Language – Culture – Politics, Vol. 1/2022
ISSN 2450-3576
e-ISSN: 2719-3217

DOI: 10.54515/lcp.2022.1.181-202

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A proposal for a systematic approach to moral philosophy

Propozycja systematycznego ujęcia filozofii moralnej

Abstract

This article gives a methodological overview of three standards against which it is possible to examine the worth of moral theories and to test their true contribution to ethics. These standards or benchmarks are requirements pertaining to metaethics, moral psychology and practical reason. The proposal is that it is only when a theory answers questions raised by these three areas of inquiry together that such a theory can be said to be a substantive theory of morality. While defending the importance of each area I also provide examples on the way to highlight such areas of relevance.

Key words: *metaethics – moral psychology – practical reason – systematic philosophy.*

Abstrakt

Artykuł zawiera metodologiczne omówienie trzech standardów, które można wykorzystać do badania wartości teorii moralnych i testowania ich rzeczywistego wkładu do etyki. Te standardy lub wzorce są wymogami odnoszącymi się do metaetyki, psychologii moralnej i rozumu praktycznego. Propozycja jest taka, że tylko wtedy, gdy teoria moralna odpowiada łącznie na pytania postawione przez te trzy obszary badań, można ją uznać za relewantną. Uzasadniając doniosłość każdego obszaru, autor przywołuje również przykłady, które uwydatniają ich znaczenie.

Słowa kluczowe: *metaetyka – psychologia moralna – rozum praktyczny – filozofia systematyczna.*

Introduction

When English philosopher G. E. Anscombe wrote her scathing paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in 1958, it was clear that, according to her reading, something was profoundly amiss with contemporary ethics especially within the analytic tradition. Since her publication there have been many outstanding responses to her invitation to radically rethink the way philosophical ethics is done. She also offered three theses which according to her judgment give both a synchronic account of the dissatisfying state of current ethics in her time, characterised by disunity and deep disagreement, as well as a diachronic account, whereby she briefly sketches thematic development and historical devolution, rather than evolution, to the current state of affairs. One could say that Alasdair MacIntyre's contribution to ethics in recent decades has been principally within the latter framework, that is, critically examining the complex upheavals within philosophy and culture in modernity and which led to the difficult state of ethics today.

What I intend to offer here in this article is a modest proposal toward a systematic approach to doing moral philosophy which establishes a set of hermeneutical criteria against which to examine any substantial ethical theory while keeping in mind the alarms that Anscombe set off with her classical paper. Hence, my contribution here is to argue for a philosophical method rather than offer substantive solutions to ethical dilemmas. My hope, would be, nonetheless, that such a clarification would also be instrumental to achieving more fulfilling answers in such ethical debates.

In her paper 'Revisiting Modern Moral Philosophy', philosopher Jennifer Frey defends her claim that Anscombe's three theses ought to be read together since they "are not intelligible independently of each other". (Frey, 2019, p. 1) My proposal in this article is that the three standards I am proposing may serve as a comprehensive benchmark against which to examine the validity and authority of ethical theories. I too claim that these standards ought to be taken together in such a way that disqualify those ethical views which cannot offer a satisfactory account of the salient issues raised by each one of them.

The three spheres of examination which in my view deserve unreserved attention are the following. There is first the complex sphere of metaethics as a branch of moral philosophy in its own right. This is an area Anscombe de-

voted attention to – as did her philosopher husband Peter Geach in a classical work entitled 'Good and Evil'. (Geach, 1956) The second standard is also, however, very much in line with Anscombe's critique which aims at taking a closer look at issues pertaining to the philosophy of psychology and which can establish for us a coherent account of moral psychology. Finally, we need to assess the importance of practical reason-based accounts of ethics since this latter avenue is what offers completeness to the subject of ethics itself as I see view it.

As the reader will have rightly guessed, this will not be an exercise in the history of ethical thought, but, rather, a synchronic approach to ethical theories irrespective of their historical milieu. What this means in practice is that one does not merely move from one step to the next having, as it were, completed the previous step and therefore would be in a position to proceed further. All three standards are mutually connected and need to be 'checked' in the light of each other.

The metaethical benchmark

One could argue that the root of all disagreement in ethics is ultimately traceable to incompatible accounts or commitments within the metaethical framework. Although the classical philosophers did not use the term, they were all, from the pre-Socratics onwards, rather aware of the importance of this branch of ethics. Of course, some have ignored the urgency of settling down such issues. Thus, to my mind, utilitarian and consquentialist accounts of ethics merely bypass the metaethical benchmark and offer an inevitably impoverished account of human action and its moral relevance. Why does metaethics carry with it an urgency that is directly foundational to ethical debate? The reason lies in the three areas of reflection that are probably the essential core of its concern. These are: the question of objectivity, that is whether one can expect to find some account that even treats the requirements of objective claims with the gravity that such claims in ethics deserve; the credentials ethics may or may not have in order to qualify as a science, that is, a discipline of thought that meets respectably scientific criteria; the truth about cognitivism, that is, whether it is possible to have ethical knowledge, beliefs etc.

