

Seminar 8 Schlick's Ethics

In 1930 Schlick published *Problems of Ethics*,¹ in which he argued that ethics should be regarded as an empirical science. He announces:

If there are ethical questions which have meaning, and therefore are capable of being answered, then ethics is a science. For the correct answers to its questions will constitute a system of true propositions, and a system of true propositions concerning an object is the “science” of that object. Thus, ethics is a system of knowledge and nothing else; its only goal is the truth. (p. 1)

This statement of the aim of ethics is reminiscent of G. E. Moore's stated intention in *Principia Ethica* of laying the foundation of an autonomous *scientific system of ethics* independent of empirical theories and metaphysical doctrines. In the preface he says:

I have endeavored to write “Prolegomena to any future ethics that can possibly pretend to be scientific.” In other words, I have endeavored to discover what are the fundamental principles of ethical reasoning; and the establishment of these principles rather than any conclusion which may be attained by their use, may be regarded as my main object.² (p. v)

The foundational truths of Moore's envisaged normative science consisted of statements about intrinsic value of states of affairs, from which the right-making features of actions were to be derived. He took these truths to be synthetic, necessary, and knowable a priori.

Three decades later such statements were deemed incoherent, along with all moral theories of traditional philosophy. According to logical empiricism, there are two kinds of truth—analytic and empirical. Since the former are true solely in virtue of meaning, entirely independent of facts, any conception of ethical theory as an attempt to extend our knowledge of ethical facts must construe ethical truths as contingent and knowable only a posteriori, on the basis of ordinary observation. Schlick was the only important logical empiricist who thought that there were such truths. The others declared ethical sentences to be cognitively meaningless devices used to express of emotion, make recommendations, or issue commands -- misleadingly packaged to look like descriptions of genuine facts.

Schlick begins with the observation that ethical behavior is conduct we demand from others and ourselves; it is conduct *we fundamentally desire* that relates us to others, and them to us. He takes this to be an empirical fact. If our most basic desires of this type can be identified, there is, for him, no further question of justification to be raised. It is nonsense to ask, *Is what we most fundamentally value really valuable?* In the end we simply value what we do. He wants to know what conduct we value and why we value it. As Schlick sees it, he is laying the foundations of an ethical theory, not for all conceivable rational agents, but for human beings, with all their psychobiological inheritance. Doing this requires trying to answer empirical questions about their psychological makeup.

¹ Moritz Schlick (1930 [1939]). *Problems of Ethics*. Trans. by David Rynin. New York: Prentice Hall, 1939. Originally published as *Fragen der Ethik*, Vienna: Springer.

² G.E. Moore (1903) *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Which human beings, you may ask? Schlick realizes that different conduct might be demanded by different individuals and groups in different circumstances. Whether their seemingly diverse moral codes reflect genuine differences in underlying value, as opposed to varying factual circumstances, differing ranges of available actions, and divergent opinions about the effects of those actions, can't, he thinks, be decided in advance. Still, he is betting that a great deal of commonality can be found.

Schlick imagines the study of the morality of a group as issuing in a hierarchical system of norms specifying morally good conduct demanded in various circumstances. The claim that something is a group norm is a factual claim about the conduct its members expect and demand. The enumeration of these norms is, Schlick says, "nothing but the determination of the concept of the good, which ethics undertakes to understand."³ The idea is simple; like the extension of the word 'green', the extension of the word 'good' is determined by the applications people make of it. In the case of 'good' he proposes to study it by studying the hierarchically ascending sequence of norms in which it appears. He realizes that there is no guarantee that a single all-encompassing moral norm will emerge, and so there may turn out to be a single morality with mutually independent principles, or, perhaps, several somewhat differing moralities governing different subgroups. Thinking of moral systems in this way, one justifies the claim that certain acts are morally good by citing the more encompassing norm under which they fall, while justifying more specific, lower-level norms in terms of more general, higher norms. The process ends with the highest norm, or norms, for which no further justification makes sense.

The question regarding the validity of a valuation amounts to asking for a higher acknowledged norm under which the value falls, and this is a question of *fact*. The question of the justification of the highest norms or the ultimate values is senseless, because there is nothing higher to which these could be referred...Such norms as are recognized as the ultimate norms, or highest values, must be derived from human nature and life as facts. (p.18)

If nothing else is said, this might seem to simply be relativistic sociology. One extracts the codes of conduct adhered to in different social groups and explains how internal moral justification proceeds in each, while insisting on the absurdity of imagining that there can be an external standard of justification. However, this isn't Schlick's final word. At the next step, he attempts to find higher, *non-moral norms* that explain the ethical norms.

