

Review: David Wiggins, *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality*.

Guy Longworth
University of Warwick
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David Wiggins' extraordinary book is a kind of opinionated introduction—or, as he suggests (vii), a *reintroduction*—to the philosophy of morality. Published in 2006, it takes the form of a series of lectures, most of which were first presented to part-time, mature students of Birkbeck College between 1988 and 1994. Although many of the book's themes connect closely with Wiggins' previous work on the nature and status of morality, as partially collected in his *Needs, Values, Truth* (1998), its primary intended audience comprises grown-up tyros rather than seasoned professional philosophers. Perhaps because of this, and despite some early positive reviews (e.g., Nagel 2006), my impression is that it has had a lesser impact on the mainstream of subsequent work in ethics than some of Wiggins' other work. I suggest that veterans of all stripes would benefit from visiting or revisiting this fine work.

The book aims to put its reader in a position to begin addressing three interconnected questions:

- (A) ...the question of the substance or content of morality, its nature, and its extent.
- (B) ...the question of the reasons there may be—and the reasons agents may make their own—to participate, persevere, and persist in morality.
- (C) ...the questions of the truth, objectivity, relativity, etc., of [morality's] judgements and the logical status of the approbation that it extends to some acts and responses but denies to a host of others. (9)

In doing so, it also treats, if 'only obliquely', a fourth question, (D):

a question...about the relations of morality, meaning, and happiness. (10)

Importantly, Wiggins doesn't attempt this task alone. The book records a series of lectures and, in accordance with that, calls regularly on the assistance of a rich secondary literature, including a good dictionary (vii). To fully appreciate and benefit from the book one must be willing not only to

think along with Wiggins' text, but also to do the further reading. At one point, Wiggins writes:

...Glaucón and Adeimantus declare that the life that men want to lead is one of doing injustice/wickedness with impunity. But it ought to be worth saying somewhere that this rings false. In real life, it is much truer to say that what most people really want is for justice to be *dead easy*. It isn't dead easy. (18)

One presupposition, or lesson, of Wiggins' book is that something similar might be said of the serious pursuit of a philosophy of morality.

Naturally, the opinions that animate Wiggins' answers to these questions are Wiggins' own. His hope is that they are also opinions which the reader shares or can be brought to share. And importantly, where the reader can be brought to share Wiggins' opinions, this will come about not only through exposing them to supporting arguments, but also by working to remove alien and distorting accretions from the reader's core moral dispositions that might otherwise prevent their dispositions from finding natural expression in opinion (236–237). (One function of a reintroduction to moral philosophy is to treat such accretions as may have arisen from a reader's earlier exposure to the subject.)

The most significant of the accretions that Wiggins seeks to treat are due to consequentialism—according to which all moral reasons, including those arising from what it is right to do or not do, are determined by (independently accessible) values—together with its ubiquitous cultural fallout. His approach to dealing with consequentialist thinking is two-pronged. The first prong comprises Wiggins' preliminary answers to questions (A) and (B): a brilliant, extended account of what he sees as the dispositional pattern of feeling and thinking that figures in our basic moral formation, a pattern in which we respond to a diversity of reasons of diverse sorts, and which separates considerations of right from considerations of value (chapters 1 to 9). The account is developed primarily through engagement with, and consequent refinements of, Hume's account, and secondarily through attention to some of Kant's less theory-bound insights. Fundamental here is the idea that our moral thinking arises through the cultural development of benevolence or fellow feeling or solidarity. (Most striking amongst the refinements of Hume is the limited but positive role for practical reasons that Wiggins finds in his account and then seeks to expand.) Wiggins aims here to provide a basis for further articulating a grown-up philosophy of morality:

What a fully grown-up moral philosophy might attempt is an account of morality that embraces the full gamut of moral predications, seeing them as mutually irreducible and mutually indispensable, allowing no primacy to character traits *or* virtues *or* practices *or* acts *or* states of affairs—or allowing primacy to all at once. Such a philosophy, being neither consequentialist nor virtue-centred, might take on some of the subtlety of the moral phenomena themselves and of our moral deliverances upon them. (82)

He is largely successful in achieving this aim and the various elements of his positive discussion should figure centrally in future discussions of the natures and sources of our practical, and specifically moral, reasons.

