REVIEW

Book Review: Metaethics from a First Person Standpoint: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy

Catherine Wilson

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Catherine Wilson’s aim in this book is ‘to present a coherent and positive argument for the existence of moral knowledge’ (p. 1). This is the final destination of a journey which begins in radical uncertainty, as the early steps of it are undertaken against a background of hyperbolic doubt about morality. The argument is framed as a series of nine enquiries, but Wilson’s inspiration is explicitly drawn from six well-known meditations in which Descartes seeks an antidote for global scepticism.

Wilson adopts a preliminary sceptical posture about morality for familiar reasons. Most importantly, there is, first, widespread moral disagreement, with no obvious way of vindicating some convictions over others. As she puts it, ‘If I believe that capital punishment is wrong, I don’t think that its ‘wrongness’ can be detected by meters or test-sticks or by the effects of the wrongness on the human organism’ (p. 9). Second, if we understand ourselves to be fundamentally animals who are the products of a long evolutionary history, then many of our responses are likely to be hard-wired. What justifies us in supposing that these responses are morally reliable, or are fit to track moral truths? Other verdicts will be owed to various cultural and social influences, but these putative sources of knowledge may also be flawed. So perhaps none of our moral verdicts can be trusted, even on matters as obvious as slavery and torture. Accordingly, Wilson adopts a thoroughgoing sceptical posture, and proceeds on the provisional assumption that the contents of a person’s ‘Normative Kit’—her beliefs, convictions and attitudes—are to be explained wholly by a mixture of ‘Neurological Constitution’ and ‘Cultural Transmission’, both of which are assumed to be wholly unreliable sources of moral knowledge. Now the moral terms in our language may embed various assumptions about the value-bearing portions of reality, but Wilson assumes, for the purposes of her investigation, that our usual moral terms can be replaced by a medley of descriptivist terms installed by the ‘Destroyers of Evaluative Illusion’ (p. 32). The Destroyers ‘maintain that most of us live in a world of illusion, *projecting* our likings, dislikings, and preferences onto the world, that we ‘see’ our targets of appraisal as possessing evaluative properties that they do not possess’ (p. 32). The world, for the Destroyers, remains stubbornly value-free, though we may have picked up the erroneous habit of thinking of it in value-laden ways. Wilson’s challenge is to show us that the Destroyers are wrong, and that we must enrich our explanation of how a typical individual’s Normative Kit gets packed.

When all is said and done, the Cartesian apparatus is rather loose—no surprise there, really—but Wilson does attempt to identify a *Cogito*-type proposition as her way out of the sceptical swamp. This is the proposition that ‘My continued existence, at least right now, is good for me’ (p. 37). This proposition quickly picks up speed. By reflecting on it further, I can discover that prudential mistakes are possible. Where mistakes are possible, knowledge is also possible. I can also make sense of the idea of sacrifice, or of the intelligibility of bearing costs for the sake of complying with ‘ought’ verdicts, at least in the prudential realm. Furthermore, the ideas of fallibility and sacrifice are exportable to other types of evaluative reasoning. That is because I can, without any pronounced conceptual difficulty, put myself in the shoes of other people. If there is a good for me, there is a good for you, too. And there is, after all, nothing particularly special about *me*, as opposed to *you*. In short, as Wilson says, ‘I am not always in a worse position in judging what it would be best for you and for other people to do in your and their own self-interest than I am in my own case. The same facts about the world and about the average person are relevant to my case and to yours’ (p. 50).

It is not entirely clear to me why this quasi-*Cogito* proposition is selected as the one which can puncture Wilson’s self-imposed sceptical force field. It displays little of the critical hardiness of Descartes’ *Cogito*. The attempt to deny it will not expose you to a charge of incoherence or performative contradiction. Our survival instincts are as hard-wired as any other response in our behavioural repertoire, and the resilience of these instincts has nothing to do with the presence or absence of goodness as a distinctive property in the world. We are not going to worry about potential bad news from the metaethical front if our interests are judged to be under severe threat, or if our lives are in danger. The Destroyers, too, will prefer to interpret this proposition in ways which will simply impute to its utterer an unassailable preference that, at any particular moment, she goes on living.

A protracted engagement with the Destroyers’ reductive programme is delayed until *Enquiry VIII*. However, it is not entirely clear, at first, which species of metaethical opponent Wilson takes the Destroyers to represent. They are initially characterized, in effect, as simple subjectivists, who think that our evaluative verdicts simply report or describe our attitudes (pp. 87-8). This is inadequate, Wilson argues, because the focus of our moral verdicts is entirely different; moral verdicts are typically concerned with the weal and woe of others, rather than on our own mental states. Fair enough—but the simple subjectivist is not a sophisticated opponent. An alternative profile for the Destroyers classifies them as expressivists, who hold that our moral verdicts express non-cognitive attitudes (p. 88). But this model is also dismissed on the grounds that it fails to accommodate the cognitivist structure of our moral thought. Now sophisticated expressivists are going to be puzzled by the relative brusqueness of this dismissal: plenty of work in the expressivist tradition has been done, after all, in trying to convince us that the expressivist programme can accommodate the cognitivist structures of our moral thought. Expressivists don’t dismiss all talk of truth or objectivity, but simply wish to secure them in ways which are metaphysically uncostly. Another metaethical option which does not receive any concentrated attention is the error theory. It is unclear what explains Wilson’s relaxed attitude to this critical threat. Is it because she thinks that moral properties are natural rather than ‘queer’? We are not told; or, at least, we must settle for a fair bit of guesswork.

Wilson’s explicit aim, announced at the outset, is to engage in ‘a freer sort of enquiry’ than one which carefully negotiates ‘the ‘isms’ of moral theory’ (p. 1). It is not entirely clear to me, however, that the ‘isms’ recede from the scene. They are just given different titles, and one of the challenges presented by the book is to figure out when and how they are being considered.

Wilson has a distinctive philosophical personality and a strong authorial voice, and this book remains, despite some critical reservations, enjoyable, intellectually nimble, and thought-provoking. There are, to be sure, certain gains in recounting a familiar journey in new ways, using new terms, unencumbered by the Procrustean tendencies of the established metaethical taxonomy. But there is also the worry, not fully surmounted here, of reinventing wheels without fully facing up to the challenges that made their invention a necessity.

Gerald Lang

University of Leeds

Leeds LS2 9JT

g.r.lang@leeds.ac.uk