
William Ransome begins *Moral Reflection* by suggesting that moral reflection is an admirable human excellence, worthy and capable of being classified as a virtue. Ransome establishes this by invoking, and then tweaking, the criteria of contemporary virtue theory. But the remainder of the book is historically focused. Did Socrates in the *Apology*, Aristotle, or Kant recognize that moral reflection plays a central role in the ethical life? It turns out – for we are kept in suspense, as each view is presented as if it might be the one that manages to properly acknowledge moral reflection (p. 77) – that all three disappoint.

What does this mean? Why would moral reflection be left out of any roster of virtues? Ransome concludes on a bold note. To him, this lapse suggests that a type of self-awareness, the type required for moral reflection, is unsettling to moral theory itself. If we are encouraged to assess our moral past clearly, to become conscious of our previous moral motives and rationales, we might engender a self-critical doubtfulness at odds with what moral theory tries to do. According to Ransome, “moral theories tend- sometimes explicitly and sometimes more subtly – to ignore, simplify, suppress and distort important, even ubiquitous, features of human psychology” (p. 177). The book closes with a plea that we ought to acknowledge peoples’ lived moral experience.

It is difficult to feel that Ransome has made his case against moral theory for a few reasons. Since he establishes that moral reflection is a virtue through theoretical considerations, it makes one wonder what has gone right, today, if moral theory can now do this. The three views considered do not seem representative of all of moral theory. That Aristotle and Kant seem to come close to representing moral reflection makes one wonder how this could constitute an attempt to suppress it. And finally, Ransome’s case depends on readers being convinced that moral reflection ought to be a named virtue with a particular form.

Chapter 1 defends virtue ethics as an approach, marking the author’s agreements and disagreements with the contemporary virtue ethicists Linda Zagzebski and Michael Slote. Chapter 2 argues that moral reflectiveness is a virtue. It develops out of moral reflection, which is “a reasonably sharply distinguished activity with a reasonably sharply distinguished end or goal – a clear understanding of our past moral experiences” (p. 56). A matter of higher-order critical thought, moral reflection is skeptical of lower-order moral responses and ‘interrogative’ of one’s moral experiences. It is not a matter of asking “What kind of person am I?” or “How good am I?” but of “What happened here?” and “What have I done?” (p. 51).

A person with a genuine commitment to answering these questions might have the virtue of moral reflectiveness, Ransome argues. He fills out the profile of this virtue, its “virtue status” or classification among activities, states, skills, motives, emotions, and success conditions. The need for moral reflectiveness arises because our commitments are not transparent to us. We can be confused by them. We might have “sincere self-understanding” and “sincere commitments” without having genuine commitments (p. 60). His example of this is a father who, with sincere
self-understanding, takes “a commitment to his children to be one of the central, defining features of his life and character” (p. 60). This commitment, though “sincere,” cannot be “genuine,” because as committed as the father is to providing financial support, he finds spending even a little time with the children tedious (p. 60). A second example shows that we might not be motivated by the commitments we think we are. It has another father believing he has taken a less intense job for his children, though he has really done it to save his failing marriage (p. 62).

Since our understanding of our own commitments can be occluded, moral lucidity is of value, Ransome explains. It involves “acquiring and developing critical capacities and skills relating to moral judgment and the evaluation of this experience and to overcoming confusion, ignorance, error and various manifestations of self-deception which are opposed to a lucid grasp of its moral character” (p. 64). This can assist integrity and the other virtues, but is also valuable for its own sake.

Chapter 3 assesses Plato’s Socrates in the *Apology*. We find that Socrates’ famous line about the unexamined life is commonly misunderstood to be about moral reflection. Instead, on the basis of “the best evidence available” (p. 96), Socrates is only really recommending lucidity about conceptual truth, “philosophical rather than moral lucidity” (p. 104). Even if lucidity about one’s moral experiences might result from Socratic knowledge and virtue, “it does not feature prominently in the motivation to possess it, or in the conduct which is supposed to bring it about” (p. 104).

In Chapter 4, Ransome shows that Aristotle acknowledges moral reflection in his depiction of self-control and in a *Magna Moralia* discussion of friendship (pp. 120-136). Aristotle’s formal accounts of *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*, however, leave no room for the self-reflection required for self-control and friendship. Ransome explains that Aristotle’s main account directs “moral attention outward – away from the possessor and into the future,” while moral reflection points us “towards the possessor, and into the past” (p. 116). In Chapter 5, Kant’s injunction to “know yourself” in the *Doctrine of Virtue* is evaluated. Ransome argues that Kant recognizes the benefits of self-reflection, and it plays a central role at the ‘heart’ of Kantian ethics (p. 169). Yet Ransome puzzles over whether Kant could endorse moral reflection as a virtue. Ransome concludes that Kant could not have, because Kant could never grant the activity of being self-reflective intrinsic value (pp. 169-173).

In the final chapter, “Moral Reflectiveness and Moral Philosophy,” Ransome gets to explaining “what it means for a moral theory” to take this “moral state and its distinctive impression” seriously (p. 2). The personal, retrospective, and doubt-laden nature of moral reflection makes it difficult to be acknowledged by a moral theory, he writes. Ransome reads the representative moral theorists as having engaged in a sort of willful evasion over the role of moral reflection. That they come close to including it in their formal accounts of ethics only shows, Ransome explains, that “a more sophisticated psychological account was not out of the question” (p. 179).

Ransome writes well, quotes liberally, and his exegeses are engaging. This work holds up each of the three approaches for fresh consideration, whether Ransome’s