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Review of "Ethics and Humanity: Themes From the Philosophy of Jonathan Glover"

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Book Review | *Ethics and Humanity: Themes From the Philosophy of Jonathan Glover*

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*Ethics and Humanity* is a collection of eleven new essays, all written in tribute to the work of Jonathan Glover, along with a brief biography (written by Alan Ryan), along with a nearly fifty-page response from Glover himself to each of the essays. The essays cover most of the central topics that have engaged Glover’s forty-plus year career, including war, bioethics, torture, moral psychology, and the history of human violence and atrocity that was made central in 1999’s *Humanity*. The contributors include the three co-editors, along with a stellar lineup of major philosophers including Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum, Onora O’Neill, and John Harris. There is an inherent difficulty in reviewing a collection of essays, namely that it becomes hard to give adequate consideration of a broad range of approaches and arguments in the body of a book review, but that difficulty is increased when the essays are presented so lovingly in tribute to a single figure. There is a sense of warmth and philosophical community to all of these essays that is not always present in tribute volumes and *festschriften*. Several of the essays end with very personal postscripts from the authors describing the kindness of Professor Glover, and it is difficult to do the feeling of love, which pervades the book, justice in a short review, but I will try to hit the key points here. I will not address each essay in detail, but begin with a summary of each before moving in a more critical direction with some comments and criticisms.

Section One, “Torture”, features only one essay, “What Can We Do About Torture?” by James Griffin, a long-time colleague of Glover’s at Oxford. Griffin addresses a central concern in Glover’s ethical thought: the limits on what human beings should be allowed, ethically, to do to her fellow human beings. The limits are tested, for Griffin,
by the use of interrogational torture and an answer is ultimately not found: Griffin argues that torture could be justified only by a “principled torture” (and not by the current defenses of torture utilized by legal theorists and moral philosophers), which is not available to us.

Section Two, “War”, addresses issues in Just War theory, following Glover’s own endeavors into the topic in 1977’s *Causing Death and Saving Lives* and revisited in 1999’s *Humanity*. Thomas Hurka and Jeff McMahan, both of whom have contributed much to the current understanding of Just War Theory, each offer essays that survey Glover’s view on the topic while presenting their own nuanced approaches to the *status quo* of Just War thinking. Hurka analyzes the consequentialism that underlies traditional Just War theory, and notes the tensions that arise from Glover’s own consequentialist leanings and how his view differs from the traditional versions. This theme, of Glover as an anti-doctrinal or non-traditional consequentialist, recurs throughout the essays in the book. McMahan’s essay addresses the issue of humanitarian intervention as just cause for war, considering the problems of consent, proportionality, and obligation for defenders of humanitarian intervention. Most notable in McMahan’s essay is the possibility that humanitarian interventions might be more obligatory than traditionally thought, and that intervening nations might be obligated to put their soldiers at risk far more than they have done in the past. This claim is certainly in line with McMahan’s recent work on war, including 2009’s *Killing In War* (Oxford University Press).

Section Three, “Ethics, Truth, and Belief”, offers the most variety of the sections, and is also home to some of the most interesting moments in the collection. In “Humanity and the Perils of Perniciously Politicized Science,” N. Ann Davis explores the consequences of capitalism and Neoliberalism on the truth-seeking nature of science, and worries that knowledge for the sake of truth has been replaced with a model of knowledge as financial commodity. Although the general concept of the chapter seems only tangentially related to issues in *Humanity* (namely, the ability to de-politicize ourselves in times of social, moral, and intellectual conflict), Davis draws parallels between the policies that effect scientific research and other public policy issues. Davis’s essay is also the most political and polemical, while also being the most broadly applicable. Allen Buchanan’s “Social Moral Epistemology and the Tasks of Ethics” might be the best summation of Glover’s work to appear in the volume, and Buchanan distills the central theses of *Humanity* down handily. Buchanan is sympathetic to Glover’s overall project, but raises doubts about how his attempt to incorporate moral psychology into ethics can succeed without the inclusion of a more expansive social moral epistemology (the epistemology of institutions and the beliefs of social groups). Richard Keshen’s contribution explores the epistemic problems of reasonable disagreement and the ‘strains of dialogue,’ and ends on a pessimistic (or, at least, not-optimistic) note: our moral psychology might be too fraught with antagonism
and small-mindedness for there to be reasonable hope to resolve dialogical disagreements.

