

Booknotes

What Can Philosophy Contribute to Ethics? is the provocative title of a short sharp book by James Griffin (Oxford University Press, 2015). Griffin is clearly pushing the reader in the direction of ‘not much’, although it might be more fair, more philosophical indeed, to qualify this by saying ‘not much, if philosophy is conceived in terms of laying down foundations or general principles for ethics’. The main targets of Griffin’s assault are those schemes of thought known generically as moral theory, such as consequentialism, contractualism, Kant’s ethics, virtue ethics ‘and so on’, as he puts it, the ‘so on’ including interestingly systems which would make equality or human rights the basis on which we should judge and develop moral or ethical decisions.

A lot of people would be put out of business (and out of salaried employment) by Griffin’s argument, so it is safe to say that it will have little impact (to use a fashionable measure). However Griffin’s underlying point is one which should be taken seriously. It is that none of these systems help us much (if they do not actually mislead us) when it comes to actual judgements. In the case of consequentialist approaches, for example, we lack the capacity and the understanding to make the necessary judgements; Kantian approaches give us general principles, such as outlawing unjustified killing of humans or torture, but cannot help us when it comes to the all too tricky borderline cases; human rights talk is hopelessly (irremediably?) indeterminate; equality is not in itself a good (equality of what?) and kicks in, if at all, only when we are talking of some other already accepted good needing to be extended; undermining one’s integrity may not be ‘a kind of suicide’ (as Williams would have it), but an example of ethical growth.

The basic thought seems to be that practicalities in the ethical area are always going to outwit system, or they would if we are not already corrupted by philosophical system. What grounds ethics is our capacity for normative reasoning, having and giving reasons for what we do, and ideally being bound by these reasons. The centrality of reasoning means that ethical accounts relying on evolutionary theory or sociobiology are necessarily inadequate, in so far as they downplay reasoning, or interpret it in reductively evolutionary terms.

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What Griffin suggests that philosophers should do is to work much more collaboratively with lawyers and judges, that is, people who are in the day-to-day business of making judgements and fine legal-cum-ethical decisions. Some of those who might welcome Griffin's sensitivity to the fine tuning which should be involved in practical ethics might wonder if judges are the only people philosophers need to collaborate with: what about politicians, teachers, doctors, soldiers, among many other professionals at what might be called the sharp end of ethical decision-making? Others (such as politician, teachers, doctors, and soldiers) may wonder whether judges are really the best collaborators here, when so much contemporary judicial reasoning is based on the very appeals to equality and human rights Griffin is warning us against.

Griffin's arguments are important and should give philosophical systematisers pause, considerable pause. However, as Griffin himself opens his book by pointing out, there are many different ethical systems, and many differences between them, which may seem to raise philosophical questions (a similar thought arises in considering the views of Michael Oakeshott on the 'intimations' involved in practical reasoning, with which Griffin's ethical thinking has a surprising convergence).

In contrast to Griffin, but in another sphere, Roger Trigg shows no philosophical reluctance or diffidence in raising and answering fundamental philosophical questions. In his *Beyond Matter: Why Science Needs Metaphysics* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015) he argues powerfully against an 'underlabouring' view of philosophy, at least in relation to science. Trigg suggests that assumptions about the intelligibility and regularity of the world are made *in* science, but cannot be justified *by* science. While not wanting to deny that some of our beliefs are caused (and are acceptable precisely because they are caused in ways explicable in terms of our biology and physiology – and hence can be seen in evolutionary terms), he also argues that we have to use our reason in order to assess this acceptability. In this context he has interesting things to say about the famous dispute between C.S. Lewis and Elizabeth Anscombe in 1947, and later Lewis-like claims from Alvin Plantinga. (Non-rational does not mean irrational, and some non-rationally acquired beliefs may be rationally acceptable and justifiable precisely because of the way they are caused.)

However, even granted all this, many of our beliefs and much of what science tells us goes far beyond anything rooted in our biological or evolutionary history, or caused in any way directly related to that. But – and this is typical of Trigg's even-handedness in the way he

handles his material – this does not mean that we should automatically accept what science tells us when it goes completely beyond the observable, as it does in the case of the many worlds hypotheses, currently fashionable in cosmology, and quantum theory. Trigg's metaphysical rationalism, perhaps because of its underlying realism, is healthily sceptical of ungrounded and unfalsifiable speculation even when it comes dressed in the finest scientific clothing.