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ROLES, ROLE MODULATIONS AND DIFFERENTIAL MORAL
ASSESSMENT OF ROLE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a further development of the second section of Social Science Working Paper Number 410. I argue here that disagreements over how well or how ill someone has performed in some social role are affected by a widespread tendency to confuse public and private roles. Those who assess performance in a given role by the standards appropriate for private roles will never agree with those who assess the same performance by the standards appropriate for public roles. I illustrate this thesis by examining differing evaluations of a number of typical policy decisions. While I do not expect that this discussion will terminate all such disagreements, I hope it may help disputants to understand what it is they are disagreeing about.

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Is it right to condemn the policy of the Johnson administration in Vietnam as ruthless? Was the Carter administration's policy in Iran during the occupation of the embassy weak and indecisive? Should Eisenhower have lied to Khrushchev about the U-2 overflights? Was Nixon's handling of the Watergate break-in immoral, or only incompetent? Assessment of role performance, difficult at best, is made more, and unnecessarily, problematic by a currently widespread tendency to conflate -- at least to slur over the difference between -- public and private roles. People who act, and expect others to act, in public roles as if these were private roles and people who act, and expect others to act in private roles as if these were public roles, will always disagree about what our duty is.

This being the case, in this paper I shall first point up some of the differences between public and private roles and then show how choice is complicated, and moral disagreements are made more difficult to terminate, by the currently widespread tendency either to assimilate private roles to public ones, or public roles to private ones. I certainly do not believe that I can terminate all disagreements about role performance -- that would be optimistic indeed. But I do hope that the analysis that follows will help eliminate one complicating

factor that makes agreement more difficult to achieve than it need be.

I

It is easy to see that there are fundamental differences between public and private roles, if one thinks of ideal typical cases.¹ But most actual roles fall into a spectrum ranging from those that are fully private (e.g., friend, lover), to those that, though still private, take on some of the aspects of public roles (husband, wife, parent, child, teacher, pupil), to those that are fully public (president of a corporation, air controller, chief petty officer). It is important to note, first, that the locus of a role on this spectrum -- the point on the spectrum at which a role is perceived to be located when it is well performed -- varies from time to time, and second, that the locus assigned to the role at any particular time varies with the varying perspectives of those making judgments about how roles ought to be played out.

I shall begin by listing some of the features of obviously private roles -- that is, roles that "everybody" locates towards the private end of this spectrum. (1) The more private a private role is the less it looks like a role; it is rather a relationship that is personal and so unique. Thus the paradigmatically private role is that of lover or friend, rather than husband or wife. Lovers and friends do indeed have expectations of each other -- expectations that may or may not be realized. However, the expectations of each pair of lovers, each pair of friends, are peculiar to this pair, not generalizable

across pairs, even in the same social class and the same culture. Each pair has its own flavor, its own tone, and its life is the living out of this flavor, this tone. This feature is especially marked in the kind of friendship Aristotle called the friendship of the good, in contrast to friendships of utility and of pleasure.² Though friendships of these latter kinds may also develop their own flavor, they are formed only because each party to the friendship expects to benefit from the relationship, and such friendships last only as long as these benefits are obtained.³

As for marriage, it is true of course that each married pair has expectations that are unique to that pair; each marriage has its own flavor, good or bad. To that extent marriage is a private role sustained less by recognized benefits obtained than by the individual perceptions the married pair have of each other. But marriage is also an institution sanctioned by the state and maintained by a consensus that defines society's expectations for marriage. To that extent marriage is a public role.

Romantic marriages are marriages based chiefly or even exclusively on an experienced flavor; unless, in the course of time, benefits come to be exchanged, they endure only as long as the flavor lasts. When divorce is imminent we can see the private morality of such marriages turning into public morality. Commercial marriages are marriages of convenience. The morality of such marriages is public from the start, though they may, as time goes on, acquire a tone of their own and so move in the direction of private morality.

People vary, and cultures vary, about where on the spectrum between private and public roles -- between romance and commerce -- they think a good marriage is located. Jane Austen thought that purely romantic marriages were a disaster. Purely commercial marriages were hardly within her ken; we must go to Dickens or Thackeray or Trollope for an assessment of those -- Lizzie Greystock's marriage to Lord Eustace and Julia Brabazon's marriage to Lord Ongar were as disastrous, in Trollope's view, as any of the romantic elopements that offended Jane Austen's expectations for marriage. In this century -- indeed, in the last few decades -- there has been a very massive shift of the perceived locus of a "good" marriage, a shift toward the romantic, or private, end of the spectrum. The current view has moved so far that, as a result of a kind of perspective foreshortening, the kinds of marriage that nineteenth-century moralists held to be eminently sound are now lumped together with the kinds which they condemned as merely commercial.

(2) Roles are private not only to the extent that the expectations in which they consist are individuated to the persons concerned but also to the extent that these expectations are less that such-and-such behaviors be forthcoming in such-and-such circumstances than that the behaviors, whatever they be, are expressive of the attitudes animating the actors in this relationship.⁴ Alternatively, we can say that a role is private to the extent that the behaviors in which the role consists are symbolic of the special flavor of this relationship, rather than recognized means to agreed-on ends. Gestures

-- facial expression, tone of voice, bodily movements -- are therefore important in private roles, and they are more important for the feelings they reveal than for the results they achieve.

(3) Roles are private to the extent that they are not clearly specified, ex ante expectations that the role players explicitly accept on entering the role. Rather, private roles grow and develop over time, within very loose and unspecified parameters. And they do not end briskly, with a bang, when one role player finds the other not living up to his expectations. They fade away as the relationship loses its flavor. This characteristically happens when the gestures come to be perceived as dishonest, as no longer revelatory of real feelings.

