set of specific objects. With government and the military, this is even clearer: governments can be housed in specific buildings, but primarily they are institutions based on social conventions; the military can be stationed in specific objects and

³ Although I do not propose that my account of morality as a public thing presents or requires a specific metaethics, it is obvious even from what little I have said about it that it will fit some accounts better than others. For instance, it will probably be in tension with what Phillip Kitcher calls "The Discovery View" (Kitcher, 2021, p. 16), which starts from the premise that moral truths are out there to be discovered; on the other hand, it much better fits Kitcher's own Deweyan pragmatist account, which sees morality as a set of evolved and evolving moral practices. This might be a problem if the account of morality as a public thing is supposed to be helpful as an introduction to ethics, for it might be seen as partial to some theoretical positions. I believe this problem can be resolved, but I must leave the matter aside for now.

incorporates many other objects, but it is also primarily an institution and an arrangement based on citizens' duties and obligations. With this in mind, even when we look back at the least problematic of Honig's examples, such as schools, parks and libraries, we can see that the issue is much less clear than it might seem at first. True, schools and libraries are more commonly housed in historical objects with a rich plethora of memories and collective meanings weaved around them, but at the end of the day it is not the object itself but what is housed *in* an object that makes it a school or a library, and even parks are also places open to the public and dedicated to a special function by specific social arrangements.

Second, when Honig talks about object permanence, which is an essential part of the thingness of public things, she refers to Winnicott's account of "transitional objects" – objects such as toys and blankets, which small children often form strong attachments to. According to Winnicott, it is while playing with these objects and exposing them to both to positive and negative emotions that children learn about the durability and resilience of external objects and achieve psychological durability and resilience themselves. As Honig writes:

The fantasy of infantile omnipotence gives way, in the face of the object's permanence, to the reality of subjectivity, finitude, survival. The object thus *thwarts* the infant with its object-ivity, but that very same trait also *underwrites* the infant's own developing subjectivity. The object's capacity to thwart is the same as its capacity to support: both are related to its permanence. The object's survival of the baby's destruction is how the baby learns it is safe and permissible to experience and express feelings of aggression, rage, even hatred. (Honig, 2017, pp. 16–17)

Building on Winnicott's account, Honig argues that in the same way as transitional objects enable a child to attain psychological permanence and at the same time constitute herself as a subject, public things enable the constitution of collectives and the achievement of the resilience and agency that are necessary for acting in concert (Honig, 2017, p. 17). She further supplements Winnicott's account with that of Hannah Arendt, who gives things a more public role, namely that of enabling us to dwell in the "common world". Honig writes that, according to Arendt, things "lend permanence to the world... provide us with a world in which to move and... provide the friction of finitude that limits or thwarts but also drives human care for the world" (Honig, 2017, p. 38).

So, the basic features of object permanence – the thingness of things – in both Winnicott's and Arendt's accounts, consist in the resistance that the objects pose for the subjects: in their "durability", their "resilience", their "friction", in the fact

that they are able to “thwart” and “limit” the subject’s intentions, but also in their ability to help subjects become a part of a “common world” (Arendt), to “support” them, to “hold” them and (in Honig’s amending of Winnicott) enable them to act in concert. All this can be achieved by their very materiality, by the fact that they possess physical permanence, but this is not necessarily the only way. The permanence of New York’s payphones (another one of Honig’s examples of public things; Honig, 2017, p. 29), for instance, is not based on the fact that they are physical objects, for these objects could easily be broken or damaged and therefore made useless, unable to support us. The basis of their permanence lies in the fact that they are regularly maintained by people whose duty it is to take care of them. It is similar with many other examples of public things Honig mentions – from governments to transportation systems.

