Nicholas Southwood


This brief, bold monograph addresses ‘the central problem of moral philosophy:... identifying the ... ultimate [constitutive] grounds of morality’ (pp. vii, 4, 9). Southwood espouses ‘the contractualist idea that the rightness and wrongness of our conduct is to be explained by reference to some ... actual or hypothetical agreement ... [This] offer[s] the best hope of vindicating a robust notion of moral truth while also acknowledging that morality is in some sense a human construction, that moral truths are somehow dependent on actual human capacities’ (p. vii). To show this, Southwood develops a novel ‘deliberative model’ of contractualism, distinct to Gauthier’s ‘Hobbesian’ and to Scanlon’s ‘Kantian’ contractualist models; its affinities to Habermas’ discourse ethics are omitted (pp. 3, 87n2).

The ‘morality’ Southwood seeks to ground is a ‘complete set ... of deontic facts ... about what is permissible, impermissible, and obligatory,’ as a common code by which we are to live (p. 102n32), in contrast to what is ‘good, worthwhile, [or] virtuous’ (p. 7) for us to do (p. 8). Adequately grounding morality requires vindicating ‘various plattitudes that define morality’s intensional character’ and ‘substantive judgments concerning morality’s extensional character’ (p. 11). Morality’s intensional character is specified by plattitudes about its normativity and its objectivity (p. 13). Morality’s normativity consists in agents having sufficient justifying reasons to act (or to refrain) as morality requires (p. 14); ‘moral requirements are necessarily categorical and binding’ and ‘distinctively other-regarding’ (p. 15). Morality’s objectivity consists in its being ‘non-subjective,’ universal and yet knowable (pp. 16–17, 148–55). Morality’s extensional character is partly specified by its permitting some forms of partiality whilst proscribing others (pp. 17, 156–71).

Southwood’s model defines a standpoint betwixt Nagel’s personal and impersonal points of view (pp. 17–18, 87, 161–3, 171), an interpersonal view of oneself ‘as fellow participant in establishing’ through collective deliberation our conjoint moral claims and entitlements (pp. 86–7, 130–3, 163); this involves neither a veil of ignorance (p. 158), nor Scanlon’s ‘generic’ standpoints (p. 97 n29). It takes agents as we are, and seeks to facilitate our self-understanding and our mutual understanding of our personal points of view (pp. 87, 97, 137). Southwood claims that ‘rationality is necessarily an interpersonal achievement’ (p. 90). His model idealizes our deliberative capacities to comply with the non-moral norms constitutive of good and proper deliberation (pp. 92, 158 n35, 175, 183). These include basic communicative norms, such as sincerity,
effective communication, attention to relevance, receptiveness and willingness to revise one’s views on the basis of cogent deliberation (pp. 93–4); the discursive norms of persuasion, both to offer others considerations they likely regard as salient, and to modify one’s own views when presented with cogent considerations (p. 94–5). This latter involves the reflective norms of internal examination of one’s own views, their coherence and one’s responsiveness to relevant considerations (p. 95). Hence: ‘The deliberative contractual situation ... is a site of relentless examination, scrutiny, and critique. ... deliberative contractualism requires that we ascend to a point of view in which we are accountable to others, in which others have the authority to demand us [sic] to take them seriously as fellow deliberators’ (pp. 101, 129, 133, 158). In sum, as collective deliberative contractors, we have normatively significant, though non-moral mutual relations, constitutive of ‘the interpersonal point of view’ (124–8).

In this situation, we are to decide upon a common code by which to live, though without supposing it is specifically a moral code (pp. 100, 126). This qualification is required, first, to allow within the scope of relevant deliberative considerations, not only our desires, aversions, aspirations, personal relations and projects, but also specific moral judgments we may make, and more importantly, our normative judgments about ‘what is important about doing things this way rather than that’ (p. 100). Second, it avoids circularity (p. 101). Agreeing to live by a common code ‘involves agreeing to accept [its] principles [... and its] attendant dispositions and judgments ...’ (p. 104). If the code chosen within the collective, deliberative contractarian situation is a moral code (p. 185), then that collective choice insures, via their acceptance of that moral code, that individual agents have reasons to act according to that code and to hold themselves and others accountable to it (pp. 104–5, 129–30, 133–4, 137). Deliberative contractualism would thus secure morality’s normativity (pp. 144–5).

Southwood offers various considerations suggesting that the common code which would be chosen in that deliberative situation is specifically a moral code, including within its scope, not only competent decision-makers, but also those incapable of making the relevant, contractual decisions (pp. 110–14, 168–71), and perhaps future generations (pp. 115–6). Southwood suggests that deliberative contractors would agree to permit individuals to pursue their life projects (pp. 159–60), but require imperfect duties of aid (p. 165) and insure a decent standard of living (pp. 165–7).

Southwood states: ‘Moral principles will be necessarily generation-relative’, whilst admitting that ‘generation-relative moral code’ may be incoherent (p. 116). Deliberative contractualism is ‘a kind of idealised ... intersubjective response-dependent theory’ (p. 150). Southwood denies that any acts are ‘necessarily morally impermissible’ because there may be distant possible worlds