(4) Private roles are organic patterns, whose end is this pattern itself, rather than aggregations of components combined into this role only because they subserve the external goal that this aggregation is expected to achieve.

(5) Private roles are essentially limited to face-to-face, one-to-one relationships. A group (e.g., of friends) will consist of a set of more or less overlapping dyadic relationships. Such a group may even have a structure, but it will be a loose, fluid, horizontal structure that results from the fact that every individual in the group stands in a dyadic relationship to several group members.

So much for the leading features of private roles. Private morality has an undeniably great appeal -- an appeal so strong that many people treat all roles as private roles. That is, they view all

social relations whatever as relations between private individuals: their expectations for the roles that I shall be characterizing as public are what they would be if these roles were private.

One of the best known versions of this view is contained in the sayings of Jesus as they are recorded in the New Testament. If we love God with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves we are not likely to go wrong in particular concrete situations. Rules prescribing correct interpersonal expectations are therefore not only not needed; they are positively a hindrance to living morally. It has sometimes been argued that Jesus' specific injunctions -- turn the other cheek, judge not, love your enemies -- are examples of an "interim morality"; they have been thought to reflect his belief that the end of the world was imminent. It is possible, however, that they reflect instead his sense that in private relationships the symbolic aspect of an action as revealing a state of mind is more important than its effect on the external state of affairs. Thus Jesus may have urged his followers to take no thought for the morrow, not because he believed they would have no time in which to calculate, but because he held calculation to be inappropriate in those human relationships that are based on love rather than on benefits to be received and given in return.⁵ Presumably Jesus would have allowed that some human relations must be based on a calculus of benefits -- he did say that we are to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. But, save for this enigmatic remark, he ignored public morality; it was simply not worth thinking about.

Kant's Critique of Practical Reason is another locus classicus for private morality; indeed, his aim may be said to have been to convert Jesus' version of private morality into a formal theory. Unfortunately, private morality does not lend itself very readily to this kind of translation; in private morality it is the spirit that counts, not the architectonic. Thus Kant's absolutely universal, absolutely binding categorical imperatives are inappropriate in the domain of private morality. What matters to people engaged in living out some private role is that their partners' truth-telling or promise-keeping is an expression of a loving heart, not a possibly reluctant response to the stern voice of duty. And categorical imperatives are equally irrelevant and impractical in the domain of public morality. What public morality requires are just those "hypothetical" imperatives which Kant rejected as having nothing whatsoever to do with morality as he conceived it.

More illuminating of the essence of private morality than Kant's formal theory is an event in his old age. Very frail, almost senile, near to death, he tottered to his feet when his physician entered his room and refused to seat himself until the visitor had taken a chair. The physician protested; Kant replied, "The feeling for humanity has not yet left me."⁶ Kant was not then acting in response to some categorical imperative. He was making a symbolic gesture that expressed the passion of a feeling heart.

II

If these are the leading features of very private roles, what are the contrasting features of very public roles? (1) Just as the more private a private role is the less it looks like a role, so the more public a public role is, the more it looks like -- in fact, is -- a role. The more, that is, it is a set of standard expectations fixed in advance for the role players, rather than created by them in the course of their mutual interactions. Thus the paradigmatically public role is a Weberian slot in some large bureaucracy, defined in such a way that everybody who meets a certain level of competence can perform equally well in the role. Ideally, role players in public roles come and go unnoticed; arrivals and departures do not affect the execution of the role. This contrasts with private roles, where the individual performer not only makes a difference, but makes the whole difference. In a friendship of utility one's opposite number can be replaced, but an Aristotelian friendship of the good disintegrates with the disappearance of one of the friends.

Of course, the ideal of the totally replaceable performer is never realized. In even the most routinized of roles -- e.g., execution of an assembly-line task or of the manual of arms -- performances vary a bit from individual performer to individual performer, as foremen and drill sergeants know to their sorrow. Further, the higher a slot is in any hierarchy of bureaucratically defined slots, the more that role, whilst remaining a public role, takes on some of the features of a private role. At the highest levels

-- president, prime minister, field marshal -- individual style makes a great difference. Think of Hoover and Roosevelt, Chamberlain and Churchill, MacArthur and Marshall.

But however individualized the performance of a public role may be, the expectations for public roles are always spelled out for the performer in advance by a constitution, or by some other document such as the by-laws of a corporation (or in nonliterate societies by an oral consensus), and the ultimate measure of role playing is not style but how well the role player manages to fulfill those expectations. What one chiefly admires in the playing out of a role that one takes to be private is integrity; what one chiefly admires in the playing out of a role that one takes to be public is effectiveness. Similarly, attitudes toward poor performance characteristically differ: the penalties for poor performance in a public role are social sanctions -- disapproval, ostracism, fines, imprisonment; for poor performance in a private role, loss of love.

(2) Public roles are less free than private roles in the sense that the performer of a public role has an obligation to the organization of which that role is a part to do the best for that organization that he can. Not that performers of private roles do not experience conflicts between the different private claims of husband, wife, child, parent. But in addition to such conflicts as these, performers of public roles experience, and have to resolve, conflicts between private claims as such and the public claim of their public role, whatever it is.

