Philosophy in Review

Étienne Brown, "Moral Judgement: An Introduction through Anglo-American, German and French Philosophy"

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Étienne Brown. *Moral Judgement: An Introduction through Anglo-American, German and French Philosophy*. Rowman & Littlefield 2022. 236 pp $116.00 USD (Hardcover 9781786615169); $40.00 USD (Paperback 9781538173602).

An overview of moral judgement vis-à-vis an examination of contrasting Kantian and neo-Aristotelian perspective might not seem, at first glance, to be particularly novel. The distinction between the two approaches—the rule-based Kantian approach and the Aristotelian approach that conceives of moral judgement as a practical skill—is familiar territory. However, this book by Étienne Brown demands attention for the specific prism through which it engages with the topic. That tripartite prism, as indicated in the book's subtitle, draws together the Anglo-American, German and French traditions in a fascinating exploration of the foundations of moral judgement that culminates with the presentation of a hybrid neo-Aristotelian-Kantian model.

Very broadly speaking, Aristotelians claim that the Kantian conception of moral judgement, with its emphasis on moral universalism, fails to provide an adequate account of how agents can make good moral decisions in particular situations. Kantians, by contrast, counter that the neo-Aristotelian conception lacks a firm basis for moral rules, making it potentially inconsistent and relativistic. In examining these 'two rival conceptions of moral judgement' (3), Brown highlights several key questions: are these two conceptions indeed mutually exclusive; how do supporters of each conception respond to the objections raised by advocates of the other; how has this debate impacted contemporary moral philosophy vis-à-vis the so-called divide between Analytic and Continental traditions (4)? The overarching exploration of these questions is divided into three parts, with each part consisting of three chapters.

Part I, entitled 'The Neo-Aristotelian Critique of Kantian Judgement,' begins with a review of Rawls' defence in *A Theory of Justice* of Kant's categorical imperative before moving on to MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian critique of Kantian ethics. Brown characterizes the Rawls-MacIntyre debate not as a 'political quarrel' (7) but rather as a 'disagreement on the nature of moral reasoning' (7). MacIntyre takes issue with the Rawlsian notion of the 'veil of ignorance', suggesting that it is ultimately delusional (28) and that there can be no account of moral judgement without a rich account of the virtuous moral agent. Chapter 2 explores the contributions of several German neo-Aristotelian philosophers—Joachim Ritter, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Rudiger Bubner—whose work remains largely unknown to Anglo-American philosophers. Leaving aside Brown's somewhat dubious remark that even philosophers working in the Continental tradition may be unfamiliar with Gadamer, this chapter effectively presents the perspective, shared by these thinkers, that moral judgements are not based on universal rules but rather are anchored in particular social institutions. Chapter 3 considers French neo-Aristotelian Vincent Descombes (also touching on the work of Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach), exploring the notion that we cannot simply characterize moral judgement as the application of general to specific situations. *Contra* a Kantian deontological approach, Descombes 'develops a non-naturalistic teleological account of the normativity of practical identities' (60). Readers curious to delve further into this perspective (and those of the other figures covered in the first part of the book) will find thoughtful

additional commentary in the 'Notes' section as well as an in-depth list of further reading.

Part II is entitled 'Three Perspectives on the Foundations of Moral Judgement.' This part deals with the central issue raised in Part I, viz. the 'problem of the rational grounding' (8) of moral judgements. A central contention of Brown's is that best way to understand Kantians such as Jurgen Habermas, Onara O'Neill and Christine Korsgaard is to consider their respective projects as 'attempts to overcome neo-Aristotelianism' (75) and, in particular, the problem of historical relativism. Chapter 4 deals with Habermas's 'discourse ethics' and the argument that any rational moral discourse can only occur under the framework of shared universal moral rules. This chapter also draws upon the work of O'Neill in highlighting the problem of historical relativism emerging from MacIntyre's arguments. Here readers are reminded that the situation with Habermas is not so simple: his analyses bring with them their own challenges and shortcomings; furthermore, his approach also differs significantly from neo-Aristotelians in terms of his position on the role of universal principles in effective discourse (90-91). Chapter 5 focusses on a second attempt to solve the problem of rational grounding in the work of Christine Korsgaard, who, like other 'Kantian constructivists' (97) argues that a more universal human agency must underpin the practical normative identities of the neo-Aristotelian conception. Chapter 6 considers how some neo-Aristotelians (MacIntyre, Foot, McDowell) have themselves attempted to deal with the issue of rational grounding. This includes an intriguing excursion into Foot's examination, influence by Wittgenstein, of the meaning of 'good' as a grammatical term. This chapter makes it clear that not all neo-Aristotelians are in agreement regarding the question of rational grounding, including whether the very demand for *grounding* is even properly 'Aristotelian'. Where this *is* agreement among neo-Aristotelians is that Kantians such as Habermas and Korsgaard are unable to provide an account of how moral agents decide what is best to do in a particular situation.

