Understanding Others

Jean Curthoys

Christopher Cordner
Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning
Palgrave, $148.50hb, 216pp, 0 333 78636 X

Moral philosophy is often disappointing to those who, unaware of the nature of the subject, look there for insight into the human condition. One reason for this is that, ever since Aristotle rejected Socrates’ strange identification of knowledge and virtue, and insisted that the moral consists of doing rather than knowing (or, in the language of the profession, of practical rather than pure reason), astonishingly few philosophers have reconsidered the extent to which moral questions may be questions of understanding. But, without some such notion, morality will not have depth and nor, therefore, will the moral philosophy that purports to elucidate it.

Christopher Cordner’s project of restoring to moral philosophy a notion of moral depth is so modestly presented that one could miss the enormity of what he is attempting and of what this book could help achieve. At the most general level, Cordner’s book profoundly shifts the focus of our moral thinking, both in moral philosophy and in everyday life. We are too immersed, he believes, in the Enlightenment notion that morality is about ‘improving things’, where the improvement is assumed to be in our external situation. The notion that we should ‘help people’ is also often based on the assumption that it is the results of our actions that matter. Insofar as these notions neglect the spirit in which such help or improvement may be undertaken (whether, say, it is done condescendingly or with compassion), they are relatively superficial. In their place — or rather, to provide them with their proper foundation — Cordner articulates what he claims are our deeper, but more covert, moral intuitions. According to these, it is appropriateness of response that is most fundamentally required of us. Since this obliges us to attend to the meaning of what we and others do, moral problems become primarily ones of adequate understanding and only secondarily of ‘doing the right thing’.

The understanding involved, however, is not of the purely cognitive kind, and is accessible to all, whatever their educational level. (Cordner refers to our ‘senses’ of things.) So the philosophical task becomes that of clarifying the nature of this sensitive understanding, which is the core of our moral life. Here, Cordner is not without his influences, and he generously acknowledges his debt to Iris Murdoch and to his friend Raimond Gaita. From them he learned that this distinctively moral understanding is in the nature of a response to others and that, at bottom, it concerns ‘the individual as knowable by love’, as Murdoch put it. To their dissident programme in moral philosophy — dissident precisely because the central ethical notion is love rather than reason — Cordner’s distinctive contribution arises from the way he demonstrates the necessity of an adequate concept of ‘the other’ to understand the nature of morality. To put this in terms closer to his own, it lies in his account of ethical life as consisting fundamentally in our encounters with others.

A difficulty with the exceptional clarity Cordner has attained (something that may appeal to those who complain of the obscurity of Raimond Gaita’s ethical writings) is that it conceals the amount of labour involved, which, in his case, is years of deep reflection. The power of the analysis emerges, nevertheless, in its capacity to reveal the limitations of both ‘mainstream’ moral philosophy and our more superficial moral ideas. One example is Cordner’s explication of our ideal of selflessness: this notion is shown to be strictly unintelligible within the standard opposition between egoism and altruism. ‘Selflessness’, he maintains, occurs when we respond to others in their ‘Absolute Otherness’, meaning independently of any conception of our own rôle, even — or especially — as their benefactor. However, because moral understanding or responsiveness is different from ordinary understanding, this does not require ‘setting aside the self’ as ordinary objectivity is thought to do, but rather bringing into play its deeper resources. We understand the nature of another’s experience only by accessing our own capacity for similar experience. The selflessness of moral responsiveness, then, is not altruistic if this implies that it is against our own interests but, on the contrary, it is profoundly in our interests because in drawing on our own depths we realise the extent to which the meaning of our life is defined by our relations with others.

More damaging to ‘mainstream’ moral philosophy is Cordner’s demonstration of the inability of any three of its standard major positions to explain our sense of moral requirement, due to their lack of a proper conception of the importance of ‘the other’. Now it is difficult to see how our sense of being required to act in certain ways could be adequately explained either by an Humean approach, which would base morality in desires, or by Aristotelianism, which locates the moral in dispositions of character. Kant’s conception of duty as the distinctively moral motivation comes closest but is notably too severe. The solution Cordner gives is that our sense of requirement lies straightforwardly in the ‘other’: it is they who move us and it is in being so moved that we experience moral obligation. It is a simple and powerfully illuminating move.

I have not mentioned Cordner’s incorporation of the notions of awe, wonder and reverence into the foundations of moral philosophy. At this point, limitations of space oblige me simply to recommend this book, most warmly perhaps to those who may have been disappointed in what they have hitherto found in moral philosophy.