And not only is there an almost inevitable conflict between public claims as such and private claims as such; there will be conflicts stemming from the fact that organizations are often nested, a smaller inside of a larger, and that larger one inside of a still larger. If the interests of the nested organizations are not identical -- and they seldom are -- the performer of a public role in anyone of these nested organizations in some sense has a role in all the others, to all of which he owes a prima facie duty.⁷ Consider a U.S. Senator weighing his differential prima facie duties to his state, to the Senate itself, to the nation, and to the UN, not to mention his prima facie duty to his family. This greatly complicates life for performers of public roles, and is sometimes felt as a heavy burden, so heavy that many people seek to avoid it, either by opting out of public roles so far as possible or else by treating their public roles as if they did not differ in any way from private ones.

(3) Public roles are impersonal in a sense that is well represented by the way two bureaucrats may negotiate by an exchange of correspondence, a procedure that reduces the chance that idiosyncracies of style or personality differences might affect the outcome in unpredictable ways, i.e., ways that defeat the expectations for the roles. Impersonality characterizes performance not only at lower level in an organizational hierarchy, but at least to some extent at the highest levels of public roles, where, as we have seen, some idiosyncratic role playing is expected. A president negotiating with a prime minister certainly takes account of that individual's personality

traits, but he does so to gain a tactical advantage, not in order the better to express his love of his opposite number.

Thus we judge the interactions of people whom we think of as performing public roles by standards that are very different from those we apply to the interactions of people we think of as performing private roles, condemning in the one precisely those modes of negotiation which we approve in the other. Certainly spouses negotiate with one another on occasion, and so do friends and lovers. But when they do, it is not a matter of one member of the dyad trying to outmaneuver the other to advance his own interest at the other's expense, but of seeking an arrangement that promotes the good of the dyad. Otherwise, we feel their relation is out of tune, if not positively harsh. An arms-length calculating stance is inappropriate for husbands and wives, friends and lovers, and other performers in private roles.

(4) Public roles are impersonal in still another way. The ideal-typical performer of a public role allocates rewards and punishments, promotions and demotions, in strict accordance with criteria that are applicable across the board, uninfluenced by his personal feelings, whether favorable or hostile, toward the persons concerned. This way of behaving is inappropriate in private roles and is rightly condemned there. In private roles it is right that love, concern, and pity, as much as merit and demerit, determine how rewards are distributed, and often right, too, that deserved penalties be foregone. Conduct that would be called "favoritism" or "nepotism" --

pejorative terms these -- in public roles is approved in private roles.

(5) Public roles are designed; private roles grow. Further, public roles are designed with a view to the maintenance and improvement of the organization in which these roles are intended to function. Performance in a public role is therefore judged by the extent to which that performance contributes to the goals of the organization in question. The motives and attitudes of a performer of a public role are therefore largely irrelevant, except so far as they affect his ability to perform well in the role.

At the lower levels in any organization -- janitor, aircraft maintenance man, assembly line worker -- roles are defined in great detail. What is expected of performers in such roles -- what they ought to do -- is to carry out the prescribed behaviors punctiliously: theirs not to reason why, theirs to get on with the job. At the upper levels of an organization -- corporation president, chief of staff -- where only the goals are defined (and then only in very broad terms) and the means are left largely open, what is expected of the performer is sound decision, i.e., correct cost/benefit calculation.

This is the basis for appeals to raison d'etat, a phrase that has a bad name because unscrupulous rulers have so often used it to justify purely selfish conduct. But misuse should not discredit a practice that all office holders have always adopted. Lord Grey, the Whig prime minister who steered the Reform Bill successfully through Parliament, was only being more frank than most politicians when he remarked, "No one admires the grand principles of morality more than I

do, but great nations cannot be guided by these rules." Grey could just as well have been speaking of the managers of any large organizations; there is nothing especially distinctive about great states. What he meant by "the grand principles of morality" was presumably something like the Kantian categorical imperatives. He was saying that a prime minister cannot afford the luxury of never telling a lie, never breaking a promise. He has to do the best he knows how to do for his country.

In describing the characteristics of public roles in this section and those of private roles in the last section, I have deliberately taken extreme cases -- very private roles, very public roles -- in order to bring out some important differences. It remains to repeat what I said at the outset, that since most actual roles have some features that are private and others that are public, roles may be thought of as lying at varying points on a spectrum ranging from those at one end that are fully private to those at the other end, that are fully public. The role of chairman of a small department in a liberal arts college is a public role, but it has fewer public features than the role of chairman of a large department in a great research university. Or consider the role of investment manager. To make an investment decision regarding one's own portfolio is to perform in a private role, though it is more like performing in a public role than is making a proposal for marriage. But participating as a trustee in investment decisions regarding a university's portfolio is performing in a public role. Thus there would be nothing inconsistent or

irrational in an individual's behavior if he were to sell his own stock in companies doing business in South Africa and yet vote as a trustee to retain the stock of those same companies held in the university's portfolio.⁸

III

A social order is possible only if most people most of the time pretty much know what their social roles -- whether public or private, or partly public and partly private -- require of them and if they by and large act as they are expected to act in these roles. There are in all societies at all times powerful forces promoting internalization: public opinion communicated in sermons and editorials and by a thousand other means; regulations promulgated by various professional organizations -- bar associations, medical associations and the like; procedural rules formulated for an organization's employees by its management; the decisions of courts backed by legal sanctions. When all these voices are unanimous -- and for certain ranges of behavior they practically are -- how is it possible for an agent to view his situation as morally problematic?

(1) An individual can perfectly well know what is expected of him (and what he expects of himself) as a role performer in such-and-such circumstances, and yet act otherwise because what he perceives to be his duty conflicts with what he feels as a strong interest. St. Paul's lament -- "I can will but cannot do what is right. I do not do the good things that I want to do; I do the wrong things that I do not want

to do. . . . What a wretched man I am!"⁹ -- is not often heard nowadays, sin having been secularized into psychosis, but the form of the conflict has not changed.

