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## THE ARCHANGEL DELUSION. DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS AND ITS ROLE IN THE EDUCATION OF ETHICISTS

**Abstract.** The role of ethicists is to provide a genuine ethical theory to help non-ethicists interpret and solve moral dilemmas, to define what is right or wrong, and, finally, to clarify moral values. Therefore, ethicists are taught to address morality with rational procedures, to set aside their moral intuitions and emotions. Sometimes, professional ethicists are prone to falling into the archangel delusion – the belief that they are beyond the influence of their own emotions. This can lead to ousting moral intuitions from the space of ethical reflection, thus making ethicists unaware of them. They may treat intuitive beliefs about morality as an expression of primal moral feelings. The main question pursued in this article, is how those feelings may influence moral theories, which should be developed by professional ethicists. Ethicists may provide an ethical theory which is merely a rationalisation and justification for their own suppressed moral emotions, rather than the effect of genuine, rational moral reasoning. To help ethicists cope with this delusion, a model of cooperation between descriptive and normative ethics is proposed. Ethicists should therefore use the research tools of descriptive ethics to determine their own intuitions, and the moral emotions in which these intuitions are grounded.

**Keywords:** descriptive ethics; normative ethics; archangel delusion; R.M. Hare

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to recent publications, there are several ways in which descriptive ethics can be useful for normative theorists, as well as for ethicists. Some ethical theories provide very sophisticated concepts and rationale for action, but at the same time seem to be detached from everyday experience of moral values and dilemmas. Some researchers (Molewijk *et al.* 2004) suggest that combining descriptive

and normative ethics might lead to overcoming this impediment to developing proper ethical solutions. Below, I enumerate some arguments for the usefulness of descriptive ethics, not only for moral theories but for professional ethicists as well.

Moral intuitions should be understood as “acts of self-evident” apprehension of a moral situation and its correct solution (Ross 2007). Such intuitions seem to be available to everyone, although they are not the same for everyone. They may be shaped by several factors, including biological, historical, cultural, and religious. Some of them may be rational, some irrational, others nonrational. Nevertheless, they are, and they should be, taken into consideration when one is to provide or analyse a moral theory. Without awareness of one’s moral intuitions, it seems impossible to provide and analyse a moral theory *sine ira et studio*. Our own moral intuitions may act as distortions for a proper argumentation.

One of the best descriptions of moral intuitions goes as follows: “When we refer to *moral intuitions*, we mean strong, stable, immediate moral beliefs. These moral beliefs are *strong* insofar as they are held with confidence and resist counter-evidence (although strong enough counterevidence can sometimes overturn them). They are *stable* in that they are not just temporary whims but last a long time (although there will be times when a person who has a moral intuition does not focus attention on it). They are *immediate* because they do not arise from any process that goes through intermediate steps of conscious reasoning (although the believer is conscious of the resulting moral belief)” (Sinnott-Armstrong, Young, and Cushman 2010, 246-247 [italics in original]).

This definition presents intuitions as a peculiar kind of moral beliefs. As will be shown below, these beliefs do not need to be conscious and in fact emerge from a special kind of feelings – namely, moral ones. What is the source of such moral beliefs? The most probable hypothesis is that they emerge from moral feelings, which are prior to beliefs understood as intuitions. Thus, the scheme

of emerging intuitions may go as follows: moral feelings – moral (intuitional) beliefs – moral statements. Intuitional beliefs may be treated as an expression of primal moral feelings. The main question pursued in this article, is how those feelings may influence moral theories as developed by professional ethicists. Unconscious moral feelings may be a great obstacle to providing a genuine ethical theory.

