



The Structure of Moral Action: A Hermeneutic Study of Moral Conflict by Martin J. Packer, Berkley, CA, USA

Reviewed by

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"The task undertaken in this research is. . . to study in detail the complex interactions that occasion and constitute interpersonal moral conflict and give rise to moral concerns. At the same time, I take it as a test of the usefulness and insightfulness of a hermeneutic approach" (p. 20). Thus, Packer's study is interesting in a double sense: First, his object is moral action and not moral reasoning; in this respect, he tries to transgress the behaviorist and cognitivist assumptions made in traditional American psychology. Second, Packer seeks another way of research than a strictly empirical one. This is a challenge which raises the curiosity of anyone working on questions of ethics from a hermeneutic/phenomenological perspective. What is Packer's contribution to his aims?

Let me first sketch the contents of the book. Packer focuses on a type of conflict called "exogenous conflict." It is different from the conflicts which are usually discussed in experimental literature: "internal conflict is between what I want to do, and what I ought to do"; "intellectual conflict is between what I think ought to be done, and what you think ought to be done. Exogenous conflict - conflicts in action . . . occur when one acts with good intentions and finds that one has hurt someone" (p. 3).

To underline the meaning of action, Packer points to the structuring function of emotion and to the rhetorical character of action. The former aspect is reflected—according to Packer—in Heidegger's *Being and Time*; the latter aspect can be traced back to Aristotle. Referring to both Aristotle and to De Rivera, Packer gains three structural elements which will lead his analysis later on. He calls them "the region of Moral Status," "the Intimacy region," and "the Mythology region," that is, ethical argument, social relationship, and form of the talk (why is this "mythology"?).

The main part of the book (pp 21-126) includes the explanation and the detailed description of an empirically founded study: Ten groups of young adults (students) have to play a modified version of a game called "Prisoner's Dilemma." The original ideas in the game of "confessing" or "denying" are symbolized by color cards; and after a time of playing, the students investigate how to arrange agreements. Packer analyzes mainly four groups; his materials are verbal transcripts and video-recordings.

The moral question arises in those four groups mainly when the winning teams start to cheat by breaking the arrangements. Packer finds three phases: The immediate reaction to the “burning” (cheating), the phase of accusation and response, and the phase of articulation or standoff including the outcome of conflict. A quotation from Packer’s analysis of that last phase may demonstrate the manner of his describing:

On the next round a similar set of events occurs. This time both teams begin cooperatively, but the Losing Team play four on the third round. The Winning Team immediately turn over their cards and play four on the fourth round, but the Losing Team now play zero again. On the final round the choices are zero, two. It seems as though each of the teams is unsure about trusting the other, and uncertain whether a play of four blue cards indicates a desire to burn, or a self-protective blocking. Finally another negotiation is called. (p. 112)

The summary of the phases of conflict documents Packer’s structuring work. Each phase is considered with respect to intimacy, moral status, and mythology (pp. 127-134). We cannot consider all details here. However, it is important that Packer stresses the different points of view of the losing and winning teams: “Each is. . .bound by its own concerns and interests” (p. 133). This is a consequence of the “game” structure with its competitiveness. And there is another set of background practice involved: that constitutive of friendship (as the students are friends). The two different sets of practices cause an ambiguity in action.

In the concluding theoretical chapter, Packer emphasizes once more the function of emotion in moral action: “Emotion’s disclosure is an inherent aspect of moral conflict” (p. 135). Hence, “*facts* are the outcome of valuative factors” (p. 149). And he claims “to have empirically demonstrated that there is a form of reflection in practical moral conflict”—“practical deliberation”—“which cannot be regarded as involving the appeal to principles, and to logical argument” (p. 139).

