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Eugene Kelly

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EUGENE KELLY

*New York Institute of Technology*

*ekelly@nyit.edu*

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# REVIEW OF ROBERTA DE MONTICELLI'S *TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AXIOLOGY*

Isaiah Berlin's familiar metaphor of the hedgehog, who knows "one big thing" and the fox who knows "many things," puts in frequent appearances in Professor de Monticelli's new work. She places herself solidly on the side of the hedgehog, whose "big thing" is the reality and coherence of the realm of values, yet one suspects the author is thinking more like the fox. For she examines the "many things" that characterize our times with verve and insight and proceeds with a moral fixity that still does not lack a bit of foxlike slyness.

The first of the many things that de Monticelli knows is that the 20th century purchased the notion that value judgements are void of cognitive content. This conviction may have begun with G.E. Moore, who argued that the terms "good" and "bad" are indefinable; they are vaguely intuitable but generally ineffable. Speakers may predicate them of natural objects given in perception, yet if they are indefinable, such predications are unverifiable. One may say, "Saving the drowning child was good." That the child was saved is a putative fact, reducible to the various perceptions in which the action was given, but that it was good to save her is not reducible to matters of perception. It is a hence judgment without a criterion of truth or falsity. One can give reasons for one's likes or dislikes in terms of the effects of a thing's natural qualities (the speaker loved the child that was saved, for example) but such reasons could not function as a justification of the rescue's goodness.

A similar conclusion was drawn by A.J. Ayer in *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936): Talk about values is simply nonsense. Others drew the conclusion that to call something good or bad is simply to express one's dislike of it and to encourage others to share that sentiment. In his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), J. L. Mackie put the matter succinctly: "Semantically, it [moral discourse] is representational thought, true or not true according to whether certain real properties apply or fail to apply in the world. But the truth is that there are no such properties; reality is simply empty of all states of affairs whose representation would require thought of distinctively moral content." This is about as good a foundation for moral nihilism as one can get. To say that Mackie's position regarding moral content is patently absurd would be disqualified by his theory itself, for "absurd" denotes a non-natural quality and hence affirms nothing except the speaker's scorn.

Some of this moral skepticism or nihilism on the part of many English-speaking philosophers in the twentieth century can be traced to its underlying and generally unspoken metaphysics: unspoken because metaphysical assertions were similarly conceived to be void of content. A bit of linguistic analysis could demonstrate that a purported metaphysical problem stemmed from a careless use of language and could be "dissolved" by unravelling the carelessness of the

metaphysician's speech – usually she has passed from speaking metaphorically to speaking literally without noticing the transition that led to the confusion. But the default metaphysics functioning in the reasoning of these moral skeptics was always a form of naturalism, not in the sense of a denial of supernaturalism, but as the epistemological affirmation that we can know only what the mind is given through the senses and what we can logically derive from those sensibly given “natural” qualities. Hume famously pointed out that such terms as “causal necessity,” the “ego,” “God,” and, of course the “goodness” we think we see in the act of saving the child are not given to the senses and are hence philosophically illegitimate. This illegitimacy is unquestionable, given the claims of the unspoken metaphysics that hovers behind it: The world is a construct out of sensible data, and the unspoken epistemology: Synthetic assertions that cannot be traced to and justified by sense-data are illegitimate. Hence, we cannot know whether a weighty object about to be dropped from above the earth will fall downward unless stopped, for we have no sense-data prior to the event that would justify the claim.

The second of many things that de Monticelli knows is that this kind of thinking (and its counterparts in 20<sup>th</sup> century Continental philosophy) has had a chilling effect on those who would use the Socratic concept of practical reason in face-to-face discourse about political, social, and economic matters. If “good” and “bad” are ineffable, if moral predicates are void of natural and hence arguable content, if in general moral discourse is a sham that conceals the will to power of those leading the discourse, then only a fool will trouble herself with them. Even Hume's denial of the ego or personhood as real and continuous stifles a person's ambition to adhere to truth and to put her unique talents for doing good to use in the world. But that attitude gives the victory to the persons conducting the public discourse in their own interest, that is, to the manipulators, demagogues and advertising types, who assert opinions and directives without any effort to justify them. A tension is needed between ideality and reality for the Socratic debate to begin. Where philosophical sophistry denies any reality to values and encourages indifference to any serious study of values and their implications for public policy, a kind of decadence infects democracy. Democracy requires at least three things: knowledge and lucidity about the political realities and conditions of power, a bright sense of values that provide the ideals worth striving for, and the moral integrity and hopeful spirit to strive after them.

