

ETHICS

Value and the Good Life

By THOMAS L. CARSON

University of Notre Dame Press, 2000. xii + 328 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper

After a detailed survey of first-order theories of value (hedonism, preference-satisfaction, Nietzsche's theory, and Aristotelian theories), Carson comes to an interim conclusion: we cannot decide among competing theories of value before answering two fundamental meta-ethical questions.

The first centres on what makes something good. Carson argues that something is good—in the sense of 'good life'—if it is correct to prefer it to any realistic alternative. This, of course, favours a preference-satisfaction theory of value. The second meta-ethical question involves moral or axiological realism. If, as realists maintain, intrinsic goodness or badness is independent of our preferences, even our most adequately informed rational preferences could be mistaken. Carson examines different versions of realism and finds them all wanting.

He then returns to theories of value and opts for a *rational* preference-satisfaction theory. Carson rejects identifying a rational preference with its being fully-informed as placing too much weight on the cognitive capacities of human beings: "Given the laws of human psychology and physiology, the size of my brain limits the amount of information I can represent to myself" (p. 229). Moreover, full information (including vivid awareness and excruciating detail) of, for example, horrendous events like the Holocaust may lead to psychological breakdown or severe depression, neither of which is conducive to the formation of rational preferences.

If the ideal of full information is beyond the capacities of the human mind it would not, Carson argues, be beyond God's mind. If God exists and if God is omniscient and "cares deeply about human beings, and is kind, sympathetic, and unselfish", Carson says we should take God's preferences for what we ought to prefer (insofar as we can ascertain them) as authoritative for us. He calls this 'The Divine-Preference Theory of Rationality' and claims that, "It deals very nicely with the main objections to the standard full-information theories and is the basis for a very attractive version of the rational-preference-satisfaction theory of value" (p. 267).

In the event that such a God does not exist, Carson provides a "fall-back" theory of rationality—an "informed" as opposed to "full-information" theory. A preference is informed if it is based on a cognitive perspective that is informationally better than other empirically possible perspectives. For example, I don't have full information with respect to whether it would be good for me to retire this year. But having read about retirement, talked to retired friends, and reflected on my competence and circumstances (familial, medical, psychological, financial, etc.), I have sufficient information to endorse

with confidence a preference to continue teaching. Full-information, Carson suggests, should be retained as a regulative ideal for criticising our preferences and seeking ever better cognitive perspectives for assessing them.

Carson thinks and writes clearly and has critical command of the classical and contemporary literature. He is also scrupulously fair and temperate. Had I more space, I would question his conception of objectivity and whether he adequately distinguishes value pluralism from meta-ethical relativism. Still this is a fine book.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

MARTIN BENJAMIN

Moral Particularism

Edited by BRAD HOOKER and MARGARET LITTLE

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The twelve papers collected in this volume develop or criticise various forms of moral particularism (all but two are unpublished elsewhere). Though unified thematically, the authors do not generally respond to one another's essays. For example, there are a number of critiques of Jonathan Dancy's defence of particularism, but Dancy does not reply to them in his contribution. Again, T.H. Irwin argues against a particularist interpretation of Aristotle, yet several authors attribute particularism to Aristotle without considering this critique. Nonetheless, the volume contains numerous illuminating discussions of the particularism debate.

'Moral particularism' connotes an increased appreciation of particular details in contrast to general considerations in determinations of what morally ought to be done. Beyond this, the term refers to a variety of distinct positions (there is considerable categorising of views in these essays). A weak form of particularism states that the application of moral rules or principles requires judgement that takes into account the particularities of specific contexts. This is now widely accepted: even Kant agreed with it. Stronger forms of particularism are usually associated with the work of Dancy and John McDowell. These views are often connected with virtue ethics and critiques of moral theory, and Aristotle as well as Wittgenstein are sometimes cited as sources. These particularist claims either eliminate moral principles or significantly diminish or modify the importance typically assigned to them. There are a number of related formulations of these views: that the moral polarity of a property always depends on circumstances, so that any property may count for an action in one circumstance and against it in another; that there is no codifiable relationship between non-moral properties and moral ones; and that moral deliberation does not involve applying moral principles to specific cases, but is a matter of a sensitivity to or discernment of what is morally salient in each particular situation (an activity often compared to perception).

