2013

Review: Truth and Faith in Ethics

Andrew Brower Latz
Nazarene Theological College, andrewbrowerlatz@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME
AUSTRALIA

Review: Truth and Faith in Ethics

Review: *Truth and Faith in Ethics*

Andrew Brower Latz

Hayden Ramsay (ed.), *Truth and Faith in Ethics*, St. Andrew's Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, John Haldane (ed.), Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2011, 275 pages, RRP $34.90.

This varied and interesting volume publishes several papers from a conference held in 2008 at the University of Notre Dame in Sydney, Australia. The feel of the conference is conveyed in the different length, tone, content and approach of the chapters. This diversity is a real strength, ushering readers into a number of different discussions in different registers (though all within the analytic tradition). The clarity of all the contributions means this book will be accessible to undergraduates and general readers yet still of interest to specialists. The common theme of the chapters is the relationship between truth, ethics and faith (the latter tilted largely towards Catholicism), lending coherence but no sense of a stifling consensus.

Some of the discussions are quite broad, such as those on the possibility of ethics with or without God, or on religion in public life, and the final piece, a publicly broadcasted exchange between John Haldane and Raimond Gaita. Most of the chapters are more fine-grained, however. Richard Hamilton, for instance, seeks to defend the objectivism of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics against challenges from contemporary biology. Edward Howlett Spence's 'neo-Gewirthian' account of the possibility of secular ethics and the unity of the right, the good and the good life, is based on the nature of humans as purposive agents. It contains a useful discussion of the need for faith in reason, distinguishing between epistemological, metaphysical and ethical moments in that need. 'The argument in brief is that even if reason is sufficient for providing objective justification for a secular morality it may not be sufficient in providing adequate motivation for compliance with its normative prescriptions unless people believed, trusted, and respected reason's moral authority. In short, secular morality requires faith in reason' (12).

Two chapters discuss happiness in relation to religion, one of which, by Julia Annas, offers an illuminating comparison of approaches to law in Philo and Plato, and the way Philo integrated religion, virtue and law. Towards the end of her contribution, however, she suggests that virtue ethics, as a secular ethical theory, 'has not been extended to the life structured by religious commitments' (117). This is an extraordinary claim given the work of MacIntyre, Hauerwas and their numerous disciples, including the influence of virtue ethics on the neo-monastic movement. MacIntyre is mentioned elsewhere in the volume, so his absence here is somewhat strange, as is Stanley Hauerwas', who regards himself (if not entirely consistently) as both Catholic and Methodist.

The two pieces by Robert George and John Finnis nicely complement one another. George's essay provides a useful overview of natural law, corrects many misunderstandings, contrasts and

compares it to utilitarian and Kantian theories, and then concludes with an indication of the direction in which he would move in order to integrate natural and positive law. Finnis carries out a more technical discussion of natural law, defending it against Bernard Williams' criticisms of morality and applying it to the 'natural' entities of nation and family.

Two essays have something like a case-study approach. One analyses the internal struggles of soldiers assessing the justice and injustice of the wars they fight and is based on extensive interviews with them. The other, on bioethics, focuses on the work of the Australian Health Ethics Committee, and the importance of reaching consensus amongst diverse views in order to make public policy. This is not, Nicholas Tonti-Filippini remarks, a skill that graduate studies in ethics and philosophy tends to teach students. He words this interesting insight provocatively.

> Instead of seeking resolution, they [graduate students] have learned to identify difference and then to adopt a view, like supporting a football team, and to support that view by decrying other views through seeking to identify error. This is not an approach that is likely to be effective on an ethics committee and would seem in fact to work against the idea of an ethics committee or policy-making being a process by which advice can be developed that is persuasive and broadly acceptable. The skill that they acquired was more suited to tyrants and dictators rather than to a rational democracy (54-55).

Two essays stand out, at least to this reviewer. John Lamont's contribution, a defence of the work of Michel Villey on objective right, perhaps deserves special mention for making Villey, who remains largely untranslated, much more accessible to the English world. Not only does Lamont offer an impressive summary of Villey's views on objective rights, he also seriously challenges the dismissal of Villey by most English speaking scholars. This defence, like Villey's work, occurs along both historical and philosophical axes. Villey's case, as he presents it, is trenchant: that objective rights exist, whereas subjective rights do not, and that the organisation of much of the modern world around subjective rights is damaging. This seems to me an extremely important discussion for legal and political theory (although it neglects to mention Hegel's notion of objective rights). If Lamont is correct, his piece should initiate a serious and substantial conversation.

Christopher Cordner's essay challenges the approach of the volume as a whole by appealing to a Wittgensteinian method (as such, its inclusion is an excellent piece of editing. Sadly, Cordner's essay suffers from a couple of missing footnotes). The basic problem with the standard philosophical approach to ethics, he argues, is in seeking rational grounds and justification for ethical principles and motivation, when this is impossible to find and distracts from the real need of paying attention and being open to the world. He suggests, through a reading of *Gorgias*, that both Plato and Socrates held this approach. He notes that after defeating various bad arguments against the notion that it is better to suffer evil than do it, Socrates does not then offer an argument in favour of his position. Rather, his argumentation was intended to clear the ground for astonishment in the face of the world. This view of philosophy is elaborated through criticising John Haldane's discussion of torture in his book *Faithful Reason*. The problem, as

Cordner sees it, is that Haldane offers rational justifications for the principle or command that one should not torture people. To torture is an attack on (as Haldane puts it) a 'basic human good'. Cordner ripostes:

> This human being in front of you, perhaps naked, certainly defenceless: you mean *that* might not be enough to stay your hand from the thumbscrews, but the discovery that in torturing him you would be "attacking a basic human good" *would* be enough?' That is supposed to be the answer that provides the 'foundation', the 'rational ground', for what is otherwise a 'merely emotional' response in someone who sees the victim and simply cannot torture? But the impossibility of torturing a human being *is* the ground, there is nowhere deeper to go.

Though Cordner does not put it this way, one senses that on his account philosophical argument serves to lead one as far as possible towards open astonishment before the world, but cannot finally deliver that attitude. There is an extra step required to arrive there, something akin to a religious conversion. This resonates with Spence's discussion of the need for faith in reason, and Tonti-Filippini's remarks on the interrelation of faith and reason. There are several such resonances and cross-pollinations, aided by the thematic pairing of chapters. The relations between law, virtue and motivation, for instance, are approached from different angles in various papers. The possibility of basing ethics on definitions of persons finds both supporters and detractors. John Finnis' defence of universally available first principles of practical reason contrasts sharply with Cordner's view of philosophy as reminders about something more ineffable.

Some of these essays provide impressive overviews and introductions to their topics. Others open up new debates. Still others move existing debates forward. What is more, although it is obviously beyond the scope of the volume itself to point this out, several of these views find counterparts amongst discussions in continental philosophy, perhaps particularly amongst the current Hegelian revival. One thinks, for instance, of Terry Pinkard, Robert Pippin and Gillian Rose on the relation of reason and ethics. In sum, a timely collection that should be of benefit to many.