Apart from problems of this kind, resulting from what is sometimes called "weakness of will," moral problems are cognitive in nature. The typical moral problem is not to bring oneself to do what one knows one ought to do but to come to see what one ought to do. In what sorts of circumstances, at what sorts of decision points, is behavior morally problematic?

(2) The agent may not know which of two or more well defined social roles is appropriate in the circumstances in which he finds himself. Roger of Mortemer must have known pretty well what was expected of him as a trusted vassal of William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy; he must have also known what was expected of him as a vassal of Ralph of Crépy, Count of Amiens. Though his obligations to these two lords did not necessarily conflict, they chanced to collide at the battle of Mortemer in 1054, when Roger, who was a general in William's army, took Ralph, who was serving in the French army, prisoner. What to do? He sheltered Ralph for three days and then returned him to the French side.¹⁰

This probably appeared to Roger as a conflict between the expectations of two private roles. In modern times roles of this kind have been shifted to the public domain (as with the conflict experienced by Robert E. Lee and other officers in the U.S. Army between their duty to their state and their duty to the United States).

A more typical example, from today's perspective, of a conflict between private roles would therefore be the problem a woman might experience in balancing the claims of her mother and of her daughter. Conflicts are also possible between a public role and a private role. For instance, when a friend is being considered for tenure, one knows what is expected of one as a member of then tenure review committee; one also knows what is expected of one as a friend -- at least one knows what this friend expects of one, for he has taken care to make it plain. One's problem, if one believes the friend to be unqualified, is whether to act in one's role as friend or in one's role as faculty member.

These are all conflicts between two prima facie duties -- duties generated by the different expectations of the two roles. Before one knows what one ought to do one has to decide which of these two prima facie duties has the stronger claim. Alternatively, one may modulate one or both of the two conflicting prima facie duties in such a way that one can partially satisfy both claims. This, clearly, is what Roger sought to do when he sheltered Ralph. And if this modulation of feudal duty took on, i.e., became a generally accepted practice, future vassals would know what they ought to do at precisely the point at which deciding what to do had been a moral problem for Roger. Since the role as modulated would now provide firm guidance, only weakness of will would be a possible problem. Thus roles are never static for long. Sooner or later they undergo modulations -- often small, sometimes large -- as some innovator's solution to a moral problem comes to be generally accepted.

(3) It is well known that the behaviors prescribed as "good" or "correct" in some role are never completely specified. There is always some tolerance -- even in a role as precisely laid down as the manual of arms -- for variation in performance, and often the tolerances are wide. As long as the tolerances, wide or narrow, are generally agreed on, the individual role performer does not face a morally problematic situation. But as circumstances change, disagreements may develop about whether such-and-such a behavior lies within or falls outside the range of acceptable variations.

When this happens the behavior in question lies in what I shall call a vagueness band. Behavior in a vagueness band is quite different from behavior within an accepted range of variation -- different precisely because there is no agreement about whether the behavior in the vagueness band is good or bad, whereas all of the tolerated diversity is acceptable, if not equally good. Thus, upper middle class American parents used to know what was expected of them regarding the protection of their teenage daughters from sexual adventures. The hour at which the daughter should be at home and in bed on Saturday nights might vary -- there was a range of tolerated diversity; there must be a chaperone at dances -- but again there was a range of tolerated diversity regarding the qualifications of an acceptable chaperone. But parents who allowed very late hours or who were indifferent to the matter of chaperonage were, there was general agreement, performing badly as parents. Society knew they were bad parents, and they themselves knew it; even their teenage daughters knew it. Now, and for

some time, the policy of protection, and indeed, the whole role of parents, is in a vagueness band. Parents no longer know what society expects of them, or what they expect of themselves, as parents.

In such cases, where the behavioral alternatives one is considering -- the options before one -- lie in a vagueness band, the band exists because, just at this point, society is not speaking unanimously but with several, perhaps many, different voices. Unfortunately for those who are made anxious by uncertainty, especially by moral uncertainty, there are vagueness bands in many roles, especially in periods of rapid social change.

An individual in such a situation, whether he be anxious or not, wants to remove the present case from the vagueness band in which it now lodges. One may take the easy way out, which is to do punctiliously what the role called for in the past, when there was still general agreement about the expectations of the role -- this may be termed the pharisaical solution. Or one may just possibly want to take a closer look. To take a closer look is to examine the fit of the various modulations of the role that are being proposed. Each proposed modulation calls one's attention to similarities between the ambiguous, problematic case in which the agent now has to decide how to act and other clear-cut, obvious cases in which the role still provides firm guidance. But unfortunately, since different proposed modulations call attention to different clear-cut cases, the problem is to decide which of the similarities is most similar. If, over time, agents in the vagueness band come to adopt the same modulation, the role will have

been changed at this point, and what was morally problematic will have become, at least for a time, morally routine.

But (4) the agent may perceive his difficulty neither as a conflict between two social roles in both of which he is a possible performer nor yet as a vagueness band in which he looks for, and fails to find, firm guidance. Rather, he may perceive it as a conflict between one of his social roles and what he takes to be an unqualified duty, i.e., a duty not attached to, not growing out of, any social role. An example might be a conflict between an unqualified duty to preserve human life and some role into which one has been cast (service in the army for a draftee) or for which one has deliberately opted (judge, surgeon).