It might be that the *moral* good could be shown to be a special case of a more general kind of good...If [so]...then the question, "Why is moral behavior good?" can be answered by "Because it is good in a more general sense of the word." The highest moral norm would be justified by means of an extra-moral norm; the moral principle would be referred back to a higher principle of life. (p. 24)

Why is reduction to a broader non-moral norm supposed to help? The answer is more promising than one might think. For Schlick, the non-moral norm causally explains why we accept the moral norms. Not why we *should accept* the moral norms, but why we *do accept* them, what in our nature compels us to accept them. Morality is a system of sometimes onerous demands that we place on others and ourselves. Why do we do so? It is obvious why we want to constrain others. But why are we willing to constrain ourselves? In part we do so for prudential reasons --

³ *Problems of Ethics*, p. 15.

because we need the cooperation of others and can only get it by being perceived as conforming to the rules we apply to them. But Schlick doesn't believe that is the whole answer. If it were, we would feel fine about cheating or free-riding when not detected. But, in fact, we typically don't. Thus, he concludes, something further must be going on. Somehow, we must find value in living up to our most fundamental norms. What is that value and why are we committed to it? Schlick's goal to tell us, and, in so doing, to lay the foundation for both happiness and virtue.

Schlick's envisioned empirical science of ethics has two parts. The first describes our actual moral norms. The second explains what it is about we human beings that makes us approve of them, that gives us reason to conform to them. He puts it this way

[T]he *determination* of the contents of the concepts of good and evil is made by the use of moral principles and a system of norms and affords a relative justification of the lower-order moral rules by the higher; scientific *knowledge* of the good, on the other hand, does not concern norms, but refers to the cause, concerns not the justification, but the explanation of moral judgments. The theory of norms asks "What does actually serve as the standard of conduct?" Explanatory ethics, however, asks "Why does it serve as the standard of conduct?" (p. 25)

The Altruistic Roots of Schlick's Rejection of Egoism

Schlick's moral theory begins with his account of the universal condemnation of egoism.

Egoistic volition is for us the example of immoral volition, volition that is condemned. To condemn an act means always to desire that it should not occur. And the desire that something should not happen means ... that the idea of its happening is unpleasant. (pp. 76-7)

Schlick takes desiring something to be a cognitive state in which contemplating it is combined with a positive or negative emotional charge. He takes it to be an empirical law that "deciding what to do" involves allowing the intensities of these positive and negative contemplations to interact until a non-neutral balance for or against some course of action is reached. The resulting decision to act is the initial cognitive stage of the action. He calls the positive cognitions "pleasant" and the negative cognitions "painful"—while admonishing us not to take these terms as standing only for familiar bodily pleasures or pains. This leads him to egoism.

Egoistic volition is for us the example of immoral volition, volition that is condemned. To condemn an act always means to desire that it should not occur. And the desire that something should not happen means ... that the idea of its happening is unpleasant. Thus, when we ask, "Why do I condemn egoistic behavior?", the question is... "Why does the idea of such behavior cause me pain?"... It is "Because the selfishness of another actually causes me pain directly." For its essence [the essence of egoism] is just inconsiderateness with respect to interests of fellow men, the pursuit of personal ends at the cost of those of others. But since I belong among these others, I am in danger of suffering a restriction of my joys and an increase of my sorrows at the hands of the egoist... Where this is not the case it affects at least the feelings and lives of our fellow men, and I share in these by virtue of my social impulses; because of them I feel as my own pain the damage done to others by the egoist. Each member of human society will... react to egoism with the same feelings for the same reasons. The blame and condemnation with which they oppose it is moral censure, moral condemnation. (p. 77)

Here, Schlick recognizes that the threats egoism poses to us are not limited to our purely self-regarding goals or interests. On the contrary, he assumes that each of us

has social impulses that bind us to others in a way that makes the contemplation of damage to them painful to us. This helps him explain not only why we condemn the egoistic conduct of others, but also why we often avoid behaving egoistically ourselves, as well as why, when we are tempted into such behavior, we may come to feel guilty about it, and thus are willing to sincerely condemn our own conduct. *Because behaving egoistically threatens our own happiness by thwarting our social impulses, we have a reason, rooted in our own desires, to avoid it.* For Schlick, this mix of self- and other-regarding interests is the source of our moral condemnation of egoism.

What is Good? The Individual vs. Society

This points to a natural strategy for explaining all moral condemnation. Since we call conduct we morally condemn ‘wrong’ or ‘morally bad’, while calling conduct of which we morally approve ‘morally good’ or ‘right’, he should be able to determine the extensions of these terms by uncovering the values, dispositions, and cognitive attitudes that guide our use of them. However, this leads him to argue for three dubious conclusions.

