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Book Review

Moral Disagreements: Classic and Contemporary Readings, Christopher W. Gowans, ed., London: Routledge, 2000. xii + 241 + bibliography, index. \$25.99 US, \$38.99 Canada (paperback). ISBN 0-415-21712-1.

According to Christopher W. Gowans, moral disagreements “resist rational resolution” and are pervasive in the modern world (viii). They are everywhere; they affect every aspect of our daily lives—personal and professional, political and social. The purpose of *Moral Disagreements: Classic and Contemporary Readings* is to give a representative sample of the “theoretical questions of the objectivity of morality” and simultaneously address the “practical questions about how we should think and act with respect to those with whom we disagree” on moral issues (viii). Yet, because moral disagreements are so pervasive, Gowans does not want only academics to understand and study the issues surrounding moral disagreements. Rather, he wants to make these ideas, issues, and debates accessible to a larger audience. Thus, the collection of essays in this anthology not only address moral disagreements from a theoretical perspective, but they also discuss the topic in an academically rigorous and accessible manner.

Gowans has created not only an anthology of works for use by philosophy and anthropology professors in their classes, but also for professors who teach courses that address such topics as ethics, history, feminist theory, and anthropology. To help professors find logical groupings of those essays, Gowans also makes suggestions as to which readings could be grouped together and follow each other coherently. Yet, while Gowans makes suggestions, his combinations do not preclude other combinations professors would find useful in teaching philosophy, ethics, anthropology, and perhaps even classes addressing moral aspects of legal issues. In order to increase the accessibility of the works, Gowans also edited the chapters for maximum inclusivity, as well as to help make their main point, their relevance, and their contribution to the moral disagreement debate more clear, concise and understandable for students. Because the works have been edited for maximum clarity, the readers are able to see that regardless of when the essays were composed, they are useful as a lens through which we can examine modern society and address current issues. Gowans arranged the chapters in such a way that leads to a dialogue being set up between the readings. This dialogue encourages an interdisciplinary, engaging discussion among the chapters. He put many of these little-known texts into a format to help those who normally would not feel comfortable delving into such works.

Another way Gowans makes this anthology as a whole accessible is in the structuring of his Introduction. Gowans’ aim in the Introduction to *Moral Disagreements* is four-fold: to provide “useful background for various aspects of debates about moral disagreements,” to “give a guide to

relevant literature,” to “supply a framework for evaluating different contributions to these debates,” and raise “fundamental questions about the main positions taken” (ix). In it, he raises many questions regarding morality and its place in our daily lives – both on a personal and global scale. He asks challenging and difficult questions which he does not attempt to answer. Rather, he asks them in order to show how broad, complicated, and challenging the moral disagreements issue is. In asking questions such as: Are “homosexual relations morally wrong?;” “Was the Buddha correct in teaching that it is wrong to kill even animals?;” “Are undemocratic forms of government ever morally justified?;” and “Is there a single correct moral” theory?, Gowans helps readers see how many various viewpoints and shades of gray are involved in discussing moral disagreements.

Thus, Gowans does not use his Introduction merely to describe the work as a whole, and each chapter specifically, but to encourage more discussion and debate, as well as help “encourage reflection by suggesting issues that need to be confronted” (ix). Instructors may find the Introduction useful in helping their students see the works as part of a larger theoretical and practical debate regarding morality, possibly leading to further questioning, debate, discussion, and soul-searching. The explanation of different terms, theoretical traditions, and ideas that are part of the moral disagreement debate also may lead to a broader and deeper understanding of how the issues raised in each chapter take place in a larger context. Those terms are not merely defined, but Gowans also explains how these terms and concepts are part of a broader knowledge base and are related and intertwined.

Part I of *Moral Disagreements*, “The Historical Debate,” addresses the Western philosophical tradition’s treatment of the moral disagreement debate. The first chapter is “Outlines of Scepticism” by Sextus Empiricus. In this work, Sextus explains Pyrrhonian skepticism, the philosophical standpoint from which one is skeptical regarding all matters, claiming to not believe in anything. This complete skepticism is produced by the “complete suspension of belief produced by the realization... that for every belief there is as much to be said for it as against it” (10).