There is no vagueness band here, the agent may feel. He simply has to choose between a clearly understood duty and the clearly spelled out requirements for some particular role. Type (4) moral problems, on this view of the matter, are not cognitive problems resulting from uncertainty about what one ought to do in these circumstances; they are, like type (1) problems, matters of "weakness of will," where role requirement has replaced interest as the challenger of duty.

But unless one is a Kantian, or some other variety of moral purist, one is unlikely to hold that so-called unqualified duties are absolutely unqualified. Ordinary people recognize that all duties are context-relative. People who would not think of lying in one social context lie freely in another, and without experiencing moral qualms when they do. But to say that truth-telling and promise-keeping are

context-relative is to say that people commonly take into account the specific social role they happen to be performing at the time they find they have to choose between lying and telling the truth.

Hence to describe promise-keeping or truth-telling as unqualified duties is an unfortunate way of calling attention to an important feature of these behaviors. It is a misleading way of saying that a strong case has to be made before allowing lying to be a part of any social role and that the conditions under which it is permissible have to be carefully specified. The onus probandi, as it were, lies on any social role's claim to incorporate lying at some point.

Putting the matter in this way does not mean that an agent -- say, a surgeon confronted with a choice between saving a fetus or destroying it -- may not face a real moral problem. But it is not the problem of choosing between an unqualified duty ("always preserve human life") and a role (surgeon). It is the problem of deciding whether to modulate the role of surgeon to take account of new insights about, say, a pregnant woman's rights, so that this role would permit, or even require, a performer on occasion to take a human life (a fetus that is grossly malformed? a fetus that is the outcome of a rape?). This way of putting the matter brings out the basic similarity between type (4) cases and types (2) and (3). Just as Roger of Mortemer wanted to modulate the role of vassal so as to allow vassals to perform their feudal obligations to two overlords, so a morally sensitive surgeon may want to modulate the role requirements so as to take account of the newly discovered rights of pregnant women.

Thus it is that moral problems arise -- because of some perceived failure of fit between an established role and the social circumstances in which the role is intended to be performed. This failure of fit may result either from changes in those circumstances since the role was established or from observation of some feature of the circumstances that was previously overlooked. Moral problems, once they emerge, are dissolved by a more or less extensive modulation of the role to produce a fit between it and the circumstances as they are now perceived to be.

IV

Role playing and making moral choices are -- to use a currently fashionable term -- dialectically related. Roles are constantly being modulated by individual moral choices made in vagueness bands; modulations, as they became more and more widely accepted, constantly enter the culture as new roles which, by eliminating vagueness bands reduce the number of occasions where moral choices must be made. Not all modulations succeed, of course. A modulation may disappear as soon as it is introduced -- the introducer himself may not like the look of it when he sees it in action, or he may retreat from the hostility of moral conservatives who hold, with the Harry Claverings of every generation in every society, that "No man has a right to be peculiar. Every man is bound to accept such usage as is customary in the world."¹¹

Modulations that are important for one society will of course be trivial for another, but for the moment let us focus on the capacity

to notice small differences -- differences which others, with less sensitive antennae, have overlooked but which, once noticed, are recognized to be important. Emma Woodhouse was one who had successfully internalized the role expectations for an early nineteenth-century English gentlewoman; she perceived herself as -- indeed, she was -- a lady. When she poked rather cruel fun at poor, defenseless Miss Bates, Mr. Knightley, whose antennae were much more sensitive than Emma's, pointed out to her the disparity between the role of lady and her behavior on this occasion: "I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance. How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation? -- Emma, I had not thought it possible." Though Emma "tried to laugh it off, . . . she was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart."¹² The result was a very considerable modulation of Emma's performance in the role of a lady; and young lady readers of the novel might -- who knows? -- incorporate this fictional modulation in their real-life behavior toward the real-life Miss Bateses of their acquaintance.

Today such a modulation as this, and the differentiations in the environment to which it was responsive will be viewed as trivial. I have chosen it precisely because it seems trivial -- to reinforce the point that there is no difference between the ways in which trivial and important modulations are introduced, and no difference in the ways in which they become established, if indeed they become established. Modulations that take on do so because they call people's attention to

aspects of the situation that, now that they attend to them, seem to them to be relevant. These modulations become a part of the culture and are now defended as correct usage by all the Harry Claverings who, earlier, had condemned them as deviations.

It took no more than self-assurance for Mr. Knightley to correct Emma. Modulators who propose large-scale modulations -- Beecher and his fellow abolitionists, for example -- need courage as well, and a strong sense of rectitude. This is often, but not necessarily, supported by religious belief -- the Quakers' inner light is a case in point. In any event, proposers of large-scale modulations characteristically have more confidence in their judgment than a careful survey of the available evidence would warrant. But for them of course, it isn't a matter of judgment or evidence. People put forward such large modulations as abolition of slavery, not because they have made a calculation of costs and benefits (though they may use such an argument ex post to justify the modulation), but because they feel deeply about it.

Role modulators of this type -- Beecher, Martin Luther King -- are to be distinguished from politicians -- Lincoln, Johnson -- who may preside over, and even participate in, the modulation of some role. Politicians characteristically respond to the pressure of events, including the pressure exerted by modulators; they do not actively advocate a modulation well in advance of a substantial movement in its favor. They are not risk-takers in the same sense that modulators are risk-takers, and modulators who acquire public office are likely at the

same time to acquire caution.

Generally speaking, then, those whose natural response to a situation calling for a decision is to calculate, are unlikely to be modulators, nor are they likely to be among the earliest adoptors of a modulation proposed by others. For in its early stages a new modulation will almost always look cost-inefficient. By the same token, modulators and early adopters are likely to be amongst those who assimilate all roles towards private ones. The result of this assimilation is that they minimize the contribution roles make to the survival of the social fabric and so are more ready to risk large modulations than others would be.