In the following, I will try an evaluation of Packer’s study under a hermeneutical perspective. I am aware that this means a certain point of view; another standpoint would provide another criticism. For example, a representative of strict empiricism might suggest that Packer has lost “objective reality” by admitting to two different qualities of *facts*, the facts of the winners and those of the losers. My suggestion would urge Packer to more clearly step out of a positivist view while affirming into a more profoundly hermeneutical, that is, understanding view. My question to Packer is—and this may astonish the empiricist—whether his step is resolute enough or whether he remains straddled between positivism and hermeneutics. I will explain this question with respect to *context*, *morality*, and *emotion*.

Packer tries to understand the students' actions by regarding the context within which they act. However, does he fully realize the situation as it is? Should his interpretation not be more radically hermeneutic? Only then it would make good sense to speak about the moral implications. What is the context in which Packer assumes to discover moral actions? First, the students act within a game situation. Yet this is only a section of our daily life, which is much richer than a game: We live at home with our family, with friends, we are alone, we work, we are lazy, we move in the traffic, and so forth. Everywhere, there is a certain seriousness. Also, a game has its own seriousness, but it is different to that of daily life. There is an easiness in the game; it is without a purpose; it's just for itself. The rules of a game have a different quality to the rules of our life. So what does morality mean in everyday life and what in a game?

Second, the students have to play a certain game, the "Prisoner's Dilemma." This sounds interesting because in the original idea two prisoners have the chance to be punished—only a little if they cooperate, more strongly if the partner acts competitively. But, this background and its moral implication disappears totally in the game. Here, only points (scores) which one gains or loses, are important. Perhaps that may be interesting for game theorists but certainly not for somebody who wants to play a game. Also, the modification which the students have to play and which has made "the game somewhat more realistic" (p. 24) is in my eyes no real game. It is just boring. No normal people, no normal student group, would play this dull game in a normal situation just for the fun of playing a game! A student—from a losing team—utters: "I'd rather have a game. I'd rather play a game, and so that's no. . . I mean, there's no fun. I mean, there's no anything in it. It's boring! I mean, why are we here? I didn't come to make four cents every shot. / Laughter/." (p. 42) What does morality mean in such a situation?

Third, what is not *normal* in the students' situation? They are neither playing as friends, but as *participants* in a psychological experiment—they have to play a role—nor are they playing deliberately, but they are told to do so. They are using matrices for the pretended game. They know that their doing has something to do with a study on *morality*. There is a *Staff Leader*, probably a psychologist, and the participants are observed and studied by psychologists watching them from behind a one-way mirror (p. 29). Their actions are video-recorded. Last but not least, Packer himself, as the researcher and author, is not within the situation but using the video-recordings and verbal transcripts. All this may be normal for an empirically working psychologist. But, in fact, it is a most artificial situation in comparison with everyday life. How do students have to behave in a scientific experiment? What does morality mean in this situation?

What does Packer think he is doing? The "conflicts I shall consider are ones that arise unbidden in the course of everyday social interac-

tion: 'mundance' moral conflicts" (p. 4). "The 'data' for such an inquiry must be the everyday 'talk'. . . It must be available in such a way that the temporality of the talk can be experienced: a video-recording suits well!" (p. 10). Where, in which world do scientists live? They put a group of students into something like a cage, observe them like rats, and think that this is everyday life! For me, the question of morality arises at this very point: it is immoral to treat people like that, to observe them under a moral perspective, and to pretend that this obscenity is everyday life. This criticism aims far beyond Packer as an individual; it aims to the very understanding science. However, it must be noted that Packer does not consider this scientific situation as a problem. This is what leaves the study as a positivistic one.

What about morality in Packer's study? Taking the hermeneutical approach seriously, morality has to be considered with respect to the different situations. Also, Packer states that "moral worth of an action depends on the context in which it occurs" (p. 37). First, morality in a game—a real game—would have its scale in fairness, in observing the specific rules. Violating the rules or even betraying would be punished and everyone, including the betrayer, would agree that there did occur a wrong or immoral action. It strikes me that the cheating groups in Packer's study do not have any consciousness of guilt at all, yet I cannot imagine that those students are persons without any moral consciousness. This makes me wonder whether the study can be taken seriously as one concerned with morality.

