The Journal of Value Inquiry **32:** 133–137, 1998.

BOOK REVIEW

James Gouinlock, ***Rediscovering the moral life: Philosophy and human practice.*** Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1993, 344 pp. (indexed). ISBN Hb 0-87975-815-5 US$34.95

In this rare mixture of conservative anti-egalitarianism and Deweyan pluralism, James Gouinlock echoes John Dewey's paean that philosophers must turn away from pseudo-problems manufactured by philosophers and toward pressing lessons and potentialities of mortal existence. "Moral philosophy," he urges, "is at the service of the moral life" (p. 82). Its role is to discern the nature of the human moral condition, reflect on its lessons and possibilities, and give it intelligent direction by distinguishing suitable values. Gouinlock entreats:

> As professional philosophers engage topics in the field with ever more sophistication, their analyses recede ever further from vital subject matter, and their conclusions wither on the vine of inconsequence. . . . Moral philosophy. . . . has its *raison d'etre* . . . not to become sophisticated in the convolutions of technical articles, but to investigate the salient characteristics of the moral predicament and the resources to contend with them (p. 11).

Moral philosophy must rediscover the moral life if it is to proceed beyond the bankruptcy of Rawls, Gewirth, and most others. In contrast to these thinkers, James, Santayana, and Dewey are esteemed by Gouinlock for elucidating the "salient characteristics of the human scene" while rejecting the Janus faces of absolutism and relativism. They sought "to fortify practical effort" without pretending to possess a philosopher's stone announcing omnicompetent rules or principles (p. 23). They thereby avoided the great vice of contemporary moral philosophy, the "quest for minute detail and impeccable accuracy in rules of conduct" (p. 21).

This vice in contemporary ethics is exemplified by "the is/ought menace" (p. 97). Whereas moral lessons and advocacies actually emerge through life experience, the "reason-besotted philosopher" acts as though moral positions are or may be taken up because they are "deductively related to verifiable propositions" (p. 97). Invariably the result is an *ad hoc* justification of pre-existing moral advocacies. Why, Gouinlock asks, do philosophers ignore their

own moral history, striving to "contrive a new argument, out of whole cloth"? (p. 98).

> Perhaps philosophers harbor the notion that without their cerebrations life would become quickly barbarous. . . . We have moral communities that have endured by a variety of means – largely as a matter of the trials and errors embodied in custom. . . . Surely there is a role for sustained reflection to lend clarity and resource to this venture (pp. 98–99).

Philosophers need to turn from asking "What ought I to do?" and begin asking "What assumptions and methods will tend to adjust and reconcile human conflicts and bring welcome ends into existence?" (p. 130). The most fruitful way to contend with a moral situation is to consult with others rather than approaching deliberations solipsistically. We must rely on pooled, social intelligence, encouraging colloquy over soliloquy, in contrast with Kant's supposition that "an ideal is worthy only if it can be universally accepted and practiced" (p. 137).

As mentioned at the outset, Gouinlock blends Deweyan pluralism with conservatism. Although there can be no single, correct theory to govern moral deliberations, he urges that a "convergence of moral advocacies" is aided by attempts at empirical confirmation of the descriptive elements of moral systems, especially their claims about human nature (pp. 316–317). Wherever a description of human nature seems relevant, Gouinlock's anti-egalitarianism steps to the fore. This is troublesome due to the political slanting of his empirical sources and his questionable assumptions about learning and behavior.

Conservative sources provide the backdrop for the book's descriptive claims, presumably in opposition to perceived liberal bias in the academy. Gouinlock throughout opposes Dewey's entreaty not to mistake acquired social phenomena, like patriarchy, for manifestations of fixed nature. Gouinlock cites favorably *The Bell Curve* authors Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray without reference to their critics, such as Leon J. Kamin, who observed that the work repeatedly confuses correlation with causation. Murray's own work purportedly shows that welfare cultivates irresponsibility because it is designed to "rescue individuals from the consequences of their acts" (p. 233). Thomas Fleming shows that a real family is a traditional nuclear family. Michael Levin offers "substantial scientific evidence" about "innate gender or racial [intellectual] differences" (p. 211). Steven Goldberg supports the plausibility "that male dominance is both universal and inevitable" so that laws demanding equality of representation are lamentable (p. 199 & 218). Thomas Sowell is cited to support Gouinlock's claim that "all attempts at

creating egalitarian man have been failures, and we have paid an appalling price for the experiments" (p. 181).

Academics critical of these studies are parties to an Orwellian nightmare. In a manner reminiscent of Alan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, Gouinlock argues the academy has become a "Ministry of Truth." Liberal academics are "moral censors" instituting "speech codes to enforce political correctness," striving to "sanitize all language in the classroom" through "intimidation and fear" (p. 211 & 237 n11). This "tyranny on mind and behavior" by academic thought police is causing the "deterioration of American higher education" (p. 237 n11). Intellectuals, Gouinlock claims, "are cowards and herd animals. . . . University faculties . . . stampede on behalf of 'politically correct' moral sentiments" (pp. 300–301).

Given his eloquent entreaties for ideologically neutral descriptions, Gouinlock is strangely silent about empirical studies that do not support his conclusions. A great weakness of this book is its unwarranted assumptions about human psychology. Gouinlock fails to distinguish reward and punishment from reinforcement, and he dismisses offhand any theory that emphasizes the mutability of human nature.

