

tried to avoid armed conflict with Nazi Germany. Indeed, throughout the 1930s Curtin was still a pacifist who believed that the ruling class had “a vested interest in war and war-making”. As a consequence, when in Opposition as leader of the federal Labor Party, Curtin opposed every initiative of Joseph Lyons and then, in April 1939, of the Menzies government to increase Australian defence expenditure.

Henderson reveals that, as a person and a politician, Curtin the pacifist believed that “war, if it came, would be the work of international profiteers and not the result of the expansionist ambitions of Germany’s arch-dictator Adolf Hitler. In other words, diplomacy (also known derisively as ‘appeasement’) was needed, and diplomacy should push on, regardless of the failure of the Munich Agreement of late 1938.”

The truth is that, before the Nazis invaded Poland in late August 1939, the overriding pressure on government politicians of all stripes was to avoid war. This was with the conspicuous exception of a few dissidents, most notably Winston Churchill in England and Billy Hughes in Australia. Moreover, as Henderson explains, it was not until well into 1940 that Labor, under Curtin, supported Menzies’s commitment in early September 1939 to send troops to Europe to fight Hitler. On November 16, 1939, as Opposition leader, Curtin had told the House of Representatives, “there is some hope of peace being negotiated ... In many places where influence is exerted some endeavour has been made to see if, even at this terrible stage, it is not practicable to resolve the situation without prolonging or continuing the war.” For Curtin, and for Menzies, this forlorn hope was misplaced.

Until his resignation as UAP leader in August 1941 Menzies presided over a relatively effective wartime government. While his first term as prime minister was racked with divisions in the UAP, as Henderson explains, Menzies “was successful in continuing the work of the Lyons government in strengthening Australia’s war preparedness”. Indeed, when he became Australia’s prime minister in 1941, the ex-socialist Curtin acknowledged the strong inheritance he had received from Menzies.

The statement above is supported by Frank Bongiorno in his fascinating, but ambiguously-named chapter “Menzies and Curtin at War”. In the National Library of Australia there is a handwritten letter, dated November 7, 1941, from Curtin to Menzies, who was by then a backbencher. Addressed to “Dear Bob”, Curtin noted that in a cable he had received from Winston Churchill, the British prime minister had concluded his observations with the message: “Give my regards to Mr Menzies. I am so glad he is on your War Council.” Curtin continued,

“I thought you would like to know that.”

As Bongiorno states, “The voluminous writings on Robert Menzies and John Curtin are agreed on one thing: that their relations were cordial and courteous.” Even though Menzies was mainly a pragmatic, middle-class, anti-communist Scots Presbyterian, and Curtin was idealistic, working-class, factionally-conscious, and of Irish Catholic background, they always treated each other with civility. According to Menzies, “in the years we faced one another across the chamber, we met and spoke regularly, and Curtin ... loved nothing more than a personal discussion which had no particular relationship to the business before the House”.

Australia’s national prosperity that emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s owed much, Bongiorno argues, “to the dynamic of Menzies’s wartime relationship with Curtin, and the legacies of Labor’s post-Depression economic and social vision”. The latter had been implemented by Curtin as prime minister and to a lesser extent by Ben Chifley. The policies implemented by these Labor leaders arguably provided a firm base for the long, and in the main, economically successful Menzies era.

Menzies’s remarkable stint as prime minister from 1949 to 1966 leading a long-standing, but occasionally divided, conservative coalition and his role in the development of political liberalism in Australia will be canvassed in three more anthologies. These books, to be published by MUP, are to be the result of other academic conferences in Melbourne, convened by the Robert Menzies Institute.

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## DAMIAN GRACE

### A Foundation for Ethics

*The Worth of Persons*

by James Franklin

Encounter Books, 2022, 260 pages, \$55

James Franklin was a professor of mathematics at UNSW when he began teaching ethics to maths students in the first course of its kind in the world. He differed from many academics offering professional ethics courses in being a philosopher (and

a historian, but jokes about him being a polymath must have worn very thin by now). Franklin has been defending realist metaphysics for many years, mainly in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mathematics. In this latest book, he sets out a strong realist case for the foundation of ethics.

