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Review of “Good and Evil”

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Book Review

Good and Evil, Richard Taylor. Prometheus Books (2000), 336 pages (includes index); paper ISBN 157392752x

Richard Taylor's *Good and Evil* first appeared in 1984; for the 2000, revised edition, Taylor has edited some sections and added a final chapter on the meaning of life. The general theme of the book is that moral theory in the Western tradition has generally and unfortunately been committed to a kind of moral realism that, in Taylor's view, treats moral problems (wrongly) as if they are intellectual puzzles to be solved by the development of abstract principles. According to Taylor, this way of thinking about morality blinds us to the fact that morality arises in our interactions with other beings who, like ourselves, have feelings and needs, and who can rejoice or suffer; that is, it blinds us to the fact that moral problems are essentially human problems. Taylor argues for a sort of social contract theory of ethics informed by the tradition of virtue ethics. Besides a discussion of the ground of ethical theory, *Good and Evil* has chapters devoted to the value of love, casuistry, and legal casuistry.

Taylor's general argument is that moral philosophy has traditionally misunderstood the relationship between Reason on the one hand and Will (desire) on the other. Most moral philosophers in the West have assumed what Taylor calls Moral Rationalism. The Moral Rationalist thinks that *Good and Evil* are objective, in the sense that those things that are good and those which are evil are so independently of anyone's thinking them to be so. It is the function of Reason to discern the nature of the good and to direct the Will to pursue it (and conversely, to discern what is evil and avoid it); hence the name 'Moral Rationalism'. So on this view, humans are 'rational all the way down', insofar as the very basis for our actions –our conception of *Good and Evil* – is itself rationally intuited.

If values are objective, it follows that moral values are objective. So, according to the Moral Rationalist, moral principles are objective features of the world and hold independently of anyone's accepting or acting upon them. Taylor calls any moral theory that takes moral values to be objective features of the world True Moralities. Save for Hobbes, Nietzsche perhaps, and Socrates' foil Thrasymachus, most ethicists have embraced True Morality. The first part of *Good and Evil* is devoted to explicating and, ultimately, rejecting Socratic, hedonistic, and Kantian ethics, all of which are, in one way or another, True Moralities.

Taylor's rejection of Kant's ethical system is instructive: Taylor says that Kant's moral theory is the logical conclusion of the notion of True Morality, insofar as Kant held that actions are moral to the extent that they conform to rules or principles that have universal validity, regardless of how doing so impacts actual human lives:

It is Reason that counts [for Kant]. It is not the living and suffering human beings who manage sometimes to be reasonable but most of the time are not. It is not our needs and wants, or any human desires, or any practical human goods. To act immorally is to act contrary to Reason: it is to commit a sort of metaphysical blunder in the relationship between one's behavior and some generalized motive. Human needs and feelings have so little to do with this that they are not even allowed into the picture. If someone reaches forth to help the sick, the troubled, or the dying, this must not be done from any motive of compassion or sentiment of love...(152)

Kantian ethics counts human beings as important only to the extent that they are rational subjects, as he envisions when he describes the Kingdom of Ends. This is to deny an important fact about human nature: that we have emotional and affective attachments to others, and that it is these relationships that make our lives valuable. Besides, if we were purely rational subjects, ethics would have no purpose, since nothing, as Taylor argues, would be good or evil in a world of purely rational subjects. In short, it is difficult to see what the point of morality is on Kant's view. It is not clear why, if morality is objective in the way that the Rationalist conceives it, anyone should care about behaving morally, since being moral may, in fact, have disastrous consequences for ourselves and others. In short, Kant seems more interested in following rules than in relating to other persons in ways that take into account their needs and desires.

So Taylor rejects Moral Rationalism in favor of Moral Voluntarism. The Moral Voluntarist denies that values are objective in the sense just described. If we imagine a world devoid of beings with any desires whatsoever, then we are imagining a world without good or evil:

...now let us note that the basic distinction between *Good and Evil* could not even theoretically be drawn in a world that we imagined to be devoid of all life. That is, if we suppose the world to be exactly as it is, except that it contains not one living thing, it seems clear that nothing would be good and nothing bad. It would just be a dead world, turning through space with a lifeless atmosphere. Having deprived our imagined world of all life, we can modify it in numberless ways, but by no such modification can we ever produce the slightest hint of good or evil in it until we introduce at least one living being capable of reacting in one way or another to the world as that being finds it. (164-165)

Furthermore, if we imagine a world of purely rational beings, that is, beings altogether without desire, then we still do not have a world with value in it, according to Taylor. However, as soon as we imagine a world that contains even a single being that has desires, we are imagining a world in which good and evil are possible:

The mere fact that a desire exists, that something is wanted, or that something is regarded as a goal, entails that the desire should be fulfilled or the goal achieved; that is to say, that such satisfaction would be a good for him who wants it. It matters not in the least what the desire is. It might be, as [William] James expressed it, a desire for "anything under the sun". (179)

Furthermore, for the Voluntarist, it is the Will (desire) that determines (in the metaphysical sense) whether some thing is good or evil (by desiring it or desiring to avoid it). Having deemed it good,

the Will then directs Reason to determine the best way to get it. Thus, whereas the Rationalist holds that the Will is in the employ of Reason, the Voluntarist reverses this order of dependency. On the Voluntarist picture of human nature, humans are not “rational all the way down”, because the fundamental motivation for our actions – our needs and desires – cannot themselves be judged by rational standards.

