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Book Review

Human Happiness and Morality: A Brief Introduction to Ethics, Robert Almeder. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000. 212 pp.

Robert Almeder seeks to provide “a reasonably brief introduction to a fairly broad discussion of the major issues, problems, and controversies in the area of ethics,” and an argument for neo-Stoic ethics. This book could serve quite usefully as a text in an advanced undergraduate or graduate ethics survey course.

This book is probably too concise and, in spots, too technical for the non-specialist. On the other hand, Almeder’s survey is too brief to provide much that is new to professional ethicists. The entire discussion of utilitarianism, for example, is confined to a scant thirteen pages; egoism gets only seven. Considered as a survey, its useful audience is the advanced student of ethics.

As a survey of contemporary ethical theory, this book is reasonably successful. Inevitably, the partisan of any of the rival views discussed will consider the Almeder’s presentation at least one argument short of an adequate treatment, but Almeder covers the major arguments for and against each view.

There are some unfortunate misstatements of historical thinkers’ views. Almeder’s presentation of Kant, for example, treats the First Formulation as a synonym for the Golden Rule. Such errors, however, do not seriously affect the main line of Almeder’s argument, which is to consider and reject the meta-ethical foundations of the major traditions of ethical thought.

Almeder’s presentation of his own views presents more for the specialist to chew on. His Stoicism grows out of his rejection of egoistic objectivism. (Presuming that happiness is the ultimate goal for any objectivist morality, he defines objectivism as the view that “certain specific goals *must* be satisfied by moral agents if they are to achieve human happiness” (173). This, despite the fact that Kantian morality, which Almeder considers a form of objectivism, is expressly based on the rejection of any link between happiness and morality. Utilitarianism, with its “greatest happiness of the greatest number” principle, must reject the attempt to ground moral obligations on the agent’s own happiness.)

Almeder sees the attraction of objectivism. If it were true that ethical principles were the sole means by which anyone anywhere might gain genuine happiness, the question “why should I be moral?” would answer itself. However, he considers such a view refuted by the fact that most people, no matter how immoral they appear to be, in fact consider themselves happy.

There is no objective way to show that some goals are better or more desirable than others. We may not like Genet's decision to become the best criminal in the history of France, just as we may not like the fact that he achieved great satisfaction in his judgment that his goal was satisfied and worth satisfying.... But we have no way of *showing* that he was not happy, because we have no way of showing just what the right goals are.... (178)

As long as Genet himself considers his goals worthwhile, we must consider him happy. If so, then any claim that morality is the only road to happiness must be rejected.

Central to this argument is the search for an ethical starting-point, an ultimate goal or set of goals, that will be *uncontroversial*. The problem with objectivism, ultimately, is that "fundamentally different intuitions lay at the root of each traditionally objectivist view about moral values, and our long-standing inability to adjudicate such differences by appealing to common intuitions that we all might somehow share makes it decidedly difficult to argue comfortably for objective moral values...." (77)

To insist that one's ethics be grounded in some uncontroversial claim, though, begs the question against objectivism. Surely, if ethics has any teeth at all it must provide some guidance: there must be some acts which one might be capable of and, under certain circumstances motivated to do, but ought not do. There will of necessity be some ends, perhaps even some which are understandable in their way, that are nevertheless immoral if put into action. Assuming that the agent acting on such ends does not openly disavow the field of morality, there is thus going to be disagreement on basic goals. The objectivist is committed to the proposition that some ultimate ends (held and defended though they may be) are nevertheless wrong.

Objectivism certainly requires a kind of universality, a universality of application: anyone of normal human faculties, in ordinary circumstances, will be covered by an objective principle. But it does not require universal agreement, any more than the objectivity of the spherical earth is invalidated by the existence of a Flat Earth Society.

Almeder does not believe that his rejection of objectivism must be fatal to the project of ethics. In the place of strict objectivism, he proposes a kind of neo-Stoical prudential empiricism, an ethics "in which one follows generally tried and true rules for promoting human happiness in a society of laws" (19). Although it cannot be shown that moral rules inevitably lead to happiness, nor that their violation necessarily leads to unhappiness,

bypassing the issue of unavoidably bad luck, for most people who not only seek happiness but also view the avoidance of unnecessary pain and suffering as a means to that end, these recommendations are more likely to be successful, if adopted, simply because they have worked for most people in the past. (194)

This claim is equivocal. Almeder might mean that everyone who values happiness will find following the principles of (Stoical) morality the best means to achieve it. He might be arguing, in other words, that the disjunct between morality and happiness, immorality and unhappiness, is entirely explained by the operations of luck — and thus that the only rational strategy for the person desiring happiness is to be moral. In that case, however, Almeder would be adopting merely a

slightly less unsubtle form of the very objectivism he rejects.

If, however, we are to take seriously his claim that there is no way to prove or disprove the legitimacy of ultimate goals, he seems to be making the stronger, pluralistic claim that different ultimate goals are in fact rational means to pursue happiness. If so, then Genet can, while admitting that our morality is “right for us,” claim to be a different sort, whose happiness is best pursued by means we consider immoral.

This suggests that the challenge of relativism and nihilism must be met by doing what Almeder considers impossible: bridging the “is”-“ought” gap.

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