The starting point provided by Wiggins' development of Hume presents the proponent of consequentialism with a challenge. That development presents a reasonable facsimile of some central aspects of ordinary moral thinking and feeling, and yet those aspects are incompatible with the defining tenet of consequentialism, that all genuine moral reasons derive from the (independently accessible) values of states of affairs. For ordinary moral thinking, as Wiggins articulates it, will not allow considerations of value—for instance, the goodness of ends—to always trump considerations of right—for instance, the evil of available means to those ends. Hence, if we acquiesce in consequentialist thinking, then we will be undertaking a significant revision of ordinary moral thinking. In consequence, we should acquiesce only insofar as good reasons are provided for doing so—only insofar, that is, as the reasons for acquiescing outweigh the diversity of ordinary moral reasons with which consequentialism regularly conflicts. The second prong of Wiggins' treatment of consequentialism is a detailed negative assessment of reasons that have been offered in its support by Mill, Hare, and Scheffler (chapters 6 to 8) together with the presentation of an alternative and superior treatment of the consequentialists' stock in trade, the moral emergency—in which no course of action seems, to ordinary moral thinking, free from significant moral cost (chapter 9). With respect to the aspects of the case for consequentialism that Wiggins considers, his critical discussion seems to me to be decisive.

Chapter 10 extends the Hume-based account—according to which our practical reasons are diverse, and have a diversity of sources, and according to which questions of right often have primacy over questions of value—into the political sphere. Wiggins' professed target here is contemporary liberalism, but one might also read the chapter as a critical reaction to the idea that, as R. F. Holland put it, “consequentialism is the ethics of politics” (Holland 1980: 135). Chapters 11 and 12 make use of the account in addressing question (C) and by developing a case, begun elsewhere (Wiggins 1998), for allowing that some of our moral opinions are plainly true, as when appropriate reflection on all the various reasons there are for or against slavery leave us with nothing else to think but that it is wrong.

One critical reaction to Wiggins' discussion is likely to be that it overstates the power of considerations of right to temper the attractions of value and that it understates the organising power of value-derived reasons in taming the superficial diversity of practical reasons. My own reaction pulls in an opposing direction: I'm not entirely convinced that Wiggins' Hume-based account has the resources fully to capture the strength and nature of our aversion to wrongdoing, and specifically to killing, another human being, whatever the value would otherwise have been of the ends served by so doing.

The difficulty here is not that Wiggins himself does not recognise the full strength of our aversion. Drawing helpfully on some of Simone Weil's important work on this topic (Weil 1956), he writes:

Where nothing at all has put the to-and-fro of ordinary interpretative discourse into abeyance, consider how much you then have to set aside—how many habits of mind and feeling—in order coolly to contemplate simply cutting off, simply ‘taking out’, another person. Obviously, these numerous things can be suspended. The point is not the impossibility of suspending them, but the psychic and visceral cost—and the affiliated moral unreasonableness—of doing so. (244)

Rather, the difficulty concerns whether, as Wiggins contends, what he says here “is a strictly neo-Humean variant of a Kantian contention” (244). We might agree with Wiggins that there are these costs, and even that *some* of these costs arise, as he has Hume suggest, from the redirection of benevolence or fellow feeling or solidarity. The challenge here for the neo-Humean is to make a case for thinking that *all* the moral costs can be explained in that way. Wiggins recognises that this is the challenge, and his response is fair but limited:

An explanation that started from here of what is wrong with wilful killing, or wanton cruelty, or repaying good with evil, might seem to be unable to rise above the superficial. But, if anything is superficial here, it is the opinion that this sort of explanation is *bound* to be superficial. Fully set forth, if only that could be achieved, the explanation would be as deep as the moral facts are. (245)

It is in this area that I would most like to see further critical engagement with Wiggins’ book, drawing not only on Weil but on other thinkers who have contended that there is more of a gap than Wiggins seems willing to allow between benevolence and the full range of our moral responses to other human beings (e.g., Holland 1980 and Gaita 2004). In the meantime, I hope that it is clear from the foregoing that Wiggins’ book, taken together with the list of further readings that it introduces, represents a challenging but essential second course in the philosophy of morality.

References.

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