

*Lottery* than there is to critique. It is a universally worthwhile read, neither too involved for intelligent nonacademics or undergraduates (with a thoughtful instructor's assistance, of course) nor too shallow for professional philosophers and other scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Extreme poverty brought about global economic institutions and maintained by birthright principles of membership allocation deserves more of the sort of gender-sensitive scrutiny proffered by Shachar in this book.

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Shafer-Landau, Russ, ed. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*. Vol. 3.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. 327. \$39.95 (paper).

The eleven papers in this volume result from the 2006 meeting of the Wisconsin Metaethics Workshop, organized by Russ Shafer-Landau. In just a few years, the Wisconsin Metaethics Workshop has become the most prestigious ethics conference in the United States and arguably the world. Taken individually, most of the papers in the present volume reflect the very high quality of work done at the workshop. But, taken as a set, there is something quite odd about them—and about the field of metaethics as it is now generally practiced. There is an important sense in which much work in the field of metaethics is not about ethics at all.

Let me explain by way of analogy. In section 33 of *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2nd ed. [1957] 2000), G. E. M. Anscombe mocked those who characterize the practical syllogism as the exercise of ordinary reasoning whose conclusion is a statement about what one ought to do. Her thought was that a syllogism representing ordinary reasoning does not thereby merit a special name just because the content of the conclusion is peculiar. So, a syllogism whose conclusion is about what one ought to do no more deserves the name “practical syllogism” than a syllogism whose conclusion is about mince pies deserves the name “mince pie syllogism.” The content of the premises or the conclusion in the syllogism does not affect the type of reasoning the syllogism represents. If there is a kind of syllogism that merits the term “practical syllogism,” it must represent a form of reasoning other than the “ordinary” kind.

Much metaethics, though in part about ethics, might as well be about mince pies. That is, the arguments metaethicists typically bring to bear upon ethics apply with equal force to many topics other than ethics. This comes in several different flavors. Many arguments that crop up in debates about reducibility, supervenience, and naturalism apply to the philosophy of mind as much as they do to ethics. Most arguments that philosophers deploy about the respective merits of generalism and particularism apply no less to epistemology than they do to ethics. Most metaethical essays that deal with reasons or rationality are for all intents and purposes indifferent to whether these are reasons for belief or for action. The same can be said for nearly everything written about normativity. Disputes about the relation between value and reason are about ethics no more than they are about aesthetics. Or, if the author indeed focuses just on the practical, then there is little to distinguish applying its results to both

the peculiarly ethical and everything else that concerns practice. To oversimplify, much metaethics is just “ordinary” philosophical argument that just so happens to apply to ethics among other things. Of course ethics is of an importance to human beings in a way that many of these other things are not. But this does not mean that we should name a whole field of metaphilosophy after it.

Work in metaethics, then, could be classified into two categories: work that is about peculiarly ethics and work that applies to multiple domains, ethics among them. Work of both sorts is valuable, as this volume illustrates. But it is hard to ignore thinking about possible upshots of this distinction once it is drawn to one’s attention.

Many of the individual papers in this volume are excellent, a few of which I will very briefly describe here. The volume opens with David Brink’s “The Significance of Desire,” in which the author persuasively argues that desire-based accounts of practical reason cannot explain the authority of reason. Brink instead holds out hope for understanding the authority of reason as the upshot of a kind of perfectionism about agency. Choice, not desire, can underpin the normativity of reason. Even so, Brink recognizes that choice itself is not the only ground of reason, and thus he devotes some space at the end of his already lengthy essay exploring ways in which the value of choice can be balanced with the value of (other) substantive constraints. Still, there’s little here about ethics in particular—what Brink says would seem to apply equally to the normativity of all practical reasoning.

There are two pieces on the persistence of moral disagreement. In “The Argument from the Persistence of Moral Disagreement,” Frank Jackson contends that the phenomenon of persistent moral disagreement supports expressivism no more than it supports subjectivism. His argument for this view turns on what notion(s) of disagreement the expressivist can rightly help herself to. The expressivist should find Jackson’s argument somewhat troubling, but nothing in it distinguishes ethical expressivism from other forms of expressivism. That is, there’s nothing distinctively ethical about the argument at all.

By contrast, the argument of the second paper on disagreement—Sarah McGrath’s “Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise”—hinges necessarily on considerations about ethics in particular. She focuses on how moral disagreement can undermine claims to moral knowledge. Following Sidgwick, she notes that we should be troubled by the fact that we have moral disagreements with others who seem to be making no (other) error in judgment. This can tempt us to think that we lack moral knowledge. However, there is plenty of persistent disagreement about nonethical matters too (e.g., philosophy, geology), and yet this fact does not always provide us with reason for thinking that we lack knowledge in these areas. McGrath contends that we nevertheless have good reason for thinking that our beliefs in these areas are knowledge, despite the lack of unanimity, when we are in the overwhelming majority. So if most competent philosophers think that global skepticism is mistaken, then perhaps my belief that it is mistaken does not fail to count as knowledge just because some philosopher no less smart than I thinks otherwise. The numbers matter.

