

## Morality Without Foundations

A review of Mark Timmons: *Morality Without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

What follows are some excerpts from the mentioned book. The guidance for this job is as follows. The book is an introduction to moral theory. It distinguishes itself from similar books in that it systematically defends its philosophical position. Two basic theses are contextualism and that morality is without foundations. Contextualism offers perhaps the main realization that there are no static foundations for moral judgments or beliefs. In this presentation, our opinion is that the thesis about morality without foundations is compatible with the defense of *genuine judgment*. I.e., genuine judgment is based upon phenomenology, one's commitment, sensibility and responsibility. Substitute justification of belief with sensibility. Sensibility goes deeper than justification. The main stress is upon genuine judgment. There is the claim that belief has to be understood as judgment, at least in that direction. There do not need to be foundations of beliefs. In fact, one needs to go in direction of *genuine judgment*. Against descriptivism: there is *evaluation* as the main approach of morality. *Evaluation* and *genuine disagreement* are both related to *genuine judgment*. Moral Twin Earth as well goes in direction of *evaluation*, against descriptivism.

The book consists of five chapters covering metaethics and methodology, new wave moral realism, the argument from moral error, contextual moral semantics, moral justification in context. These titles need positioning. One hint is contextualism, featuring in the subtitle. Foundation, as its name indicates, may be understood in direction of foundationalism, an approach in epistemology. It would then mean that there are some basic beliefs upon which the rest of beliefs are relying so that the construct may lead to knowledge. Foundationalism is indeed discussed in the book, along with coherentism, the view that search for knowledge needs to be based upon an intertwined web of beliefs which together support justification of a given belief. None of these are bought however, given that justification gets disciplined through epistemic sensibility. That sensibility may be understood as contextual matter. If one appropriates beliefs in a sensible and responsible manner envisioning contextual conditions in which they come to the surface, justification is not needed. This then gives way to Wittgenstein's dictum about belief without foundation which is in the basis of justified beliefs. The main departure from the usual way to go is not taking objective truth route but normatively and teleologically supported contextual appropriateness in order to get to support of one's beliefs. That goes as well for moral foundations.

There is a main thesis of the book, contextual basis of morality. This thesis leads from metaphysics to semantics and epistemology. In respect to metaphysics, the thesis is that of irrealism, which means that moral entities such as properties or states of affairs are not admitted. Therefore one main argument is directed about new wave realism in moral thought. Semantics thesis of truth as indirect correspondence is opposed to the thesis of truth as direct correspondence. This goes well along with semantic contextualism. Moral epistemology argues against foundationalism and coherentism, both of which build upon too harsh requirements.

The overall approach starts with post-analytic philosophy as against synonymy definitory requirements for such concepts as goodness. For the case of moral thought, it starts with two

accommodation requirements. Moral theory needs to respect common sense approach to morality, also named the requirement of internal accommodation. And it should as well be envisioning external accommodation, it fitting to the requirements of sciences and other areas that may be relevant to moral thought. In this sense, the approach is broadly naturalist, which means that it is in agreement with natural sciences. This is as well the approach of naturalistic methodology. Post-analytic take does away with reductive definitions of moral concepts as the main job of moral theory.

The approach is broadly expressivist. It should thus as well be non-cognitivist, claiming that moral judgments aren't beliefs but expression of attitudes. So they should as well not have truth value ascribed. This however is countered by contextualist approach. Moral judgments according to it express beliefs, and they have claim to truth. If I say "Apartheid is wrong", I do mean what I say and affirm it; it is my belief. And that belief is true. But it is not a descriptive belief; it does not describe some reality, and so this goes along with irrealism. The belief in question is rather *evaluative*. It is a committed evaluative judgment.

In fact, here moral contextualism builds upon the traditionally accepted distinction between cognitivism and noncognitivism-expressivism, which took moral judgments to either be beliefs or not to be beliefs. Abandoning rigidity of this distinction seems to be ready if reduction of moral judgment to belief would be abandoned in profit of recognition of *genuine judgment*. Then one can say that genuine moral judgment is *evaluative* indeed.

The difference between normative ethics and metaethics is that the first one ask such questions as which actions are good, whereas the second one asks questions about metaphysical or epistemic positioning of these answers. One main difference is between the analytic and post analytic metaethics traditions. The first one assigns priority to semantic questions in respect to epistemic ones: so meaning should be handled before justification. Semantic analysis of moral terms aims to provide their reductive synonymous definitions. Proper methodology is a priori. Semantic naturalism reduces moral terms to sociological or other naturalist basis, whereas semantic non-naturalism takes them to be sui generis, thus irreducible.

