Review of “Thinking How to Live”

Steven Ross  
_Hunter College & The Graduate Center/CUNY_
Once, many, many years ago, I heard an exasperated philosopher in a seminar in London say, “I know what Wittgenstein said was wrong, but surely not everything he said was wrong!” This thought, among many others, occurred to me while reading *Thinking How To Live*, Alan Gibbard’s intelligent, wide ranging, unpretentious, but in the end, rather disappointing work. In making this last claim, I do not want to suggest Gibbard’s work is particularly unusual in this respect. Gibbard’s argument disappoints me in the way that a great deal of contemporary meta-ethics does, (particularly it must be admitted, the arguments of so called expressivists). The reader I am sure has been there before (this is certainly so if the reader has been reading Simon Blackburn or Frank Jackson for example). A picture is rehearsed with undeniable skill and sophistication, the Frege-Geach problem is invariably trotted out one more time and “solved,” but the hard questions, the interesting questions, that an account like this generates, tend to get answered with soothing phrases rather than taken up with good arguments. This is particularly so for the issue of how an expressivist understands *justification* in moral life.

But to say this is to get a bit ahead of myself, to point out what I think is the fundamental gap in the overall presentation, an issue to which I will return. What lies behind this opening recollection; why begin with this invocation of the later Wittgenstein? The answer has to do with the way in which we appear to live in a philosophical climate at once highly attuned to important differences within a general philosophical category and remarkably indifferent to those differences. When Wittgenstein offered the idea of “family resemblances” as an antidote to essentialism, for those in philosophical aesthetics or philosophy of religion, for example, the idea was a godsend, a model that enabled philosophers to bypass the sterile, fruitless task of offering generalizations about “the nature of art” or “the nature of religion” and instead turn to distinctive subgroups where plausible generalizations might hold all the same. Instead of the nature of art, Arthur Danto wrote interestingly on the nature of contemporary painting for example. And in moral theory, it is as if this point was achieved in the philosophical culture simply through the work that was done *in* such subgroups. The past fifty years or so has seen the emergence of constructivist political theory that takes up only the basic structure of society, a revived interest in what may count as virtuous character without discredited metaphysics, and in applied ethics, discussions of obligations to others in other nations or obligations to animals. The idea that the justification story offered in any one of these domains would simply instantiate some general justification story operating everywhere, the idea that in each case we are worried about how to bring about some single thing, “moral goodness,” has been left behind as implausible. Here, one might say, the later Wittgenstein just had to be right. And as I say, the philosophical culture seems to understand this very well. Rawls and
Singer (to take but two more well known examples) make it very clear they do not think the considerations that constitute “the just” or “the obligatory” in the domains they take up are instantiations of some more general evaluative concept (let alone property) that lives everywhere in our normative life. The anti-essentialist point has been absorbed and the quality of the philosophical work that has been generated over the past fifty years is ample testament to the fertility of this threshold insight.

But when one turns to meta-ethics, a rarely commented upon Alice in Wonderland quality dreamily emerges as philosophers earnestly wonder about “the meaning” of this thing “good,” and Moore, here and here alone, is discussed endlessly (and I mean endlessly). It is hardly surprising that, if you do think there is something interesting to be said about “the good,” (or, more pointedly, if you feel that there must be something interesting of a general nature to be said here and it is just a question of choosing the best from a fixed set of available philosophical candidates), then that something will turn out to be very abstract, almost bloodless. After all, consider what an analysis of “the divine” would look like if it had to apply to everything that calls itself a religion, or what a description of “art” would be if had to be consistent with every slide shown in every introduction to art class. It is equally unsurprising that, if one is driven by this ambition, many philosophers will find the expressivist strategy of identifying “good” with (roughly) the expression of a certain sort of attitude towards courses of action a natural winner. After all, no natural property, however wildly disjunctive, gives us the truth conditions for all instances of evaluative attribution. As no one will now ever forget, since it always makes sense to ask, any answer that names a property cannot be right. And besides, no property talk could ever capture the active or practical nature of evaluative life. Thus the expressivist view: “good” names no property but a way of taking things, a plan in life, a decision, a verdict that some state of affairs is, for some agent, given his plan, “okay to do” (Gibbard’s term).

