Solidarity and Moral Imagination in David Greig’s *The Events*:
Ethics in Conversation with Performance

Introduction

What is the moral message of David Greig’s *The Events*? Can ethics, understood as a philosophical and theological discourse, illuminate a reading of this play? Can ethics be enriched by it? ‘Moral restoration’ could be a fitting topic for an ethical analysis. Another theme might be ‘love’; different philosophical accounts of love could be tested against the key characters of the play. There are other ways of reading the play: a classical moral theorist would want to apply a specific theory when examining the choices and decision-making of the characters. A typical utilitarian would look for actions that benefit as many people as possible. They would scrutinise the Boy’s and Claire’s notions of happiness in terms of a utilitarian calculus. They would want to know whose actions produced the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. A Kantian theorist, however, would dismiss the utilitarian analysis by advocating the categorical imperative approach (‘act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law’\(^2\)) and would concentrate on duties, obligations, and categories of acts that are universally valid. According to this approach, for example, killing an innocent human being is always wrong. Even if a utilitarian finds a way of justifying the sacrifice of a person or a


small minority for the sake of the well-being of others a Kantian would label such action as immoral.

Given that the play contains several direct references to God, a theological ethicist or philosopher of religion would find rich ground for considering such topics as evil, grace, sin and redemption. For example, for most philosophers and theologians ‘redemption’ implies that there is something in us that is inadequate, broken or destroyed which requires restoration and healing. If we read the play through the lens of redemption, we would ask what overcoming ‘brokenness’ in the key characters, the Boy and Claire, would mean. In order to be redeemed, do they need an external agency in the form of either another human being or some divine intervention? Conversely, rather than concentrating on the actions and behaviours of individual characters, a virtue ethicist would look at the overall moral orientation of the characters. She will try to identify those virtues which make the characters rightly ordered beings and will consider those vices which hinder their moral growth. She will claim that moral maturity is what benefits both the individual as well as his society and will look for ways of empowering the Boy and Claire so that they and their society can flourish.

It would be beyond the scope of this study to consider the aforementioned possibilities of reading the play in detail. By signalling them I simply want to show how Greig’s work can be approached from an ethical perspective. The line of inquiry I shall pursue here will be focused on a single ethical theme, namely solidarity. Why solidarity? Because, for me, solidarity is the most basic quality in which all other ethical categories are grounded; it serves as a benchmark for any ethical discussion. But, solidarity is also an ambiguous idea. The Events exposes this ambiguity, challenging our thinking about associated themes such as tribalism, belonging, openness and bonding with others. The Boy at one point utters the following statement ‘it is not easy to be open to others if your tribe is
weak. But what do ‘openness to others’, ‘tribal strength’ and ‘tribal weakness’ mean? What cost does a society have to incur when its ‘tribes’ or groups within that society are weak? It is not only the Boy who talks about a tribe - though he uses the word (in its different forms: singular, plural as well as tribesman) more than ten times. Claire too refers to the idea when she speaks of her choir a ‘crazy tribe’. My conceptual tool for addressing the above questions will be ‘moral imagination’. Why moral imagination and not, for example, moral reason? Firstly, moral imagination encompasses reason, but it also involves emotions and experience. Secondly, moral imagination is what fosters the development of a genuine solidarity with the other. Thirdly, it is appropriate to engage with works of art in an imaginative way and to show that imagination is not a faculty reserved solely for artists: academics too can make good use of it. The statement ‘it is not easy to be open to others if your tribe is weak’ can also be tested in our academic tribalism. So often we work in our academic silos, afraid or unable to move beyond the discourses we represent. I learnt from the play that stretching tribal boundaries is not easy but it is necessary if we want to experience a genuine inter-disciplinary encounter. Thus, despite my initial discomfort to write to an audience outside my disciplinary tribe of moral theorists, I decided to make a leap beyond my comfort zone. I have certainly benefited already from reading the play, watching its performance at the Young Vic, London, in July 2014, hearing the director Ramin Gray talking about the play, and speaking to Nick Williams from Actors Touring Company about the ideas behind this particular staging.

**Tribalism: A Test of Solidarity**

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3 Greig, p.27.
4 Greig, p.5
The Events is the story of Claire, a priest who is gay, and who has recently witnessed the killing of several members of her community, and who is trying to make sense of this atrocity. In addition to Claire, the play’s dramatis personae lists ‘The Boy’ and ‘A Choir’. While ‘The Boy’ seems to indicate a discrete character, this ‘character’ in fact comprises a number of personalities, or roles, including a mass murderer (recalling Anders Breivik who in 2011 was convicted of killing 77 people in a terrorist attack in Norway). As the special issue of Contemporary Theatre Review contains a detailed analysis of the play and its characters, we shall turn straight away to the focus of our examination, namely ‘solidarity’.