Finally, modulators are often admired in the abstract and at a distance. It is generally recognized that a society in which there were, literally, no modulations at all would be an absolutely static society -- not a human society at all. Hence the social utility of modulators is widely acknowledged. But what one wants is modulations that are occurring somewhere else, at some other time. Individual modulators, when they are close enough to have to be dealt with directly, are usually heartily disliked, for the obvious reason that one has to decide whether to accept the modulation they have proposed or to reject it. And most people find most modulators, again seen close-up, to be obsessive, intolerant, impatient, demanding -- in a word, "difficult."

If large-scale modulations are usually launched by individuals of the kind just described, these modulations, somewhere along the road

to becoming established roles, are likely to be reinforced by the sanctions of courts and self-regulating bodies -- institutions for which, ironically, the modulator himself feels nothing but contempt, precisely because of the public nature of the roles associated with them. But no such sanctions are likely to be introduced -- still less to be sustained -- unless they are based on substantial, spontaneous consensuses. Thus the key element in moral change is always a risk-taking decision by some morally sensitive individual, who, having detected a failure of fit between an existing role expectation and the situation in which he now has to act, modulates the role accordingly.¹³ The spread of a modulation through a society, prior to its modification in institutional and legal forms, is quite like the spread of an esthetic innovation -- a new style in art or in music. If the modulation, whether moral or esthetic, takes on, we may be sure that it has brought into focus some aspect of people's experiential field that is important to them and that was missed in the earlier, unmodulated formulation.

Thus living morally -- that is, living well -- depends on learning to adjust roles to each other and role expectations to changing circumstances as we come to see their relevance or as they are shown to us by others. Here, if Aristotle did not say it all, as usual he said most of it:

Any one can get angry -- that is easy -- or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the

right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not . . . easy . . . to determine by reasoning . . . ; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception.¹⁴

v

Although roles are constantly being modulated, at any given time roles are arrayed in an order from those perceived, at that time, to be most public in character to those perceived to be most private in character. About performance in very private roles and in very public roles there is usually little disagreement. People know within broad limits what is expected of performers in such roles; they know what good role performance is. About roles in mid-range positions on the roles-spectrum there is likely to be more disagreement. Since, as we have already pointed out, mid-range roles have features that are private and also features that are public -- that is why they are mid-range -- some people will focus on the private features and some on the public features. Those who focus on the private features of the role in effect shift the role down toward the private end of the spectrum and evaluate performance in that role by criteria appropriate for private roles. Those who focus on the public features of that same role make a corresponding shift in the opposite direction and evaluate the same performance by the very different criteria for public roles.

But that is not all. Not only does the locus of a particular role shift from time to time, as the role is shifted toward the public end or toward the private end of the spectrum. It seems also to be the case that on occasion the spectrum shifts as a whole, either toward the public or toward the private end. Such a shift in perspective can be thought of as a directionality common to all, or to most, of the many different specific modulations being recommended at any given time for many different roles.

Why is it that at certain times the directionality of role modulations shifts in this way? To begin with, it appears to be the case that people differ temperamentally -- "attitudinally" might be a better word -- and that these difference in temperament or attitude affect the way they look at social roles and so their moral assessment of performance in these roles.

Some people, that is to say, feel comfortable only in relatively well-defined relationships with others (they like to "know where they stand"). Loose and fluid relationships not only seem to them to be wasteful and inefficient; such relationships generate a considerable amount of cognitive dissonance. Such people prefer to maintain a distance -- psychic and even physical -- from the people with whom they interact; actio ad distans is their motto. Further, they like to organize problems systematically, dividing them into their components and dealing with each of these in turn. Other people, in contrast, feel comfortable only in informal relationships. Situations that the first group find congenial, are felt by these people to be

stiff, empty, and "unnatural." So far from preferring to tackle a problematic situation from outside, these people want to know how it looks to those with whom they are interacting. Empathy, not observation, seems to them the route to success in interpersonal relations, and calculation if detected or even suspected puts them off.

Clearly, the first sort of temperament performs best in public roles; the second, in private roles. And when people with the first sort of temperament find themselves in private roles they are likely to perform in these roles as if they were public -- for instance, they may adopt an arms-length attitude toward a spouse or a child, treating him/her almost as they would business rivals. And the second group, who perform best in private roles, are likely to make an identical shift, but in the opposite direction, assuming that they can have the same easy relationship with their employees that they have with an old college chum.

The conditions of contemporary life, playing on these differences in temperament and exaggerating them, have resulted in strongly bipolarized perceptions of many roles. In the later nineteenth century and during most of this century there was a gradual assimilation of most roles, save only the most private of private roles, to the public end of the spectrum -- a shift in direction that probably reflected such social developments as large-scale organizations, bureaucracy, mass-production, urbanization, and the disappearance of the squirearchy. In any event it is certainly the case that more and more roles became externalized. An example is the

role of physician, which was once largely private (the Victorian physician who helped his dying patient across the threshold and supported the survivors in their grief is no fiction), and has now become largely depersonalized, more public than many public roles.

In a substantial part of the population this perspective on roles survives largely intact. But beginning at least as early as the thirties, a movement in the opposite direction can be noted. One sign of this was the widespread appeal of Sartre's emphasis on "good faith" as the only moral relationship between people, for good faith, as Sartre understood it, is possible only in the most intimate relationships. Sartre's mordant description, in Nausea, of the portraits in the Bouville museum is in effect a wholesale condemnation of performers in public roles: they are, one and all, inevitably in bad faith.