It is not beyond reason, then, to claim that morality could have its own object permanence, its own *thingness*, if it were able to provide its own version of “friction” and “resilience”, if it could “thwart” and “limit” the subject’s desires and make her recognize the world’s objectivity, while at same time enabling her to “act in concert” with others. Indeed, this is exactly what morality does: it puts limits on what we are allowed to do, and even (through different social sanctions) on what we *can* do, while at the same time allowing us to live and act together.⁴ If these are not physical facts, they are social facts which might prove to be equally resistant to our desires while also creating a common world. So, I would argue, it is morality as a part of our social life that might be seen as a public thing, morality as a social fact, as something that already organizes our lives together.⁵

⁴ Take, for example, one widely accepted feature of morality that Kurt Baier calls “ethical conflict regulation”, and defines it as the claim “that moral requirements must be capable of authoritatively regulating interpersonal conflicts of interest”. As Baier notes, “such a regulation implies that conduct contrary to one’s interest is sometimes morally required of one, and conduct in one’s best interest is sometimes morally forbidden to one” (Baier, 1991, pp. 201–202). A similar view is advocated by David Wong, who describes morality as “a relatively enduring and stable system for the resolution of conflict between people” (Wong, 1991, p. 446). If we see morality as something that enables conflict regulation while at the same time requiring of us to sometimes sacrifice our own interests, then it seems to possess both the “thwarting” and the “enabling” conditions Honig identifies as necessary features of public things.

⁵ However, the difference between physical and social facts might be less clear than is usually thought, and morality may indeed possess “thingness” in a more literal sense. Consider the example offered by Bruno Latour: a device which by emitting an irritating, high pitched sound “makes” him act morally by not letting him start the car until he buckles his seat belt. “Where is the morality?”, Latour asks, “In me, a human driver, dominated

Although this might seem like a conservative endorsement of the *status quo*, it is actually nothing of the sort. For Honig's public things require neither conformity nor unanimity; on the contrary, they open up a space for deliberation and contestation and are essentially political. As she writes:

[Public things] furnish a world in which we encounter others, share the experience of being part of something that is larger than ourselves, and work with others, acting in concert, to share it, to democratize access to it, to better it, to desegregate it, to maintain it. A politics of public things is committed to the daily practice of preserving, augmenting, and contesting the qualities that make public things both 'public' and 'things'. Public things are things around which we constellate and by which we are divided and interpellate into agonistic democratic citizenship. They are not innocent or pure. They are political. (Honig, 2017, p. 36)

The first part of this description seems to fit morality almost perfectly: it does "furnish" a common world, it does enable us to work with others, and it can enable us to democratize access to "something bigger than ourselves", to better it, to desegregate it, to maintain it – indeed, these are what we consider to be typical examples of moral progress.⁶ It is the second part of the description – which might go against the popular understanding of morality – which is not usually seen as something political. In this part, the suggestion that morality should be seen as a public thing in Honig's sense of the term might prove contentious; however, of course, this is exactly what public things themselves do: they provide us with a space for our disagreements, while still allowing us to act in concert. And that is what morality does: it invites different accounts of itself, while still allowing us to regulate our everyday lives together.

by the mindless power of an artifact? Or in the artifact forcing me, a mindless human, to obey the law that I freely accepted when I got my driver's license?" (Latour, 1992, p. 225) Latour's point seems to be that what we used to think of as an autonomous domain of spirit, or culture, or social relations is actually inextricably entangled with the world of artifacts and is therefore inexplicable without it. I find his account intriguing and certainly compatible with my idea of morality as a public thing, or rather as one possible way to explain the "thingness" of morality. Furthermore, I believe that the morality of vaccination would be a particularly interesting topic for a Latourian analysis, especially in the light of the use of vaccine passports and the fact that Latour's central example – mandatory seat belt use – also plays an important role as an analogy in arguments for mandatory vaccination (Giubilini & Savulescu, 2019). I am grateful to anonymous reviewer B for pointing out the similarities between my thesis and Latour's actor-network theory and for suggesting Latour's article on the "missing masses".

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Philip Kitcher's *Moral Progress* (Kitcher, 2021).

