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**Stupid Goodness**

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**Abstract**

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan is at one point described as “Stupidly good”: his state is one of admirable yet inarticulate responsiveness to reasons. Turning from fiction to real life, I argue that this is an important moral phenomenon, but one that has its limits. The focus of the essay is on answering three questions about the relation between having a reason and saying what it is – between normativity and articulacy. Is it possible to have and respond to morally relevant reasons without being able to articulate them? Can moral inarticulacy be good, and if so, what is the value of moral articulacy? And thirdly, what is the practical value of moral philosophy? Can *it* play a role in helping us to be good? I argue that morality has an inarticulacy-accepting part, an articulacy-encouraging part, an articulacy-surpassing part and an articulacy-*dis*couraging part. A description is offered of each of these parts, and answers to the three questions defended. Along the way, an account is proposed of what it is to respond to the reasons that make up the substance of morality.

I take my title from the Devil. As has often been observed, he is one of the more attractive characters in *Paradise Lost*. And to give him his due, the Satan described by Milton is not completely bad. It is true that the overall plan he sets himself is very bad – that of avenging himself on God by corrupting Adam and Eve. But once he has disguised himself as the serpent and finds Eve, he is stopped in his tracks. His vindictive spite is temporarily overpowered by Eve’s innocence and beauty. Milton offers us this description:

That space the Evil One abstracted stood   
From his own evil, and for the time remained  
Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,  
Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge…[[1]](#endnote-1)

However, he soon gathers his wits again and talks himself out of his weakness:

“Thoughts, whither have ye led me, with what sweet   
Compulsion thus transported to forget   
What hither brought us, hate, not love, nor hope  
Of Paradise for Hell, hope here to taste  
Of pleasure, but all pleasure to destroy,   
Save what is in destroying...”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Having successfully remonstrated with himself, he then sets to work.

Stupid goodness, I shall argue in what follows, is an important moral phenomenon. I start with a question about Milton’s Satan: how could his temporary stupid state really be a kind of *goodness*? But that will be a preliminary to my main discussion. Satan, after all, is only a fictional character – and a character in what has rightly been called “a monument to dead ideas” (albeit a mighty one).[[3]](#endnote-3) My main aim will be to describe the kinds of stupid goodness that we should admire in each other, and the kinds we should try to surpass.

**I**

When Milton calls Satan “stupid”, he means that he is stunned, overpowered by the impact of Eve’s goodness. Inadvertently struck by this, he is both temporarily disarmed of his evil qualities – deprived of the power to act on his bad dispositions – and dumbfounded, rendered inarticulate. Satan’s evil is articulate; his goodness is a state of speechlessness. This state is a form of goodness, Milton suggests, because it is a way of admiring Eve’s beauty and innocence, as one should. These qualities of Eve are reasons to admire her, and Satan, struck by these qualities, does so. His admiration is thus a response produced by the impact upon him of the reasons for admiring her; he admires her through his sensitivity to those reasons. His state of stupid goodness, then, is a state of inarticulate responsiveness to reasons.

How can this state be *good* if it is so passive? There are some kinds of goodness that it cannot have: it cannot be praiseworthy or meritorious. After all, he has donenothing to attain this state, and is not responsible for it.[[4]](#endnote-4) It is a state that comes to him unbidden, and he exerts himself to get rid of it straight away. However, that does not stop his state from being good in other ways: it can still be admirable, and worth aspiring to. For you do not have to be responsible for your possession of a feature in order for it to be admirable. I could rightly admire your upright posture or melodious voice even if they are only part of your genetic endowment.

In describing Satan’s stupidly good state as a state of inarticulate responsiveness to reasons, I am assuming a kind of moral rationalism – a kind that makes three claims. Morality gives us reasons; these are reasons we have independently of the responses we happen to make to them; and the primary form of moral goodness is responding to these reasons well. (This is not the *only* form of moral goodness, since you can respond morally well to what you mistakenly believe to be the facts of your situation. Then you are not responding to the recognition-independent reasons themselves. So that is a secondary form of moral goodness.) It is natural to think of morality in this way, since it is the way that morality seems to be experienced by people who display the most obvious kinds of moral goodness. A kind person sees the helpfulness of an action as counting in its favour, and an honest person sees the deceptiveness of an action as counting against it, in same sense of “counting in favour” or “against” that an action’s being pleasant or painful to you yourself counts for or against it. So to the extent that we are kind or honest, we treat those considerations as reason-giving, and as having that status independently of whether we happen to recognize it or not.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The overall issue I want to explore in what follows is this. If we adopt this rationalistic framework, what is the relationship between, on the one hand, responding well to the morally relevant reasons that bear on your action and, on the other, articulacy about those reasons? In asking this, I shall be concerned with “articulacy” both in the sense of being able to describe your reasons, and actually doing so – either to yourself or publicly to others. I shall approach this overall issue by examining three more specific questions.

The first is: Is it possible to have and respond to morally relevant reasons without being able to articulate them? This is the application to morality of the more general question: is responding to a reason for action possible without being able to say what it is? “Being able” here will need closer attention, but I think it will be fairly clear that there is a robust sense in which the answer to the general question is Yes: we can respond to reasons for action without being able to articulate them. Morality, however, is a special case, which throws up its own special obstacles to extending that generalization.

The second question is: Can moral inarticulacy be good, and if so, what is the value of moral articulacy? Suppose the answer to the first question is Yes. So you could have and respond to a morally relevant reason without being able to say what it is; but could doing so be good? And if so, wouldn’t being able to articulate the reason be better? That is our second question.

The third question concerns moral philosophy. If the substance of morality is a subset of our reasons for action, then the job of moral philosophy, surely, is to articulate those reasons. –Or at least, that is *a* job of normative moral philosophy. Others will be to describe their relation to each other, how they interact to determine overall moral verdicts, what forms of responsiveness to them are best, and so on. So then, our third question is: What is the practical value of moral philosophy? Can *it* play a role in helping us to be good?