And as the years have past, partly in reaction to what is perceived by some as excessive externalization, partly as a part of that change in ethos associated with Vietnam protest, flower children, Zen, drug culture, and hippy-dropout, more and more people have shifted the whole spectrum of roles sharply toward the private end of the spectrum, personalizing roles that were formerly regarded as public: corporation executives go to great pains to be liked by their employees, parents want to be friends with their children, and deans would not think of imposing fines on student offenders.

When role expectations are strongly bipolarized, sharp disagreements about role performance are inevitable. Those who view a

particular role as public apply public criteria to the evaluation of performance in that role, while others, viewing that same role as private, apply private criteria to it. Thus evaluations of McNamara's performance as Secretary of Defense vary widely depending on which of these two views one adopts. From the former perspective one sees area bombing in Vietnam and the wholesale uprooting of villagers a distasteful but necessary job well done -- one praises McNamara for his competence. From the latter perspective one sees only the appalling human suffering and so condemns McNamara. "Professional" changes into "ruthless" as the perspective shifts.

Was Carter sentimental in subordinating U.S. policy in the Middle East to the safety of 52 hostages? Or was he a noble humanitarian? Those who selectively attend to the public features of public roles are likely to emphasize the risks Carter ran for the sake of the hostages -- what was at stake, they point out, was not merely the lives of those 52 individuals but the thousands of lives that would be lost in a general war. In contrast, those who tend to assimilate public roles to private ones, will praise Carter for "caring" -- as one praises a parent for unselfishly succoring his defenseless children. Those who take this later view of Carter's performance in the hostage crisis are likely to evaluate his long support of Bert Lance more sympathetically than those who, viewing the role of president as strongly public, point out that this support seriously damaged Carter's ability to govern.

Again, though Nixon's handling of the Watergate case is almost universally condemned, the grounds for condemnation differ widely. Condemnation expressed in such language as "betrayal of trust," "dishonesty," "lack of integrity" reveals a tendency to assimilate public roles -- in the case the role of president -- to private roles; the underlying model is that of the close associate -- spouse, lover, friend -- who has let the other member of a dyad down. Contrast condemnation expressed in such terms as "initial blunder" and "repeated miscalculations" -- those who use such language expect a president to stretch the law a bit if that seems to him the only way to assure his reelection; that, these people, think, is a part of the role as it is usually played. What they are criticizing is incompetent performance in the role.

Was Henry L. Stimson naive when, on learning that the mail of foreign ambassadors in Washington was being opened, he commented disdainfully, "Gentlemen don't open other gentlemen's mail"?¹⁵ Clearly Stimson did not distinguish relations among people in their private capacity from their relations as officials. How people today react to Stimson's reaction depends on whether and to what extent they too assimilate public roles to private ones.

Or compare Eisenhower's lie to Khrushchev about the U-2 overflights and the lie he may have told Mamie, supposing he had anything to lie about, regarding his relation with Kay Summersby. People who strongly assimilate public roles to private ones are likely to regard both lies as blameworthy. Others -- those who strongly

assimilate private roles to public ones -- may agree that there is no difference between the two lies but argue that this is the case because the latter is as justified as the former. Doubtlessly, they will say, Eisenhower should not have allowed himself to be maneuvered into the position where he had to lie. But the only relevant question about lies to Khrushchev or to Mamie was whether, in the awkward circumstances in which he found himself, a lie exposed would do more damage than the truth admitted. What is called for in all cases is a calculation of comparative costs.

Still others -- those who distinguish between public and private roles -- will distinguish between the two lies. They will argue that the lie to Khrushchev was justified. It is, they would say, just the sort of case in which *raison d'état* operates, whereas the calculations that are appropriate in deciding how to act in public roles are unseemly in the relations between a husband and a wife. A lie to Mamie, had he indeed lied to her, would have been wrong even if he hoped thereby to spare her pain. For, though one certainly wants a friend or lover to be faithful, one would rather know him to be unfaithful, if he is, and forgive him if one can, than live in a fraudulent relationship.

But what about (possible) lies to Harold Macmillan, instead of to Khrushchev? to George Catlett Marshall instead of to Mrs. Eisenhower? In such cases the behaviors have both public and private features, and since some people selectively attend to the private aspects of roles and others emphasize the public aspects, they will

reach different conclusions about whether Eisenhower ought not to have lied to Macmillan and Marshall. Some of those who approve a lie to Khrushchev will disallow a lie to Macmillan, recalling that Eisenhower and Macmillan were longtime friends; others will regard this relationship as irrelevant in view of the fact that Eisenhower was now president and Macmillan was now prime minister. Some will weigh heavily, and others will minimize, the fact that Marshall had been Eisenhower's mentor in the army.

That is to say, some people assimilate the Macmillan and the Marshall cases toward the Mamie case. Others assimilate the Marshall and Macmillan cases to the Khrushchev case. On the assumption that in recent years there has been a considerable shift in perspective toward the private role, it seems likely that lies to Macmillan or Marshall would be more widely criticized today than they would have been in the Eisenhower era. Such a shift would correspond to the shift in perspective (already noted), as a result of which marriages that Jane Austen and Trollope praised as "sound" are, more often than not, condemned today as "commercial."

