

MORAL KNOWLEDGE V : PRACTICAL JUDGEMENT

David Wiggins writes of ‘*directive or deliberative (or practical) judgements (e.g. “I must ψ ”, “I ought to ψ ”, “It would be best, all things considered, for me to ψ ”, etc.)*’. *Qua* judgements, asserting propositions, they have a content of a kind to be assessable as true or false; *qua* practical, they have a content of a kind to connect variably but non–contingently with the formation of an intention. Yet it may be doubted whether the two aspects are compatible.

An agent who says ‘I must ψ ’ may be understood as meaning: ‘I must ψ , in order to ϕ .’ This picks out an *act* explicitly for the sake of an *end*, and implicitly with regard to *quasi–ends*. (‘Quasi–ends’ are background or standing considerations, not necessarily moral, which do not set deliberation in train themselves, but tell for or against certain ways of behaving or modes of proceeding, and so, with varying stringency, constrain or influence the choice of means.) The judgement counts as true so long as it selects what really is an end of his, and proposes what really is a way or means of realizing it with adequate regard to his quasi–ends – and/or to the quasi–ends of the community to whom he is answerable for what he says..

We must reject any principle that an intention to ϕ can only yield a necessity to ψ for the sake of ϕ –ing if there is a necessity to ϕ . Distinguish saying (a) ‘I must ψ ’ (act), ‘in order to ϕ ’ (end) from saying (b) ‘I must ψ and thereby ϕ ’ (complex act). (b) may be false when (a) is true. A critic who argues ‘But you don’t have to ϕ ; so you don’t have to ψ ’ thereby shifts from (a) to (b).

It would be a mistake to try to subsume all relevant quasi–ends within a single comprehensive end for the occasion, say ‘I will ϕ acceptably and conveniently.’ Deliberation requires an initial target to aim at, which means a target consciously defined and delimited; but it is in the nature of quasi–ends to be multiple, open–ended, and often conflicting.

Deliberation on behalf of an agent needs to be sensitive to a variety of ways in which he may entertain an end. To the extent that it is up to the adviser to select an end of the agent at which to target his advice, he may reasonably privilege one desire over another for such reasons as that it is grounded rather than ungrounded or ill–grounded, or that its fulfilment will bring satisfaction rather than indifference or regret. Good advice is, in part, a function of the agent’s ends, but the function is loose and leaves the adviser leeway. This is why his judgements have to be meant contextually, that is, relative to some selected end, if they are to achieve a determinate content and truth–value.

An other–person practical judgement cannot count as advisory, or as issued on behalf of the agent, if the value (or disvalue) being adduced is altogether alien to him. However, in certain cases, advice or quasi–advice may depend upon trust or authority or consensus to make up for the agent’s lack either of a pre–existent end or of a proper sensitivity to quasi–ends.

This framework for the understanding of practical judgements grants them the two features that appeared to be in tension: practicality, and aptness for truth. Indeed, it may now appear that these features fit perfectly together, since the judgement has a content that is relative to an intended (or otherwise motivating) end, and is correct if the act selected serves the end in the way stated (while respecting quasi–ends). If this is right, the concept of a practical judgement is vindicated.