

## BOOK REVIEWS

1. *Thinking About Ethics* : Richard L. Purtill, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, U.S.A., Prentice-Hall Inc., 1976, pp. ix, 147, \$ 7.00

In a book that is occupied with thinking about ethics, we should look for a theory covering the principles of selective behavioural events in relation to some kind of ontological perspective. But the author scarcely complies. He deals largely with ethical principles as they may be applied in specific situations. There is no formal theorizing about the nature of concepts such as duty, justice or the right, and much less is there a search for a universal law of free moral action. Ethics is popularized and becomes little better than a guide to acceptable human conduct. To attempt to persuade us what actions are right under a litany of rules, however, is surely not to offer a theory of rightness any more than to list the objects that are red or blue is to propose a theory of colour.

The author discusses the applicability of certain well-known theories, although his support is not always wholehearted. In the case of traditional Utilitarianism his criticism is well founded, for he notes that the 'greatest happiness' principle allows the exploitation of minority groups in favour of the wants and will of the majority. He might have said, too, that the aggregate of human happiness can never be encompassed by any one human experience, so that there is really no measuring device available to make us aware, in a collective sense, of how much happiness there is. No one has so far discovered a means of calculating or even of estimating the sum of happiness other than by the happiness that is experienced in one individual consciousness. Your happiness plus my happiness means nothing unless the sum of both together could be felt by either one of us individually.

There is a decided partiality shown by Purtill for the ethical philosophy of W. D. Ross and to what may be called the 'Ross Rules'. Indeed, there is the suggestion that the Ross Rules, suitably organized into a code and a guide to action, might be considered as an exemplification of natural law. Having settled

for this criterion of moral behaviour at approximately the half-way mark in the book, the remaining chapters are given over to an application of these standardized rules in attempting to grapple with some of the more troublesome moral problems of our time. Issues currently facing mankind such as violence, euthanasia and abortion are taken up, and the emphasis upon the fact that we should become more aware of the sanctity of life can hardly be said to be misplaced. Never neglecting to draw attention to the duties owed both to ourselves and to society, the author's approach to these areas of practical concern is generally one of sanity and good sense.

Purtill's own basic convictions in ethics may be said to take on a decidedly social cast. If we ask why we really should be 'moral', that is, why we should acknowledge and observe what we consider to be moral principles, the answer is that to be liked and accepted by others rests at the foundation of morality. All considerations having to do with things moral in the final analysis turn upon basic human needs. But it might be added, nevertheless, that while human concerns are admittedly of prime importance to us, and while this type of humanistic approach to man's welfare has the outward appearance of respectability, a still deeper investigation should unmistakably reveal that a society built upon a faith in mankind alone runs the risk of incurring man's inhumanity to man and the eventual enslavement of many of the very persons whom we set out to benefit.

The book ends with what purports to be a sketch of the history of ethics, remarkable both in its scope and its brevity. The moral philosophy of Leibniz, for example, is given no mention. There is some concern shown that much of recent moral theory relates only to normative ethics, a concern that is not lessened by the author's selection of reading material, much of which has originated within the past fifty years. But this neatly arranged book by Purtill is quite clearly thought out as far as it goes and the issues are fairly well argued where argument is called for. Thus it is rightly claimed that to hold a declared tolerance for all viewpoints in matters of morality is nevertheless to show an intolerance to those who differ with this overall principles of tolerance. By and large the author's views are surface refreshing if not always as deeply convincing

or as conclusive as some readers might wish them to be. Replete with illustrative anecdotes, Purtill gives his work the appellation of 'text-book'. It might more appropriately be referred to as a hand-book of ethics.

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2. *Cognitive and Conative Ethics : Two Approaches to Moral Theory* : Glen O. Allen Pocatello, Idaho, U.S.A. : Idaho State University Press, 1975, pp. vii, 120, \$ 6.00

Much of the discussion in this essay turns upon what would appear to be a basic misconception, namely, that cognitive ethics produces a set of principles upon which we as human beings are obliged to act. According to this view, ethical theory will decide that we must act in certain ways, making it mandatory that we carry out those duties that knowledge has prescribed for us. It is this kind of restriction, allegedly inseparable from theoretical ethics, that Allen at the outset finds so very objectionable. It is not surprising, therefore, that he believes that cognitive ethics leans much too far in the direction of authoritarianism, and it is largely on the strength of this conclusion that he repeatedly flays theoretical ethics and denounces natural law. Should it not, on the other hand, be considered that not any theory, not even a cognitive ethical theory, necessarily motivates anyone to act. Cognitive ethics will simply embrace a theory that imparts impartial and objective knowledge concerning situations involving entities of a moral nature, leaving our actual behaviour contingently free to operate at the pleasure of the agent and his will. Matters of free conduct themselves admit of no predetermined fixity, and in the final analysis man acts morally, insofar as he does so freely act, simply because he desires spontaneously to act in this manner and not necessarily or always because he is first convinced of an ethical theory which instructs him to do

so.<sup>1</sup> In other words the act that is morally free is free in such a way that it escapes the limitations of theory; propositions do not necessarily order anyone or anything save perhaps other propositions.

