Review of Essays on the History of Ethics by Michael Slote

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Essays on the History of Ethics by Michael Slote (review)

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Philosophy of Psychology I, §§19), but also fails to acknowledge the fundamental challenge posed by Wittgenstein’s example for Putnam’s procedure.

In Putnam’s thought experiment, the idea of a “Twin Earth,” exactly like ours except for the molecular composition of what Twin Earthians call “water,” is used to support the conclusion that meaning is not “in the head.” Conversely, Wittgenstein’s example of the “two-minute England” raises the question of whether we are licensed in drawing any conclusions from a two-minute observation (or rather imagination) of a person’s activities about what sort of activity they are engaged in. Rather than using an imaginary example to deduce a quasi-empirical conclusion about language, Wittgenstein uses the profound inconclusiveness of the “image” of the two-minute England to draw attention to the non-experimental (and non-philosophical) ground of our ordinary recognition of forms of language use.

Here Klagge is arguably a victim of precisely the sort of misunderstanding his approach is meant to guard against, as his familiarity with the tendency of contemporary philosophers to use imaginary scenarios as though they were empirical experiments obstructs his engagement with Wittgenstein’s imaginary examples on their own terms. As a result, Klagge misses the full significance of examples such as “two-minute England,” part of which, we submit, is to challenge the contemporary scientistic appeal to thought experiments to establish philosophical conclusions. Contra Putnam, we do not discover what “meaning” is by imagining a test case; but rather, our everyday familiarity with the practice of using words such as “meaning,” “calculating,” and the like is what enables us even to imagine such a case in the first place. Wittgenstein’s imaginary scenarios are not meant to establish anything. They are there to enable us to remember what we already know how to do, which needs no imaginary test or argument for support.

Wittgenstein’s philosophical approach, as we have suggested, is, in a civilization like ours, irrevocably in exile. Klagge even underplays the extent to which this is so, by at times assimilating Wittgenstein to more “mainstream” philosophical tendencies. Wittgenstein was and is out of joint with the supposed progress happening in the world around (and since) him still more deeply than Klagge allows. All of the above serves only to underscore the book’s central, impressive idea: that Wittgenstein is more distant from one than one might like to imagine—that sometimes (as Wittgenstein’s great followers Winch and Kuhn deeply understood), in order to be able to understand something, it is necessary to place it at a greater distance than might feel natural. Only then, ironically, can it be seen aright, actually understood—and perhaps even followed.

Rupert Read and Jessica Woolley

University of East Anglia


In this book Michael Slote discusses the history of ethics from a sentimentalist perspective. It can be read in two ways: first, as a tribute to great thinkers whose contributions have helped shape contemporary ethics, and second, as a defense of a sentimentalist virtue theory. This review centers on the two chapters most relevant to sentimentalist virtue theory: chapter 1, in which Slote defines and defends elevationism, and chapter 5, in which he offers a defense of sentimentalist.

The first essay distinguishes between three theories about the relationship between virtue and well-being, Dualist theories, like Kantianism, contend that virtue and well-being are distinct concepts. Reductionist theories, like utilitarianism, hold that virtue is reducible to well-being. Slote contends that Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics are the opposite of reductionists, what he calls “elevationists” (4). For elevationists, well-being is reducible to virtue. Slote ends the chapter by contending that elevationism may offer a plausible alternative to dualism and reductionism.
Problematically, Slote’s distinction between reductionism and elevationism rests upon his assumption that virtue is regarded as higher than “the sheer enjoyment of well-being”; thus, to explain virtue in terms of well-being is to reduce virtue, while to explain well-being in terms of virtue is to exalt well-being (11). But both are better understood as a single equivalence theory, such that virtue and well-being are concerned with the same subject. Whether one is a reductionist or elevationist depends solely upon which concept (virtue or well-being) one less willing to revise in the face of their prima facie nonequivalence. For a utilitarian, virtue must be revised to promote well-being, understood in terms of pleasure, whereas for Plato, well-being must be revised to exclude any pleasure that does not accompany virtue.

In chapter 5, Slote contends that Hume has a sentimentalist account of approval and disapproval, and offers a defense of sentimentalism. Hume contended that our capacity for moral judgment, approval, and disapproval depends upon our ability to sympathize with others. For Hume, to feel sympathy for someone is to have her feelings mirrored in us; to sympathize with someone in pain is to be in pain. The extent to which we sympathize with someone depends upon how close we are to her; moral judgment, however, is needed to control for this bias. Moral judgment, approval, and disapproval are based on how traits tend to affect well-being.

Here Slote discusses an enduring criticism of Hume he attributes to Adam Smith and others (66). For Hume moral disapproval depends upon our reaction to traits likely to cause harm; Smith asks why, then, is it inappropriate to disapprove morally of tornados? Hume contends that the pleasure we feel toward objects and events is different from that which we feel toward moral agents, and that it is not compatible with moral judgment. Slote believes Hume’s reply is “tendentious or question-begging” (67).

Slote offers an original reply to this objection, contending we have greater empathy toward those with developed empathies than those with undeveloped empathies. Non-agents are incapable of empathy, and are thus not appropriate subjects of moral judgment. But there are two problems with this reply. First, Slote’s response is practically identical to Hume’s: for both, our sympathetic/empathic response to inanimate objects is just not the same as our response to moral agents. Second, Slote’s response entirely skirts the issue of free will, which I believe is behind the objection. If free will is compatible with determinism, why is it appropriate to judge some determined things morally, but not others? Both the murderer and the tornado are likely to cause harm, but only the former is regarded as morally blameworthy.

Slote contends that sentimentalism is able to offer a plausible alternative to rationalist and intuitionist theories of ethics. If our moral judgments do not abstract from our empathic bias, he argues, they are capable of explaining why our commonsense ethical beliefs are self–other asymmetric (86). The problem with this claim is that on Slote’s view, we cannot empathize with ourselves and thus cannot see ourselves as the appropriate object of moral judgment. Furthermore, the personal bias found in commonsense ethics favors ourselves, whereas on Slote’s view, we would favor others over ourselves. In contrast, on Hume’s concept of sympathizing with others is to feel what they are feeling; this offers a reasonable explanation why we might value the well-being of others as we value our own.

In conclusion, Slote’s clear and focused analysis of Greek elevationism has the promise and potential to advance our understanding of both ancient and modern ethics. His defense of Hume’s sentimentalism elucidates the correlation between our emotions and moral judgments according to Hume in an attempt to defend a foundation for sentimentalist ethics. This book is a welcome addition to the body of literature on virtue ethics and an interesting companion to Hume’s most influential works.

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