

Looking Each Other in the Eye: Interpersonal Morality and Social Justice within a Common Moral Universe

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Abstract

This work introduces and discusses two moral tropes: “looking each other in the eye” and “living in a common moral universe”. It further distinguishes the immediate, face-to-face agreements of morality from the mediated agreements of social justice, arguing that both tropes apply to the latter, though they need to be understood there in a slightly different way. Finally, the tropes are used to disentangle some of the complex normative issues surrounding homelessness.

Looking Each Other in the Eye: Interpersonal Morality and Social Justice within a Common Moral Universe

In this work I discuss two tropes that have helped me organize my thoughts about justice:

“looking each other in the eye” and “living in a common moral universe”. I use these tropes to understand both the nature of interpersonal morality and social justice and the difference between them.

I take as my primary example the issue of responding to the homeless people we encounter on the streets of any major U.S. city. For occasional visitors not inured to their presence, the homeless call up a welter of emotions: sympathy, nobility, obligation, grief, suspicion, fear, disapproval, helplessness, self-protection, penuriousness, self-condemnation, ... and anger at them for occasioning these confused feelings.¹ I intend the concepts and distinctions made herein to help us disentangle these feelings and respond in useful ways.

¹Actually, these feelings never go away. Even if repeated confrontations with homelessness result in an apparent callousness, the feelings remain like an abscess in our sense of meaning. But I cannot pursue this issue further here.

Interpersonal Morality and Social Justice

In this work, the terms “morality” and “justice” are separate concepts.² Although both refer to normatively binding ways by which people coordinate their behavior, and although the two are often confused with each other, I believe that a careful distinction between them is important. Here, “morality” (or, more descriptively, “interpersonal morality”) refers to ways of relating that are negotiated and grounded within a network of face-to-face relations. For simplicity I will write as if the moral norms are between two specific people, but in their largest sense they refer to norms that arise in any group small enough to create, maintain, and renegotiate these norms face-to-face. “Justice” (or “social justice”), on the other hand, refers to the claim on which laws base their normative bindingness — “laws” being understood as general norms by which we coordinate our behavior with each other when we are incapable of doing so face-to-face. Constitutions, laws, administrative regulations, formal institutions, shared cultural practices — all assert their claims on one’s behavior on the grounds that they are just. To phrase the distinction directly, morality contemplates the agreements two people make between themselves face-to-face, agreements that do not impact others; justice contemplates the agreements that we make with each other (or take to be made with each other) even though we are unable to negotiate or even agree to them face-to-face.³

²In *Ways of Relating* (Chilton forthcoming) I also consider a third domain, intrapersonal authenticity, and distinguish it from interpersonal morality and social justice.

³The modern era arose when interpersonal, face-to-face morality could no longer sustain the coordinating we wanted with each other. When our business was no longer with our neighbors, when technical specialization or the physical or cultural differences between us meant

A Common Moral Universe

My opinions may have changed, but not the fact that I am right.

— Ashleigh Brilliant

Any analysis of normatively binding relationships must start by recognizing that no one can ever unilaterally possess Rightness. By Rightness I do not mean people's rebuttable assertions that they are right, i.e., that they believe their normative understandings are acceptable to and will be agreed to by all concerned; rather, Rightness means people's unqualified assertions that their understandings of the moral way of relating in the situation are normatively correct, i.e., *must* be acceptable to and agreed to by all concerned. Stated so baldly, this claim of absolute Rightness seems unsupportable, and yet we often manage to persuade ourselves of our Rightness. We contend, for example, that we have knowledge of the situation that others do not possess: hidden facts, uniquely complex considerations, greater cognitive development, unrecognized perspectives, a clearer vision of consequences, and so on.

we could no longer understand each other's needs, when our face-to-face negotiations with each other could no longer keep up with economic and other change, then we needed a new way of coordinating behavior, a way of relating whose claim was broader and more flexible than that of laboriously negotiated face-to-face agreements. (Hence Marx's view of the capitalist mode of production as qualitatively different from previous, tribally-based modes.) Of necessity this new way of relating would be clumsier than face-to-face discussion, but its considerable advantages were apparent enough to warrant agreement. Please note that my reference to "advantages" is not (or not necessarily) the classical liberal claim of self-interest; I'm simply saying that people were faced with the problem of coordinating their behaviors in a way they could accept and that a restriction of coordination to face-to-face agreements was not a normative improvement, even if people disagree about the precise meaning of "normative improvement".