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Second, the special game the students have to play seems to be so boring that I understand their cheating as a constitutive necessity to maintain the game as a game. "We only did it for the humor of it!" (p. 76). Cheating generates fun, sometimes even for the cheated party: "Being burnt 'was so funny actually'; it was a joke" (pp 55, 56, cf 61). In other cases, the losing team are shocked about the cheating and are talking about broken trust. The winners are "the fun party," the losers the "moral party" (p. 144). Why? The groups are formed accidentally, but surely a morally conscious person would feel and think morally as a winner as well as a loser. Once more: Is morality involved in the experiment at all?

Third, sane students would stop a dull game after five minutes. However, these students are caught in a scientific experiment. I would like to ask the question whether cheating is—in such a case—a sound protest against the dull situation. Are not the losers, the moral party, really being "immoral" persons because of their accepting the amoral research situation? Cheating is a self-defense here. Who acts immorally then? "Let's break the trust, we won't play anymore" (p. 116); "I think we've all learned something today. / Mock serious tone Laughter./" (p. 121). Do not the students mock

here at the psychologists who have scheduled morality? The students laugh at expressions like friends and trust (pp 112-113). They would not do that in a normal everyday situation and therefore, I cannot find this reaction as sad as Packer does and complain that the "concerns of trust and responsibility appear to be irresolvable for these young adults" (p. 98). Packer should ask himself whether morality is possible within a planned experiment.

I concede that my interpretation is an extreme one, stressing the unnatural experimental situation. But to consider this seems necessary if the study claims to be a hermeneutic one. The different interpretation of the events in the experiment provided here may demonstrate that the question of what is to be considered as moral is itself a case for interpretation. Even the students seem to have a different notion of morality than Packer has. After having read his book, my impression is that the experimentalists expect moral action and they have to discover it. To me, the moral implications in the described situation seem to be overestimated. Morality is carried into the experimental situation as a certain notion from outside. Further, I wonder which notion of morality Packer has and how he could legitimize it. There is no discussion of this in the book. As a psychologist, Packer may not wish to undertake the work of a philosopher, but it becomes obvious that he depends on philosophical presuppositions with respect to ethics.

As a psychologist, Packer has to transform morality to a process in order to make it suitable for empirical observation; therefore, he talks about moral actions, conflicts, and emotions. These are available for observation and description. This includes the danger that morality is eliminated as soon as it is interpreted as a result of different views. As Packer argues, understanding the situation in different ways make it "possible to interpret the 'wrong' act as grounded in a different point of view" (pp 130-131). Thus as soon as the points of view join in a mutual understanding, the moral question disappears. Furthermore, what are the interrelations between morality and action, morality and conflict, morality and emotion? Are they the same? Certainly not. But what makes an action, conflict, or emotion, a moral one? What is moral? This circle leads us to a basic limitation of psychology (and similar sciences). It is not Packer's task to solve that fundamental problem, but it is the hermeneutic approach which discloses it.

A final remark with respect to emotions: Packer refers to Heidegger's *Being and Time* and interprets the conception of *Befindlichkeit* roughly as "emotion and mood" (p. 16). But Heidegger himself refuses a psychological meaning of *Befindlichkeit*: This "is far from something like the finding of a psychic state" (p. 29). Emotions can be understood as being founded in *Befindlichkeit* but they are not identical with it. *Being and Time* is

neither a psychological nor a methodological book just as it is no book of philosophical anthropology. Consequently, I cannot recognize a similarity to it in Packer's "investigative approach," though he hopes to get support from the same (p. 9). Packer is right in broadening the investigation of morality to moral action—although this is more and something else than the sum of cognition and emotion. Exactly that could be learned, for example, from Heidegger.