## 2. THE ARCHANGEL DELUSION

According to Jonathan Haidt's conclusions, emotions are primary in moral decision making (Haidt 2001). This seems to be true for both everyday moral dilemmas and professional reasoning on either real or hypothetical moral issues. In fact, Haidt's model shows that most moral decisions primarily emerge from emotions, which determine one's stance on a certain issue. Reasoning comes in place afterwards, to provide a rationale for it. In trying to explain why moral theorists seem to overcome their moral emotions, Haidt puts forward the hypothesis that "philosophers are able to override their initial intuitions more easily than can ordinary folk" (Haidt 2012, 352). This may be usefully compared with Richard M. Hare's ideal types of the archangel and the prole. The latter is described as a person who relies only on their intuitions when taking moral decisions, whereas the former's approach is based exclusively on a rational scrutiny of morality (Hare 1992). Since Haidt shows that moral intuitions are based on moral emotions, according to his account "proles" could be understood as ordinary folk, using only their emotions to cope with moral problems. Professional ethicists, in contrast, try to rely on their critical approach, traditionally seeing emotions as an obstacle to moral decisions. This is why some philosophers tend to override their emotion-rooted intuitions and provide arguments which rely mostly on critical analysis. It must be stated that this analysis is not as efficient as could be (regardless of the correctness of the solutions proposed) (Hamalainen 2016; Hoffmaster 2018), but this is not the

main concern here. The main focus of this paper is rather on the fact that some professional ethicists seem to commit a fallacy that may be called the “Archangel delusion”: they are so devoted to thinking critically about morality that they cease to realise that their emotions also play a role in their reasoning. If Haidt’s conclusions are correct, then no one can completely override their emotion-based moral intuitions, including professional ethicists. Therefore, some ethical conclusions should be treated merely as a rational justification of an emotionally driven moral stance that is already in place. The Archangel delusion explain why some ethicists ignore this fact, disregarding their moral emotions and providing very sophisticated solutions to moral dilemmas, as if their solutions were based purely on critical thinking.

The term “archangel delusion” is new. It is inspired by Hare’s theory and Haidt’s remarks about the education of ethicists, the stance it captures has already been discussed, for example, by Jeremy Bentham in the following passage: “the various systems that have been formed concerning the standard of right may all be reduced to the principle of sympathy and antipathy. ... They consist all of them in so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing upon the reader to accept of the author’s sentiment or opinion as a reason for itself” (Bentham 2000, 24-25). As the founder of utilitarianism remarks, some ethicists, instead of examining their sympathies and antipathies toward moral norms, use ethical arguments to justify the norms they feel most sympathetic towards. A formal system of ethics is, therefore, a justification for beliefs already possessed. In what follows, Bentham’s own system, based on carefully examining beliefs and emotions and then providing justifications for norms regardless of sympathies and antipathies, will be considered a genuine moral theory.

A notable example of the archangel delusion can be found in Kant’s argumentation against lies, based on the universal law formula of the categorical imperative. It is well known that Kant provided strong

arguments against the moral permissibility of lying. However, as Korsgaard notices, while arguments that come from the formulas of Humanity or the Kingdom of Ends are convincing, those based on the formula of a Universal Law are not (Korsgaard 2000). It is possible to accept the permissibility of lying to those that do not deserve the truth as a universal law. There may be some situations in which “it is permissible to lie to deceivers in order to counteract their intended results of their deceptions” (Korsgaard 2000, 137). The issue that is most important here is not, however, whether lying is permissible or not, but why Kant provides an argument that can be so easily reversed or challenged. A possible answer is that we can observe here a form of the archangel delusion – Kant had such strong intuitions about the absolute impermissibility of lying that it seemed to him that any adequate moral theory should provide strong arguments against it. To put it differently, Kant’s intuitions on this issue do not seem to follow from rational arguments. On the contrary, he might have been so convinced that his intuitions were right that he did not consider whether his arguments supported them well enough. This example suggests that even the greatest philosophers may use their moral intuitions as a source of objective knowledge and produce some arguments to support it. Ethicists who suffer from the archangel delusion only differ from the abovementioned “folk” with respect to their argumentation skills, not in the way they deal with moral problems.