The meaning and plausibility of these views have been at the centre of most recent debates. In this volume, nearly all the authors address the work of Dancy or, to a lesser extent, McDowell. The exceptions are Lawrence Blum, who defends the role of partiality in moral life and criticises several

impartialist attempts to deflate partiality (especially those of R.M. Hare and Peter Railton), and Martha Nussbaum, who undertakes a broad defence of moral theory against anti-theory critics. Nussbaum has travelled some distance since earlier works such as *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1990). There she defended the 'priority of the particular' she claimed to find in Aristotle (a view criticised in this book by Irwin and Roger Crisp). Here and in more recent works she has drawn on the Stoics and even Kant in emphasising the importance of explicit, abstract principles guided by moral theory. At a minimum, this is a striking change of emphasis that has coincided with her increased concern with political philosophy.

The first four papers raise sharp criticisms of strong forms of particularism. Brad Hooker maintains that a true particularist would not be trustworthy since he or she would not suppose that keeping a promise *per se* has any positive moral significance. Crisp distinguishes between non-ultimate reasons for returning a book (such as that I borrowed it) and ultimate reasons (doing so would be just, for instance), and he argues that everyone would accept particularism about the former, but no one would accept it about the latter. Joseph Raz contends that the plausibility of particularism rests in part on a failure to realise that we do not always fully articulate or even understand the complexity of our reasons. Finally, in a jointly authored piece, Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith argue that, if there were no codifiable patterns in the connections between non-evaluative and evaluative predicates, then we could not make sense of our ability to learn and use the latter.

The remaining essays all purport to defend some form of particularism. Dancy himself develops his view that the polarity of reasons may change from one situation to another. He maintains this for both theoretical and practical reasons, and expands it to include the theory of both value and choice. What is striking about the other defences of particularism is that they all insist on a role for general considerations (perhaps providing a basis for responding to some of the aforementioned objections). Though Piers Rawling and David McNaughton are sympathetic to Dancy in some respects, they argue in a co-authored essay that there are weak moral principles based on the fact that thick moral properties such as justice have invariable polarity (that an act is just always counts in its favour, though all things considered a just act may be wrong). Likewise, though David Bakhurst and Margaret Olivia Little think Dancy is right about the metaphysics of moral properties, they both believe general moral knowledge is needed in deliberation. Thus, Bakhurst says that suffering always has moral importance even if it is not critical in deciding what to do, and Little says causing pain can be presumptive of the moral property of cruelty. Finally, Jay Garfield claims the main issue is epistemological rather than metaphysical. Following McDowell rather than Dancy, he argues that particularists can allow universal moral principles, but insists that these principles are only incomplete summaries rooted in particular paradigm cases.

A central objection to particularism is that it cannot provide an adequate account of the justification of moral judgements. Bakhurst, Little, and Garfield all address this objection, and each emphasises the idea that there is a critical dimension to moral judgements that is rooted in our specific moral

practices. Bakhurst, drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre, speaks of justification “in the context of the communities and traditions in which I participate” (p. 174); Little talks about epistemic skills that discern moral presumptions involving properties with a “*local epistemic status*” (p. 303); and Garfield, following Wittgenstein, stresses the “shared background” that informs our formulations of moral principles (p. 193). These proposals may show how moral judgements can avoid being capricious on a particularist account. However, there is much cross-cultural variation in moral practices. Deeper issues of justification arise when these cultures confront one another. At this juncture, particularists could endorse a relativist outlook. But they have tended to resist this, and it is unclear what resources they possess to sustain this resistance.

I have touched only lightly on the many themes and complex arguments in these essays. Anyone concerned about moral particularism will benefit from careful reflection on them.

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

CHRISTOPHER W. GOWANS

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