In Milton’s Satan, we have a description of someone for whom the answer to the first two questions would be Yes. He gives us a model of what stupid goodness could be like: his state of inarticulate reason-responsiveness could be admiration-worthy, if not praiseworthy. But now we need to move beyond that literary example. Does this model fit the way people really are?

**II**

Our first question asks whether one can have and respond to a morally relevant reason without being able to say what it is. To approach this, we can begin by considering what to say about reasons of other kinds, before examining morality’s case for special treatment.

“Being able” deserves some preliminary remarks. In general, there is a distinction to be made between the possession of a competence and the absence of impediments to its exercise. The possible impediments can be external – as when a competent speaker is gagged. But they can also be internal – as in those forms of expressive aphasia which prevent a person from saying aloud the sentences she can form in her head. Here, I shall follow the practice of calling the absence of internal and external impediments to exercising a competence the *opportunity* to exercise it, and of calling the conjunction of competence-and-opportunity to do something the *ability* to do it.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The case of aphasia is a painfully stark illustration of an important general point: that being good at detecting a reason and being good at saying what it is are two different skills. Aphasia will not stop you from being able to understand and follow instructions, and thus to be responsive to the reasons you recognize for following them, but it can stop you from being able to describe them – and in some forms can deprive you not just of the opportunity but the competence too.

There are various more everyday cases where our ability to respond to a reason seems to outrun our descriptive competence. The main ones I can think of fall into four broad categories.[[7]](#endnote-7) First, there is our competence in re-identification – our ability to recognize an individual object or person, or a property, we have encountered before. Face-recognition is an obvious example. Most of us are much better at re-identifying someone’s face than we are at describing our evidence for the identifications we make. There are shape-features that do count in favour of our face-identifying actions, but our ability to detect and respond to them is not matched by an ability to say what they are.

Here, our reason-recognitional ability is an ability to spot a pattern – to see the commonality between different visual presentations of the same face. There is a second familiar group of cases in which our pattern-spotting abilities outrun our linguistic ones. I group these together as “predictive hunches”. Scientists’ intuitions about potentially fruitful hypotheses, feelings about other people’s trustworthiness based on their body language, premonitions about danger that are picked up from subliminal cues in the environment, skill in detecting forgeries, talent-spotting... – there are many apparent examples of this type.[[8]](#endnote-8) Another example that belongs here is the kind of social skill that involves knowing just the right thing to say in order to defuse an awkward situation, without being able to give an articulate explanation of why that is so. This ability is also a predictive skill – a skill in seeing that *this* remark is likely to lead to everyone’s feeling at ease, but without being able to say why.

Now a fair point to make about the examples so far is this. In cases of the first kind there is an impression, or in the second a feeling, which the agent is able to report by saying: “He looks like Fred”, or “The situation felt unsafe.” In reporting the content of the impression or feeling, one attributes a relational property to its object: the property of giving rise to that impression or feeling. The face has the property of looking-like-Fred-to-me; the situation has the property of feeling-unsafe-to-me. The object does have the relational property, and if the impression or feeling to which it gives rise is reliable, then the object’s having this property is indeed a reason for the resulting action: the action of identifying the person as Fred, or of getting out of the situation. So these are not cases in which someone can recognize and respond to a reason for action without being able to say what it is.

That seems correct, as far as it goes. However, we can go further. In these cases, the impression or feeling has a propositional content: the impression one has is that the face is Fred’s; the feeling one has is that the situation is dangerous. The reliability of the impression or feeling is its being a reliable indicator that the proposition in question is true. And if it is reliable, that will be because of one’s sensitivity to the features whose possession by the object are reasons why that proposition is true, and also reasons for making the response one does.[[9]](#endnote-9) The structural properties of Fred’s face are reasons for identifying it as Fred’s; the fact that the building is about to collapse is a reason to get out. So when you are inarticulately responsive to those facts, you are inarticulately responsive to reasons.[[10]](#endnote-10)

With cases of a third kind, we move away from pattern-spotting. These concern what I shall call “reasons of individual integrity”. For an example of this kind, think of a painter making corrections and changes in the process of creating a great work of art. Here is a memorable description of J.M.W. Turner’s working procedure:

He began by pouring wet paint till it was saturated... he tore, he scratched, he scrubbed at it in a kind of frenzy and the whole thing was chaos – but gradually and as if by magic the lovely ship, with all its exquisite minutiae, came into being and by luncheon time the drawing was taken down in triumph.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The various corrections, revisions, additions and reworkings that are made along the way are not arbitrary. They are orchestrated towards producing the particular overall effect of the resulting work. It counts in favour of the actions that are taken during this process that they contribute towards producing that effect, making the work what it is. That is then a reason for the artist’s actions: chaotic as they might seem, they are actions performed for reasons. But, as the case of the famously inarticulate Turner makes clear, the sensitivity that guides the artist’s actions need not be accompanied by a skill in verbally describing what one is sensitive to. Questioned about one of his famous evocations of a storm at sea, he offered: “I hope I may never be out in another. Anything but snow. Like the King of Sweden – anything but a bear.” As one of his friends charitably put it, “Turner’s thoughts were deeper than ordinary men can penetrate and much deeper than he could at any time describe.”[[12]](#endnote-12) This then gives us another way in which the recognition of reasons can be inarticulate. But it is not a pattern-spotting case like the earlier ones. The competence the artist deploys in creating the painting is not a matter of spotting commonalities between this painting and others – it is a matter of seeing what details need to be added to this one to allow it best to express what it does.