His very first sentence, “Ethics is not fundamentally about what to do,” is startling. Surely everybody knows, or else should know, that ethics is about what we should do and what we should not. As Franklin points out, however, rules, norms and injunctions do not hang in the air. They have a basis and he argues that that basis is the worth of persons. He points to cases where this is evident, such as when we become aware of human horror stories, like the murders of Srebrenica. We recoil at “the violation and destruction of something of immense value, a human life”. Instances of this recognition are not difficult to find, and they point us towards the fundamental worth of persons. That worth is Franklin’s foundation for ethics and the theme of this book.

The book is divided into sections dealing with objections to metaphysical or foundationalist theories of ethics, and those justifying a metaphysics of ethics in the intrinsic worth of persons. It should not need to be said that metaphysics is not about mysticism or alternatives to science but is the philosophy of fundamentals—in this case, the nature of the human person and what is proper to that nature.

Franklin notes wryly that “a phobia of metaphysics is widespread in ethical theory”: foundations are out and constructions and moral scepticism are in. How anything can be constructed without foundations is a mystery Franklin explores in his early chapters. He takes the worth of human beings as basic. Such worth does not depend upon our value to others but on our humanity.

Interestingly, Franklin differs with traditional defenders of ethical realism, such as Aristotle and Aquinas, who hitch human worth to action. He argues, in contrast, that the worth of persons may be grasped with no practical purpose in mind, and, indeed this understanding must be so if we are to avoid viewing the worth of persons through their pursuit of goods such as knowledge, liberty or friendship. I’m not sure that the undoubtedly practical bias of Aquinas precludes such an appreciation, but the significant point is that Franklin’s emphasis on understanding human worth orients ethics differently. His focus is on the worth of persons rather

than the worth of goods. This establishes a basis for ethics in moral realism rather than in the currently fashionable terms of an evolutionary survival or a convenient social fiction.

Franklin argues that traditional understandings of ethics (deontological, consequentialist and virtue theories) are at some, often unacknowledged, level committed to the worth of persons. Other candidates for grounding ethics, such as the Darwinian, the Calvinist, the Humean (after the Scottish philosopher David Hume), and those of Socrates and Aristotle are not so committed. Franklin’s disagreement with them all is that they focus on acts and rational action. They do not provide accounts of ethics relating to the significance of human worth. Divine command theorists, for example, place ethics wholly in the arbitrary decisions of God.

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Evolutionary ethics travels a different path to a similarly arbitrary conclusion, explaining away rather than explaining what we know. The fittingness of moral norms to human evolution is pre-ordained by the theory, but what of the value to survival and reproduction of successful but repugnant practices like violence and theft? Then there is the evolutionary reduction of ethics to physiological explanations. The US entomologist Edward O. Wilson produced a well-known instance of this. He held that because natural selection produced the hypothalamus and limbic systems from which emotions like love, hate, fear and

guilt arise, ethics, “if not epistemology and epistemologists”, can be explained in evolutionary terms. Presumably entomological knowledge claims could be explained in this way too.

Franklin shows such arguments to be invalid. He gives a parallel case: “We cannot know mathematical truths except through the calculations of our frontal cortex, therefore, we cannot know mathematical truths at all.” This, says Franklin, is an example of the “worst argument in the world”, a soubriquet bestowed upon this form of illogicality by David Stove.

Franklin takes Kant to be the philosopher who most fully gives human worth (dignity) its due. For Kant, human persons are ends in themselves, worthy of boundless respect, and able to accommodate a rich conception of human nature in individual worth. Not all deontological theories fare as well as Kant’s. Franklin argues that the pre-eminent political philosopher of the second half of

the twentieth century, John Rawls, fails in trying to establish a non-metaphysical theory of justice. This is not a new criticism, but Rawls's prominence and persuasiveness justify Franklin's riposte. Rawls posits primary goods that any rational agent would seek to maximise were they in a position to choose a fair or just society. Franklin takes one of those goods, "a sense of one's own worth", and asks upon what that sense is founded. Assuming it is a sound claim, it must be based in some belief about oneself—which in Rawls's terms may be generalised to a belief about persons—and which therefore "threatens to be 'metaphysical'". Another good, freedom, unavoidably raises a metaphysical problem. If freedom is not a delusion, and Rawls does not treat it as such, then that belief must be justified by something metaphysical about persons.

