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Review - Moral Value and Human Diversity - Philosophy

One would expect a significant book from the author of such notable publications as Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Religious Commitment and Secular Reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). These books explored their themes in considerable depth and sophistication and, along with his many other works, confirm Robert Audi as a notable contemporary philosopher. The relatively brief present work could serve as an introduction to his thinking in the fields of ethics and cultural tolerance. It is written in an accessible style and touches on issues that will be of interest to both a general and academic readership. Audi frequently refers the reader to publications where he has explored the issues being discussed in greater depth.

The book begins with an overview of major moral theories propounded today, including Kantianism, utilitarianism, virtue ethics and a description of Audi’s favored view: the intuitionism of W.D. Ross. The focus is upon the usefulness of these theories in helping us understand ethical issues and make responsible decisions in situations of moral complexity. Accordingly, Audi is not as interested in adjudicating between the various ways in which they account for moral normativity as in showing how they can bring differing but salient considerations to bear on moral decision making. This is an eclectic and practical form of what Audi calls “pluralist universalism”. There are two aspects to this pluralism. The first is a pluralism of moral concerns: namely, concern with what sort of person we are to be, concern with what we are to do, and concern with what goals and values are good to pursue. The second is a pluralism of moral values that are to be protected: namely, happiness, justice and freedom.

The practical concerns that Audi focuses on include the role of religion in politics and in an individual's conscience, the gap between ethics and developments in technology, problems relating to old age, the tendency of...
affluent peoples towards self-indulgence and insularity, the lack of suitable role models for ethical development and the part that the media play in this problem, global justice, and the low standards of public discourse and debate. Though brief, Audi's comments on these problems in his final chapter are insightful and suggestive.

Of special interest in the book is Audi's discussion of value rather than obligation as a motivator for action. As a further instance of his pluralism Audi suggests that moral value is one value among several which human agents should take seriously. This challenges the view of many moral theorists that moral values trump all others. If moral value is but one value among others then our moral obligations would have to be weighed up against other goals that we might pursue. The moral obligation that we have to help to alleviate the suffering of the world's poor, for example, needs to be balanced with our commitments to such values as family, art or knowledge. That said, Audi does acknowledge that the moral requirement to avoid acts that jeopardize happiness, justice or freedom for others must trump the pursuit of any other values. It seems that the exact practical significance of moral value needs further clarification.

This becomes more urgent when we note that Audi's theory of value requires that, to be realized, a value has to be experienced. As an example, Audi says that the value of acting honorably consists in the moral satisfaction this would give the virtuous agent. However, it might be suggested that the value of acting honorably ought to exist in a more objective, interpersonal or social sphere than merely the experience of the agent. One wonders whether moral value can be conceived in less subjective terms than Audi allows and whether his position here is consistent with the objectivism he espouses in other sections of the book. He accepts that values are grounded in the physical and factual properties of things but does not sufficiently acknowledge the social construction of value. For example, he says that "a perfect copy of a sculpture would have the same beauty as the original" (53) but, as any investor in art knows, such a copy does not have the same value. In the case of moral value, an act that gives its agent moral satisfaction may fail to have moral value in the eyes of others.

Audi takes up these difficulties in his third chapter where he argues that an integrated and satisfactory life must contain the fulfillment of prima facie duties as well as the successful pursuit of values. Moreover, it also requires adherence to the moral prohibitions against threatening the happiness or freedom of others or violating the norms of justice. Audi goes on to argue that this picture of the ethical life is of universal validity even while the forms in which it is realized can differ from one society to another. The last chapter turns to the more practical issues enumerated above and indicates how institutions, acting as collective agents, are also required to instantiate ethical norms in relation to those issues.

There is much insight condensed into the fairly brief compass of this book. It will have fulfilled its promise if it leads its readers -- whether they be students, lay people or scholars -- to explore the issues further.

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Stan van Hooft is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Deakin University in Australia. He is the author of Caring: An Essay in the Philosophy of Ethics, (Niwot, University Press of Colorado, 1995) and numerous journal articles on moral philosophy, bioethics, business ethics, and on the nature of health and disease. He is also a co-author of Facts and Values: An Introduction to Critical Thinking for Nurses, (Sydney, MacLennan and Petty, 1995). His Life, Death, and Subjectivity: Moral Sources for Bioethics, was published by Rodopi (Amsterdam and New York) in 2004. Stan published two further books in 2006: Caring about Health, (Aldershot, Ashgate), and Understanding Virtue Ethics, (Chesham, Acumen Publishers). His current research centers on Global Ethics and the philosophy of Cosmopolitanism.
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