It is accordingly easy for me to fall into a belief that I am right in opposing the U.S.'s unilateral invasion of Iraq because (say) my long study of political development gives me a uniquely comprehensive understanding of the consequences of such international behavior. George Bush, on the other hand, clearly believes he is right, possibly — to give him the benefit of the doubt — because he believes that he is privy to information and considerations that I do not have. But the fact is that neither of us can know in advance whether the other might have a point. Neither of us can know in advance that the other's arguments, even if poor, will not reveal some incompleteness in one's own thinking. I become particularly aware of this when recalling my previous absolute beliefs, recognizing how I have changed my mind about them. I recall how my views on abortion went absolutely this way and then absolutely that way, back and forth several times. In college I lost a quarter betting my roommate that six times seven was thirty-five, and I recall vividly my certainty that I was right. These days I find myself arguing against philosophical doctrines that I used to believe in, arguing them with just as much conviction of my Rightness and the other's Wrongness as I now feel. These personal anecdotes don't prove anything, but my aim here is not proof but rather to call up your self-recognition of similar experiences. If you have never changed your mind about what you believed was absolutely Right, then this work cannot convince you of anything except that I can be wrong. "Thank God I'm not fallible like Chilton," you can tell yourself.

It may be that moral Rightness exists, but even if so, we cannot know that it does, and still less can we know that we possess it. Thus this concept can never have more than a metaphysical existence and is accordingly useless.

My point applies not just to our ignorance of a decision's Rightness prior to making it but also to our ignorance even afterwards. People often argue the Rightness of a decision because events turned out according to their expectation, but this argument fails on at least five different counts. First, we lack control groups to show the inferior consequences of alternative decisions. Second, the happy outcome could have been due to luck instead of good decision-making. Third, we lack an understanding of the hidden, indirect, and unanticipated consequences of the decision, both those that have already occurred and those still to come. Fourth, we lack an agreed-upon scale of determining what consequences are best. Fifth, even if we were to agree upon such a scale today, we cannot know that we will agree upon it tomorrow.⁴

This uncertainty means that in deciding how we are to relate to one another we need to regard each other as fellow members of "a common moral universe", that is, a social world in which we coordinate our behavior only through our agreements with each other, not through norms that any of us assert to be Right independent of each other's agreement.⁵ This common moral universe is not common by virtue of our seeing things the same way, having the same doctrines, or knowing the same facts in making normative agreements; rather, it is common in that we all occupy the same existential situation of uncertainty in making normative agreements; it is common in our mutual recognition and our resulting respect for each other. The uncertainty of morality, its

⁴I am reminded of the opinion famously said to have been expressed by Chinese Premier Chou Enlai (sometimes attributed to Mao Zedong or Ho Chi Minh) on whether the French Revolution could be considered a success: "Too soon to tell."

⁵Alas, despite what I said earlier about distinguishing (interpersonal) "morality" and (social) "justice", the phrase "a common moral universe" refers to both these normative categories collectively.

dependence upon agreement instead of doctrine, means that we must see ourselves as occupying a common moral universe.

The only thing we can know when deciding how we are to relate to each other is how we have treated each other in the deciding. Even though we do not and cannot know whether our decisions are good in any sense beyond the simple, immediate fact of agreement, we do know how we came to the decision. This is all that is real in the situation. So “ways of relating” means more than the actual norms, and patterns of norms, agreed to; it means, most deeply, how we relate to each other in deciding how to relate to each other. When we recognize the self-referentiality of that phrasing, all that is left — as I say, the only thing we can know — is our recognition of each other as fellow members of this common moral universe.

Looking Each Other in the Eye

Mutual recognition manifests itself physically in our ability to look each other in the eye. This act constitutes a criterion of what constitutes a moral relationship between me and someone else. A moral relationship is one that allows me to look that person in the eye. Even in the midst of disagreement, our recognition of the other allows us to look the other in the eye. Recognizing that conflict arises from our different experiences and understandings — differences that are inevitable in our contingent, finite, incarnated existence — we can see each other as partners in the situation instead of opponents (or merely opponents, at any rate). We exist in a world in

which decisions must be made willy-nilly — that is, where failure to make a decision is usually itself a decision, and where we have neither time nor other resources to work things out fully. In that sense we can recognize we are in the same predicament and thus can hold each other blameless — mistaken, perhaps, but not evil.