The question of objectivity in ethics is one of the most exciting as well as unsettled debates and always deserves special attention. In recent times the concept of a moral fact has been put forward in an attempt by analytic philosophers to secure some accountability and to avoid the problematic Emotivist view which stands diametrically opposed to any possible defence for ob-

jectivity and reduces all the noble ambitions of the metaethical concerns just outlined to an account of expressions or sentiments of approval or disapproval.

What sort of objectivity should we expect to find a justification of in ethics and, moreover, is such a quest for objectivity desirable even? If ethics is that branch of philosophy which studies the goodness and wrongness of human action as well as good and evil in general, then surely, we need some form of intelligible criteria which could guide us in doing so with satisfying results. This requirement, however, has apparently been considered to be too ambitious and many 'diagnostical' philosophers have offered their account in trying to explain why. In his classic work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre tackles two principal culprits which led modernity into an impasse and left ethics in a sorry state where our debates about highly sensitive and crucial issues are not only left unsettled but they also could not even hope to converge at all in the first place. These two causes, according to that reading, are emotivism and the Enlightenment project. Positions in divergent debates in liberal societies are not only incompatible with each other but they are potentially incommensurable, since they are not merely different viewpoints but they also belong to a long sequence of antecedent points of view which are radically different as well. MacIntyre's solution was to advocate a return to the ecology of human virtues which is also connected to a sense of human finality and teleology. Working the details of that neo-Aristotelian account, however, is not an easy task in an intellectual and scientific milieu that is far removed from Aristotle's.

The issue of objectivity has of course been a thorny one in analytic circles and it is connected to an even more elusive theme, namely that of truth. One way of underpinning the debate has been by appealing to the notion of a 'fact'. The main appeal to moral facts is twofold: first of all, it promises to simplify apparently intractable issues by reducing the analysis to an exercise in factual analysis. Moreover, it strikes a chord with those who would like to establish the same authority in ethical debates as that enjoyed by the natural sciences which, of course, appeal to a fact-based approach and therefore presumably credible. There is of course, an important debate to be held about the wholesale transportation of methods of analysis and thought that best befit the natural sciences to the social sciences and most of all, to philosophy. This topic has been masterfully tackled by Mary Midgley in her prolonged critique of scientism which she views as the "vaulting ambition of science to be omnicompetent, the only arbiter of what is reasonable and rational, that which philosophy and poetry should humbly celebrate". (Oberdiek, 2003, pp. 187-189)

Of course, appeal to 'moral facts' may be a noble move toward the establishment of objective criteria for ethics. Yet it may, in the long run, raise more

questions than it purports to resolve. The first challenge is about the very nature of a moral fact. What are moral facts? What should we be looking for – whether in the world or in our minds – when we speak of moral facts? This invited the famous objection by J. L Mackie who famously argued that such objective moral facts would be rather 'queer' entities if they existed. So, the opening line of his work *Ethics: inventing right and wrong* insists that, "There are no objective values". (Mackie, 1977, p. 15) His criticism has had the effect of highlighting two serious challenges, one metaphysical and the other epistemological. The former shows the stubborn difficulty of explaining the ontological nature of such facts if they existed. The latter raises the old problem concerning moral knowledge, just in case moral facts existed. Not only do we need to answer the question, what in the world might moral facts be, we also need to offer an explanation of how, in such an improbable scenario, we could get to know them. The way Mackie develops his 'queerness' argument showed that there is a potentially insurmountable problem with explaining the existence of objectively prescriptive properties such as moral facts. In his own words and with reference to Plato's account of Forms and their putative motivational power, "Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it." (Mackie, 1977, p. 40) Perhaps it would be interesting to take a closer look into the debate in order to properly situate the metaethical debate within the broader ethical framework I am proposing here.

One example: A closer look at the metaethics of values

Philosophers like J. L. Mackie and S. Blackburn have argued, firstly, that we should see humans as part of nature. Consequently, their behaviour and life-form are ultimately explicable in terms of that same natural world. Secondly, since we have now adopted a post-Galilean stance and no longer understands the cosmos in terms of meaning, ethical values can no longer be treated as part of the ultimate furniture of the universe. It is a mistake in our judgement to attribute value to things. Such attributions are in fact a kind of projection we make on to the world. Blackburn's projectionism and his views on quasi-realism have invited a good number of commentaries and updated reactions in recent times. (Johnson, Smith, 2015)

By contrast, John McDowell has argued that although values may not be "out there", this does not make them any less real. Values are not "brutely there" in the sense that if we were absent, value-attributions could get no purchase on the universe. Developing the analogy between moral qualities and seconda-

ry qualities, McDowell tells us that an account of what we are attributing, of various value-properties, like 'attractive' or 'dangerous', involves at some level or other some reference to their impact on us. Thus, we can say of colour, heat and taste, that they are "not adequately conceivable except... in terms of dispositions to give rise to certain subjective states". (McDowell, 1998, pp. 133-136)

Can we speak of error or truth in such cases? The secondary quality 'red' is only there to be seen, true, but perhaps we can still make right or wrong attributions of it. The proposal could be that moral qualities are not "brutely there" without any "internal relation to some exercise of human sensibility". Rather they are best seen as dispositions that elicit the appropriate responses from humans. Within this framework might we argue in favour of a stronger account of moral values that went beyond secondary qualities? McDowell's solution heavily relies on the classical Lockean view and this enables him to put forward the idea that moral qualities are 'response-dependent' since they coincide with the disposition to elicit an appropriate response in us at the right place and time. (Johnston, 1989) Moral properties are just that: they exist only in so far as they give rise to appropriate responses in suitable agents.

