Ethics

An Economist Reads Philosophy

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Ethics as Social Science:
The Moral Philosophy of Social Cooperation
Leland B. Yeager
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When I first began to investigate Ayn Rand's ideas seriously, I was a graduate student studying economics. Economics being a type of applied utilitarianism, I supposed intuitively that if we formulated utilitarianism in a rational and individualistic manner, attending to the same facts of human nature and social interaction Rand attends to, we would have a philosophy that was very much like Objectivism in essentials. Now, in Leland B. Yeager's *Ethics as Social Science*, we have a serious attempt to lay out a utilitarianism of such a stripe. To me, it has shown both what was right about my grad-school intuitions, yet has equally confirmed the reasons why I consider myself an Objectivist and not simply an individualist utilitarian.

Why is a book putting forth a version of utilitarianism entitled *Ethics as Social Science*? Yeager (2001) explains: "Utilitarianism invokes social science and psychology to compare how well alternative sets of institutions and practices function" (143). Not all of ethics can be put on a scientific basis, however: Yeager accepts the "is-ought" gap and holds that ethics must rest on intuition (but the minimum possible). "If appeal to unprovable ultimate intuitions or emotions sounds fuzzy and unscientific, so be it; ethics does have such a component. However, appeals to intuition need not be *premature* and *promiscuous*"(32; emphasis in original).

Happiness, although somewhat undefinable, is the only plausible ultimate value. "If pressed to explain why happiness and misery are intrinsically good and bad, most people (or I, anyway) would merely

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say something to the effect that they just *are*" (30; emphasis in original). On this basis, most ethical questions are amenable to an objective style of analysis. Real-life disputes about ethics usually involve factual issues or inconsistencies between one's concrete and fundamental values. "Moral disagreement rarely boils down to undiscussable disagreement over fundamental value judgments"(39). Therefore, proceeding as if happiness is the objective good and logically analyzing values is a fruitful hypothesis, even though values are ultimately only "'quasi-objective'" (39).

Since individual happiness is at the center of morality, the Objectivist view of basic moral terms is essentially correct. "*Self-interest* is not the antithesis of morality" (36; emphasis in original). "Randian altruism" (which is "actually subordinating one's own values to the needs and wishes of other people, together with the perverse belief that such subordination is virtuous and ethically required") "implies other-directedness in the worst sense" (37). The only acceptable meaning of "altruism" is equivalent to David Kelley's egoistic conception of the virtue of benevolence (Kelley 1996). But this is essential if society is not to fall apart. "It is enough for a healthy society that individuals have genuine sympathy with small circles of relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, coupled with mostly passive goodwill toward humanity in general. Against this background of diffuse benevolence, the small circles within which special sympathy prevails will overlap in a network of direct and indirect sympathetic ties" (Yeager 2001, 166).

Yeager's argument largely concerns the methodological considerations involved in moral reasoning as such. In discussing human sympathy for others, he ranges over the economic, biological, and political science literature on the evolution of norms and the development of human social dispositions. He accepts as plausible Hayek's contention that morality has evolved to solve social problems, and entertains biological arguments from such sources as Charles Darwin, E. O. Wilson, and Peter Singer. However, Yeager insists that we must nevertheless assess received norms and dispositions based on their effects on happiness: "'has evolved' does not mean 'is good'" (61).

The basic purpose of ethics is to prescribe consistent, "mutually

compatible" principles and practices (81). This is of course similar to Rand's conception, but to Yeager this is the method of the mainstream of "rules or indirect" utilitarianism (81). Rand recognized, following Aristotle, that virtues were principles to guide our actions that we have incorporated into our characters as fundamental dispositions to action. This is Yeager's view, too: "Indirect utilitarianism recommends . . . rules whose application is conditioned by suitable attitudes and inclinations and dispositions" (88). Moral "rules" are not deontological rules, nor acontextual commandments, but general principles. "A realistic rules utilitarianism stresses the impossibility of full knowledge and accurate case-by-case prediction of consequences. It stresses the coordinate value of rules generally obeyed" (154). Yeager identifies John Stuart Mill, Henry Hazlitt, and R. M. Hare as prominent figures in the tradition of approaching ethics in this way.

But what are the standards for establishing such principles? Yeager holds that happiness is the ultimate standard, but declares that "social cooperation" is the "penultimate criterion" (81). How these work is together is unclear, but we'll come back to that problem. Yeager goes on to dismiss the idea that a utilitarian will be tempted to try to aggregate utility into a collectivist measure of social welfare. Nor is it possible to reduce ethical reasoning to the case-by-case maximization of individual utility. "Since maximum utility, whether personal or aggregate, is not a goal that anyone can directly pursue, the question facing ethical philosophers and policymakers concerns background conditions instead. What self-consistent and attainable framework of institutions, rules, character traits, dispositions, and attitudes conduces best to mutual non-interference and effective cooperation among individuals pursuing their own diverse objectives?" (117).