Section Four, “Bioethics and Beyond,” addresses Glover’s pioneering work in the field of bioethics. Onora O’Neill’s “Humanity and Hyper-Regulation: From Nuremberg to Helsinki” addresses problems found in implemented informed consent and what O’Neill sees as the overreaching of consent codes post-Nuremberg. John Harris’s “Transhumanity: A Moral Vision of the Twenty-First Century” considers the moral and biological consequences of the creation of “humanimals,” creatures with mixed human and animal components. In his own way, Harris blends Glover’s work in bioethics (What Sort of People Should There Be?) with the questions he addresses in Humanity and, in the most broad way possible, reconsiders some of the fundamental questions of philosophy and humanity.

Section Five, “Some Silences in Humanity,” addresses three major gaps in Glover’s central argument in Humanity. Roger Crisp’s essay “The Foundations of Humanity”, the shortest in the volume, challenges Glover’s claim that the twentieth century has seen a decline in the acceptance of the ‘moral law’ and raises concerns about Glover’s own apparent moral skepticism for the presumption of moral philosophy in general. Crisp’s attack is the most meta-ethical to appear in the book, and renews some crucial questions for any moral theory. Peter Singer’s “Bystanders to Poverty” resurrects one of Singer’s most well known arguments (the drowning child argument from “Famine, Affluence and Morality”) against Glover’s own claims about the obligations of humanity. It is a crucial point he raises-Glover himself rejects the acts and omissions doctrine, and never defends a strong obligation to provide basic aid to a fellow human being in peril, but this seems to clash with the core tenets of his defense of humanity as such. If we should be concerned with preventing future genocides, why should we not also be concerned with helping prevent massive death due to disease and starvation? Singer notes that Glover’s careful moral history of the twentieth century completely ignores the massive amount of death and suffering caused by famine, pestilence, and disease that may have been preventable but for the inaction of those wealthier nations to offer the resources to prevent it. Since Glover argues that the bystanders to Nazi genocide were morally culpable for their inaction, it would be morally inconsistent to claim that wealthy individuals and societies are any less culpable for standing idly by as poor nations suffer from starvation and disease. Martha Nussbaum’s “Compassion: Human and Animal” concludes the essays on Glover’s work by considering the role of compassion and related moral emotions as they present themselves in animals, and by focusing on human ‘anthropodenial’ (the implicit denial by humans that we are animals) and the human moral and social weaknesses that may be lacking in other members of the animal kingdom. As Nussbaum succinctly puts it, “Human compassion is diseased” (203) and a long look at the psychological behavior of animals might provide us with an antidote for our own moral failings. And, as is customary in Nussbaum’s works, there is a rich world of examples from literature (Rousseau, Walt
Whitman, Theodor Fontane, Tolstoy) and horrifying case studies (her discussion of a 2002 Hindu pogrom against Muslim women is chilling) to elucidate her philosophical point. Despite her pessimistic claims about human compassion, Nussbaum considers her argument to be locked arm-in-arm with Glover’s, and closes with a Glover-like claim that we need to better understand our place in the animal world to make ourselves all the better.

After Alan Ryan’s thoughtful biographical essay on Glover’s life and work, Glover himself gets the last word, in the form of a series of detailed responses to each of the articles and a final, personal, reflection on family, friends, colleagues, and philosophy. Much could be said about Glover’s replies, but I will leave most of it unsaid. What I will note, however, is an interesting tension that lingers over Glover’s response to Griffin’s article on torture. Both Glover and Griffin want to condemn torture, and want to repudiate the practice of torture, but neither is willing to truly close the door on it as a practice. Both (regretfully, it seems) stop short of an absolute prohibition on torture. This reflects back to Crisp’s analysis of Glover’s meta-ethics, and suggests that whatever sense of foundation Glover has for his moral theory is, at best, tenuous. This, at the very least, is an interesting consequence of the essays.

I will close with a few general thoughts on the essays themselves, covering both content, scope, and engagement with Glover’s own work.

1. At the beginning of his chapter on war in *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, Glover warns about what happens when “we compartmentalize our thinking, finding it hard to think about both the large scale and the small scale in the proper perspective”. The authors of these essays have done an excellent job of heeding his warning, and while all of them utilize detailed philosophical arguments, they have avoided ‘compartmentalized thinking.’ Glover has, interestingly, changed his philosophical style from his earlier works (the thought-experiments present in *Causing Death and Saving Lives*) to his more recent one (the real-life examples and cases, and the influence of empirical moral psychology found in *Humanity*) and his commentators tackle both stylistic phases. Glover was one of the figures present at the birth of ‘applied ethics’ and both he, and his commentators, nicely examine the places where ethics collides with medicine, law, epistemology, and politics with clarity and precision. In this way, the influence of Glover on the authors is quite apparent, in that the work is often tightly focused without becoming overly ‘compartmentalized’.

