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## Is Ethical Theory Opposed to Moral Practice?

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**Abstract** Many philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition have held that the predominant modern western theories of ethics like Kant's deontological theory and Mill's Utilitarianism have failed to deliver as a "theory" of ethics. In other words, they are not successful as "decision procedures" whereby one can determine which action from a multitude of actions open before the agent would be right and therefore morally obligatory for him to do. In fact, the basic concepts of moral obligation, impartiality, and objectivity of moral standards has been questioned and pitted against the "personal point of view" of the agent. It has been held that the "moral goods" have to be given up for the sake of the "personal goods." Is this a systemic fault which is linked with the normative nature of ethics? Or, can we understand ethics in a manner where it can be objective and yet not have to give up on the plurality of moral and nonmoral goods? Can ethical theory in this sense function as an "action guide to moral practice"? These are some questions that will be taken up in the paper against the backdrop of the views of the critics of ethical theory.

**Keywords** Ethical theory · Moral practice · Moral goods · Nonmoral goods · Morality critics

Modern western ethics gives us different ethical theories that come across as answers to one of its main questions—what is it that makes an act morally correct or incorrect? The theories state the criterion of morality by means of which one could evaluate an act to be, either morally correct or incorrect and for that reason morally obligatory. There have been many theories of ethics predominant amongst them being Immanuel Kant's deontological theory and John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism. In one word, for the former, whatever comes across as "duty" is the morally obligatory act to be done; for the latter, "the maximum good of the maximum number, determines the moral quality of an act."

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Normally, a theory is supposed to offer a “decision procedure” which helps in eliminating alternatives and throwing up the most correct course of action/explanation while simultaneously justifying that result. Bernard Williams thinks that it is the “justificatory urge” to give reasons, which is what drives human thought to propose theories. If this is true, then it is expected that like a theory in any other discipline, a theory of ethics should also provide a decision procedure which would help us determine which act is morally right or wrong in any given real-life situation where an agent needs to choose the right one from amongst several courses of actions open to her. The theory must help the agent make a choice in terms of providing justificatory reasons for choosing that particular course of action as opposed to some other. But, are any of the modern western ethical theories successful in doing this? Decision procedures in theories are often mechanical in nature, and it is doubtful whether such mechanical decision procedures can be provided in ethics since in making ethical decisions, the agent’s choice, which is determined by multiple factors, is very important, and there can be no mechanical way by which the choice of an agent can be predetermined. Hence, it is often thought that moral theory fails to deliver a decision procedure whereby actions can be ascertained to be morally right or wrong and to that extent it is held that ethical theory fails to achieve the status of a “Theory of ethics.”<sup>1</sup> Such concerns about ethics often lead to the thought that there is an unbridgeable gap between any theory of ethics and the practical purpose of ethics in terms of providing action guiding principles. It may lead one to conclude that theoretical ethics is essentially opposed to moral practice. This is, perhaps, a charge more appropriately brought against modern western ethics than against ancient Greek ethics or Indian ethics. In the latter, there is no systematic science of the principles of morality; rather ethics is more of “a way of life.” My aim in this paper is to examine this complaint of the critics of ethics and to show that the reason why ethical theories fail to meet the status of a “Theory” is because of the nature of the subject matter of ethics and that even if we do not have a Theory of ethics, ethical reflection, as we find in ethical and metaethical discourses, does serve as an action guide and in doing so fulfills the basic aim and purpose of ethics. In this endeavor, I will examine some ethical theories. However, my examination will be limited to Kant’s deontological theory and Utilitarianism of Mill, since the larger point that I wish to examine is whether there is any inherent conflict between theory and practice in ethics as such, irrespective of the substantive content of ethical theories. I begin by first stating the distinctive characteristic of modern western ethical theories and then go on to discuss specific and general points made by the critics. Lastly, I attempt to resolve the issue of the conflict between the theoretical aspirations of ethical theory and its practical applications.