As a final example of the way in which differential attitudes toward public and private roles can affect the assessment of behavior in certain roles consider the acrimonious disagreement a few years ago between trustees and students¹⁶ over colleges' and universities' investments in companies doing business in South Africa. Most trustees, interpreting their role as a public one, regarded it as their duty to maximize investment return for the institution for which they

were responsible. As individuals, they were of course entitled to sell such holdings in their personal portfolios if they wished to show their disapproval of the South African government. But as trustees it would be wrong to allow "sentiment" (as they might have put it) or moral indignation to affect their investment policy. So long as they maximized return within the limits of the prudent-man rule they were doing their whole duty as trustees.

To their student critics the matter looked very different. They ignored the distinction, fundamental to trustees, between public and private roles, and in effect demanded that trustees behave, as trustees, in ways appropriate only in very private roles. They wanted the trustees' investment policy to express love for the abused Blacks, in much the same way that we want the behavior of a husband to his wife to express his feelings for her. Hence when trustees pointed out that their holdings were too small for sales to affect the policy of the South African government, students were quite unmoved. They did not recommend divestiture as a rational policy calculated to achieve such-and-such results; they demanded it as an end in itself. Given such differences in perspective it is not surprising that trustees and their critics failed to understand each other.

As a result of this tendency to assimilate public roles to private roles, performance in many roles -- Begin in the West Bank, for instance, Thatcher in the South Atlantic, Nancy Reagan in the White House -- that is viewed as praiseworthy by the role players themselves and by much of the population, is condemned by many others as

incompetent or worse, because performance fails to correspond to their view of the role as a private role. Of course perspectival differences over the nature of roles are by no means the sole cause of varying assessments of some individual's performance in some particular role -- Begin's policy could be regarded as counter-productive, Thatcher's as too risky, Nancy Reagan's as bad public relations for reasons having nothing to do with the public/private distinction. Nevertheless, differences in perspectives on roles can be a complicating factor that makes agreement even more difficult than it otherwise would be.

That is the modest, but not unimportant, thesis of this essay. I have argued, first, that there are fundamental differences between public and private roles; second, that the criteria appropriate for evaluating role performance vary depending on whether a role is public or private; hence, third, that people who differ about whether a role is public or private will evaluate the very same performance very differently. It would be naive to hope that this analysis, by explaining why people disagree, will eliminate their disagreements. But it may at least show disputants what they are arguing about.

FOOTNOTES

1. An example is a possibly apocryphal dean of Balliol College, Oxford, in the years just after World War I, who is said to have enlivened long winter evenings by leading a coterie of undergraduates friends in raids on the rooms of other undergraduates whom he and they disliked; on mornings after these forays he would summon the offenders to his office and fine them heavily for having damaged college property. Everyone will surely agree that this dean had an astonishing capacity for confusing social roles. As dean -- performing in a public role -- he should not have incited undergraduates; as friend, he might. As friend -- performing in a private role -- he should not have fined undergraduates; as dean he must.

2. Eth. Nic. 1156a 6, ff.

3. In The Dean's December Saul Bellow exactly characterizes Aristotle's friendships of utility: ". . . love [was] simply an investment that looked good for the moment. Today you bought Xerox. Next month, if it didn't work out, you sold it" (p. 289). The contrasting requirements for an Aristotelian friendship of the good were set out by Ford Madox Ford: "One's friends must accept one's actions and divine the justification for those actions--or one must do without friends!" (quoted in Frank MacShane, Ford

Madox Ford [1965] p. 138).

4. In an important essay, "Ruthlessness in Public Life" (Moral Questions, pp. 75-90), Thomas Nagel has distinguished between what he calls "concern with what will happen" and "concern with what one is doing." As I see it, the latter sort of concern is predominant in private roles, the former in public roles.
5. So, too, Lear. When Goneril and Regan argue that the costs to them of maintaining the knights attendant on the king greatly exceed the benefits to him, he replies, "O reason not the need" (II, iv, 267).
6. K. Vorlander, Immanuel Kant (Meiner, Leipzig, 1924), 2:331.
7. The terminology is W. D. Ross's (in The Right and the Good).
8. See below, pp. 33-34.
9. Romans, 7:8-20, 24.
10. The Ecclesiastical History of Ordericus Vitalis, Book VII (ed. and trans. by Marjorie Chibnal, 6 vols., Oxford, 1969-1980), vol. IV, pp. 86-88. I owe this example to John F. Benton. See his as yet unpublished paper, "Written Records and the Development of

Systematic Feudal Relations," pp. 6-7. It is interesting to note that Duke William apparently agreed with Roger's assessment of the relative importance of his two roles. Though William at first banished Roger from Normandy, he called Roger's treatment of Ralph "handsome and proper," and restored Roger's honors.

11. The Claverings, Ch. xxii.
12. Emma, vol. III, ch. vii.
13. Mr. Justice Bazelon's address at the 1981 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association is a good example of the way a modulation can start. Relying on his long experience hearing cases in which psychological "experts" testify, the judge discussed what he called the "sins" of the profession: a tendency to make "conclusory pronouncements," a failure to "expose the facts under their conclusions" and "the values underlying their choice of facts," and a failure to "come clean on the uncertainties of opinion that may exist. . . ." The fact that extensive excerpts from the address were printed in the APA Monitor, (vol. 12, no. 10) shows that this modulation is beginning to spread, though it is far from clear that it will eventually take on.
14. Eth. Nic., 1109a 26-27, 1109b 22-23.

15. Quoted in Los Angeles Times, February 5, 1982. The Times' editorial writers thought that Stimpson lived in a "quaint," but "better," world than ours.

16. I use the term "student" as a convenient shorthand to refer to the whole group of which students probably form the majority but which also includes many faculty members and some trustees. Similarly, as regards the term "trustee."