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Review Of "A Theory Of Value And Obligation" By R. Attfield

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usual worth and therefore to *deserve* above-average compensation (chap. 14). This notion of desert rests, in turn, on the underlying belief in the goodness of human autonomy: "Wage systems offer greater rewards for the performance of more serious jobs, and . . . these more serious jobs also guarantee a greater autonomy to the person performing them" (p. 201).

No one interested in either normative theories of justice or empirical studies of justice can fail to profit from this book. It cannot, however, be viewed as a definitive treatment of its own thesis. In the first place, Sołtan puts forward the criteria of difficulty and importance of tasks as a proposal about our underlying conceptions of the good, but he does not really test this proposal, or even show that it is the most plausible interpretation of previous empirical findings. It is at present a research program.

Second (and much more fundamental), Sołtan does not clinch his argument for moral objectivity as persuasiveness in nondistortive circumstances. Not everyone would grant that universal justification extending beyond the bounds of a specific tradition/community is possible. And even those who grant the possibility will want to distinguish between the *form* of universal justifications and their *content*. Different communities offer (and respond to) very different kinds of universal justifications for their rules and practices. It is far from clear that inhabitants of different communities, brought together in nondistortive conditions, will find the same universal propositions equally persuasive. Individuals and groups within a specific community are indeed likely, as Sołtan suggests, to participate in whatever broader conception of the good animates that community. But this seems far less likely to occur when the boundaries dividing communities are crossed. This would not pose a problem if Sołtan intended to define moral objectivity relative to a particular community. But I believe that his aspiration is more ambitious—that is, to define an empirical method (as a substitute for state of nature theories) that can gradually overcome the influence of historical loyalties and "proceed step by step from relativity to universality" (pp. 75–76).

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Attfield, Robin. *A Theory of Value and Obligation.*
London: Croom Helm, 1987. Pp. x+262. $45.00 (cloth).

Moral standing, Attfield contends, belongs to whatever has a good of its own, including (possible) future creatures, plants, and animals; however, not all have equal moral significance. What is deemed to have intrinsic value, and thus supply the underlying reasons for moral action, is pleasure and, more important, "flourishing," said to consist in realizing most of the essential (not necessarily distinctive) capacities of one's species in an integrated and harmonious development. As flourishing is "species-dependent," we must investigate the good of each species. In the case of humans, flourishing consists in exercising capacities for growth and self-motion; perceptual faculties; linguistic communication; practical reasoning; autonomy; self-determination and theoretical reasoning; responsibility for one's beliefs, attitudes and actions; memory and experiencing emotions; meaningful work; self-respect; aesthetic appreciation; forming friendships; self-creation; and evil. The latter concession troubles, but Attfield attempts to limit the damage by

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asserting that his general principle "concerns only the ability to exercise various powers; it does not require that they actually be exercised" (p. 51). A "life worth living," then, will be one in which states, activities, and experiences of intrinsic value of the sort alluded to offset those we have reason to shun.

But how are we to determine priorities among intrinsically valuable characteristics? Attfield maintains that survival needs take precedence over other basic needs as basic needs generally take precedence over nonbasic needs, which, in turn, take precedence over wants and preferences. Basic human needs take precedence over basic needs of creatures with less complex and sophisticated characteristics, but the basic needs of sentient creatures take precedence over the preferences of humans. Moreover, worthwhile lives of future creatures, including humans, count for neither more nor less than the lives of those currently alive. However, only individuals have moral standing: thus, trees have moral standing, but woods and ecological systems generally do not—though they may have instrumental value because they make it possible for individuals to flourish.

This sets the stage for a lengthy defense of a version of "practice-consequentialism," which maintains that acts falling under practices are right or obligatory when and because the practices are optimific. More explicitly, we are not called upon "to consider whether each and every action, whether important or trivial, should become part of a social practice, but rather to adhere to optimific practices which are already in force, and also to comply with ones of whose adoption by the relevant agents there is a significant prospect. . . . Where no optimific practice is either in being or in prospect, agents are urged instead to look to the foreseeable consequences just of their own action" (p. 110). Attfield is acutely sensitive to the familiar charges leveled against consequentialism and shows that his version fares better than most with respect to integrity, supererogation, autonomy, negative responsibility, and justice. His discussion of these objections is thoughtful, though breaks little new ground, except for his rebuttal of Derek Parfit's criticism that consequentialism leads to advocacy of overpopulation.

