
Over the last thirty years, Bernard Williams has been one of those responsible for putting virtue ethics back into the running in contemporary ethical theory, and so for reviving interest in classical approaches to ethics, and in Aristotle in particular. In criticising traditional utilitarian and Kantian theories, Williams emphasized the importance of personal integrity, close personal relationships (such as those of love and friendship), and in general what are now called agent-centered reasons: reasons an agent has that are not derived from an impartial perspective but are, in some important sense, her reasons. The work of Williams and others has prompted new interest in nonconsequentialist ethics, and in particular in those based on practical reason. Not only has Aristotle been revived, but a whole new way of reading Kant has emerged which tries to accommodate many of Williams’ themes. This is the setting for George Harris’ new book.

Harris’ project is to argue for a broadly Aristotelian approach to practical reason over the kind of Kantian approaches found in Kant’s contemporary disciples, such as Henry Allison, Marcia Baron, Barbara Herman, and Christine Korsgaard. He is particularly concerned to combat Herman-style Neo-Kantianism, which holds that ‘respect for others is the most fundamental value of a meaningful life for a rational being’ (31). For this view is close to Aristotelianism, and also provides answers to many Williams-style concerns.

In the course of his argument, Harris provides detailed discussions of a number of topics, including the values of respect, and the normative boundaries of many different kinds of relationships, including parental love, friendship, and community. But as the book is long, and the argument sometimes intricate, here I will merely capture some of the main themes, focusing on some of the issues of interest from Williams.

One respect in which Harris sees himself as Aristotelian is that he believes that ethics cannot be done a priori, for example by considering the concept of a reason and the requirements imposed on agents as rational
beings considered as such. Instead, it must depend on empirical facts about the structure of human psychology. (This is the point, Harris believes, of Aristotle's function argument: that 'eudaimonia is an active life that is expressive of a psychology that is most natural to human beings', 99.) This suggests to Harris that we can find empirically-based tests for whether a life is in fact one that fits human nature. One such test, the integration test, is the focal point of the book.

Harris' method is to argue from a conception of human agency to a conception of practical rationality and then to a conception of morality. The core argument lies in his account of agency, which is in turn founded on an account of human integrity. Harris believes that normative beliefs, including moral beliefs, are rationally defensible in so far as they provide solutions to what he calls 'integration problems'. The notion of integrity provides a way of assessing rival philosophical approaches to agency, in the form of an integration test.

The first step is to understand integration. Harris believes that this requires a general conception of integrity, which he calls the thin conception. This conception requires a self which satisfies minimal requirements of unity, self-knowledge, strength of character and having a sense of self-worth. But the thin conception requires supplement, and this may be done in a number of ways.

Harris considers three main candidates: a traditional Kantian picture, Herman's Neo-Kantian alternative and his own Aristotelian view. A key difference between these approaches concerns the structure of regulative norms. Kantians defend asymmetrical structures, where norms of impartial respect regulate other norms, such as norms of parental love or friendship. But Harris claims that both commonsense morality and Aristotelianism are supportive of a symmetrical relationship: in some contexts norms of impartial respect regulate the other norms, in other contexts, norms of parental love or friendship regulate norms of impartial respect. For example, although sometimes it would be disrespectful to others to favour the interests of my child over impartial concerns (e.g., by avoiding jury duty), in other circumstances favouring impartial concerns would constitute a betrayal of the child (e.g., if I use money to send a number of...
children to college rather than to send her to the best college consistent with her abilities, 73-4).

Harris’ Aristotelianism relies on an inclusive-end interpretation of eudaimonia, of roughly the sort prominent in contemporary interpretations of Aristotle of the school of Ackrill and Irwin. He believes that, interpreted according to an inclusivist model, Aristotelian formal requirements of finality and self-sufficiency can provide a structure for integration that amounts to a thick conception of integrity. The basic idea is as follows. In order to satisfy the requirements, the agent must order goods within a life as a whole as proper objects of final choice (finality), and include as many kinds of the most important goods as possible (self-sufficiency) (14-15). But, given the facts of human psychology, this involves sometimes allowing partial concerns to regulate impartial concerns.

More particularly, Harris claims that some goods have a special status within the inclusive structure of eudaimonia. They generate categorical interests, without which ‘there is a serious loss in unity and meaning of one’s life from one’s own point of view’ (91). (The idea of categorical interests or goods is linked to Williams’ notion of a ground project desire, 96.) Furthermore, he argues that both personal norms, such as of love and friendship, and impersonal norms, such as of respect, generate categorical interests. This implies that an agent of integrity must be committed to both in order to have a worthwhile life, and Harris argues (mainly by examples appealing to commonsense moral phenomenology) that this implies that impartial norms are sometimes regulated by partial norms.

Harris’ book is long and sometimes dense. It is therefore probably not for those with only a peripheral interest in the subject matter. (This is especially so given that it is not easy to read most individual chapters independently. Harris’ arguments are highly interconnected, and involve technical terms introduced at various points in the book.) But for specialists in virtue ethics or contemporary ethical theory it is both timely and important. I highly recommend it.
REVIEW

(One gripe for the publisher: the quality of the binding leaves much to be desired. My hardback copy is already broken at the spine and shedding pages.)

Stephen M. Gardiner
University of Canterbury