For another example of this third type, consider the choices we make between different goods in our own lives – choices between personal relationships and career advancement, between old loyalties and new stimulation, and so forth. One difficulty with such choices is predictive: it is difficult to judge how things will turn out if you pursue one of two alternatives. But another is evaluative. Often, the question you face is not which of a pair of competing goods is in general superior. Rather, it is the particular question how best to continue *your* life: of the various goods around which you could structure your life, which combination of them makes the most sense as a way of continuing the life you are already leading. So – while few of us are going to claim that the result is a masterpiece – here, too, decision-making can have the same form as in the artistic case.[[13]](#endnote-13) We are making decisions about the actions that contribute to creating a valuable whole by reference to the integrity of the whole; and we can do that without being equipped with a vocabulary that captures exactly what kind of integrity is being contributed to.

The fourth case concerns reasons of love and admiration. “But we don’t love for reasons”, it is commonly said. There is a sense in which that is true; but it is what makes cases of this kind belong on our list. We do not cite reasons to ourselves in deciding whether to love someone or something; but usually, the objects of our love really do have features that make them lovable.[[14]](#endnote-14) The way they are counts in favour of loving them, and we love them *for* being that way. So those features are reasons for loving them, and in loving them for having those features we are responding to reasons. But that response, again, is often inarticulate – like Satan’s. When he is stopped in his tracks, he is struck by the admirable qualities of what he sees – they cause admiration in him, despite himself. His state belongs in this fourth category.

This gives us four plausible kinds of inarticulate responsiveness to reasons. With them in hand, we can now answer our first question. Is responding to morally relevant reasons possible without being able to articulate them? Yes; because there are moral instances of the cases we have just surveyed. For the first kind of case – an inarticulate competence in reidentification – we can point out that when moral instruction is inarticulate, the same can be true of moral learning. A young child, told that a certain piece of behaviour is wrong, may be able to tell that other similar behaviour is also wrong before learning a name for its wrong-making feature – vindictively damaging someone else’s possessions, say. Turning to the second kind of case – predictive hunches – social skill was one of the examples I gave. That could itself be an exercise of kindness: a concern for easing someone else’s embarrassment. In general, kind people are sensitive to what will benefit or harm someone; and respectful people are sensitive to avoiding what will be taken as belittling a person or their attachments. But having those sensitivities need not be accompanied by an articulate ability to explain *why* a given remark or gesture is likely to lead to those results.[[15]](#endnote-15) In the third category – reasons of individual integrity – I cited our decision-making in shaping the content of our own lives. But the same sensitivity can be deployed in the advice we give to others and the decisions we make that impact upon them – particularly in the concern we have for the development and fulfilment of our children. And there are moral instances of the fourth kind too: the love or admiration of virtue is an example. Being struck by the nobility of someone’s character is itself an instance of a morally good state – a state which we do not attain by articulating reasons, but which is a responsiveness to the admirable features of what we are impressed by. Again, the reasons need not be inarticul*able*: if we go searching for names for the virtues we admire, often we can find them. But the admiration can precede the explanation.

**III**

For some, this will be too fast. The first two kinds of case, especially, may seem to have been misdescribed. Inarticulate pattern-spotting behaviour can involve successfully reacting to the facts that are reasons for our reactions, but *responding to reasons* requires more than that.[[16]](#endnote-16) Reacting to something that is in fact a reason is not yet responding to it *as* a reason. To this worry, let me offer first a reply and then a concession.

The reply is to provide a description of what it is to respond to a reason, as a reason, that is general enough to cover such cases. To arrive at that description, we can start with the most obvious paradigm cases of responding to a reason, and then consider what they have in common with the further examples I have just been discussing. Once we have seen how to do that, we can then consider how strong a reply this gives us to the objection.

The most obvious paradigm cases of responding to a reason have three features. One explicitly represents to oneself that a certain fact obtains, one occurrently believes that this fact is a reason to make a certain response (a response of action, feeling or thought), and one is non-accidentally guided by those two psychological states to make that response.[[17]](#endnote-17) (We might want to question how often this actually occurs; but any process meeting these conditions would clearly count as responding to a reason.)[[18]](#endnote-18) By broadening these conditions, we can produce an account of reason-responsiveness that has the same tripartite structure but extends to cover cases of the kinds described above. It will contain a fact-sensitivity condition, a reason-attribution condition, and a non-accidental guidance condition; but the first two conditions need to be weakened and thereby broadened.

The first condition needs to be broadened if it is to cover cases like the predictive hunches. In those cases, the agent’s response is explained by her sensitivity to the properties the instantiation of which gives her reasons to do what she does (run away, for example). But the fact to which she is responding need not be one that she explicitly represents to herself. So the first condition needs to be broadened to include states of property-sensitivity that involve no explicit representation of the properties to which one is sensitive.[[19]](#endnote-19) It will also need to include *indirect* as well as direct sensitivity, in order to cover cases such as those in which I come to believe a fact through someone else’s testimony.[[20]](#endnote-20)