## Theory Critics and Morality Critics

In considering the validity of the complaint against ethical theory, it will be helpful to first, following Brian Leiter,<sup>2</sup> draw a distinction between morality and a theory of

<sup>1</sup> I continue to call ethical theories as “theories” although it is their “theory status” that is at issue in the paper. I presume that the context would make this clear in each case. I have put the first letter of “theory” in caps when I wish to denote theory which uses decision procedures and is reductionist.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Leiter, “Nietzsche and the Morality Critics”, *Ethics*, Vol. 107. No. 2 (Jan., 1997), pp. 250–285. All references to Leiter’s paper will be given in parentheses in the text of the paper henceforth.

morality and also between types of criticism of moral theory. Leiter is of the opinion that a lot of Anglo-American work has been critical of particular moral theory only, not of morality as such, where he describes morality as “an everyday cultural phenomenon, the stuff of common sense and common opinion, guiding the conduct of ordinary people.” (Leiter 1997:252). In this sense, ethics is deemed to be an integral and indispensable part of human life because ethical principles, however common place they may be, afford “action guiding principles” for human conduct. A theory of morality on the other hand considers morality as “more or less systematized, improved, and codified in some theoretical framework produced by a philosopher” (Leiter 1997:252). Moral theorists of course would claim that their theory of morality captures the essence of our ordinary notions of morality but yet may be worried about the effects of that notion being unsystematic, unclear, and obscure. They may also claim that these faults in the ordinary notion can be remedied by a clearer *theory* of morality. Thus, most Anglo-American critics of morality are critical of particular theories of morality without claiming that there can be no *theory* of morality, per se. However, some critics of morality make a stronger claim to the effect that theorizing in ethics is futile since the process of theorizing belies the “action guiding” character of ethics.<sup>3</sup> They are not critical of the substantive principles of any ethical theory but doubt that there can be a Theory of ethics. Leiter calls the former “Morality Critics” and the latter “Theory Critics.”

According to Leiter, there are two distinguishing characteristics of a theory characterizing its two aims. They are the following:

1. Reduction: A Theory tries to reduce all value to a single, unitary source.
2. Mechanical decision: A Theory tries to articulate an explicit, mechanical decision procedure for generating answers to ethical questions (or explicit criteria for ethical decision and a decision procedure for their application) (Leiter 1997:253).

Against these aims, the Theory Critics like Baier (1985), Larmore (1987), Taylor (1985), and sometimes Williams (1985)<sup>4</sup> argue first that ethical value cannot be reduced to a single value because there is a “diversity of goods” (Charles Taylor) and secondly that ethical decision requires “practical wisdom, virtues, or sensitivity to the particular context, all things which (allegedly) cannot be captured within the confines of Theory” (Leiter 1997:254). Generally speaking, Theory Critics have considered Moral Theory to be “too abstract, too general, too systematic, too foundationalist, too simplistic, and too contemptuous of non-Theoretical forms of reflection” (Leiter 1997:254). However, they have not denied the importance of the role of ethical reflection in practicing moral philosophy which, to a certain extent, does involve “some degree of abstraction, simplification, generality, and coherence” (Leiter 1997: 255). So, in a sense, ethical reflection also shares some characteristics of theorizing, but what it cannot afford to do is reduce all value to a single overarching value and devise mechanical decision making procedures neglecting the wide gamut of social determinants which influence the

<sup>3</sup> In Indian Philosophy, there is no theorizing about ethics. In fact, Buddha in his teachings often emphasized the futility about raising metaphysical questions related to morality, for instance about the metaphysical status of the moral agent, etc. The emphasis was more on action guiding principles to improve moral character.

<sup>4</sup> It appears that Bernard Williams in some of his writings is more of a Morality critic than a Theory Critic, but this is not so obvious.



choice of action of the agent. According to Leiter, it is the “joint aims of Reduction and Mechanical Decision” that marks the distinction between bad theory and good ethical reflection (Leiter 1997: 255). Morality Critics (like, Stocker (1976), Slote (1983), Wolf (1982), and again Bernard Williams, in contrast) are those “who criticize moral theory, not because of its theoretical ambitions, but because of its moral commitments (more precisely, either the substantive *content* of the morality endorsed or the *weight* assigned in practical reasoning to moral demands)” (Leiter 1997: 255).

The distinction between Theory Critics and Morality Critics cannot be overemphasized because the distinction is mainly in standpoint, the former being a “second-level” inquiry into the theoretical status of a theory of ethics, whereas the second is concerned with “first-level” content of a theory of ethics. Having stated that, one must not overlook the finer point of distinction either. A Morality Critic may go on to hold that because there are first-level problems with a theory of ethics, there can be no theory of ethics per se. Here, the Morality Critic comes closer to the Theory Critic. But, he/she may not go that far and be hopeful that although no existing theory of ethics qualifies to count as a Theory, some future theory could. As Leiter puts it, for the Theory Critic, “Theory (in the technical sense) is the heart of the problem, not part of the solution” (Leiter 1997: 257). In the light of this distinction, it becomes clear that our original question whether modern western ethical theories fare well as “Theories of ethics” is more complex than it appears in the first instance. In fact, the question breaks into two parts, viz.