- (1) The meaning of the word “good” (that is, what is considered as moral) is determined by *the opinion of society*, which is the lawgiver formulating moral demands. ...
- (2) The content of the concept “good” is determined in such a way by the society that all and only those modes of behavior are subsumed under it which *society believes are advantageous to its welfare*. ...
- (3) The moral demands are established by society only because the fulfillment of these demands appears to be useful to it... [T]he material meaning of the word “moral” exhausts itself in denoting what, according to the prevailing opinion in society, is advantageous (its formal meaning consists in being demanded by society). (pp. 96-97)

Juxtaposing this passage with the previous one, we see Schlick pulled in two directions. The previous passage tells us that *each one of us* has a reason—of our own—to morally demand non-egoistic behavior of ourselves and others. This suggests that the claim that one morally ought to behave in a certain way will, if true, provide one with a reason, *grounded in one’s own desires*, for so acting. However, in the second passage the value to the individual of acting morally seems to disappear. Instead, the source of moral demands is said to lie in the *beliefs of society* about what is useful to *society*. Schlick is driven to this by the fact that society does make what it deems to be moral demands on its members, and also by his implicit thought that the extension of a simple indefinable term like ‘good’ (in its moral use) is fixed by the community’s application of it to certain things and not others. The tension between the two passages arises from the possibility that *most individuals* in a given society might well *believe* that certain conduct is most beneficial to the society, even if there is no genuine reason, grounded in their own desires, for many in the society to act in that way. Is it really true, in such a case, that these individuals morally ought to act in the socially prescribed way?

Paths to Virtue

In the final chapter, Schlick focuses on society’s attempt—through instruction, suggestion, admonition, reward, and punishment—to socialize the individual into internalizing its moral demands. Midway through the chapter, he notes the central problem: the possibility that the socially mandated way of life may not be experienced as valuable by those who adopt it. He labels this a discrepancy between *motive*

pleasure and realization pleasure.

If we wish to generate lasting dependable dispositions in a person, we must take care that the realization pleasure contains what the motive pleasure promises. ... We can now say that there is only *one* way to create motives of conduct which will prevail against all influences: and this is by reference to *actual happy consequences*. (pp. 179-80)

Schlick concludes that when a socially imposed moral code systematically contradicts fundamental values of large numbers of individuals, and thereby thwarts their happiness, it will not survive, but will instead be modified. This leads him to ask:

[A]re the ends commended to us in the moral precepts [imposed by society] really genuine values for the individual, or do they consist in the feelings of pleasure with which society has been clever enough to equip the ideas of the ends desired by itself? We are confronted by the ancient problem: does virtue lead to happiness? (p. 182)

Note, he doesn't ask, *Does what socially passes for virtue lead to happiness?* He asks, *Does virtue lead to happiness?* These two questions will be the same, if the moral demands on one are, by definition, the demands sanctioned by the conception of morality endorsed by one's society. Up to now Schlick has written as if the moral demands were the socially sanctioned demands. Now a new possibility emerges. *Suppose the path to happiness is one that offers the best prospect of fulfilling our most fundamental natural impulses, including those that relate us to other people.* Suppose further that the moral life mandated by one's society is *not* the path to happiness. Should we conclude that virtue and happiness diverge? *Or should we instead conclude that socially mandated virtue is not true virtue, because society's conception of morality can, and often does, deviate from true morality.*

Schlick begins to explore this possibility by characterizing the social impulses as those the fulfillment of which are of paramount importance to our happiness.

I have no doubt that experience indicates very clearly that the *social* impulses are those which best assure their bearers of a joyful life. The social impulses are those dispositions of a person by virtue of which the idea of a pleasant or unpleasant state of *another* person is itself a pleasant or unpleasant experience... The natural effect of these inclinations is that their bearer establishes the joyful states of others as ends of his conduct... [T]here is not the least essential reason why, for example, the pleasure in filling one's stomach should be in any way distinguished from the joy one has looking into eyes shining with happiness. The latter joy may be more difficult to understand in biological-genetic terms, but this, above all, concerns neither the philosopher nor the psychologist. (pp. 186-87)

Schlick's suggestion is arresting. The social impulses that lead us to be concerned with the welfare of others are as basic to our nature as the impulse to eat when hungry, while being more important for achieving happiness than many of our other natural impulses. Suppose he is right. The natural next step is to explore the possibility that our social impulses form the biological and psychological basis for genuine morality, over and above what is socially dictated. The passage clearly shows Schlick to be moving in this direction. But the last sentence of the passage is somewhat confusing. If the social impulses are as ethically important as he thinks they are, then investigating their possible biological or genetic origin should be of interest to the moral philosopher—particularly one who maintains that ethical claims are empirically verifiable or falsifiable. Perhaps Schlick is here merely registering that not knowing the ultimate causal origins of our social impulses is no reason to doubt their existence.