Surely one should demand more than this from professional ethicists. If ethicists are so similar to ordinary “folk”, most ethical argumentation is sophistry: given that ethical outcomes are already provided (consciously or unconsciously by emotions and intuitions), ethicists only have to provide a proper argument for them. However, the role of professional ethicists goes beyond that. They must override intuitions and ensure that they are guiding us in the right direction. It seems that ethicists should check both their own intuitions and folk ones to examine what kind of moral values and rules they convey,

and develop a theory which provides not only arguments to support existing intuitions, but also helps to shape them. If a professional ethicist follows their moral intuitions, which have been shaped by the process of evolution, culture, personality, their own life experience, and other factors, they can either preserve such norms or justify their own intuitions, presenting them from the “archangelic point of view”. What seems to be the core of genuine ethics is the examination of existing norms and their justifications, to show whether they are properly understood and applied. Sometimes, very strongly anchored norms should be questioned by ethicists, who might themselves be going against intuitions and common moral behaviour (e.g., arguments that were given versus slavery or torture). To recall Haidt’s account, it seems that the ethical education of professional ethicists should teach them how to override their intuitions in order to make it clear what is right, and not just what has been taken as right by a particular culture.

It is important to distinguish the archangel delusion from other improper forms of ethical argumentation, which also provide arguments to support outcomes already established. This general form of argumentation can be found in some ideology- or religion-oriented theories, where the conclusions must be compliant with an already existing set of convictions (such as the axioms of an ideology or dogmatic system). The difference between the archangel delusion and concerting individual beliefs with an existing system of beliefs is that the latter is merely intersubjective (sometimes even considered objective), whereas the former is primarily subjective and sometimes even unconsciously accepted. It is possible that ethicists internalise ideological or religious norms so deeply that they become their own intuitions. In other words, ideological or religious norms can make a strong influence on one’s moral intuitions – in fact, the latter are often shaped by the former. They become so intertwined in this process that it is very hard to distinguish between ideologically-driven norms and moral intuitions – one forgets about the original source

of the latter and accepts the realisation of moral feelings in the way provided by the norms.

Another consequence of the archangel delusion is a lack of integrity, understood as a “walk the talk” feature. It has been demonstrated that ethics professors are no more (and no less) moral than ordinary people (Schwitzgebel, Rust 2013). More than that, it has been shown on the basis of a survey that ethicists use philosophical reflection more often than sound reasoning to enhance post hoc rationalisation (Schwitzgebel, Rust 2013, 320). This shows that the archangel delusion may pose a threat to ethics – instead of providing impartial arguments, it serves as a justification for ethicists’ intuitions, moral feelings and cultural residuals. In other words, ethicists go straight from “is” to “ought”. However, “moral intuitions are unreliable to the extent that morally irrelevant factors affect moral intuitions” (Sinnott-Armstrong, Young, and Cushman 2010, 247). Because of this fact, they should be treated very carefully, especially by ethicists, to avoid the possibility of justifying norms accepted acritically. Once again, it is a duty for ethicists to know their intuitions and reflect upon them.

Another way of balancing personal intuitions with moral standards is called rational equilibrium. As Rawls proposed, this is a state of affairs where rational principles and judgments coincide (Rawls 1999, 18). Reflective equilibrium may be interpreted as a remedy for the archangel delusion – rather than justifying one’s prior intuitions, an ethicist can place them under rational investigation in order to achieve equilibrium. Yet, as Brunn has noticed treating reflective equilibrium as a method for coping with intuitions might be a misuse of them (Brunn 2014). Brunn distinguishes between a “moral commitment” and a “moral intuition”. According to this distinction, a reflective equilibrium can be established as an agreement between commitments and principles, but not between intuitions and principles. Commitments may be rooted in intuitions, but they may also be inherited from other commitments, authorities, etc. The point is that a coexistence of commitments and principles may also mask

the archangel delusion. That is, the intuitions and emotions that underlie them might be very strong and ethicists may be unaware of them. As a result, instead of providing a reflective equilibrium this can lead to the justification of one's intuitions.

### 3. DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS AND THE ARCHANGEL DELUSION

Descriptive ethics, in contrast to normative and metaethical reflection, is aimed at identifying the moral practices and beliefs of given groups. It also aims at identifying their various sources and trying to predict changes and the future shape of morality (Hamalainen 2016). Its methods are empirical, it is grounded in moral psychology, sociology and the neurosciences. There are several arguments as to why ethicists should consider taking the outcomes of surveys in descriptive ethics into consideration. After all, they reveal "morality in practice": that is, how abstract moral norms are interpreted by ordinary ("folk", in Heidt's words) users of morality and realised in human behaviour, how they are applicable in specific circumstances and the way in which circumstances (social, cultural, religious contexts) influence them (Hoffmaster 2018; Parker 2009). For ethicists, taking into account descriptive ethics could be helpful in determining real (instead of academic) issues in moral practice, as well as coping with different interpretations of moral norms in practice and determining whether their theories yield the intended consequences. Moreover, it could enable ethicists to verify whether the "ought implies can" rule is justified in a given case, or whether it is merely wishful thinking about how people should behave.