In graduate school in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, I and all of my professors who were linguistic analysts had read their Moore, their Ayer, their Mackie. What I found amazing was the disconnect between my professors' philosophy and their political beliefs. One professor who, as I knew from personal conversations, was a radical leftist, never tried to justify any of those beliefs in class. He would show how a person may be logically consistent or inconsistent in his or her moral beliefs, but not whether those beliefs were true. A consistent German, I learned, who was convinced of the moral rectitude of the Nazi policies of driving out, arresting, and finally exterminating her Jewish fellow countrymen would, upon discovering that both her parents were Jews, turn herself immediately over to the Gestapo. Here we have an application not of morals but of logic. Even more remarkable was a late interview with A.J. Ayer that I recall but am unable to retrieve. He was discussing Martin Heidegger as a man and a philosopher, and the number of disvalue terms that Ayer applied to him was so large and their meaning so cutting that I gasped in amazement: here is the man who taught me that value-judgments are vacuous now spouting insulting value-judgments like any man in the street, including myself! Ayer might have said that he was just venting his feelings or asking for sympathy and not asserting claims that may be true. Yet why read a philosopher for what is admittedly nonsense?

The third small thing de Monticelli knows – or is willing and capable of arguing for – is the

hypothesis of the unity of values, its epistemological source, and the means we have for unpacking the content of values from the cognitive experience of them. The means to this end is a material value-ethics. Some ten years ago the present writer developed a platform for moral discourse similar to that which de Monticelli envisages by synthesizing the work of four early 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenologists, E. Husserl, M. Scheler, D. von Hildebrand, and N. Hartmann (Eugene Kelly, *Material Ethics of Value*, 2011). On this platform values are seen not as “queer” predicates, empty of content but functioning illegitimately to describe real things, such as “useful” (a tool), “noble” (an action), or “generous” (a person). The qualities denoted by the terms in quotation marks, whatever their ontology (are they like Platonic essences, as Hartmann observed, or are they like numbers, real but without natural qualities?), are given to us not in acts of perception, but in acts of *feeling*. They are, as de Monticelli wisely observes, “entangled with” real things and our feelings of them. Usually, the content of values is not immediately given in our experience of them, but they can be thematized in phenomenological reflection. Their content, when so extracted from the intentional feelings in which they are given, can *constrain* what can be rationally said about some good or some act or some person regarding its usefulness, its nobility, or her generosity. A point may be reached in a person’s behavior at which it becomes *incorrect* to evaluate him as generous. Moreover, values are given on both a horizontal and a vertical scale. On the horizontal scale there are many values of a kind similar, say, to nobility, all of which are given in emotional acts on the level of human vitality. They include the values of good health, physical grace and moral generosity. On the vertical table, values range from those of pleasure and pain, intended by visceral feelings, to those of goodness, truth, and beauty, and further to the values of the holy or sacred. Such values are phenomena that appear on different levels of human sensibility, just as colors, sounds, odors, and roughness appear to the different senses of the body. Only if a philosopher cannot feel the difference in the value height of a nice warm bath and the goodness of self-sacrifice for a noble cause will it occur to him that the assertion of that distinction is a vacuous sophism. Yet again the openness to values and a willingness to seek out their content founds the very possibility of earnest person-to-person discourse about things that matter: democratic process, criminal justice, individual rights, and justice among nations.

It is impossible to live in a world where values are considered to be chimeras and civil discourse vain, a world that celebrates the freedom of individuals from all social sanctions and yet degenerates the obligation to justify one’s opinions and actions by reference to the felt values on which they are based. Values are everywhere in the world of a human being; our philosophy may question their ontology, but they are always present to us. I look up from my notebook and wonder if what I am writing is clear and worthy, and immediately I am confronted with a value and an obligation. I may choose to be obscurantist and trivial, but I cannot turn these disvalues into values, just as I may choose to lie to someone but I cannot make lying morally good. Values are not so tractable.

The “one big thing” is not, however, simply the reality of values; it is their coherence, that is, their constituting an ordered realm of values. The alternative is a set of incommensurate “ethe” founded on sets of incommensurable values, sets known to the fox as he surveys, disinterestedly, the communities and persons he encounters along the way. De Monticelli cites Ronald Dworkin to make this crucial point – crucial, because Socratic questioning and its political point and force depends upon an appeal to universally known and shared values: “The truth about living well and being good and what is wonderful is not only coherent but mutually supporting. What we think about any one of them must stand up, eventually, to any argument we find compelling about the rest.”

But is the realm of values internally coherent? In *Formalism in Ethics* (G, 1916; E 1973), Scheler

believed that such coherence could be found. His development of the ancient concept of an *Ordo amoris* bears witness to his belief, though it hardly forms an argument for it. Each person, he taught, has a unique internal order of her loves and hates that refract, as it were, the values that appear in her emotional acts that intend the values in things present to her. The *Ordo* of each person may overlap those of others and found a shared ethos, but for Scheler it is possible for the values functioning in the *Ordo* of each person or community to overlap those of all of humanity. Phenomenology can describe the values functioning in every ethos, given knowledge of the life-situation of its members. Scheler further postulates a universal *Ordo amoris* that is known by the mind of God, who intends all possible values and disvalues in their proper horizontal and vertical order; no value would elude Him.