2. While most of the authors agree with Glover’s main goals (it would be hard to reject the core theses of *Humanity* with a straight face), the most critical take in the book probably comes from Allen Buchanan. For Buchanan, the central thesis in *Humanity* is that moral psychology and moral education need to
be cultivated to avoid the kinds of vices that have led to the atrocities of the twentieth century. The problem with this view, claims Buchanan, is that Glover does not offer enough to ensure his theoretical proposals will take root. His view is insufficiently empirical and leaves out a crucial factor—the role of social institutions on the development of moral-epistemic frameworks. Buchanan demands a deeper examination of social moral epistemology, based on the belief that epistemic-moral beliefs are more deeply rooted in institutional frameworks than in individual moral psychology. The worry that lingers over Buchanan’s counter-proposal is that institutions may not be the mechanism that fully implants epistemic-moral beliefs, and that he is short-changing individual moral psychology. I think that some combination of social moral epistemology and empirical moral psychology will be necessary to help eradicate the moral failings that lead to human atrocities. And, maybe more pessimistically, I worry that these failings may not be adequately correctible, although I would hope not.

3. The most interesting point to arise in these essays, in my eyes, is Buchanan’s discussion of Glover’s view as a ‘consequentialist virtue ethics.’ This isn’t merely an outside assessment of the view—Buchanan notes that Glover self-describes his approach in *Humanity* as such. Given his apparent pessimism about the axiomatic certainty of his own moral views (as evidenced in both Crisp’s essay and Glover’s reply to Griffin), continuing to describe Glover as a ‘consequentialist’ might be to overstate things a bit. His attempt to merge an adequate moral psychology into a realistic understanding of virtue fits well both in the current philosophical worldview, with strong emphases on cross-disciplinary research and ‘experimental philosophy’, as well as with an older claim by G.E.M. Anscombe (in “Modern Moral Philosophy”) that we are faced with a gap “which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human ‘flourishing’.” The merging of virtue ethics with other forms of moral theory is nothing new (Rosalind Hursthouse does something like this in *On Virtue Ethics*, for instance), but the development of a virtue-consequentialism with an eye towards overall human welfare is, at the very least, worth looking more deeply into.

4. In a section on the oversights of *Humanity*, I was somewhat surprised that no discussion was ever broached by noted animal welfare defender Peter Singer about the treatment of animals by humankind. Similarly, in Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of the role of animal emotion and empathy, little is said about human attitudes towards animals, instead focusing on human ignorance of what animal minds are like. It would be interesting to consider, from the perspective of Buchanan’s social moral epistemology, how attitudes towards animals and their consequent treatment might impact the development of virtues and vices. At the very least, we might worry that Kant was right that “a person
who already displays such cruelty to animals is also no less hardened towards men” (Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p.212), and that this might impact the goals of *Humanity* in practice. While I grant that Glover’s central goal is discuss the nature of human harms to other humans, it might be worth considering that our approaches towards non-human creatures might be relevant here, particularly if we are truly ‘anthropodeniers’, as is suggested by Frans de Waal (de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) and echoed by Nussbaum’s essay.

5. Most of the essays make at least passing mention of Glover’s character and personality, and all of the comments are of the same general type: that Jonathan Glover is a kind, giving, gentle, and thoughtful teacher, mentor, colleague, friend, and person. Over the last few years, Eric Schwitzgebel and his colleagues have been collecting data that seems to support the claim that ethicists are no more ethical in their actions (understood in several different contexts) than non-ethicists (See, for example, Schwitzgebel and Rust, “The Moral Behavior of Ethicists: Peer Opinion”, *Mind* 2009, 118). In his essay, Jeff McMahan notes that philosophers are often wary of utilitarians because they are reputed to forego typical human kindnesses for the sake of the greater good, but Glover clearly transcends both the Schwitzgebel thesis and the anti-utilitarian bias. I’m not sure how to take Schwitzgebel’s research on the whole, but if it is the case that ethicists generally, and utilitarians particularly, are less likely to act ethically, Jonathan Glover would appear to be a glaring exception to the rule. Obviously, this doesn’t disprove either claim, but it says volumes about the man whose life and work is being celebrated here.

*Ethics and Humanity* is an excellent collection of original essays on Glover’s work. While the material presented is not likely to be easily accessible to typical undergraduates without a background in ethics, it would serve as an excellent edition to any syllabus on applied ethics, the ethics of war and torture, bioethics, or the political philosophy of *Humanity*, or any graduate course on recent philosophical work in ethics. Anyone interested in Glover’s work should consider it required reading, as well as those whose interests range across the spectrum of value theory in general. It serves as a fitting tribute to an excellent philosopher whose work continues to challenge our concept of what it is to be human.