Part III, entitled 'Principles, Skills and Actions,' examines several Kantian responses to the neo-Aristotelian critiques explored in the first part of the book and culminates with the presentation of a 'hybrid Aristotelian-Kantian model of moral judgement' (10). Chapter 7 deals with the problem of 'indeterminacy' and examines the Kantian solutions offered by Hannah Arendt, Onora O'Neill, Barbara Herman, and Nancy Sherman. Arendt offers a reply to the neo-Aristotelian criticism that Kantian approaches neglect the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) necessary to make moral judgements by emphasizing Kant's notion of *Urteilskraft* (the ability to think of the particular under the universal) as outlined in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. This chapter ends with a consideration of Sherman's and Herman's recognition that there is a need to develop a 'Kantian theory of deliberation' (172) which in turn might point the way to an understanding of Kantian virtues. Picking up on this suggestion, Chapter 8 again draws upon the work of O'Neill, Herman, and Sherman in a particularly intriguing discussion that examines the possibilities of a Kantian approach from the point of view of the cultivation of virtue. The analyses here dispel the neo-Aristotelian criticism that contemporary Kantians cannot provide an account of the development of moral education and literacy. Taking an alternative approach to the issue of moral judgement, the book's final chapter, entitled 'A Merleau-Pontian Conclusion,' draws upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of a 'lateral universal' (200). This is something acquired through

'ethnological experience'—a knowledge of human practices across different cultures and traditions—and is presented as a contrast to the 'overarching universal' prevalent in moral theories seeking to formulate universal principles. Brown suggests that this might provide a more nuanced approach to the question of moral judgement, striking a balance between the problem of universalism and historical relativism.

While Brown's 'Merleau-Pontian conclusion' is suggestive at best (it is only presented in the final few pages of the book) and in need of further development, this does not detract from the overall accomplishment of Brown's study. His examinations of these thinkers and approaches create a rich portrait of the intersection of Kantianism and Aristotelianism that subverts the facile false dilemma pitting rule-based ethics against virtue ethics. His analyses are frank and engaging, animated by his willingness to offer his own perspective on the issues and to draw upon contemporary relevant issues in doing so. What makes Brown's study particularly valuable to scholars in the field is its highlighting of the work of philosophers (Bubner, Descombes, Reneault) whose work is not widely known but, as Brown's analyses demonstrate, should be. Readers more steeped in the Analytic tradition but with less awareness of the Continental tradition will benefit from the discussions of Habermas, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, while readers more familiar with the Continental tradition will find informative the considerations of Rawls, MacIntyre and O'Neill, among others. For this reason, as Brown points out, the book lends itself to different methods of reading it. Some readers may choose to read it in sequence as a whole, whereas readers interested in specific topics or philosophers can focus on particular sections.

In terms of 'readers', it is important to note that the audience that would find this book most edifying are likely specialists (including advanced students) in the area who are looking for a more nuanced exploration of the issues surrounding rational grounding and moral judgement. The lesser-known philosophers (some of whom have not yet been translated) may be particularly intriguing to specialists, and Brown rightly highlights this (10) as a virtue of his study. He further suggests that readers who are unfamiliar with the philosophical issue of moral judgement in general might benefit from reading the entire book. While this is possible, the primary value of this work is not as a general introduction to the topic and is not recommendable in that respect. To be clear, this is not a flaw of the book, but it should be recognized that the sheer number of thinkers and perspectives covered might prove daunting for a novice reader, and a more generalized overview would be preferable. That aside, Brown's study is unquestionably a welcome contribution to the literature on ethics and moral judgement as well as thought provoking overview of an issue that is as relevant today as it has ever been.

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