Carritt, E. F.

Anthony Skelton

E. F. Carritt (1876–1964) was born in London, England. He studied at the University of Oxford, at Hertford College, and received a first-class degree in Greats in 1898. He was later elected to a fellowship at University College, Oxford where, but for one year spent as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, he worked for nearly 50 years. He died in Ascot.

Carritt made contributions to aesthetics and to ethics. His most notable works in aesthetics include *The Theory of Beauty* (1914) and *An Introduction to Aesthetics* (1949). He published three books in ethics: *The Theory of Morals* (1928), *Morals and Politics* (1935), and *Ethical and Political Thinking* (1947), as well as several articles and reviews.

Carritt maintains views in metaethics and in normative ethics. In metaethics, he holds that moral judgments are capable of truth and falsity, that some of them are true, and "seem to be true or false whatever people may think or feel" (1938: 145; *see* COGNITIVISM). He defends a robust moral realism on which there are moral facts making some moral beliefs true (1947: 43, 184, 186; *see* REALISM, MORAL). He maintains that some moral truths are self-evident (e.g., that one ought to pay one's debts) and that these are capable of being apprehended by an intellectual act similar to the one involved in the apprehension of truths in logic and in geometry, and about causal necessitation (1947: 3, 43; *see* INTUITIONISM, MORAL).

Carritt was not unusual in holding this general view. He was, however, one of the first to defend it against A. J. Ayer, who argued that moral claims are, strictly speaking, meaningless, serve only to express emotions, and thus have no cognitive value. "You ought not to harm" becomes, on this view, "Boo harming!." Ayer arrived at this position on the basis of a criterion of meaning according to which to be meaningful a proposition must be empirically verifiable or analytic (Ayer 1936; *see* EMOTIVISM). Since ethical statements are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, they are not meaningful. Against Ayer, Carritt maintained that moral judgments are meaningful. We attempt to use moral language to convey moral propositions. We seem to form beliefs on the basis of our acceptance of such propositions. But this is impossible on Ayer's view (Carritt 1938: 134; 1947: 33). Carritt thinks this hard to accept and that we have more reason to accept that ethical statements are meaningful than we have to accept Ayer's view (1938: 135). He argues further that Ayer needs moral statements to be meaningful to show that they cannot be empirically verified, for "unmeaning sounds … cannot be verified or refuted" (1938: 136; 1947: 35).

Pace Ayer, Carritt concludes that moral judgments are about something. With Ayer, he argues that moral judgments are not about one's own or others' mental states, as in certain forms of subjectivism (1938: 137ff.; 1947: 38ff.). Instead, they are

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about a different kind of "fact, namely an obligation" (1938: 140; 1947: 42). Carritt thinks this insufficient to fend off worries about moral realism. Intriguingly, he confronts an error theory on which all moral judgments are false because the moral properties they posit do not obtain (1938: 140). He does so because he accepts an error theory in aesthetics, on which all aesthetic judgments are false because the aesthetic properties they posit do not obtain (1947: 181; 1938: 140, 132), and because for him the "chief argument" against moral realism involves arguing that moral judgments are analogous to aesthetic judgments on just this score. He has to establish that there is sufficient difference between the two kinds of judgment to justify an error theory about aesthetic but not moral judgments.

To do this, Carritt relies on a range of arguments. The main one begins with the observation that views about what possesses beauty vary from society to society, from individual to individual, and from time to time within the same individual. A love poem is beautiful when one is in love, but grotesque when one's beloved has forsaken one. Mountains were admired in the nineteenth but not in the seventeenth century (1938: 142; 1947: 178). Carritt suggests that the best explanation of these differences is that they reflect mere differences in an individual's or a society's conception of what is meaningful or with one's or a society's affective association with the objects of aesthetic judgment (1938: 142; 1947: 177). Differences in these conceptions or associations are a result of mere differences in mood or spirit, not distorted perceptions of objective aesthetic value, rendering them purely subjective. Carritt concludes, on this basis, that there are no aesthetic facts. Insofar as aesthetic judgments assert that something has or lacks the quality of beauty, they are all false. He argues that this separates moral judgments from aesthetic judgments. There is some variability in moral judgments, but it is not possible to doubt that there are moral truths about what we owe to others (1938: 145; 1947: 44, 183).