An ontology that viewed properties as 'primary' qualities would *deny* that moral qualities are *mind-dependent* qualities. Moral qualities are not transferred to a thing by the appropriate attitudes an agent may display under conditions whether correctly or incorrectly appraised. If moral properties are treated as primary, rather than secondary qualities, they are different from properties like being a 2 Euro stamp or a desirable concert-ticket, values which are arguably attributed by the attitudes we may have.

Which line of metaethical reasoning could lead us away from the view that moral properties are mere dispositions "to merit the appropriate attitudes"? (McDowell, 1998, p. 143) What could be reflected by an ontology of primary qualities within our ethical counterpart? One plausible approach could be to suggest that moral qualities are instantiated in actions, mental causes and intentions – all primary features within the account of human and hence moral, action – rather than the rather feeble account of having subjective attitudes or appropriate responses to those actions and intentions. McDowell's solution was primarily to tackle Mackie's original charge that we typically assume that moral qualities are primary qualities and that this is grossly misleading and unhelpful when thinking about moral qualities. McDowell's move was to shift the focus toward the kinds of personal or subjective responses that those qualities merit. Grasping the nature of humility coincides with various sorts of appropriate responses in our moral psychology. McDowell evidently assumes that this is something a 'primary' quality approach to moral properties cannot satisfy.

One can see why. It is easier to strike a causal link between a secondary quality approach and moral motivation instantiated by the very apprehension of such qualities. One limitation, in my view, of McDowell's solution is that it cashes almost exclusively on motivational internalism. In other words, there is a necessary causal link between a person's apprehending and judging that something is morally required and that person's being motivated to act appropriately. On this view, for moral motivation fails if cognitive apprehension fails, that is, when an agent fails to apprehend a moral situation aright. Apprehension, judgment and motivation are all closely and causally connected according to McDowell, which is why he considers it to be a successful response to Mackie and Blackburn. There is nothing queer about moral qualities for they just are the sorts of entity which, necessarily, when grasped elicit or merit appropriate motivational states in moral agents. Finally, as M. Johnston observed, the response-dependent view can preserve the intuition that practically important features of reality cannot in principle outstrip our grasp of them. (Johnston, 1993, pp. 113-115) Moral qualities bridge ontology, action and ethics in a marvellous way since they necessarily depend upon the apprehension of moral agents and thereby hold immensely promising motivational prospects. This is happily different from the alien or "queer" Platonic entities hovering somewhere in a Platonic heaven as suggested by Mackie.

Does this proposal adequately fit in with the phenomenology of our ethical life? One could point out that we do not have the experience of apprehending a disposition of the sort proposed by response-dependent theorists when we say that we apprehend a moral quality. Our experience of cognitively detecting the wrongness in Alex being deceived by Nicola, for instance, goes beyond a mere apprehension of a disposition to elicit or merit kinds of subjective experience. In fact, the content of our apprehension does not really refer to how suitable subjects would respond to it. In fact, the wrongness of Nicola's act of deception resembles a monadic, non-relational quality of his action. In response, Colin McGinn suggested that the secondary-quality view of moral properties could avoid the force of the objection if it were detached from McDowell's idea that moral qualities are identical with dispositions. So, for instance, moral qualities could be said to supervene on dispositions. (McGinn, 1996, pp. 547-553) This could offer a path to the response-dependent theorists since wrongness is an action is envisaged as an "emergent", monadic quality which is grounded in a disposition.

R. Pargetter, on the other hand argued that moral qualities cannot be dispositional qualities because "we directly perceive, or have a direct acquaintance with or an awareness of, moral properties" and hence, "goodness

must itself be causally efficacious if it is to be directly apprehended". (Pargetter, 1988, p. 115) Pargetter says very little to explain the directness of this apprehension. Is he saying that moral qualities can be present to us in some sort of "mental or perceptual experience" similar to the squareness of the table in perceptual experience, as well as in the way the dimensions of the table are available via a mathematical calculation?

