# INTRODUCTION:
## THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRADITION
## AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

### John J. Drummond
*Fordham University*

Ethics as a philosophical discipline is back in vogue in the English-speaking world. Ever since the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*[1] moral philosophy has undergone a remarkable resurgence. One need only to review job advertisements over the last several years to note how great is the percentage of available positions in philosophy devoted to ethics. Courses in ethics and a concentration on "values" have been revived as centerpieces of liberal education. This development was spurred not only by Rawls and his successors, but by our need to respond to the various ethical issues posed by the technological explosion of the last century. Indeed, we have seen the rise of whole new fields of "applied ethics," such as bioethics and environmental ethics. Against the background of this revival, one of the central aims of this handbook is to show the great fertility of the phenomenological tradition for the study of ethics by collecting a set of papers on the contributions to ethical thought by major phenomenological thinkers. Most of the chapters in the book, therefore, sketch the thought of the major ethical thinkers in previous generations of the phenomenological tradition and direct the reader toward the most relevant primary and secondary materials. Other chapters sketch more recent developments in various parts of the world, and three chapters explore the relations between phenomenology and the dominant normative approaches in contemporary moral philosophy.

A chief contribution of Rawls's work was to shatter the stranglehold of utilitarianism, especially on discussions of public policy, and to create the space for the re-emergence of deontological and virtue approaches to ethics. In the non-English-speaking world, however, phenomenological thinkers had long developed views that challenged utilitarianism and that pointed to new developments in moral philosophy. But few of these thinkers engaged ethical or metaethical theory as it was developed in the "analytic" tradition. The same is true for English-speaking

---

[1] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

1

moral philosophers; they took no notice of developments in phenomenology. Given the radical divide for much of the last century between English-speaking analytic philosophers and German-, French-, and Spanish-speaking phenomenologists, this is no surprise. Another central aim of this work, therefore, is to point to those places where these different moral philosophies can be brought into fruitful relations. Insofar as the book achieves its aims, we hope not only to introduce non-phenomenologists to this rich tradition, but to assist students of phenomenology in preparing for those positions in which they will be asked to teach moral philosophy.

Relating moral philosophy as done in the phenomenological tradition to the ethics done in the analytic tradition is challenging because the two traditions have tended to approach moral philosophy from different perspectives. We should note in this regard that the terms "ethics" and "moral philosophy" can be understood in different senses and in different dimensions. Both the term "ethics" and its cognates and the term "morality" and its cognates are somewhat problematic. They are used in different senses by different authors, both within and without the phenomeno-logical tradition. Some use the term "ethics" in an Aristotelian sense to address the teleological concern with the development of an individual agent's character and the realization of a good life for that agent. The term "morality" and its cognates is, on the other hand, used to refer to actions and the deontological concern with the obligations and norms governing actions.[2] Others use the term "ethics"—as in "utilitarian ethics" or "deontological ethics"—to refer to the rules and principles governing action, reserving the Humean term "moral" to refer to the human being as "born for action,"[3] as a moral agent. The differences in usage, in other words, are mirror images of one another. In this introduction the terms "ethics" and "morality" will be used more or less interchangeably, for it is more important to clarify the different dimensions of ethics and ethical reflection.

The terms "ethics" and "morality" can be thought to operate in three dimensions. The first is that of everyday moral experience. This dimension includes our ordinary decision-making regarding actions affecting both ourselves and others, as well as our reactions to, our attitudes about, and our judgments concerning ourselves and others and the actions we and they commit or omit. These actions, reactions, attitudes, and moral judgments are categorially formed. Persons and actions appear to us as and are judged actually to be good, noble, fine, virtuous, generous, honest, just, patriotic, compassionate, hospitable, friendly, bad, base, evil,

---

[2] Paul Ricoeur is a good example of a phenomenologist who uses these terms in this manner; cf. his *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 169–71.

[3] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* in his *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals,* ed. P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 5.

wicked, vicious, petty, rancorous, spiteful, inhospitable, mean-spirited, treacherous, traitorous, and so on, precisely because persons decide to undertake actions insofar as those actions are noble or fine, base or wicked, and so forth. There is nothing particularly philosophical about this ordinary moral experience. All of us, no matter how untutored in philosophy, undergo these everyday, ordinary experiences.

The categoriality of first-order experience, however, makes possible a critical reflection both on the actions themselves and on the moral judgments we make about them and their agents. We can reflect on the rightness or wrongness of actions and on the correctness or incorrectness of our appraisals of them and of their agents. This ethical reflection occurs in the second dimension of ethics. It is here that normative questions arise, for we reflect both on the principles by which we determine the rightness or wrongness of actions and on the evidence that attaches to our judgments about actions and their agents. It is in this second dimension and in respect to the principles governing actions that the philosophical discipline of ethics as ordinarily understood in the contemporary world is located. The two dominant moral theories of the 20th century, utilitarianism and deontologism, have been concerned to identify precisely those considerations that allow us to determine the rightness or wrongness of our actions and the moral praiseworthiness or moral blameworthiness of agents.

