Review of “Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality”

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§0. David Wiggins’ new book is an interesting mixture of detailed analytic moral philosophy, history of philosophy, and general introduction to ethics. As Wiggins notes in his preface, much of the material he presents was developed as teaching lectures for part-time philosophy students at Birkbeck College, and the chapters read as high-level course material. The lectures themselves cover a great deal of ground, but are divided into three major thematic sections: morality (roughly conceived as normative ethics and moral psychology), justice (applied moral and political philosophy), and meta-ethics. The majority of the lectures (nine of the twelve) are housed under the morality section, with only one lecture on justice and two on meta-ethics. Several key figures in moral philosophy receive deep and detailed treatments, namely Hume, Kant, Aristotle, Plato, J.S. Mill, Jeremy Bentham, John Rawls, and John Mackie. It is an ambitiously broad-ranging attempt to cover the whole of moral philosophy in just under four hundred pages, and it succeeds in being both a nice ‘big picture’ look at what he calls ‘the philosophy of morality’ and a detailed look at very specific elements in the philosophy of these major figures. In what follows, I will give a brief overview of each of the lectures (§1). I will then offer a short discussion of some of Wiggins’ main points and propose some specific criticisms of them in §2 and conclude in §3 with some brief comments about the text as a whole.

§1. As the title implies, this book contains twelve distinct but interconnected lectures on moral philosophy. While each lecture can stand alone, they also serve as a linked series, each reading like a part of the larger story, a defense of morality. In what follows, I will attempt to provide extremely brief synopses of the lectures themselves without any critical commentary, which will follow in the next section. But before I do, however, I would like to offer a handful of points, drawn directly from the text, which might provide a guideline of his moral modus operandi.

The first key point centers on the nature or concern of morality itself, and what appears to be Wiggins’ idealized moral theory. He offers a moral division of labor in the first lecture, breaking the ‘philosophical study of morals’ into three key questions, paraphrased here:

1. Questions about the substance of morality, its nature, and its extent, including the broader question as to whether there IS any substance to morality.
2. Questions about the reasons there may be to adhere to any substantial morality, assuming one exists.
3. Questions about the logical and metaphysical characteristics of the findings of morality.
Lectures one through ten address the first two questions explicitly, focusing on the nature of normative ethical theories and theories of moral reasoning and moral psychology that make normative theories workable. The latter two lectures focus on the third question, the *metaethical* question, a question which addresses questions of truth and objectivity in ethics. These three central questions are the underlying themes of these lectures, and it is useful to have them in mind when walking through the more detailed studies of the major ethical figures that follow.

The second key point to keep in mind is the *type* of moral theory that he seems to have in mind as the ideal. Those familiar with Wiggins’ prior work in ethics may anticipate his approach in meta-ethics (cognitivist non-naturalist moral realism) but Wiggins focuses most of the lectures on the *normative* bent of moral theory, and not on the meta-ethical concerns of theory (Wiggins, 1987). He offers his first attempt at such an idealized normative theory at the end of lecture three:

> What a fully grown-up moral philosophy might attempt is an account of morality that embraces the full gamut of moral predications, seeing them as mutually irreducible, and mutually indispensable, allowing no primacy to character traits or virtues or practices or acts or states of affairs—or allowing primacy to all at once. (82)

This kind of approach to moral philosophy is not a purely consequentialist theory, or a deontological theory, or a virtue-centered theory, but one that takes into account all of the subtleties of moral phenomena without giving central importance to any one aspect (‘being virtuous’ or ‘performing right acts’): it appears to be a fully balanced, ‘eyes wide open’ moral theory. Having set these two key points out, I move to very brief discussion of the contents of the chapters.

The first lecture sets the stage by considering the challenge to morality raised by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book I of the *Republic*, specifically how they raise, in part, the three questions noted above as the central questions of morality, focusing on the second but tangentially addressing the other two.

The second lecture begins Wiggins’ excursion into a detailed analysis of David Hume’s moral theory, starting with his ‘genealogy of morals’ (namely, Humean moral psychology) and the notions of self-love, benevolence, and the moral sentiments. He considers how the Humean sentiments might fit within the scientific context of evolutionary theory, ably applying work from Darwin’s *Descent of Man* as well as more recent work by John Mackie, and Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson. Finally, he considers the nature of evil through the eyes of both Hume and Schopenhauer, and applies the concept of wickedness to Humean moral psychology.

The third lecture extends the discussion of Hume’s moral theory by considering the difference between Hume’s *natural* and *artificial* virtues and by drawing out more clearly what it is to be *reasonable* for Hume. In this lecture, Wiggins also addresses the question of just what *convention* is for Hume, and what binds people to conventions. It is here that he gives his first approximation of a properly constituted moral theory (quoted above) and then dismisses theories that are too focused on one aspect of morality or another for their short-sightedness.

