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Practical Realism and Moral Psychology

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Preface

During recent years several versions of ethical realism have been developed. Do we need another? We only need the right one, and that presented here is offered in the hope that it is the right one or could be developed into it. I discuss antirealist, quasi-realist, and realist positions with fairly equal attention. So this handling of metaethical questions is not just part of a debate that is internal to realism. It takes up the main meta-ethical issues that anyone interested in the subject must deal with, and supplies realist answers to them. It is not a survey of positions taken with respect to metaethical issues. It is, I hope, a contribution that might make a difference to the debates about them.

The account is realist in that I accept that moral claims are literally true or false and that their truth-values depend upon the facts. Talk of facts here is not to be interpreted in terms of anything Platonic or of any special technical notion of metaphysics. To speak of the facts is to speak of how things are. To say it's a fact that the river flooded the fields is just to say that the river flooded the fields. To say it is a fact that what he did was slander the other fellow, and it's a fact that slander is wrong, is just to say that what he did was slander him, and his slandering him was wrong. Moral claims register the ethical significance of realities, and register it realistically. Values are not an additional category of entities, but what the value situation is is a matter of the facts.

Realism, I believe, is the most successful metaethic in accounting for the locus and nature of value, for both moral properties and requirements, for the pluralism and incommensurability of values, and for the phenomenology of ethical thought. It does so in cognitivist terms and, as such, does so in a manner that acknowledges the roles of both reason and reality, but without mysterious or merely convenient ontological commitments.

Perhaps the most controversial claim in this book is that there is practical cognition, and that practical cognition is motivational. In that sense, facts are prescriptive for practical reasoners. While ethical claims are to be interpreted realistically, there would be no ethical content to the world, no ethical significance to anything, in the absence of practical reasoners. ¹It is because there is *practical* cognition that there is ethical significance, that situations and actions and characteristics ethically count for something. So, it is the facts, or how things are, that is realistically prescriptive *for* practical reasoners. A good deal of this book addresses the issue of motivation, which for realists has proved at least as problematic as the ontology of value. Mark Platts asks, "Why should it not just be a brute fact about moral facts that without any such further element [he speaks of a non-cognitive mental state] their clear perception does provide sufficient grounding for action?"² I'll offer an account that, although it does not settle for this being a brute fact, does not undermine the realism of value.

I call this view *practical realism*. I develop this metaethical position and go on to examine some central topics in moral psychology on the basis of it. The general character of the project is Aristotelian, though it is not exegesis of his ethical philosophy and it departs from his positions in many ways. My purpose is to explicate and illustrate how reason in its practical employment can understand the ethical significance of facts about human nature and social life. In order to fulfill this purpose, some of this work is devoted to an account of how ethical considerations are to be interpreted as realist and some to an exploration of some central topics in moral psychology in these terms, namely, self-love, friendship, and respect. These have been chosen because I believe they are among the ethically most significant relations and forms of regard that human beings have about themselves and others. Self-love is ethically significant because it is a good no one would choose to be without, and its basis is knowledge of oneself as having sound conceptions of worth and acting on them. Friendship is a good we wouldn't choose to be without, and it is ethically significant because the bases for the best kind of friendship are people's knowledge and appreciation of each other as exhibiting excellences and being productive of good. Both self-love and friendship entail knowing and loving persons because of the good they exhibit and actualize. Respect is what unifies people in a common moral world. While it need not be based upon knowledge of an individual in the ways that self-love and friendship are, it is a kind of

concern for others that is owed to them as practical reasoners, as equal participants in an ethically significant world. So, the discussion of moral psychology works its way up from the individual to relations with others.

These discussions of moral psychology follow chapters that present and defend a metaethic and an associated conception of practical reason. My main claim is that practical reasoning can achieve a substantive understanding of the ethical significance of facts and that this understanding can be action-guiding. In this view, the central question of metaethics is not "How can our theoretical understanding of the world be ethically significant?" Rather, the central question is "What is a right understanding of the world by practical reason?" We *do* act with a view to good, however sound or unsound our conception of what is good or choiceworthy or worthwhile. Our acting with a view to good or under concepts of what we take to be worthwhile is an exercise of our rationality. The involvement of reason makes it action and not just motion. It is not as though we have a theoretical understanding of the world somehow engaged to something else (desire, affect, etc.) in order for reason to be practical. Nor is reason practical just because it provides an informational service to the passions or a universal form to volitions or prescriptions. One of reason's practical employments is its comprehension of facts in terms of their significance for action. It is not "pure" practical reason, Kantian a priori reason, that structures and orients ethics. Practical reason's object is the world, including human nature, and practical reason understands and judges facts in terms of conceptions of worth and good relevant to action. Practical reason's telos is to do this rightly; there are sound and endorsable comprehensions of the world by it, just as there are sound and unsound comprehensions of the world by reason's theoretical employment. And this is so even if there is no specific end intrinsic to human nature. There needn't be a best kind of life for a human being for there to be fact-based human goods, needs, and interests that give content and detail to ethical considerations. There needn't be a single, comprehensive end for the exercise of practical reason in order for there to be practical cognition, the understanding of truths for practical reason.