It is in this second dimension also, but now in respect to the evidence that attaches to our judgments about agents and their actions, that we make yet a further distinction. We can consider evidence in the mediated sense of reason-giving, of appealing to principles and of offering justifying arguments. Such a consideration leads us into questions concerning deontic logic. But we can also consider evidence in the intuitive sense, i.e., in the sense of our direct apprehension of moral goods and of our fulfilled judgments about moral agents and their actions. We can reflect on and criticize the principles themselves to which we have appealed in justifying our actions, the values we have sought to realize in our lives, and the emotions and attitudes that have governed our ethical relationships both to ourselves and with others. This kind of reflection discloses for us the possibilities of either confirming our ethical standpoint or reforming our lives in accordance with principles, values, emotions, and attitudes now reflectively and evidentially recognized to be more adequate in governing our everyday attitudes, actions, and judgments.[4] It is this focus on the agent, her emotions and attitudes, her dispositions to act in certain ways, and her character as a whole and as manifest in her actions that is

---

[4] James G. Hart speaks of this "taking stock" of our moral lives and their significance as the "ethical reduction"; cf. his *The Person and the Common Life: Studies in a Husserlian Social Ethics* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 26–34.

characteristic of virtue ethics, an approach that in the late 20th century made a comeback in moral philosophy.

The second dimension of ethics points us toward yet a third dimension that completes the turning of our attention to the agent. In this dimension we investigate the nature of moral agency itself. We reflect upon the nature of the everyday moral experience itself, the manner in which we experience moral categories, the nature of the emotions and of evaluative experience, the nature of action, and so forth. In this kind of reflection, we turn properly to moral philosophy in something like the Aristotelian and Humean senses, the investigation of the human as agent. Questions concerning moral epistemology and moral psychology come to the fore. Whereas in the second dimension of ethics we reflect upon what it is to be a *moral* agent, in the third dimension we reflect upon what it is to be a moral *agent*. We see this development not only in Aristotle and Hume but also in Kant, in the impoverished noncognitivist "metaethics" of the early part of the 20th century, and in the phenomenological tradition, where it is developed, as it was in Kant, from a transcendental perspective.

When I speak here of a "transcendental perspective," I mean only that the phenomenological thinkers in question move beyond merely psychological accounts and consider moral phenomena in their relation to a subject of experience that grasps or discloses or fashions the moral significance of things, situations, actions, and agents. I do not intend to imply that all the thinkers in the phenomenological tradition are committed to some form of transcendental idealism—for that is clearly false—or that they all have a sense of an active, functioning subjectivity that brings moral phenomena to awareness. For some phenomenological value theorists, this claim means only that they have a sense of the intentional correlation between value-consciousness and the value as apprehended; for them, consciousness remains largely passive in the apprehension of values whose existence and sense are independent of consciousness. This sense of "transcendental" is, to that degree, merely incipient or "naive" and, at least sometimes, not explicitly acknowledged, or even denied in favor of "realism." For other phenomenologists, the "transcendental perspective" leads to a reflection on the subject's activity in constituting values or to a focus on the correlation between willing and the willed.

The threefold distinction among the dimensions of ethics is the parallel in the moral order to distinctions Husserl makes in the cognitive order among our everyday cognitions, our critical or logical reflection thereon, and our phenomenological reflection. Our everyday cognitions are directed straightfor-wardly to objects and states of affairs; similarly, our everyday moral experiences are aimed straightforwardly at goods as ends, at actions, and at agents and patients. Critical reflection, on the other hand, is directed toward the veridicality or non-veridicality of appearances and the truth or falsity of judgments. Our attention is

turned to the sense of the object present in our experiencing of it, and we are concerned in this critical attitude to establish the correctness or incorrectness of that sense. This critical attitude can be generalized into what we might call the "logical" attitude wherein we are concerned not only with the truth or falsity of individual propositions, but with the logical correctness or incorrectness of a system of meanings, e.g., an argument or a theory. While this "logical reflection" can be carried out in an abstract matter divorced from the concern with truth, as a rule it serves the interests of our first-order experience, serving to demonstrate the truth of systems of belief. In a similar manner, ethical or moral reflection can be directed to the rightness or wrongness of actions and the virtue or vice of agents. More broadly, however, our ethical reflection can be directed to the whole system of our actions, to our entire life and the moral meaning or significance it has for us. In this sense, both critical and ethical reflection are aimed at the sense or meaningfulness of the things with which they concern themselves. Finally, phenomenological reflection, whether directed to cognitive or moral experiences, is concerned with the acts, the experiences, in which things, situations, actions, and agents disclose themselves in determinate ways. It is concerned, that is, with the subjective achievements in which the meaningfulness of things is disclosed.

Although phenomenological reflection considers the questions of moral epistemology and moral psychology from an implicit or explicit transcendental perspective, its considerations cannot be divorced from the kind of ethical activity and reflection that occurs in the first and second dimensions. Phenomenological reflections are directed precisely to our everyday moral experience and its categorial structures, to our everyday actions as they are categorially structured in their performances, to the judgments and evidence involved in our critical reflections on everyday experience, and to the norms developed in order to guide our everyday actions.

Apart from the various forms of "applied ethics," contemporary ethics focuses on the rival normative positions represented by utilitarianism, deontologism, and, to a lesser extent, virtue ethics. Contemporary utilitarianism after Mill is characterized by the view that the rightness or wrongness of actions is determined by appeal to the greatest happiness principle. Happiness, on this view, is defined as utility or benefit understood in a broad sense to include not only sensory pleasures (as in utilitarianism's earliest form), but also such goods as knowledge, friendship, autonomy, and achievement. The greatest happiness principle requires us to undertake the action that produces the greatest happiness for the collection of persons affected (or likely to be affected) by our action. On this view, reason's role in our evaluations is the "scientific" calculation of the consequences of our actions. Judgments about the worth of the states of affairs an agent seeks to realize in her actions are referred exclusively to feelings of pleasure and pain.