1. Is there a problem with the substantive content of particular ethical theories which do not afford them the status of a Theory?
2. Is ethics a subject where it is futile to aim at a “Theory status” for any purported ethical theory, irrespective of what its substantive content might be, and therefore, must aspire for a status that is less stringent?

It is to be noted that Morality Critics affirm that there is a problem with the substantive content of particular ethical theories which comes in the way of their claiming a Theory status. The Theory Critics, on the other hand, would affirm that no ethical theory, notwithstanding its substantive content, could claim the status of a Theory. The following sections of the paper will discuss these two questions with an aim to seek answers to them.

## The Distinctive Feature of Modern Western Ethical Theories

A survey of the history of western moral philosophy shows that there was a shift in the idea of “morality” as it was understood by the ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and philosophers of the modern period. Describing morality as conceived in the modern period, Stephen Darwall says, “The key idea was that morality concerns not just what is good or virtuous, but what we are *obligated*, and would be wrong not, to do” (Darwall 2010:541). The ancient Greek philosophers believed that the distinguishing feature of human beings is their capacity for virtuous activity and in engaging in such activity not only do they do what is *good* but also *live well*. They also

maintained that no ethical idea or principle can provide reasons to act that are independent of the agent's good and self-interest. To quote Skorupski,

Perhaps the most philosophically acute utilitarian, Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), remarked that a central difference between ancient Greek ethical thought and “the modern ethical view” is that whereas the ancients took there to be but one fundamental ethical standard – the agent's own good or happiness – modern moral philosophy holds that morality provides a source of reasons that is independent of the agent's own good (Sidgwick 1967: 198)” (Skorupski 2010:542).

Referring to Sidgwick's famous “dualism of practical reason” Darwall says,

It seems that we can view our practical lives either from our own perspectives as individual agents, seeing things in relation to ourselves and our own overall interest or good, or we can view them from an impartial perspective in which we are simply one among others (the moral point of view). Sidgwick claimed that neither perspective is any more intrinsically rational than the other. And no argument exists to get us from one standpoint to the other” (Skorupski 2010:545).

This dualism of “the individual and the universal” and “the partial and the impartial” standpoint is amply evident both in the deontological theory of Kant and the Consequentialist Utilitarian theories of J.S. Mill. However, in each of these two theories, the idea of “moral obligation” is central. The question is “what is the ground of our sense of moral obligation?” It cannot be self-interest always because in many instances, complying with moral requirements is unlikely to coincide with agent's interest. For instance, when it serves my self-interest to break a promise or cheat on my taxes!! But, a moral theory of obligation would have to ascertain that either breaking a promise in self-interest or keeping it as a moral requirement is the morally right and therefore obligatory thing to do. Both Kant and Mill's theory purport to state the moral authority of moral obligation—the former by deducing it from the categorical nature of the Moral Law grounded in Reason and the other by appealing to the Utilitarian maxim of the “greatest good of the greatest number.”

There are problems with Kant's deontology and Mill's Utilitarianism, and these have been pointed out in the form of standard objections to the theories, respectively. Against Kant's theory, it has been alleged that it is too rigorous, formal, and intellectualistic affording no space to the emotional side of human nature. Against Utilitarianism, the standard charge is that its goal of maximum utility is either theoretically or practically incoherent, because it presupposes abilities to compare the consequences of an infinite number of possible actions and to make interpersonal comparisons of welfare. Furthermore, it is alleged that Utilitarianism could, on its maxim, justify the violation of moral and political rights. It also fails to take into account and is not accommodative of, the extent of our obligations to others. Williams (1973) has also alleged that Utilitarianism as a moral theory undermines the significance of moral personal integrity and alienates the agent from his agency. In *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Samuel Scheffler has argued that Utilitarianism cannot account for the natural independence of the agent's point of view and so should be replaced by a “hybrid moral theory” that incorporates what he calls “agent-centered

prerogatives.” On this hybrid moral theory, agents are permitted but not required to maximize the good. In Brink’s opinion, the impartiality characteristic of Utilitarianism cannot account for “the personal point of view” (Brink 1986:417–418). The specific shortcomings of both deontology and utilitarianism as seen above are problems with the substantive content of the respective ethical theories made from within the domain of first-order normative ethics. But, there are other criticisms, of a more general nature, which raise serious questions about theorizing in ethics. We shall look into these now.

