

***Two Key Texts in Practical Ethics: a Comparative Review David Arnaud***

**Thomson, Anne. *Critical Reasoning in Ethics: A Practical Introduction* (Routledge, 1999)**

**Weston, Anthony. *A Practical Companion to Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1997)**

These two texts share much in common. They are both non-technical in that the reader, while needing to be alert, does not need to have mastered the language of professional philosophical talk about ethics, and both set out to help us to do ethics better. A standard assumption made in many ethics texts is that, first, the reader needs to know ethical theories, such as utilitarianism, Kantianism and, possibly, virtue theory, and, second, that the application of these theories to particular situations can show us how we should act. Neither of these texts adopts this 'theory-first' approach. Both instead, in different ways, seek above all to get us to be reflective. Anne Thomson attempts to do this by showing us how to analyse arguments. Anthony Weston instead aims at demolishing pretenders to 'ethical mindfulness' such as dogmatism, rationalisation and relativism, the simple reliance upon appeals to rules and authority, and unimaginative, polarised thinking and closed-heartedness. Indeed these two texts can be seen as offering us complementary skills - the Thomson text in how to analyse the construction of ethical arguments, and the Weston text to remind us what the point of doing this at all is and to beware of habits of mind we can easily fall into that reduce our 'ethical mindfulness'.

Thomson's book is squarely in the critical thinking tradition. Thinking ethically, the background assumption is, largely involves being able to apply specific logical abilities, to distinguish good reasons from bad reasons and hence to come to better ethical decisions. It, like many other critical thinking texts, is crammed full of exercises to practice your skills upon. Thomson begins by suggesting two contexts in which one reasons about ethical issues. First, when reading newspaper articles that seek to persuade us about some issue and second, when we ourselves have to confront an ethical dilemma, when, for example, we see a fellow worker stealing from our employee and feel both loyalty to our friend and responsibility to our employer.

While Thomson here gestures to the role of the philosophical consultant in helping people to think through their personal issues, sadly, but perhaps inevitably, given what I assume is Thomson's lack of personal experience here, virtually all the examples are drawn from newspaper articles. This lack of material drawn from personal experience has, I think, the further consequence that Thomson focuses exclusively on what might be called the mechanics of ethical reasoning. There is little room here for any analysis of why we might find ethical thinking difficult, other than intellectually. The material for analysis comes ready packaged in neat articles, presented without the context which would explain why someone might come to be reflecting on the issues raised. Furthermore as there are no reports from the frontline of how to engage others in thinking through this material, the dimensions the ethical consultant must deal with of how to uncover personal or organisational material, and how to dialogue about it are bypassed. While the overall feel of the book is consequently rather impersonal and arid Thomson does offer some useful advice for the ethical consultant about how to analyse ethical

issues.

The text starts from the basics. If, as Thomson assumes, good moral thinking involves the analysis of ethical arguments (a necessary but not sufficient condition I would argue give the other skills needed in the practical philosopher, some of which are outlined above and others of which can be found in Weston's text) then there are two prerequisites of good moral thinking. One has to be able to recognise the genus of arguments and the differentia of ethical. So first the text gives some clues about how to recognise an argument - are there argument indicator words such as 'so', 'therefore', 'because' and so on, and are there reasons and a conclusion? Clearly the ability to distinguish an argument from a simple assertion is crucial for the philosophical practitioner who wants to help the client think more carefully about their issues, so we can all take as much practice as is available here. The next step is to distinguish ethical arguments from other arguments. We can be alerted to the presence of a moral argument by the presence of ethical words and phrases, or the discussion of certain issues but the acid test, Thomson suggests, is to look for a conclusion that recommends what we should or ought to do. It is necessary to distinguish 'should' and 'ought' used prudentially ("you want to live to a ripe old age, so you should take regular exercise") from morally ("you should look after your mother when she is ill"). While this distinction might be a useful rule of thumb it rules out all social contract theories of morality where the assumption is that we adopt moral rules for prudential reasons - the simplest example of this being I ought not to hit you because you'll hit me back.

