



Contemporary Moral Philosophy.

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have always been having constantly to struggle to force myself to work, and constantly suffering from a more or less bad conscience for not succeeding better'. But this is not the most important thing; what is important, and of course quite consistent with these statements of his own, is that, when he did work, he never did so in a lazy or uninterested way. This, along with his immense, unobvious intelligence and directness of character, goes far to account for the hope which his talking and writing could arouse in pupils and readers, to make intelligible the force of his example, and indeed largely to justify the hopes that he was able to arouse.

G. J. WARNOCK

Contemporary Moral Philosophy. By G. J. Warnock. London : Macmillan. New York : St. Martin's Press. 1967. Pp. vi+81. 8s. 6d.

WEAT is original about this short paperback, and its great merit, is its clarity. Most of the arguments are by now familiar; but in the beautiful nudity in which Mr. Warnock exposes them, it is possible for the first time to see plainly how much of them is sinew and how much mere seduction. Since a great part of the book is concerned with my views, I shall concentrate on my differences with it, and shall use the first person more than is usual for reviewers.

First, a word about the object of the whole enterprise of moral philosophy. What gets many people into the business (including this reviewer) is anxiety about Plato's question, 'How ought we to live?'; Warnock is more interested in determining the precise limits of the field of discourse commonly called 'moral'. And the way in which he thinks this might be done (his book is too short actually to do it) leaves open the possibility that we might, in the end, have 'morality' neatly displayed for us in a show-case, with labels saying 'If you disagree with this you can't be making a moral judgment' or, as Warnock says on page 68, 'Certain kinds of facts or features are necessarily relevant criteria of moral evaluation'—and yet the passers by, though still deeply concerned about Plato's question, might say, as many of them already do, 'We don't believe in making moral judgments'. This is the danger to which anybody is exposed who, as Warnock would like to do, founds a moral system upon a definition of morality in terms of its content.

A philosopher who wants to engage the attention of these passers by will have to be trying to answer (and first to elucidate) the question which *they* are trying to answer. If they do not call it a moral question in Warnock's sense, we must still address ourselves to it; and there probably is (though it does not particularly matter) a sense of

'moral' in which it is a moral question. Whatever we call it, if they say 'We don't make moral judgments', we can still catch them asking 'ought'-questions, and even answering them. And, if I know them, they will not accept as an elucidation of their questions anything which prejudges the answers to them to the extent that a content-based definition of morality is bound to do.

The right strategy for the moral philosopher is to study first the form of the questions they are asking, which is determined by the formal properties of the word 'ought'. If, as I think, this word has, as used in Plato's question, the formal property of prescriptivity, that gives us one logical tool for handling the question (and we can afford to neglect the fact that it also has, as I have often admitted, other uses which are not prescriptive). Another tool is provided if 'ought', as used by these passers by, has also the formal property of universalizability. (In the interests of historical accuracy, it has to be granted that the 'ought' in *Plato's* question was at least partly a prudential one, as may be seen by comparing *Rep.* 352 d with 344 e; but our passers by are not concerned with history, and they, as Warnock would probably agree, are asking a question in which the 'ought' is universalizable without restriction; they are not asking how they personally can get on best in life.)

The moral philosopher who follows this strategy will then see what he can do with these two logical tools. Warnock thinks 'Very little'; but, as we shall discover, this is because he expects us to rely entirely on the second and forgets the crucial importance of the first. It should at any rate be clear already that one who has hopes of doing something on these lines will be interested in the prescriptive uses of 'ought' and related words, and will treat them as central; indeed, for anybody who is concerned with the prescriptive-universal question 'How ought I to live?', they are central.

Coming now to Warnock's particular arguments: the basis of one of them is to be found in note 1 (p. 78), where Austin's doctrine about locution, illocution and perlocution is appealed to. 'Briefly and roughly, the distinction Austin has in mind is that between *what is done by saying something*, e.g. getting a person to go away, and *what is done in saying something*, e.g. ordering him to go away. *What is said*, of course, is distinguishable from both of these.' The 'of course' reveals a lack of scrutiny (Austin would never have been so incautious). Would not 'He ordered him to go away' be a natural answer to 'What did he say?'? Indeed, if what he said was 'Go away', what else did he say that this answer fails to report? The perlocution-illocution distinction, as Warnock sees, is certainly fundamental for ethics (albeit still not clear), and makes the main difference between emotivism and prescriptivism; but the illocution-locution distinction, or that between illocutionary force and meaning, on which Warnock relies heavily, was hurried over by Austin in all that survives of his work, and can hardly be sustained in any form that would damage prescriptivism.

If, therefore, it is part of Warnock's case that prescriptivists neglect the meaning of moral terms in order to concentrate on their illocutionary force, which they fail to distinguish from their meaning, he has yet to show that the meaning of these terms is entirely distinct from their illocutionary force. This is quite clearly not the case with imperatives; how is Warnock so sure that it is the case with 'ought'? Or that the illocutionary element in its meaning is not central to an understanding of it? I would myself go further, and claim (but not in this review) that meaning of any kind is only explicable finally by reference to what we are doing in saying various sorts of thing.

Another unscrutinized assumption of Warnock's is that there cannot be *genera* of speech-acts as well as species. Only this assumption could make sense of the argument expressed on page 35: 'Those who employ moral words . . . may be prescribing, certainly; but also they may be advising, exhorting, imploring; commanding, condemning, deploring; . . .' The suggestion that if a man is commanding he cannot be prescribing is especially odd; and if this is, as I suspect, a misprint for 'commending', consider the case of advising. It is surely obvious that prescriptivist would say that advising (of the usual sorts) was a species (or group of species) of the genus prescribing. Warnock significantly calls prescriptive discourse a 'species' of discourse (p. 32); his taxonomy has, evidently, only one level. That is why, on pages 35, 38 and 40, he is able to use, as examples of things which are not prescribing, speech-acts which are species of the genus prescribing and states of mind which are acceptances of species of prescription.