There are realists who accept reductionist semantics, and again realists with non-reductive semantics such as Moore. Reductionist semantics irrealists take moral sentences to be synonymous with non-moral non-fact-stating sentences. Non-reductive semantic irrealists have error theorists as their representant. Post-analytic metaethics does away with just linguistic concerns, along with synonymy and analytic-synthetic distinction. Ontological questions have therewith chance to make resurgence, as it is testified by error theory with its embracing of phenomenologically experienced moral objectivity (although error theory then expresses its skepticism about ontological existence and epistemic accessibility of moral objectivity). Causal theories of meaning introduced ontological presuppositions and naturalistic science embracing approach, opposed to a priori analysis. Satisfaction of both common sense and naturalistic accommodation requirements though is put under question by new wave realism, which takes a fresh stance, yet in opposition to irrealism.

New wave moral realism is realism indeed, of naturalistic kind, appropriating naturalistic semantic underpinnings. There is causal and functional construal of key moral terms. Yet Moral Twin Earth argument shows falsity of attempts to semantically construe moral terms. And this

leads to lack of prospects of naturalistic accommodation for such approaches. Moral Twin Earth thought experiment shows failure of causal external accommodation of moral discourse, whereas applying causal construal to common sense internal accommodation leaves us wanting as well. Moral realists buy the existence of moral properties and facts, along with their objectivity. Semantically, moral discourse is fact-stating, and thus true or false. Moral properties and facts need to be naturalistically accommodated and explained. Accommodation may go the way of narrow reduction. There are analytically true naturalistic definitions. Naturalistic fallacy presents a concern here, via open question argument: X is pleasant, but is it morally good? Broad reduction accommodation helps itself with necessary truths without analytic, but with synthetic definitions (water = H<sub>2</sub>O). Type identity gets substituted by token identity functionalism. Broadly reductive semantic views are opposed to narrowly reductive ones. Narrow and broad semantic reductionism expand options of reductive semantic realism, being combined with narrow and broad ontic reductionism. Realization is then still possible, without reduction.

Queerness argument has its metaphysical and epistemic side, first accepting common sense realism or objectivity of prescriptive facts, and then denying their naturalistic accommodation. Supervenience of moral upon the physical is mysterious and cannot be explained. New wave moral realists propose to satisfy common sense accommodation by endorsing objective moral properties and facts. They as well endorse their naturalistic accommodation, which would then beat irrealist proposal. Ethical internalism is rejected in profit of externalism, avoiding queerness of to-be-pursuedness criticized by error theory. Functional causal role is proposed to give their place to moral properties. Necessary truths, according to rigid designator story, are synthetic and thus not knowable a priori. Broad reductionism relieves supervenience from its queerness. Realist construal though may be countered by recognition of the need for supervenience explanation, which may not be available to moral realist.

New wave moral semantics rejects synonymy and embraces rigid designation. Causal regulation thesis for terms such as 'good' is thereby enabled, along with that kind of term designation of natural property. This realist construal however encounters troubles from the Moral Twin Earth thought experiment. According to the Twin Earth thought experiment, there is difference in *meaning* between term 'water' such as it is used on Earth, where its chemical composition is H<sub>2</sub>O, and between its use on Twin Earth, where the substance composition is quite different, let us call it XYZ. For moral case, the meaning of 'good' is consequentialist on Moral Earth, and it is deontic on Moral Twin Earth. But now notice that there is no disagreement between protagonists involved into Twin Earth case according to the described setting, for different meanings will not lead to it. But there is disagreement for moral case: the issue there is that here we deal with *belief and theory* of the involved participants. So the dispute is not descriptive as in the meaning case, but *evaluative*. Our competence in judging Moral Twin Earth scenario shows that new wave moral realism is wrong. Being evaluative, moral terms do not have meaning supported synthetic definitions. Moral terms appear in moral judgments whose primary purpose is evaluation and not description. Hare's story about cannibals and missionaries use of term 'good' confirms evaluative side of moral discourse. Irrealism is thereby supported. If realist supports naturalistic accommodation in causal-functional manner, common

sense queerness is revived. Evaluative dimension is recognized just by abandoning of causal story. Irrealism may help.