Thomson is well aware that distinguishing moral arguments from non-arguments and non-moral arguments is more an art than a science (in the sense that it requires judgement, not simply the working through of an algorithm). An illustration of this can be drawn from one of the examples that she offers for practice. Here is the example:

*Fox hunting and angling are similar in some respects. They are both done by human beings for their own enjoyment, and in both cases, an animal is made to suffer.*

And here is Thomson's assessment of this passage:

*This could be regarded as an argument, with the first sentence as a conclusion. However, since the first sentence doesn't do much more than summarise the comparisons made in the second sentence, it is also reasonable to say that it is not an argument. It is not a moral argument, since it does not make a moral recommendation, although the comment about animal suffering could be used to draw an evaluative conclusion about fox-hunting and angling.*

Clearly the dialogue consultant is at an advantage here over the interpreter of the written word, but only if she is aware of the multiple potentialities in the example. If this is said in a dialogue the participants can be invited to further analyse the claim, and to draw out possible reasons and conclusions through the following sorts of questions: "Is the enjoyment of a human at the expense of the suffering of an animal what both angling and fox hunting share in common?"; "Is it true that they both involve the suffering of an animal?"; "If so does it follow that both angling and fox-hunting are both to be similarly

condemned, or are both equally justified?"; " Are there any other relevant differences between the two sports that would make causing suffering acceptable in one and not acceptable in the other?".

Once we can recognise arguments Thomson takes us through some of the basics for assessing these arguments. After making short work of the claim that moral arguments cannot be assessed (yes they can, like any other argument they can have reasons that support or fail to support the conclusion) she rehearses some of the standard moves in the critical thinking literature for assessing arguments. She asks her reader to consider whether there are any authorities relied upon and if so are they reliable, is a correlation being mistaken for a cause, is there an unwarranted generalisation, are purported analogies appropriate and what further evidence would impact upon the arguments. Furthermore she shows the reader how to analyse the structure of arguments as founded upon stated reasons and unstated assumptions that build to provide intermediate conclusions on the way to a main conclusion.

However Thomson keeps her eye steadily on the differentia of moral argumentation: the presence of moral concepts, such as harm, rights, courage and principles such as don't lie, don't kill and so on. Both moral principles and concepts can be assessed, she suggests, by testing them in their application to cases and abandoning or modifying the concepts and principles to bring our judgements into line with each other. This is essentially Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium. Of course it is one thing to have a meta-principle, such as reflective equilibrium, for assessing principles and concepts and another thing to have a practical method for making use of this meta-principle. As a practical method Thomson provides the following sequence of stages for analysing concepts (the steps can easily be modified to assess principles):

1. Think of a typical instance, or instances, of the concept in use.
2. Write out an initial definition of the concept.
3. Clarify any further important terms in the definition.
4. Consider the implication of the definition by seeing:
  - i) whether there are other cases to which the term must apply
  - ii) what the concept implies we should do in relation to the particular cases
5. Consider whether you wish to modify 2 in the light of 4(i) and (ii)

Thomson illustrates several times in the text, convincingly to me, how well this method works, analysing concepts such as 'rights' and the 'sanctity of life' and principles such as 'firms should not aim to act ethically' and 'killing is wrong'. However these illustrations are 'ideal' illustrations produced by Thomson herself. She is a competent, already skilled philosopher with an enormous background understanding of ethics. What was missing from this method was analysis of how to get 'ordinary' people, whether students, organisations or clients to make use of these steps, and the kind of outcomes this produces. Perhaps if any practical philosophers try to use these stages they would be willing to write a report of their experiences (and what their clients come up with).