There is a problem with Carritt's argument. An argument like his for accepting an error theory in aesthetics might be provided for an error theory in ethics. Although some judgments in ethics, one might grant, do not appear to depend on conceptions of meaningfulness or on affective associations as in aesthetics, there might be other subjective factors on which they do depend that might give us reason for thinking that there are no facts to which ethical judgments refer. One might note moral variability across cultures and argue that it is best explained as resulting from cultural differences rather than poorly formed beliefs about a moral reality. Carritt might reply that certain moral judgments, about the value of motives and about obligations to those with whom we have relations, cannot be doubted (1938: 145; 1947: 182). But this is unlikely to convince those who lack Carritt's credence level in common sense and who are more impressed with the fact of disagreement about, and the cultural variability in, moral claims. And it is not clear that those who want to defend truth in aesthetics cannot argue similarly that some things – the treasury building at Petra or the Taj Mahal in Agra – just are beautiful.

In normative ethics, Carritt is best known for his (often pithy) criticisms of utilitarianism and for his articulation and defense of a brand of deontology familiar from the works of H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross (*see* PRICHARD, H. A.; ROSS, W. D.).

Carritt raised a number of worries about utilitarianism (*see* UTILITARIANISM). Classical utilitarianism says that an agent's act is right insofar as it produces at least as much surplus pleasure for the aggregate as any other act she could have performed in her situation. Carritt attacks the axiological and the deontic component of this position.

He denies that all and only pleasure possesses noninstrumental value, for two reasons (*see* HEDONISM; INTRINSIC VALUE). First, some pleasures are bad, for example, pleasure taken in cruelty (1947: 64, 92). Only innocent pleasure (for example, that had by a child playing in the surf at the seaside) possesses noninstrumental value (1947: 93–4). Second, things other than pleasure possess noninstrumental value, including moral merit (motivation to do what one believes is one's duty in opposition to one's desires), virtuous dispositions (dispositions which lead "usually … to right acts"; 1928: 137), intellectual activity (the production of reasoned convictions), aesthetic experience (though somewhat confusingly given his view of aesthetic facts), and other mental dispositions (e.g., courage; 1947: 83–90).

Carritt agrees with hedonism that only states or activities of consciousness possess noninstrumental value (1947: 80, 83, 117). He does not defend this view. He thinks that to be good a state or activity must be something "of whose existence some creature is aware" (1947: 117). One might, however, agree with this and reject the view that only states or activities of consciousness are noninstrumentally good. There is a difference between something involving awareness and being such a state.

This is important, because, one might argue, Carritt's view fails to capture some of the things that appear to possess noninstrumental value, such as friendship. Friendship is not a state or activity of consciousness, though it does involve them. On Carritt's view, it therefore lacks noninstrumental value.

In reply, Carritt might adopt Ross's view, on which nothing is noninstrumentally valuable except states or activities of consciousness *and* relations between them (Ross 1930: 140). On this view, friendship is good because it is a relationship between two people involving virtue, pleasure, and intellectual activity related in a particular fashion. There is a wrinkle: accepting Ross's view makes it harder for Carritt to hold that equitable distributions lack noninstrumental value (1947: 99). For him, a just state of affairs involves an equitable relation between the states or activities of consciousness of discrete individuals.

Ideal or (as Carritt calls them) agathistic utilitarians, for example Rashdall, agree with Carritt that there is a plurality of goods (*see* RASHDALL, HASTINGS; VALUE PLURALISM). This view holds that an agent's act is right insofar as it produces at least as much surplus good for the aggregate as any other act she could have performed in her situation. Ideal utilitarianism disagrees with its classical counterpart that there is only one noninstrumental value, but it agrees that there is only one fundamental moral requirement: to maximize surplus good for the aggregate.