Of course, this is only an hypothesis; God's mind is not a phenomenological given. Hartmann, for his part, was skeptical of the unity of values. We have not explored the entire realm of values that function in or have functioned in human history, he thought. Moreover, new values are discovered as we live. Then too, some positive values seem incompatible with others, especially when they function in the character of a person's life, not just in the ends that the person chooses autonomously and that make meaningful her daily activities, but even in the *way those ends are pursued*. Hartmann distinguishes several clear but incompatible "ways of living" that embody opposed values of human character. For example, there is the life of innocence versus that of sophistication, or that of the morality of struggle, of competition, of expression of energy versus the morality of peace, of compromise, of charitableness. There is no Golden Mean in such oppositions; both sides represent valuable ways of living, and it is hard to see how one attempt to justify any one of those ways of living wonderfully must stand up to any argument for the others, if indeed they are arguable at all. They are perhaps arguable only by analyzing the process of living out one side or the other.

If we cannot overcome the conflict between the hedgehog and the fox or establish the justice of one or the other, perhaps we can come to understand the origins of their value-conflict not only in the diverse values they make functional, but in other factors that are at the root of those values' functionality in history. When Scheler was established in a chair for social philosophy in Cologne, he began to write works (some published posthumously) on what was then called the sociology of knowledge. His initial insight was simple enough, though it had tremendous implications for moral discourse. The *Ordo amoris* of various individuals and communities is shaped in greater part by two factors, the "ideal" and the "real". Some segment of the postulated universal order of values becomes functional in persons and cultures in part by their own spiritual capacity and energy for grasping values and internalizing them, and in part by the real circumstances that surround them. The conditions shaping the values that are functional in persons are different, say, in a seafaring community than in a mountain-dwelling one. Understanding the ethos of a foreign community or one remote in time and space, no matter how different it may be from one's own, requires a twofold inquiry: one into that culture's ideals and the root values that found them, and another into the real conditions of its life. The first is a phenomenology of its moral, aesthetic, and practical values, where one attempts to re-experience empathetically the emotional acts in which they were given to them. The second requires a grasp of the languages in which values are expressed and a study of the culture's history and environment. Such understanding may allow a practical "balancing out" of the apparent conflicts between that culture and others. Scheler compared the capacity for mutual understanding among citizens of diverse cultures to the capacity for mutual understanding of space-time by persons inhabiting different spatio-temporal systems. They can understand why they each measure time and space in ways different from themselves, but they cannot justify the claim that the measurements one of them is the only correct one. For values become functional in ways that depend upon the real factors

imposed by the life-praxis of each discussant. Thus, my conception of the value of honor and the constraints it imposes upon behavior may be quite different from that of an 18<sup>th</sup> century gentleman, whom it may constrain to fight a duel with another gentleman who has offended his honor. I may understand that gentleman's values and virtues perfectly. I may know how honor has become functional in his behavior and have studied the real cultural factors that have shaped his behavior. Yet the value of honor has not become functional in that way in my life and times. This effort at mutual understanding does not guarantee, of course, a settling of cultural conflicts, some of which are founded on existential concerns: two peoples each with strong social identities will find it impossible to share the same geographical space, however much they may comprehend each other's ethos.

Does this conclusion make us look more like foxes than hedgehogs? Or is this idea of the sources of the structure and diversity of humankind's orders of loves and hates the "one big thing" that the hedgehog grasps? There would then be no "right" ethos that would give an Archimedean starting-point to individuals wishing to argue with each other in a Socratic manner in the hope of arriving at practical wisdom, that is, not just knowledge of the material content of values but also of their applications to concrete situations and to the constraints on behavior they legitimately impose on all rational men and women. Yet the outlook for de Monticelli's hope for the re-engagement of morally committed Socratic philosophers in disputes as to what makes a life wonderful or just may not be so dim, even given the necessary limitations of that debate. We may be able to accept her invitation not only to become value-phenomenologists again but Socratic questioners operating in the public sphere: in politics, education, foreign policy, and even in philosophy. Such a practice rides ideally upon the honest and lucid moral commitments to truth of agents. The human race is not as diverse as it may seem when one scans the range and diversity of human cultures. The hedgehog must become a fox if he wishes the one big thing he knows to become effective in history; he must first understand his neighbors. Almost everyone, everywhere, desires or would desire education for one's children, everyone wishes to be treated with some sort of dignity even before a well-earned flogging, everyone wishes to see justice done to himself and others, even when one suffers from it. But what does a good education comprise? What is dignity, and what does it demand? What is justice in a person, in a state, in a system of laws? How does knowledge of these things constrain the behavior of persons and institutions? Such debates do in fact take place among us all today, perhaps in the arena of journalism if not in philosophy. De Monticelli's book provides a means to restore the axiological underpinnings of careful moral debate that have been neglected or undermined by a century of indifferent sophistic foxes.