A version of the second, reason-attribution condition needs to be retained, if we are to have an account of what it is to respond to a reason *as* a reason. There is a sense in which, if I see that you are ailing, take this as an opportunity to poison you, but ignorantly drug you with something that saves your life, then I have saved your life by responding to the fact that was indeed a reason for saving your life. But that is not the sense of “responding to a reason” that we are trying to capture. So we need to retain the reason-attribution condition; but if it is to cover the cases described earlier, it will also have to be broadened, in three ways. In a case in which you have no explicit representation of the fact that gives you a reason, your state of reason-attribution cannot be an occurrent belief that this fact gives you a reason. Instead, what needs to be true is that you think that *there is* a reason, in virtue of your sensitivity to the reason-giving fact. Secondly, your state of reason-attribution need not be an *occurrent* cognitive state: there need be no psychological event of telling yourself that you have a reason. And, moreover (thirdly), the attribution-state need not amount to a *belief*. We need to say that in order to accommodate cases of the Huckleberry Finn type.[[21]](#endnote-21) Huck believes he ought not to help the runaway slave Jim escape those who are hunting him down – we can imagine that he sincerely denies that he has any reason to do so. But when we admire Huck for akratically protecting Jim nonetheless, this is because he is sensitive to the features of Jim’s plight thatcount in favour of protecting him, and sensitive to them in the right way: despite his belief that he ought not to help Jim, he sees his plight as counting in favour of helping him. Huck’s sympathy is more than just the experience of a brute urge to help: the situation presents itself to him as one in which the action of helping Jim is called for – in which there is a reason to help. “Reason-attribution” is my name for the class of psychological states that include both its seeming that there is a reason and believing that there is. When you are in the first kind of state, the situation presents itself to you as one in which it is true that there is a reason; in the second, you endorse that proposition *as* true. This leads to a large further question: can we give a general account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a state of “reason-attribution”, that explains what it is for a situation to “present itself to you as one in which it is true that there is a reason”, in a way that covers both reason-beliefs and reason-seemings? However, the task of defending an answer to that against rivals would take us too far afield; so having acknowledged the question I will leave it unanswered here.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The third condition for responding to a reason is that your response must be non-accidentally guided by your property-sensitivity and reason-attribution.[[23]](#endnote-23) This needs to be retained – but also filled out. It must not just be an accident that your response accompanies your meeting the first two conditions: there are three different sorts of accidents that must be precluded. Filling out the guidance condition is a matter of developing it in a way that successfully precludes them.

First, there are the cases of a kind familiar from the literature on intentional action, in which your psychological states cause a piece of behaviour that is not an intentional action: “Chisholm cases”, we can call these. To adapt one of his examples, a nephew might see from his car that his uncle is threatened by an assassin, see this as a reason for saving him, and be disturbed by that thought so much that he starts shaking, loses control of the car, and accidentally runs over the assassin.[[24]](#endnote-24) To deal with cases of this kind we need to assure that the way your response is produced tracks the response-type for which you have a reason. We can secure this by requiring, not just that you are caused to make a response of a certain type by your property-sensitivity and reason-attribution, but that you are disposed to adjust your response to ensure that it is of that type. Chisholm-cases fail to meet that condition. Had the assassin not been standing just where he was the nephew would not have redirected the car to hit him. The shaking-response caused by his psychological states does not track the outcome of killing the assassin. This is what makes the killing accidental.

Secondly, we need to rule out “Frankfurt cases”, in which the tracking is done by someone else, manipulating you to ensure that a response of the target kind is made.[[25]](#endnote-25) To rule these out, we can simply require that what makes it true that you satisfy the tracking condition is not that someone else is doing so: you are doing so by yourself.

And thirdly, a further condition is needed to rule out the following kind of “reason-switching” case. Suppose I realize that it is my wedding anniversary, that my wife would like a phone call, and that that gives me a reason to pick up the phone; this then sparks a chain of associated thoughts about our relationship; I conclude as a result of this that I ought to ring a divorce lawyer; and I consequently pick up the phone. Here, picking up the phone is something I do intentionally, and my tracking this response is something I am doing by myself. I am guided by *a* reason, but we need an account that ensures that it is the right one. In order for the response I am making to be a response to a given reason, it must be true that I *now* satisfy the property-sensitivity and reason-attribution conditions in relation to that reason; not just that they were causally efficacious at some time in the past. So we need to add that.

Assembling these conditions, the account we arrive at is this:

When the instantiation of property *p* is a reason for you to make a response of type *R*, your making response *R* is a response to that reason if and only if:

a) You are (directly or indirectly) sensitive to the instantiation of property *p*.

b) In virtue of a), you attribute to the situation the property of being one in which there is a reason for you to make a response of type *R*.

c) Your making a response of type *R* is caused by your now satisfying conditions (a) and (b), in the right way.

The non-accidental guidance condition c) is satisfied just in case:

c1) Your satisfying conditions (a) and (b) causes you to be disposed to adjust your response to ensure that it is of type *R*.

c2) What makes (c1) true is not someone else’s satisfying conditions (a)-(c).[[26]](#endnote-26)

This gives us an account of responding to a reason that can accommodate the examples of inarticulate reason-responsiveness given earlier. It should be acknowledged that, since it has been arrived at simply by thinking up examples that should be ruled in or out, the possibility remains open that I have overlooked others that it mishandles, so that it needs further supplementation. However, any such additions would amount to refinements of a simple overall idea. Reason-responsiveness requires that one is sensitive to the facts that are reasons, that in virtue of this sensitivity one makes a reason-attribution, and that this guides the response one makes. The point is that the sensitivity, attribution and guidance conditions can be interpreted broadly enough to accommodate the cases of inarticulate responsiveness to reasons I described in Section II.

Now I add a concession. I am not going to claim that *the* correct way of using the phrase “responding to reasons” extends it this far – far enough to include cases in which I have no explicit representation of the reason-giving fact and do not believe I have a reason. I accept that, for some purposes, we will want to pick out the narrower range of cases in which one’s response is guided by a belief that some fact that one does explicitly represent to oneself is a reason for it. To someone who insisted on reserving the phrase for that more tightly restricted class, I would happily concede the terminological point. However, our interest in this discussion is in identifying those forms of non-accidental sensitivity to reasons that are good. And for *these* purposes, the relevant class of cases is the broader one just identified. It includes forms of unreflective sensitivity that can be good without being articulate, and that are good in virtue of their possession of these three broad features. So there is *a* sensible use of the phrase “responding to reasons” that extends it beyond the paradigm cases to cover this broader class.