## Concerns of Morality Critics

Morality critics are not so concerned with the intra-moral criticisms of Kant’s deontology and Utilitarianism which belong to the first level of ethical discourse. They are more concerned about the nonmoral elements influencing moral decision making and how this affects the theoretical aspirations of a moral theory.<sup>5</sup> In other words, they hold that there are certain nonmoral considerations which sometimes determine the morality of certain actions, and these nonmoral elements thwart the theoretical ambitions of any aspiring moral theory. So, Morality Critics criticize morality from outside the domain of first-order theoretical ethics and from the standpoint of nonmoral goods and considerations.

Susan Wolf in her paper “Moral Saints” examines in details the case for Utilitarianism and Kant’s theory and states that such moral theories would require ordinary human beings to become “Moral Saints” where a moral saint is a “person ... who is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be” (Wolf 1982: 419). But, she goes on to add that “moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive” (Wolf 1982: 419). An overemphasis on cultivating moral virtues that would make a “moral saint” of a person would “crowd out the nonmoral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well rounded, richly developed character” ( Wolf: 1982: 421). She further states that “moral ideals do not, and need not, make the best personal ideals” (Wolf 1982: 435) and concludes that “a person may be *perfectly wonderful* without being *perfectly moral*” (Wolf 1982: 436). It is clear that Susan Wolf’s attack on traditional moral theories is based on nonmoral values/virtues which cannot be hierarchically ordered with morality occupying the top most position.

In a similar vein, Nagel (1986) terms the conflict between moral goods and nonmoral personal goods as the conflict between the “Good Life” and the “Moral Life” or between “living well” and “doing right.” He speaks of morality posing “a serious threat to the kind of personal life that many of us take to be desirable” (Nagel 1986: 190).

Bernard Williams in his famous book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) argues that morality is “a special system, a particular variety of ethical thought that we would be better off without.” Like Elizabeth Anscombe in “Modern Moral Philosophy”

<sup>5</sup> The definition of “non-moral goods” is debatable as some philosophers include such goods as being within the purview of the standpoint of morality. Leiter calls nonmoral goods as “personal goods.”



(1958), he advocates abolishing morality. His charge against morality is that it “actually conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual” (Williams 1985: 191) thereby diminishing the role of other nonmoral values. Against the theory of Kant and Utilitarianism, Bernard Williams argues that both will sometimes require us to abandon our “ground projects,” those projects “which propel [a person] in the future, and give him (in a sense) a reason for living” (Williams 1976: 209–210).

Michael Stocker in his paper “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories” argues that “if we...embody in our motives, those various things which recent ethical theories hold to be ultimately good or right, we will, of necessity, be unable to have those motives” (Stocker 1976: 461). Stocker claims, however, that a suitable ethical theory must be one in which reasons and motives can be brought into harmony, such that one can be moved to act by what the theory identifies as “good” or “right.” Stocker’s point is not that theorizing in ethics is a misguided enterprise; it’s just that we need better theories, ones in which theoretical reasons can also serve as motives for action. Clearly, Stocker’s position moves away from the Theory Critic because he leaves room for better ethical theories.

In the light of these general criticisms, it appears that the argument that the Morality Critic would put forward in support of her claims can be stated in terms of two theses. The two theses are stated by Leiter as follows:

Incompatibility Thesis (IT): Acting in accordance with morality is (at least sometimes) incompatible with realizing or enjoying these personal goods.

Overridingness Thesis (OT): Moral considerations are always the practically determinative considerations and thus override all competing considerations (Leiter 1997: 259).

Leiter further says that it is the conjunction of the two which creates problems for a theory of morality. By IT, moral considerations will conflict with “personal” considerations and by OT personal considerations must lose. The Morality Critics say that this conflict shows that OT must be rejected (Leiter 1997: 259). The defenders of morality, on the other hand, reject IT suggesting that there really is no conflict between moral considerations and personal considerations and that the aim of moral theory is to show this. They argue that morality includes personal goods or that morality includes supererogatory duties or virtues, such that morality can recognize morally praiseworthy conduct without always demanding its performance in a way that would inevitably override personal considerations.

The charges of the Morality Critics against the defenders of morality are far and varied. Notwithstanding that, one can say that they do not cut much ground, for the defender of morality always has the room to try and replace an unsatisfactory theory of morality with a better theory of morality. In this regard, the charges of the Theory Critics are more damaging in the sense that they strike at the very root of the “Theoretical” ambitions of aspiring theories of morality. We shall now look at the contention of the Theory Critics and examine the seriousness of their allegations.