In a culture that alienates us from one another, one that encourages us to see each other as competitors instead of fellow mortals, “looking each other in the eye” is easily taken as idealistic: unreachable, unrealistic, and generally meaningless — a rhetorical trope rather than a real experience. However, this culturally conditioned judgment cannot tell us what humans are inherently like or what is possible for them, for we are trapped in a self-referential argument, justifying our social practices by theories of people’s inherent nature and then justifying those theories by studying people who have grown up within those social practices. I am under no illusion that a different doctrine will automatically create new cultures and new attitudes — I’m not advocating a “New Soviet Man” approach. As Habermas (1983/1990:207-208) puts it, social systems “have to meet morality halfway”. Nevertheless, that is a different sort of unrealism from the usual accusation. If anything, it is unrealistic to believe that a culture that alienates people from each other can maintain itself in the long run. Despite all social practices to the contrary, human beings persist in being connected to each other, in interpenetrating each other’s psyches. The true unrealism lies with those who believe that our culture’s current ways of relating to each other can continue to function despite neglecting this fundamental human characteristic.

Although “looking someone in the eye” is a strong, present look, it is not a glaring-at or a staring-down-of the other, behavior whose brittleness communicates weakness instead of strength. To look each other in the eye does not insist or dominate but rather opens; it reflects a psychological centeredness that acknowledges its contingency even while it states its position. It opens the self to the possibility of being convinced while still requiring the other to do the convincing. To look in that way opens up one’s gaze; one proffers one’s assumptions and judgments instead of insisting on them. To put this another way, one offers one’s self to the other.

Let us consider several possible objections to this trope. First, it is certainly possible to look *at* someone, even at someone’s eyes, without looking them *in* the eye. What distinguishes these attitudes? Could the distinction be that we look *at* another’s eyes when we see the other only through a veil of assumptions and emotions, while we look people in the eye when we see them without illusion? Alas, that comfortable distinction rests on the problematic assertion that we can see each other without assumptions and emotions — as if unmediated knowledge of the world and each other were possible. No, the true distinction between looking *in* and *at* each other’s eyes is our acceptance of the contingency of our understanding, i.e., whether we can acknowledge the possibility of being wrong.

A second objection to this trope is that of cultural relativism. It has been said that looking each other in the eye is a culturally bound value, that in some cultures — e.g., African-American

culture, to name only one — it is insulting to look another in the eye.⁶ But even if this is true, the implied cultural relativism is mistaken. To take the African-American case, it seems to me that the practice comes from the experience of slavery; a slave looking the master in the eye assumed an equality that slave-owners could not tolerate, because they had no justification for keeping slaves that was independent of the agreement of the slave. They had justifications for slavery, of course, but none of those justifications could admit that the relationship had to be accepted by both parties.⁷ This is another manifestation of the truism that an oppressive relationship dehumanizes both parties.⁸

A third objection to this trope is that it is too vague and subjective to be a definition or characterization of the moral — at the philosophical level of Jiminy Cricket singing to Pinocchio, “♪ Just let your conscience be your guide ♪♪”. However, I don’t mean it as a definition; rather, I mean it as both a shorthand for and a standard of what our definitions of morality are

⁶It can also be taken as hostile, but it seems to me that the act is not inherently hostile. It is made so, rather, by the underlying attitudes of judgment and/or hostility, attitudes that are communicated through facial expressions and other body language. Of course, as a practical matter one must recognize that looking people in the eye can be misunderstood.

⁷I believe that slave-owners had to have experienced the same problem in looking their slaves in the eye, for to do so in recognition of the slaves’ humanity was to open the door to questions about the legitimacy of slavery itself. This is the psychological and emotional dynamic of *Huckleberry Finn*, although the book takes for granted Jim’s saintly ability to look Huck in the eye right from the start.

⁸I recognize that this speculation may not apply to other cultures in which it is considered rude to look another in the eye. (And perhaps the speculation is not true even in the African-American case.) Nevertheless, I mention it to indicate the terms in which we could approach an explanation of cultures’ possession of this norm.

trying to accomplish. It's not a morality as such; rather, it is a guide to moral life, a reminder of how we want to live. This work's apparently informal characterization of morality rests on what I hold to be our innate (but often unrealized) capacity to understand each other, a capacity that has its fullest flowering in speech — as held by Jürgen Habermas and others of the linguistic turn — but that is present in animal brains as well — as held by those who point to the difficulties of linguistic approaches in dealing with animals and other moral patients.