The moral realist could still argue that actions have moral properties in a derivative sense only insofar as they express morally appropriate or inappropriate character traits, intentions, beliefs, and the like. If that's true, the fact that we have no direct apprehension of moral qualities is not surprising at all. For in most cases, it would seem that the *signs* of these intentions and their properties are more readily present to us. So where does this leave us? Can we safely say that the secondary-quality approach to moral values overcomes the significant disanalogies between the phenomenology of paradigmatically response-dependent qualities and apprehending moral qualities? (Johnston, 1998) When we reflect upon the phenomenology of being nauseating, for instance, we are unlikely to conclude that, our cognitive access to a way that meat is necessarily depended upon its being disposed to cause us to feel nausea. Rather, we are inclined to think that such a phenomenology of the nauseating strongly suggests that the nauseating just is the power to cause feelings of nausea in creatures like us.

When applying this to metaethical considerations, however, the apprehending of moral qualities does *not* clearly suggest that moral qualities are just powers to elicit appropriate responses in practically rational or virtuous agents. Moral qualities, by contrast, seem independent of our subjective attitudes in a way not supported by a theory of response-dependence. Of course, I am simplifying here, simply with the intention of highlighting the seriousness of such metaethical points of contention. An Aristotelian of a particular strand might be tempted to think of moral qualities as dispositions to elicit the appropriate responses in ideal agents, or those exhibiting *phronesis*, in terms of cognitive and practical excellence.

Moral qualities are unlikely to be seen as independent of the attitudes of ideal agents. What happens when ideally practically rational agents fall short of judging well? Would they consequently lose access to a way the world is independently of its being such as to elicit or merit certain kinds of responses in them? Therefore, are moral qualities independent from our responses or not, after all? The analogy with secondary qualities purports that things are not as they appear. We have good reason to think that colours are not existentially independent of our responses in spite of appearances. However,

one could reply by saying that the strength of response-dependent views in explaining motivational internalism depends heavily on the performance of idealised agents in idealised conditions. Do we, therefore, have independent reasons for thinking that moral qualities resemble secondary qualities?

One could – and probably should – reasonably express reservations about the phenomenology of moral qualities that are identified with dispositions to give rise to certain kinds of subjective experience. For, we are still taunted by the question of what we mean when we say that we apprehend a moral quality. There might be limitations with the 'Lockean' account of moral properties which is why it cannot adequately address the objections levelled against it. Moreover, how comprehensive is the view offered by theorists who take McDowell's approach to moral value? Are all moral qualities are treated as such? If not, then we still need criteria that help us distinguish moral qualities that are response-dependent and those that aren't. The case would greatly diminish the effectiveness of the secondary quality analogy. In fact, such an approach would be incoherent because there are moral qualities which stubbornly resist being characterised as response-dependent qualities.

Terence Cuneo has argued extensively on these lines. His example based on a given moral property he names 'Sound Practical Reason' (Cuneo, 2001, p. 578) shows that there is another and more coherent account of dependence, namely that seen in terms of identity, rather than supervenience. This kind of dependence gives us a more accurate account of the sorts of relations that instances of 'Sound Practical Reason' bear to agents who exhibit it. An agent's Sound Practical Reason is in the most important sense a competence the agent has to respond appropriately to things. It is a mistake to place the emphasis on the fact that such a capacity gives rise to certain responses, rather than a capacity to respond to things.

This shows us that an account of moral qualities inspired by a Lockean account of secondary qualities cannot adequately do justice to an account of moral qualities of certain kinds – specifically, moral virtues. Such powers are not merely values which elicit certain kinds of response. Rather, and quite differently, they are capacities to respond appropriately and efficiently to the world. The weight would therefore shift in favour of a 'primary' view account which arguably has the resources to give a fuller and phenomenologically more coherent account of what practical reason and other virtues actually are.

The centrality of moral psychology

The previous section has probed three challenging questions it brought to light in the first place when it comes to ethical values or ethical properties: we need to settle their ontological status (i.e., what are they?), understand how we cognize and acquire ethical knowledge (i.e., their epistemological standing) and finally, explain how such ethical beliefs motivate us and explain human action. Of course, things are not as simple as they appear. In the next section, that on practical reason, we will need to return to the debate on the status of good and evil, in the light of a classic paper written over half a century ago, Peter Geach claimed that there can never be "just good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so-and-so". Is it true, then, that goodness can never be used in a non-relative sense? The rejection of absolute good and evil may be unacceptable to those who believe there are intrinsically good and evil actions. We shall need to hope that once we look at ethics 'through' practical reason, further light may be brought to the matter. Yet one may also provide considerable insight by moving away from the purely metaethical and by adopting what might be called an 'incarnational' approach which looks at humans as agents, indeed moral agents, even though the term 'moral' – pace Anscombe – purportedly adds nothing to the meaning of human action when it is taken to be free, responsible and thereby, the subject of ethics.

The second benchmark, therefore, within the systematic taxonomy I am here proposing will need to be a core aspect of analysis for it touches upon the very nature of ethics in its being a study of the good or evil in human action. Although in its entry on the subject the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* says that moral psychology is necessarily interdisciplinary, I wish to delineate the specifically philosophical nature of psychology as an integral feature of the ethics done comprehensively, so to speak, rather than adopt the methods and starting points of the social sciences which tend to leave the philosophical questions we need to ask unanswered and beg the question instead. In this I am in agreement with what Anscombe says in her *Modern Moral Philosophy* paper when she suggests that more work needs to be done to clarify what the core mechanics of human action are, for instance, intention, will, virtue passions and freedom. Moreover, ethics is about persons, their dignity, rights and also their value qua rational beings. It is only if we devote the appropriate space to a critical reflection on human agency that we can provide a reliable framework for the demands of a satisfactory moral psychology.