This thought is confirmed by several passages in the next few pages about the social impulses and their connection with happiness. Here is one.

The social impulses constitute a truly ingenious means of multiplying the feelings of pleasure; for the man who feels the pleasure of his fellow men to be the source of his own pleasure thereby increases his joys with the increase in theirs, he shares their happiness. ... The objection that social feelings have as a consequence the sharing of sorrow is partially justified, but does not weigh so heavily, because suffering too gives scope to the satisfaction of the social impulses, in that one can work for its alleviation. (p. 189)

Schlick's point is only the beginning. To it we might add a number of related points. One is the observation that while our capacity for deriving satisfaction from purely self-regarding desires often declines with age and the recognition of our own increasingly evident mortality, this is not true of our capacity for deriving satisfaction from the welfare of others and the contributions we make to it. Thus, it is natural that the attachment we feel to life as we grow older, and the enjoyment we derive from it, comes to depend more and more on our interest in, and commitments to, colleagues, friends, children, loved ones, and indeed to all who do, or will, participate in the human projects with which we identify.

Next, Schlick connects this appreciation of the power of our "social impulses" to the possibility of a more objective conception of morality.

Thus far in answer to the question: what paths lead to the highest values? we have discovered at least that the guide to them is to be found in the social impulses... But to the concept of morality... there is joined an indefiniteness of no small degree. We found that those dispositions are called moral which human society *believes* are most advantageous to its general welfare. Hence the content of the concept depends not only upon the actual living conditions of society, but also upon the intelligence of the class which determines public opinion, and upon the richness of its experience. This confusion and relativity is unavoidable... But it remains unsatisfying that the definition of morality by the *opinion* of society makes meaningless a question which the philosopher (here becoming a moralist) would very much like to ask: namely whether what society holds to be moral really *is* so. (pp. 195-96)

Here, Schlick confronts the tension noted between what initially appeared to be his moral relativism, on the one hand, and his identification of elements in human nature that might provide an objective basis for morality, on the other. The way he frames the issue in the passage suggests a continuing uncertainty. He is uncomfortable with the subjectivity and relativity inherent in letting the opinion of society determine the content of morality, thereby rendering *the truth* of its moral judgments unchallengeable. But he is also uncomfortable about assuming the role of a *moralist* by criticizing the morality of society -- perhaps because he sees adopting such a role as replacing objectivity with advocacy. But what exactly is the worry? If the social impulses in human nature are as important as he thinks they are, why can't they be the source of genuine moral demands the flouting of which typically risk diminishing one's prospects for lasting happiness?

Schlick approaches this idea by noting that, for him, the ground for morality is not a concern for "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" but the individual's own prospect of happiness. He says:

We did not begin by seeking the causes of "moral" dispositions [i.e., those commonly so labeled], but sought the disposition which is most valuable for the agent himself, which, that is, leads with the greatest probability to his happiness...[T]hus we

eliminated any reference to the opinions of society...And, thus, the otherwise disturbing relativity and confusion is removed in so far as this is at all possible...With the most sharply defined question there would, perhaps, be given the possibility subsequently of speaking of a standard of morality, and of judging whether different moral views correspond to it or not. The philosopher could, for his purposes, *define as moral* that behavior by means of which an individual furthered his capacity for happiness, and could designate the precepts of society as “truly” moral if this criterion fitted them...The formulation of a “moral principle,” too, would be possible on this basis; and it would run, “At all times be fit for happiness.” (pp. 196-97)

This final formulation – *At all times be fit for happiness* – as the most fundamental moral principle is exaggerated. Schlick’s case that there is a powerful, psycho-biologically based connection between virtue and happiness is plausible. But the idea that the two – virtue and happiness -- are one and the same is far too strong. *The insight to be maintained is that moral reasons are a subclass of motivating reasons.* When one morally ought to do something one always has a reason, rooted in one’s own values and motivational structure, for doing it. If this is right, then a genuine, non-subjective conception of morality will tell us that *morally good conduct is conduct aimed at enhancing the welfare of others that is in accord with values, dispositions, and character traits the cultivation of which increases one’s prospects for long-term happiness.* The basis for this conception is the empirical thesis that powerful social impulses relating us to others are part of our psycho-biological nature, and hence are, for all practical purposes, inescapable. Since they are not the only determinants of our behavior, we do not always act in accordance with them. Since they are so important to our well-being, however, we always have a reason to honor them, and we risk violating them at our peril. For Schlick, this is the true morality in which virtue and happiness are complementary, rather than at odds with one another.

