

Philosophy vs ethics: How theory interacts with messy reality when it comes to articulating good behaviour

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James Griffin

WHAT CAN PHILOSOPHY CONTRIBUTE TO ETHICS?

168pp. Oxford University Press. 25 [pounds sterling] (US \$65).

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Richard Joyce

ESSAYS IN MORAL SKEPTICISM

288pp. Oxford University Press. 45 [pounds sterling] (US \$74).

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Webb Keane

ETHICAL LIFE

Its natural and social histories

289pp. Princeton University Press. 24.95 [pounds sterling] (US \$29.95).

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That can philosophy contribute to ethics?", asks James Griffin in a challenge to some of the deepest assumptions of contemporary philosophy. The very question might come as a shock to those used to thinking of ethics simply as a subfield of philosophy. But Griffin reminds us that ethics conceived of as thinking how we should live--is "something that appears early in the life of a culture", and does not wait on philosophers to provide it with foundations and the trappings of a theoretical science. Griffin argues that this obsession with contorting the messy expanse of ethical life into a neat theoretical mould distorts our understanding.

Philosophers have tried to reduce all of ethics to a small number of simple rules or principles, but they have missed the fact that the vital constraints on ethics are practical, not theoretical. Ethics cannot be blind to the limits of our capacities --not just what we can physically achieve, but also what we can

calculate, and what we can be motivated to do. Neat, abstract theories like Utilitarianism, which tells us to maximize the well-being of all people, demand calculations of future consequences of actions that we cannot perform, and a degree of impartiality in our motivations we do not have, and indeed could not have, without losing the attachments and commitments that make our lives worthwhile.

In any case, there is little chance of finding a simple, unified foundation for ethics. Purportedly foundational principles, like the claim that people are fundamentally equal, or Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative, are too abstract to provide the guidance we need; while supposedly universal principles, like the prohibition on taking innocent life, all seem to admit of plausible exceptions. So like Bernard Williams, to whose work the current volume is both a tribute and a response, Griffin concludes that philosophers should abandon the search for systematic, all-encompassing "ethical theories", in place of more limited, local forms of moral criticism and conceptual explication.

Griffin draws many of his conclusions from the well-known claim that "ought implies can" --that is, you are never morally obliged to do what you cannot actually do. Although the formula is familiar, Griffin extracts far more from it than most philosophers do. Kant is the most famous proponent of the claim, and yet stands as one of Griffin's targets, as a philosopher who attempts to make ethics simple and systematic, but merely leaves empty and impractical abstraction. Griffin's divergence stems from his extremely stringent interpretation of the principle. He excludes from the scope of ethical obligation not just the literally impossible, but also anything that is merely beyond the abilities of the normal person. Ethics cannot tell us to do what would require the impartiality of saints or the foresight of seers.

This interpretation is a bold one, so it is regrettable that Griffin has no better argument than the rather tired philosopher's appeal to language and meaning. "Ought implies can", in Griffin's specialized sense, is a "lexicographical judgement"--that's to say, it is a judgement about words. But this is contentious even as stated, and inconclusive as an ethical argument. Many ethical codes demand of us more than the ordinary person is capable of, and so it is doubtful that the very concept of obligation rules this out. Even if it did, the many philosophers who see the primary job of ethics as spelling out ideal codes of conduct would not thereby be silenced. For there surely are moral concepts that are not thus bounded by the limitations of the average agent, and ethicists interested in ideals can simply focus on them.

A better argument would appeal to practicalities all the way down. Ethics should concern itself with what falls within the limits of normal human capacity because the purpose of ethics is to guide conduct. Ethics, as philosophers since Aristotle have acknowledged, belongs to the practical, not the theoretical, disciplines. If ethics retreats to a fantasy world, providing dictates that could guide only the infinitely rational, perfectly impartial, all-knowing agent, then it loses its interest and its value to our societies. Moral philosophy is then, in the Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey's words, nothing more than "a sentimental indulgence for the few".

Griffin is right to say that philosophers have been unduly obsessed with trying to get normative ethics--that is, our account of what is good, right and admirable--to resemble a systematic theoretical science. So if the key constraints on ethics are practical ones, one would expect to gain significant insight from empirical investigations into the underpinnings of ethical life and thought: from psychology, anthropology and natural history. Yet Griffin's attack on "systematising" in ethics tends to spill over into these fields too. He accuses the Empiricists David Hume and Adam Smith of a "Newtonising" reductionism, but Hume and Smith are arguably more interested in understanding the moral psychology and philosophical anthropology of the human beings who engage in ethical life than in promulgating some prescriptive account of right and wrong. And Griffin dismisses the "Darwinising" turn in recent ethical theory, because he judges its conclusions either implausible or irrelevant to ethics.

One philosopher who has long taken evolutionary theory seriously is Richard Joyce. *Essays in Moral Skepticism* is a collection of Joyce's recent papers, and as such offers more to the specialist interested

in contemporary scholarly debates where Joyce is a major figure, than to the general reader, who might do better to look to his previous book-length works.

