LUKE BRUNNING

Timothy Chappell
KNOWING WHAT TO DO
Imagination, virtue, and platonism in ethics
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In 1965 a window ledge fell in Prague, killing a woman. The communist authorities responded by radically contextualizing the issue [we'd need a little bit here about as to what effect the authorities obfuscated – to avoid blame etc? – could you bring out the significance of this a little more, in a sentence or so? – thank you!]: ledges are usually safe, buildings have improved, and society is progressing. Addressing his fellow writers, Václav Havel castigated the forms of thought visible in these responses:

> The praiseworthy attempt to see things in their wider context becomes so formalized that instead of applying that technique in particular, unique ways, appropriate to a given reality, it becomes a single and widely used model of thinking with a special capacity to dissolve – in the vagueness of all the possible wider contexts – everything particular in that reality. Thus what looks like an attempt to see something in a complex way in fact results in a complex form of blindness. For if we can't see individual specific things, we can't see anything at all.

In his artful book, Timothy Chappell contends that contemporary ethical philosophy, like communist obfuscation, often "dissolves . . . everything particular" in the reality it purports to survey when it attempts ot answer the question of what we should do".

Chappell's book has two aims. First, he argues that philosophical theories rest on generalizations that erase important particulars, or add extraneous details, when discussing ethical deliberation. Second, he offers a remedy for this complex blindness: an "ethical outlook" in which contemplation and an open imagination assist us in knowing how to act.

Chappell anchors his arguments in a prodigious grasp of the "sheer variousness of the things that can appear explanatorily basic" to ordinary rational people. One brilliant and representative argument focuses on philosophical debate around torture. In the familiar "ticking bomb" case, philosophers ask whether it is morally permissible to torture someone who they know has planted a bomb that will soon kill millions. An affirmative answer often seems unavoidable. If torture is the only way to save millions and we know it is the only way, then surely it is permissible. Chappell makes us look again at this example. He shows that we are unlikely to have certain knowledge about an attack; and even if we did, we would not know that we did. Knowing that the terrorist knows where the bomb is seems to be as difficult as knowing where the bomb itself is; terror cells change their plans when a member is captured; torture is unreliable; terrorists can delay by lying, to enable the bomb to go off; people resist torture to different degrees; we do not know torture is more reliable than other methods, and so on.

These considerations transform a simple example into a fraught and complex case of ethical deliberation. By exhibiting patient imaginative reasoning, Chappell demonstrates the importance of expansive deliberation in difficult situations, and warns us of the danger of using sanitized examples to compare very different situations.

Philosophers appeal to our intuitive judgements about such "hard cases" as a way of testing their moral theories. For example, many think torture cases bring pressure to bear on the idea that a person's intrinsic value should be respected irrespective of any consequences. Chappell argues, by contrast, that those theoretical allegiances, and the use of schematic examples, obscure morally relevant details. His deeper conclusion is that the ability to perceive this detail, and to maintain what he calls an "open" imagination, is not only indispensible when deliberating about what to do, but is not the sole preserve of any one theory of right or wrong.

To illustrate this thought, Chappell leads us through an exercise in "moral seeing". He compares torture with other possible actions in the ticking-bomb scenario, such as impulsive harm committed by a official under pressure. Only the former rests on an "intentional structure" that extends beyond single actions. Torture is an institutionalized practice involving rules, oversight, equipment, training, and social acquiescence. Chappell shows that when we assent to the moral permissibility of torture in the ticking bomb example, we also unknowingly assent to this broader practice. (It is no coincidence that Havel's oppressors, masters in obfuscatory "models of thinking", also used torture.)

His discussion of torture is just one of the many ways in which Chappell confronts those who have suffered "training in the failure of their imagination". A rich moral imagination is cultivated by attending to ethical exemplars, not by engaging in "bathetically inadequate" discussions of why torture is wrong. Chappell makes an Owellian eye for detail seem indispensible when thinking about what to do.

This book must be praised as an inspiring expression of an ethical vision with deep historical roots and urgent contemporary relevance. The ethical thinking of theorists and laypeople alike can be distorted by unexpressed presuppositions and theoretical trends. Philosophers are often tempted by frugality: the recycling and reapplication of methods, arguments and distinctions. But even creative thrift can impoverish our thinking disastrously. If a window ledge falls, and someone dies, ethicists must resist the impulse to cut corners with a fashionably sharp distinction, or contextualize away a lost life in a field of abstractions. Chappell's book is itself an ethical exemplar, a study in the contemplation of value, a testament to ordinary goodness. Even those who disagree must contemplate his arguments; since "if we can't see individual specific things, we can't see anything at all".