He is convinced that this account of human psychology and human motivation is correct. The only thing that gives him pause is, I suspect, the metaethical claim that the conception *morally good conduct* we have sketched is what the expression ‘morally good conduct’ literally means. He says, in the passage cited, that “the philosopher could, for his purposes, *define as moral*” the behavior we outlined. He adds the following:

We must not forget, however, that he [the philosopher who does so define ‘moral’] would in this fashion establish nothing but a definition, at bottom arbitrary, as is every other. He cannot force one to accept it, and cannot elevate it into a “postulate.” I would hold it practical to accept this definition, because the end it establishes is that which *de facto* is most highly valued by mankind. (p. 197)

What are we to make of this, somewhat confused, disclaimer? If every definition is arbitrary, then the definition of a *square* as a rectangle with equal sides is arbitrary. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t a correct definition of ‘square’. So why should we assume that the imagined “philosopher’s definition” of ‘moral’ isn’t correct? Of course, one can’t force anyone to accept it, or any other definition. But often one can find linguistic evidence supporting the claim that a definition correctly gives the meaning of a word—in which case the definition isn’t a postulate either. Is it obvious that no such empirical evidence could be found for the “philosopher’s definition”?

I doubt that Schlick was of one mind about this. What, after all, is the point of his “practical” suggestion that we *accept* the definition because the coincidence of virtue and happiness it establishes is so highly valued? How could that be a reason for accepting the definition if we didn’t already believe—prior to philosophical

argument—that the very fact that we expect the claims of morality to motivate us shows that apparent conflicts between virtue and happiness must, for the most part, be resolvable?

Finally, “the philosopher’s” claim about the connection between moral goodness and happiness doesn’t have to be seen as a *definition* at all. Indeed, it shouldn’t be. Instead, Schlick should treat it as an empirical generalization about the connection between virtue and happiness that is confirmed by verifiable truths about human psychology plus metaethical observations about the truth conditions ethical statements must have, if they are to fulfill their linguistic functions.

Whatever qualms Schlick may have felt about advancing surprising and far-reaching normative claims of this sort that reflected his ethical beliefs are submerged in the last few pages of his book, where he appears to speak with full-throated moral authority. Here is a sample of his remarks.

[I]t seems to me that the idea of the capacity for happiness must everywhere be made central in ethics. And if a moral principle is needed it can only be one which rests upon this concept, as does the formula just proposed [in the last cited passage]. Therefore it is truly amazing that readiness for happiness nowhere plays an important role in ethical systems [proposed by philosophers]. (p. 198)

A necessary condition of the capacity for happiness is the existence of inclinations in which the motive pleasure and pleasure of realization do not clash; and all conduct and motives which strengthen such inclinations are to be accepted as leading to the most valuable life. Experience teaches that these conditions are fulfilled by the social impulses, hence by those inclinations which have as their goal the joyful states of other creatures; with them there is the least probability that these joys of realization do not correspond to the motive pleasure. They are, if we use the philosophical definition of morality...the moral impulses *par excellence*. I am, in fact, of the opinion that those philosophers are quite right...who find the essence of moral dispositions in *altruism*. We recognized that its essence lies in *considerateness* for one’s fellow men; in accommodation to and friendly understanding of their needs lies the very essence of the moral character...Considerateness consists in the constant restraint and restriction of the non-altruistic impulses; and one can perhaps conceive all civilization as the colossal process of this subjugation of egoism. (pp. 199-200).

As soon as the altruistic and the...“higher” impulses [pleasure in knowledge, beauty, etc.] are developed to a sufficient degree the process of subjugation [of egoism] is completed ...for proper conduct ...now flows quite of itself from the harmonious nature of the man. He no longer falls into “temptation”; “moral struggles” no longer occur in him....There is no longer required a strong excitation of pain to deter him from...[bad] ends....This is, of course, wholly attained by no one. And thus civilization works ceaselessly with all its means to establish motives for altruistic conduct. (pp. 200-202)

As these passages illustrate, there was much more to the ethical and metaethical views of the logical empiricists than the well-known dismissal of normative ethics and metaethical commitment to emotivism favored by Carnap, Ayer, and others. Schlick’s view of as a branch of the empirical study of human nature connect him to Aristotle, Hume, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Smith.