A few things need to be stressed before going further. In one important respect, Gibbard’s project goes back to Hume, in that it attempts to figure out a place for moral life within a fundamentally naturalistic outlook. How, one might ask, do moral properties, (or, to use Hume’s term, “moral distinctions”) “fit” into our world, a world explained by reference to physical stuff, law and causation? At the same time, like Hume, Gibbard rightly rejects any “error theory” or attempt to explain moral life away. We need an account that makes sense of this fundamental feature of ourselves – no error theory is (again, quite rightly) taken seriously for a moment. The success of Hume’s own secondary property / projectivist treatment of morality with respect to these ambitions was mixed – by tying moral qualities to inner reactions, he did make sense of how morality is possible within a fundamentally naturalistic account, and he made sense (he thought) of how moral qualities could be important to us and motivate us. But an account like Hume’s leaves it unclear how we can think of persons in genuine opposition to one another (as opposed to merely different from one another), and how any state of affairs in the world (as opposed to some state inside the person) can really be said to bear a moral property. These undeniable features of moral life seem unsatisfactorily accounted for when within secondary property projectivism, and an expressivist view like Gibbard’s seeks to remedy these deficiencies without abandoning the fundamental projectivist insight.

Gibbard’s expressivism differs from the Humean model in several ways. In Gibbard’s argument, the essence of the normative is found in the closely related ideas of norm and plan. We deliberate and
accept various norms, and it is in virtue of those norms that facts in the world, or courses of action, have the normative valence that they do. In deciding what to do, in fixing upon a plan, we identify what we take to be good. As Gibbard puts it many times, “In deciding what to do, we decide what we ought to do.” “Questions of what we ought to do are questions of what to do.” (10, 19, 181) In theory, we could try to imagine every conceivable contingency, in every possible world, and then go on to determine what we would do in that contingency – this fully specified set of decisions Gibbard calls a “hyper-plan,” and a person with a hyper-plan would then be said to have a complete system of value. What we would do (upon reflection) and what we take to be good are simply identical – hence “expressivism.” The term “good” does not denote some property or fact in the world; rather its use on any occasion expresses a posture of endorsement or approval towards such facts. “[These] states of mind are explained not as beliefs with such and such content, but in some other way. They are explained psychologically as sentiments or attitudes, perhaps, or as universal preferences, states of norm acceptance – or states of planning.” (181)

So, does Gibbard’s expressivism improve upon Hume? Yes it does, in certain ways. In the first place, states of affairs (not merely inner states) now bear evaluative properties, or descriptions, though they do so only relative to a norm or a plan. “There is no such thing as a specifically normative state of affairs; all states of affairs are natural. We do though have normative thoughts and they are distinct from naturalistic thoughts.” (181) Torturing children really is wrong – relative to the norm you have presumably accepted that torturing children is wrong. "The world, as Gibbard puts it in more than one place, is filled with “plan-laden facts” – given, that is, a person has a plan and this plan determines what is “okay to do.” Second, because particular courses of action really do rule out rival courses of action, we can speak of one plan or norm opposing or contradicting another. We are expressivists in the sense that there is no fact the use of the term “goodness” picks out – for a person to find some state of affairs good is for that person to express a preference, or more elaborately, a preference for a plan in which that course of action is endorsed. But given that this is what goodness is, it is then, for persons, an undeniable fact that certain states of affairs in the world bear normative content. Given a norm, a plan, (or even better, a hyper-plan), goodness then supervenes abundantly on an otherwise value-less world. Thus we get a kind of realism (Gibbard follows Blackburn in calling his view “quasi-realism” – I would prefer “faux realism”), in that when all is in place, we will have a grammar of attribution, contradiction, reason giving and so forth – but without anything so silly as moral facts, without anything like what Mackie made up and then quite understandably professed to find so queer.

There is much in this book to be admired and praised. The discussion of naturalist realism and its limitations is excellent. The elaboration of the distinction between properties and concepts makes it easy to be both a naturalist and non-reductive about the normative. The way in which Gibbard explains what he means by plan or reason is a model of patience. But, to get to the heart of things, one cannot help but feel reading Gibbard that “everything old is new again,” and in two ways. First is the point made earlier: the whole project of offering a general account of “good” and the candidate put forward for a successful version of this, that goodness is essentially finding something “okay to do,” smacks of the mind numbing 1950s. I mean, really. When we are positively drowning in context sensitive discussions of distributive justice, personal virtue, obligation and the like, how can anyone really expect us not to feel the jolt of strangeness in offering “okay to do” as the fundamental touchstone of moral judgment? This sort of analysis just makes it easy for the French to lampoon us. More fundamentally, unless I am missing something, we have in Gibbard’s
argument really simply a re-issue of the view of R.M. Hare, but, sadly, without Hare’s willingness to acknowledge (grudgingly, it is true, but acknowledged nevertheless) what a view like this commits you to on the crucial issue of justification.

