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ON THE VERY IDEA OF 'MODERN' MORAL THINKING

Marjaana Kopperi (1998): Right Actions and Good Persons. Controversies between Eudaimonistic and Deontic Moral Theories. Academic Dissertation, Helsinki. Ashgate, Aldershot. 131+vii pages.

Marjaana Kopperi's small book deals with a large topic – the relation and "controversies between eudaimonistic and deontic moral theories". At the heart of this debate lies the question whether right actions or good persons should be the centre of our ethical thinking – at least this is what Kopperi tells us. Throughout the book the reader is told an old and familiar story: the myth of the battle between ancient and modern ethics (1 ff.). The modern approach is described as having two characteristic features: "its action-guiding nature and its universalistic justification" (2). The ancient one is characterised as an "agent-centered approach" (ibid.), its main feature being that "the agent's concern for her life as a whole is regarded as the starting point for all moral inquiry" (ibid.).

The defenders of ancient ethics should be dead and gone, but – as Kopperi says – modern moral theory has come under attack by some philosophers who criticise the main features of modern moral thinking and try to develop a "consistent and acceptable alternative" (ibid.).

Kopperi's task is not a historical one. She does not ask whether the parties present a correct interpretation of the ancient philosophers' ethical thinking. Her "aim is rather to examine the crucial distinguishing features between these forms of moral reasoning *as seen by contemporary critics of modern ethics*" (3 – my emphasis). This is the first main feature of Kopperi's strategy. The second one is that she takes the crucial features of modern moral theory (universalistic justification and act-centredness) and the main outfit of ethical thinking under these presuppositions as given. From this perspective she formulates some questions which deliver the adequacy-conditions for ethical theory: "It can be asked, for instance, what it actually means to begin ethical reflection from the point of view of the agent and her good life. What is the good life that the critics of modern ethics want to place at the centre of moral theory? Is it even possible to offer a specific account of the good human life? And if so, how can such an account be justified? Is it based on culturally and historically developed interpretations or on universalistic assumptions of some kind? One can also ask how people are to be motivated to accept and adopt such a view?" (2).

According to Kopperi answering these questions "cannot be avoided" (ibid.) if we want to determine whether the agent-centered approach really is an alternative to modern moral thinking. So her strategy is to "examine how the promoters of agent-based ethical views deal with these questions" (3). And her "central thesis is that critics of modern forms of ethics do not succeed in answering these questions" (ibid.). In Kopperi's eyes these critics "fail to provide an *appropriate* account of the good human life and to define ethical theory in agent-centered terms. In other words, they fail to formulate an ethical view that would clearly give priority to the notion of the good life in moral theory. Moreover, *attempts to justify morality by binding it to a historical, social or cultural context also faces serious problems*" (ibid. – my emphasis).

Kopperi's book is written in a clear style and her argumentation is straightforward. In the second chapter she elaborates the differences between ancient ethics as understood by their present defenders and 'modern' moral thinking. In the third chapter different attempts to give a foundation of morality based on the notion of the good life are discussed – Kopperi deals with the theories of Robert Louden, Martha

Nussbaum, William Galston and Charles Taylor. In the fourth chapter the focus of her arguments lies on the concept of justification. The later Rawl's political thinking is taken as target in examining the question whether we can "tie the justification of moral and political norms to history and culture" (ibid.). In the final chapter of her book Kopperi explicates why "the modernist way of moral thought is still worth defending" (4) and – at the end of her book in a stronger tone – "still the best possible way to think about morality" (120).

Kopperi presents her diagnosis and her arguments in a clear, concise and non-pretentious way. Although there are neither subtle details of analysis nor any new arguments, nor a thesis which could surprise anybody, to be found in it, Kopperi's book is interesting in two respects. Her diagnosis and her way of argumentation is a diagnosis of a philosophical misunderstanding on the one hand and a misdiagnosis of ethical thinking on the other hand. Kopperi's way of thinking is part of the philosophical main-stream and her unpretentiouness and the clearness and plainness of her arguments makes visible the main features of current 'modern' moral thinking. Kopperi's argumentation is of philosophical importance because her mistakes exemplify a type. In the following I will try to discuss briefly the main problems one could or should have with her defence of 'modern' moral thinking.

