***Being Good*, by Simon Blackburn (Oxford, 2001)**

Introductions to ethics sometimes take the form of run-throughs of the views of traditional moral philosophers. In this way, we get outlines of what Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill and others said about ethical matters. Such works, like Richard Norman's *The Moral Philosophers,* or D.D. Raphael's *Moral Philosophy,* are perhaps too close to doing a course for many. But another kind of book can be written which tries to present ethical philosophy as something that might be expected to be part of anyone's general knowledge, particularly anyone who was at all concerned about the kind of life they could be living. Such a book is much harder to write, as it has to make moral philosophy seem relevant to anyone, and it also has to be written well, that is, with a certain style. Writing in a certain style does not mean writing with a noticeable style. This may be a fault of Bernard Williams' otherwise excellent *Morality,* he finds it difficult to restrain his elegant prolixity. It is as if we want Graham Greene to write the book, in a prose that we barely notice. Perhaps this is the book that Simon Blackburn has written. It is called *Being Good*.

Like many who write introductions to ethics, Blackburn starts by considering the threats to ethical thought. These are many. Blackburn identifies a magical seven and breezes through them, leaving ethics standing at the end of it. He stands up to the modern demon of relativism, a natural outcrop of our modern pluralism. Unlike, say, the Victorians, we now know about tons of moral views around the planet. How can any one of them be better than others? Blackburn tries to comfort us with the thought that although there are many rules, every culture feels compelled to have a rule. A culture without any rules would not be a culture, but a chaos. This partly rebuts the relativist, but not

wholly. So, he points to what might be seen as common values, such as the idea that no one should enslave another. But we know that some people, even now, think slavery is alright, just as some people think that killing people is alright. Our worry is what to say when faced with someone who does not seem to care about morality at all, or people at all.

Blackburn notes that relativism seems to drift towards subjectivism, the idea that each person can have their own morality. Of course relativism seems to rest on subjectivism, so subjectivism is the real enemy. Subjectivism seems to be against moral facts, and moral truth. It suggests that morality is just a matter of *opinion* or *feeling*. Initially, Blackburn seems to have no answer to it, telling us he will come back to it at the end, so we will as well.

He sees evolutionary theory as a threat to morality, with its starling claims – epitomized perhaps by Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* – that there is no *real* altruism, that everything acts in its own self-interest because its genes are acting in their own self-interest. Dawkins thought that people were just vehicles that genes had cleverly evolved for the prosperity of genes, so that morality, which seems to involve altruism, was some kind of fraud. Blackburn points out that explaining why we are altruistic does not show why altruism does not exist. On the contrary, it shows why it does exist. This seems fair. An evolutionary account of the moral 'ought' is enlightening, but it does not therefore seem to undermine the force of this 'ought'. The evolutionary theorist says we have morality probably because it aids survival. Yes, but it does not mean that we obey the moral ought just because it aids survival. I may feel I ought to fight for my country, which will reduce my chances of survival. It can still be true and interesting

that the human race will do better if people think like me, but that is not why I do this. It is not my *reason* for doing it.

Having hopefully made some room for ethics, Blackburn seems keen to give us an ethic, something that will, in his words, 'determine our attitude to life and what makes it worth living'. In Part Two of his book, he slowly builds towards a conception of the good life. In this, his conception of ethics, like that of many modern philosophers, has moved beyond a conception of what is simply *moral*. Morality is seen as concerned with duty, what I am obliged to do, and what others are obliged to do, and not do, to me. The *moral* words in this respect are *ought, duty, right* and *wrong*. But the key word for ethics is 'good', as per the title of Blackburn's book. And if one takes this view of ethics, i.e. how can I be good, other moral words hove into view, words that point to what are called the *virtues,* words like honest, brave, kind, charitable, patient, temperate & so on. Not all philosophers see the problems of ethics and morality in this way, but many do. For some, the foundations of ethical thinking are still the moral ideas of obligation and duty. They acknowledge the importance of virtues, but think their moral content must ultimately pay out in terms of duties and obligations. Blackburn is not in this camp, and, as he tells us what being good means, he does not acknowledge that there is an underlying dispute here.

