

**BOOK-REVIEW**

*Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism.*

By Michael Slote. Routledge and Kegan Paul pp. ix+157.

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Shortly before closing his discussion in this closely argued short book the author reveals that when he began to think about the problems he has discussed in it he hoped to be able to defend common-sense morality against consequentialism. The comparison between the two that he is in reality able to make is termed by him as 'a process of attrition', so that he is forced in the concluding sentence to recognise that there might be some advantage in turning once again to Kantian moral theory or, even, to Greek ethics with its emphasis on character (and the virtues) rather than acts. But despite Professor Slote's generally careful sorting out of alternative possibilities there is an asymmetry in this list of moralities. While consequentialism can be characterised in terms of how it is put forward and criticised, as indeed are the latter two alternatives, common-sense morality, supposed to be what most of us live by, is by comparison nothing very definite. Indeed if it is the morality which is implicit in how 'ordinary people treat people' (p. 7), as he seems to suggest early in the book, then it cannot be something with a firm and settled identity of its own, but a very variable and uncertain thing. Not only does moral practice vary from community to community, and even within the same community at different times, if there are deeper underlying principles which are stable and unvarying they can hardly be capable of being

delineated merely by a critical appraisal of our moral practices or by some process of moral intuition as Slote to a certain extent seems with Sidgwick, whose *The Methods of Ethics* he greatly admires, to think.

The truth is that the term 'common-sense morality' hides a profound difficulty. Since we cannot understand by it the current *mores* of a society, which would merely be of sociological interest, there would seem to be need for distinguishing something whose reference includes not only prevailing practices but also the deeper source of moral insight and inspiration to which most of us have some degree of access. How is such a morality to be described? The strategy adopted by Slote makes no mention whatever of the possibility that such a rich area of moral understanding exists. Had Slote moved in this direction he might have seen that there exists a category of morality which, unlike the varieties of consequentialism distinguished by him, does not purport to be a complete determinant of right conduct, i.e. of what is enjoined or forbidden and what is merely permitted, and is not to be faulted for that reason. And in doing this he might have also seen that this incompleteness of ordinary morality, while it poses agonising problems for us, is remediable in a fascinating variety of ways, depending on how the human situation is described.

Slote's way out of the difficulty of identifying something of fundamental interest in what seems inescapable, confused and indefinitely variable consists in giving a spurious ready distinguishability by a process of underdescription to certain features which the *mores* of our own society seem to share with other societies. From these I shall select two for special comment in this review. There is, first, what Slote calls the 'self-other asymmetry' which allows us to harm ourselves, or deny ourselves some personal benefit, in ways that are not permitted in respect

of others that are clearly unacceptable to the consequentialist. And, in a different category from the difficulties which utilitarians generally raise against ordinary morality, there is the problem of what has attracted special attention in the recent literature of academic ethics, namely the problem of 'moral luck', described by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel in an Aristotelian Society symposium in 1976, which raises questions which Slote frankly admits to be beyond the present capacity of ethics fully to handle. I shall deal with the two successively.

What seems to be undoubtedly true about the asymmetry of self and other is that a moral failure to meet the claims of others is judged more stringently than a failure to benefit ourselves in what are otherwise similar circumstances; self-neglect does not seem morally to be so bad as neglect of or injury to others, and at times even appears to be wholly innocent. But what Slote sees as a contrast of exoneration and blame is more in the nature of a contrast between appraisal in terms of virtues and vices (some of which are clearly moral in nature) and blame for wrong doing. Thus a man may neglect his own material comfort from an admirable disposition of simplicity while feeling that he would not be justified in contributing to the involuntary poverty of others (On the other hand, he might neglect himself to impress others from a feeling of vanity). Though Slote rightly claims against Williams that it is not agent-integrity which underlies the special claims we make for our own projects but the more fundamental notion of moral autonomy, he fails to see that the latter notion covers much more than innocent non-optimisticness. And this in turn suggests the possibility that an agent may be morally innocent to the extent that no one we know would be justified in finding fault with him, but not in the sense that no one *could* justly make an unfavourable moral appraisal of how he has acted.

Slote does not have anything new to say about deontological constraints against bringing about intrinsically worthwhile results by wronging the innocent that are recognised by most of us, nor, again, about our natural preference for kith and kin even when much greater good can be achieved by acting on the Utilitarian duty of optimal conduct. Since it seems to me that ordinary morality is not at any greater disadvantage than the consequentialist in these well-worn areas of controversy, I shall pass on to the so-called question of moral luck which specially exercises Slote and is seen by him to pose seemingly insuperable difficulties for the morality of common-sense. Roughly speaking, the phenomenon of moral luck arises because we tend not to blame, or to blame less strongly, when a likely evil does not come to follow upon a certain kind of behaviour emanating from us. Thus an attempted murder may not succeed or a piece of rash driving have no untoward consequences. We may ask, why is this kind of good fortune a reason for being regarded as less blameworthy than when the worst does come to pass? Slote sees common-sense to be caught here in an inextricable difficulty: "... common-sense morality, having denied, in its deontological 'part', that acts should be entirely ruled by consequences, seems in another of its 'parts' to place an unreasonable and unjustifiable emphasis *precisely on consequences*" (p. 134, italics author's). But significant help towards finding a way out of the difficulty we are here in becomes available if we follow a clue provided by Slote himself when he observes that we have a reluctance to sit beside a murderer which we do not feel when we are with some one whose attempt to murder someone has failed. We need to distinguish between moral feelings which tend to arise in us spontaneously and such of our actual moral judgements which we come to make when we have given some attention to a question of right and wrong. The undeniable fact is that we see men not only as agents who do good and bad deeds but also as

possible loci of good and evil. And the transition from possible to actual evil is a major transition, whatever the place of this category in our moral experience, bringing into being something that we may have to live with.