There are theories who place the requirements for moral psychology at the core of their ethical system, as is the case with Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and Kant. There are other theories which do not even make space for it as is the case with utilitarianism and consquentialist theories of action. Finally, there are systems which are reductivist and collapse into a circular account of human action as is the case with emotivism and intuitionism. Let me attempt to explain further the point I am trying to make. I am not, here, advocating one particular moral psychology over another. The purpose of this article is to establish the necessary framework I believe to be sufficiently complete that it offers a reliable tool in our validation of ethical theories. This, I propose, should be done by testing a theory against these established standards, the failure of which should rather helpfully sift through those ethical theories which are more intellectually complete or not.

The question that needs to be asked here is this: do we need a moral psychology at the heart of our ethical theories? How does a careful reflection on the mechanics of the human qua agent contribute to our philosophising about good and evil? Can we adequately formulate a reliable ethical theory without taking into consideration the very sources of human action? Theorists who have given much importance to a consideration of moral psychology within their ethical philosophy have also often claimed that such sources coincide with the very sources of normativity. Thus for, instance, Kant famously declared that there is nothing in the universe that we can possibly conceive to be good without qualification except a good will. (Kant, 2009, 59) That is, for him, the aim of morality and it is also its very source. How can one understand Kant's account of morality and his theory of action without having a clear understanding of the role played by the will? Things, of course are not so plainly clear since it will become evident that the will plays the role of intention in his moral psychology and we would need to carefully lay out the textual underpinnings to show how this is in fact the case. Conceived by arguably the most illustrious son of the Enlightenment project, Kant's moral psychology is also a microcosm of that audacious faith in the capacity of unaided human reason to establish quasi-scientific criteria for morality, a target which was, after all, his ultimate ambition. One could say that he wanted to establish for philosophy what Newton did for physics and he relied on the powers of human rationality in order to generate morality's own 'laws of nature'. That will take us right into the heart of both the metaethical quest for objectivity as well as to the standards of practical reason-based theories of action. The former is met through the universalizable principles or maxims which are mental exercises supplying action-directive norms, while the latter, which ge-

nerate the Categorical Imperative, manifest his views of practical reason since a moral reason is for Kant necessarily a Categorical Imperative.

Of course, one can – perhaps one should – fault Kant with promising something his system could not possibly offer, namely objectivity. For ultimately, the criteria of subjectivity, at least on a rather mainstream reading, that is, the thinking subject qua quintessentially rational agent, would be the foundations for one's objectivity understood as 'consistency in action', to use Onora O'Neill's phrase. (O'Neill, 1990) The Enlightenment project did, after all, place man's rationality at the centre as the starting point for any truth whether metaphysical, epistemic or moral. Kant would say that it is not possible to appeal to any other authority, whether transcendent or natural as the objective and external foundation for knowledge. Yet one still needs to explain why Kant thinks that the rational and the moral so closely align each other. His answer lies in the supreme role the account of the will as the showcase of practical reason plays in his theory of action. He is of course aware of the requirement to 'fill-in' his account of the ethical and thus offers a number of formulations of the Categorical Imperative as we shall briefly note in the next section.

The account philosophers offer of their moral psychology is thus, I claim, a function of their metaphysics, their anthropology and consequently of their philosophical ethics. Greek philosophers, for instance, did not have an explicit psychology of freedom and the will and what later European thinkers achieved by developing a psychology of freedom came to rely increasingly on the work done by *voluntas* in their account. (Byers, 2006; Frede, 2002; Perkams 2013) It is the concept of *hekousion*, the voluntary vs involuntary that is broadly used by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance in III.1 even though commentators like Anthony Kenny and David Bostock argue that the distinctions are rather casual as opposed to technical. In Aquinas the Greek term *boulesis* will be served by the notion of the will, *voluntas*. (Kenny, 1979; Bostock, 2000)

That Aquinas, however, is fully aware of the complexities of practical reasoning – namely instrumental or means-to-ends reasoning – is shown by his highly nuanced account of the various acts of the will, distinguished from each other in terms of whether they are for the means or for the end, while of course being coextensively linked within one ongoing human act. In that account, as found in the *Summa Theologiae*, II, qq. 6-17, intention, for instance is the direction of the will toward an ultimate end of action while choice, which is probably the most important act of the will, is addressed to the means of an action. The contrast from rather impoverished accounts of

ethics such utilitarianism and intuitionism could not be greater. Aquinas is keen to show that: the means chosen are ethically pertinent as much as ends, that human agents ought to be held fully responsible for both means and ends and, thirdly, that this is fully reflected in his philosophical psychology.