The introduction and first two chapters describe and support this view. They explicate its realism and the role of practical reason in understanding the ethical significance of facts and in motivating and guiding action. There isn't an additional object, the good, nor

are there additional value-entities along with natural and social facts. There is a world of natural and social facts, including practical reasoners, and these facts (including facts about them as practical reasoners) are ethically significant for them because they are practical reasoners.

The Aristotelian idea that ethics is grounded in our nature as rational animals and that it is intimately bound up with an understanding of practical reason and the capacities of our psychological life has, I believe, enormous merit. I hope to show that a certain conception of human nature and practical reason is supportable and explanatorily powerful, and that people are capable of a kind of practical wisdom that a great deal of moral philosophy ignores or discounts. I would like to characterize some of the aspects of that practical wisdom and thus help to credential it philosophically.

In addition to the support and background supplied by Aristotle, I will also refer to Kant. Although the project is quite un-Kantian, both in its general thrust and in its details, I will often use Kantian claims and principles to heighten contrasts with my own view. Aristotle's thinking will direct much of the accounts of self-love and friendship, Kant's will influence the account of respect and self-respect. I will refer to Kant more than appeal to him. But his thinking is central for understanding how and why respect is so morally important, though the account of it here will involve neither his nonnaturalism nor his apriorism.

One of the constant themes in this book is that the operation of practical reason is to be interpreted in terms of its objects. In order to understand practical reason, we need to consider more than its form or logic. Considerations that constitute good reasons for a practical reasoner count as such by virtue of being part of a sound or right understanding of the world. What makes reason practical is not just that it is sometimes concerned with action rather than with understanding but that it is concerned with the action-guiding of understanding. Ethics isn't just a construction *for* something (e.g. overcoming a tendency to selfishness, securing conditions of order, instituting policies of fairness); it is also an understanding *of* something. It is about the world and rational action in it, in the sense that facts about the world and human nature are the object of practical reason.

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During the four years that I worked on this book, I became a husband and father. Nancy, Nathan, and Daniel have not just made the world different and better for me; they have made it a different and better world.

Introduction

Practical realism depends upon a certain conception of practical reason, and that is the link between the metaethical theses and the claims about moral psychology. A good deal of post-Humean moral philosophy has been skeptical of practical reason as a capacity for ethical understanding and as a motivational capacity. This project attributes to practical reason powers of both kinds. Practical reason is the link between metaethics and moral psychology in its being the capacity by which the ethical significance of facts is understood and by which one's motives and passions can be organized by that understanding. It is because we are practical reasoners that ethical concerns are real concerns for us. And it is practical reason that enables us both to achieve sound conceptions of what it is good to do and also to do it.

When we say that this is a type of moral realism, the emphasis is not only on the ontology of moral values. Indeed, the emphasis is as much on practical reason as on ontology. The idea is that in order to account for our making moral judgments at all and to diagnose some as sound or subtle or apt, and others as unsound or unsubtle or inapt, and so forth, we need to look at both our capacities for practical reasoning and at facts about our nature and the world. If there are moral insight, moral perception, moral imagination, and moral understanding, it is not because there are special moral faculties in us, nor is it because there are special objects or facts. Good biological thought and good historical thought and political vision do not depend on special, distinct faculties, and neither does moral thought, which, like the others, is thought about the world. In calling this view realism, we are committed not to an attempt to itemize what there is but to characterize moral thinking and judgment and decision as concerned with values that are not subjective or projected onto the world. Moral claims can be mistaken, uninformed, and inaccurate as descriptions of

what happened and otherwise treated as factual claims. The reasoning that supports and addresses them is full-fledged reasoning, not reasoning dependent upon emotive meanings, or prescriptions, or the lordship of the passions. And concerns about objectivity, rational endorsability, adequacy to the complexity of the phenomena, and so forth, are as much in place in moral discourse as elsewhere.

In saying these things, I am not trying to deflate the realism/antirealism debate, nor am I appealing to Wittgensteinian notions of forms of life or rules and practices that shape a social world that is the basis of objectivity. The aim is not to domesticate realism in that way. We can't claim to be realists just because in making statements we *of course* take ourselves to be referring to the world, and what else could the world be but what we are referring to? There are arguments for realism, and arguments for antirealism, and their merits cannot be wholly ascertained by noticing features of discourse that are second nature to us. In *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* Sabina Lovibond argues that on Wittgensteinian grounds there is no basis for denying truth status to the propositions of ethics just as we assign it to propositions of science. "In this sense ethics is promoted to the metaphysical status enjoyed already by the sciences." 1 And as for objectivity, there is, "materially speaking," nothing else for it to be but intersubjectivity; and assertibility is a matter of "conformity to the consensual standards of sound judgment."2