'Prescribing' is a convenient name for a genus of speech-acts, distinguished by being 'intimately related to conduct' and by the possibility of deeds being 'consonant or dissonant with words' (pp. 37 ff.). Although the limits of this genus can be disputed, certain typical and central uses of 'ought' are clearly species of it. But nobody of my acquaintance has maintained that anything ever said by anyone engaged in moral discourse is a prescription. To use Warnock's parallel (p. 41): in 'legal discourse' a variety of things is said; but for all that, it might shed a great deal of light, and not, as he strangely says, 'practically no light', on the law to ask what one is doing when one *legislates*; for legislating is a very central activity in legal discourse, and if we could understand it, we could explain a great deal of the rest indirectly in terms of it.

A further mistake in interpretation of the views he is attacking is this: he says (p. 34) that prescriptivism encapsulates two doctrines, of which one is absurd and the other less so. The absurd one—which, he thinks, I sometimes embrace (p. 36)—is that 'to issue a moral utterance is always to tell someone what to do'. He does not say where I embrace this absurd doctrine; and in checking, word for word, two translations into foreign languages of my first book I have not discovered it. My view has been (as he correctly states else-

where) that moral judgments, though only in certain central uses, entail answers to questions of the form 'What shall I do?', not that they are answers to them.

It does not seem, therefore, as if Warnock has done much to damage the view that the moral words are best understood by examining certain central uses of them, and explaining the rest indirectly by reference to these; and that *one* of the essential features of these central uses is a feature, namely the possibility of deeds being consonant or dissonant with words, which imperatives also have, and which puts them both in the genus 'prescription', though differentiated as species by the fact that moral judgments are universalizable and imperatives not. To state this view in a paragraph is, of course, to state it too crudely. But, if true, it surely sheds *some* light on the nature of moral judgments.

Does it, however, give any help towards a theory of moral argument? Warnock, who agrees with the thesis that moral judgments are universalizable, thinks, nevertheless, that this thesis will not do what I claim for it. He thinks that the only reason why I clutch at this straw is that I am drowning for want of such support as only a content-based definition can give. The buoyancy of life-belts is easiest tested by immersion in water; when moral philosophers again handle live moral problems, as they are starting to do already, it will be seen who has a viable theory of moral argument. Practical trials of a purely formal theory have given me some confidence in its efficacy. But here I shall only point to the main theoretical weakness in Warnock's argument.

He thinks (p. 45) that, if somebody (a hard landlord for example) maintains that he ought to do some action in disregard of the interests of his victim, the principle of universalizability will not help us much in arguing with him; for, although we can compel him, by its use, to admit that it would be *right*, on his view, for his interests to be similarly disregarded were he in his victim's situation, we cannot show that he is inconsistent with this if he does not *want* such a thing to be done to him. He may say that 'business is business, the economic show must go on'; that is to say, he may stick to the moral judgment that it would be right, however much he wants it not to be done.

Warnock writes so elegantly and persuasively that many readers will fail to notice the *petitio* here. It will become apparent if we reflect that what is at issue at this point is, not whether prescriptivism is right, but whether, *if* it is right, a viable theory of moral argument can be based on it. But if it is right, to assent to a prescriptive moral judgment is to assent to the *prescription* that it should be acted on. If we care to talk in psychological terms, and use the Aristotelian generic term '*orexis*' for the acceptance of a prescription, it is to have an *orexis* (a desire in a wide sense) that it should be acted on. This economic man must (to adapt a device of Professor Rawls) be prepared to prescribe—he must desire—that this should be done, even if he does not know which role he is to play in the situation,

landlord or tenant. Now, as Warnock says, there have been people who have accepted this position ; but the claim of prescriptivism is that, given logical clarity and a full appreciation of what we are doing to other people, they will be negligibly few. And it might be claimed that the reason why they have now indeed become fewer is precisely that the situation of other people is now more commonly appreciated and the logic of moral discourse better understood. This has come about largely through the work of the utilitarians, for whose method of argument prescriptivism provides the beginnings of a logical foundation. If so, prescriptivism could claim to have exposed the nerve of some real and important moral arguments. Contrariwise, the neglect, in any account of moral judgments, of their prescriptive element, will cause any at all fundamental moral argument based on such an account to collapse. Descriptivists commonly do not see this, because they smuggle in the prescriptive element under cover of such words as 'harm'.

Needless to say, an economic man who, instead of claiming intrinsic rightness for self-seeking, claimed instead that the interests of all are, by the economic process, best furthered if everybody concentrates on furthering his own interests, is outside the scope of this argument ; with him we should have to deal by showing, factually, that what he predicts, will not happen.

Warnock's penultimate chapter is intended to rebut certain arguments against naturalism. Since the moves are not new, and since I have in another place done my best to show that they are based on equivocations, I can save space by merely referring to that paper, which he does not mention (*Proc. Brit. Acad.*, 1963).

The book begins with a brief account of the intuitionists and emotivists. This is, on the whole, well done, and the criticisms he makes are in the main ones with which I should agree. The only serious fault of scholarship that I noticed was the impression given that emotivism started with Carnap and Ayer. The work in this field of Ogden and Richards (*Meaning of Meaning*, 1923) and Hägerström (1910 onwards) should at least have had a mention. It would be unjust to end this review without paying tribute to Warnock's strenuous efforts to be fair to his opponents. He has not entirely succeeded ; but since an unprejudiced and balanced exegesis is nearly always dull, the readability of the book should be allowed to atone for its bias. As a reviewer, I must ask the same indulgence for my own opposite prejudices.

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