This kind of reasoning is meant to yield a moral code, although Yeager is somewhat sketchy with the specifics. "[W]ithin the range of broadly defensible positions, a broad consensus can prevail on the basics of ethics and on the ethical principles guiding policy. . . . These include disapproval of lying, cheating, stealing, coercion, and murder; approval of honesty, courage, and sympathy; the principles underpinning legitimate government and political obligation; and support for private property and a market economy" (128).

Such in broad strokes is Yeager's ethical philosophy. In its basic conception of the proper domain and aim of ethics, as well as its conclusions, it has a great deal in common with Objectivism. It is as if an Old-Right acquaintance of Rand's (such as Henry Hazlitt, whom Yeager plainly admires) had taken her attack on conventional morality to heart and endeavored to offer, on his own terms, a systematic defense of the values of classical liberalism that was innocent of the worst aspects of traditional ethical thought.

It is also very much a book written by an economist with an interest in philosophy, and Yeager's account of the meaning of utilitarianism is strongly influenced by the microeconomic doctrines common to Austrian and neoclassical free-marketeers. This is most telling in his out-of-hand rejection of aggregation, a procedure that is still prominent in philosophical accounts of utilitarianism and that underpins a great deal of the policy analysis work done by economists. After all, to paraphrase a one-time professor of mine, if economists consistently accepted the impossibility of aggregating utility, how could they offer practical counsel to the government on the overall social impact of policy changes? It would be awfully handy to be able to appeal to social welfare—or at least consumer surplus—to settle the matter.

Ethics as Social Science is notable for the breadth of its reading. Yeager spends more time describing interesting or prominent philosophic arguments on an issue than he does developing his own positions. Indeed, in structure, this book is less a defense of certain propositions than a set of surveys of plausible positions as mapped out in the literature. This makes the book valuable as a kind of collection of bibliographical essays, finding sometimes surprising topical commonalties among a wealth of diverse—and occasionally little-known—philosophical and economic writings. This breadth of reading lends a certain weight to Yeager's reconstruction of the history of ethical thought. By the time we are done, we have been nudged towards thinking that perhaps no decent ethicist or economist ever has truly embraced aggregation; that pretty much all utilitarianism has been of the sensible, contextual, "rules" variety; that its antipode, "act" utilitarianism, is a straw-man position invented by critics of utilitarian-

ism and never really advanced by anyone; that nothing is more simple than to derive classical liberalism from utilitarian conceptions of social cooperation; and that most any sensible ethical or political doctrine can be assimilated to Yeager's liberal utilitarianism.

Of particular pleasure for the scholar of Ayn Rand's philosophy, Yeager appears to have an exhaustive acquaintance with the Objectivist literature. Even obscure and somewhat informal pieces are cited at times, such as an unpublished paper by neo-Objectivist Peter Voss (1995), posted to an online Objectivism discussion site. More prominent—and published—writings by Harry Binswanger, David Kelley, Ronald Merrill, Leonard Peikoff, and Tara Smith are all touched upon at various points, and Yeager notes Rand in the preface as one of the "philosophers (who) have most influenced my thinking" (vii).

Yeager's philosophical temperament is in many ways the polar opposite of Rand's. Perhaps their greatest similarities are a certain common-sensicality and comfort treating a moral code at a systematic level of exposition. But while Rand was never happy until she had traced the logical conclusion of an argument, Yeager simply refuses to be driven to extreme positions, even when the facts lead there. Where Rand sought firm definitions and absolute distinctions, Yeager often writes vaguely. And where Rand re-envisioned the approach to classic problems in philosophy, Yeager is prone to splitting the difference between contradictory doctrines.

These traits taken together may significantly detract from Yeager's reception by the Anglo-American philosophical community as well. For while the general thrust of his argument is congenial to anyone in sympathy with Rand or classical liberalism, in substance his discussions of philosophical topics are not sharply posed, notable for their conceptual clarity, or highly novel in argument or examples.

As noted, Yeager's chief methodological shortcoming is vagueness. It is apparent in many parts of the book; I will just treat a few examples to show its nature.