**IV**

We have now answered our first question, and part of the second. Is it possible to have and respond to morally relevant reasons without being able to articulate them? Yes – at least, there is a phenomenon, just described, which deserves to be called “responding to reasons” and for which the answer is Yes. This phenomenon is worth pointing to because it gives us part of the answer to the second question – it answers the part that asks: can moral inarticulacy be good? The answer to this is also Yes. As we have seen, there are various forms of sensitivity to morally relevant reasons that need not be accompanied by articulacy. They amount to ways in which we can learn morally from people who are less articulate but better than us. We can come to appreciate the significance of a reason by appreciating the goodness of someone’s response to it, even if the responder cannot tell us what it is.

But if all of that is true, then what is the value of moral articulacy? That is the other part of our second question: we should now turn to that.

When we ask this question about morality, I think there are four main answers. The first comes from the part of morality that requires treating other people respectfully. Acting with prudential wisdom – making wise choices about my own best interests – requires only being properly responsive to the relevant reasons. But treating other people morally well requires not just recognizing and responding to reasons, but *giving* them to those who stand to be affected by our actions. Suppose I need to block your driveway in an emergency: I appreciate the inconvenience to you, look hard for ways to avoid it, give you as much notice as I can, apologize to you, offer to compensate,… but I don’t think to explain to you *why* I am doing it. There remains an important defect in the way I am dealing with you – a failure of respect. It is one thing to think that there are weighty reasons bearing on the way I treat you; but another to see myself as *answerable* to you for how I treat you.[[27]](#endnote-27)

As I see it, the acceptance of our answerability to others – that is, the acceptance that they have the authority to demand reasons for the way we treat them – is a central part of what it is to treat others respectfully, as equals. I say “central”, but not “fundamental”, because I think that our answerability to each other derives from something deeper. This is our standing as reason-responsive agents whose actions are attributable to us in a way that renders us eligible for the reactive attitudes of those we affect – attitudes such as blame, praise, gratitude and resentment. We can call that our being *accountable* for what we do. In treating ourselves as accountable to each other, we act under the recognition that the mistreatment of another person makes us fitting objects not just of the dislike appropriate to a harmful force but the blame or resentment appropriate to a reason-responsive agent. When others hold me to account for the way I treat them, their responses are governed by the question, “Why did he do that to me?” So to accept that I am accountable to others is to see my treatment of them as properly subject to that interrogative attitude. Part of respecting other people is then addressing them *as* people to whom I am accountable; and I do this by giving them reasons that address the question that governs the responses they make in holding me accountable. Giving them reasons is a way of respecting them because it is a way of *saying*, “I am accountable to you for how I treat you.” This is true both before I act in a way that affects you, if I can feasibly explain myself first; and afterwards, if I cannot. And it is important independently of whether I can expect you to be satisfied with the reasons I offer you. If you are not satisfied, it may be you rather than me who is being unreasonable. However, I still I owe it to you as a matter of respect to address you *as* someone who can properly ask that question of me.

In this way, I think our answerability to others – our acceptance of their authority to demand reasons for the way we treat them – derives from our more fundamental accountability to them. We can also say this. In treating ourselves as answerable to each other, we express our acceptance of a valuable ideal of respectful interpersonal relations: the ideal of dealing with each other as co-equals in the commitment to structuring our relations with each other through the giving and receiving of reasons.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Thus, there is a part of morality – the part that requires us to respect each other by seeing ourselves as answerable for the ways in which we treat them – that insists that we go beyond merely *having* good reasons for what we do: we must also respect others’ authority to demand that we give them those reasons. So does this mean that morality requires articulacy from us after all? Not quite: to say that would be too strong. For one thing, if we try our best to spell out our reasons but fail, that failure of articulacy need not be a failure of respect. It is a failure to meet a standard to which it makes sense to aspire, successfully giving you the reasons you are entitled to demand from me. Success in describing one’s reasons is aspiration-worthy; but that does not make failure blameworthy: on the contrary, if I have tried harder to do this without succeeding, my effort may be more praiseworthy than someone else’s effortless success. And for another thing, if my response to your request for my reason is to tell you a story or give you an analogy that succeeds in getting you to appreciate the force of the reason without naming it, then I have given you all you could reasonably ask for, whether this ends up equipping either of us with a description or name for that reason, or not.[[29]](#endnote-29)

So it would be a mistake to say that this part of morality requires us to describe our reasons. However, we can at least say this: morality has an articulacy-*encouraging* part – the part that enjoins that we respect others by recognizing our answerability to them.

A second source of the value of moral articulacy comes from the role that our moral vocabulary can play in helping us to develop our moral sensitivity. Of course, having a detailed moral vocabulary – having a word for sentimentality as well as kindness – does not guarantee that we will apply it correctly, nor that we will act well even if we do. And it is possible for an attentive person to develop a moral sensitivity by being *shown* situations of moral complexity, in fiction or life, without developing a fine-grained vocabulary for picking out their important features. However, the assistance that it can give us in doing that is a reason to encourage it as part of our ongoing moral education.

In these first two cases, the value of articulacy is in helping to produce an outcome that could be achieved by other means: by showing, rather than saying. Once we notice this, we might wonder: is there ever any value in articulacy itself? To see the force of this question, we can return for a moment to the cases involving reasons of individual integrity. Here, I pointed out, the agent can lack a name for the quality to which he sees himself as contributing. But if there really is a distinctive quality, one can still talk about it by using a demonstrative: one can use language to point, and say “*that* quality”. If we can satisfy ourselves that we are talking about the same thing, we might subsequently invent a name for it. This can happen with artworks that seem to us to have a distinctive quality in common: we can start saying that they are “Turneresque”. Once we do that, we are directing each other’s attention to the property the works share in common by using a name for it, rather than a demonstrative. In now being able to name the property, there is a sense in which we have become more articulate. But why does that matter? Apart from convenience, what does name-mastery give us that demonstrative-mastery does not? What is so good about being able to name the reasons to which we are responding, rather than just pointing to them?[[30]](#endnote-30)