Not only do the numbers matter, but so does the comparative expertise of those disagreeing. There is very plausibly some expertise about questions such as the age of the earth. The opinions of those who lack such expertise provide

no threat to one's own claim to knowledge about such matters. But McGrath is less cheerful about the possibility of relying on some notion of moral expertise that only we but not our opponents supposedly possess. Just as there is no expertise concerning which shade of green is "true green"—a matter about which people widely disagree—there is no expertise concerning the solution of moral problems. She concludes that there are epistemic peers who nonetheless have different moral views, rendering claims to moral knowledge suspect.

This result seems plausible, though, only if we forget that sometimes we regard ourselves as epistemically inferior to those whose moral advice we trust. If it makes sense for you to trust another person's advice about what you should do, this is likely because you regard them as having a better grasp on how to solve the moral problem you face. You think they have some moral expertise you lack. In these cases you attribute moral knowledge to other people. By contrast, it never makes sense for most people to defer to others about which shade of green is true green. So paying even more attention to how ethics in particular works is important for thinking about this metaethical matter.

Shifting gears. In a very long essay, Sharon Street defends metaethical constructivism, the view that "the fact that X is a reason to Y for agent A is constituted by the fact that the judgment that X is a reason to Y (for A) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A's other judgments about reasons" (223). (Again, one might wonder why it is called "metaethical constructivism.") Street considers many objections to this view, including the objection that starting to make judgments about reasons cannot itself be done for a reason. This objection is not all that worrisome, but a more troubling objection can be seen by considering an agent who has already made only one judgment about his reasons. Suppose Elvis judges that he has a reason to eat a peanut butter, bacon, and banana sandwich, but he makes no other judgments about his reasons. According to metaethical constructivism, it appears that Elvis then has trillions of reasons to do all kinds of crazy things, for almost all of these reasons "withstand scrutiny" from the perspective of his judgment about eating a peanut butter, bacon, and banana sandwich. His one judgment rules out very little indeed. But this result is absurd.

The most interesting piece in the collection is Matthew Hanser's "Actions, Acting, and Acting Well," and its success is in part due to the fact that it focuses upon the logical grammar of peculiarly ethical sentences. Hanser studies the different ways in which sentences that seem to evaluate actions actually work. Here I can only introduce a couple of the distinctions he makes.

Compare the following use of thin evaluations (277–78):

- (3a) Yvonne sang *La Marseillaise* well.
- (3c) Yvonne was good to sing *La Marseillaise*.
- (3e) Yvonne acted well in singing *La Marseillaise*.

Statement 3a says that the action—Yvonne's singing—was good by the standards set by singing: she wasn't off-key, she didn't sing it too fast or too slowly, and so forth. It is not a moral evaluation. By contrast, statement 3c says something about how good Yvonne was with respect to the fact that she was singing; it is more like a moral evaluation, and it is clearly an evaluation of her, though it evaluates her with respect to a fact about her behavior.

But now look at statement 3e. The surface grammar suggests that statement 3e evaluates an action, and a moral evaluation at that. But looks are deceiving. First, notice that “acting” does not obviously posit standards of evaluation in the same way that, say, “singing” does. In the phrase “acted well,” “well” does not (obviously) function as an attributive adverb, not in the same way that “well” does in the phrase “sang *La Marseillaise* well.” Rather, the adjunct “in singing *La Marseillaise*” is the fact about Yvonne’s behavior in light of which we evaluate her. So we should not understand statement 3e on the model of statement 3a. Statement 3e actually means roughly what statement 3c means.

Note also that we say that people act well not only with respect to what they concretely do but also (i) with respect to what they do not do and (ii) with respect to their patterns of behavior. So we can say both (282–84):

- (4) John acted well in not speaking rudely to his in-laws all week.
- (5) John acted well in calling his depressed friend once a day for a week.

Statements 3e, 4, and 5 all have the same form: A acted well in \_\_\_\_\_. But since 4 and 5 both do not directly evaluate a concrete action, we have good reason to think that statement 3e does not either. This suggests that thin moral evaluations such as 3e, though they have the surface grammar of evaluating actions, actually evaluate agents with respect to facts about their (patterns of) (in-)action. Hanser notes that most moral theories do not accommodate this logical insight. Although he does not draw out all the implications of this fact in his paper, one can see how his argument might support an agent-based theory of ethics.

There are several other good-to-outstanding papers in the collection: Chris Heathwood persuasively argues against fitting attitude analyses of personal welfare, Caj Strandberg argues that supervenience can explain more than particularists think, Nick Zangwill argues that the way in which distinctively moral properties depend upon nonmoral properties differs from other forms of metaphysical dependence, William Fitzpatrick motivates an ambitious form of non-naturalistic moral realism, Thomas Baldwin attempts to piece together Rawls’s moral psychological views, and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord claims that Hume’s views about practical reason are very different from what most interpreters understand them to be.

Metaethics—whatever it is exactly about—is an exciting field in philosophy right now, largely because of the sheer variety of work that happens to fall under its heading. And the Metaethics Workshop will likely continue to lead the way.

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