Lectures four and five do a considerable amount of work, in that they compare Hume’s moral theory to that of his ‘chief rival’, Immanuel Kant. The fourth lecture lays out, in intricate detail, the
rationale behind the Categorical Imperative, in particular the Formula of Humanity, focusing on the content of morality. Wiggins takes great pains to explain both the Formula itself and the reason that all rational creatures must accept it, including nice discussions of contradictions in conception and contradictions in the will, as well as analyses of four crucial examples of violations of the Imperative, including an interesting analysis of the absolute moral obligation to tell the truth (112-114) and a discussion of the nature of Kantian Kingdom of Ends.

In lecture five, we move from the first of Wiggins’ moral questions (‘what is the content of morality?’) to the second (‘what reason do we have in participating in morality?’) regarding Kant’s moral theory. It is here he brings Hume back into the story, and considers the nature of autonomy and of self-legislation from both Kantian and Humean perspectives. He considers the role of the ‘villain’ (a version of Hume’s sensible knave) and lays out what he finds to be the ‘real problem’ between Kant and Hume, namely the fact that Humean subjectivism allows us to give ourselves reasons in a different way than the Kantian law can allow. He also hints that the conditional defense of Humean moral philosophy that he has offered will be cashed out by “better emphasizing his numerous concealed or further constructible affinities with Aristotle” and claims that the answers to his looming ethical questions can be found in the “space that lies between Hume, Kant, and Aristotle” (138).

Before we get to that space, however, Wiggins takes us on a crucial detour through the other main contender for dominant normative ethical theory: classical utilitarianism. In lecture six, he explores the theories of Bentham and Mill, moving on to a more nuanced version (R.M. Hare’s) in lecture seven, and concluding with a detailed consideration of what he calls the ‘consequentialist tendency’ (best described by Samuel Scheffler and challenged by W.D. Ross) in lecture eight. When he concludes lecture eight, Wiggins has guided us nicely through three dominant views in ethics: Humean sentimentalism, Kantian rationalism, and the various forms of consequentialism.

Wiggins concludes his nine-lecture discussion of normative ethics with an attempt to defend what he calls a ‘first-order ethics of solidarity and reciprocity’. He claims to want to borrow from Hume’s ‘explanatory naturalism’ while still considering Kantian and utilitarian insights to connect morality with human happiness. Wiggins seems to want to begin the endeavors of morality by understanding, with Hume, the phenomenon of morality itself rather than rushing straight into moral theorizing (231). The kind of ‘first-order ethic’ Wiggins is pushing towards is an ethic that incorporates a human scale of values and a human deontology’ (242). It is an ethic that attributes to certain kinds of agents a distinct kind of moral space which cannot be invaded by others, regardless of claims of expedience or utility (241), even in the face of deployment of clever moral devices like the Doctrine of Double Effect (see 9.15 and 9.16). This first-order ethic is described as the ‘sum of good reasons’ which is “something that is not even describable or intelligible externally to the whole life of which it, morality, forms one central constituent” (264). This kind of ethic (of solidarity and reciprocity) is made from, and reactive to, real human emotions, experiences, and sentiments. He takes this ethics to work at the ground level in Part II, his single lecture on political philosophy.

Lecture ten, “Neo-Aristotelian Reflections on Justice” (originally published in 2004) attempts to see a dialogue engaged between Aristotle and contemporary liberal political philosophers about justice. It is at this point in the book, he notes, that the lectures stop being interconnected and start to appear as ‘stand-alone’ readings (Chapters Eleven and Twelve were also previously published in
other formats) while still being tied, thematically, to Wiggins’ concerns with the philosophy of morality. The chapter plays out, in large part, as a fictional dialogue between the neo-Aristotelian political theorist Bertrand de Jouvenel (aided at points by John Lucas and G.A. Cohen) and the contemporary Kantian liberalism of John Rawls.

In Lectures eleven and twelve, the emphasis turns to a discussion of meta-ethics, including the nature of objectivity, Mackie’s famous arguments from queerness and relativity, and the semantics of moral language. Wiggins concludes with a very brief summation and overview, tidying up a few loose ends and pointing out, for instance, the places where the lectures have come closest to supporting Hume’s claims on the nature of virtue, along with making more general reflective claims about the scope and purpose of moral philosophy. Following the summation, Wiggins provides some bibliographic details (including a postscript on the best translations) of the key works by Aristotle, Kant, and Hume. The book also contains an index, but does not feature a collected bibliography or works cited.

