BOOK REVIEW


In this rare mixture of conservative anti-egalitarianism and Deweyan pluralism, James Gouinlock echoes John Dewey’s paean that philosophers must turn away from pseudo-problems manufactured by philosophers and toward pressing lessons and potentialities of mortal existence. “Moral philosophy,” he urges, “is at the service of the moral life” (p. 82). Its role is to discern the nature of the human moral condition, reflect on its lessons and possibilities, and give it intelligent direction by distinguishing suitable values. Gouinlock entreats:

> As professional philosophers engage topics in the field with ever more sophistication, their analyses recede ever further from vital subject matter, and their conclusions wither on the vine of inconsequence. . . . Moral philosophy. . . . has its *raison d’etre* . . . not to become sophisticated in the convolutions of technical articles, but to investigate the salient characteristics of the moral predicament and the resources to contend with them (p. 11).

Moral philosophy must rediscover the moral life if it is to proceed beyond the bankruptcy of Rawls, Gewirth, and most others. In contrast to these thinkers, James, Santayana, and Dewey are esteemed by Gouinlock for elucidating the “salient characteristics of the human scene” while rejecting the Janus faces of absolutism and relativism. They sought “to fortify practical effort” without pretending to possess a philosopher’s stone announcing omnicompetent rules or principles (p. 23). They thereby avoided the great vice of contemporary moral philosophy, the “quest for minute detail and impeccable accuracy in rules of conduct” (p. 21).

This vice in contemporary ethics is exemplified by “the is/ought menace” (p. 97). Whereas moral lessons and advocacies actually emerge through life experience, the “reason-besotted philosopher” acts as though moral positions are or may be taken up because they are “deductively related to verifiable propositions” (p. 97). Invariably the result is an *ad hoc* justification of pre-existing moral advocacies. Why, Gouinlock asks, do philosophers ignore their
own moral history, striving to “contrive a new argument, out of whole cloth”? (p. 98).

Perhaps philosophers harbor the notion that without their cerebrations life would become quickly barbarous. . . . We have moral communities that have endured by a variety of means – largely as a matter of the trials and errors embodied in custom. . . . Surely there is a role for sustained reflection to lend clarity and resource to this venture (pp. 98–99).

Philosophers need to turn from asking “What ought I to do?” and begin asking “What assumptions and methods will tend to adjust and reconcile human conflicts and bring welcome ends into existence?” (p. 130). The most fruitful way to contend with a moral situation is to consult with others rather than approaching deliberations solipsistically. We must rely on pooled, social intelligence, encouraging colloquy over soliloquy, in contrast with Kant’s supposition that “an ideal is worthy only if it can be universally accepted and practiced” (p. 137).

As mentioned at the outset, Gouinlock blends Deweyan pluralism with conservatism. Although there can be no single, correct theory to govern moral deliberations, he urges that a “convergence of moral advocacies” is aided by attempts at empirical confirmation of the descriptive elements of moral systems, especially their claims about human nature (pp. 316–317). Wherever a description of human nature seems relevant, Gouinlock’s anti-egalitarianism steps to the fore. This is troublesome due to the political slanting of his empirical sources and his questionable assumptions about learning and behavior.

Conservative sources provide the backdrop for the book’s descriptive claims, presumably in opposition to perceived liberal bias in the academy. Gouinlock throughout opposes Dewey’s entreaty not to mistake acquired social phenomena, like patriarchy, for manifestations of fixed nature. Gouinlock cites favorably The Bell Curve authors Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray without reference to their critics, such as Leon J. Kamin, who observed that the work repeatedly confuses correlation with causation. Murray’s own work purportedly shows that welfare cultivates irresponsibility because it is designed to “rescue individuals from the consequences of their acts” (p. 233). Thomas Fleming shows that a real family is a traditional nuclear family. Michael Levin offers “substantial scientific evidence” about “innate gender or racial [intellectual] differences” (p. 211). Steven Goldberg supports the plausibility “that male dominance is both universal and inevitable” so that laws demanding equality of representation are lamentable (p. 199 & 218). Thomas Sowell is cited to support Gouinlock’s claim that “all attempts at