

Moral Disagreements: Classic and contemporary readings, edited by Christopher W. Gowans. London: Routledge, 2000, 265 pp.

This collection is a must-read for three reasons: the editor's choices and lengthy introduction, and the relevance of the problem of moral disagreements.

Moral disagreements seem to undermine objectivity in moral matters, and to many people in the street it is a major motivation for moral relativism. That is why this collection is of interest to lay people and students alike. The reader is encouraged to ask whether moral disagreements are as deep as they seem and whether they really undermine moral objectivity. The collection is arranged so that opposing views follow one another, thus encouraging the reader to think for himself.

The editor's introduction is not just a summary of the presented readings. It charts the territory in an illuminating way. Gowans asks how deep are moral disagreements; are they deep enough to back up the Disagreement Thesis, the idea "that there are widespread and deep moral disagreements that appear persistently resistant to rational resolution" (p. 2)? And if the Disagreement Thesis is right, does that undermine the objectivity of ethics? And how are we to solve our ethical disagreements if the Disagreement Thesis is correct?

Gowans edited *Moral Dilemmas* (1987), the reader many students are familiar with. However, "moral disagreements should be distinguished from moral dilemmas as philosophers have employed this term in recent years" (p. 15). We face a moral dilemma when we do agree we ought to do two things, and yet cannot do them both because doing one precludes us from doing the other. In a moral disagreement two moral agents do *not* agree as to what is morally required or permissible.

The book has five parts. Arguments for moral relativism based on moral disagreements were discussed from Greek Antiquity onwards. Thus, Part I ("The historical debate") presents readings from Sextus Empiricus, Aquinas, Montaigne, Hume, and Nietzsche. Sextus Empiricus, Aquinas and Hume discuss in subtle and sophisticated ways what moral disagreements entail. This subtlety and sophistication is absent from Montaigne and Nietzsche, however, that seem to ignore standard arguments against their positions and fail to realise their views are *prima facie* incoherent (something Sextus is acutely aware and tries hard to respond to).

If we are to run an argument for moral relativism based on moral disagreements we better make sure there really is anthropological evidence of deep moral disagreements between societies. As it turns out, things are not that easy. There are moral disagreements to be sure, but their precise meaning is controversial. Part II ("Some voices from anthropology") presents three pieces from anthropologists Chagnon, Shweder, and Turner. Shweder wants to hold on to relativism, but it is interesting to note that in order to do that he has to run philosophical arguments. Anthropological evidence does not seem to entail by itself moral relativism. Turner argues convincingly that "The mere existence of cultural differences does not logically preclude the possibility of cultural universals" (p. 118). Turner is concerned with the human rights — something *prima facie* incompatible with moral relativism. Whether respect for human rights and relativism are compatible is a problem faced in some of the readings and in the editor's introduction. And this should prove useful, for I have come across many laypersons that endorse relativism believing it to be the way to tolerance and a more humane approach to relations between nations. But this is *prima facie* wrong, for a true relativist will have to say human rights are just relative ethical principles, as any others.

However, a die-hard non-relativist surely wants more than just cultural universals. He wants it not just to be the case that we all happen to believe in a common core of ethical claims, but that if we all happened to believe in a different common core of ethical claims we would be wrong. This is the kind of deep non-relativism Bernard Williams and other philosophers believe is false. Part III ("Challenges to moral objectivity") presents papers from Mackie, Bernard Williams, and David Wong that discuss the philosophical import of moral disagreements. Parts IV ("Defenses of moral objectivity") and V ("New directions") present papers by David Brink, Martha Nussbaum, Alan Gewirth, Isaiah Berlin, MacIntyre, Rawls and Uma Narayan. The only complaint I have regarding the chosen readings is the absence of

Thomas Nagel's defence of moral objectivity — probably one of the most sophisticated moral objectivists.

Gowans offers the reader a good collection of essays on an important problem, packed with a lucid introduction. It is hard to disagree as to the value of this book, but you might want to read it for yourself. In matters philosophical, there is no shortage of disagreement about practically everything, including this very remark.

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