Gouinlock opposes welfare because it rewards rather than punishes people for not working, so people learn not to work. This presupposes that human learning and behavior is motivated primarily through expectation of reward or fear of punishment. When Gouinlock says "we have no choice but to make do with who or what we are" his model of what we are is that of conservative folk psychology (p. 214): "Holding persons responsible, by way of praise and blame, reward and punishment, is precisely the way in which they *become* responsible" (p. 206). Believing his conclusions follow naturally from taking "the moral life as our subject matter", he argues that programs like welfare block the road to responsibility by "excusing weak behavior" (p. 170 & p. 207). "The entitlements provided in our welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, have been disastrous for parents and children alike, rewarding the most self-defeating conduct" (p. 169). In politics as in childrearing, "[t]he fear of penalty or the promise of praise might be just the stimulus they need. If they fail, the penalty must be visited, precisely on the assumption that a better effort will be called forth next time" (p. 208).

Gouinlock's remarks could as well be found in William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* or in the writings of religious right psychologist James Dobson. But their cure is part of the problem. Far from cultivating moral self-reliance and self-discipline, punitive enforcement of strict rules tends to make children dependent on external control.

There are further reasons to reject Gouinlock's psychology. He writes as though it is universally self-evident what functions as a reward and what

functions as punishment. But this is a result of his failure to distinguish reward and punishment from reinforcement. Whatever functions to strengthen a behavior is reinforcement, and since this is relative to idiosyncrasies of individuals and situations, we cannot specify just what will be rewarding or punishing for a class of people.

Gouinlock's advocacy of punishment is especially troubling. Punishment is like cutting off a hydra's head. Worse forms of behavior tend to replace the previous one, calling forth increasingly painful punitive measures. It is a commonplace that undesired consequences stem from punishment, such as increased aggression, escape from or aversion to the punishment situation, a strong tendency toward abuse, and modelling of aggressive behavior begetting aggressiveness.

Coupled with his conception of reward and punishment is Gouinlock's belief in an innate and inviolable Lockean demand for individual desert. With Melvin Lerner he claims that "the universal motivation of human beings is to get what they deserve" (p. 179). Due to an inborn and universal demand for desert, programs like affirmative action go against a "natural imperative" (p. 183). Rewards must therefore be distributed on the basis of desert.

We may wonder how even the simplest behavior could be learned. Do we forego reinforcing a child's failed attempts to walk because she is not yet deserving? How, then, will she ever become deserving? In childrearing as in politics, if we wait to reward only those who have reached sanctioned ends, we wait forever.

With his notion of an innate demand for desert, Gouinlock dramatically parts paths with Dewey. He criticizes Dewey's progressivism as the social philosophy of an unconstrained moral utopian who "exaggerates the plasticity of human nature" by failing to recognize our innate demand for individual desert (p. 47). Dewey's progressivism "is based more on ideology and wishful thinking than candid thought and observation" (p. 199).

In Gouinlock's portrayal, Dewey, along with Marx, Mill, Mead, Habermas, Rawls, and Skinner, argues that culture is omnipotent over nature. "The moral life is an empty canvas to be painted by the educator, upon whom our nature places no limitation" (p. 209). Gouinlock agrees that our nature is not a "uniformly unchangeable given," but he insists that Dewey let "his enthusiasms run ahead of his evidence" (p. 28 & p. 229).

Gouinlock underscores the limits and boundaries of socialization and the Adamic "weaknesses of the flesh" (p. 221). Aside from a helpful discussion in the final chapter of the virtues of courage, rationality, and respect, the recurring theme of this book is negative: we must not exceed the boundaries, constraints, resistances, and limitations of human nature. We must not join the "soaring enthusiasms of Mill and Dewey" (p. 221). Far better to defend

a "scarce resource, realism" and dash these utopian hopes about educating human nature, since these hopes "invite tyrannical means to make them come true" (p. 277).

Gouinlock's case is overstated. The claim that Dewey tended to regard nurture as omnipotent over nature is itself rooted in a dualism between culture and nature that Dewey fought throughout his life. Moreover, Gouinlock commits a fallacy of reification, taking human characteristics as we may find them and claiming that they are invariable. His innatist emphasis on nature over nurture flies in the face of thousands of studies demonstrating the susceptibility of people to change. The results of these studies cannot be so offhandedly dismissed.

Conservatives have long claimed a grounding for their commitments in unreformable human nature. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey criticizes an outlook exemplified by Gouinlock:

> Wary, experienced men of the world have always been sceptical of schemes of unlimited improvement. . . . This type of conservative has thought to find in the doctrine of native instincts a scientific support for asserting the practical unalterability of human nature. . . . Heredity is more potent than environment, and human heredity is untouched by human intent. Effort for the serious alteration of human institutions is utopian. As things have been so they will be. The more they change the more they remain the same (Middle Works, vol. 14, p. 76).

Rediscovering the Moral Life is nonetheless a highly articulate, carefully reasoned contribution to the current refocusing of moral theory on the exigencies of the human condition and away from tedious polemics about the single right thing to do in a situation. As in his classic work, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Value*, Gouinlock masterfully demonstrates the power of the American philosophical tradition to clarify, direct, and extend contemporary moral inquiries.

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