What is solidarity? The root of the word (‘solid’) implies that solidarity has to do with strength, reliability, and firmness. In Latin solidum connotes wholeness or entirety. Even if its origin can be traced to Roman and feudal law, in which it denoted a joint obligation of a group for a debt incurred by its members it post-dates the French Revolution. The French solidarité refers to a specific form of brotherhood in the struggle of the working class for social inclusion. In his 1893 work The Division of Labour in Society, Emile Durkheim uses solidarité quite frequently though he doesn’t define it. He talks about ‘mechanical’ and ‘organic’ solidarity and examines the idea of ‘human fraternity’. Are solidarity and fraternity the same? For Durkheim they are. In his role as the white supremacist, The Boy too invokes a sense of fraternity when he speaks of the difficulty to be open to others who are outside his tribe. There are contemporary studies of solidarity in an era of globalisation, such as Lawrence Wilde’s Global Solidarity, which discuss such areas of social division as nationalism, gender, religion and culture, each of which speaks of a certain type of tribalism. But it is the work of David Wiggins that I find most inspiring for our discussion here as it goes to the core of solidarity, challenges

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its limited versions and takes us beyond the tribalism debate by focusing on the solidarity of the *human qua human* type.

In his paper ‘Solidarity and The Root of the Ethical’ Wiggins argues against a reductionist view of solidarity as fraternity or narrowly understood benevolence. He bases his argument on an observation made by Chateaubriand about *conventionnels* in France (*conventionnels* were members of the National Convention, which governed France in 1792 - 1795) and the incongruence between the *conventionnels’* ‘preoccupation with their own benevolence and their repeated acquiescence in judicial killing justified only if at all in the name of the greatest happiness’. The example of *conventionnels* is relevant to our discussion here and we will return to it shortly. Wiggins asks whether we can be benevolent and at the same time prepared to impose misery or even death on others. He explains that benevolence properly so called does seek the happiness of others but also, and importantly, resents the misery of others: ‘thoroughgoing and rational benevolence must hold that, in the fulfilment of its commitment to the greatest happiness, nobody’s happiness or misery can matter more than the happiness or misery of anyone else’. In other words, while protecting the important bonds we have with others (members of our tribe), we must resent the causing of misery to others with whom we don’t share any special bond (who are not part of our tribe). As *conventionnels* in France, the Boy-the-mass-murderer - in the name of the protection of his tribe - chooses to dispel certain types of people who in his view pose danger to his tribe. He says (more than once): ‘I kill to protect my tribe’.

While in his various incarnations the Boy is trying to convince his audience that he cares about his tribe, there is nothing convincing in his behaviour and in his words to suggest that

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9 Wiggins, 240.
10 Wiggins, 240.
11 Greig, p.13.
he is a caring man, that he is capable of protecting his tribe, that he knows well whom and what he is protecting. When Claire asks him ‘Who are the tribe?’ He answers: ‘Nobody knows’¹². Whom would we want to have in our tribe, the Boy or Claire? I certainly would prefer Claire. Yet, if I want to take seriously Wiggins’ approach to solidarity, I must recognise the human form in the Boy despite my repulsion for the crime he commits. Greig has an intelligent way of confronting us with the humanity and inhumanity of the Boy. Perhaps he wants us to recognise that the Boy is one of us. The play certainly challenges me to think about tribalism, even though I find the language of tribalism uncomfortable from my cosmopolitan point of view. It forces me to recognise that I and the Boy are inter-connected. Wiggins’ point about resenting the imposing of misery on others is crucial for my consideration of the Boy-the-murderer. While I disapprove of his views and actions, I must resent the idea of him coming to any harm. (The Norwegians seemed to have practiced this particular approach by not calling for the execution of Breivik and instead settling for a civilised imprisonment). Wiggins’ solidarity is based on the recognition that I and the other (including someone like the Boy) share the same human form and we both try to make sense of each other.