Despite the rarefied and apparently fragmentary account of the acts of will, the narrative is not at all disjointed and Aquinas is also careful to preserve the overall unity of the moral character of the agent qua rational by devising an ingenious definition of the will as *'appetitus rationalis'*, a rational appetite. This is striking for it goes beyond the minimalist determinism of a Humean account of agency according to which 'reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions' (Hume 2009, p. 415) by integrating desire into a richer account of the 'appetible' while also preserving the intellectual primacy as a condition for true human freedom. Human beings desire because they want and they want because they know. On this view, the will follows upon understanding or cognition.

Aquinas's is but one example of philosophers who have taken seriously their account of moral psychology and their account of ethics would be incomplete without it. Taking account of this important insertion in their philosophical system I am proposing that this should be a standardised benchmark for any ethical theory that ambitiously aims to contribute to the conversation of morality. A coherent philosophical psychology is crucial to morality and ethics because it lays the foundational basis of any assessment of human action. Let us say, for instance, that we agree that there are three irreducible aspects of human action which serve as the tracking spheres for ethical evaluation: intention (taken broadly to include will and other important aspects of human agency), the human act and the consequences. The first, namely intention, plays an extremely important role in the determination of moral responsibility. One asks, "why did you do that?" with the aim of being told an account of one's intentionality. In recent years, Anscombe's work, particularly her magisterial work *Intention* first published in 1957 has been very influential on debates related to human action, responsibility and ethics. (Anscombe, 1963) Julia Driver claims that this work "continues to be a standard point of reference for those working in action theory and philosophical psychology". (Driver, 2019)

Although the work is not actually a work in ethics, it is directly relevant to it since Anscombe argues in favour of an intrinsic link between intentionality and 'object', hence her claim that "intentional acts are directed upon intentional objects". (Frey, 2017, pp. 202-247) Similar to Aquinas's account of the acts of the will, Anscombe's account of reasons for action points to a series of causally linked means/end descriptions which shape what we could call the 'inten-

tional narrative' explaining what the agent takes to be good about what he or she does. More needs to be said, of course. However, this has served to demonstrate, I believe, the centrality of moral psychology to any respectable ethical system which values the categories of freedom and responsibility. For how can one measure an agent's blameworthiness or praiseworthiness, to cite but one example, without having fully developed the conditions for such an appraisal? One could go on, to cite another example, by comparing Aquinas's and Kant's accounts of the passions and the emotions, following each account to its conclusion which are strikingly different. For Kant, rationality and ethics are two sides of the same coin and the well-educated will proves that it can transcend any heteronomy and confusing fuzziness caused by the impact of the emotions. For Aquinas, by contrast, the reining in of the passions through reason and virtue is compatible with a positive account of such passions and which has a lot to be said for it when looking for paradigms that are holistic, i.e., inclusive of passion and emotion as integral to morality.

The demands of practical reason(s)

Humans are distinct from the rest of the animals in virtue of the kind of rationality they exemplify. Our symbolic thinking enables us not only to think mathematically and philosophically, that is through abstraction. It enables us to creatively theorise about music, art, literature and architecture in ways other animals cannot. Our symbolic thought also enables us to explain why we intend to act in a certain way or other, to discuss the meaning of our actions and how that connects to what we take to be the meaning of our life in connection with thoughts about finality and purposefulness. We also struggle with a loss of meaning when this connection gets damaged and sometimes destroyed, even. Of course, other animals may display instrumental behaviour as well, for instance, a spider weaving its intricate web, a bird dancing or chirping in such a way as to attract its mate. These instances of behaviour can all be intelligibly interpreted as cases of means to ends activities. Yet we could also insist that they are all explicable in terms of instinct and are, for that reason, unconscious. They belong to the genetic and programmatic constitution of the species of which the animal is but one particular. To take the example further, it would be absurd to hold a snake morally responsible for killing a prey – humans included – with its venom, or a hungry tiger mauling an intruder into its cage or territory, for that is just what snakes and tigers do in their carnivorous capacity when they are in a particular natural mood when confronted by this or that threat.

Things are quite different when it comes to us humans. We do not only act unconsciously and from instinct as other animals do. We reflect and deliberate, we formulate principles and norms, we are sensitive to notions such as freedom, obligatoriness, choice and responsibility, normativity and duty. We also get involved – or so Aquinas and Aristotle would insist – affectively, through our passions that are rightly ordered through the proper habituation and virtue. We also have the potential to choose from a wide array of ends, outcomes and purposes, what Aristotle would call final causes. When we act freely and meaningfully it is because we choose some means in relation to an end intended. And so on, depending on one's preferred account.