While Weston recognises the importance of critical thinking, his text does not seek to analyse its mechanics but rather to look at wider issues that prevent people from being 'ethically mindful'. Enticing readers to think for themselves requires undermining what Weston calls the 'counterfeits' to 'ethical mindfulness'. These counterfeits are dogmatism, rationalisation and relativism. The dogmatist, rationaliser and relativist might be thinking, but they have not gone about the task in the right way, argues Weston . While dogmatists

might disagree about what is the best answer to an ethical question, what all dogmatists agree on is that careful and open-minded thinking is not necessary. It is this attitude that leads to them pleading "My mind is made up; don't confuse me with the facts." However what happens if the dogmatist is challenged ? Something that all facilitators of ethical dialogues will recognise, and have to deal with: "They scramble to find plausible sounding reasons to back up their original overstatements. They rationalise." In the search for a quick offhand justification any argument, however weak, is accepted that allows for face-saving. Relativists escape this problem but at the expense of denying that there is any such thing as thinking better or worse about an ethical issue. While Weston doesn't draw this conclusion, relativism can be seen as the final face-saving device of the dogmatist. Initially I make a dogmatic claim, but this claim is overstated, so you challenge me. I need to find some justification for my belief so I quickly find some semi-plausible sounding reason. I rationalise. But still you pursue me, "Is this reason acceptable ?" How can I defend myself ? By denying that reasons are relevant at all. "That's what *you* think, but it's all a matter of opinion." My initial dogmatic belief is 'saved' but at the expense that now I must make the paradoxical claim both that I am completely certain that I am right and that any opinion is as 'right' as any other (do others recognise this as something they hear their clients or students saying ?).

An alternative way that we can avoid being ethically mindful is by denying that we should think at all - our task is to obey authority or rules. Weston deals briefly with problems in obeying the authority of social norms and the commands of leaders and bosses but his eye, no doubt accommodated to the issues raised in American classrooms, is mainly on appeal to God. This appeal cannot settle ethical questions because of the inevitability that appeals to God must really be appeals to some religious leader or text that is taken by humans to be the word of God, and the ambiguity of religious texts. This final problem Weston illustrates through analysis of the problematic claim that God's destruction of Sodom shows that God is anti-homosexual. Was God's destruction of Sodom a protest against homosexuality, or the level of violence in Sodom, or its disrespect for strangers ? The Bible does not allow a definitive answer to this question. Finally Weston turns appeals to God's authority on its head. The Bible, Weston suggests, tells us we should think for ourselves. When God is thinking to destroy Sodom Abraham questions God whether it would be right to destroy the righteous along with the wicked. God was, the Bible says, 'mindful of Abraham'. Rhetorically powerful perhaps but rather against the flow of the previous argument that the Bible cannot straightforwardly be taken as a reliable moral authority. Appeal to rules is also limited as rules are at best rough guides with exceptions, can conflict, are often simply too vague to be useful, and moreover how to apply them remains up to us. "Choosing is inescapable" Weston concludes. "Whether we admit it or not we make our own decisions."

So if ethical mindfulness, rather than counterfeits or denial of our ethical choice, is needed, where do we start ? Here Weston's text takes a pleasing slant. Life poses a question to us and we search for an answer, a solution. But aren't we moving too fast already. Before we seek a solution don't we need to find the best problems ? Weston warns against seeing ethical problems too quickly as dilemmas - or one might add as arguments needing the application of the skills of critical thinking. We need to be more creative he urges. Sartre was famously visited by a young man during World War Two who asked Sartre's advice about whether he should leave for England and join the Free French or stay with his mother in France. Sartre responds that he is free to choose, to invent. True perhaps, but has Sartre really helped the young man ? Weston thinks that Sartre has too easily seen the young man's problem as a dilemma with only two options;

but surely this isn't the case. Any competent counsellor would do more than Sartre has here. Doesn't the young man need better problems, more options. Perhaps he can stay with his mother to wean her off her dependence on him before leaving for England ? Or maybe he can work for the Free French in Paris ? Is it really true that the mother is as dependent as he claims ? Is it true that the father is not available ? Have these claims been sufficiently investigated ? Far more exploration of the issues is needed before any choosing should be undertaken.