## Concerns of the Theory Critics

Theory Critics (amongst whom Bernard Williams is a forerunner) have attacked the single value of moral obligation to which all ethical values have been reduced, and they have persistently argued that this value cannot be claimed as absolute in ethics. Consequently, if there are no absolute values in ethics, ethical theory cannot claim to provide mechanical decision procedures in terms of such values and hence cannot aspire to reach the coveted status of a Theory.

Williams (1985) launched a scathing attack on morality or the “morality system” by which he meant a distinctive form of ethical thought that was characteristic of the modern world. Williams distinguishes between what he calls “thick” ethical concepts which are substantive concepts and “thin” ethical concepts. The former are relatively specific concepts (Williams 1985: 129) and are also “world-guided”: that is, their application “is determined by what the world is like” (Williams 1985: 129), by which he means that they are derived from our social interactions understood in the widest sense. The thin concepts are “general and abstract” (Williams 1985: 152), and they “do not display world-guidedness” (Williams 1985:152) The morally thin concepts are the result of reducing diverse values accepted in society to one abstract all encompassing value in the form of “the morally right” or “the morally wrong” thing to do which is also the morally obligatory thing to do. Furthermore, people who have acquired the thick concepts will typically agree about their application to particular cases (Williams 1985: 141). Thick concepts are also “action-guiding,” in the sense that if “a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action, though that reason need not be a decisive one and may be outweighed by other reasons” (Williams 1985:140). Examples of thick concepts are “treachery,” “promise,” “brutality,” and “courage” (Williams 1985: 129). Examples of thin concepts are “good,” “right,” and “ought” (Williams 1985: 128). According to Williams, moral experience expressed in terms of morally thick concepts yields propositional knowledge which may be true or false, but ethical reflection on this knowledge in terms of morally thin concepts destroys it. This view of Williams is expressed in his startling remark that “in ethics, reflection can destroy knowledge.” For Williams, moral obligation is only one kind of moral consideration among others. But, what is typical of the morality system is that it tries to reduce as many types of ethical considerations as possible to moral obligation. In his view, the institution of morality, as it is found in modern western ethical discourse, in its attempt to systematize through reductionist mechanisms, neglects significant dimensions of ethical life as it is actually experienced. For Williams, ethical theories are the product of the morality system which neglects thick concepts in favor of thin concepts. His opposition to theorizing in ethics is based on his belief that modern western ethical thought is too deeply concerned with the concept of moral obligation which is not world guided and does not provide objectivity to the discourse of ethics.

In his view about theorizing in ethics, Bernard Williams comes across as a Theory Critic although his criticisms are directed against both deontological theory and the utilitarian theory making it appear as if he was a Morality Critic criticizing particular moral theories and suggesting that their shortcomings could be overcome by a better theory. But, Williams does not suggest any better theory to replace these. In that sense, it substantiates the view that he is against all theorizing in ethics.

## Criterion of Morality vs. Decision Procedures

Having stated some of the general objections against the two major ethical theories in respect of their status as “theories,” we can now consider whether there is indeed a problem in ascribing them this status. It may be true that reductionism and providing mechanical decision procedures are means to fulfill the aims of objectivity in theorizing. The question now is whether ethical theories can succeed in achieving objectivity by these two techniques. That they have not succeeded in this endeavor is the point made by both the Morality critics as well as the Theory Critics. Clearly, Bernard Williams’s objections are more serious to this issue since they strike at the very root of the fundamental aim of theorizing which is—objectivity. But, is this an inherent fault of the discipline itself? Or is there some sense in which one can achieve objectivity in Ethics without subscribing to the impartial, impersonal, and absolute point of view? On the other hand, if we reject this point of view, the “view from nowhere” in Nagel’s words, are we doomed to the form of relativism in ethics where “anything goes”? Can we have ethics where we make room for “Objectivity without Absolutism” and “Plurality without Relativism”?<sup>6</sup>

At this juncture, we need to look at a distinction often made in the discourse, i.e., between (1) a standard or criterion of morality, i.e., an account of what makes right acts right, and (2) decision making procedures which would determine for us the right action from amongst many alternative courses of actions. We need to see whether without the two above, we can have an ethical theory which can aim for objectivity and plurality of values.