The strength of ordinary morality will be seen if we consider the sceptical extensions of the argument from moral luck which Nagel makes (See especially the rewritten version of his paper in *Mortal Questions*, ch. 3). Thus we praise people for what has its origin in qualities of character and mind with which their genetic inheritance has endowed them or are such as the result partially at least of what was done by others for them, and it is difficult to see how this could be wholly just when others who through no fault of theirs are lacking in them are subjected to criticism. But this line of attack by which moral scepticism attempts to move to the centre of moral judgement cannot succeed. Only a moral cynic would deny that the possibility of high moral praise is sometimes open even to men of ordinary endowments and that such praise may be given with full certainty and some would even say, as would the present reviewer, that capacity for moral heroism is not a prerogative only of a select few. Thus if the centre of moral judgement is immune against this form of doubt only the periphery can at worst be threatened. And since a form of doubt which can succeed only peripherally cannot be considered to be a form of scepticism but at the most as raising certain problems we have here only a source of difficulty for ordinary morality. But we know that ordinary morality abounds in difficulties, and the moral philosopher's essential task is to look for guidelines for dealing with them. In the present case our difficulties will perhaps be best dealt with by a fresh examination of the Kantian idea that all men are equal in respect of the moral dignity they can achieve. On the other hand act-consequentialism, which also among the varieties of conse-

quentialism is in Slote's view fully consequentialist, threatens the very category of moral appraisal as a way of bestowing praise or blame on the moral agent, as distinct from assessing the good or bad that causally issues from them. As the committed act-consequentialist J. J. C. Smart recognises, following a moral rule has for someone in such a position no intrinsic merit but can at best earn praise only to the extent to which such praise is productive of further good.

Given thus that so much of the criticism that Slote sees common-sense morality to be subject to is due to an underdescription (or misdescription) of it the question inevitably arises whether he has, like so many others who talk of common-sense morality, identified something which stands as a genuine alternative to utilitarianism (which for Slote is the form of consequentialism which ignores considerations of justice and concerns itself only with the totality of good that may be attained) or is only a caricature of ordinary morality, of which the Kantian and Greek moralities are descriptions which do compel respectful attention. In other words we have to decide whether the latter three are simply possible versions of something to be identified in descriptivist terms only and which utilitarianism alone seeks to replace. The difference between mistaking the real nature of something already available and creating something new is too important to be obscured : since a description cannot be a theory, what is described under that rubric cannot be a rival to what can only be a theory, as utilitarianism needs must be. Slote has done too little to show that the alternative I have just suggested deserves to be rejected.

Instead of surveying what is, within its terms, a well articulated argument, I have in this review chosen to highlight with comments of my own some of the features of this book which are likely to be of special interest to someone from a tradition

outside the world of Anglo-Saxon ethics. At present utilitarianism seems to be in ascendancy in this world and it would be churlish not to acknowledge that in certain respects contributions to it are being made both by way of clarification and also constructively. Its major influence has however been, and continues to be, in the areas of legislation and economics (As Sidgwick says towards the end of his *Methods*, a sincere utilitarian would be a keen politician). But real significance of its influence is a matter of further enquiry in some depth, which I cannot undertake here. I shall however in conclusion mention a notion of considerable interest for ethics which Slote takes over from economic theory and develops much further. This is the notion of what he calls 'satisfying consequentialism' as opposed to the customary notion of optimising consequentialism which has hitherto all but defined consequentialism (or utilitarianism as this term is generally understood). Economists are familiar with the idea of a choice in which something profitable or advantageous is opted for rather than the best that may be obtainable because in practical terms that is what is really convenient (because, say, the agent wants to avoid uncertainty or the trouble of working out what would be the best), Slote extends the notion of such a choice by introducing the notion of a 'satisfying' choice, made by someone who is by nature or temperament content to aim at what is good enough, or even very good, but lacks a strong desire to optimise. Thus a doctor who wants to help mankind might for reasons of a personal nature choose India for his work, rather than the country where the greatest contribution is likely to be made. We would praise such a doctor, even though by the usual standards of consequentialism he is to be blamed for making less than an optimistic choice. Undoubtedly such an alternative would help us escape from what is an element of tyranny in traditional utilitarianism. Slote gives several examples and is perhaps right in regarding this notion as the contribution he can be most confi-

dent of. I shall make only one comment. It seems to me that this notion is in need of supplementation by that of an appropriate choice. Often we are justified in aiming at doing a good, not the best, deed, and yet are saved from arbitrariness only because we are also at the same time choosing what is fitting or appropriate and not merely good to a degree that would seem to do. In his example of the hotel manager who gives shelter to and feeds a poor family this notion clearly has application. Slote describes his choice to provide a wholesome and enjoyable meal, and not the best that he would be allowed to by the rules of his employment, as worthy of unqualified praise. But suppose, counterfactually, this family, though now poor, are of aristocratic lineage would a meal that is simply nourishing and enjoyable be still what he should provide? If this makes no difference to what he should do this can only be because we think that it would be inappropriate to give weight to the question of origin in such circumstance. If on the other hand it does then also would we be concerning ourselves with the question of appropriateness. There is here a clear gap in Slote's argument.

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