The two other ways in which moral articulacy can be valuable supply answers to that question. One comes from moral epistemology. It can be right for a good person to retain the conviction that her action *is* justified, and to carry on with it despite being unable to say why. When you are outwitted in conversation by a devilish individual who is cleverer than you, it can make more sense to distrust your own dialectical powers than to trust your interlocutor’s moral discernment. However, this leaves you with a challenge – a challenge in applied moral epistemology. What warrants you in trusting your own judgement that you really are responding well to reasons you cannot identify? Why believe that you’re getting it right, when you cannot even say *what* you are getting right? If you are serious about the importance of morality, then you cannot simply be complacent about your moral convictions. Studies of the psychology of morality provide convincing evidence of the systematic ways in which our dispositions to moral judgement can be influenced by factors which on examination are patently morally irrelevant.[[31]](#endnote-31) The search for descriptions of one’s reasons makes sense as a way of seeking assurance that there really *is* something that supports one’s moral opinions and actions. It makes more sense for you to be confident that your judgement is correct if you can say what it is that makes it correct.

Finally, there is this point. Having a vocabulary for representing to ourselves what we are doing when we treat other people decently can change the significance, and consequently the value, of what we are doing. For an application of this point, consider what was said above about the practice of giving reasons to others for how you treat them. You might do that quite unreflectively, and thereby deal with others respectfully, whether or not you think of your actions in that way at all. But once you conceptualize what you are doing in that way – as an expression of respect for others to whom one bears relationships of mutual answerability – then something further becomes possible. This is that one’s reason-giving does not just respond to reasons of respect: it can *express* the agent’s own attitudes of respect. It thereby makes possible a further valuable way of being related to others.

**V**

So far, we have identified an inarticulacy-accepting part of morality and an articulacy-encouraging part. It is an extension of what was said about respect in the previous section that morality also has an articulacy-*surpassing* part. If I am to respect you by accepting that I am answerable to you for the way I treat you, it is not enough that I have given a description of the reasons supporting my action that satisfies *me*. If you do not understand or appreciate what I am talking about, I may need to try harder. This is not to say that I have to keep working to convince you no matter how obtuse or unreasonable you are. But simply saying what the reasons are does not guarantee that I have met the demand that I am answerable to you. And, as we saw, I could meet that demand by showing you my reasons, without being able to find names for them.

But now we need also to notice that morality has an articulacy-*dis*couragingpart. There are certain ways in which articulating the moral character of one’s own action to oneself can be bad; ways in which articulating it to others is bad; and even, I will suggest, ways in which the inability to articulate one’s reasons for acting can itself be admirable. We can consider these three cases in turn.

For the first kind of case, we can look at the self-effacing virtues: the virtues that you only succeed in exercising if you are not acting for the sake of attaining them. The most straightforward example of this is modesty. Like other so-called “executive” virtues – such as the various forms of temperance and fortitude – this virtue needs a negative formulation. It does not involve the pursuit of characteristic aims, nor the operation of characteristic motives. Rather, it involves *not* being diverted from the right aims in a particular way: namely, being motivated by the appetite for status to secure other people’s recognition. The most obviously self-defeating attitude towards modesty is of course boasting about it. When people do this, they usually try to conceal it – as Stalin did, when he ordered the following sentence to be inserted in his biography:

Although he performed his task as leader of the Party and the people with consummate skill and enjoyed the unreserved support of the entire Soviet people, Stalin never allowed his work to be marred by the slightest hint of vanity, conceit or self-adulation.[[32]](#endnote-32)

What if you are motivated *not* to boast about yourself, by the thought that this is modest? Then there are two points to make. First, when you act for the sake of being modest, there is the danger that this is just another form of the appetite for status: moral status. To act for the sake of attaining your own superior moral status as modest is self-defeating. I say there is a “danger” of this: it depends on what is really motivating you, and that is a question about what really guides your action: which state of reason-recognition really is causing you to do what you do? Psychology teaches us that the answer is likely to be complex, and that we are not especially trustworthy as judges of our own case.[[33]](#endnote-33)

But suppose you manage to avoid that. You succeed in motivating yourself not to boast, for the sake of being modest, but without being attracted to modesty as a form of augmented moral status. Then what you do is not self-defeating in the same straightforward way as Stalin; but it is still problematic. (This is the second point.) Needing *any* motive for not boasting about yourself means that you fall short of the state we are usually commending when we talk about modesty. Your continence could stop you from irritating other people with displays of self-importance. But it falls short of the quality we think is aspiration-worthy: not having attitudes of self-importance themselves. That state is not a matter merely of continent action. It is a state of not needing a motive for not boasting about oneself.

It is true that there is a guiding function, as well as an identificatory function, in our practice of using a virtue-term like “modest”. Part of the point of using it is to help us instantiate it. But it does not give us the content of the reason on which someone with those virtues acts. Instead, in aspiring to be modest, you should aspire *not* to be motivated by the appetite for status. To succeed in that, you must lack a certain sort of over-articulacy. Articulating to yourself the virtuous character of your action as your reason for performing it can be a way of lacking that virtue.

However, this is not a case in which there is any problem in being articulate about the right reasons. It is a case in which articulating to yourself the moral character of your action as your reason for performing can mean you are responding to the wrong reason. And when I say that it *can* mean that, the real question is what reason you *are* responding to; not what you are saying to yourself.

So for cases in which being articulate about the right reasons is problematic, we need to look elsewhere. One place in which we can find this is in cases where acting for a reason is good, but actually going to the length of telling others what the reason is is not. Earlier, we noticed the way in which respecting others requires recognizing one’s answerability to them. But this does not mean that I should always, all things considered, tell people why I have acted in ways that affect them. The point here is that whenever I have done something, telling others about my reason for doing it is a second action. And the goodness of the first action does not block the possibility that the second is bad. It might display a lack of proportion, if there are more important things to be doing, or if no-one needs to be told. It might just be annoying. Or, depending on how it is motivated, it might amount to a display of self-importance – even if the action I am describing did not. In general, in most of the ways that a speech-act can be ill-judged or insensitive, an action of spelling out one’s reasons for some prior action can be.

