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BOOK REVIEW

# Jan Narveson, *This is Ethical Theory*

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In *This is Ethical Theory*, Jan Narveson seeks to meet the needs of two different audiences. On the one hand, the book is a systematic introduction to ethics meant to be accessible to students with "no previous background in ethical theory" (p. ix). On the other hand, the book is an argument in favor of Narveson's own preferred theory, contractarianism, meant to be of interest to the professional reader. In parts 1 and 2 Narveson provides a general introduction to ethics; in parts 3 and 4 he presents his own view.

This overall structure has several virtues. It is of benefit to the novice that the author is open and honest about his convictions: This makes the book transparent and helps emphasize that ethical theory is not a subject fit for memorization, but a live and ongoing debate. At the same time, it benefits the professional philosopher that the author takes time to explain how he understands competing theories, and how he thinks these relate to each other and to his own views.

To utilize the structure to the fullest, Narveson endows the book with an intriguing narrative: His aim is to save moral realism, and to make the case that—in spite of allegedly widespread moral skepticism in both academia and the rest of the culture—"the Enlightenment view, as it has been called, looks pretty good" (p. 2). This purpose integrates well with the book's structure: Narveson first presents moral skepticism, then surveys different attempts at securing realism, then presents his own take on how realism can be secured. This narrative, combined with a witty and accessible writing style and real-life examples, lets *This is Ethical Theory* open on a promising note. Sadly, however, the book does not realize its full potential. Though it offers a good exposition and defense of contractarianism, it has many shortcomings as an introduction to ethics.

A first problem is the book's steep start. Narveson starts "Part 1: Metaethics," 115 pages, with an elaborate discussion of the relationship between metaethics and

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normative ethics, and presents and criticizes two views in detail: intuitionism and emotivism. Contentwise, this section is solid, but a reader with "no previous background in ethical theory" is likely to have a hard time understanding the issues at stake. In particular, Narveson's discussion of the difference between reportive, stipulative, and theoretical definitions, and of the Open Question Argument, stand out as overly difficult.

Narveson explicitly writes that metaethics is about taking a "step back" from ethics (p. 19). It is hard, however, to take a step back before one has been up front. To some extent, Narveson accomodates this by frequently pointing forward, but it is not unlikely that the "metaethical" question that will be made most vivid to the student using *This is Ethical Theory* as a textbook is neither "Are moral claims truth-apt?" nor "Is intuitionism uncorrectable?" but "Why did I decide to study ethics?" This question is likely to be particularly pressing when Narveson writes, in the middle of the metaethics section: "Meanwhile, you may wonder what this all has to do with ethics. I sympathize."– yet fails to give any further explanation (p. 50).

"Part 2: Normative Morals: A Review of the Popular Theories," 50 pages, is easier to follow than Part 1, and I would recommend first-year students reading this book to start here. One virtue of this section is that it covers a wide range of views, and includes theories outside the mainstream, such as "Elitism" and "Bureaucratic Ethics." The wide scope comes at the expense of depth, however, when in only 50 pages, Narveson discusses and dismisses 17 different normative theories. Some of these theories are hardly given a fair hearing. This is particularly true of natural law theory and sentimentalism, which are each dealt with in only one page. In the case of sentimentalism, Narveson introduces it solely as David Hume's view, it is hardly argued for, and it is dismissed by the statement: "If morality came to that, that would be bad news. The cynics would have won the day. We have to do better" (p. 175). Here Narveson's reasoning is rushed, and he leaves the reader wondering what is missing, or worse, wondering how anyone in his right mind can be a sentimentalist. Unfortunately, the author often also leaves the reader in the dark concerning the relationship between the various theories he presents, and two theories—intuitionism and what Narveson calls the "conscience view"—appear to be almost identical without this being commented on. A notable exception to the general picture is the book's seven page treatment of utilitarianism, which is clear, accessible, and fair. Narveson provides us with a clue as to why: He used to be a utilitarian (p. 182).

A more general problem with Part 2, as well as with other parts, is a lack of clear and explicit micro-structure. Though the book is clear enough on a macro-level, several paragraphs begin with statements like "One more note about…" or "Instead, let's turn to…", and it is often difficult for the reader to see where the author is heading (examples from pp. 30–31). This gives the impression that rather than reasoning with the reader, Narveson serves the reader a series of disconnected points. The lack of a clear structure also leads to occasional repetition. Virtue ethics, for example, is treated in three different chapters: "Virtue," "Virtue, Again," and "Virtues—One Last Time" (pp. 148–151, 236–239, 255–257). This piecemeal treatment would have been justified if Narveson had been explicit about his choice

of structure, and each time had shed new light on the theory using newly covered material. In the absence of this, however, the presentation becomes unsystematic.

In "Part 3: Normative Morality: A Theory," 50 pages, Narveson presents and defends his own view. This is the most engaging part of the book, and Narveson makes a solid, although not unproblematic, case for contractarianism. Contractarianism, as Narveson defends it, is a theory that reconciles central aspects of both egoism and deontology. The contractarianism that Narveson defends is egoistic insofar as it holds that what every agent has most reason to do is to promote his or her own good, on a desire-satisfactionist view of goodness. This egoistic fundament is moderated, however, by certain moral restrictions, and what is right, Narveson argues, is "to do what is best for each person, *if* each other person does it too" (p. 208). To explain the appeal of this position, Narveson presents and discusses in detail the contractarian view on violence. Although it might, in isolated cases, benefit an agent to be violent, inflicting violence is, in Narveson's view, immoral. The reason why is neither that agents have an independent reason to be concerned with the well-being of others, nor that agents have deontological duties to refrain from violence, but that it would benefit the agent herself if everyone, herself included, refrained from initiating its use. If everyone honored a contract where no-one initiates violence, it is true that the agent would lose her right to initiate violence, and thus would fail to gain what she would have gained in being violent. At the same time, however, she would avoid being the victim of violence initiated by others, and this benefit, Narveson argues, would greatly outweigh the benefits of being permitted to be violent. This makes the non-violence contract a rational contract for everyone to enter, and the moral law, in Narveson's view, is a contract of this kind.