Concluding remarks

The picture I have offered in the previous pages is, at least in one respect, undoubtedly more pessimistic than the ones offered by Andre and Blackburn. While, in their pictures, dominant social arrangements do not necessarily, but only accidentally, work against the concerns of morality, moral reflection and reasoned debate, in mine the dominant social arrangements are in many ways deeply opposed to these projects. If this is true, then the challenge I am describing is more serious than the one of naïve or freshman relativism, and there are clear limits to what an ethics teacher could do to tackle it, for what underlies it is not just an intellectual conundrum but a strong pull of currently dominant socio-economic forces.

To make things worse, unlike Andre, who offers precepts that were tried and tested on the frontline in the classroom, I do not (yet) have anything similar to offer. However, what I can offer are a few thoughts about the direction in which we should look for solutions. First, I believe that, even before we point out the importance and value of reasoned debate, we should find ways of pointing out the importance and value of expressing dissent through voice rather than through exit. Second, I believe that seeing morality as a public thing – not something we can decide to “buy” or not, but rather something of clear social value which requires the participation and contributions of us all – is of crucial importance.⁷ Third, just as Honig uses narratives offered by Jonathan Lear in his book *Radical Hope* (Lear, 2008) and Lars von Trier in his film *Melancholia* (Trier, 2011) in order to demonstrate the importance of public things and our relationship to them, perhaps we, ethics teachers, could use different modes of expression and not just the mode of philosophical argument in order to communicate the importance of exercising one’s voice in the domain of ethics.

Finally, the very limits of what we can communicate in the classroom remind us of the fact that ethics is primarily a practical discipline, and there are issues

⁷ Such a view is also not without precedent. Consider this memorable quote from famous British ethicist Phillipa Foot: “Perhaps we should be less troubled than we are by fear of defection from the moral cause; perhaps we should even have less reason to fear it if people thought of themselves as volunteers banded together to fight for liberty and justice and against inhumanity and oppression” (Foot, 1972).

which cannot be resolved only through theory. There is a larger social world of which an ethics classroom is only a part, and the need to engage with this world in ways other than purely academic might be a lesson in itself.

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Ja tego nie kupuję. Wycofanie, szczepienia i moralność

Artykuł rozpoczyna się od opisanego problemu relatywizmu naiwnego, charakterystycznego dla studentów pierwszego roku, z którym zwykle spotykają się nauczyciele etyki na zajęciach wprowadzających. Pokazuję, że ten dobrze znany, opisany i dokładnie przeanalizowany problem mógł przesłonić pojawienie się innego problemu – wycofania – oraz że stało się to szczególnie widoczne podczas pandemii COVID-19. Nawiązując do takich autorów, jak Albert O. Hirschman, Wendy Brown, a zwłaszcza Bonnie Honig, przekonuję, że to nowe zjawisko najlepiej traktować jako symptom neoliberalnej racjonalności „kolonizującej” domenę moralności. Dalej sugeruję, że powinniśmy postrzegać moralność jako to, co Bonnie Honig nazywa rzeczą publiczną, i pokrótce rozważam pewne implikacje tej propozycji. Na koniec proponuję kilka możliwych sposobów radzenia sobie z problemem wycofania z moralności.

Słowa kluczowe: relatywizm naiwny, etyka, pandemia COVID-19, szczepienia, głos, wycofanie, Judith Andre, Simon Blackburn, Albert O. Hirschman, Bonnie Honig

Not buying it: Opting out, vaccination and morality

The paper starts with describing the problem of “naive” or “freshman” relativism that is typically encountered by ethics teachers in introductory ethics classes. I then go on to show that this well-known problem, described and thoroughly analysed by several authors, might have obscured the emergence of a new and different problem – opting out – and that this

has become particularly obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on authors such as Albert O. Hirschman, Wendy Brown and especially Bonnie Honig, I go on to argue that this new phenomenon is best thought of as a symptom of neoliberal rationality “colonizing” the domain of morality. I further suggest that we should view morality as what Bonnie Honig defines as a public thing, and I briefly consider some implications of this proposal. Finally, I suggest some possible ways of dealing with the problem of opting out of morality.

Keywords: naive relativism, ethics, vaccination, COVID-19 pandemic, voice, opting-out, Judith Andre, Simon Blackburn, Albert O. Hirschman, Bonnie Honig

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