Carritt thinks this is a mistake. He remarks that utilitarianism cannot capture our intuitions about justice and desert (1928: 38–41; 1947: 62–3, 68). If two states of affairs, A and B, have the same quantity of surplus good, but A has a more equitable distribution than B, we have more reason (contra utilitarianism) to choose B. He

thinks that if Ted has a greater amount of moral merit than Fred, we ought to benefit Ted more than Fred even if doing so produces fewer units of surplus aggregate good.

Nor can the view capture the importance that common sense attaches to the obligation to keep one's promises. Suppose X has promised Y that he will help Y, but that X can, by helping Z, provide slightly more good to Z to whom he has made no promise. And suppose that X cannot help both. Utilitarianism suggests that X ought to help Z, though this is not our moral judgment.

These are not Carritt's most original criticisms. He is among the first to articulate the objection that utilitarianism justifies punishing the innocent (Sverdlik 2012). "[I]t would … appear that, if prevention of crime be the whole justification and nature of punishment, then the hanging of an innocent man who is universally believed guilty is as ideal an instance of punishment as can be conceived" (1928: 109; see also 71; 1947: 65). He remarks that more sophisticated brands of ideal utilitarianism might capture the obligations of justice, desert, and promise-keeping by arguing that their ground rests (exclusively) on the value of fitting with "some as yet unrealized rule or pattern of my own whole life or the life of some ideal community or of mankind, a rule to which my fulfillment of the obligation would conform" (1947: 68; see also Joseph 1931). Carritt rejects this position: there is no obligation to conform to a rule or pattern or ideal unless the rule or pattern or ideal is a good one, and, he argues, the goodness will depend, at least partly, on "its demanding for its realization the fulfilment of obligations" (1947: 68).

This fails to impugn a different variety of ideal utilitarianism. On this view, the obligations of justice, desert, and promise-keeping rest not on the value of conformity to an ideal or rule or pattern; rather, the (exclusive) ground of these obligations is the noninstrumental evil of the acts of injustice, punishing the innocent, and promise-breaking (Ewing 1948). The state of affairs in which justice is not done, the innocent are punished, and promises are broken is worse than the state of affairs in which justice is done, only the guilty are punished, and promises are kept. In this way, ideal utilitarianism might capture our intuitions about justice, desert, and promise-keeping.

Against this view, Carritt can wield a powerful argument. He notes that there appear to be cases in which one can, by producing one injustice, prevent several more injustices from taking place. This version of utilitarianism says we should commit the injustice. But we do not think it right to murder one man even if by doing so we prevent two men from being murdered (1928: 108). This version of ideal utilitarianism does not have an easy time deflecting this worry.

Out of these criticisms emerges a distinct brand of moderate deontology. Carritt thinks that we have four obligations: those of justice (distributive and retributive, including obligations of realizing an equitable distribution of satisfaction and of other goods, of rewarding the morally meritorious and punishing the guilty in proportion to their merit or guilt, of promise-keeping, of gratitude, and of recompense); of improvement (to promote surplus virtue, aesthetic experience, intelligent activity, etc.); of beneficence (to promote surplus – innocent – pleasure and liberty); and of prudence (to promote one's own satisfaction) (1947: 96–116). Interestingly, he does

not defend a distinct obligation of nonmaleficence, even though it is now considered central to deontology.

Carritt does not think obligations are absolute. They are similar to *prima facie* duties (1947: 3n2, 15). Each obligation specifies a factor that matters to what we ought to do. Obligations can conflict with each other. Carritt contrasts them with duties, or with what we ought, all things considered, to do. In determining our duty, we appeal to the various obligations that we believe we have and our (putative) duty is to "fulfill the strongest, or each in proportion to its strength" (1935: 183; see also 120n1, 143, 184–5; 1947: 3, 69, 155). Carritt thinks that these obligations inform one's ethics and one's politics. Political philosophy is a branch of "applied ethics" (1947: 142). On his view, the only basis for allegiance to the state are the obligations of justice, improvement, and beneficence (1947: 144, 148; 1935: 199, 212). Carritt is keen to show that you cannot rest political obligation on an appeal to self-interest or the general will (1935: 178ff.).