Interpersonal (face-to-face) morality is easy to understand in these terms. Two people talk over a situation, they decide what to do, they shake hands, and that's that. Presumably they reached their decision in a way that is acceptable to both of them, and presumably (in consequence) the outcome is acceptable to both. They may not find this outcome equally valuable; in many situations these agreements might not even produce a “win-win” outcome. Nevertheless, given the situation facing them (including their limited ability to invent or consider potential solutions), each is satisfied with the outcome, recognizes that the other is as well, and therefore can look the other in the eye. The reverse is true for what we would consider immoral or coercive agreements; the means of reaching the decision were not mutually acceptable, the outcome is also so, and the participants are not able to look at each other without that coercion falling like a sword between them. In sum, the concept of looking each other in the eye has a specific referent in the context of the morality of face-to-face agreements.

The situation is more complex when, in an increasingly large, intricate, and impersonal world, face-to-face agreements are no longer capable of organizing our relations with each other. In

such a situation our relationships are mediated by the institutions and cultural patterns that we at least acquiesce in. But despite this mediation, we are still in a relationship. Institutions' mediation of our dealings with one another may make our relationship clumsy, like trying to sew wearing oven mitts, and it may disguise or obscure that relationship, but it does not alter the fact that we *are* in a relationship.⁹

However, the institutionally-mediated nature of our relationship does alter our ability to change it, since the mediating institutions are constituted in a collective decision, not an individual one. Face-to-face agreements are governed by us alone, but our mediated relationships are not entirely under our control. Even if I refuse to approve of the mediated relationship (something that is difficult enough, given that systems do not survive if they cannot induce approval), I often acquiesce in it simply by not acting against it. And the pressures to acquiesce are even greater than those to approve; a system that is unable to sustain mass acquiescence will disappear. We need not inquire immediately about the nature of the system that creates such pressures to agree or at least to acquiesce; we need only understand that such must be the case.

⁹This clumsiness arises from the difficulty of coordinating behavior when face-to-face coordination is not feasible. It does not arise from a dismissal of normative concern and should not be taken as evidence that social justice is inferior to interpersonal morality.

Jumbling Moral and Just Ways of Relating

I now want to return to my encounter with a homeless man, who I will call Joe. It seems to me that the situation is made so complex because it jumbles issues of morality and issues of justice. Let us disentangle them by considering them separately.

At the face-to-face level, the normative issues revolve around the immediate situation: Is Joe truly in need? Will he use the money for food or for liquor, and do I care? What, if anything, can I afford? Regardless of what I can afford here, what can I afford to give to all who ask? These issues are complex enough, but in the end they concern only whether I will give or withhold money. More importantly, they involve only me and Joe. True, the issues appear within the overall social context, but they take the context as given — a fact of life, not a subject of negotiation.

However, when we interrogate the social context itself, then Joe and I can recognize our relationship as mediated and our negotiations as constructing our mutual understanding of social justice. The issue at this level is not whether I give Joe money but rather whether I can accept a system that places him and me in our respective situations. In order to look Joe in the eye, I must be able to have a realistic, good faith expectation that he will consent to our mediated relationship. In other words, I have to believe that he will agree to the overall socio-economic-

political arrangements that have placed him in his position and me in mine. I must have some justification in mind that I can reasonably expect will persuade him. (And vice-versa, of course.)

What might a reasonable justification look like? Well, suppose we were to know that God has arranged things so that there are only two social positions possible in a society — political science professor and homeless man —, that only one person can be in each position, that God simply flipped a coin to assign us our positions, and that once occupied, occupancy of these positions is permanent. In such circumstances I can look Joe in the eye, because the problem we face of his homelessness — I say “we” because I too feel it a problem — arises from something outside our control. For us to trade places just gives us the same problem in reverse; it hasn’t solved anything. And since it hasn’t, Joe and I can see his homelessness not as arising from me but from the way God structured the world. I am not the cause of Joe’s difficulties, or at any rate our actions cannot alter the fact that one of us is going to be homeless.

A second possibility — well, a certainty — is that U.S. society has the resources to ensure that no one is homeless. It follows that we have the collective power to change things accordingly.¹⁰ To do so will surely mean that some must give up some wealth, perhaps even to such a degree that our national production declines, but such a decline would not mean preventing homelessness for one group of people only to inflict it on another. Bill Gates might become poorer as a result of preventing homelessness, but he will not himself be cast into homelessness. In these

¹⁰That there are forces militating against the exercise of that power is a separate question; our concern here is simply establishing the nature of our responsibility in the first place.

circumstances I find that I cannot look Joe in the eye; I can have no reasonable expectation that he will agree to sacrifice his own life so that I can live a bit better. On what basis can I claim that I deserve to live such a more privileged life than Joe does?

