

Being True to the World

Jonathan A. Jacobs (New York: Peter Lang 1990).

With refreshing clarity, Jonathan A. Jacobs tells us that the main aim of his recent book is "to defend the view that there is such a thing as moral knowledge, and that it can be action guiding." Jacobs stakes out a moral realist position where "realism" refers to facts in the world about human beings. Hence the title *Being True to the World* refers to the sense in which morally right actions are right. Correspondingly, then, immorality can be accounted for in terms of ignorance or error. A secondary goal, which occupies approximately one-fifth of the book, is a refutation of ethical relativism.

Perhaps because it is quite fashionable to be unsympathetic to this sort of argument, Jacobs wants to be very clear about the strategy he will use to defend the position. For example, when he first introduces the idea of moral realism, he denies that he is introducing a new entity called a moral fact (moral realists are often accused of doing this). "There are not two kinds of facts, 'ordinary' facts and moral facts. There is only one kind, but some of them are morally significant." This is not hair-splitting, but rather it is an important point. Jacob's argument is that facts about human nature have relevance to human action. In other words, "The moral facts just are the natural and social facts." Jacobs calls this approach a naturalist approach, however, he distinguishes the view he is promoting from the "naturalist" stance of utilitarianism. And indeed he is promoting nothing like utilitarianism, rather, the approach is neo-Aristotelian, by which I mean that the primary emphasis is not on actions but on character, and that crucial to developing good character is acquiring some kind of wisdom.

Jacobs wants to argue that if there *is* such a thing as practical wisdom, then relativism is false. Relativism also has, in his view, other considerations counting against it which, when recognized as flaws, encourage one to think about a naturalist realist approach. So Jacobs' critique of relativism is neatly bound up in his defense of practical wisdom. To begin, then, let us examine his objections to relativism.

Jacobs considers relativism "inadequate for the development of a moral theory." If relativism were the case, then all moral beliefs and practices would be "optional." Therefore there would be no reason for acting even on one's own ethic, and even less reason for expecting others to follow one's prescriptions. A related flaw, then, is relativism's inability to account for the "moral reality of people." Unfortunately, this is not a failing that is likely to convince a relativist of anything. Anyone with a conception of morality will see this as a flaw, but anyone who believes that there are no objective standards to begin with will simply agree with the statement. Of course, granting this means that the relativist will have no basis for criticizing the actions of others even when others are harming him, and few are sufficiently committed to the view actually to concede this. (I suppose we might say that relativists are fortunate that they are wrong, for if they were right, there would be no reason for the rest of us not to kill them.)

As even a casual reader of Plato will have noticed, it is always easy to criticize an attempt to provide an objective moral standard, typically with refutation by counter-ex-

ample. For instance, when Cephalus claims that justice entails always returning what one has been entrusted with, Socrates points out that it might not be just to return the borrowed weapon to its now insane owner. But such difficulties do not mean that no standards are available for evaluating human conduct. How can we arrive at such guidelines? A question like that is really a question about practical reason, or practical wisdom. Let us remember the distinction Aristotle makes between theoretical reason and practical reason. While the result of a theoretical syllogism is a statement, e.g. that Socrates is mortal, the result of a practical syllogism is an action. If I understand that when it's cold, I should wear a coat, and then see that it is cold, I do not simply produce a statement about wearing a coat, I actually do wear a coat. It is this type of reasoning that applies to the development of a virtuous character. Jacobs says that "Practical wisdom is the virtue that is needed to orient and guide the other virtues . . . One's ability to reason and to judge develops . . . and living a morally sound life involves *making right judgments*."

Right judgments about what? At the very least, we might answer, right judgements about realizing ends. If one is interested in living well, then one must make correct judgments about what this means and what it entails. A relativist might at this point reply that living well might be different for everyone. The advantage of a *naturalist* realist response is that there are some features of human life that are common to all humans. Since being virtuous, or excellent, is being excellent *at* something, we can think about standards for correct judgments, and clearly reason will have a role to play in determining what these are.

Jacobs' next task is to explain how practical wisdom can be motivating, that is, how it can be action-guiding. The whole point of a realist approach is to show "how the knowledge of what we are can be efficacious in guiding action aimed at our good." Understanding what kind of knowledge this is makes things more clear. "This is not knowledge of a good independent of human emotions, appetites and inclinations. It is knowledge of what is good for beings (among other things) constituted to have the kinds of emotions, appetites and inclinations that humans have." It is in this sense that practical wisdom can be motivating. (Note that the claim is that practical wisdom *can* be motivating, since it is obvious that it is not always so for all people. The point is that one can learn to improve one's character if one wishes.) Jacobs here gives a full discussion of how the Aristotelian account of motivation differs from and is more satisfactory than other approaches, particularly the Socratic and Kantian conceptions. Yet the book never seems like a mere exercise in comparative exegesis. Such work is valuable, but often fails to provide philosophical insight. Jacobs' book, on the contrary, has the tone of a serious and honest discussion which attempts to explore an issue using the history of philosophy as a backdrop.

In the final analysis, Jacobs argues that practical wisdom can be motivating with regard to "moral" action in the same sense that wisdom in general is motivating to action in general. "[I]t is rational to act for moral reasons because of what they refer to, namely, factual considerations of value for anyone." Just as it is relevant to whether one strikes a match whether there is a gas leak in the kitchen, it is relevant to whether one robs a bank whether that is the sort of activity that is beneficial. "It is rational to hold beliefs because they are true and known to be, and it is rational to act on the basis of true beliefs about

objective value. Being moral is the practical dimension of being true to the world." Can we say anything intelligible about what is of objective value for anyone without sounding like Cephalus? Jacobs' attempt at doing so is Aristotelian at heart: what is good for people is what promotes self-development or well-being, and what diminishes these things is bad. If this is correct, then "to act rightly in a moral sense involves acting on the basis of understanding, being guided by truth." Of course this gives us slightly less specific guidelines than "always tell the truth." But wisdom is like that. Coming to this sort of an understanding about the good life takes some experience as well as some thought.

In the latter part of the book, Jacobs produces an interesting discussion of the formation of the character and the development of moral understanding. He argues that we must become self-determining in order to flourish, but he is also critical of the more radical conception of the "self-made self" which is claimed to arise *ex nihilo* in such authors as Emerson and Sartre. Jacobs calls "will" the name for "the interrelated set of abilities to construct ends, make reasoned decisions, evaluate actions and interests and so forth, and to act on the basis of these." But acquiring the understanding to do these sorts of things is a social process, even if it is, as Jacobs puts it, "minimally social." Jacobs refers here to Aristotle's account of the value of friendship for the development of virtue. But the discussion does not produce any conclusion of the sort that therefore moral standards are subjective, or that therefore the state must take an aggressive role in the inculcation of virtue. This is surely the sensible way to evaluate the role of friends (and enemies, I suppose) in the development of moral understanding. Jacobs stresses that, in his view, although moral objectivity is bound up with truth, moral rationality is not merely calculation. It involves knowledge of what is right from a human standpoint. Developing this kind of understanding must be a process of self-development, but it seems clear that if knowledge of one's own good is related to knowledge of the nature of people in general, then it is right to say that there is a social component to its acquisition.

An additional strength of the book is that while it is a serious and incisive work in moral philosophy, it should be accessible to philosophers in any field. Jacobs' work could therefore greatly improve the quality of contemporary moral discourse, since much bad moral philosophy comes from non-ethicists (although to be sure much of it does not). Through his incorporation of a non-question begging critique of relativism into a defense of a naturalist moral realism in the Aristotelian tradition, Jacobs produces a convincing and coherent discussion that deserves to be widely read.

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