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The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory

Second Edition

Edited by Hugh LaFollette and Ingmar Persson

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Edited by
Hugh LaFollette and Ingmar Persson

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Introduction

Hugh LaFollette and Ingmar Persson

Contemporary moral philosophers entertain theories about human nature, explore the nature of value, discuss competing accounts of the best ways to live, ponder the connections between ethics and human psychology, and discuss practical ethical quandaries. Broadly conceived, these are the same issues ancient philosophers discussed. However, the precise questions contemporary philosophers ask, the distinctions we make, the methods we employ, and the knowledge of the world and of human psychology we use in framing and evaluating ethical theories, often only faintly resemble those of our philosophical predecessors.

Nonetheless, current ethical theories are shaped by our predecessors. We wrestle with the questions they posed. We ask the questions we ask, in the ways we ask them, because of their philosophical successes and failures. Their debates were likewise shaped by the questions posed by their predecessors. The connection between our, their, and their predecessors' questions explains why we have a history of ethics, why we all participate in the same debate. The differences between their debates and ours reflect the ways ethics has evolved. This is as it should be: the debates are similar because we are all looking for better ways to relate to each other; different because with time and the benefits of hindsight, we should better understand ourselves, our place in the world, and our relationships to others.

We can divide their questions and ours into three broad categories: metaethics, normative ethics, and practical ethics. Here are examples of each.

Metaethics: What is the status of moral judgments? Are they statements of fact or expressions of attitudes? If they are statements of fact, are these facts subjective or objective? Are they statements about a normative or evaluative realm distinct in kind from the natural world? Is moral agreement possible or do we land in relativism?

Normative ethics: What is the best way, broadly understood, to live? Are there general principles, rules, guidelines that we should follow, or virtues that we should inculcate, that help us distinguish right from wrong and good from bad?

Practical (or applied) ethics: How should we behave in particular situations: when should we tell the truth, under what circumstances can or should we go to war, what is the best way to organize society, how should we relate to the environment and to animals?

The first part of this book contains essays in metaethics and moral epistemology: they discuss the nature and status of ethics and our knowledge of moral matters. The third and largest part contains essays in normative ethics: they offer competing accounts of how we should live. In-between them there is a part with essays on factual matters of relevance to ethics, such as how the psychology of beings must be if they are to be capable of developing and following ethical norms. It must arguably be such that they are capable of being responsible for their actions and being altruistically motivated. This book does not cover practical ethics.

The idea that ethics, like Gaul, is divided into three parts reveals the ways in which ethics as a discipline has evolved. For this is not a distinction the ancients made. Likely they would have seen it as a contrivance, carving nonexistent joints in the moral universe. Still, we can, without undue violence to their views, classify their discussions into these three camps. Plato’s theory of the forms (as traditionally understood) could be seen as the first attempt at defending

moral realism and offering an objective ground for moral truths. Aristotle’s account of the virtues is an early example of virtue theory. And Plato’s proposed structure of the state could be envisaged as an early exercise in practical ethics. As long as we use these distinctions as simply a convenient way of distinguishing the kinds of questions they asked, then likely they would not take umbrage.

In the middle of the twentieth century philosophers, however, did not see these distinctions as merely part of a useful classificatory scheme, but as separating ethics into three wholly distinct disciplines, where metaethics was the primary discipline and the only one which constituted “real” philosophy. Philosophy in the English-speaking countries had taken a decidedly “linguistic turn,” and the analysis of language, in particular everyday language, was seen as the chief occupation of a philosopher. The British philosopher A.J. Ayer boldly proclaimed that “the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic . . .” (1946/1952: 57). This was a view of philosophy which originated in the Vienna Circle in the 1930s.

Accordingly, moral philosophers were almost exclusively concerned with the analysis of ethical terms. Typical titles of the period are Charles Stevenson’s *Ethics and Language* (1944) and R.M. Hare’s *The Language of Morals* (1952). Moral philosophers at the time thought they could fruitfully engage in metaethics without the slightest interest in or acquaintance with normative or practical ethics. Indeed, most would not even consider normative ethics as part of ethics. Not surprisingly, virtually no one then would have envisioned practical ethics as we now know it. Still less would they be tempted to think of it as philosophy.

Present-day moral philosophers engage in activities that fall into all three categories. Unlike their mid-century predecessors, they reject the idea that moral philosophy is equivalent to metaethics. They also recognize the great

relevance that some empirical matters have for ethics, as will be evident from the essays in Part II. Moreover, they are disinclined to think that the three ethical categories make up three wholly independent inquiries. For instance, Stephen Darwall rejects any clear separation between metaethics and normative ethics (1998: 12), while Shelly Kagan not only eschews the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics (1998: 7), he also renounces any firm distinction between normative and practical ethics (1998: 5). In addition, as you will notice when reading the essays, distinctions between the types of normative theory are likewise blurry and should not be taken as indicating more than a vague family resemblance.

The Essays

Metaethics and Moral Epistemology

Part I begins with two essays discussing the meaning of moral judgments: Are they true or false descriptions of states of affairs or expressions of noncognitive attitudes like desires and emotions? If they describe states of affairs, are these objective, or do they have to do with subjective attitudes? If they describe or express attitudes, will not moral judgments be relative to individuals or cultures?

Michael Smith takes "Moral Realism" to be the doctrine that (1) moral judgments are capable of being true and false, and that (2) some of those judgments are, in fact, true. Realism is best understood in contrast with two alternatives: nihilism and expressivism. Both alternatives agree that moral claims cannot be true: expressivists by denying (1) and nihilists by denying (2).

