

## Book Reviews

### *Moral Animals: Ideals and Constraints in Moral Theory*

By Catherine Wilson

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Catherine Wilson, now a professor at the City University of New York, is largely known for her writings on early modern metaphysics and philosophy of science (including books on Leibniz and on Descartes). *Moral Animals* is her first book-length treatment of topics in moral theory and social and political philosophy. The book has two ambitious aims: a meta-ethical aim, to provide an account of moral judgment and moral theorizing; and a moral aim, to defend egalitarianism, specifically to argue in favour of greater socio-economic and sexual equality. The first half of the book provides the meta-ethics that allows for the advancement of the arguments for equality in the second half.

According to Wilson, morality is unique to *Homo sapiens*. Animals do not rise to having moral rules, which are essentially rules that reduce individual advantage: ‘*Moral rules are restrictive and prohibitory rules whose function is to counteract the short- or long-term advantage possessed by a naturally or situationally favoured subject*’ (p. 9; italics in original). A moral rule compensates for inequalities that allow individuals to dominate over weaker individuals, and is egalitarian in nature. A rule such as ‘Torture children’ is not a moral rule at all, since it does not reduce my advantage over others. If it is converted into a judgment, such as ‘You ought to torture children’, it likewise follows that this judgment is ‘not a moral judgment at all’, rather than ‘an example of a moral judgment that happens to be false’ (p. 10). I have no problem with this account of moral rules, although I do not consider it to be as innocent an account as Wilson does. She says that she intends her account of morality to be ‘non-committal as between moral theories’ (p. 8), but it has the result that ethical egoism is simply not a moral theory at all. It also, as she admits, eliminates purely self-regarding moral rules from morality (p. 16).

Wilson rejects moral realism, ‘understood as the strong claim that every moral judgment is either true or false’ (pp. 40–1). Nevertheless, she holds that certain moral judgments can be ‘confirmed’, and ‘Confirmed statements can even be regarded (though I will avoid this locution) as “true”’

(p. 43). This must be explained. Every moral rule is translatable into a moral judgment. For example, 'Do not torture persons' is translatable into 'It is morally wrong to torture persons.' Every moral judgment is a description of how agents relevantly similar to us – 'The Reality Constraint' – behave faithfully – 'The Idealism Characteristic' – in a 'paraworld' (p. 49). For example, 'It is morally wrong to torture persons' means 'In paraworld *X*, agents relevantly similar to us do not torture each other.' This is what Wilson means when she says that 'The semantics of ought statements are ... irreducibly modal' (p. 51). It is also what she means when she says that moral judgments have 'representational ... content' (p. 61). For someone to assent to a moral judgment is for someone to prefer the paraworld it describes in this respect to other paraworlds that it does not describe. Hence, 'moral judgments, on this view, represent preferences, as non-cognitivists maintain, or more precisely, elections' (p. 61). A moral judgment is confirmed when all competent judges prefer the paraworld it describes in this respect to other paraworlds that it does not describe. For example, 'It is morally wrong to torture persons' is confirmed when all competent persons prefer paraworld *X*, where the relevantly similar agents do not torture each other, to other paraworlds in which they do torture each other. More generally, 'moral theories project paraworlds' (p. 62), and a moral theory, say, *M*, is confirmed when the paraworld it describes, say, *W*, is preferred by all competent judges to other paraworlds that it does not describe. The competent judges in question do not have to be 'ideal observers' (p. 69) who have all the relevant knowledge, and are not required 'to agree on or to stipulate the criteria by which "betterness" is to be judged, only on betterness itself' (p. 61). In providing this account of what happens when moral judgments are made and moral theories are advanced, Wilson understands herself to be simply providing a description of what is going on all the time: 'My concern here is merely to give a non-normative philosophical account of how the notion of paraworld betterness is employed by rival moral theorists' (p. 61).

I remain uncertain how accurate or helpful this redescription of moral theorizing is. The Idealism Characteristic strikes me as redundant, and may well be mis-named. All talk about actors behaving 'in an ideal fashion' (p. 49) unfortunately connotes the morally ideal, even though, as the author admits, there is nothing necessarily morally ideal about acting faithfully in a certain way. The Reality Constraint may be much too restrictive. Wilson's description of it seems innocuous enough: actors in the paraworld described by the moral judgment or theory 'are endowed with the motives, preferences, levels of rationality, and overall aims and purposes' that we actually have (p. 49). Later she says that a 'disposition to partiality' (p. 149) on the part of the actors in the paraworld is part of the Reality Constraint on moral theorizing. This seems to be its true meaning: by nature, people are not impartial. However, the Reality Constraint must not be so restrictive that it

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prevents impartial rules and theories, even extremely impartial rules and theories, from being moral rules or theories at all, as opposed to ones that are not confirmed, otherwise too many moral philosophers are not engaged in moral theorizing.