Hare, like Gibbard, sought a general, overarching account of “good” that would accommodate what was taken to be the undeniable insight behind Moore’s open question test – that no natural property could give us what goodness means – while moving beyond what was already seen as the deeply implausible ontology of intuitionism. Hare also succinctly criticized naturalism along lines more or less identical to those found in Gibbard. Hare argued that we could not take good to mean “has descriptive properties D1, D2, D3…” for then it would be impossible to commend those properties. If naturalism were correct, then in saying “D1 – D3 is good,” we would simply be repeating ourselves, and that cannot be right. When Gibbard argues that even if we knew every fact, or had on hand a full description of the world, we would still find it reasonable to debate about what we ought to do, he is making virtually the identical point. (14) And so, (returning to Hare), “goodness,” Hare thought, rejecting descriptivism, but determined to find a general account of the concept, cannot be a property but must be found essentially in an activity, in commending. (Sound familiar?) In moral life, there is in Hare this further wrinkle: we are said to commend sincerely only if we do so by reference to a principle in universal form (what Gibbard would call a norm), and one would accept were we ourselves to occupy any of the relevant place holders the principle speaks of. (For Gibbard, the same result is approached via the possible-worlds device – we imagine the agent endorsing the norm or plan with the implications fully specified in all possible worlds – the hyper-plan.) Hare speaks of principles that we accept prescriptively, Gibbard speaks of norms we understand fully when we think through the decisions they would entail in every possible world. Both reject a descriptivist or naturalist analysis of the concept for identical, and identically sound, reasons – one might say, for both, the descriptivist or naturalist cannot capture evaluation in so far as it is a form of life. The activity of commending or thinking what to do will resist capture in any descriptivist reduction. And the differences between these two would appear to be marginal too. In both cases, you will have a world that bears normative properties, but not in itself; only once the norm has been endorsed. Moral properties will indeed straightforwardly supervene upon natural ones, but only because people choose the norms that make it so. Evaluative attributions, to use Gibbard’s term, are “plan-laden.” In both cases (though this was not Hare’s worry, it is available to one who holds his view), there is a robust realism about moral life, but moral life is fit into the natural world without presuming any strange entities, which is to say, neither natural nor non-natural “moral facts.” In both cases, by understanding moral life in terms of agent centered plans or norms, this anti-naturalism towards the moral will not prevent you from making sense of contradiction and opposition in moral life too.

And in both cases there is a big problem with how we are to understand justification. With Hare, the problem is striking and unavoidable. Because judgment is always relative to a principle, and because principles cannot be said to describe or mirror any moral facts, should we have fundamental conflict among principles, we cannot adjudicate such conflict or say one or the other side to that conflict is really or objectively wrong or right. Justification is relative to a principle but ultimate principles cannot themselves be justified – they are chosen and lived out sincerely, but beyond that, there is no criterion of assessment open to one who follows Hare. As I say, to his enduring credit, Hare faced out this consequence of his view in the chapter “Toleration and Fanaticism” in his later work, Freedom and Reason. If the Nazi really and truly sincerely accepted
the consequences of his view, even should he or she occupy one of the, shall we say, “less favored” places, then there is nothing further the liberal can say. Of course, we are right, by our lights, to oppose and resist the Nazi with all our might. And we can say that relative to our principles, the Nazi is bad, bad, bad. But we cannot say, our theory cannot make sense of saying, there is some fact or consideration the Nazi gets wrong. Ontologically, from the standpoint of meta-ethics, (however you want to put the point) the two justifications are simply on a par. Hare thought this conclusion, unhappy as it was, was simply what followed from “the nature of morals” and so just had to be swallowed. There was a bracing existentialist willingness to look the void in the face in those days. Nowadays, expressivists never take up this sort of example, and certainly never admit in such bald terms that their view cannot avoid this consequence. Yet the consequence is equally unavoidable and equally embarrassing. On the whole, in my experience, contemporary expressivists just prefer to change the subject to something that appears to resemble the justification problem. So consider Gibbard’s to me rather disingenuous discussion of skepticism in ethics:

This accusation of skepticism we can dismiss. Suppose, as I maintain, that ethical statements concern what to do. What then constitutes ethical skepticism? It must be the view that there is nothing to do – not just that the alternatives are always bleak and boring, but that nothing is ever the thing to do, given what choices we have. All answers to questions of what to do are mistaken, a skeptic must say to count as a skeptic. (14)