This way of characterizing realism is, however, problematic because there is a popular "minimalistic" conception of truth, according to which saying that a

sentence is true is just expressing agreement with it. In this sense, expressivists can claim that moral claims are capable of being true. A better way of characterizing expressivism is by saying that it endorses *internalism*, the doctrine that there is a necessary connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated to act in accordance with it, for instance, between judging that it is wrong to torture babies and being averse to doing it. Although Smith rejects expressivism, he thinks expressivists are right about internalism. He accepts an internalist naturalistic moral realism which claims that judging an act to be right is judging that it is such that in conditions of ideal reflection it induces a desire that it be performed. Internalist naturalistic realism stands in opposition not only to externalist naturalistic realism, but also to nonnaturalistic realism, which takes moral judgments to refer to properties that are distinct in kind and irreducible to the empirical properties investigated by science.

But will the desires of all of us converge under the conditions of ideal reflection? Smith thinks that a presumption to this effect is part of the meaning of our moral terms. So, he is to that extent a nonrelativist, but he admits that this presumption might turn out to be false. If so, relativism or nihilism will have the final word.

In “Relativism” Simon Blackburn agrees with Smith that, because of the psychological and cultural differences between human beings, relativism poses a threat to moral realism. The remedy Blackburn proposes is, however, to give up the realist idea that moral judgments purport to represent how the world is and an accompanying substantive conception of truth, according to which they are true when they succeed in so doing. Instead we should accept the expressivist claim that moral judgments express the speakers’ desires and emotions and a minimalist conception of truth, according to which saying that moral

judgments are true is merely to endorse the attitudes they express. Contrary to what many think, Blackburn believes that expressivism can give satisfactory sense to the idea that moral norms can be objective: they are objective if they are not biased or blind to relevant facts. They can also possess an appropriate authority if we regard it as not optional or permissible to embrace conflicting norms.

In “Moral Agreement” Derek Parfit also grapples with the question of whether in ideal conditions – in which we are all adequately informed about relevant empirical facts, thinking clearly, and not subject to any distorting emotions – our moral beliefs will tend to converge. Parfit accepts a form of nonnaturalistic moral realism, according to which we have intuitive knowledge of the basic norms of rationality and morality. (McNaughton and Rawling defend a similar kind of view in “Intuitionism.”) This view would be dubious if even under ideal conditions there were deep and widespread divergences in respect of the norms that we endorse. But Parfit contends that this does not seem to be so. In many cases moral disagreements can be put down to differences as regards nonmoral beliefs, for example about matters of religion. In others they are due to distorting factors, such as when the selfishness of the rich makes them underestimate the extent to which they ought to aid the poor. But here, Parfit claims, people also disagree because they think that moral norms are more precise than they actually are. It is unlikely that there is a precise amount that the rich are required to give; in many cases it is indeterminate whether or not the rich have given as much as is required, just as in many cases it is indeterminate whether or not a man is bald. Parfit is thus hopeful that when we get a clearer picture of the reasons for moral disagreement, we could reasonably conjecture that the convergence of our moral belief in ideal conditions would be so substantial that his nonnaturalistic moral realism is not jeopardized.

In “Divine Command Theory” Philip L. Quinn offers another account of the grounds of the objectivity of morality. He defends the claim that morality depends on God. His aim is not to convince atheists of the truth of his view – that would depend on him first convincing them of the existence and nature of God. His aim is more modest: to show that such beliefs constitute a defensible theory of ethics. Quinn offers and refines a version of the Divine Command Theory, and then responds to assorted criticisms which purportedly show that the very idea of a divine command ethic is indefensible. He ends by offering what he sees as a “cumulative case argument” for the suggestion that categorical moral requirements cannot exist unless there is a deity that intends them.

By a “moral intuition” Jeff McMahan means a moral belief or judgment that is not the result of an inference. He uses the term in a broader, metaethically neutral way rather than in any of the more specific ways it has been used by nonnaturalistic moral realists like Parfit, and McNaughton and Rawling. In his essay “Moral Intuition” McMahan sketches a *foundationalist* moral epistemology which takes as its starting point our intuitions about particular moral matters – for example, that it is wrong to kill innocent human beings – and works its way bottom-up to more general moral principles. The principles extracted then need to be confirmed by a top-down procedure of checking how they square with other particular intuitions. This methodology may seem indistinguishable from what John Rawls famously called the search for a *reflective equilibrium*. But Rawls’s procedure has usually been interpreted as a coherentist approach, whereas McMahan takes his proposal to be foundationalist. This is because McMahan believes that we have some moral intuitions that we regard as so certain that we would not be willing to surrender them to achieve greater coherence. What

ultimately provides the justificatory foundation in his view are the general principles we abstract from our more particular intuitions, but we must have recourse to these intuitions in order to discover the principles: "The order of discovery is the reverse of the order of justification," as he puts it.

Factual Background of Ethics

Part II opens with an essay by Richard Joyce in which he approaches "Ethics and Evolution" from both an empirical and a philosophical perspective. The main issue of the empirical approach is the truth of *moral nativism*, the doctrine that moral judgments are not cultural products but products of a biological adaptation: an innate trait favored by evolution because it provides humans with a reproductive advantage. One problem confronting this hypothesis concerns what precisely "moral judgments" are. Joyce tentatively suggests that they are judgments that involve a notion of justification and that possess a "categorical" authority which gives them an independence of subjective attitudes. Another major problem concerns lack of evidence for this hypothesis that rules out competing hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that the disposition to make moral judgments is a by-product of other biological adaptations.

However, assuming that moral nativism has enough going for it, the philosophical question arises as to what implications it has for ethics. The implications can concern metaethics, normative ethics, or practical ethics, and they can be either vindicating or debunking. Joyce ends by outlining some such implications and the objections they face.

In the second essay of this part Elliott Sober discusses a long-standing worry about "Psychological Egoism." Philosophers since Socrates have worried that all human motivation is ultimately self-interested. If this is the case, it