In ethical and political reasoning, moral philosophy has a special function. Carritt does not think that it can or should directly influence practice, for two reasons. First, moral philosophy *cannot* prove or demonstrate, if we doubt it, that we have obligations:

> such demonstration must consist in deducing obligations from something more certain, and what can be more certain than that a man whom I have promised to pay for an unpleasant bit of work, and who has done it, has a claim to the payment promised? This is as self-evident as the axioms of mathematics … or the principles of logic … [neither] of which can be proved from anything more certain. (1947: 2–3; see also 43–4; 1925: 574)

Second, moral philosophy *ought not* influence practice directly: it is liable to corrupt it with theoretical generalizations contradicting "men's reflective conclusions on simple moral questions" (1947: 6; see also 1925: 575, 576; 1928: 70). But such conclusions are the philosopher's only data, so that in the case of a conflict between a philosopher's view and such conclusions, we must assume that the philosopher is wrong. Carritt's worry in part is that moral philosophy may have a less than salutary influence on behavior. It may enable those searching for an excuse to avoid doing what is morally required (1925: 576).

This is not to say that moral philosophy has no effect on practice. The "prime value" of moral philosophy is "purely speculative" (1925: 576; see also 1928: 71; 1947: 6). Its function is to clarify our moral views and terminology and to protect us against prejudice and the warping effects of bad philosophy. This has an *indirect* effect on practice: "a truer moral philosophy releases us from the false dogmatisms which may … corrupt our practice" (1925: 577). It does this when it eliminates bad philosophy and articulates a theory that is a "truer generalization of the verdicts of reflective conscience upon particular situations" (1947: 8).

This appears to contrast with the view of moral philosophy taken by philosophers working in the generation before Carritt. Sidgwick thinks that we "study Ethics … for the sake of Practice: and in practice we are concerned with particulars"

(1907: 215; see SIDGWICK, HENRY). He holds that in part the philosopher's "function is to tell men what they ought to think, rather than what they do think" (1907: 373). Rashdall contends that it is possible to establish what we ought to do by "application to particular cases of principles already admitted" (1894: 462).

It is not clear how deep the disagreement is, however. Carritt is worried about contradicting "men's reflective conclusions on simple moral questions." Sidgwick and Rashdall might be keen to respect the same conclusions, though they may disagree about which theory provides the "truer generalization of the verdicts of reflective conscience." They may share the worry about the warping effects of moral philosophy and be keen to ward against it. But there may be more complex cases where appeal to men's reflective conclusions reveals nothing clear or certain. We might deal with these by reference to the "common quality in all our known duties," since this may give us a "clue in more doubtful situations" (1928: 31). But this may not be fruitful. In such situations, a direct appeal to moral philosophy may prove directly practically useful. We may even agree with Rashdall that in these cases "there is a likelihood of their being better answered by those [moral philosophers] who have thought about them than by those who have not" (1894: 466; cf. Carritt 1928: 71).

Carritt was a socialist in politics. His views about the practical value of philosophy did not prohibit him from making strong pronouncements about distributive justice. He holds, for instance, that one's right to distribute one's property upon one's death in the way one wants is "easily … overridden by the claims of other persons to equal liberty and opportunities of happiness or improvement." Indeed, he thinks that a child has no claim (with some exceptions) to inherit from its parents what will raise it "above the level of equality" (1947: 171). These are quite radical claims, making it hard to motivate the (common) worry that an intuitionist position like Carritt's is mired in "parochial dogmatism" (Murphy 1949: 269).

See also: COGNITIVISM; EMOTIVISM; HEDONISM; INTRINSIC VALUE; INTUITIONISM, MORAL; PRICHARD, H. A.; RASHDALL, HASTINGS; REALISM, MORAL; ROSS, W. D.; SIDGWICK, HENRY; UTILITARIANISM; VALUE PLURALISM

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