Thomas Aquinas’ essay, “Natural Law and Moral Disagreements” is the next essay in Part I. Aquinas gives the foundational structure of moral theory and responds to the disagreement challenge to moral objectivity from an objectivist perspective. Michel de Montaigne’s “Renaissance Skepticism” follows Aquinas’ chapter. In this article, Montaigne critiques moral objectivism, explaining that we cannot justify our beliefs because our world is so unstable that we are not able to understand anything and have no stable ground with which to justify those beliefs.

The fourth chapter in Part I is “A Dialogue” by David Hume. Hume denies that there is “a rational foundation to morality,” yet, conversely, he writes that there is a universal moral principle that can be “accepted by and applied to all persons” (12). Hume responds to the contradiction of a universal moral principle and moral disagreements by explaining that there are more agreements than we think, and that disagreements can be explained as part of “universal basic principles” (12).

Hume’s account is followed by Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in which he harshly questions philosophers who try to “justify morality rationally” (12). According to Nietzsche, philosophers who do so are giving in to the morality of their particular era, giving in to trends. As he suggests, instead of jumping on a morality bandwagon, we should study and compare various moralities, such as the two types he suggests, master morality and slave morality.

“Yanomamo: The Last Days of Eden” by Napoleon A. Chagnon begins Part II, “Some Voices from Anthropology.” Chagnon’s essay is an account of the way we find human diversity in what we classify as “primitive” cultures. Chagnon describes the Yanomamo people of the Amazon basin of Venezuela and Brazil, who have had little contact with the rest of the world. According to Gowans, Chagnon’s essay also illustrates the prominent role relativism plays in the interpretation of anthropological data.

Following Chagnon’s anthropological study is Richard A. Shweder’s “The Astonishment of Anthropology,” in which he proposes an “anthropological relativism” that “emphasizes moral diversity, lack of moral objectivity, and tolerance” (8). According to Shweder’s theory of anthropological relativism, different groups are equally justified in a moral difference of opinion. “Human Rights, Human Difference: Anthropology’s Contribution to an Emancipatory Cultural Politics” by Terence Turner follows Shweder’s essay. Turner differs from Shweder in that he believes there should be “transcultural” principles of justice, which would be combinations of appreciating diversity and moral objectivity, allowing people to be different, provided they allow others to be different. Thus, rather than encouraging a form of moral relativism, Turner writes there should be some form of universal principle of morality and justice.

Part III, “Challenges to Moral Objectivity,” is a collection of three essays that make disagreement arguments against moral objectivity. The purpose of this section is to explain why disagreement arguments “are plausible and what is required to properly evaluate them” (15). Part III begins with J. L. Mackie’s “The Argument from Relativity.” As Mackie explains, people disagree about moral codes and adhere to certain codes because of the way they live, not the other way around. Moral codes reflect life, not because they express our objective perceptions of the world, but vice versa. Mackie then explains that we claim our moral codes are objectively valid based not on moral codes, but on “basic principles” found in all societies (128).

Following Mackie’s short essay is Bernard Williams’ “Knowledge, Science, Convergence.” In this essay, Williams argues that while a certain society believes it has a firm grasp on what a certain moral concept means, societies do not know that their embodiment of a moral concept is better or more accurate than another society’s, thus leading to moral disagreements among societies. The final essay in Part III is David B. Wong’s “Moral Relativity and Tolerance.” In his essay, Wong defends the idea that “moral relativism” is the “most popular nonobjectivist response to moral disagreements” (26).

In contrast to Part III, the purpose of Part IV, “Defenses of Moral Objectivity,” is to defend moral objectivity and to illustrate some of the theoretical problems inherent in the moral objectivity perspective. First, David Brink argues that moral realists need to challenge the idea that if there is moral disagreement, we should assume there are no moral facts or moral truths, or what Brink calls moral nihilism. Additionally, according to Brink, we should not expect or require that anyone hold fast to all moral truths throughout our lives. We should allow people’s morals to evolve. For Brink, moral nihilism is not the best explanation of moral disagreement. Rather, moral realists need to acknowledge that moral disputes usually are resolvable.

Following Brink’s essay is Martha Nussbaum’s “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach.” According to Nussbaum’s objectivist approach, moral knowledge is based on “a detailed empirical understanding of human nature” (29). In the essay, Nussbaum defends Aristotle’s view that an

objective account of human good exists by examining different realms of daily human experience that are universal and in which most people must participate. Unlike Nussbaum, Alan Gerwith, in “Is Cultural Pluralism Relevant to Moral Knowledge?,” writes of moral knowledge as following from “the presuppositions of our nature as rational agents” (29). As Gerwith explains, all “actual or prospective” agents must accept that they have the right to “freedom and well being” and that these rights are fundamental in fulfilling her or his purpose (30).