His discussion of the good life, starts with birth and death. He outlines what is known as a 'gradualist' position on abortion. This is the view that abortion in the early stages is probably fine but it becomes more problematic as the foetus begins to look more like a human being. This, of course, is only to skim the surface of the huge debate about abortion. Most opponents of abortion reject gradualism, seeing a foetus from conception as a person of moral

value. Blackburn clearly does not believe this, but does not wade into the debate.

He offers Stoical and stoical views about death. The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, argued that death does us no harm, so why worry about it. Blackburn, who does not believe in an after-life, is not entirely comforted by Epicurean stoicism. If death is not an evil, he wonders why killing should be. However, he is not opposed to euthanasia, if the alternative is terrible suffering. He seems suspicious of the various defences of it, however, such as the distinction between killing and letting die, and the question of what is the cause of what. He thinks these try to introduce some certainty into an area where there is none. He feels that in the end, it should 'be just a question of making sure that life, including the part of life that draws it to a close, goes better'. Again, as with the question of the morality of abortion, Blackburn is bound in the space he has given himself, to skim along.

He briefly raises the great philosophical question of the meaning of life. He accepts that viewed against the whole of time and space, human life can seem meaningless. He suggests we should therefore see it from a narrower perspective. One should simply ask whether life has a meaning now, to me. Does this sound too homely? Perhaps. Thomas Nagel once more bluntly pointed out that if my life does not matter against the whole of time and space, then it does not matter that my life does not matter against the whole of time and space. Perhaps this thought helps us better to consider things from a narrower perspective.

In considering the good life, he considers the utilitarian idea that happiness or pleasure should be maximised. Clearly, sensual pleasure is not enough for happiness. As Robert Nozick one

pointed out, a machine could be built to give you this, and you wouldn't want to be in it. So, some deeper happiness is sought for. And this cannot be, as the economists hope, maximising what people want. For people often want what will make them unhappy. Blackburn thus points us towards Aristotle's notion of happiness, which requires 'some correct relationship with our world'. For Aristotle, the happy man (and woman) pursues a life in keeping with their nature, so that in pursuing it, they *flourish*. Such a life is seen to involve such things as basic comforts, being rewarded for achievements, having friends, being in love. And it gets better if one has, in addition, honour and success, and is admired. It is a fundamentally *social* life, and one that also – because of our rational, intelligent natures – should involve intellectual activity. Blackburn, while admiring this outlook, is naturally (sic) suspicious of the references to nature given the 'plasticities' of modern life. We are reminded of the pluralism that threatened relativism and subjectivism.

Blackburn is not opposed to the utilitarian aim of maximising the general happiness. He thinks a world in which each person is given equal value and where the happiness of the majority is a target cannot be wholly misguided. He thinks it points to the centrality of *benevolence* to any ethical system. Overall, he thinks a form of *rule* or *indirect* utilitarianism is the most coherent shape of this philosophy. This is where we follow *rules* that have been seen to maximise happiness. This approach is aimed at avoiding some of the most egregious problems with a utilitarianism which claims that on each occasion we should aim to maximise happiness, the kind of view that is seen to lead to the hanging of the innocent man in order to please the mob. Far better to follow the rule that says that one should not generally

hang innocent men. Like many utilitarians, he wants to be critical of the notion of *rights*. He prefers a more communitarian view in which 'we' prevails over 'me'. He is uncomfortable with the image of people haggling over their respective rights, although he does not think he can show, as the utilitarian Jeremey Bentham once did, that talk of rights is entirely bogus.

In Part Three of his book, entitled Foundations, Blackburn is ready to sketch our the results of his ethical reflections. He starts by considering the role of reason in ethical thought. David Hume, the great 18th century Scottish philosopher, had argued that ethics cannot be based on reason, but must be grounded on what he called the *passions*. Blackburn seems sympathetic to this, and is therefore led to an ethical view guided ultimately by something akin to feeling. He ultimately doubts the Aristotelian vision, embodied in contemporary 'virtue ethics', that claims that a life based on reason and nature and virtue must lead to happiness. He doubts that living according to 'nature' could have all these benefits. And anyway, what is considered *natural,* and virtuous, is ultimately culturally determined. In a misogynist culture, it will be considered natural and virtuous for women to marry, have children and be quiet. The defender of virtue ethics may say that the virtuous person, employing reason, will see the faults of the misogynist culture, but there does not seem to be a guarantee of that. Even one's conception of the just is culturally determined.