§2. There is much to consider in this book and the breadth and scope of the work precludes any sort of comprehensive criticism. I want to make a few general comments on specific ideas that come out in the lectures, and then offer a few comments on the text as a whole.

Much of the weight of Wiggins’ argument is rooted in the understanding of morality as a workable human endeavor, and of understanding the phenomena of human morality as such. For Wiggins, this is the part of the genius of Hume: the ability to recognize that morality needs to be built from human experiences and not from impartial and distant theories. For instance, he says “It is a significant as well as an obvious truth that no passable (or truly ethical) first-order human ethic can be humanly unliveable” (383, emphasis mine) and uses this claim to question the simplicity of subsuming morality into simple principles. At other points, he makes specific claims about the virtues of understanding moral phenomena rather than “rushing into that which goes under the name moral theory” (231) and encourages the incorporation of “a human scale of values and a human deontology”(242). While Wiggins makes a specific point to note (see footnote 17, page 242) that this concept of ethics need not be exclusive to humans, it certainly doesn’t seem to be very open to the possibility that ethics may exist in other animals who don’t seem to have the concept of a (modified) Kantian kingdom of ends (as he notes in §9.2 and §9.3). I certainly don’t want to put the weight of my reply on the guarantee that such a system of non-human ethics will be found, but I wonder if limiting the discussion of ethics to the merely human phenomenology might be cutting short some of the possible features of non-human ethics, if such a thing exists (see, for example, De Waal, 2006, for an evolutionary view of ethics). It may be that Wiggins’ emphasis on the human system of values is merely a place-holder for a biological one which may, if the facts fit, eventually include animal sentiments as well. More might need to be done to flesh this position out, however.

It is difficult to try to criticize the scope of Wiggins’ book, considering how much ground he covers in such limited space, and it feels a little short-sighted to point to individual flaws in such a big-picture project. It feels like picking nits to point out, for example, that it seems that Wiggins doesn’t take on the proponents of rule-utilitarianism in as much detail as he could (§6.5 and §6.6) and that, instead of relying on John Austin and John Stuart Mill, he could have considered a more nuanced and careful defense of rule-consequentialism (see, for example, Hooker, 2000). Or that he could have greatly expanded on the coverage of the moral importance of what he calls ‘extreme
cases’ in §9.17, particularly given the role of such cases in moral philosophy (trolley cars speeding towards bystanders, ticking bombs in city centers, etc) and given the role of these kinds of intuition-pumping cases in meta-philosophical discussions (see Sunstein, 2005 and Knobe, 2006 for some of the meta-philosophical debate). But this is, mainly, just to ask for Wiggins to try to cover even more ground than he already does, and maybe unfairly so.

I will raise two more general criticisms that are not specific to any of his arguments, but only to the overall makeup and structure of the book. The first is to note that he offers all of his cited texts in footnotes only, making it difficult, at times, to backtrack and find which particular source he is referencing. Having a universal bibliography of all cited texts would have made following the sources considerably easier, and made the book slightly more appealing. The second point, again a minor one, would be that the flow of the book might have been served by a summation of his general conclusions about morality at the end of the first part of the book (following Lecture Nine). After tracing the history of moral philosophy from Plato through Hume and Kant and into the 20th Century, even the most focused reader may feel a little dazzled. A nice, brief summary, leading into the lecture on political philosophy, of the moral conclusions one should have gleaned from the preceding lectures, would have been useful.

§3. Wiggins’ book is, as I have noted, wide in scope and heavy in details. It reads extremely well, and would seem to have been the sort of classroom lectures that inspire and enlighten casual philosophers and professionals alike to think about these issues in new ways. It is a strong and careful defense of a Humean approach to moral philosophy, a detailed critique of moral theory in the face of moral phenomena, and a careful study of key figures in the history of moral philosophy. As such, it is a rewarding read. It’s not entirely clear who the intended audience for this book really is, however. It doesn’t seem to be directed explicitly at an audience of professional philosophers, particularly given the lecture format and the explanatory nature of some of the discussions. But, on the other hand, it would seem to be a pretty ‘heady’ book for the average person who is interested in a simple introduction to ethics. I think it would serve as a nice addition to an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course in the history of moral philosophy (buttressed, of course, by close readings of Plato, Kant, Hume, and Mill, among others) or in a course focused on Humean approaches to ethics and the responses to Humeanism. Outside of the profession itself, philosophically serious readers would also take much away from this book, but they may do well to assent to Wiggins’ advice, and read the works he is commenting on before starting on Wiggins’ intensive analysis and critique of said works. This is not ‘learning annex’ philosophy: this is Birkbeck College philosophy, coming from a man with a great deal to say about the nature and role of ethics. While it is challenging and difficult at times, it also offers great insights into the theories of the key figures in moral philosophy.

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