In his conversations with Claire, the Boy (in all his roles) appears confident and in charge, his views are often well articulated and make sense. For example, when he speaks about ‘cheap togetherness’ as an ‘illusion fostered by failed elites who cling on to power and wealth through immigrant labour and globalisation’¹³, doesn’t he have a point? Or, when the Boy-as-psychologist explains the notion of ‘empathy impaired’: ‘If you tell me that a person has deliberately planned to cause pain to a large number of people. I can say, with confidence, that person’s behaviour is empathy impaired’¹⁴. Yet most of the time, his views

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¹³ Greig, p.13.
¹⁴ Greig, p.18.
are exclusive; they are not in line with ideas of ‘entirety’ or ‘wholeness’ which we find in the etymological meaning of the word ‘solidarity’. When he is interviewed by some ‘audience members’ (it is not clear who the audience is; it is perhaps some kind of reality show, played by the Choir), the Boy-as-warrior talks about his aloneness which (he explains) is normal for someone who is a visionary. He comes across as full of himself. He is obsessed with a healthy diet and dissatisfied with anything that poses a challenge to his lifestyle, language, customs, and food. He has nothing positive to say about foreigners, he feels no connection with them. Yet, when asked whether he hates foreigners, he responds ‘I don’t hate foreigners. I hate foreigners being here’\textsuperscript{15}.

The Boy-as-murderer takes this feeling further and acts upon it by killing innocent people. Claire, on the other hand, though she appears fragile, broken, imperfect and angry, is more open to others (in particular, her mixed choir, but also to the Boy in his various incarnations); she is engaged, she listens, she tries to make sense of what she hears, she even tries to hate (the Boy-as-murderer). But, most of all, we see her as someone who has a fellow-feeling for others which the Boy lacks. Claire’s approach is more in line with Wiggins’ notion of solidarity. It may well be that the Boy’s lack of openness to others is an outcome of some deeply rooted fear: fear of the other who is different, fear of change, invasion and the loss of what is familiar. His way of seeing (his imagination) is limited in that it does not allow him to think that the other who is different to him might, after all, not be a threat, either to him or to his tribe.

Some might argue that the Boy lacks a proper moral and spiritual formation and that this lack might be the reason why the Boy-as-murderer commits his crime. Claire is shaped by Christian values which she has accepted deeply in order to become a priest. ‘Neighbourly love’ and the ‘love of enemies’ are part of her moral outlook. She has learned not to view

\textsuperscript{15} Greig, p.13.
people in terms of their single (tribal) identity and go beyond what is conventional. Being a gay female priest is just one example of her openness and less conventional way of being in the world. Could it be that people who experience pain and challenges when coming to terms with their various identities are better equipped for forming solidarity with the other?

There is a danger in viewing people in terms of belonging to a single tribe. This is something that Amartya Sen discusses in his ‘Finding Our Common Ground’\(^\text{16}\). He suggests that single (tribal) identities are problematic, especially religious and racial. According to Sen, ‘if a person can have only one identity, then the choice, for example, between the religious and the non-religious, the national and the global, becomes an “all or nothing” contest’\(^\text{17}\). Both the Boy and Claire have multi-identities but only the Boy subscribes to that ‘all or nothing contest’. For him, the primary contest is between foreigners and non-foreigners (his tribe). He seems unable or unwilling to view others in a multi-identity way. Although Claire is primarily presented to us through her membership of the clerical ‘tribe’, she is also a life partner, a professional, a homosexual, a woman, a leader of a multi-ethnic choir, a citizen who cares for others-as-human-beings. There is a sense of coherence in her overall moral (multi) identity. There is no such coherence in the Boy. It seems that the solidarity of the human qua human depends on our ability to see others as a multi-storey of identities. To see others in such a way requires a special type of imagination; one that is capable of picturing the human form in each and everyone. This is something so basic yet (as we see in the Boy) difficult to achieve. Especially in his roles as a warrior and mass-murderer, he doesn’t recognise the human form in everyone -- such ‘recognition’ involves seeing with all our capacities, cognitive, affective and sensory. This kind of seeing employs moral imagination which is a key to the formation and practice of solidarity.


\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
Moral imagination and human solidarity

‘Imagination’ as ‘solidarity’ is an elusive term. Despite its existential evidence and significance, imagination, often confused with fantasy, has been variously evaluated in scholarly works. In contemporary moral philosophy, scholars such as Mark Johnson prefer to focus on the moral significance of the imagination rather than try to resolve ambiguities and tensions relating to it, and so avoid conceptual misunderstandings by use of the phrase ‘moral imagination’18. Johnson describes moral imagination as ‘self-knowledge about the imaginative structure of our moral understanding, including its values, limitations, and blind spots’. Moral imagination also involves ‘similar knowledge of other people’ (being aware of what other people think as important and what limits their moral outlook). It is also ‘the ability to imagine how various actions open to us might alter our self-identity, modify our commitments, change our relationships, and affect the lives of others’. This aspect of moral imagination refers to a skill of seeing not only consequences of our actions on us but can foresee the effect of behaviour on others. Finally, Johnson, describes moral imagination as ‘the ability to imagine and to enact transformations in our moral understanding, our character, and our behavior’19. This last point emphasises the fundamental change that the moral imagination might prompt in us.

