Aner Govrin, ***Ethics and Attachment: How We Make Moral Judgments,*** (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 262 + xx pages. ISBN: 9781138079786 (pbk.).

This is a very interesting book. Starting with a promising idea for "a conceptual revolution in our understanding of morality" (p. x), it ends, in this reviewer's estimate, in the traditional deadlocks it wanted to escape. Govrin's "attachment approach" (p. x) sees the surface phenomena of moral life as mere "variations on a central theme, reflecting an underlying knowledge of infant/adult dyads" (p. 128). Prior to any cultural conditioning, we share an elementary framing of moral situations simply because we were once children, totally dependent on our caretakers (pp. xii-xiv; 77). To see situations in moral terms means, Govrin claims, construing them as *dyads* comprising a powerful, adultlike party (A) and a dependent, childlike one (C). We see moral failure whenever A somehow, through neglect or intentional harming, fails to care for C as we instinctively expect; "This expectation stands behind every person's moral judgment in every culture" (p. xii). We see human relationships in terms of this A→C schema (p. 91 ff.) even where no actual children are involved, and frame interactions between groups or institutional actors analogously, depending on "the asymmetry of power between the parties" (p. xi). While people may view an offender with a childlike appearance more leniently (p. 117), often the action performed alone determines who is seen as A or C. If X murdered Y, "this will lead to X being construed as A and Y as C, even though X can be physically weaker than Y, poorer than Y or younger than Y" (p. 122).

In a sense, this makes Govrin's account circular: perceiving moral wrongdoing just *is* perceiving an A→C situation, even if there's nothing otherwise childlike about the wronged party's relation to the wrongdoer. This is more than an arbitrary definition, however, insofar as we can make better sense of moral phenomena by connecting our concepts of wrong and responsibility with relations of vulnerability and power, and seeing these in light of our earliest experiences. Standard ethics focuses on moral norms, principles, ideals, etc., that is, on mere abstractions about which it remains unclear why they should *matter* to us at all, or, in sentimentalist accounts, on the feelings of the agent, but seen in abstraction from the relationship to the other person (cf. p. 76-7), whose mattering to us is, after all, the heart of moral concern (saying one cares about morality, but not about other people makes no sense). Govrin, by contrast, focuses precisely on the understanding of "the relationship between two people" (p. 200) and on an "unconscious relational knowledge" as the core of morality (p. x) – where 'unconscious' means that our basic moral responses arise in us "without us having brought it about", and that we can "neither stop nor change [them]"; "we cannot [for example] condemn the victim and pity the murderer, nor can we decide to feel nothing at all" (p. 105-6).

The strength of Govrin's approach is the focus on the interpersonal relationship and on the inescapable givenness of basic moral concern. Clearly, it provokes many questions and objections, and leaves out pervasive dimensions of moral life. Shame, for example. Prototypically, we feel guilty for having harmed someone, which fits Govrin's A→C schema well, but feel ashamed for our weakness and inability to fulfil expectations (moral or otherwise), perhaps for being too weak to even threaten anyone. In A/C-terms, shame-moralities thus seem focused on *proving that one is not a child* – although one's anxious concern to fulfil collective expectations reveal an infantile dependence on group-approval. As Govrin notes, but without sustained discussion of the implications of this "major and most decisive" fact, this dependence may "supersede any feeling of sympathy towards the [individual] victim[s]" of group-oppression, as when a woman thought to have dishonored her family is mercilessly killed (p. 173). Another serious limitation of Govrin's perspective is that the exclusive focus on caring-for-the-weak leaves no room for the central moral

task and difficulty of daring – *despite* one's shame – to reveal oneself truthfully as oneself to the other. The task here is not to to protect the weak other but to overcome one's own fear of openness.