In Part V, Gowans’ goal is to show the reader the “New Directions” we can take in debating the issue of moral disagreements. Part V begins with Isaiah Berlin’s “The Pursuit of the Ideal.” Berlin’s chapter is one of the two which Gowans labels as “providing grounds for mixed positions” (31). In his chapter, Berlin defends moral objectivity, while simultaneously examining the disagreements studied by nonobjectivists. Berlin takes a flexible position in his defense of moral objectivity. He acknowledges common morals, while at the same time explaining that these values conflict, contradict, and are incompatible.

The next chapter, Alasdair MacIntyre’s “The Rationality of Traditions,” is the second chapter which takes a mixture of positions. MacIntyre argues that certain moral truths can be understood in a “straightforward, nonrelative” manner (32). Yet, the author also stresses that we must see that these moral truths to which we pledge allegiance are part of a historical-cultural context. Also addressed is MacIntyre’s view that it is possible for two conflicting groups to understand the other’s moral truths, and at the same time acknowledge that one set of truths is better or more rational.

In “Political Liberalism and the Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” John Rawls suggests that while two groups may have conflicting sets of moral truths, they can reach a consensus in which “justice is fairness” (36). According to Rawls, when an overlapping consensus is reached, while each group has a different moral ground, each group accepts common principles. The final chapter in the book is Uma Narayan’s “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Criticism of Cultural Essentialism.” In this chapter, Narayan argues that focusing on difference is as detrimental as making generalizations because often the difference approach accepts without question the values of women without looking at the way in which women’s local cultures are socially and politically defined in a way that does not benefit women. According to Narayan, relativism is not beneficial for feminism because it emphasizes the differences between women and men. Instead, we should, Narayan suggests, realize that many different feminist values are useful, but should not be applied to all cultural contexts in the same uniform way.

Many of the essays in this collection would be useful in upper-level undergraduate or graduate philosophy, anthropology, or ethics courses. In particular, the essays by Montaigne, Aquinas, Hume, and Nietzsche could be used in courses that address Western philosophical traditions such as skepticism, natural law, and moral objectivity. Other essays including Nussbaum’s and Aquinas’ could be used to show students how philosophical traditions can be used to study and interpret modern issues. Essays in “Some Voices From Anthropology,” particularly Turner’s and Shweder’s could be useful in courses addressing such anthropological traditions such as the international human rights movement and anthropological relativism. Many essays could be used in anthropology courses to show the importance of morals in the examination of anthropological phenomena.

Other essays, such as Narayan’s could be used in Women’s Studies or Feminist Theory courses. She addresses the problems inherent in using the difference theory, a recurring debate in feminist

theory. She also explains why we should avoid applying the same feminist values to all women in all cultures, across history. Chagnon's essay, which addresses the violence against women by men in the Yanomamo tribe, also could be used as a starting point from which a class could discuss violence against women, not only in Western culture, but in other, "primitive," cultures.

Each essay in this collection offers original and interesting insight into the debate surrounding the issue of moral disagreements. While such philosophical theories as moral objectivism, non-relativism, and skepticism are used to examine the moral disagreement issue, contemporary perspectives such as feminist theory and an emphasis on socio-historical contexts, are also used to examine aspects of the moral disagreements debate. Each author brings her or his own unique academic perspective to the essays, exploring familiar ideas in new ways, while helping the reader see the prevalence of moral disagreements in our modern culture.

In this anthology, Gowans has more than accomplished his goal of creating an accessible, easily understandable collection of works that helps readers of all levels better understand the complicated issue of moral disagreements. With this collection, Gowans truly does bring a "diverse array of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers into dialogue with one another as well as with both historical philosophical figures and contemporary anthropologists" (viii). From Gowans' Preface and Introduction to Narayan's feminist critique of cultural essentialism, the essays in this collection address the topic of moral disagreements from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The contributors are faithful to their disciplines' theoretical traditions, discussing complicated issues within philosophy and anthropology, while helping those outside of the disciplines see the importance of examining the way moral disagreements are part of our everyday lives.

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