THIS ISSUE

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Realist Foundations of Ethics

I: Realist ethics, what it's about

When we are confronted with pictures of genocide victims dug up, such as those of Srebrenica or the Holocaust, we know "Those were people like us, and something terrible happened to them." Our emotional reaction gives us an immediate perception of the violation and destruction of something of immense value, a human life. It is gross violations of the right to life that most immediately force upon us a sense of the objective inviolability of human worth. That is where we first understand that ethics is objective – that good and evil matter in some absolute sense and that right and wrong cannot all be a matter of mere opinion or personal choice.

So to be sceptical about something as ethically basic as the terribleness of the evil suffered by victims of genocide would be not only an intellectual mistake but an evil act against the victims. Rai Gaita writes in *Good and Evil: An absolute conception*:

> imagine a tutorial in which one of its members had been a victim of terrible evil of which all the other members were aware, and in which the tutor invited them to consider whether our sense of the terribleness of evil was not an illusion. Everyone would be outraged if their tutor was not serious and struck by unbelieving horror if he was.[i]

Starting with the reality of evil (or its opposite) makes it clear that ethics is not fundamentally about what to do.

Of course, it is true that questions of right and wrong, good and bad actions, rights and duties, virtues and vices, are an important part of ethics. But they are not *fundamentally* what ethics is about. Firstly, what we are most disturbed by ethically – what most violently forces itself on us as ethically objective – is not anything to do with actions, but the terribleness of suffering.

That is something John Anderson got right about ethics – up to a point. Anderson distinguished sharply between "good", a property of things or activities, which he thought existed, and right or obligation, which he thought did not exist. "Good", he said, was an objective property of certain activities (such as, of course, criticism and inquiry – no surprises there – but also love and productivity). But in his view, that does not give rise to any obligation to promote the good – that would be a "relativist error". He says

It is better, therefore, to drop the term 'right' from ethical theory, and it is necessary emphatically to reject the view that goodness has anything to do with obeying commandments.[ii]

That seems to me ludicrous, because the nature of evil makes it clear why you should do something about it. You see someone drowning, which is an evil outcome, and if you can help them, you should do so. Your

obligation follows from the evil of the outcome and your ability to do something about it. Nevertheless, it is quite correct to distinguish sharply between good and evil on the one hand and right and wrong – obligation – on the other. Good and evil come first, and any realist theory of ethics should start there. (There is however some question about Anderson's strategy of attributing good to activities in abstraction from the entities that conduct the activities; like Peter Singer's idea of attributing good to interests in abstraction from the beings that have the interests, it is questionably coherent and threatens unpleasant consequences.)

When you think about how obligation does relate to good, you keep coming back to one thing – the worth of persons.

Our intuitions can be firmed up by noticing that a sense of the worth of persons is implicit in how almost all of us think about morality. That is a theme of Alan Donagan's *The Theory of Morality*. The definite article in the title is important. He argues that there is a coherent theory underlying the general moral outlook and behaviour of all (normal) people, though it is not necessarily consciously expressed. Rules of ethics are not basic. Instead, the normal rules of behaviour are generated by the more fundamental assumption that persons are valuable in themselves. He writes:

I take the fundamental principle of that part of traditional morality which is independent of any theological presupposition to have been expressed in the scriptural commandment, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself', understanding one's neighbour to be any human being, and love to be, not a matter of feeling, but of acting in ways in which human beings as such can choose to act. The philosophical sense of this commandment was correctly expressed by Kant in his formula that one act so that one treats humanity always as an end and never as a means.[iii]

All moral rules, Donagan maintains, even very detailed ones about specific cases, should be deducible from this general principle, with some thought. Why is murder wrong? Because being dead is a grave evil, so causing it is seriously wrong. Thus it is possible to say why the prohibition against murder might be reconsidered in the case of capital punishment: the destruction of the life of one person is balanced against the destruction of life of the criminal's victims, actual or potential; that is a consideration of the same nature as the one that led to the prohibition of murder in general. Rights arise in the same way: a right to life is simply the wrongness of destruction of a life, seen from the point of view of the person living the life.