If values are not objective, then moral values cannot be objective, either. Taylor thus holds that moral rules are not metaphysically grounded. Rather, moral rules arise when two or more affective beings come into the world; only in such a world is there the possibility of conflict between desires, and only in such a world is there the possibility of cooperation toward a common good. So for Taylor, moral rules are not objective in the sense that they hold independently of whether anyone believes or even considers them, as the Moral Rationalist thinks. Rather, moral rules are conventional; Taylor ends up arguing for something like a social contract theory of ethics:

That two beings should fight and injure each other in their contest for something that each covets, and thereby, perhaps, each lose the good he wanted to seize, is clearly an evil to both. But in the absence of a rule of behavior – that is, some anticipated behavior to the contrary – no wrong has been done; only an evil has been produced...The wrong comes into being with the violation of the rule. (176)

It should be noted that by a ‘rule’, Taylor means “...nothing but practices or ways of behaving that are more or less regular and that can, therefore, be expected.” (173). However, it is misleading to say that morality is purely conventional:

The distinction between good and evil is not a natural one that merely awaits discovery, neither is it purely conventional, in the sense that it is arbitrarily created by this or that culture. Good and evil, as such, form no part of the framework of nature, as do darkness and light, for they would find no place whatsoever in a world devoid of any living thing. At the same time, however, they do result, in a perfectly natural way, from certain facts of human nature that are evident to anyone, and along with them emerges every other moral distinction...(191)

So what are we left with once we reject the idea that there is a True or Natural morality, and claim that moral principles are only conventional? And what does morality amount to if it isn’t a matter of acting on the correct moral principles? Taylor thinks that Kant was correct in identifying the motive for one’s actions as the essential element in determining whether they are good or evil. But Kant was wrong to think that the motive for good actions was the motive of duty, which simply amounts to allegiance to abstract rules. According to Taylor, there are four basic kinds of motive: egoism, self-hatred, malice toward others, and compassion. Behavior that is motivated by sympathy and compassion for others, Taylor thinks, is good; behavior that is motivated by self-hatred or malice is evil. This is so regardless of the moral principles invoked to justify the behavior in question. Taylor makes this point by way of a series of very effective examples, in what is perhaps the best chapter in the book, “The Virtue of Compassion”. There the basic point of the book emerges: if we want a world in which people treat each other with compassion and respect, we will not achieve it by appealing to abstract rules that direct us to treat one another in such ways. In fact, if some person – a psychopath, for instance, or Thrasymachus perhaps – simply refuses to care for the interests of others, there is no principled way to say that he or she is wrong. The best we can do

is to try our best to cultivate the virtues of compassion and respect for others in ourselves and in those around us. This raises the problem of what to do when people's goals and values conflict, as they inevitably will. Although Taylor rejects classical Utilitarianism because of its commitment to hedonism (Taylor argues that the claim that pleasure is the highest good is either false or empty), he does think that when desires conflict, the right course is to promote those desires that are compatible with the maximization of the most actual desires that people in general have:

A better formulation [than Mill's] of the idea of the common good...would be this: The maximum fulfillment of all those aims that different people actually have, and the maximum satisfaction of their felt desires, whatever these may be, at the least cost – that is, with the minimum frustration of precisely the same aims and desires. (182-183)

Good and Evil, then, is a book that challenges one of the fundamental assumptions of most of Western ethics: that the task involved in debating and solving ethical problems is one that essentially involves the use of Reason and requires somehow 'setting aside' our feelings toward others and our relationships with them.

In the final chapter, on the meaning of life, Taylor draws out the implications of his view for the case of Sisyphus, condemned to eternally push rocks up hills only to see them tumble back time and again. Taylor's view is, predictably, that although Sisyphus' toils have no meaning in the sense that they have no ultimate purpose, they would have meaning if Sisyphus were somehow made to desire rolling rocks up hills for eternity. That is, life has no objective meaning, but we should not despair at this fact. After all, even if there were some objective, important, meaningful purpose at which Sisyphus' activities were aimed, what good would it do Sisyphus unless he himself found that ultimate purpose to be valuable? And isn't the question of whether one's life is valuable one that must be answered subjectively, since it only arises in any concrete way for the subject himself or herself?

Good and Evil is one of those philosophy books – Stroud's *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* comes to mind as another – that is accessible to undergraduates but addresses issues of fundamental importance in such a way that it is a challenge to professional philosophers as well. Taylor does an excellent job of explaining the basic philosophical principles behind such diverse thinkers as Socrates, Callicles, Thrasymachus, Epicurus, Kant and James without distorting them and without oversimplifying them. The prose is simple and elegant, and the arguments are straightforward and clear; Taylor does an excellent job of getting the reader to realize the weight of the problems at hand, and of explaining why philosophy is not simply – as many seem to think – an empty intellectual game but rather the most important discipline of all.

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