

Caring About Metaethics: Psychological Perspectives on Moral Philosophy

A Review of

Caring About Morality: Philosophical Perspectives in Moral Psychology

Thomas E. Wren

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Reviewed by

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A philosopher friend of mine once described the relationship between philosophy and science this way: Philosophy, he maintained, is a holding tank (he said "garbage can," actually) for particularly sticky problems. Science may want to know about the meaning of life, the nature of time, or alternative conceptions of causality, but these puzzles do not readily yield to scientific analysis. So science throws these intricacies into philosophy where they can be mulled over. Eventually, when clarified and recast, scientists reclaim them.

Wren believes that ethicists' analysis of the question "What motivates people to follow their conscience," has reached the point that psychologists can now incorporate portions of this philosophical analysis in their theories of moral thought, behavior, and action. In *Caring About Morality: Philosophical Perspectives in Moral Psychology*, he suggests psychological work on morality is in "considerable disarray" (p. 3) because theorists and researchers fail to recognize how their work is shaped by their "metaethics": tacit assumptions about the nature of morality. What are some of these unstated metaethical assumptions? Wren is particularly concerned with the way psychologists think about the motivational aspects of morality. Rarely, Wren argues, do psychologists distinguish between moral motives, which are specific elements of morality such as "be kind to others" and "don't tell lies," and moral motivation, which is the general tendency to care about being moral across situations. He maintains that psychologists should incorporate this distinction into their analyses of moral phenomena. He also suggests that psychological theorists too often think of morality as an external pressure that forces the individual to act in certain ways simply to avoid negative sanctions. He then discusses the philosophical debate on the intrinsically motivating nature of morality, and recommends that psychologists adopt philosophy's

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bottom line conclusion on the matter: Moral principles supply their own motivation.

Wren's analysis is strongest when it does what philosophy does best: the finegrained analysis of the conceptual meaning of morality. Wren drives wedges into psychological constructs that seem indivisible, he draws distinctions between ideas that psychologists think of as isomorphic, and he relentlessly pursues lines of logic that underscore some inconsistencies in psychological theories of moral phenomena. When he strays from philosophizing to psychologizing, however, his own argument applies: Wren's assumptions about psychology guide his analysis of psychology's limitations. In many cases the psychology that is attacked is not contemporary psychology, it is a conceptualization drawn from older versions of cognitive-developmental views, behaviorism, or social learning theory (for recent reviews see Darley & Shultz, 1990; Kurtines, Azmitia, & Gewirtz, 1992). Wren sometimes assumes that the arguments that sway philosophers will sway psychologists. He notes as support for his argument that moral principles are motivating the fact that most people naturally assume principles include a motivational component. Psychologists would likely want to see the numbers. Wren also seems to assume that psychologists are interested in philosophically important distinctions. But if research psychologists were asked "Would you like to know what philosophers have to say about moral motivation?," their answer would likely be "Thanks, but no thanks."

References

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