



## Book Reviews

Alan Thomas, *Value and Context: The Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 358 pages, ISBN 0198250177 (hbk.). Hardback/Paperback: £45.00/-.

Alan Thomas has constructed an impressive in depth defence of moral cognitivism. His starting-point is a consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the type of cognitivism developed in different versions by David Wiggins and John McDowell, according to which the objects of our moral perceptions and judgments would not be what they are but for our responses and responsiveness to them, yet those responses are nonetheless to be evaluated as appropriate or inappropriate and are to be explained by reference to the distinctive moral properties of those objects. 'In a moral explanation essential reference is made both to a subject and to a property to which that subject is attuned: neither can be characterized independently of the other. This does not downgrade the claim to objectivity on the part of the property' (p. 43). By endorsing this claim to objectivity Thomas is committed to rejecting the projectivist and expressivist view developed by Blackburn and others. But expressivism is not the only rival view with which Thomas engages.

Both Wiggins and McDowell – Thomas notes their disagreements as well as their agreements – take moral understanding and judgment to involve the use of 'thick' moral concepts and Thomas remarks that 'getting a person to conceptualize their situation in the right way, using the right 'thick' vocabulary, is an important part of practical deliberation' (p. 58). But he disagrees with both Wiggins and McDowell about the relationship of reasons and motives to judgments and actions and he does so in part because of the extent of his agreement with Bernard Williams's account of practical reasoning and motivation. Yet that account is closely related to Williams's rejection of cognitivism. So a problem confronting Thomas is that of how to draw upon the philosophical resources provided by Williams, while resisting Williams's non-objectivism. And this engagement with Williams's work makes Thomas's book of the highest interest.

Williams has often been misunderstood. And Thomas takes care to correct misunderstandings and to disentangle various threads in Williams's thought. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985) Williams argued that the kind of account of moral knowledge defended by Wiggins and McDowell is persuasive only so long as it is taken to be an account of knowledge claims making use of 'thick' concepts within some particular social world, from the standpoint of

the inhabitants of that world, but that such claims cannot survive critical reflection from an impersonal perspective external to that world (pp. 2-3 and 149-50). Thomas argues against Williams for the possibility of an agent's reflectively adopting an objective and impartial perspective on her or his own reasons, while also acknowledging the relativity of those reasons to that agent's particular motivational set, including that agent's present evaluative commitments. Reflection from such a perspective might issue in the endorsement of some presently accepted motivations and the deletion of others (pp. 69-86). Thomas thus takes himself to be able to assent to Williams's internalism with respect to practical reasoning, while also insisting that agents whose knowledge claims are of the kind defended by Wiggins and McDowell are not precluded from engaging in critical reflection, reflection that plays a key part in justifying those claims. Although no contemporary reflective agent could have the properties of Aristotle's *phronimos* – on this Thomas agrees with Williams and disagrees with McDowell – less than ideally rational agents are justified in some of their claims to moral knowledge. But what then do we mean when we ascribe knowledge of *truths* to such agents?

Thomas follows Crispin Wright in taking a minimalist view of truth and of the class of truth-apt sentences, while rejecting Wright's antirealism. He accepts Wright's characterization of moral truth as 'durable justifiability in the light of the standards that discipline ordinary moral thinking' ('Truth in Ethics', *Ratio* 8.3 (December 1995): 209-226, here 210; quoted by Thomas, p. 30). And everything therefore turns for Thomas on how those standards are to be characterized. What he advances is a contextualist account of moral justification, contrasting it with coherentist appeals to the procedures of reflective equilibrium. Thomas defends contextualism with respect to all knowledge claims, arguing that it alone provides an adequate response to scepticism. He puts his own specifically moral contextualism to work in giving accounts of moral error and most interestingly of how to identify and to diagnose moral beliefs informed and distorted by hitherto unrecognized ideological commitments.

This is a book that deserves many readers, but is not always easy to read. Thomas seems anxious to defend his views against any and every possible objection and to draw upon any and every possible means of support and so he continually turns aside from the main thread of his argument to evaluate this or that set of critical or supportive considerations. The sheer number of philosophers whose work he discusses or to whom he alludes is remarkable: it includes, over and above those already named, John Mackie, Christine Korsgaard, Gilbert Harman, Alan Gibbard, Thomas Nagel, Mark Timmons, Michael Williams, Hilary Putnam, Robert Audi, Barry Stroud, Donald Davidson, Charles Taylor, myself, and quite a number of others. His final chapter, in which he develops a contextualist defence of a version of republican liberalism, adds to this list.

Thomas's overall line of argument is vulnerable to criticism of at least two kinds. There are first of all criticisms concerning the detail of particular arguments. I give

just one example. Thomas rightly emphasizes the importance for Williams's case against externalism of the thesis that 'reasons for an agent, while normative, must be potentially explanatory of action'. Yet, according to Williams and to Thomas, on an externalist account reasons, so it seems, cannot be explanatory (pp. 69–70). But this is misleading. For on occasion we explain someone's actions by referring to their ignorance of, insensitivity to, or cavalier disregard of considerations that provide good reasons for action, independently of the actual or possible contents of their motivational set. 'Doing such and such will render anyone liable to permanent and serious ill health' is, the externalist will say, a good, even if not a conclusive reason for refraining from doing such and such for anyone, whatever their motivational set. The actions of those who nonetheless do such and such are characteristically explained *either* by their having some other reason for doing such and such that outweighs this reason *or* by their ignorance of, insensitivity to, or disregard for this reason. So external reasons can on occasion play an indispensable part in our explanations.

A second type of criticism concerns, for example, Thomas's critique of Blackburn's quasirealism. Thomas needs to show both how his view differs from Blackburn's, given that they are both minimalists about truth and both motivational internalists, and to provide arguments for preferring his view. About Thomas's way of distinguishing his view from Blackburn's I am not wholly clear. He says that he, following Wright, has a minimalist view of truth that nonetheless allows that if a sentence 'sustains a truth predicate, then it has truth conditions' (119) while on Blackburn's deflationist view of truth, sentences may sustain a truth predicate without having truth conditions. But about the nature of the truth conditions of sentences expressing moral judgments Thomas says almost nothing and so the force of his point is unclear.

More serious difficulties confront his claim to have advanced arguments that are 'decisive' on the issues that divide his cognitivism and Blackburn's expressivism by showing that 'that Blackburn's strategic commitment to an ontologically parsimonious naturalism undermines his treatment of unasserted contexts' (p. 116). What Thomas has certainly shown is that, if Blackburn is to defend both his ontologically parsimonious naturalism and his treatment of unasserted contexts, he is going to have to say something more both what such naturalism requires and about what he takes to be involved in projection. But it is not too difficult to imagine lines of argument that Blackburn might develop. I therefore remain unconvinced that Thomas's arguments against Blackburn are decisive. And neither are the considerations urged on behalf of his own view, even at their strongest.

Thomas may well have put together the best possible arguments for the cognitivism that he defends. For this he is to be congratulated. But he has by so doing inadvertently strengthened the case for concluding that in the disputes of recent decades between cognitivists and expressivists no decisive arguments are to be found. And the time has perhaps come to ask why this is so and to put in question some presuppositions of the metaethical enterprise as it has generally

been understood by both contending parties. One such presupposition is that contemporary moral discourse and practice provide an identifiable well-defined and coherent subject-matter for metaethical reflection rather than consisting of a collage of various and assorted none too coherent fragments that are open to a range of rival and contentious metaethical interpretations. I predict that, so long as this ideologically influential assumption is not put in question, much of metaethics will continue to be ingenious, but barren.

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