Book Reviews


Peter Railton has been manning the barricades of ethical naturalism for close to two decades now, and the present text brings together several of his most important essays on the topic. Although the collected articles here touch on diverse subjects, we can view them as part of the grand project of ethical naturalism: to situate values in nature. The text is divided into three parts: ‘Realism about Value and Morality’, ‘Normative Moral Theory’ and ‘The Authority of Ethics and Value—The Problem of Normativity’. In what follows I focus primarily on the first section and gloss the other two.

Railton characterizes his project in this first section as follows: ‘I attempt to develop a “naturalistic” approach to intrinsic value (including intrinsic aesthetic value) that would enable us to see how claims about objectivity could be well-founded and could support a critical evaluative practice’ (p. xiv). He begins where many contemporary ethical naturalists feel compelled to begin, by arguing against the fact/value distinction (‘Moral Realism’, ‘Facts and Values’). Several lines of argument have been offered for this rather dubious distinction, and Railton handily challenges each of the prominent ones. His assault on these arguments is quite subtle, and among the best there are. Still, however, even after the fact/value distinction has been shown not to be as ‘hard’ as antirealists have alleged, there remains the task of defending a plausible naturalist moral realism.

Railton follows what he calls the ‘generic stratagem of naturalistic realism’: ‘to postulate a realm of facts in virtue of the contribution they would make to the *a posteriori* explanation of certain features of our experience’ (p. 9). He argues that individuals possess objective interests, natural properties that can do important explanatory work. An objective interest of an individual is defined as that which an individual would want herself to pursue were she to possess full information and exemplary instrumental rationality. Railton provides several hypothetical scenarios to illustrate how a person’s objective interests explain various behaviors of the individual. Although hypothetical, these tales have the ring of truth. Through his arguments and examples, Railton decidedly shifts the burden of proof over to those who think that a person’s subjective interests (her wants, desires, etc.) can do the requisite explanatory work in such cases. All we have been provided with at this point is an explanatory posit, of course, which might lead us toward realism about non-moral value yet leave us still skeptical about the prospect of realism about
distinctively moral value. But Railton’s moral realism involves a two-stage process, which will be familiar to readers versed in a certain sort of ethical theory construction. First, one provides an account of ‘intrinsic non-moral goodness’, that which forms, as it were, the subject matter of ethics. This has been done, Railton thinks, by his account of objective interests. Next, one proceeds to a higher level, that of moral evaluation. From this purview, one can see how the non-moral goods are distributed, for example, and whether that distribution is one that makes sense from a moral point of view, that is, from a perspective ‘that is impartial, but equally concerned with all those potentially affected’ (p. 21). The central idea is that what is rational—or moral—from this ‘social’ perspective is ‘what would be rationally approved of were the interests of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full and vivid information’ (p. 22). Railton shows how this notion of social rationality can do theoretical work in explaining the evolution of societies, as well as providing us with a criterion by which we might critically evaluate contemporary norms and social practices.

Various objections might be raised to Railton’s account, two of which we will briefly consider. First, Kantians (at least) will seek to disrupt the project by challenging the instrumental conception of rationality. Although aware of that idea’s contentiousness, Railton is willing to bite the bullet and assert bluntly that ‘the ignoble instrumentalist view’ provides ‘the clearest idea we have of what it is … to have a reason for acting’ (p. 47). However, as someone of Railton’s philosophical acumen surely knows, clarity does not necessarily entail truth, and opponents of instrumentalism will be left unsatisfied by such a response. Second, although Kantian critics might accept something like the moral point of view, others not so inclined will see this move as question begging. Again, I am not sure that Railton provides an adequate answer. He does say that the moral point of view embodies ‘central truisms’ of ‘self-aware’ philosophical accounts of moral evaluation (p. 360). However, we might worry that, if the moral point of view cannot itself be justified, we will have to settle for an account of intrinsic non-moral goodness and be left wondering what to do with it.

Objections aside, all of the essays in this section have something to contribute to Railton’s overarching project, as well as probing into other interesting areas of value theory. ‘Noncognitivism about Rationality: Benefits, Costs, and an Alternative’ presents a redoubtable challenge to Allan Gibbard’s well-known account of rationality. ‘Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism’ convincingly demonstrates that Hume is less of a friend to non-factualists than they have reckoned. And ‘Red, Bitter, Good’ critically dissects the idea that values are ‘secondary properties’, concluding that goodness is in many ways more like sweetness than it is like redness.

In the two subsequent major sections of the book, Railton takes up many other topics of import, often obliquely defending his preferred naturalistic ethical theory. He counters those who contend that the moral point of view—and especially consequentialist moral theory—lead to alienation, either from the self, from others, or from morality itself (‘Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality’). He shows us how, by looking at ‘character’ and ‘motive’ versions of utilitarianism, we see that utilitarians have probably gone wrong in starting their theorizing with an account of right action (‘How Thinking about Character and Utilitarianism Might Lead to Rethinking the Character of Utilitarianism’). He shows us that, while