(1.) First of all, Kopperi is right in showing that some contemporary philosophers who try to restore eudaimonistic theories are impressed by the main features of modern moral thinking she has identified. With respect to Louden or Rawls this comes as no surprise since both belong to the other camp and want to add aspects of ancient ethics to the modern approach trying to overcome some defects in modern moral thinking. But for sure Nussbaum's and Taylor's motivation may be different, at least in those texts of the former Kopperi takes into account. This fact is important for the way Kopperi starts her misdiagnosis, because she finds some aspects in the accounts of the critics of modern moral thinking she can work with in a characteristic way. Since she has not asked whether the present defenders of ancient ethical thinking have a correct understanding of the historical positions, Kopperi has not seen that these contemporary accounts are infected by features which stem from modern moral thinking. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that she can show aspects of these theo-

ries which are open to objections coming from a defender of modern moral thinking. But this is only so because these runs a dialectic between modern moral thinking and modern eudaimonistic accounts. Kopperi has not taken into account positions which are free from such modern influences. Since she evades this conflict, one of the main problems with her argument as a whole does not come into view. Her standard of justification is absolute universalisation, which can only be given in a context free manner. But this standard simply is out of reach for ancient ethics. Eudaimonistic ethical theory is measured by an incommensurable set of conditions of adequacy – no surprise that it cannot fulfil them. Most of the objections Kopperi presents have one of the following structures:

- standards of a cultural tradition are confronted with ethical standards of other cultures
- members of a culture who are in disagreement are forced to accept the standards of their culture (these standards are doubtful from the point of view of another tradition)
- members of a culture, who cannot decide for themselves, are treated paternalistically according to the standards of their culture and these standards are problematic for members of other cultures

For sure, these conflicts raise serious questions for present ethical thinking. But it is doubtful whether these kinds of conflict should be the prime cases on which we base our ethical theory. As nearly everybody knows, 'hard cases make bad laws', and focussing on these extreme cases leads to the idea that only pure practical reason can deliver universal justifications which can handle these problems. But it is one of the central insights of Aristotelian ethics that practical reason has a different structure than theoretical reason. Practical reason cannot start from nowhere and develop an account of the good life for 'moral strangers' but has to start from within a shared culture. This shared praxis is open to critical reflexion and to revision but there must be a common ground. If it comes to these hard cases, listed above, there either is a common practice in form of social or political relations, or the question simply is whether we are allowed – according to our own standards – to intervene. This is a hard question, for sure. But a contextualist conception does not exclude the possibility of intervention, although it denies that the other party

has made something wrong in an objective sense, where objectivity is understood as being free form any context.

(2.) Secondly, Kopperi's way of arguing is not fair in two respects. On the one hand she seems to presuppose that modern moral theory has been successful in dealing with those hard cases which ancient ethics and their current defenders are confronted with. But here one should be skeptical. There is a difference between claiming to have a foundation of universal human rights and giving a foundation for them. Therefore we should be aware that an ethical or political argument which simply takes universal human rights for granted without having such a justification at hand is in no better situation that those defenders of eudaimonistic approaches who accept the context-boundedness of their ethical claims but decide to intervene into another context nevertheless. One could even say that the latter are doing consciously what the former are doing in an ideological or self-deceiving way. There is no philosophical account at hand which would be able to justify the strong theoretical and material claims modern ethics has formulated. Thus it is simply not convincing to presuppose that modern moral theory has been successful in giving a philosophical foundation for itself.

On the other hand Kopperi has not asked why there is this comeback of eudaimonistic approaches. If she had done that she would have found a lot of hard cases for modern moral theory which come from bioethics or politics. In these areas there a problems which cannot be answered adequately by relying on a purely formal account of autonomy or a subjectivistic account of the good (e.g. in form of preferences). There are hard cases for eudaimonistic theories, too. Nobody will deny this. But there are hard cases for modern moral theory as well. And these are missing in Kopperi's book. So her comparison cannot be convincing because Kopperi's philosophical thinking suffers from a one-sided diet here. But there is a deeper problem in Kopperi's way of posing the questions. She compares ancient ethics and modern moral thinking on the level of validity claims – universal justification versus contextual boundedness. By doing this she cannot see where the real differences and conflicts are.

