Reflective Agency: An Essay on Ethical Theory and Deliberation

On the standard conception, the aim of systematic ethical theorizing is to develop an ideal criterion of rightness from which we can derive what to do in any conceivable situation. Agents should have an overriding commitment to that criterion, and though they need not use it as a decision procedure on each particular occasion, their ordinary motivations have value only insofar as they provide a heuristic implementation of that ideal criterion. But there’s a second, more flexible conception of ethical theorizing, on which agents decide based on the norms of their local practices and appeal to theory only when confronted with a problem. In my dissertation, I write in praise of flexibility.

The first part argues that adopting the standard conception, epitomized by R. M. Hare, is bad for agents. The tension between our ordinary motivations and the deliverances of theory causes an unhealthy bifurcation in our thinking, leads to alienation from our personal commitments, and implies that we have false beliefs about our reasons. My flexible conception avoids these undesirable outcomes. Drawing an analogy to P. F. Strawson’s distinction between the reactive and objective attitudes, I argue that ethical theorizing, like the objective attitude, can play both an explanatory and an ameliorative role without being taken as the sole justification of our practices.

Given my focus on practices rather than individual actions, I consider a version of utilitarianism to be the best criterion for us to adopt. The second part of my dissertation outlines a theory, actual practice utilitarianism, on which an act is right if it is permitted by an actual practice in one’s current context, so long as that practice is not structurally incompatible with the overall good. I show how this theory makes better sense of our practices of regret, toleration, and punishment than a standard maximizing act-utilitarian theory, and I apply the theory to the vexed issue of partiality, explaining how it generates limited reasons to reform. Finally, I argue that while the standard conception leads to what J. S. Mill calls ‘moral unfreedom’—in which the will is unfree because of an overriding commitment to an ethical theory, higher with respect to any possible object of choice—taking a more flexible attitude toward actual practice utilitarianism allows us to have multiple independent priorities, none of which trumps all the rest. Ethical theory still has a role to play, but only in contexts of problem-solving.