As Kant himself expresses it, "man regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price, for as a person he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others, or even to his own ends, but as an end in himself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them."[iv]

The same happens if you start with other general concepts that have a major role in ethics, like rights or virtues or commands or utilities. They don't make sense as freestanding concepts, only if they have a relation to the worth of persons. To take a single example, what is the point of the virtue of temperance, or self-control? It is to preserve the self so that one is in a position to do what is right – say, to be sober so as to drive one's drunk friends home from a party.

Actually, it is not quite as simple as that, in that not everything about ethics does follow solely from the worth of persons. For example, why do children have a right to education, so that indoctrination in a narrow madrassah is a violation of their rights? It is not just their worth in the abstract, it is because of a special feature of the nature of humans – they are intellectual beings and being able to think straight is very crucial to them, so deprivation of that possibility is a grave violation of rights.

But let us not go further now into "natural law" ethics about what is right for persons.[v] It is important, but at the moment we are trying to do foundations.

Just to emphasise, the worth of persons has to be an objective reality to do the job as a foundation of ethics. It's not good enough to undermine it (or as some now say, deconstruct it), by regarding it as a purely psychological matter, as if our evolutionary history has made us think we're important, but we're not really. No doubt our evolutionary history has made us think this and that, but that doesn't tell us anything ethical. Compare mathematics. Our evolutionary history underpins and causes our belief that $2 + 2 = 4$. But that is separate from the fact that, out there in mathematical reality, $2 + 2$ really is 4, and we don't have a choice but to accept that. The objectivity of the worth of persons needs to be as solid as the objectivity of mathematics.[vi] Otherwise, the reality of evil is in fact an illusion, and Gaita's comments apply.

There remains a difficult question as to what properties of humans are the ones that give them moral worth; or indeed, if one should attempt to answer that question. That must be left to another time, but it seems fair to say at least that size and colour are not among the morally relevant qualities of persons, while rationality and the ability to suffer are. One would like to know too if other beings such as animals have any share of moral worth. A good question, but first things first.

II: God and ethics?

So far, there has been no mention of God, religion or anything of that nature. Religious people and non-religious people should be able to agree equally that ethics depends on the worth of persons and should be equally able to take a realist view of worth. It is just a matter of knowing humans, and you know at least one of them inside out and some others quite well. If you experience injustice to yourself, you know perfectly well that it's an affront to yourself and that you deserve better. Seven-year-olds are very strong on "It's not fair." (It is true that some people have a psychiatric problem that undermines their sense of self-worth, but normally we think that's an error caused by some trauma.)

But there is a problem. There are two insights, apparently incompatible, as to the relation of realist ethics to religion.

The first is: Since ethics is about worth inherent in humans, there is no room for God to get into it, even if there is a God. Allen Wood in his excellent book *Kantian Ethics,* which defends a very objectivist reading of Kant, notes that at a few points Kant drifts towards a connection between ethics and spirituality; Wood simply expresses outrage and moves on. That is an understandable reaction. And if one takes an individual ethical topic, say euthanasia, talking about God does not seem to bear on the question. Even the Catholic Church advises natural law thinking about those questions.

The problem is encapsulated in the Euthyphro dilemma posed in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. In reply to the claim that what is good is (by definition) what the gods approve, Socrates asks, Is something good because the gods approve it, or do the gods approve it because it is good? (There's a saying in the philosophy world that one is capable of doing philosophy if one understands the point of that question.) If something is good simply because the gods approve it, it appears to give the gods free choice to declare murder right, which is incompatible with a realist ethics. But if the gods approve something because it is (already) right, they seem to have no ethical role; like us, they are bystanders to a pre-existing moral realm, so that realm itself seems to have no role for gods. (Compare the realm of mathematics, where the digits of pi must be as they are, and there is no role for the divine will, since necessities as strong as that are not capable of being changed by any will, human or divine.)