In a sense, this highly artificial characterization of “skepticism in ethics” is entirely natural. In the domain of meta-ethics, the tendency to compare our epistemic and metaphysical concepts as they play out in the naturalist context with the alleged “counterpart” concepts in the moral one can become something like a parlor game that has gone out of control. As I think has been pretty clear since Plato’s Republic, “skepticism in ethics” is not given in the thought that “there is nothing to do”; rather it is given in the thought that our justifications in fact cannot deliver the objectivity or authority they purport to have. Rather than look at moral life and just describe what skepticism there is, Gibbard takes skepticism as it is understood since Descartes, plugs in moral notions and voila, it turns out that there is nothing to worry about after all! It goes without saying that the authority problem, with us in moral life, not merely in moral philosophy, as soon as anyone (in this case, Thrasymachus) bothers to offer a subversive interpretation of our central moral concepts, goes completely unaddressed.

An analogous point can be made with respect to his discussion of normative kinds, and how the use of different normative concepts across different cultures is to be characterized. (Chapter 8) This is in fact an excellent discussion, one of the high points of the book; I choose it because here we see the problem of justification evaded rather than mischaracterized; here what we see is simply the disinclination to take up the next natural issue in the argument. One cannot tell if Gibbard thinks that there is a solution to the authority problem consistent with his expressivist views, or if, like Hare, he thinks that the truth of expressivism means that a certain stoical realism about our inability to get anything like real objectivity here must just be faced out and accepted. And generally, I feel when reading expressivists like Gibbard and Blackburn, they are themselves not sure what they think on this issue and just prefer to change the subject. But let me now turn to the discussion of normative kinds and connect it with my earlier claim regarding the objectivity problem.

Normative kinds will be terms that both pick out bits of the world (usually behavior and intentions) and do so with evaluative criteria. So to call an act “malicious” or “brutal” is to say not simply that...
some violence was done, but that it was _undeserved_, unwarranted. When a surgeon amputates or a soldier kills in self defense, this is not generally termed “malicious.” When a jury debates about whether to find the beating “malicious,” that a certain amount of physical damage was done is already conceded and not at issue; the jury must determine whether the action was in every way _unjustified_. Now let us take our term “brutal” and suppose (Gibbard’s example) a culture of the Bulli that has a term “wumpura.” The Bulli use this term before many of the same actions we term brutal, and so on the surface of things, the two terms can appear roughly co-extensive. But it turns out that for the Bulli, such actions are to be praised, they show (they think) who is boss, and they get the weaker party to fear you. Gibbard is quite right to say that with these understandings in the background, we could never then translate “brutal” as “wumpura,” since the implication of being undeserved and so wrongful is not preserved in their normative kind. Gibbard suggests (and I think he is right) that should they disagree as to whether an act is “wumpura” or not, we cannot enter into this dispute, we cannot understand it. (When Wittgenstein said, “If a lion could talk, we would not understand him” he meant _exactly_ this point.) Since for us, _no_ act is really “wumpura,” only brutal or not-brutal, a very different matter, we must simply demur, and regard what they say as “neither true nor false.” (169)

Gibbard is quite right to resist the crude reductionism that certain versions of moral naturalism might be committed to here – our moral concepts have irreducibly normative components woven into them, and should these differ, then no amount of shared reference will give us equivalence (how far we are from “gavagai” now). But it is only natural to ask: well, can we ever say that some normative kinds (or more precisely, the judgments they support) are simply right, not simply not-identical with their imagined rivals, and the judgments supported by their rivals wrong? Of course, this is a thought that would have to be made good without any talk of anything so spooky as stand alone “moral facts,” but it turns out that this is not so wild an idea as expressivists might have us believe. So consider the idea that this person is wrongly enslaved because no one, on the basis of color or race, _deserves_ to be enslaved. Crazy, huh? Let us imagine the counterpart culture that has the counterpart normative kinds that supports the counterpart judgment. Fine. The natural question now is: _is_ there any non-controversial description of the person that requires ruling out one of these judgments and endorsing the other? Kant certainly thought so, and I think so did Mill. (Figures we rarely read about in meta-ethics, funnily enough.) If you think that we simply must see persons as more or less equally rational and more or less equally free, (in the sense of merely being deliberative), then slavery would seem to be _wrong_. If you think that all creatures, let alone persons, have a prima facie claim to freedom from suffering and death, as utilitarians do, then failure to save the child drowning in the wading pool is _wrong_. Notice there is no talk of moral facts here – so far as I know, Kant and Mill, our pre-eminent objectivists, _never_ talk this way. What they do talk about is the _person_, and what certain descriptions of the person, once granted, would seem to require when we think about morality. Gibbard never considers this line of argument – we simply do not know whether he thinks it must be thought of as but one more norm that is equally embraceable or resistible, one more plan or hyper-plan an agent might or might not have after deciding what to do, or whether the Kantian can make good on the claim that it is not, consistent with moral thought, resistible after all. And if there is any objectivity in moral thought, it is here. It is not in the oft-repeated, bland assurances of “quasi-realism” that the “grammar” of expressivism “mimics” the grammar of “realism.” (19, 112, 126, 181) Nietzsche and Marx would snort with derision to hear that claim! The “justifying grammar” of libertarian capitalism “mimics” that of realism too – so what? Does the fact that talk of God and the divine mimics talk of clouds or tress
(and it really does) in any way show that all this God-talk we hear is *justified*? To the critic, or to the skeptic, (again, consider Marx, Thrasymachus) it is precisely this surface resemblance relation that is so annoying.