According to Bales (1971), “A proposed ethical theory “*could* provide a correct account of right-making characteristics *without* spelling out a procedure” (Bales 1971: 261). Defending Act-Utilitarianism against its critics, Bales says that there may be different ways to determine which of given acts would maximize utility, for example, and the theory per se may not be committed a priori to any one procedure. Act-Utilitarianism, thus, does not a priori commit one to a particular decision-making procedure (Bales 1971:263). But, as a theory which by way of its content does give us an account of right-making characteristics of an act, it would at least help us to determine which decision procedures, generally followed, maximize the performance of acts pronounced right by the theoretical account. She is of the opinion that theories of any kind may be too general to provide the immediate practical kind of help in decision making. Hence, this is not a drawback of ethical theories alone. However, having a true account of right making characteristics could be of considerable practical help, even if the account were general. In her opinion, “it probably would not tell us how to single out from the acts open to us at a given time, those which in fact have the morally relevant features; it at least could tell us what to look for. It could provide a standard against which to measure the success or failure of rules-of-thumb and moral codes: those are successful the adoption of which tends to maximize the performance of acts pronounced right by the account” (Bales 1971: 264). In that sense, it would, at least partially, serve a practical purpose and be action guiding.

What about the charge of reductionism? How is that to be tackled? One can argue that the concept of moral obligation which is the fulcrum of modern western ethical

<sup>6</sup> I owe the coinage of these phrases to Prof. Bijoy Boruah in a discussion on these topics.

theories is really not a first-order concept but a meta-concept, and in that sense a meta-value. Whether applying the moral criterion of “happiness” in general or specific virtues of Virtue ethics or the thick concepts of Bernard Williams leads us to “the morally obligatory act” to be performed is a matter of debate, and in this meta-ethical debate, the value of moral obligation is a higher value, more general and more abstract. Williams’ “thin concepts” (which includes the concept of moral obligation) are higher level moral concepts or meta-level concepts. Values representing Williams’ “thick concepts” need not be reduced to the value representing the concept of moral obligation; rather they belong to two separate levels. In that sense, contemporary ethical theory is neither reductionist in its approach nor is it strait-jacketed. It aims at taking into account the multiplicity of values both moral and nonmoral and aims at giving an explanation in terms of reasons which would be relevant to these.

If “Reduction” and providing a Decision Procedure are necessary features of anything which can be called a theory then there is no such thing as an ethical theory because Ethics cannot possibly aim to reduce all values to a single value whatever that be. Nor can it provide a clear-cut decision procedure to tell us what a morally correct act is. After all, it is not enough to point to act A and say that it is the morally correct act to do in the situation; one also needs to know the reasons why it is correct and the reasoning can be far more complicated than any reasoning explaining causal relationships in scientific explanations. At best, the two conditions of “Reduction” and “Mechanical Decision” can be taken to be sufficient conditions of anything which can be called a theory. But, they need not be taken as necessary conditions of a theory in which case we can still speak of a theory of ethics although not a “Theory” of ethics. On the other hand, we may choose not to speak of ethical theory and simply speak of ethical reflection or ethical discourse while at the same time remembering that ethical reflection would also have some elements of theorizing.

If ethical theory is not reductionist in its aim, then we have been able to secure pluralism since now we can talk of plural and diverse values (including nonmoral values) which determine the morality of an act. But, how do we account for the normativity and objectivity of ethics without admitting some element of absolutism? Here again, we can take recourse to Williams’ notion of thick concepts which are “world-guided” as such, that when we learn to apply them, we typically agree about these applications. Agreement about what counts as morally right or wrong albeit in a given context is the only kind of limited objectivity that we can aim for in ethics. This, however, does not lead to a degraded version of relativism amounting to moral anarchy or “anything goes.” Moral agreement in the sense spelt out is based on moral reasoning which provides justificatory grounds for agreement and helps in achieving objectivity. Beyond this, any absolute objectivity is only achievable in the exact sciences and not in the social sciences, and it has started dawning on us that ethics is best treated as a social science for it is only in that sense that ethics can fulfill its practical aim of being an “action guide.”

Moral philosophy or ethics as a theoretical enterprise has certain distinct and specific but limited goals. Because no single theory can make absolute claims, there are so many theories which comprise the field of ethical discourse and in and through an understanding of what they have to offer ethical theory comes across as an “action guide” of moral practice. Therefore, for all practical purposes, one can conclude that there is really no conflict between ethical theory and moral practice. In this background,

the answer to the original question couched in the title of the paper is no. Ethical Theory with its aims of achieving objectivity (in the limited sense explained above) and plurality of values is not opposed to moral practice. It is, on the contrary, an effective “action guide” to moral practice.

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