Furthermore, there has historically been little connection between religion and ethics. We tend to forget that because our civilization grew up in the Judeao-Christian tradition, which does connect God and ethics very closely. But that is exceptional. Roman and Indian religions, for example, do not do that. The strange juxtaposition of a maximally powerful deity and ethical concern for humans (and humans at the lowest end of the social scale, at that) occurs in the space of a few verses of Psalm 146:

> He is the Maker of heaven and earth
> the sea, and everything in them—
> he remains faithful forever.
> He upholds the cause of the oppressed
> and gives food to the hungry.
> The LORD sets prisoners free,
> the LORD gives sight to the blind,
> the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
> the LORD loves the righteous

The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
That is absolutely out of step with the general run of world religions, as well as being unexpected in itself.

On the other hand … there is an opposite insight, which seems to suggest that ethics is not so easily understood without some reference to the divine or at least something beyond the purely material world. There seems no hope of there being an objective worth of persons in a purely materialist universe. The death of a human is a tragedy; an exploding lifeless galaxy is merely a firework. But materialist atheism says those two are the same kind of thing. A human is just a biological entity, more complex in some ways than a galaxy but fundamentally just a mass of matter.

David Hume, in a famous passage that set the agenda for a great deal of later questioning about ethics, rightly exposed the radical divorce between *is* and *ought*; between matters of (scientific or other) fact and ethics:

> I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason.[vii]

Some of Hume's more enthusiastically atheist followers have taken that to mean that when it comes down to it, there is no such thing as ethics. John Mackie (Anderson's student) held an "error theory" of ethics: he thought that our feelings of right and wrong are illegitimate projections onto the world of our habits as determined by our evolutionary history and individual training.[viii] There is really no such thing as ethics, in his view. Many writers on evolutionary ethics have not quite gone to Mackie's extreme of entirely denying that there is really a right and wrong, but why they stop short is often not clear from their reasoning. Mackie did rightly point to the "queerness"[ix] of objective ethics: it does look strange from a purely scientific picture of the universe. It just does not fit into a purely scientific view of the universe, so it must be a sign of something deep.

Another aspect of the awkwardness of the relation of science to ethics is shown by the ethical problems arising if one tries to read your ethics off a scientific view of the universe.

Hume's is-ought gap just as firmly rules out any kind of "evolutionary ethics", in the sense of an ethics based on or reducible to facts about evolution. If our evolutionary history has equipped us with certain habits, that is in itself no reason at all why we should approve those habits or follow them. Perhaps evolution has sometimes given us habits that we regard as moral, such as altruism or survival instincts. Some evolutionary theorists felt a rosy glow when it turned out that nature need not be as "red in tooth and claw"

as the early Darwinists supposed, but that altruism too could be shown to have evolutionary advantages (for a group). But any attempt to actually found ethics on its evolutionary history faces a problem when evolution comes up with less savoury characteristics. Rape and ethnic cleansing offer obvious advantages for "selfish genes" wishing to spread themselves in future generations – advantages all too well realized by Genghis Khan, who has an estimated 16 million living descendants.[x] But rape and genocide are evils and their role in evolution is entirely incapable of providing an excuse for them. Hume is correct – there is no possible inference that "Whatever is, is right." Trying to replace talk about ethics with pseudo-scientific talk about the evolutionary role of ethical behaviour is a kind of "vacuum activity",[xi] as where dogs long deprived of bones and soil "bury" a "bone" in the corner of a room. A pretence of ethics with a narrative structure similar to ethics is not actual ethics. Whatever evolutionary traits, tribal customs or individual acts exist, moral criticism of them from an outside standpoint is possible and necessary.

If ethics is impossible in a strictly materialist universe, are there any other possiblities? Materialist atheism and personal theism aren't the only games in town. A third avenue to explore is pantheism, in the wide sense of a view of the universe that has a genuine spiritual aspect but without a personal god.