(3.) There is a deeper motive for defending ancient ethical thinking against modern moral theory than the success in dealing with hard cases. This deeper motive lies in the implicit or explicit analysis

of the nature of practical reason and justification in ethics. Kopperi herself analyses in the second chapter of her book the main differences between both approaches and concludes: "what is crucial, as already stated above, is not the *scope* of the concern but the way people are supposed to reason in moral matters" (21). But in the next sentence she forgets this insight and comes back to the material claim that ancient ethical theories are "based on the notion of the good life" (ibid.). This is true, but not the decisive point. The important point is, that practical reason is, according to ancient ethical theory, an internal affair. Justifications are given always from within an ethical praxis. Modern moral theory, on the other side, is dazzled by the methodology of natural sciences. They try to reach an objective, context-free justification for morality itself which allows for absolute universal claims. The success of the natural sciences has impressed modern philosophers in two ways. On the one hand they hoped that this method of gaining knowledge would be able to replace religious justifications without limiting claims of validity. On the other hand the rise of modern science has led to a new understanding of (human) nature which seemed to destroy one central element in the ancient ethics' basis.

(4.)As Kopperi says: "With the progress of natural science the teleological approach as an explanation for the natural world lost its intelligibility" (27). But this implies a misdiagnosis of ancient ethics, projecting the modern needs of justification backwards. In Aristotelian ethics, human nature is not – as McDowell has shown – something which is outside of the ethical and which gives our ethical claims an external foundation. The internalistic account simply has no need for such an externalistic basis. Only if we presuppose scientistic naturalism we have to think that human nature, detached from conceptions of the good life, has to have an independent justification. But this is so only in the framework of modern ethical theory which needs justification from outside the ethical. Therefore it comes as no surprise that Kopperi herself tries to show that we can have a conception of "basic interests common to all human beings" (111) which are independent from any conceptions of the good life and can be defined in purely descriptive ways. Her way of avoiding a purely subjectivistic or formal account is a clear example of the way modern moral theory understands ethical

thinking and universal justification in general. "General facts about the needs and interests of human beings" (113) which can be grasped from sideways on, to use McDowell's phrase, have to be the basis for modern moral theory. But this is illusionary: On the one hand, "necessities of life" (ibid.) themselves, without being connected to a conception of a good life, cannot be justifications for ethical claims. And on the other hand our ethical thinking simply does not need such an external justification. There is an irreducible "arbitrariness of all moral norms" (119), but we have to acknowledge this fact. It simply shows that our ethical worldview is *ours* and is in permanent need of critical reflection from within. Understanding this as arbitrariness only shows that our ethical praxis is described from an external point of view. But from there ethics does not come into view at all.

Kopperi's book is helpful in two ways. Firstly, she criticises correctly some modern defenders of ancient ethics who try to give justifications which are impressed by the demands of modern moral theory on the one hand and incompatible with ancient ethics on the other hand. This hidden influence poses a dilemma for many theories: either they try to give strong justifications which cannot be given within the framework of ancient ethics at all. Or they acknowledge that such strict universal justifications are out of reach and overemphasise the relativistic and internal structures. Both reactions are implicit acknowledgements of the basic needs of modern moral thinking – the former in trying to fulfil them, the latter in emphasising the difference and ignoring the potential for critical reflection an internalistic account can and should have. This impact of modern moral thinking on current defenders of eudaimonistic ethics leads to theories which are either inconsistent or ethically weaker than necessary (or acceptable). In both cases it results in ethical theories which are – as Kopperi shows – proper targets for defenders of modern moral thinking.

Secondly, Kopperi's own thinking is a clear example of the basic features of 'modern' moral theory and makes visible the differences between modern and ancient ethics on the one hand. On the other hand it is a fine example of modern moral thinking itself, its misunderstandings of ancient ethics and its misconception of practical reason. Demonstrating all this makes Kopperi's book an interesting and helpful contribution to current ethical philosophy.