The above description of the moral imagination emphasises the importance of self-knowledge in terms of what we value, the willingness to look for blind spots in our vision, an effort to examine what other people value, and readiness for the transformation of the self. The Boy and Claire, to different degrees, have a self-knowledge. They both reflect on their past

19 Johnson, p.187.
lives, articulate their different values but the Boy appears less willing to learn what others who are not part of his tribe value. We have no indication that he is open to considering his blind spots. Claire is more open to do this - she doesn’t see people through a narrowly viewed tribalism or brotherhood.

It is Claire’s ability to practice the solidarity of the human qua human that makes her change her mind when she visits the Boy in prison in the penultimate scene of the play. She decides not to poison him; she creates a kind of moral space in which she recognises the human form in him. We don’t have access to what images play in her mind but we know that their effect is transformative.

Moral transformation starts at the level of imagination. Claire’s envisioning of the ‘crazy’ tribe into which everyone is welcome is symbolically important. The common good of singing together is prior to the individual differences of the choir members. This also says something about the role the arts have to play in fostering human solidarity. Perhaps, after all, such crazy tribes as Claire’s choir are the ones that are strong even if they appear as weak. The Events facilitates a recognition that only when we imagine ourselves to be capable of resisting narrow views of brotherhood, and insist on broadening our moral vision in which there are certain moral non-negotiables (such as imposing harm on the innocent other), can we understand what solidarity of the human qua human truly means.

**Conclusion**

The Events contains a profoundly moral meaning, which is both orthodox and modern. It is orthodox not only because it has a religious minister, hymns, a parish, etc. at the centre of its story but also because it touches deeply upon the old topic of the human condition. It is modern because it speaks about current global as well as local issues. It enables us to see the
old and new complexities of tribalism, its powers and limitations, the problems of inclusion and exclusion and difficulties with seeing others as single identities.

Bringing ethics into a conversation with theatre is delicate and always incomplete. I am mindful of the limits of this discussion and of the many points I have left unsubstantiated, but I hope I have proved that the conversation is worthwhile. *The Events* tested my own ethical thinking and perhaps my ethical thinking has somewhat tested *The Events*. Wiggins’s account of solidarity of the *human qua human* and Greig’s presentation of the challenges to solidarity lead me to conclude that strong ‘human’ tribes are not easy to achieve but they so much depend on our efforts to see the human form in everyone and go beyond such basic distinctions as ‘foreigners and strangers’. Wiggins reminds us that we must stop thinking of ourselves as caring or fostering brotherhood while we simultaneously make life miserable for others. Failure to recognize the human form in everyone is a moral failure. Solidarity of the *human qua human* requires us to go to the core of the brokenness in ourselves and in our relationships with others. Fostering this kind of solidarity involves keeping one’s eyes open to the reality of the other so that we become sensitive to those structures in us and in our society which suspend the recognition of the human form in all and everyone. Much of what we value depends on what we notice through imagination\(^{20}\). Unless we are able to see someone of a different race, religion, culture, sexual orientation as equal to us and us as equal to him or her, we won’t be able to see anything wrong with racism and various kinds of social phobias. The lack of moral imagination is a serious obstacle to human solidarity. Through the moral imagination, solidarity asks us to consider what we as human beings share in common. It challenges us to examine our differences and find out which differences matter most. It questions our identities and how we fit into the reality of the human tribe. Moral imagination

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empowers us to be morally attentive. By attending to the multidimensional and compelling characters of Claire and the Boy, we are reminded that even in situations where moral failure exceeds moral success, there is still place for growth and hope, providing there is a willingness to recognise the human form in everyone whom happens to enter our moral space.

I would like to thank Dr Jacqueline Bolton whose comments on the earlier draft of this paper have been immensely helpful. I am also grateful to Professor Maria Delgado who generously suggested me as a contributor to an earlier discussion of the play and to this issue, and to my friend and colleague Dr Fiona Ellis, Reader in Philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London, for her most helpful questions and remarks on this paper.

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