When it comes to analysing moral intuitions, researchers usually provide some hypothetical scenarios, of which several variations of the trolley problem are probably the best known, and then review the respondents' answers, their immediacy, stability, reaction time and intensity of emotions (Bruder, Tanyi 2014). During testing, researchers can identify which intuitions are common, and which

are related to several social groups. What is postulated here is the inclusion of such research and testing methods in the professional training of ethicists. This would help explain the role and emotions connected with intuitions, as well as aid ethicists in identifying their preconceptions and deep commitments about morality and make them more aware of their presuppositions and biases towards various moral problems.

Common arguments against using the tools of descriptive ethics in normative ethics are: first, their lack of normative force and attempt to derive “ought” from “is” ( the violation of the fact/value distinction); second, that descriptive ethics tends towards moral relativism; third, that this could lead to the naturalisation of ethics; and fourth, that this is not ethics at all and it has moved too far away from philosophical research (Luetge 2014; van der Scheer, Widdershovem 2004; Parker 2009). It must be noticed that those in favour of using descriptive ethics in normative research are aware of these dangers and try to address them. Descriptive ethics is only concerned with the efficacy of ethical theories and avoids formulating normative claims. It is important to show that some ethical theories are implemented in ways that diverge from their original formulation. It is also important to ask why some ethical theories, especially those with a very strong philosophical basis, are either not influential enough in society or, as demonstrated by the so-called Sidgwick paradox, should be kept away from ordinary people (Sidgwick 1907).

Having outlined some of the limitations concerning descriptive ethics, we move on to consider the influence of the archangel delusion on ethical theory. On closer examination, it seems evident that any norm whose justification can be traced back to the archangel delusion falls within the scope of the abovementioned objections. If an ethicist provides a justification for a norm that has been *a priori* accepted by him/her, then they may be accused of deriving “ought” from “is” – the justification provided merely follows from their existing intuitions. This is tantamount to using ethical arguments to objectify

one's intuitions. It may also lead to moral relativism, connected with the very sources of one's intuitions. Intuitions presented as justified (and sometimes objective) norms may in fact be seen as the naturalisation of ethics. This may also appear to be inauthentic philosophical investigation – that is, a philosophical inquiry of norms given in advance. It seems that failing to critically examine one's own intuitions can lead to an improper, and indeed immoral, use of philosophical tools.

#### 4. THE ARCHANGEL DELUSION AND HOW TO AVOID IT

The above arguments show that being unaware of one's own moral intuitions is a tremendous obstacle to being an ethicist with a high level of self-awareness. Therefore, it would be advisable for any ethicist to undergo a survey to identify their intuitions. Identifying does not mean to changing or ridding oneself of one's intuitions; rather, it means precisely defining their content (e.g., what stance one is more inclined to take on a given moral issue). The survey would be aimed, in Aristotelian terms, at showing the direction of one's natural inclinations. As Aristotle advised, “we must drag ourselves away from it toward its contrary; for by leading ourselves far from error, we will arrive at the middle term, which is in fact what those who straighten warped lumber do” (Aristotle 2011, 41 [1109b]). The awareness of one's own inclinations might lead to the deliberate and voluntary transcending of our intuitions. If moral development demands an awareness of one's inclinations, ethical development (the development of an ethicist) needs the conscious transcendence of natural and cultural inclinations, as well as moral emotions and intuitions. This transcending is a core condition for being able to provide a valid ethical theory. Following Aristotle, it is important, especially for an ethicist, to *agere contra* one's intuitions to verify whether they are justified or merely seem to be justified. By adopting such an attitude, ethical theory and the justification of moral

