L. Besser-Jones


Lorraine Besser-Jones’ *Eudaimonic Ethics: The Philosophy and Psychology of Living Well* is one of latest philosophical works which presents an empirically grounded treatment of character and virtue. Besser-Jones joins other philosophers who are interested in seeing how contemporary work in psychology and related fields can inform our best moral theories. While many of the issues Besser-Jones takes on are quite familiar, Besser-Jones’ eudaimonic approach is refreshingly innovative, and it promises to move the relevant debates in new and fruitful directions. What sets Besser-Jones’ account apart from many recent efforts is the skillful and organic way in which empirical data both grounds and helps develop her view throughout the book. Where some shy from mixing the empirical and philosophical, Besser-Jones thrives, and the result is a virtue-ethical account that appears well equipped to both engage with empirical criticisms of virtue ethics and provide practical guidance for living a life of personal flourishing. While there is much that could be discussed in this impressive text, here I focus on a general overview of essential elements of Besser-Jones’ view along with some commentary on where the project might continue to develop in future research.

Besser-Jones’ clear commitment to what she terms *moderate psychological realism* sets up much of the direction and tone for the text. *Moderate psychological realism* is the view that moral theorizing should be restricted to “a psychologically realistic understanding of what sorts of behavior, belief formation, and decision-making processes can be reasonably expected of people” (pg. 6). Some understand virtue ethics as primarily evaluative talk, able to fulfill its role independently of the types of psychological structures that most people have, but that is not line taken here. Besser-Jones’ commitment to a psychologically realistic picture of moral agents begins with identifying three fundamental psychological needs that are necessary to fulfill in order for us to experience eudaimonic well-being: relatedness, autonomy, and competence (pg. 49). The most effective strategies for fulfilling these three needs provide the normative structure of how to best conduct our lives. Relatedness is achieved when we feel and judge ourselves to have, overall, positive relations with those around us. Autonomy and competence involve the identification of and endorsement of personal goals and the achievement of said goals experienced with some level of proficiency, respectively. It is undeniable that there is a subjective element to the fulfillment of these goals, which naturally raises questions about “inauthentic” achievement. Inauthentic is the sense that, despite experiencing
myself as relating to most or all of my peers, in reality I have failed miserably according to those same peers. Is it right to say I’ve fulfilled my need for relatedness if most of my peers are really just putting up a good front? If I join in on belittling a minority group in order to bond with certain other groups in power, am I simply pursuing my well-being in a different way? Besser-Jones addresses many such worries throughout the text by citing various psychological studies that speak directly to these worries. For example, while it may not seem that I have reason to care about the cold stares from groups I’ve cheerfully ostracized with my friends, there is a negative toll on my well-being nonetheless (pg. 40).

Those skeptical of such an unapologetically empirical approach may be reminded of the age old worry of the “is” informing the “ought”. To this point, Besser-Jones maintains that our own proper functioning is, by itself, a valuable goal, something that we ought to pursue. While the goal is more modest than the traditional Aristotelian conception of the “good life”, which Besser-Jones acknowledges, the goal here is argued to have significant value nonetheless. To be clear, the view presented is instrumentalist in its approach. This is, of course, not a unique approach to virtue and character; Julia Driver’s consequentialist approach (J. Driver, Uneasy Virtue, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001)) has a similar structure (which Besser-Jones nicely contrasts with her own view in chapter 6). Particular traits are better suited for flourishing than others insofar as they contribute more to the individual’s well-being through the satisfaction of psychological needs. This provides grounding for preferring, for example, relatedness to all people, and not ostracizing particular groups, given the negative toll on relatedness which can result from any amount of ostracizing or feelings of “coldness” from others (even non-human “peers”, see pg. 41).

There is more than enough material in Eudaimonic Ethics: The Philosophy and Psychology of Living Well to warrant a number of reviews, so I must focus on just a small part of Besser-Jones’ project where I think continuing research is warranted. As mentioned above, there is good empirical evidence for pursuing the most authentic types of relations with others, along with genuine (rather than perceived) competence and identification with goals. There is undoubtedly, however, the potential for an inaccurate, albeit convincing, perspective on the part of the agent with respect to whether psychological needs have genuinely been fulfilled. Throughout the text, Besser-Jones maintains a pluralistic outlook on states of character and virtue (pg. 99), where multiple approaches to fulfilling psychological needs may all contribute to well-being roughly equally; there no single privileged set of traits or virtues everyone should pursue. One worry is that even if the more authentic route of relatedness may lead to greater gross fulfillment of my psychological needs, the effort