

Book Reviews

Ethics and Practical Reason

Edited by Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut

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One of the most pressing problems in contemporary moral theory is that of providing a correct account of the relationship between an agent's having a normative reason to act (what she ought to do) and an agent's being motivated to act (what she actually does). Broadly speaking, there are three rival accounts of this relationship on offer. Neo-Humeans (e.g. Michael Smith, Stephen Darwall, Bernard Williams) argue that an agent has a normative reason to act if and only if so doing would satisfy some desire of the agent; consequently, their task is to show that there is an internal relation between an agent's having a normative reason to act and an agent's having a desire to act. Kantians (e.g. Christine Korsgaard, Thomas Nagel) argue that any agent who has a normative reason to act, and who is practically rational (i.e. not suffering from some debilitating form of practical irrationality, such as weakness of will or depression), will act; consequently, their task is to show that normative reasons always have overriding authority and that it is always irrational not to act upon them. Neo-Aristotelians (e.g. John McDowell, Philippa Foot, David Brink) argue that normative reasons for action are derived from facts about human well-being, and that an agent will be motivated to act provided that she has been habituated into having desires, guided by reason, to act for her own well-being; consequently, their task is to show how normative reasons can be derived from facts about human well-being and whether it is always in an agent's best interest to act morally.

All of the thirteen original essays in this collection, the majority of which were presented at the Ethics and Practical Reason Conference held by the Department of Moral Philosophy at the University of St Andrews in March 1995, are devoted to some aspect of the problem of practical reason, and most of them side with one of the three accounts described above. James Dreier defends the neo-Humean position that 'the only ultimate sort of reasons are instrumental reasons' (p. 96), although he does so by arguing that fellow neo-Humeans are wrong to claim that there are no categorical imperatives, since there is *one* categorical imperative, namely, the means/end principle of instrumental reason: 'If you desire to ¥, and believe that by ø-ing you will ¥, then you ought to ø' (p. 93). His defence of the categorical nature of this principle is similar both to Peter Railton's argument that there cannot be a purely hypothetical account of why we must conform to certain forms of practical reason, and to David Velleman's argument (against David Gauthier) that our reasons for favouring certain principles of practical reasoning over others cannot themselves be practical. Meanwhile Michael Smith argues, with his customary optimism, that the neo-Humean dispositional theory of value can provide a perfectly satisfactory account of human freedom and responsibility.

Christine Korsgaard argues against Dreier and other neo-Humeans that they are unable to provide an account of the normativity of the instrumental principle: 'if you hold that the instrumental principle is the *only* principle of practical rationality, you cannot also hold that desiring something is a *reason* for pursuing it' (p. 223). Since the neo-Humean position rules out the possibility of practical reason determining which ends ought to be pursued, it follows that an agent's ends are wholly determined by her desires. However, this means that the instrumental principle must be reduced to something like: If you desire to Ψ , and believe that by ϕ -ing you will Ψ , then you are *going* to ϕ . The principle cannot advocate that one *ought* to ϕ on the basis of having a *desire* to Ψ , since this would be to derive an *ought* from an *is*. The only way to avoid this error, and to derive a reason for acting from the principle, is to construe it as follows: If you have reason to Ψ , and believe that by ϕ -ing you will Ψ , then you have reason to ϕ . But this means that neo-Humeanism must be rejected, and that the instrumental principle must be supplemented by another principle of practical reason, one that determines which ends ought to be pursued. Korsgaard ultimately argues that the principle of practical reason required to support the normativity of the instrumental principle is that 'the adoption of an end is conceived as the person's own free act' (p. 234).

Korsgaard's Kantian constructivism – the thesis that an action is good insofar as it is the object of free rational choice – is in turn attacked by Berys Gaut in an essay which seeks to undermine key elements of Kantian ethics in favour of a neo-Aristotelian position. Gaut first undermines the hoary article of faith that the only thing which is good without qualification is a good will (something which would have us believe that there is nothing admirable in a clever thief), advocating in its stead a plurality of unconditional goods. He then argues that Kantian constructivism gets the relationship between value and rationality backwards: 'The proper criterion for being rational here is the ability to recognise what it is good to do' (p. 178), as opposed to its being good to do whatever it is rational to do. Gaut argues that it is a mistake to identify goodness with being the object of free rational choice, since the notion of goodness is teleological and 'for living beings the teleology is biologically categorised, linked to what fulfils the needs or advances the interests of a living being – and not all living beings are rational (p. 178). Joseph Raz, in an essay entitled 'The Amoralist' which does not quite live up to the promise of its title, also criticizes the Kantian thesis that persons are to be valued in themselves *tout court*, as opposed to being valued in themselves in virtue of their possessing various natural qualities, while both David Brink and Jay Wallace argue against the Kantian thesis that impartial moral obligations should always have overriding authority. Finally Robert Audi places a plague on both the neo-Humean and Kantian houses by undermining all attempts to find an internal relation between an agent's having a normative reason to act and her being motivated to act.

Although none of the three rival accounts emerges as the victor, each of these essays, along with those by Terence Irwin, John Skorupski and Garrett Cullity, makes a significant contribution to the debate over practical reason. Cullity and Gaut are to be congratulated for putting together an extremely valuable collection.

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