Other philosophers, such as the anti-foundationalist Richard Rorty, are no more successful than Rawls. They reject the metaphysics of ethics and thereby exclude questions about intrinsic human worth. Franklin's confrontation of anti-metaphysical ethics is reminiscent of the post-war critiques of Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe and Mary Midgley, the "metaphysical animals" who are the subject of a recent book by Clare MacCumhaill and Rachael Wiseman. This quartet refused to accept the enfeebled Oxford moral philosophy that fashionably rejected metaphysics in favour of the analysis of language, and gave no purchase on the recent evil of mass human destruction. Franklin's critique of practical philosophers who believe that ethics is simply "traffic rules" for society echoes their challenge. As he puts it, persons are "not members of the human species", but individuals, meaning that their worth comes not from belonging to a class but inheres in their personhood. Tragedy is a pointer to that status. The loss of a person in a war or an accident is a tragedy as the death of a kangaroo or the explosion of a star is not.

It is one of the strengths of Franklin's book that he takes tragedy seriously. His criticisms of other theories draw heavily upon their failure to do so or do so sufficiently. That is because they have more regard for acting well or badly than for the worth of the person. Peter Singer is a good example. His valuing of experiences leads to counter-intuitive conclusions, such as an infant having no inherent right to life. Because an infant has no conscious interests to be counted, its worth depends on its value to others whose interests do count. If it is disabled, they might not wish to keep it alive and perhaps to replace it with another child at a more convenient time. That makes killing a child permissible or right. Such anaemic theory has no

room for tragedy.

Franklin's case is that we recognise that moral worth is grounded in our complex humanity, which points to a relation of supervenience. Supervenience means that one set of properties is grounded in another set without which it would not exist, as in the supervenience of chess strategy on the rules of chess or the supervenience of rational thought on logic. Understanding supervenience is grasping that the grounding properties give rise necessarily to very different supervenient properties. Franklin argues that supervenience is the bridge to worth. He is not dealing with the conceptual relations discussed by Hume, who suggested a sleight of hand in moving from descriptions to prescriptions, and much less with the "constructions" and other letters of transit that dominate much contemporary thinking about ethics. Returning to his very first proposition, Franklin points out that Hume's is/ought objection applies to gaps between descriptions and prescriptions—actions—and not obviously to a gap between non-moral facts and worth.

Nevertheless, the Australian philosopher John Mackie challenged ethical facts as "queer". He thought they were utterly unlike anything else in a universe of solid entities, like planets and tables. The problem with Mackie's queerness objection is that it is not peculiar to morality. Knowing about other things shares the alleged problems of knowledge about ethical facts. Retaining facts about, say, logic as trouble-free while rejecting moral facts as fantastic is arbitrary, as Franklin, and others like John Finnis, another Australian, have argued. Mackie's queerness objection would apply not only to morality but intentions, aesthetics, meaning and the truth of theories about the universe.

Against the reductionism attempted by E.O. Wilson or, say, those who believe thoughts are mere brain states, Franklin argues that supervenience adds to what there is. The supervenient relationship is not one of identity, but describes the rise of properties which exist because of their grounding in others. The supervenient entities would not exist without that grounding. This is the metaphysical core of Franklin's work. It supports his argument that theories that attempt to avoid metaphysics cannot really do so.