Given this, he turns to perhaps the greatest attempt to base ethics on reason, that of the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Blackburn's Kant is the early one, of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* not the later one of interest to many modern Kantians, who addressed the role of virtue in ethics.

Blackburn's Kant is the one who proposed a single rule for ethics, grounded in reason. In acting, one should ask whether the principle of one's action could be followed by all rational agents. If this was seen to lead to contradiction, then one's principle was not a rational one, and should be rejected, as you were a rational being. For instance, could I act on the principle 'I will like when it suits me'. No, for if all did this, the practice of truth-telling would fail and with that the notion of lying would make no sense, so my principle, 'I will *lie* when it suits me' would make no sense.

Blackburn goes over various limitations of Kant's project. After all, my principle could be, 'Lie if it's too risky to tell the truth'. If everyone followed this principle, it is not clear that truth-telling and thus lying would become impossible, but one might still think it were immoral to lie just because it's risky. In any case, the idea that all of morality could be captured in a single rule does not seem likely.

Blackburn surveys the contractarian views of ethics that are similar to Kant's outlook. These include the views of the likes of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Rousseau, John Rawls and T.M. Scanlon. The overall idea is that ethics is based on some form of agreement between rational beings, largely acting in their own interests. I recognise a duty to you because I prefer that you have a similar duty to me. Scanlon suggests actions are wrong if they are disallowed by principles that no one could reasonably reject, if they were looking for principles to guide behaviour. Blackburn notes the difficulty with this as an account of ethical behaviour is that the nature of the contract formed would seem to be depend on the prior ethical views of the parties to the contract. It might be hoped that the parties to the contract bring nothing but *reason,* but this seems unrealistic. Or, the risk is that what seems

reasonable to one party to the contract may simply reflect their cultural presuppositions, e.g. a belief in the inferiority of women for example.

This leads Blackburn to a consideration of John Rawls' famous framing of the contractual act as taking place behind a so-called 'veil of ignorance'. That is, the parties to the contract have no idea where they will be placed in the society whose contract they are framing. In this way, perhaps, their prior values might be discounted, and they will seek an arrangement that leads to a 'pure' notion of justice. Blackburn points out that Rawls own view, that such reflection will lead to principles of justice that favour the worst-off, may still mean that from behind the veil of ignorance the parties to the contract have still reached a contract that presupposes a preference for a certain form of life.

However, he thinks that a search for a 'common point of view' is important to ethics and clearly thinks that some broadly contractarian view of ethics, perhaps allied with utilitarian views about maximising happiness, is the way forward. In this way, we might answer the relativist and the subjectivist by arriving at a form of life in which many, even the majority, flourish. He is hopeful for the human race and points to progress on such matters as equality of gender and sexual preference as evidence of our ability to come to wide agreement on what is good for mankind.

Having read Blackburn's book, you will have been introduced to a number of major ethical philosophers. You would not have an especially rigorous understanding of what they had said, even at an introductory level, so in this sense his book is not one kind of introduction to ethics. But it is a book that helps you to think

about ethical issues in an intelligent way and one which takes a positive view about the possibility of an ethical life. Like the ethics it recommends, it is reasonable and considerate to others. There are notable gaps and a great deal, such as the discussions of abortion and euthanasia, are skimmed over. There is, for instance, no real consideration of our ethical relationship to non-human animals, or to the environment. One of the risks of the contractarian view of ethics is that it does not make clear how one can have ethical relationships to those with whom one can form no contracts. Perhaps Blackburn is aware of this with his underlying sense that the dominant force behind ethics is benevolence, a feeling, rather than reason. Being good seems to involve caring about others, and really caring. Of course, in this, we are close to the religious idea that being good involves *loving* one another. Blackburn might not wish to go this far, and he is clearly not religious, but that is what we might ultimately be left with.