Another classical ethical dilemma is Kohlberg's Heinz dilemma. Heinz's wife is near death. Heinz doesn't have the money needed to buy the drug he needs for her from a druggist, who refuses to sell it to him at a lower price, so he breaks into the druggist's store and steals the drug. "Should he have done this ?" asks Kohlberg of his subjects to measure their moral maturity. "Should you ask this question ?" asks Weston. Weston gives his students training in problem solving and then asks "Can you think of other options for Heinz ?" Some of the options his students have generated are that Heinz could barter rather than use money, that he could appeal for charitable assistance, and that he could threaten the druggist with some bad newspaper publicity.

Even better than having to engage in this kind of flexible thinking to solve a problem, Weston urges, is to engage in preventative ethics. Think why the problem arises in the first place and consider what can be done to stop the problem even being caused. Abortion raises a classic ethical dilemma but shouldn't we put as much, or more, energy into thinking about how to prevent the demand for abortion arising, as we do in trying to persuade others of the rightness of our views about abortion ? How can we make it easier for women not to have abortions either through better birth control or reducing the burden of pregnancy and childcare ? Similarly in business the possibility of whistle-blowing produces a dilemma over whether to be loyal or honest but why need this dilemma arise in the first place. Organisations can prevent whistle-blowing by developing more effective ways of protecting lines of communication and complaint or by having better public participation.

Such problem solving skills don't solve all cases of value conflict. However we can think better than we tend to about these value conflicts Weston suggests. The first thing to notice is that we tend to polarise values. We think that there are two sharply opposed options, with no ambiguity or middle ground. In the abortion debate you are either pro-choice or pro-life, in the environmental debate you are either for humans or for the environment. The parties to these debates simplify the issues and present their own side as all goodness and light and their opponents as all badness and dark. But, Weston says, we shouldn't ask which (one) side is right but what each side is right about. If we step back from the heat of the abortion debate isn't it clear that foetal life matters (whether you think that it is a fully-fledged person or not) and isn't it the case that autonomous control over our bodies matters ? Mature dialogue doesn't depend upon characterising others as evil opponents but recognising that in most moral disputes there are powerful values on all sides, values moreover that we also recognise when we are not busy demonising our opponents. Once this is realised then the task becomes not which side wins at the expense of the other but to work out, where possible, ways that the values at stake can be integrated and harmonised. This requires the problem solving skills again. Weston suggests that a solution for the abortion problem is that during the early stages of pregnancy the woman's autonomy should be honoured but as the foetus matures it develops more of a moral claim and the woman's autonomy should be more restricted. This is hardly a radically unheard of solution, but perhaps by framing the

solution as heeding the values of both the pro-life and pro-choice groups, more chance of compromise by these parties becomes possible.

The final kind of mindfulness that Weston asks us to remember is the mindfulness of resisting the closed-heartedness of treating the people we are dealing with as things, forgetting that they too have feelings and needs as we do. This can happen through the self-centredness that can come from perceiving our own needs as looming too large, through habit, through the use of disparaging language and stereotypes, and through self-fulfilling prophecies that mean that people become the way that we treat them. How can the heart be opened ? Weston suggests through treating other people as people, through breaking out of seeing others in routine stereotyped ways, by training ourselves to have periods of stillness, and by offering our trust to others. Weston could easily add through meeting and engaging others in genuine and open-ended dialogue, aided by the use of critical thinking skills.

Both these texts would be, I suggest, profitably studied by the practical philosopher. I found myself thinking about ethical issues, and how to get others to think about them, quite differently after reading both these texts. But what of our clients ? Could these texts be useful for 'bibliotherapy' ? For a client or organisation who are perceived to be somewhat stuck in their ways the Weston text could be used to demonstrate the value and need for imaginative thinking, and how to go about thinking creatively. The Thompson book is harder and dryer work - to get the full value from it a client would have to be willing to put in the time analysing the arguments in the book. It must be doubted how many people would be prepared to do this on their own. Moreover the articles examined within it are not likely to directly relate to the issues a client is facing. However it might have a role in allowing clients to develop their reasoning skills if the use of the text is well supported by a practical philosopher or the clients are particularly self-motivating.

*David Arnaud's series on Wise Decision Making (with Tim LeBon) will be resumed in the next issue.*