The question has to be, how good are the justifications? And that, in turn, has to be the question: do justifications ever hook onto certain descriptions of persons we cannot deny, with implications that that cannot admit of any plausible rival? I sometimes think so, in some contexts at least. But why I think this and whether I am right (which is to say, whether Kant or Mill were right) is not the issue. What *is* at issue is this: just what exactly is the *expressivist* position on this strategy? Talk about our commitment to the constraints of naturalism, deflationary conceptions of truth, supervenience and constitution, the Frege-Geach problem – all of this can only go so far. Moral judgments claim to be justified. Some theorists have claimed they are objectively so – not because of anything so silly as moral facts, but because of what persons are. What does the expressivist think of *that* claim? Of course, I do not deny that expressivists can draw upon Darwinian-naturalist explanations for why most of us act in certain ways, why cooperation is generally valued, or why certain moral judgments seem normal to us, and others seem monstrous. But I take it as obvious that this sort of argument cannot really be said to address the challenge at hand. In the epistemic context, the extreme demands of Cartesian skepticism can be set aside on pragmatic grounds as of largely theoretical interest only. No one really needs to be persuaded they are not brains in a vat before they will trust the evidence of their senses. And a Darwinian or naturalist explanation of this proclivity can more or less satisfy us as to why it has the authority it does. But in the moral context, troubling, substantive challenge to our everyday notions of the good (such as plantation slavery, colonial conquest, sexual subordination) are as common as sand, sometimes even historically dominant, and by no means so easily set aside with any bland appeal to what Darwin might point to. One might imagine a naturalist explanation for why certain symphonies seem harmonic to most us. Fine. But if there were subgroups whose ears appeared to be different and heard other sorts of things as harmonic, we would then, in this example, be left with something like a “whose to say?” relativism. Something like this is surely the case with the comic. No “naturalistic” explanation of why we laugh generally can hope to generate any objectivity on the divisive issue of whether *Borat* really is funny. (It is not.) Is moral difference, on the fundamental level, like *that*? Well, not if Kant or Mill is right. But we do not know what Gibbard thinks about that possibility, how well granting it fits with a consistent commitment to expressivism, or how at ease he would be with the alternative.

Again, moral judgments claim to be justified. Some theorists have thought they might be objectively so. Hare made it clear that sadly, this claim could not stand – not consistent with how moral language was thought to work in his theory. As an expressivist who does not wish to cause undue alarm on this issue, Gibbard sometime speaks in ways that would give comfort to the objectivist intuition here – he speaks of some plans as being “crazy” or “mistaken” (150) – but at the same time, because he really is an expressivist, the language of non-objectivity runs like a continuous drum beat throughout his account. And fundamentally, it would seem undeniably, what normative attributions there are there are because of plans, and plans themselves cannot be assessed by anything but another plan. Gibbard writes: “Expressivism, I keep stressing, is not a substantive theory of what’s right and wrong, what’s good and bad, and what makes it that way.” (185) Maybe. But it certainly is a theory about what a “substantive theory” could *be*, or what the idea of a “substantive theory” can possibly amount to. It may be right, but it would be nice if expressivists
who believed in their account would face up to what being right entailed and then tried to figure out how convincing *that* would be. It is an odd fact that while our current expressivist theories are infinitely more sophisticated than their hoary ancestors of sixty years ago, they are far less transparent, far less honest, and so to me, far less satisfying. It’s not okay.

Steven Ross  
Hunter College & The Graduate Center/CUNY