But beyond this, there also seems to be a smaller class of cases in which actually lacking the ability to describe one’s reasons is itself good. In this connection, we can consider the studies that have been done to examine the ordinary people who imperilled themselves to rescue Jews from the Holocaust.[[34]](#endnote-34) An impressive feature of the interviews with them is how little they have to say about their motives for acting: “I don’t know. I don’t think so much because I don’t have that much to think with… It’s pretty near impossible not to help.”[[35]](#endnote-35) I think it would be implausible to describe the inarticulate rescuers as lacking the *competence* to identify the reasons for their actions. Those reasons, after all – the urgent needs of the people they helped – were very simple. Presumably the rescuers did not lack the general competence to articulate the thought that others’ needs provide reasons for helping them. But they seemed unable to exercise this competence when asked; and that actually seems admirable. This is not to say that a more articulate Holocaust rescuer – a Wallenberg – is thereby worse. But there seems to be a particularly pure form of goodness in the inarticulately altruistic rescuers. Their inarticulacy stands as a guarantee of the directness of their concern for the people they helped. They did not have to talk themselves into what they did; they saw the situation as demanding action, not as inviting reflection; they did not think of their action as standing in *need* of justification. Their attention was directed outward, towards the needs of those they helped: those needs provided them with the reasons to which they responded, but the idea of needing to identify reasons – of seeing this as an occasion for *deliberation* – does not seem to have occurred to them.

**VI**

Before turning to our third question, let me sum up the points that have been made in considering the first two.

The answer to the first question is Yes. You can respond to a morally relevant reason without being able to articulate it. I gave four examples of that: moral applications of more general kinds of inarticulate reason-responsiveness.

The second question, about the value of moral articulacy, has a more complicated answer. Morality has an inarticulacy-accepting part, an articulacy-encouraging part, an articulacy-surpassing part and an articulacy-discouraging part. The inarticulacy-accepting part is the part that evaluates our responsiveness to the right reasons: that kind of goodness does not require being able to articulate the reasons to which we are responding. The articulacy-encouraging part prominently includes the requirement that we respect each other as autonomous equals: to do that, we must see each other as entitled to demand justifications for the way we treat them. But this also yields its articulacy-surpassing part, since respecting others requires us to do our best to communicate our reasons to them, not just to state them. And the articulacy-discouraging part comes from the ways in which certain sorts of articulacy can involve moral losses.

The picture we arrive at is this. Reason-articulating competences are aspiration-worthy. Having the *aspiration* is part of treating others respectfully. But having the competence itself is not. If you try your best to attain the competence but fail, you have not thereby treated anyone disrespectfully. So we should distinguish three main forms of goodness in relation to moral articulacy. One is competence, which is an aspiration-worthy ideal. The second is the state of aspiring to that ideal. This state, aspiration-to-competence, is good as part of what is involved in respecting others. And the third is a discerning disposition to exercise that competence. The best such disposition is itself one that is sensitive to reasons of two important kinds, governing good interpersonal relations. Reasons of respect for each other as autonomous equals count in favour of exercising that competence, giving justifications to those who are entitled to demand them. But reasons of humanity count against over-elaborating the reasons through which we respond to each other, preserving the direct connections between us. We should aspire to be less stupid in some ways, but more stupid in others.

**VII**

We come now to the last of our three questions. What are the implications of this for moral philosophy? What role can *it* play in helping us to be good?

Moral philosophy seeks the fullest possible description of the reasons that make up the substance of morality. And it also – in the branch to which this essay belongs – tries to say something about the forms of responsiveness to those reasons that are morally good. So if the view about moral articulacy we have arrived at is on the right lines, it carries implications for the importance of moral philosophy.

One good reason for being interested in moral philosophy is that it potentially confers understanding, and that seems itself worth having. But we need to be more wary of any claims that it will actually help us to be morally good. There is a general obstacle to that: namely, the difference, as we saw, between the ability to respond to reasons and the ability to describe them. Being a good face-recognizer and being a good theorist of face-recognition are different skills, and while it is conceivable that having an accurate theory of the cues we respond to in recognizing faces might help some people become better at actually recognizing them, that would hardly provide a strong argument for studying the theory of face-recognition. So there are grounds for being dubious about how much help having a theory of moral goodness will give you towards attaining it.[[36]](#endnote-36) Indeed, you might think that the causal dependency would have to run the other way. If you don’t already come to moral theory with a developed moral sensitivity, you won’t even be able to find the phenomenon your theory is trying to describe, so you are bound to have a bad theory.[[37]](#endnote-37)

But having said that, we saw in Section IV above that there are ways in which moral articulacy is morally valuable, and not just theoretically interesting. It can help you to meet the aspirations that constitute an important part of what it is to treat people with respect; it can help to sharpen your moral sensitivity; and it can serve a form of reflectiveness that enables your actions to carry a further expressive significance. If moral articulacy can do those things, then moral theory can potentially help you to achieve it.

It can also play a role in moral epistemology, helping to support – or undermine – our confidence that we are indeed responding to genuine reasons when we take ourselves to be doing so. A question raised earlier was: What warrants you in trusting your own judgement that you really are responding well to reasons you cannot identify? A moral theory could potentially help with that. Your confidence that you really are responding to good reasons could reasonably be strengthened by being able to say what they are. And if you find yourself persistently unable to describe a reason when others deny that there is one, that gives you grounds for doubting that you are right while they are wrong.