Wilson does hold that 'high-demand' moral rules and moral theories are 'very difficult to confirm' (p. 89) and that 'prescriptive moral theorists must take into account the relationship between the formulas of obligation they advance and our ordinary or average capacities. A confirmed theory *M* cannot consist of formulas of obligation that are so exigent that only heroes, ascetics, omniscient beings, or persons devoid of worldly ambition, can do what is morally required of them' (p. 93). For example, if a moral theory has the moral rule 'Never lie', or the moral rule 'Donate all income other than what is required for subsistence to charity', then it cannot be confirmed, since only moral saints never lie and send all their income not required for subsistence to charity. Neither Kantianism nor utilitarianism can be confirmed, according to Wilson, because these moral theories are too demanding for beings like us. They violate a principle of 'descriptive moral psychology', namely, 'The Heavy Costs Principle', according to which the more difficult the obligation created by a moral rule is to fulfil, the more its authority is weakened (p. 86). Lest this must-not-be-too-demanding-for-beings-like-us constraint on confirmation be misinterpreted as a recipe for never confirming any progressive moral theorizing, Wilson attacks the metaethical position she names 'immanentism', according to which the task of the moral philosopher is simply to 'make visible and understandable the moral aspects of particular ways of life', and not to propose 'better moral theories that capture our obligations more accurately' (p. 97). (It seems that Wilson must mean by 'that capture our obligations more accurately' nothing more than 'that are confirmed'). In the course of this attack, virtue theory, the most conservative of the Big Three moral theories, gets its comeuppance for not being demanding enough: 'Virtue theory contains a bias towards moral neglect simply on account of its relatively narrow focus' (p. 122). To counteract this privileged bias, Wilson argues for an 'anonymity requirement' (p. 126), which entails that 'I cannot prefer a set of rules *R* to a set of rules *R'*' (because *R* contains rules that work to my advantage, or to the advantage of my family, my class, or my country' (p. 129). Note that the anonymity requirement is not the same as the demand to be completely impartial. It is not a violation of the anonymity requirement to prefer the rule 'Save one's own children rather than those of strangers' to the rule 'Toss a coin as to whether to save one's children or those of strangers.' It is a violation of this requirement, however, to prefer the rule 'Save the rich people's children over the poor people's children', or 'Save the Irish children over the Rwandan children.'

Wilson also introduces three further principles 'of moral psychology' (p. 153) that counteract the Heavy Costs Principle, insofar as they tend to

strengthen the authority of any obligation (derived from a moral rule) that is demanding. If the heavy costs are the results of advantages unfairly gained – the ‘Ill-Gotten Gains Principle’ – or the result of an agreement knowingly entered into – the ‘Contract Principle’ – or the result of the person having false beliefs that she shouldn’t have – the ‘Culpable Ignorance Principle’ (however, since being ignorant is not the same as having a false belief, this principle is misnamed) – then the authority of the demanding obligation is strengthened (p. 154). It is at this juncture that Wilson also considers the question of the authority of morality, and argues that:

The claim that moral considerations do not have automatic priority ... can be taken to mean that we humans sometimes disregard moral considerations or refuse to take them into account and that this is also a good feature of our world. A promise to help someone move furniture can be broken in favour of a once-in-a-lifetime chance for box seats at the opera; established habits of service and sacrifice can be abandoned in order to have an emotionally meaningful life. Worlds in which everyone cares more about morality than anything else are unfit for our habitation.

(p. 159)

This argument is question-begging. If the person whom you have promised to help that day needs the help that day, and there is no one else who can help, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is immoral for you to break the promise and go to the opera. Hence, it is not a good feature of our world that you disregard or refuse to take into account the moral consideration that you have promised to help someone, as you consider going to the opera instead of helping the friend. Alternatively, the moral rule about keeping promises is: ‘Keep your promises, so long as circumstances do not change in such a way as to release you from your promise.’ It is possible that serendipitously acquiring opera tickets that can only be used on a particular day can release one from a promise to help on that day. If this does indeed release one from the promise, then one has observed the moral rule about keeping promises if one goes to the opera. Either way, it can be argued, morality has automatic priority over self-interest, and it is not a good feature of our world that we sometimes disregard moral considerations or refuse to take them into account. I am also suspicious of the terminology of ‘weakening the obligation’ (p. 154), strengthening the obligation, etc. It is one thing to say that because one unfairly gained an advantage over someone, one has an obligation to do or refrain from doing something that one would not otherwise have. It is another thing to say that because one unfairly gained an advantage over someone, one’s obligation to do or refrain from doing something is strengthened. The latter language seems unduly subjective. More

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generally, I am worried about referring to what appear to be controversial moral considerations (e.g. the Culpable Ignorance Principle) as principles 'of moral psychology', such that they cannot even be contested.