Attfield rounds out his case with an analysis of the foundations of moral knowledge intended to rebut skeptical claims that we lack the resources to transcend emotivism, subjectivism, and relativism. He develops his cognitive, naturalistic metaethic within a framework set by Joel Kupperman, R. M. Hare, and Renford Bambrough. His argument, though always plausible, is too cursory to be convincing. For instance, he briefly rehearses and endorses several of Bambrough's criticisms of skepticism without considering in depth and detail the kinds of objections that can and have been brought against the entire approach.

Indeed, Attfield's arguments for each central thesis—that some things have intrinsic value, that intrinsic value may be located independently of specifically moral criteria, that we can draw sufficiently sharp distinctions between basic needs, nonbasic needs, and wants, that what ought to be done consists in optimizing value primarily through practices, and that the concepts of morality can be shown to be analytically derived from a naturalistic base—fails to grapple in depth and detail with counterarguments. Here, for instance, is Attfield's central "knock-down" argument for the thesis that something must have intrinsic value: "If nothing is of intrinsic value, then nothing is of value at all. For if anything is of instrumental value, there must be something else which confers value upon it; and though this too could be of instrumental value, there could not be an infinite series of items of instrumental value, each dependent for its value on the others. For then there would be nothing to tie their value to any of the items in the

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series, and all would be valueless. Thus either there is something of intrinsic value, or everything is valueless" (p. 30). So much for those, like Dewey, who fully appreciated this "proof" but developed philosophically sophisticated positions designed to avoid its conclusion.

Nor does Attfield give sufficient justification for what is perhaps his most distinctive claim: namely, that plants and animals have moral standing because they have a good of their own. Bentham restricted the moral domain to those creatures who could suffer. But Attfield worries that such constraints sets up "an elitism of the sentient" and "another equally irrelevant limit" to the claims of morality (p. 16). Such excesses follow from his reliance on the ordinary moral judgments of most reflective people—and their extension by analogy and presupposition. Again, not enough attention is paid to the difficulties inherent in this method, especially as strained in such arguments as this: "If trees lack moral standing it is very difficult to account for several intuitions which most people would endorse. Most people, for example, would hold that it would be wrong for the last human being, even if she were also the last sentient creature, deliberately to cut down a tree, if no benefit could be derived from doing so; but this judgement strongly suggests that the tree itself is of independent value" (p. 17).

But I don't wish to end on a negative note, for whatever its deficiencies, Attfield's book provides challenging theses gracefully presented, earnestly argued, and distinctively molded into a coherent, if challengeable, theory of morality.

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Lomasky, Loren E. *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Pp. ix+283. $24.95 (cloth).

Loren Lomasky's title tells us to expect a theory of rights. His acknowledgments to the Reason Foundation and the Liberty Fund tell us to expect a theory with a libertarian flavor. We are not disappointed; for the most part *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community* defends Nozickian orthodoxy concerning individual rights, distributive justice, and the minimal state.

Committed libertarians will therefore find much here to their liking. But the book is primarily intended not to preach to the faithful but to convert the rest of us. Those who found Nozick entertaining but unconvincing might profit from trying Lomasky. Aside from occasional lapses into cuteness (it seems to be a libertarian disease), his style is engaging, accessible, and often vivid. Furthermore, aside from occasional lapses into declamation or innuendo, his defense of his own convictions is appealingly modest and his treatment of contrary views respectful and fair-minded.

Quite the most valuable feature of this book is that, in place of Nozick's parenthetical questions and undefended assumptions, it actually sets out to make a systematic case in favor of a libertarian rights theory. Although the distinction is not highlighted, this case has both an analytic and a substantive side. On Lomasky's favored conception, rights impose constraints on the pursuit of goals by defining protected spheres within which individuals have control over central aspects of their lives. Although this is a plausible picture of the normative function of rights, it is not a uniquely libertarian one; socialists can accept it just as readily.

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