But here, too, we need to be cautious. The warrant for our claims to be responding to reasons cannot be straightforwardly dependent on the provision of a theory that vindicates those claims. For if, in areas of complexity, we generally find that our responsive abilities themselves are more trustworthy than our theoretical-explanatory skills, we do need to ask ourselves why we should not also expect ourselves to be better as moral agents than we are as moral theorists, and to trust our moral perceptiveness more than our moral articulacy. This leaves us with a large, unanswered question in moral epistemology: When, exactly, am I warranted in trusting my inarticulate moral hunches over my attempts to construct explicit justifications? Any general answer to that question would itself lie within moral theory – the theory of moral epistemology.

In these ways, our discussion does offer some support to the high-minded idea that moral theory is something that is morally worth pursuing. But it has also suggested that moral theorizing carries two dangers. One is that it will deaden our responsiveness to reasons we have not succeeded in capturing in our theory, because the theory is too crude. The other is that it will actually make us worse, as agents, at the articulacy-discouraging part of morality: the part that tells us to connect ourselves to others directly, motivating ourselves out of a concern for them, and not out of a concern to exemplify our own theory.[[38]](#endnote-38)

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**Notes**

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, ll.463-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, ll.473-8 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “The *Paradise Lost* is not the less an eternal monument because it is a monument to dead ideas.” (Raleigh 1900), p.88. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is not as strong as the claim advanced by (Levy 2013), p.212, that responsibility for an action requires introspective awareness of one’s reasons for it. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Another thing I find it natural to say is that our moral emotions are our experience of the impact of recognizing morally relevant reasons. This encourages the “sentimentalist” thesis that moral emotions are essential to moral competence. But it also makes rationalism and sentimentalism consistent with each other. Compare (Scanlon 2002), p.183; (Railton 2006), p.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On the relationship between competence and ability, compare (Wallace 1994), pp.182-92. For further discussion of abilities, see (Maier); for the different uses of “can”, see my (2016), Section 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For further examples of these kinds, see (Jacobson 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See (Klein 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This is consistent with thinking that the mental process involved in such cases is one of simulation, not inference: see (Gordon 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Reasons, as we ordinarily think of them, are facts. There is a debate to be had over the metaphysical commitments of reasons-discourse: are the “facts” that are our reasons states of the world, or true propositions? I mean the formulation in the text to be neutral on that. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Edith Mary Fawkes, cit. (Bailey 2013), pp.26-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (Bailey 2013), p.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Some do: see (Nietzsche 2001), p.131. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Compare (Scanlon 2002), p.181. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. A kind person is usually able to say, “I thought this would spare her embarrassment.” But the earlier point applies: someone skilled in finding the actions that achieve this need not be good at describing the reasons why those actions do so – facts about those actions which are reasons for performing them. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See e.g. (Brownstein and Madva 2012), pp.87-9. For a treatment of reasons-responsiveness that is closer to the one advocated here, see (Railton 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Compare (Railton 2006), p.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For the insistence on how rare this is, see (Arpaly 2003), Ch.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. On how to distinguish explicit from implicit representation, see (Kirsh 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. But it will not cover cases in which I truly believe some reason-giving fact but my belief has no direct or indirect causal connection to that fact. If you mischievously tell me my house is on fire to prove my gullibility, and I rush home to find that it *is* on fire, then I am not responding *to* that reason (although that is the content of the reason *for* which I have acted). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For an extended discussion of such cases of “inverse akrasia”, see (Arpaly 2003), Ch.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This allows that cases of reason-responsiveness could include the kind of automatic cognitive/evaluative response that Tamar Szabó Gendler calls “alief”, when it is triggered by one’s sensitivity to a fact that really is reason-giving: see her (2008). Part of the alief would need to be a construal of one’s situation as one in which there is a reason to do what one does. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. As (Markovits 2010), pp.209-11 points out, your good motivation itself could be a lucky accident. Then it could still be admirable, and you would still be responding to a reason; but I think (contra Markovits) that you would not be praiseworthy. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. (Chisholm 1966), pp. 19-20. The most famous “Chisholm case” is the climber example in (Davidson 1980), p.79. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. (Frankfurt 1969), pp.835-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For an attempt to account of acting for a reason without attributing *normative* content to the psychological states that explain what one does, see (Audi 1986). For an account on which “the reason for an action is not something outside of, or behind, or separate from, the action” see (Korsgaard 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. On the connection between second-personal address, the giving (and demanding) of reasons, and respect, see (Darwall 2006), Ch.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. This is the ideal embodied in Kant’s metaphor of the “realm of ends”: see (Kant 1996), 4:439. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. I am grateful to Niko Kolodny for getting me to appreciate this. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. I am grateful to Antony Eagle for showing me the force of this question. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See e.g. (Wheatley and Haidt 2005); (O’Hara, Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010); (Prinz 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. From the *Short Biography* of Stalin: cit. (Glover 2001), p.254. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. This is documented in detail in the psychological literature sparked by (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). However, this literature is mistaken when it claims to uncover the “real” reasons for which we act: see (Sandis 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See e.g. (Oliner and Oliner 1988), and (Monroe 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Margot, a German/Dutch rescuer of Jews interviewed by (Monroe 1991), p.404-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. For some evidence that it may get in the way, see (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Compare (Aristotle 1999), 1095a2-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. My work on this essay was helped by invitations to present it as the Presidential Address of the Australasian Association of Philosophy for 2013 at the University of Queensland, and to conferences at Flinders University and the University of Melbourne. I am particularly grateful for the comments and advice of the editors of this volume, Karen Jones and François Schroeter, as well as James Morauta, Christine Swanton, Chris Cordner, Andrew Gleeson, Craig Taylor, Rae Langton, Ant Eagle, Jordi Fernandez, Niko Kolodny, Michael Smith and Julia Markovits. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)