Perhaps no philosopher more than Aristotle strived to place practical rationality at the core of his ethical system. His ethical system does not offer blueprints of the good life but rather takes the concept of human flourishing as its principal hermeneutic standard. To adopt a recent version from Macintyre,

> "Just as wolves, dolphins, gorillas, foxes, and rabbits flourish or fail to flourish, so [...] it is too with human animals [...] Our everyday judgments about the good and the bad, the better and the worse, at least when our evaluative language is in good order, presuppose some perhaps inchoate view of what it is that human flourishing consists in, even though it may be one that we ourselves have never spelled out". (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 25)

Aristotle famously developed the notion of a practical syllogism in his *Nicomachean Ethics* for he thought that practical reasoning, that is, rationality applied to action, can be formulated logically. Having reasons for action – whether they are the result of complex deliberation or of spontaneous choice – is a quintessentially human characteristic. That is what ethics is all about, as he argues on Book VI of the *Ethics*. The virtues are the corresponding stable and good qualities of character that enable the human agent qua rational to internalise through practice what he or she has chosen as the good, object of finality of one's action. Earlier on I put forward the idea that philosophical ethics always display an anthropology which in turn is generated by commitments to some ontology. Of course, Aristotle's teleology and his philosophy of nature lie at the basis of his action theory and, naturally, of his views on practical reason. This can, Aristotle suggests, be expressed syllogistically. The major premise concerns some end or good that is identified or a universal principle. The minor premise is related to the particular circumstances of the here and now of the agent. The conclu-

sion is typically a choice that results in an action: indeed, it is an incomplete syllogism if an action does not ensue. Aristotle would say inaction would result in a failure in practical reason. The virtue of *phronesis* – right practical wisdom – is thus necessary to enhance the efficiency and the success of our deliberations. *Phronesis* ensures that the agent dialectically strives to discern the right action inductively as well as by the help of virtues informed by principles:

> "[...] The practical intellect must still be seen as aiming at the truth; specifically, its object is practical truth, which Aristotle defines as 'truth in agreement with right desire'" (Aristotle, 2009, p. 1139)

As Jennifer Frey has recently shown, Anscombe continues on this important Aristotelian vein. Deliberation in practical reasoning is a discerning and selective transition from "some general object of intention to the particular act that will realise it in some specific set of circumstances". (Frey, 2019, p. 1137) She then cites Anscombe herself on the very nature of practical rationality:

> "For in the sphere of practical reasoning, goodness of the end has the same role as truth of the premises has in theoretical reasoning. This is the great Aristotelian parallel: if it is right, then the goodness of the end and of the action is as much of an extra, as external to the validity of the reasoning, as truth of the premises and of the conclusion is an extra, is external to the validity of theoretical reasoning. As external, but not more external. We know that the externality is not total. For truth is the object of belief, and truth-preservingness an essential associate of validity in theoretical reasoning. The parallel will hold for practical reasoning." (Anscombe, 2005, p. 146)

This, however, is not the only theory of practical reasoning in recent philosophy. Although all variants agree that practical reason is the figuring out of what to do and practical inference results in an action that can be derived from the logical structure of the act, other versions are in contrast with the model embraced by Aristotelians like Anscombe, or Aquinas for that matter. Kant himself had formulated three versions of the Categorical Imperative: The Formula of the Universal Law: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, 2009, p. 84); the Formula of the Law of Nature: "Act as

if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature" (Kant, 2009, p. 84); the Formula of the End in Itself: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end". (Kant, 2009, p. 91) Contemporary Kantians like Christine Korsgaard have insisted, that, despite the differences in the logical framework that undergirds their notion of a practical syllogism (not to mention the contrasting differences in their psychology of freedom), Aristotle and Kant have very much the same answer to the question: 'what are we referring to when we talk about the reason for an action'. It is what she calls the "reflexive structure of reasons", with reference to an agent's "consciousness of its own appropriateness" which is at the core of both the Aristotelian and Kantian account of practical reason. (Korsgaard, 2008, p. 208)

There is no opportunity here to enter into a deeper analysis into the merits of such a judgment yet such paradigms of practical reason offer any substantial moral theories the reliable conceptual scaffolding they require. Their systematic and semantic richness becomes more evident when contrasted with yet another model, one focused exclusively on the interplay of mental beliefs and desires to the detriment of the 'external' objectivity of reasons for action mentioned above. Most famous in this area has been Bernard Williams who in his seminal paper 'Internal and External Reasons' (Williams, 1981, p. 101-113) argued that there are only internal reasons and that "what some thinkers would consider to be 'external reasons' are, on close examination, disguised claims about what it would be good for someone to do, not claims about what they have reason to do". (Pettit, Smith, 2006, p. 142) According to Williams' formula, an agent has an internal reason to φ only if he would be motivated to φ if he were engaged in deliberative reasoning. Williams argues that a statement of the form 'A has a reason to φ' is true only if φ-ing would satisfy some motivation that A has. By contrast to Williams' internalism, an externalist would argue that it can still be true of A that 'A has a reason to φ' even if the consequent of the above conditional fails to obtain; that is, the proposition that 'A has a reason to φ' is not always falsified by the absence, for A, of a motivation.

Can there be reasons for acting?