Rhetorical questions like this are supposed to be unanswerable, but they elicit answer anyway, e.g., “Because I won the inherent struggle for survival of the fittest”, or “Because God has elected me”, or “Because competition is necessary for social advancement”, and so on. Now, let me be clear that I am not rejecting counter-arguments per se. Instead, I am simply noting that they lie between us. Nothing prevents me from asserting such arguments, but looking someone in the eye means being open to a response, accepting that the other is a partner in the discussion. In my experience, at least, replies like the above are made in denial of that partnership; they are used to dismiss the other, not to invite mutual understanding. I think of them as a mist or veil before our eyes, as when we look at someone in anger or fear, not seeing the other as they are but through the screen of those powerful emotions. When I make such arguments, I find myself de-focusing my eyes, cutting myself off from the other as I pay attention solely to the pictures in my head.

Does this imply that an objective view of the world (and the human other) is possible, and that we could see clearly if only we could detach ourselves sufficiently? No. I deny the first and doubt the possibility of the second. The important thing is not that we can or do see the other but rather that we can be open to seeing him. We must *offer* our understandings to the other and must *consider* his response to them. We are mortal creatures, located in this not-fully-satisfactory space between the past and the future. Neither morality nor social justice is possible without the

agreement of the other, and agreement can only mean anything if disagreement is possible. This is what it means to share a moral universe.

Questions and Objections

Q: Your¹¹ argument rests on the tenuous (and certainly unproven) assumption that my success has caused the homeless man's failure. But I don't think there's any connection — certainly none that is clear to me. If, as I believe, the homeless man's failure is his own, why should I feel any responsibility for his welfare? And even if you differ in your judgments about the situation, what gives you the right to substitute your judgment for mine when you demand that I spend my money and time solving what only you see as a problem?

A: You have raised two questions, which I will answer separately.¹² Your first question is whether you specifically are responsible for Joe's situation. This question is posed at the individual level, but as I tried to make clear above, I separate the individual from the systemic level. The issue isn't whether you personally are responsible for Joe's situation; I agree with you that no specific connection can be shown. However, the issue is whether you support (or, more mildly, acquiesce in) a social system in which some rise and some fall ... and fall to such an extent that they are homeless. Any society that allocates rewards on the basis of economic competition will result in people who win and people who lose

¹¹The questions are framed as if someone else were posing questions to me; the answers are in my voice.

¹²Let me also note that you prejudge Joe's situation by calling it his "failure".

quite apart from their individual merits. Even if we were all noble, workaholic geniuses — i.e., even if we were all indisputably deserving — some will rise and some will fall. We have a society in which one can fall so completely as to be homeless, and it is the justice of our social arrangements, not your individual behavior, that I encourage you to assess by thinking about it in terms of looking the other in the eye.

Your second question asks why I have the right to substitute my judgment for yours in this area. But this mistakes the point of this work, which is not to justify my overriding your judgments but rather to suggest a criterion by which you can assess those judgments for yourself, a criterion that I do argue will be a faithful guide.¹³

Q: I naturally feel sympathy and concern for the homeless man, but I don't share your sense of guilt about his plight.

A: You are certainly entitled to argue that “looking each other in the eye” is not the correct criterion for moral decisions, but it is Joe, not me, you need to look in the eye. To put this another way, “guilt” is the wrong issue. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty; I'm just advancing a criterion for making up one's own mind, one that is not theoretical but rather calls on you to encounter real people who are homeless. Until you do so, we can't have a meaningful conversation about our responses.

¹³In saying this I am not counting the right we all have to vote on how we want our society to be arranged, which results in laws that apply to all regardless of our wishes. Decisions do have to be made, even if we haven't reached agreement.

Q: U.S. society has many programs designed to address the problem of homelessness. Haven't we therefore reached a point of diminishing returns in solving homelessness? To put this another way, when will you be satisfied? You are demanding that our society sacrifice everything in order to solve the problem of homelessness, but that ignores all the other problems that need to be addressed.