There has been a great variety of views occupying the logical space between materialism and personal theism. They provide hope to those who find personal theisms and their dogmas unconvincing, but feel the absolute force of moral claims. The conflict particularly oppressed the Victorians, as recorded in F.W.H. Myers' recollection of a conversation with George Eliot in 1873:

> I remember how, at Cambridge, I walked with her once in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity, on an evening of rainy May; and she, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men—the words *God, Immortality, Duty*—pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first,* how unbelievable the *second,* and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third.* Never perhaps, have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unrecompensing Law. I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic countenance turned toward me like a sibyl's in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise, and left me the third scroll only, awful with inevitable fates. And when we stood at length and parted amid that columnar circuit of the forest trees, beneath the last twilight of starless skies, I seemed to be gazing, like Titus at Jerusalem, on vacant seats and empty halls—on a sanctuary with no Presence to hallow it, and heaven left lonely of a God.[xii]

They don't write prose like that any more, sadly.

David Stove used to say that Absolute Idealism of the late nineteenth century was the perfect "decompression chamber for that century's vast flood of intellectual refugees from Christianity."[xiii]

I am all for attempting that project, but the actual results so far are rather disappointing. The many versions on offer – Spinozist pantheism, Absolute Idealism, various Buddhisms, Neoplatonism, theosophy, emergentism, deep ecology, Teilhard de Chardin's progress of the world towards an Omega Point, and so on – are dogged by vagueness as to what they really hold about the nature of the universe. No precise theory becomes clear in the large books of the writers of these schools. In the last few years, views of the same general type have been revived in books such as Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*, Ronald Dworkin's *Religion Without God*, and Antony Flew's *There is a God*, which deny personal theism but argue from mental, ethical and aesthetic features of the universe to some non-materialist view of the universe. But their arguments are nearly all about why we need to go beyond a materialist view, hardly at all about what we see if we do go beyond. When reading these books one finds oneself thinking "Come back Thomas Aquinas, all is forgiven …" At least in the *Summa* you get plenty of precise theses to agree or disagree with.

Those theories do also tend to share a problem which calls the pantheist option into question on moral grounds. On the one hand, the Spinozist, Buddhist and "deep ecology" pictures are coherent, and they do have a notion of absolute value in the absence of a God. On those views, Nature has some of the moral qualities attributed by religions to God. But they tend to dissolve the (human) self to one degree or another, in a way that threatens to undermine the seriousness of evil suffered by individual humans. That was the point of objections to "deep ecology" based on its quietism in the face of possible asteroid strikes, ice ages

or HIV mutations, which are perfectly natural, and from the point of view of the universe, may well clear the earth for a wealth of exciting new evolutionary opportunities.[xiv] That contradicts the strong sense of the worth of individual persons that we started with.

So what is the answer? Unfortunately time does not permit …

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i R. Gaita, *Good and Evil,* 319.

ii J. Anderson, Realism versus relativism in ethics, *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 11 (1933), 1–11, repr. in J. Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962), 238–47, at p. 242; J. Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia,* (Macleay Press, Sydney, 2003), ch. 2.

iii   A. Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1977), 65-6; similar in N. Brown, *The Worth of Persons* (Catholic Institute of Sydney, Sydney, 1983).

iv   Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:435, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), 186.

v More in J. Franklin, Traditional Catholic philosophy: baby and bathwater, in J. Franklin, *Catholic Values and Australian Realities (*Connor Court, Ballan, 2006), 65-82.

vi See J. Franklin, On the parallel between mathematics and morals, *Philosophy* 79 (2004), 97-119.

vii David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III section i.

viii J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977).

ix   Mackie, *Ethics,* 38-42.

x   T. Zerjal *et al*, The genetic legacy of the Mongols, *American Journal of Human Genetics* 72 (2003), 717-721.

xi D.C. Stove*, Scientific Irrationalism: Origins of a postmodern cult* (Transaction, New Brunswick NJ, 2001), 181.

xii F.W.H. Myers, George Eliot, *Century Magazine* , Nov 1881 (http://www.bartleby.com/309/1001.html).

xiii D. Stove, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991), 87-8; Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth,* ch. 6.

xiv W. Grey, Anthropocentrism and deep ecology, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71 (1993), 463–75.

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