With the prolegomenon of meta-ethics complete, Wilson turns her hand to prescriptive social and political philosophy – to projecting her own para-world, as it were. First she argues for a 'qualified egalitarianism' (p. 163). As against the likes of David Gauthier, Wilson argues that simply eliminating theft, deception, etc., from the marketplace is not 'morally adequate' (p. 209). People can still enter into voluntary cooperative arrangements that allow one party to dominate another (p. 182). Hence, there need to be procedures to 'regulate and police their cooperative arrangements to dissuade agents from making and accepting the bad bargains they otherwise would' (p. 210). Regulation of procedures is not sufficient, however, since even with such regulations in place accumulated resources can allow eventually for significant disparities in wealth between people. There must also be redistribution of wealth on the basis of need and, to a much lesser extent, merit. Wilson's combined proposal is that everyone's 'first-tier' needs – food, water, shelter, medicine, etc. – and 'second-tier' needs – 'some variety and pleasure in food, drink, furnishings or ornaments, the opportunity to engage in meaningful work and to advance one's knowledge and understanding, along with opportunities for affiliation, mobility, some choice of mates, and freedom from harassment and derogation' (p. 244) – must be met. Then, 'in a condition in which we have more than is required to meet first and second-tier needs universally' (p. 245), the surplus wealth should be distributed according to merit, where 'merit' includes 'the passive possession of qualities deemed admirable', 'the active performance of tasks that require strength and effort', and 'the exercise of coordinated specialist knowledge and effort' (p. 213). This concession to merit, however, is premised on the idea that merit is the least evil basis for surplus redistribution. Wilson rejects Rawls's proposal for redistributing surplus wealth according to a 'ranking in which the relatively worst-off are first, and the relatively best-off are last' (p. 245), regardless of merit. As she says, 'it is unclear why, once needs are universally met, the relatively worst-off, who are no longer in a condition of objective deprivation, should continue to be favoured' (p. 246). She also rejects the strict egalitarianism of distributing surplus wealth equally, regardless of merit. Against the objection that her combined proposal is too demanding, she says that the 'thirty million top income earners (who are not of course the most meritorious persons) could bring about this result by redistributing less than 10 percent of their salaries' (p. 247). If this is correct, then this sacrifice is surely not exigent, and it is surely pure selfishness to refuse to give up even this much of one's earnings. Peter Singer and Peter Unger could be happy with Wilson's combined proposal.

The final chapter of *Moral Animals* argues that male–female relations should be a topic of all moral and political theory. Even in 'the wealthiest

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and most rights-conscious nations', it is still the case that women exist 'in a condition of subordination', and men benefit from that subordination (p. 258). Wilson engages with the literature of evolutionary psychology (formerly known as sociobiology, before that name was tainted), which credits the traits of women's smaller size and lesser strength, their ability to bear children, their greater receptivity to infants, their greater patience, and their lower level of interest in status as the causes of their subordination (p. 273). Her conclusion is that, even if it were granted that women have some, or all, of these traits, it does not 'justify the current state of the world' (p. 274). The 'subordination of women is not natural' (p. 276), and it remains for moral theorists to advance proposals for greater equality for women 'in light of the reality constraint and the idealism characteristic' (p. 277). She considers but rejects 'The argument from heavy costs', according to which transferring 'a large proportion of the holdings, liberties, and cultural and intellectual authority of men over to women would be disruptive of reasonably comfortable and efficient modes of life and traumatic for both sexes' (p. 279). She argues, very quickly, that in any case 'Male advantage reflects the enjoyment of ill-gotten gains; implies the violation of an implicit contract to cooperate for mutual benefit; and is the product of increasingly culpable ignorance' (p. 283). Although she insists that 'a fifty-fifty division of baby-minding might be unacceptably burdensome for most men and unacceptably anxiety-provoking in most women' (pp. 290-1), she holds that 'men stand under a moral obligation to divert some proportion of their energies from productive and directive activities to maintenance and uncompensated' activities (p. 289), and 'some proportion of funds' must be diverted to 'childcare provisions for mothers in the active world' (p. 290). Again, it can hardly be maintained that this sacrifice is exigent.

Whether or not the specific arguments for socio-economic and sexual equality are accepted, it is interesting to see how the model of moral theorizing works in these cases. I will conclude with two minor points. First, when Wilson rejects 'Emotivism', she describes it as the meta-ethical theory according to which "'Ought statements" ... are ... equivalent to declarative statements about what the assertor likes, admires, or prefers' (p. 50). This makes emotivism out to be a descriptivist theory (a form of individual subjectivism), according to which 'moral judgements have truth-makers in this world' (p. 50). This is not emotivism, however. Emotivism is the meta-ethical theory according to which ethical judgments are the expressions of ethical emotions, and these ethical emotions are *sui generis* and may clash with what a person likes. Secondly, Wilson is ill served by Clarendon Press. The book's relatively short Bibliography manages to mix up authors and publications in several places, including mixing up Bernard Williams's publications with Wilson's.