Argument from moral error is the main argument against moral irrealism, the view that there are no metaphysical objective entities such as properties. But common sense recognizes moral objectivity, and as well the possibility of error in moral judgment and belief. Given that irrealism does not buy metaphysical moral objectivity, it cannot account for possible change in moral view and for moral improvement. There is as well dilemma out there for moral realist: either he recognizes evaluative dimension of morality and then has problems with accommodating naturalism, or again he goes revisionist in his semantics and so fails to comply to common sense.

It seems that irrealist, in opposition to realist, will not be able to account for change of belief and for genuine disagreement in moral practices. Irrealist can first claim that error resides from non-moral part of judgment. Argument for moral error starts with the claim that moral judgment according to irrealism should be understood reductively involving norms of individuals or groups. But error in moral judgment is possible even with improved sensibilities. So irrealist cannot explain moral error. And given that realism comports well with moral practices it trumps irrealism. One may distinguish between truth value and acceptance value of certain claims. Irrealist will not endorse this distinction. Irrealist recurs to non-reductionism. Strong form allows for exceptions. There are images of patterns of correct moral behavior, and they are value-laden.

Contextual moral semantics accepts genuine evaluative assertions, relying on minimalist truth. This may be explained by irrealist denial of existence for moral properties and entities. Non-reductive moral irrealism goes along with this. Non-descriptivist versions of irrealism are still reductive, such as is the case of emotivism. Contextual semantics builds upon changeable normative parameters. These parameters can change depending on context, the harsh ones complying to ultimate metaphysical reality, whereas the moderate ones allowing for bigger share of normativity. There is semantic slack with moral norms that are not tight. Contextual semantics does not aim to reduce truth to epistemic notions.

Norms and the world conspire together in direction of making moral assertions true. This may be interpreted outlook-relative in direction of relativism. But again it will be countered by *categorically* assertive nature of moral judgments, with its engagement. Such assertions then lack tightness. The descriptive approach is then rejected, in opposition to what was mainly presumed to be the case, in favor of evaluation. Minimalism about truth goes teleologically in direction of discourse point and purpose. The upshot is assertoric non-descriptivism.

Moral judgment is evaluative, and it is softly, *ceteris paribus* motivational. This supports weak version of internalism. In respect to their assertive nature moral judgments may be called beliefs.

Moral assertions are evaluative and categorical; they are reason guided. There is authority of non-subjective reasons. Truth of moral assertions is minimalistic. Engaged perspective needs to be distinguished from detached perspective. Truth ascriptions are fusion of semantic and moral evaluation. There are no ultimate moral facts, which goes along well with irrealism.

We judge as normative stance takers, from a moral outlook. Irrealist needs to confront objectivity experiences of moral discourse. Moral judgments are often true, moral error and improvements, together with genuine moral conflicts are possible. Reasons giving often guides moral engagement. Frege-Geach problem comes from unasserted appearance of conditional antecedent; but the whole conditional sentence is asserted from within a moral stance. Moral phenomenology displays objectivist features. Moral commitment is an integral part of our moral stance. Objective pretensions of moral discourse involve reasoned evaluations. Moral concepts are metaphysically austere.

Moral justification in context: beliefs may be founded without being justified. This involves responsible belief formation, from one's reasonish cognitive background. Circumstantial contextualism makes one's beliefs dependent upon certain facts of oneself and of one's environment. Normative contextualism is based upon norms that may be egocentric or group related. Structural contextualism is based upon beliefs that are not themselves in need of justification. Parameters of epistemic appraisal involve goals, perspectives and resources. Epistemic responsibility is central here. Truth is one goal in belief formation. Resources are linked to moral responsibility.

Epistemic responsibility involves gathering evidence and dealing with counterpossibilities and with internal belief conflict. Epistemic judgment does not involve following exceptionless principles. Pragmatic dimension involves objective and subjective rationales. Structural contextualism allows for responsibility of holding beliefs without justification, which may serve as basis for other beliefs, context indicating where justification may be needed. One's goals at an occasion are meritory for one's epistemic responsibility.

Some beliefs need no proof, there is a plurality of middle-level generalizations, and there is no rule guided algorithm that would solve their conflict. So something such as judgment is needed. Beliefs require justification in respect to the context in which they appear. Moral outlook and moral stance are important. Engaged context is different from detached context. Judgment appears in situations where no rules are followed.

Moral foundationalism involves some intuitionistic versions: infallibility, indubitability, self-evidence. Moral coherentism builds upon wide reflective equilibrium. Moral knowledge is assessed from moral outlook. Normative deontological and truth conducive conceptions of justification are available. Reliability is tied to virtue and sensibility.