A: Yes, there are many social problems besides homelessness, and it isn't reasonable to sacrifice everything on the altar of this problem. My thought here is that the social problem of homelessness arises not from a failure of funding but from a failure of will. Homeless shelters are relatively inexpensive to maintain, and there are several alternatives to shelters in any case.¹⁴ As far as I can see, the basic problem is not money but rather the general ideological belief that homeless people deserve their fate¹⁵ and a sense that in any case we have no personal responsibility for alleviating their situation. So for me, at least, and at least now, I can't make this argument while looking Joe in the eye.

Q: The groundrules of your argument are unclear. You are demanding that I get the homeless man's consent to a system only after the dice have been rolled, so to speak. Of course he won't consent to a system once he finds out that he got the short end of the stick; no one would, so what kind of criterion is that? The most important aspect of this agreement situation is not looking him in the eye, as you claim, but rather asking him after the results are evident. Let me illustrate my objection in a

¹⁴Besides shelter itself, the homeless need secure places to store their possessions, places to receive mail, places to clean up, places to get basic health care, and so on. And they need to have these things without social opprobrium, including the belief that they are receiving "charity". These things are not expensive to provide — particularly the last.

¹⁵"Ideological" because it is a belief not grounded in direct knowledge.

less emotionally loaded situation than homelessness: the public policy issue of raising the speed limit on a stretch of highway. We know statistically that an increase in speed limits will result in more people being killed. According to your thinking, we ought to make our decision only after asking for the (imagined) agreement of one of those who would be killed as the result of the increased speed. Would they agree to that, just as you say the homeless man is being asked to agree to capitalism? You say that I can't look the homeless man in the eye because he wouldn't consent to the system that resulted in his being there. You let him speak as a representative of the worst-off, not simply as himself. He may previously have supported the socio-economic-political system, but now that he has lost, he does not support it. O.k., fair enough — he now realizes the consequences not just for himself but generally. But how is this different from the speed limit problem? Someone who has died cannot testify, of course, but we can still imagine him saying with his dying words that he now believes the new speed limits to be unjust.

A: Let me give a series of responses to this question. My immediate response is to say that the two situations feel different in that I can look the dying motorist in the eye in a way that I can't with Joe. I don't mean this intuitionist response as a final justification; it is simply where I need to start in responding to your question.

So I think about looking the motorist in the eye and ask what I would say to him, and what pops up is my telling him that everyone took the same risk and received the same benefits from the higher speed limits. No one selected him for death (or benefits) ahead of time; in fact, he belongs to no identifiable class that we could foresee would be disadvantaged. It may be that he clutches my lapel and convinces me that it isn't worth it, but this is quite a different argument from the one you suggest, that he simply doesn't like

the outcome. I can look him in the eye both while making my own argument and listening to his.

Now, he might pursue this with a deeper argument: that even though he can't be identified as a member of the class of auto fatalities, which cannot be known in advance, he is (we might suppose) an elderly citizen who drives at 55 mph regardless of any higher speed limits. To him, the increased speed increased his risk without any offsetting benefits. Even though we can't know in advance who will die, we can recognize that the new speed limit poses greater risks for people like him. "So as usual," this man argues, "you are sacrificing the elderly to the haste of the young."

"Hmm," I think. "Maybe we did." But then it occurs to me that there are many laws passed for the convenience of many different kinds of people, and that they tend to average each other out, or at any rate mix in a way that does not clearly favor one group over another. Bridling at this argument, he points out the unrepresentativeness of our lawmaking apparatus, and so we go back and forth — at least in my imagination. The point is not whether I can win the argument or even whether I can give any definite response to your original question above. Rather, the point is that at each stage I can look (or imagine myself looking) my fictional auto victim in the eye: say what I think, and hear what he thinks. We may reach a common understanding eventually, but it is not something that can be forced. The important thing is the discourse; the outcome we must leave to take care of itself.

Conclusion

The tropes examined in this work are subjective, and they do not provide us with any clear demarcations of what our norms are or should be. Nevertheless, they merit examination. First, they can be applied to extreme cases like homelessness, so while they are imprecise, they are not meaningless. Second, “looking the other in the eye” is not just a metaphor; it has been and continues to be for me a literal and powerful reminder of when (and why) I am deviating from the path. I feel my imperfections all too strongly, and “looking others in the eye” helps me clean up my act. Whether this is equally true for my readers remains to be seen, of course, but obviously I believe it is. Overall, then, it appears to me that these tropes handle the subjectivity of morality appropriately: not as an absolute, leading to relativism and nihilism, but as a sign pointing to the final ground of morality in our uncoerced agreements with each other.

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