Allen is strong for moral action determined by means of a conative faculty rather than allowing the ultimate dependence of morality to rest in cognition alone. Conative ethical theory is somewhat paradoxically understood as the acquisition of moral knowledge through the operation of that faculty by which we as human beings experience feelings. But rather than dwell upon feelings and emotions in formulating ethical theory, would it not be better to recognize that this area is surely one in which unbiased intellectual activities are scarcely at all generated, or at any rate are not uniformly or consistently articulated. Doubtless any insights emerging from the turbulence of the passive mind have been subjected to a conditioning of the most rigid kind and anything of worth that survives an emotional encounter should be held at a very high premium. But to place our theory squarely among the dispositions of the agent puts in jeopardy any good attempt to achieve a genuinely unbiased ethical theory. Strictly speaking there can be no conative theory because a theory as such is never a feeling, and moreover, the feeling that is supposedly represented in terms of a symbolism must be one that has already been modified toward some kind of nominal standard, so that it no longer necessarily carries with it the emotion that gave rise to the need to express it in the first place.

With a heavy emphasis upon conscience in conative ethics, the author is intent to focus upon various undefined shadow areas that are altogether anarchic to law. There is a tendency to confuse feelings as the stimuli from which an awareness of moral consciousness undoubtedly does sometimes arise with a

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1. Cf., for example, Richard McKeon, editor, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York; Random House, 1941, 'Ethica Nicomachea', 1143-a, 17-35, 1152-a, 7-8. Aristotle maintains that when we possess certain states of character we are not more able to act virtuously for only knowing these virtues. We have practical wisdom not only through knowing how to act but by being able to act.

formal account of ethical concepts such as goodness and justice. Feelings and emotions, unless taken in detachment, which is exactly how they usually never are taken, in themselves lead away from, rather than draw closer toward, a deliberative discipline where a common ground for agreement may be looked for. One of the aims of any theory should be to attain certainty that its subject matter is seen to be objective; the alternative is to settle for some sort of subjective criterion of acceptability. Conative ethics would at times replace even descriptive language with expressions of feeling, with a form of language that is little better than persuasion and therefore one designed to incite feelings rather than to put them at rest. The options in drawing up an objectively theoretical account of moral action would in this way be very much narrowed and not as clearly delineated as they otherwise could be.

The latter part of Allen's work is almost entirely taken up with a presentation of the case for conative ethics; the attempt is made to convince the reader that moral discrimination is grounded altogether in those human feelings which cause us to act in certain ways. We are asked to consider a so-called causal theory of moral action, one which gives primacy to what has come to be called the theory of moral agency. At best, ethics would be written in terms of descriptive moral laws or principles, saying in effect that human beings conform to moral action solely because they have the desire to act as moral agents. If the author, however, at this point is attempting to explain that we are motivated to do right and good acts only for the reason that we possess the desire to be moral, the argument amounts to nothing more than a tautology and is worthless as far as any constructive theoretical account is concerned.

An ethic, it must be noted, that centres upon the agent, his intent and his conscience turns out to be a humanism *par excellence*. In not taking ethics beyond the agent and the experiences he is unable to share, the problem of how to fashion unpredictable feelings into an objective and communicable science of right and dutiful action is scarcely ever resolved. Admittedly, insofar as we are able in some measure to conceptualize the privately given intuitions for conative ethics, or far any other science, our concepts may be taken as objectively cognitive.

Otherwise the originally given stimuli remain subjective and still very much a part of the organism which gave rise to them. This inarticulate state of affairs with which Allen apparently would allow theoretical ethics to identify, can in and by itself do little to advance any complete understanding of our moral behaviour. Theorists are notoriously prone to confuse private experience that supposedly gives rise to morality with theories which should be designed to explain such experience, not in terms of felt emotions, but in terms of an agreed upon symbolism in the form of suitable assumptions and hypotheses. In any event it is surely an error to conduct a search within the human psyche for the origins of a natural morality. It betrays a desire to effect a short-cut that tries to obviate the necessity of postulating an ontological ground for those value standards which manifest themselves through our various human ways of acting.

London, Ontario,  
Canada.

A. W. J. HARPER

#### BOOKS RECEIVED

1. *Kabir Vani* : Charlotte Vaudeville : Institut Francies D'Indologie, Pondichery : First Edition, 1982 : pp. xiv+459+4.
2. *Personal Identity* : P. K. Mohapatra : Santosh Publications, Rashtrabhasha Road, Cuttack : First Edition 1983 : pp. xiv+310 : Rs. 75/-.
3. रौरवोत्तराममः N. R. Bhatt; Institut Francies D'Indologie; Pondichery; First Edition 1883; xlv + cxx + 190 + 4.
4. *The Philosophy of Religion* : S. P. Kanak; Lotus Publishers, New Delhi, First Edition 1984, pp. xiii + 480, Rs. 150/-.
5. *Vedic Concept of God* : Vidyanand Saraswati, Deva Vedic Prakashan, Khar, Bombay; Second Edition 1983; pp. 174+2, Rs. 20/-

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