The supervenience theory accounts for consistency in morality because it excludes irrelevant (non-grounding) properties, such as skin colour or sex. It also excludes human worth by degrees characteristic of instrumental goods. Knives are better or worse depending on their sharpness, the worth of cars is measured against performance standards, and so on. Human beings are not like this, worth less because they are poor or uneducated or worth more because

of artistic talent or intelligence. Franklin's argument is against depersonalisation as much as it is for a foundation for ethics.

He considers a range of qualities believed to endow humans with worth: rationality, freedom, detachment, giving and understanding reasons, and the exercise of aesthetic appreciation. Another is good will, which Kant identifies as the only unqualified good. In addition to these are rational capacities conferred by the emotions, among which love is the most significant. Simplifying Franklin's argument, these characteristics, as elements in a unified self, separate persons from plant and animal life and from mechanical simulacra. It is upon persons, thus considered, that worth supervenes. Hence, when persons are deprived of some of these properties a sense of grief or shock or tragedy is a normal response.

Yet lists of characteristics united in a continuing, self-aware person cannot be the full story. Worth inheres in babies who have not actualised their capacities. Talk of lists of capacities and potentials in babies suggests they have value from being loved rather than being loved because they are valuable. Human persons defined in terms of characteristics could still be interchangeable without loss. Even adding the capacity to love does not fully individuate persons. Love does alter when it alteration finds. What intellectual and emotional capacities reveal is the unique capacity of human persons to realise themselves. The worth of individuality is most clearly evident in the realisation of potentials over a lifetime. It is essentially human to form and execute a plan of life. Franklin discusses individuality with insight, using examples from literature and life to show how the actualisation of potentials produces irreplaceable individuals. But the possession of potentials also supervenes on worth, as those who have lost children know.

These considerations of worth are enlarged in a chapter on the epistemology of worth: how is ethical knowledge possible? Here Franklin discusses emotions, such as empathy and love, as forms of ethical knowledge. Empathy, for example, is a sharing in another's emotional life. We *know* how they feel. In knowing this, we know one of the bases of their worth. Someone shown photographs of Holocaust death camps, but who experiences no horror, "lacks a necessary insight into the worth of persons". Such were the Nazis whose depravity allowed them to destroy something of worth, not only in others but in themselves.

By now the significance of establishing the worth of persons as the basis for ethics should be clear. Note that Franklin is properly modest about moving

from intrinsic worth to moral precepts. He rejects such moves as implausible. Nor does he try to dissolve ethical dilemmas. He does not dodge difficult questions, including abortion, euthanasia, incarceration, war and equality, yet Franklin's account of our obligations to others is not mysterious. As he says, "If persons were worthless, what they did or what was done to them would be of no moral significance."

The ethical positions incompatible with Franklin's moral realism include most obviously subjectivism, a strictly materialist atheism which regards human beings as not much more than star dust, and divine voluntarism, by which God's commands make right and wrong.

I had the pleasure of reading this book in manuscript and have been thinking about it ever since, particularly its resonances with the theories of G.E. Moore and John Finnis. As a good philosophy book should, it raises difficult questions and gives strong arguments that its author occasionally and modestly admits are defeasible. While making demands of its readers—skipping chapters is not recommended—it is accessible to an educated audience without a background in philosophy. Both those seeking a convincing foundation for ethics, and those who believe none can be found, will find enlightenment in its pages. I can't think of a better recommendation.

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*Damian Grace is, with Michael Jackson, the author of Machiavelliana: The Living Machiavelli in Modern Mythologies (2018).*

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## GARY JOHNS

### A Foolish and Dangerous Idea

*Beyond Belief: Rethinking the Voice to Parliament*

edited by Peter Kurti & Warren Mundine  
Connor Court, 2022, 190 pages, \$29.95

A stupid idea, once embedded in the heads of intellectuals, is hard to remove. So it is with the Albanese proposal for a constitutional Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The object of this timely collection of short essays is to persuade readers to vote down the stupid idea. Many essays will follow, and the more voices opposed to the Voice the better! As Tony Abbott makes clear, "It would be a dreadful mistake for an abundance of goodwill to propel changing the Constitution without careful regard for its consequences; because constitutional change is 'for keeps'."