Williams writes of an agent's "subjective motivational set S" and gives an account of "rational deliberation". He often refers to the elements of S as "desires", but notes that "this terminology may make one forget that S

can contain such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects... embodying commitments of the agent". (Williams, 1981, p. 105) Moreover, the elements of S do not remain fixed, as "internal reasons statements can be discovered in deliberative reasoning". (Williams, 1981, p. 104) A necessary condition for the truth of an internal reason statement is that φ-ing satisfies some motivation that agent has. Through deliberative reasoning an agent can also acquire new motivations. This account of deliberative reasoning includes practical reasoning of the sort that leads one to the conclusion that one has reason to φ because φ-ing is in more ways than one the best manner of satisfying some element of that *subjective motivational set*. Deliberative reasoning also involves considerations as to i) how various elements of S might be arranged or combined, ii) which of two or more incompatible elements of S are preferred, and iii) finding constitutive solutions as to the most desirable way of satisfying some element(s) in S. (Williams, 1981, p. 104-105)

In his later response to McDowell, Williams considers the idea of a "sound deliberative route" – one free of errors of reasoning and fact – sufficiently important such as to warrant an alternate version of the internalist thesis formulated around this notion:

> 'A has a reason to φ' (is true) only if A could reach the conclusion that she should φ (or a conclusion to φ) by a sound deliberative route from the motivations that she has in her actual motivational set. (Williams, 1995, p. 35)

It is fundamental that the conclusion be reached by a *sound* deliberative route, since, according to Williams, if an agent has the false belief that φ-ing will bring about some desired result Z, it is not true to say of the agent (on this information alone) that she has a reason to φ. Williams brings the example of an agent who has a desire to drink a gin and tonic and mistakes a bottle of petroleum for a bottle of gin. In this case it would not be true to say of the agent that she has a reason to drink the bottle of petroleum, for there is no sound deliberative route from the agent's desire to this particular action. (Williams, 1995, p. 36) Note that the notion of a "sound deliberative route" is objective in a way that the contents S are not, since this notion of "soundness" provides some criterion to distinguish between appropriate and faulty deliberative reasoning, while the appropriateness of the elements of S remains entirely immune to any such objective constraint.

According to Williams, "when some reason is an explanation of an action, then of course it will be, in some form, in that agent's S, because

certainly – and nobody denies this – what he actually does has to be explained by his S". (Williams, 1995, p. 39) This claim only gets by because of the many diverse elements that have been allowed as members of an agent's broadly construed "subjective motivational set". For Williams' claim reduces to the rather trivial truth that the purposeful action of an intentional agent must be able to be explained in terms of something that motivated him to act. But if what motivated an agent to act was an evaluative judgement that some action was "worthwhile", then it is either misleading or false to claim, as the Williams would, that this reason for action merely amounts to satisfying a subjective motivation or desire.

Williams was aware of the objections from externalist approaches to reasons for action. In his own words, McDowell's critique aimed "[...] is to leave room for an intelligible account of 'external' reasons for action: that is to say, to give a sense to 'A has a reason to φ' that does not necessarily ground φ-ing in A's existing S." (Williams, 1995, p. 36) His internalism about reasons fails to disentangle itself from the Humean belief-desire psychology that dominates the behaviourist economy of action. Yet it is an important advancement upon the expressivist – and its less sophisticated variant, emotivist – theories of ethics. Consider this passage from A. J. Ayer:

> "If I say to someone 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money', I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money'. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it, I am simply evincing my moral disapproval about it [...] If now I generalise my previous statement and say, 'Stealing money is wrong,' I produce a statement which has no factual meaning – that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false." (Ayer, 1996, p. 124)

There are, for the emotivist, not only internal or subject reasons for actions: there are no reasons at all. Ethical claims are merely expressions of approval or disapproval and their function is to exert psychological influence on others. There is, sadly, no philosophical exchange between thinking minds and free agents engaging in this pivotal dimension of the human qua rational, namely practical reason. As Macintyre recently observed, with lament,

> "Moreover, if we were to consider those other issues on which expressivists and their critics disagree, we would find that there is a story of the same kind to be told, a story of apparently ineliminable disagreement. We are entitled to conclude not only that no decisive argument, or at least no argument that an honest

> and philosophically sophisticated expressivist would find decisive, has as yet been mounted against expressivism, but also that there is little or no prospect of such an argument being mounted." (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 25)

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to propose the view that the way forward for a more fruitful philosophical debate on the nature of morality requires a set of criteria which function both as a method as well as an opportunity for the majority of ethical issues that require systematic ordering to be tackled. By looking into the metaethical debate, we sharpen the foundations of our ethical debate and also face longstanding aporiai that have dominated certain areas of moral philosophy, such as the possibility of objectivity in values and how such values motivate human action. Since ethics concerns persons as well as actions, we need to examine carefully – taking Anscombe's recommendation – the philosophical mechanics of psychology. Ethical systems which ignore this exercise end up being irrelevant within one of the most influential areas of philosophy. Finally, there is something distinctively human in ethical discourse. This can be only undergirded through a discovery of the logic that is built in to the practical application of human intelligence. The aim of the article, I hope, has been to encourage a rapprochement between these fundamental areas such that a more coherent as well as specialised account of morality may be eventually achieved.

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