There are several issues that may be raised in response to Narveson's contractarianism. One issue is whether the contractarian approach to ethics renders it true, as Narveson suggests, that we only have negative moral rights. Narveson holds that positive moral rights—such as the right to be helped when in need—are such that "the able and industriously lucky" might not rationally support them, and that this is sufficient to falsify them as binding moral rights. The issue of positive versus negative rights, however, is discussed in more detail in other of Narveson's works, most prominently *The Libertarian Ideal* (1988) and *You and the State* (2008), and will not be pursued here.

What will be pursued here, however, is Narveson's discussion of why one should choose to be moral, granted the egoistic foundation of his view. The problem is this: If the satisfaction of one's own desires is the ultimate good, then why should one not abandon the moral contract and follow one's desires in cases where these are in conflict? Sadly, Narveson's argument against full-blown egoism is weak. He claims that "if some see that they should ignore or circumvent the rules when that is how they are generated, that's bad," that egoism is "a bad idea," and that things would go "very badly indeed" if egoism were practiced (p. 201). This is not likely to move the egoist, however, since the egoist does not see the well-being of others as independently reason-giving. Narveson further argues that breaking moral rules does not pay, since few will cooperate with rule breakers (p. 224). This is not likely to move the egoist either, however, since it is consistent with egoism to take into

consideration how others will react to rule breaking. Finally, Narveson argues that the egoist, now referred to as the "immoralist," would want others to be moral, yet is caught in an inconsistency since he could not consistently wish morality to be followed "one hundred percent for in that case the immoralist himself would be one of those caught in the net of enforcement" (p. 211). It seems easy for the egoist or immoralist to claim, however, that he does not want 100 percent compliance, but 99.9 percent compliance. Why should the egoist want 100 percent compliance if this does not benefit him? Why is wanting 99.9 percent compliance inconsistent? Narveson does not address these worries, which is unfortunate, since Narveson's theory, at its core, is an egoistic theory held back by contractarian moral constraints.

To accommodate parts of Narveson's view, an egoist could say that although contractarianism fails to be a binding ethical theory, it might work in a political context where there is a rule-enforcing sovereign that makes sure it is in no-one's interest to break the rules. Narveson briefly discusses this view, with emphasis on Thomas Hobbes' similar suggestion. Narveson's argument against Hobbes, however, is gravely inapt: "The problem with the idea is, in a nutshell, that sovereigns are untrustworthy and expensive" (pp. 206–07). It might well be true that sovereigns are untrustworthy and expensive. That, however, is beside the point. The point is that Narveson's theory—granted that it is based on desire-satisfactionist egoism—has a problem accounting for why agents should choose to be moral in cases where this does not benefit them.

In the final part of *This is Ethical Theory*, "Part 4: Happiness, Living Well, and Doing Well," 22 pages, Narveson discusses the nature of well-being. This is a straight-forward and easy to follow exposition of the major views. Two things about this part are puzzling, however: For one, it is unclear why well-being is treated at the end of the book, in conjunction with Narveson's own view. This is a surprising choice since Narveson maintains—in contrast to most of the other theorists he treats—that well-being is irrelevant to morality. Narveson is a subjectivist about well-being but an objectivist about morality: Whereas he claims that "What is the best life for you … is *your* question. Perhaps only you can answer it," he holds that morality—understood as a rule-regulating contract made by rationally selfish agents—binds you regardless of your desires (p. 268). The second puzzling thing is that Part 4 ends with a suggestion, unsupported by reasons, that well-being is not only distinct from morality, but that it might not matter much at all. Narveson claims that our lives might not matter much since they occupy just a small fraction of cosmic time, and then moderates himself saying that even if we shall soon die, we might "prefer to have lived the better life if we can" (pp. 271–72). This ending leaves the reader in mid-air, wondering if Narveson—during the process of writing the book—lost his initial enthusiasm for ethics.

Sadly, the reader is also at times left with the impression that *This is Ethical Theory* is a rushed work. John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is introduced as *Essay on Liberty*; Immanuel Kant is introduced as Emmanuel Kant (pp. 14, 31). Several central works—such as G. E. M. Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," Alasdair MacIntyre's "The Nature of the Virtues," Kai Nielsen's "Why Should I be Moral? Revisited," and David Wiggins' "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life"—are referred to, not where they were originally published, but as they appear in the 1995

edition of Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber's anthology *20th Century Ethical Theory*.

In spite of its virtues, *This is Ethical Theory* is a problematic book: It is sometimes hard to follow and it fails to provide a fair treatment of several central ethical positions. These are serious vices for an introduction to ethics – perhaps especially for one with the ambitious title *This is Ethical Theory*. Although *This is Ethical Theory* provides a fine introduction to contractarianism, it does not measure up—neither in relevance, accessibility, nor rigor—to Narveson's earlier works.