

Review of: Moral Perception and Particularity By Lawrence A. Blum; Cambridge University Press, 1994.

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Article:

This book consists of eleven chapters, nine of which were previously published in journals and anthologies. Only Chapter 1, an introduction, and Chapter 11, an essay on Carol Gilligan's 'two voices', appear here for the first time.

The essays span a period of fourteen years, though most have been published during the past seven years. Much of contemporary moral theory has been concerned with the battle between consequentialism (especially utilitarianism) and Kantianism. But Blum thinks that there is much common ground shared by these warring factions, and it is some of these shared assumptions that he wishes to dispute. These views are characterised as principle-based ethics, committed to the view that people's projects derive their legitimacy only by reference to an impartial perspective. Blum does not deny the importance of principles or impartiality, but he does deny their ubiquity. It is his contention that the impartialist perspective cannot account for certain elements of morality. There is a kind of plurality that utilitarianism and Kantianism miss.

Part I focusses on particularity. Blum frequently acknowledges the influence of Iris Murdoch on his thinking, and in Chapter 2 he argues that Murdochian reasons—acting from concern for a particular other person—have positive moral dimensions that cannot be accounted for by impartialist ethical theories. Chapter 3 explores the roles of moral judgement and perception of particulars in the moral life. Among other things, Blum argues that recognising given features of a situation as morally significant and knowing how to apply rules or principles are aspects of moral judgements that principle-based theories fail to account for.

The four chapters that constitute Part II take up Murdoch's challenge to provide ideals that exemplify moral excellence. Chapter 4, utilising the examples of Oskar Schindler (from Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*) and Magda Trocme (from Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*), distinguishes between moral saints and moral heroes and argues that there are irreducibly different kinds of moral excellence, each with its own psychology. When contemporary theorists discuss moral reasons for acting, they typically categorise them as either personal or impersonal. But in Chapter 5, Blum argues that some morally significant actions and motivations fit in neither of these categories; there are moral aspects to some carings that some theorists have not recognised. The moral exemplars discussed in Chapter 6 are persons who, at risk to their own well-being, rescued Jews during the Holocaust. Blum's principal claim here is that the notion of altruism is insufficient to express the moral accomplishments of these rescuers, and so a moral theory will have to be complex and pluralistic to do justice to these phenomena. In Chapter 7, Blum explores the connections between virtue and community, arguing that there are numerous ties between these two notions and that some forms of community are crucial to the maintenance of a moral psychology of excellence. Here Blum contends that the usual ways of conceiving certain actions as supererogatory distort the role that community can play in supporting virtue.

Part III, entitled 'The Morality of Care', is concerned primarily with theories of moral development. In Chapter 8, Blum provides an account of the virtue of compassion, arguing that it is more complex than is usually acknowledged. Chapter 9 argues that impartialist moral theories leave no room for the "care virtues" and that dominant developmental theories presuppose conceptions of morality that neglect these same virtues. Blum focusses on the moral development of children to make his case. In Chapter 10, he construes Gilligan as a critic of the impartialist conception of morality, and defends her morality of care against some of Lawrence Kohlberg's criticisms. Blum does not uncritically accept Gilligan's entire theory, however, and in Chapter 11 he suggests that she has a binary view of morality, pitting care against justice, responsibility against rights. To suppose that these notions are exhaustive, he argues, fails to do justice to "morally significant group identities".

Collections of previously published essays often either lack unity or are too repetitive. These essays are appropriately unified, and though there is some repetition, it is minimally annoying. This work expands on some of the themes developed in Blum's influential *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), but goes well beyond that book, especially in the discussions of moral excellence and moral psychology.

This is a complex book, and it raises important challenges to traditional moral theories. A fair evaluation of it, I believe, requires focussing on the details. This is rendered more difficult because there can be so many variations of impartialist theories, a fact of which Blum is acutely aware. To consider but one point, the ubiquity claimed by impartialist theories may be of different sorts. Strong ubiquity requires that any morally significant phenomena be explained or implied by an impartialist theory. By contrast, weak ubiquity merely requires that these phenomena be consistent with and not forbidden by an impartialist theory. Those claiming ubiquity of the latter sort do not pretend that their theories account for the whole of morality; but they do demand that any actions assessed positively at least be permitted by their theories. Clearly theories making these weaker claims will be more difficult to refute.

Philosophers who defend more traditional, principle-based moral theories should have a clear sense of just what sort of impartiality their theories demand before they read this book. They might then understand Blum's strategy as (roughly) having two parts: first, arguing that any adequate account of morality must be able to explain the significance of certain phenomena or satisfy certain conditions; and second, claiming that impartialist theories cannot explain these phenomena or satisfy the conditions. It is obvious, of course, that impartialists will reply either that the conditions need not be satisfied or that their theories can account for the phenomena. Taking the latter option, for example, they might argue that observing certain distinctions—between perfect and imperfect duties and between act and agent evaluations, for example—enables them to do justice to the phenomena in question. Blum is aware of these possibilities (see, for instance, pp. 39-40, 235-236) and many others, and thinks that they will not work. It is precisely at points like this that a fair evaluation requires judgments about the details.

Though I am inclined to defend some version of the more traditional theories of which Blum is so critical, I believe that this book is well-written and challenging. The chapters (4 and 6) detailing the importance of moral exemplars are especially enlightening. I think that all moral theorists, regardless of their preferences, will benefit from this work.