THE SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL BASIS OF ETHICS—A REVIEW OF MAX HOCUTT

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Max Hocutt’s *Grounded Ethics* launches a spirited attack on all forms of rationalist moral theory. Hocutt marshals careful philosophical argument supported by a solid grasp of relevant psychological research and a thorough understanding of the history of ethics, and he offers no quarter to his rationalist targets. Densely packed with interesting arguments, vigorous assaults on opposing views, and a strong historical orientation to the major issues, *Grounded Ethics* is a demanding book that is worth the reader’s effort.

Hocutt is a defender of moral relativism—hardly a popular theory in contemporary ethics. But Hocutt obviously believes in the old dictum that the best defense is a good offense, and the heart of the book is Hocutt’s sustained attack on Kantian moral philosophy (including such well-known contemporary proponents of Kantian ethics as Stephen Darwall and Thomas Nagel). Even those who remain skeptical about moral relativism will find Hocutt’s critical assessment of post-Kantian moral philosophy well worth examining.

Hocutt seeks no special grounds for morality: not in God, certainly not in reason (or Reason), nor in intuition. If morality is to be solidly grounded, the support must be found in social structures rather than intellectual exercises:

> If we want to give the moral cynic a reason to behave as we wish, we must offer him not abstract philosophy but concrete social reform. The rest of us must so alter our behavior towards him that he cannot reasonably expect to prosper without doing his duty. Word magic will not do the trick. The answer to the moral skeptic cannot come from moral philosophy. It must take the form of concrete moral sanctions. (p. 41)

Thus the book’s ambiguous title: *grounded* ethics. Grounded ethics refers not to ethics that have been bad and are confined to a room for a week, nor ethics grounded in natural law or natural science; rather, for Hocutt, ethics are grounded in concrete social sanctions and enforced rules, and outside of such specific social systems there are no ethics whatsoever. Thus, no legitimate *ethical* claims—claims

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of moral goodness or badness, claims of moral obligations—can be made except within specific societies, relative to specific social systems with ethical rules enforced by effective sanctions.

With this focus, it is not surprising that Hocutt treats the psychological study of behavior and behavioral conditioning with seriousness, sympathy, and sophistication. Behavioral psychologists may squirm as Hocutt speaks of “negative reinforcement,” when he means aversive conditioning, but that is such a common misuse that it is almost standard usage outside psychology. In any case, psychologists will be placated by the fact that this is a philosopher who takes psychology very seriously and employs it in substantive philosophical work. For example, using psychological resources, Hocutt draws a very clear distinction between intrinsic and instrumental good, a distinction that philosophers sometimes muddle. More significantly, Hocutt draws on psychological resources to not only critique Kantian moral philosophy but to bring into clear focus the empirically improbable and even bizarre nature of Kantian ethics. Kant holds that moral acts must be good absolutely and must be done for no motive other than pure moral duty. For Kant, a moral act cannot be tainted with utilitarian concerns nor be motivated by any interest other than duty; in particular, it cannot be motivated by feelings of affection or kindness. Persons who perform kind acts from compassion or affection may be agreeable, but they are not acting morally. The person who feels no compassion or concern or affection for anyone but whose commitment is entirely to following the moral law (who acts not because it brings satisfaction to the actor nor because it brings joy to the receiver but strictly because it is dictated by the moral law) is the only genuinely moral person. Hocutt describes the basic problem with such a view thus:

...if the act reinforces neither its agent, its beneficiary, nor its observer, it is not clear why anybody would regard it as good or wish to make it a duty. The whole idea is paradoxical in the extreme, and so is the companion idea that an agent might be motivated to do what is neither itself reinforcing nor reinforced by other persons. What would motivate anyone to do what nothing in nature or society encourages him to do? This is a question for which Kant had no answer, no doubt because there is none. (p. 117)

Of course Kant does have an answer: the driving force that makes it possible to follow the stern dictates of duty is my will, a will that transcends all natural forces and natural laws. What Hocutt makes clear is how very strange this special will is. That probably would not bother Kant: he was quite willing to think of the will as transcending all natural influences. But contemporary philosophers are loath to base their views on such miraculous props. Kant may clothe his ethics in secular garb, but Hocutt effectively strips away the disguise to reveal its mysterious and otherworldly character.

Hocutt has a much simpler account for what is good and bad: “Briefly, the good is the reinforcing or reinforced. The bad, as we have observed, is just the opposite” (p. 118). This is indeed simple, but it invites a simple response: what is positively reinforcing is often actually bad for us. One need not be a moral
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objectivist to note that many things that are immediately reinforcing—cigarettes, chocolate chip cookies, cocaine—are long-term aversive. Skinner (1971) offered a clear example:

In the incentive system known as piece-work pay, the worker is paid a given amount for each unit of work performed. The system seems to guarantee a balance between the goods produced and the money received. The schedule is attractive to management, which can calculate labor costs in advance, and also to the worker, who can control the amount he earns. This so-called “fixed-ratio” schedule of reinforcement can, however, be used to generate a great deal of behavior for very little return. It induces the worker to work fast, and the ratio can then be “stretched”—that is, more can be demanded for each unit of pay without running the risk that the worker will stop working. His ultimate condition—hard work with very little pay—may be acutely aversive. (pp. 34-35)

But Hocutt is well aware that there are bigger issues than immediate reinforcement and the moral system favored by a specific society. Goodness (what is reinforcing) may require a broader perspective that encompasses long-term results. Hocutt is a strict relativist, and from his relativist position all morality is local: “The truth is this: Since there is no transcendent Morality, conduct can meaningfully be judged moral or immoral only by using the relevant local morality as a standard” (p. 153). But his sophisticated version of relativism does not preclude larger judgments concerning the worth of moral systems:

If the health, happiness, longevity, and prosperity of their members are any measure, some societies are very much better ordered than others. In other words, some cultures, including some moralities, are superior to others. I would be the last person to deny it. (p. 200)

If Hocutt accepts this much in the way of transcultural critiques of morality, it may appear that he has conceded everything that contemporary moral realists want: that is, such moral realists as Peter Railton (1986) and Michael Smith (1991), who seek an objective cross-cultural standard for morality based on the needs of human animals, needs and values discovered by empirical research in psychology and sociology and biology, and making no appeal to transcendent moral truths. And in fact, Hocutt does have some kind words for Railton’s moral realist emphasis on “actual interests and beliefs” and the challenges of balancing them “to accommodate likely projections and modifications of these interests and beliefs into the future.” Hocutt regards this as an important, difficult, and legitimate task, and praises Railton’s work on these issues: “These are all important insights, for which Railton deserves much credit” (p. 242). But Railton pushes further, and proposes a larger test for morally right practices; specifically, the morally right thing to do is the act or practice that “would be morally approved of were the interests of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full and vivid information.” And this step moves too far into the philosophically ideal for Hocutt:
Railton’s insistence that equal weight be given to the interests of all conceivably affected parties invites us to take up not the point of view of an actual individual with definite interests and limited knowledge but the point of view of an omniscient and impartial deity—which is as “cosmic and absolute,” so other-worldly and useless, as any ideal gets. (p. 243)

Hocutt is not rejecting the criticism of social rules and conventions: “A society’s conventions do not, however, always determine what, in the society, should count as good, because that depends in the final analysis not on social conventions but on personal preferences. . .” Hocutt offers the following example:

Thus, eating crow could be made obligatory in a society, either by enactment of a rule of law or by evolution of a rule of morality requiring it, but this rule could not make crow taste good or nourish those who ate it. The existence of such a rule would make the eating of crow to be legally and morally just where it was required, but it would not make the practice to be either pleasant or beneficial. (p. 155)

So Hocutt is willing to critique a society’s moral code and willing to ask what the society should count as good; but such critiques must be based on narrow identifiable interests of specific individuals, not on abstract ideals concerning what all perfectly rational persons might prefer.

Contemporary moral realists typically do not claim that they have established the existence of objective moral facts; rather, they insist that the existence of moral facts is an open empirical question, to be settled by empirical study. Thus, Michael Smith (1991) argues:

The existence of a moral fact—say, the rightness of giving to famine relief in certain circumstances—requires that, under idealized conditions of reflection, rational creatures would converge upon a desire to give to famine relief in such circumstances.

Of course, it must be said that moral argument has not yet produced the sort of convergence in our desires that would make the idea of a moral fact . . . look plausible. But neither has moral argument had much of a history in times in which we can engage in free reflection unhampered by a false biology (the Aristotelian tradition) or a false belief in god (the Judeo-Christian tradition). It remains to be seen whether sustained moral argument can elicit the requisite convergence. . . (p. 410)

Though he doesn’t use it in the context of critiquing moral realism, Hocutt has a very insightful argument that makes such “moral convergence” quite implausible. If there were one strong candidate for universal convergence, it would surely be the prohibition against murder: a universal prohibition that moral objectivists often cite as evidence of cross-cultural objective moral principle. But Hocutt swiftly undercuts the supposed universality of such a rule:

The universal existence of binding rules prohibiting murder does not suffice to guarantee the existence of a universally binding Rule prohibiting murder.
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Furthermore, we have no reason to think that any such Rule exists. On the contrary. Although indiscriminately killing other persons in one’s own society is everywhere forbidden, indiscriminately killing people in other societies than one’s own may be permitted, even required. So, although every society has a rule prohibiting murder, there is no Rule prohibiting murder in every society. Yet, the existence of such a Rule is just what the moral absolutist is eager to assert and must be prepared to prove. (p. 261)

Hocutt’s carefully argued book is filled with insightful attacks on moral objectivism, and anyone who is skeptical about moral absolutism will find Hocutt a worthy champion. However, I find myself wishing he had stopped with nonobjectivism, rather than pushing on toward conventionalist relativism. Though Hocutt is clear that existing moral systems can be subject to vigorous criticism, his relativist view provides subtle support for the moral status quo. After all, to say that our only obligations are to uphold the moral rules of our society is to provide no small support for the existing rules: the language of obligation has substantial emotive force. Thus, Hocutt’s relativist approach to nonobjectivist ethics has some affinities with Montaigne’s (1603) use of skepticism to support the Catholic Counter-Reformation: since there is no objective way of determining the truth, we should “stay where God placed us,” and not take up the banner of reform. This is hardly an argument against Hocutt; instead, it probably reflects our basically different political outlooks: conservative versus liberal, the difference between one who is skeptical of reform efforts and one who enthusiastically embraces reform. I think my side is more entitled to carry Skinner’s banner into battle—after all, Skinner (1948) was not only a reformer but even a “practical utopian” in his vision of Walden Two—and behaviorism has generally focused on the ways behavior can be changed and shaped for better results. Again, here is no argument, but just a personal reflection on why I find myself resisting Hocutt’s relativism when I find much to admire in his spirited attacks on objectivist ethics.

This is a powerful book, dense with facts and rich in argument, and Hocutt is an impressive champion for an ethical relativism that has had few contemporary defenders. Any future attacks on relativism that do not grapple with Hocutt’s sophisticated theory and rigorous arguments will be guilty of the straw man fallacy.

References