What is briefly described above is not the realism of practical realism. In the latter, considerations about reason, rather than language, are fundamental. Ethical claims are to be interpreted realistically because facts are objects of practical cognition and we can get them right or be mistaken. This is not Platonic reason grasping a supersensible reality, or Kantian reason constructing moral value from a priori materials; it is though full-fledged reason, not reason assimilated to linguistic practice and its associated forms of life. What is shared with Lovibond's view is that ethical claims are not to be interpreted as somehow lesser than nonethical claims in propositional significance. But the explanation will be different from the one she supplies, and it differs in its commitment to the possibility of moral claims being rationally vindicated in a manner other than by articulation of their place in a form of life. Practical reason is reason that considers the world in terms of conceptions of worth and understands the grounds for and against acts, situations, and policies of action and the place of dispositions of certain kinds in a good character and

a good life. We think in terms of value, of reasons for judgment, choice, and action, and in so thinking we are thinking about the world. What we need is not to reconstruct this in noncognitivist or projectivist terms but to consider what makes for thinking well in these ways. Reflection on moral discourse is important for sorting this out, but the discourse is important for what it indicates about reason and the world. The metaphysics of morals is a subject we cannot hope to get clear about without taking seriously the role of language. Looking at language helps us on our way. But language is not the primary substance of the metaphysics of morals; it is that through which the relation of reason and its objects is expressed, and that relation and its constituents are primary.

This is why so much weight is put on a robust conception of practical reason here. Reflection on the nature of moral claims is more than reflection on rules governing the use of moral terms and more than analysis of moral concepts. And it needn't be driven by comparison with scientific or some other sort of thinking. We should start with a recognition that there is practical thought, thought concerned with good action and the justifying reasons for it, and that it is a pervasive, important part of our lives. Nor is it clear that sound ethical thought issues in elaboration of rigorously systematic theory. The kinds of things that are of moral concern are pervasive and important, but the particular forms they take and their urgency often require us to make quite context-sensitive judgments and choices with fairly finegrained attention to the facts of the case. The fact that ethical claims are to be interpreted realistically does not imply that there is, even in principle, a formalization or codification of ethics. Ethical claims and statements can be true to the world without being part of a science of it.

This approach also explains the prescriptivity of practical reason in a non-Kantian manner. Prescriptivity, in this view, is a product of reason's practical, contentful understanding. Kant opened his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* with an emphasis on the distinction between duty and inclination. Kant was not a realist about moral considerations, but the prescriptivity of practical reason is central to his view. The distinction between duty and inclination marks for him the awareness of the prescriptivity of practical reason that even the most unsophisticated person can be aware of as a centerpiece of common moral knowledge. The distinction between the prescriptivity of moral obligation and the causal impetus of inclination is based upon

Kant's claim that reason is practical. The explication of the condition for this, namely, the postulate of freedom, is part of metaphysics and not part of common moral knowledge. But metaphysical thinking is not, according to Kant, needed in order to recognize the prescriptive claim of practical reason. The notion of value that Kant defends is nonnatural, and so too is the rational causality that makes possible the realization of that value. The present account seeks to avoid non-naturalism and certainly does not involve a distinction between fact and value, with a counterpart distinction between phenomena and noumena as a basis for it. What it does share with Kant's view is the emphasis on human beings as rational agents, as beings for whom there is a practical exercise of reason, though it will be explained as an exercise that can only be guided by factual understanding and we will see that desire has a role in it as well. Neither the ends of morally sound action nor its motive, however, can be supplied only by affect or desire or subjective interest. Those who have held that they must be so supplied have generally done so on the basis of skepticism about reason's ability to motivate or to formulate or detect an end for action, or of confidence that one or another species of antirealist naturalism or projectivism is adequate to explain both value and motivation.

A great deal of metaethical argument concerns skepticism about practical reason. Theorists such as Nagel and Donagan have articulated conceptions of practical reason that are broadly Kantian in character without dependence upon a noumenal self and an a priori law of freedom. ³ Nagel, for example, argued in *The Possibility of Altruism* that structural features of practical reason show there are ethical motivations independent of desires and also ethical principles similarly independent. This view depends upon an interpretation of the metaphysics of agency that Nagel believes best accounts for rational action, both with respect to one's own interests and with respect to promoting the interests of others. It has as a result the inescapability of ethical requirements on action, an inescapability not explicable on the basis of morally neutral desires. Donagan, too, argues that there are ethical principles that are binding for a rational agent and that they are grounded in the nature of rationality. Neither theorist is committed to noumena in their accounts. They have thus partially shifted away from certain peculiarly Kantian claims the debate over whether reason is practical while retaining the Kantian notion that the metaphysics of rational action underwrites moral principles. Other theorists, such as Mackie, Harman, and Williams, have developed approaches

to