The most serious problem, however, is that Govrin's own elaboration of his account undermines its apparently radical starting-point. This surfaces in his response to an obvious objection: If we all "speak the same moral language" insofar as we "break down moral situations into the exact same basic constituent parts" (p. 131-2), why is there so much apparent moral disagreement between individuals and cultures? Govrin starts by making the important point that even violent disagreement in moral judgments need not reveal value-differences in any deep sense. Rather, as he suggests (pp. 130-4), people may see the situation in terms of the same dramatic structure but, for whatever reasons, assign the roles of villain (A) and victim (C) to different parties. Thus, in debates over abortion (p. 132), pro-lifers see the fetus as the innocent victim, while pro-choice people see women as victims of oppression by patriarchal society. Here, "although arguments may differ in what is justified, they do not differ in what does the justifying" (p. 160). But now the question becomes how people *can* 'assign' the role of victim and villain to different parties, and whether there's any way to determine which assignment is right. If "constructing a party as A or C is the act of moral judgment itself" (p. 118) and we can arbitrarily decide how to construct any given situation, the result is pernicious relativism. Alas, this is where Govrin's account leads, because of his acceptance of an egocentric-collectivist perspective. "The victim's objective distress, or [their] vulnerable and childlike features, are not", he says, "the decisive factors in recognizing the harmed party as C" (p. 169). Instead, "[t]he weightiest factor … is the emotional engagement between the observer and each of the parties", and this "depends on the like-me criterion: the likeness in terms of ethnicity, religiosity, race and gender between the observer and the two parties" (p. 168).

Govrin acknowledges that this dependence is morally problematic; explicitly invoking Kant, he affirms that "I have to recognize every human being as C not because [they are] like me, but because [their] suffering is, in principle, acknowledged" (p. 187). However, "[t]he psychological mechanism that forms dyads" that he presents as the basis of moral thinking "is itself subjective [and] capricious", and so "cannot ... be relied on" to adhere to this principle (p. 169). Apparently, some kind of *non*-moral thinking allows Govrin to determine that the result of 'moral thinking' is sometimes morally wrong! How? Govrin suggests that we can "avoid the dominance of the like-me criterion" by "somehow detach[ing] our feelings" and formulating "a general [Kantian] moral principle" based on "a 'cold' rational perception of the moral failure" (p. 186-7). This maneuver utilizes our ability to, effectively, "adopt a psychopathic viewpoint" by forming "turned-off dyads", where "we clearly see the victim's distress, we judge it correctly – but we just don't care" (p. 176-7). Only psychopaths, then, can teach us how to turn our concern into genuinely moral concern! On Govrin's view, we actually care only for those who are like us, but we *should* care for everyone impartially. But whence comes the idea that we *should* care for those we don't (supposedly) care for? It certainly cannot derive from the coldly 'rational' psychopathic perspective itself, for the psychopath cares for no-one – but neither can it derive from "the chaotic/subjective/emotional component" of our responses (p. 166). The problem is that on Govrin's view, there's really no such thing as caring for *the other*, there's only collective egoism, concern with oneself and one's own group: "All our understanding of the other, our ability to ... bestow meaning on [their] behavior, are based on [the like-me] criterion" (p. 170-1), and the basic form of moral response is that "the observer feels someone, who has in some sense *become part of him- or herself*, is in danger" (p. 226, emphasis added).

Thus, despite his stated aim of moving beyond the assumptions of “the eighteenth-century controversy between rationalists and sentimentalists” (p. 3), Govrin operates with the standard duality of egocentric (amoral) emotional inclination and purely formal, and so equally amoral, rational principles. This means – and this, in my view, is the basic problem with his account – that, like the tradition, and initial appearances notwithstanding, Govrin fails to provide for a *direct moral caring-for-and-understanding between human beings*. But isn’t it some such caring-understanding that makes us see/feel that there’s a *moral problem* with collective egoism? And wouldn’t a crucial task for ethics be to account for this caring-understanding – and for the tendencies and orientations that contradict it, and that go into making the conflicted, “complex and messy” (p. 165), frequently sinister reality of moral life? In this task, the data from psychological experiments and loose neuroscience-inspired speculations that Govrin summarizes cannot help us. We don’t need new facts but an adequate conceptualization of the elemental facts of moral life that, as Govrin rightly says, “every human being knows in their heart of hearts from a very early age” (p. x). The question is: Why are these facts so hard to acknowledge?

Joel Backström,
University of Helsinki
joel.backstrom@helsinki.fi