Joyce is, by his own admission, attracted to a sort of mischievous iconoclasm. The present collection is devoted to a group of extreme positions that he collectively dubs "moral skepticism". According to him, all our moral beliefs are not only epistemically unjustified--we have no good reason to hold them--but they are also literally false. However, he argues that we have self-interested reasons to retain our moralizing practices as a kind of useful fiction. The first claim he derives from "moral nativism"--the claim that morality is innate in humans, as an evolutionary adaptation. This, he argues, "debunks" our ethical beliefs: evolution shows that we would believe exactly the same things whether or not they were true. And our moral judgements presuppose the existence of some objective source of overriding "practical authority" independent of human desire or convention, which could lend its "oomph" to the dictates of morality. Since there is no such source of authority, we should treat the claims of morality as atheists treat those of theology as all literally false.

Although Joyce enjoys espousing radical positions, he is at his best when he moderates his tone. In one of the most interesting contributions in the volume, he argues that an acceptable response to his arguments would be to continue with the practice of morality, and simply reject the need for the sort of foundation he is demanding. Elsewhere, he suggests that moral nativism might actually be impossible to prove--or disprove. In the end, it may be that he chooses extreme positions more as a matter of temperament --in protest against philosophical complacency --than because he thinks these are the only defensible conclusions.

Anyone interested in these questions would learn much from the anthropologist Webb Keane's outstanding *Ethical Life: Its natural and social histories*, a book that masterfully interweaves insights from philosophy and the natural and social sciences. The problem with past attempts to understand ethics in terms of psychology, neuroscience, or natural history is not that empirical investigations have nothing to tell us about ethical matters. Rather, the problem lies in failing to take enough empirical perspectives into account. Many anthropologists, historians and other social scientists have dismissed natural scientific research in ethics, seeing ethical life as something determined only by social and cultural factors, but their objections are only half right. The appeal to natural histories is flawed only when it assumes, as nativists often do, that ethics is determined by biological or psychological adaptations. But nothing on its own determines moral life. Rather, Keane argues that the central concept of empirical research in ethics should be that of an "affordance" --an enabling factor that allows a certain kind of ethical life to emerge, without determining that it will, or how it will take shape.

These affordances are to be found in many places: in universal features of human psychology, in contingent and variable specificities of cultural and social life, and, as Keane constantly stresses, in the realm of interpersonal interaction, which connects these two domains. Ethical life grows from psychological capacities for empathy and emotion, the necessities for turn-taking and trust in conversation, and local social traditions and practices. None of these alone suffices for ethics, or determines its emergence.

Some psychologists have played down the significance of ethical thinking, claiming that ethical justifications are usually just post-hoc rationalizations, and that our notions of virtue and vice presuppose that people have settled characters, whereas in truth their actions are more determined by situation. But, as Keane points out, our ethical ideas shape cultural conditions, which in turn constrain what actions are even candidates for rationalization, and provide a stable situational backdrop in which it can make sense to talk of character. Both individual psychology and social reality provide the stage for ethics, and are transformed in turn by it.

This notion of an affordance--deriving from the psychologist J.J. Gibson--shows the limitation of Joyce's arguments for nativism. Joyce claims that moral judgements must be innate, because none of the psychological universals on which anti-nativists try to base ethics, like the capacities for empathy and anger, suffices for full-blown moral thinking. Keane accepts this, but without having to appeal to

innate moral judgements. It is cultural conditions, not innate adaptations, that explain why some instances of empathy can reach beyond in-groups, and why some instances of anger amount to moral outrage. What is innate are the affordances for, not the determinants of, moral thinking.

Keane also helps to defuse Joyce's worry that ethics lacks an objective source of practical authority. "Objectification" is an endemic feature of moral life: we need to see ethical standards as settled and "out there" to prepare ourselves for the scrutiny of a generic other. But it takes many forms. Norms may be seen as rooted in the identity of the tribe, the dictates of the divine, or the goals of the Communist revolution. But when communities reject some supposed foundation of morality, they don't abandon morality, but simply search for new ground on which to build. The rejection of an objective, universal source of authority may undermine a certain line of post-Christian, post-Kantian philosophical ethics. Yet, as Griffin would agree, ethical life is too heterogeneous to believe that it is reliant on any one foundation.

This heterogeneity runs not just between, but within ethical practices. Ethics arises in agents who endlessly adopt a succession of distinct perspectives: the first-personal individual concern, the second-person stance of mutual engagement and the third-person perspective of the detached onlooker. We shouldn't expect to gain any satisfactory account of ethical life by privileging just one perspective. This fact explains a common thread that runs through both Joyce's and Griffin's work. Joyce rejects morality, but thinks we should hold onto a semblance of moral life for self-interested reasons. But why assume that the demands of self-interest have any more--or less--secure foundation than those of "other-interest"? We frequently flout self-interest for the sake of others. The real question is how to stretch other-regarding impulses so that they transcend mere whim. James Griffin worries about how far we can renounce our partial commitments and projects for the sake of the greater good. But he acknowledges that most of us recognize that our private commitments don't grant us infinite defence from ethical scrutiny, and even ordinary individuals are sometimes capable of great impartiality. If Webb Keane is right, then the tension between individual inclinations and interpersonal demands, and between partial and impartial moral requirements, is likely to remain an irresolvable feature of ethical life. We shouldn't expect a neat ethical solution for these tensions, because it is in the context of such tensions that ethical thought arises in the first place.

Caption: "The Hero", 2001, by Marina Abramovic; from *Terrains of the Body: Photography from the National Museum of Women in the Arts*, Whitechapel Gallery, London January 18-April 16, 2017



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