To begin, let's return to Yeager's treatment of happiness as the "ultimate criterion" of ethics (82). Yeager is content to accept happiness as a somewhat fuzzy, intuitively-known state, on which

"Aristotle . . ., Carl Menger, Ayn Rand, Mortimer Adler, Henry Hazlitt, Brand Blanshard, and many others" are all authorities (85). "It is individuals' success in making good lives for themselves, or fulfillment, or satisfaction, or life befitting human potential, or what Aristotle called eudaimonia. No single word is adequate" (82). Rand, faced with the same facts and history of thought, demanded a clear definition for happiness and pushed on to metaethical bedrock by anchoring her conception of happiness in the life of an organism (Rand 1964). Yeager's heart appears in the right place, but his Olympian gaze from above seems blind to the very real differences among these eudaimonistic theories of the good and to the technical problems that they face (not least of which is the apparent subjectivism inherent in defining the good life as doing good).

Having taken the trouble to define an "ultimate criterion," and having stated a desire to bring a rational approach to ethical justification, we might expect Yeager to rigorously show that the institutions and virtues that are the normative prescriptions of ethics all follow from the moral premise of seeking happiness. Yet, such a hope is dashed when Yeager (2001) announces "the penultimate criterion: social cooperation" (81). "Social cooperation flourishes through institutions, rules, and practices that improve people's chances of predicting others' behavior and coordinating their activities" (82). How do these two criteria relate to one another? Yeager offers an explanation of sorts: "Social cooperation is only a *nearly* ultimate criterion. It serves some further value taken as desirable without argument" (82). "Regardless of just what plausible interpretation we give to happiness, social cooperation is prerequisite to its effective pursuit" (83). Apparently, even if we find lasting joy in sowing chaos, this is to be ruled out. It remains a puzzle throughout the book how these interact: *how much* further "value" derives from cooperation *per se*?

Yeager is a libertarian, so we would expect that he would have a strong defense of libertarian negative rights. And he does defend them, after a fashion. Like Rand, he does not regard rights as primaries or inherent characteristics of man. But the key to any such defense is the ability to exclude welfare rights—broad positive claims enshrined in rights. The real issue is not rights-talk, but the law: what

sort of obligations do we have? Here is what Yeager says after noting that any able-bodied adult surely has a moral obligation to save a drowning child in a nearby swimming pool: "One must beware, however, of basing sweeping assertions about positive (or 'welfare') rights on exceptional cases like that of the drowning child. To move to some notion of a right to benefits unmatched by anyone's clear duty to provide them is vague and unsatisfactory" (216). Yet, the road to such entitlements is built exactly on the move from cases in which one can help others at little expense, to cases where it takes a bit more expense, to cases where a small tax will do the trick, and so on. Yeager appears to have nothing more to say against that process than that it takes positive obligation too far. But too far—by what standard? And there's the rub, because while a standard of personal happiness would seem to allow that we must live by our own lights, a standard of social cooperation would seem to allow that we might require to be bound together in mutual support. And, in fact, despite his position on rights, this seems to be where Yeager ends up, holding that "a complete absence of redistributive measures (other than perhaps private charity)" is an "extreme" that "would result in less utility" (127). *Whose* utility? Perhaps interpersonal utility comparisons are more evident in utilitarianism than first appears.

Ayn Rand was exasperated by the well-intended imprecision of Old Right defenders of liberty and of Aristotelian defenders of reason. In Yeager's meditative excursus through ethics, there is plenty of cause for similar exasperation. I doubt that any established moral relativist will succumb to Yeager's plea for less "promiscuous" intuitions, given his acceptance of intuitionism (32). I doubt that any hard-shell determinist will be swayed by Yeager's tentative objection that determinism "is just too preposterous—though I may be mistaken in saying so" (45). Insofar as he maps an approach to utilitarianism, he seems to have allowed plenty of room for less individualistically inclined thinkers to construct an edifice in accord with his terms and methods.

Yet, perhaps this was his intention. *Ethics as Social Science* is more than anything a bridge from the mentality and method of economists to the arguments and concerns of ethical and political philosophy.

Yeager hopes for an ethics that is less other-worldy: less concerned with abstract standards, less concerned with bizarre hypothetical situations, less pre-committed to its conclusions, and less contemptuous of markets and incentives. In its place, he wants detailed, factual inquiry into the effects of institutions, policies, and patterns of behavior. I doubt this book can show researchers in terms comprehensible to their own disciplines how to go about this objectively. But Yeager has given his readers a sense of how a wide range of philosophical and social science research programs converge to support a liberal, eudaimonistic ethical/political system, one that, in outline, has much in common with Ayn Rand's ethical vision. For those interested in this project, the book is, all told, interesting and suggestive.

References

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