norms can achieve a higher degree of purification from artefacts, totems and other cultural residua, leading to the exploration of moral issues *sine ira et studio*. Anna Abram proposed two unusual aspects as key factors in moral development: growth-through moral failure and growth-through-unpredictable reality (Abram 2007). While the first seems obvious, the second can be explained as concerning the rare circumstances which people sometimes face, such as a car accident, sudden death or illness and so on. Such cases can be treated as an opportunity to show one's moral prowess or to depart from it. Cases such as these are also usually uncomfortable, forcing people to modify their everyday preferences and reevaluate their goals. If, as Abram states, such conditions are crucial in moral development, then by analogy the conscious confrontation with one's unconscious intuitions and inclinations, even if inconvenient, could be crucial for the development of an ethicist. They should be challenged and worked through by employing the tools of descriptive ethics.

Thus understood, descriptive ethics may improve the model of integrated empirical ethics proposed by Bert Molewijk and colleagues (Molewijk *et al.* 2004). The authors distinguish five modes of interaction between descriptive and normative ethics. These are: a prescriptive approach, a theorists approach, a critical approach, a particular approach and an integrated one. The integrated approach is described as taking the interdependence between ethical theory and moral practice into consideration. Integrated empirical ethics aims to avoid the difficulties caused by extreme models, which focus exclusively on either a theoretical or empirical approach, thereby devaluating or reducing the significance of the other. The integrated approach acknowledges that sometimes illustrating the facts leads to normative values. The authors propose three examples to help clarify their ideas: the first is that "facts produced by 'descriptive' sciences are interwoven with discipline-specific epistemic values. There is no Archimedean point of view" (Molewijk *et al.* 2004, 58). The second example relies on the fact that "every moral theory is inherently based

on ‘empirical background assumptions’. ... Different moral theories on patient autonomy are based on different ideas about the identity and rationality of humans” (Molewijk *et al.* 2004, 58-59). Lastly, the third examples stresses that “ ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ ” (Molewijk *et al.* 2004, 59). Although the integrated model is proposed for both moral theories and empirical ethics, there is a common dimension that should be underlined: the empirical background of the ethicist herself. It seems that a truly integrated approach should involve a demand from the ethicist to show his/her cultural, theoretical and intentional background. To create a genuine integrated empirical ethics, ethicists should start by acknowledging their own moral assumptions, intuitions and feelings. The integrated model seems to propose the correct way for ethicists to foster their own development.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that theoretical ethics needs empirical ethics not only as a reality check, but also to formulate moral arguments and ethical theories. Every person has moral emotions and moral intuitions (which are interconnected), and there is a grave danger that ethicists may commit a ‘naturalistic fallacy’, thereby providing moral arguments which are not genuine but rather use a philosophical methodology for the rationalisation and justification of their own intuitions. Professional ethicists should be aware of and confront their own intuitions and moral emotions to consciously override them. If ethicists abandon an awareness of their own intuitions and emotions, they seem to fall into the archangel delusion – the belief they could override something that they do not precisely discern. The methods for recognising existing intuitions are provided by the broad field of descriptive ethics, which includes moral psychology and the sociology of morality among other disciplines. Of course, an ethicist can always provide a theory that is perfectly consistent with his/her intuitions. However, it is a matter of intellectual honesty whether

such a theory merely takes intuitions into account or is conditioned by them, possibly without the ethicist consciously acknowledging this fact.

The ethicist's integrity has also been discussed. It seems that the integrity of ethicists should not be placed in the specific norm or values they accept. Rather, it depends on whether they are capable of moral thought in a truly different way from non-ethicists and non-philosophers. This distinction is similar to that between folk psychology and academic one. If ethical theories were just a sophisticated folk philosophy, then it would be very hard to formulate a genuine moral argument, provide a righteous critique of a possession or norm, and make progress in morality. One of the aims of ethics is to provide new norms or propose modifications of current norms to better comply with a common interpretation of values (and a new interpretation of values, as well). An integrated model of empirical ethics would allow one to avoid total detachment from the social interpretation of values and norms provided by theories. If descriptive ethics were to play a role in the formulation of an ethical theory, the theory itself would appear more effective.

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