

Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007, Pp.288.

If, as the lazy and oversimplified philosophical tradition has it, you can't derive *ought* from *is*, what is a good naturalist to do about ethics? Does morality just have to hang there in the air, underivable and insupportable, at best the creature of some sort of "existential" choice that can only be justified internally, within one's chosen moral compass? Or can there be a sort of scientific investigation of what is the best way to live one's life *all things considered*? Can meaning, in the grand sense of the meaning of life, not just the semantics of one language or another, be found—and confirmed—in the natural world, and if so, how? That is what Owen Flanagan thinks is the "Really Hard Problem," and he proposes to solve it, or at least to sketch out the best path to its solution, in an exercise of *eudaimonics*, "the attempt to say something interesting and systematic about what makes for human flourishing and that gives life meaning—that is, if anything does" (pxii)

This is well-trodden territory, of course, but mainly explored by amateur, not professional, philosophers: people who have thought hard—but not "rigorously"—about the issues, often from the perspective of some religious tradition. Perhaps for that very reason most professional philosophers have shunned the topic as too ambitious, too naively formulated, to be tractable. We should be grateful to Flanagan for bucking that trend, for he conducts his inquiry with erudition, calm open-mindedness, cautious optimism, and ingenuity. Flanagan's choice of '*eudaimonia*' as his term for the most important form of human flourishing—allowing him to acknowledge that some people are quite *happy* in a familiar sense while not yet conceding that their lives are all they could or should be—signals his willingness to draw heavily on the philosophical tradition going back to Aristotle, but he is eclectic, drawing heavily on the thinking of the Buddha (primarily as interpreted by the Dalai Lama) and also on such contemporary moral thinkers as Amartya Sen, John Rawls, and Martha Nussbaum, and introducing philosophers to the important recent empirical literature in the social sciences on subjective well-being by Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, Joshua Green and Jonathan Haidt, among others. Eudaimonics is not "just philosophy," or better: when philosophers address the questions of eudaimonics, they had better get out of their armchairs and consider a panoply of empirical findings about what people actually do, and think, and care about. The goal is nothing less than a theory of human nature, grounded not just in the social sciences but in the natural sciences, with special attention to evolutionary biology.

A key feature of the theory are the "Spaces of Meaning" that structure our deepest values. People don't all have the same Space of Meaning, not surprisingly, but the task of coordinating or merging the different Spaces is not forlorn. This project obliges Flanagan to breach the various defensive ramparts that have been erected to keep science out of philosophy in general and ethics in particular, and this he does with no waste motion and no rancor. Partisans on both sides have a lot to learn from him; he appreciates the strengths and weaknesses of both "sides" and does not resort to the varieties of insincere lip service that typically deflect the hard questions. First, he argues (*pace* Clifford Geertz and other ideologues of *Geisteswissenschaft*) that there can indeed be a naturalistic, objective, scientific explanation of all human social and cultural phenomena. But this in itself cannot advance beyond *is* to *ought*. Before we can get to

*ought*, we need to understand how there come to be valuers at all, and then how they evaluate their values. Then, wielding Wilfrid Sellars' useful distinction between the manifest image and the scientific image, we can identify the Space of Meaning within the manifest image of our species, and, finally, *participate* in its critique. "The scientific image, if conceived carefully, need not be reductive, eliminativist, or disenchanting." (p36) Flanagan, who coined the term "mysterian" in earlier work, firmly sets mysterianism aside. (Noam Chomsky has notoriously divided all unanswered questions into puzzles and mysteries; puzzles are soluble, mysteries are not. According to Chomsky, both consciousness and free will, for instance, are mysteries. Flanagan will have none of it.) The path he follows is carefully biological and evolutionary, avoiding the pitfalls of crass views, and not asking for too much from genetic evolution: ". . . our explanatory resources do not end with evolutionary biology. . . ." and we also have the "transformative work that culture can do." He can thus be agnostic about whether we are born selfish or altruistic; we are, he thinks, a "mixed bag". And at the same time he sets aside specifically religious paths to "transcendence" and spirituality. So Flanagan presents us with a suitably mundane and matter-of-fact set of raw materials out of which to construct morality, with no ingredients a scientist might shun, but also with all the categories and norms that culture can furnish. Basically, eudaimonics is trouble-shooting the soul. What makes a good one tick, and what can go wrong? How can we optimize the potentials of these marvelous contraptions that evolution, both genetic and cultural, has endowed us with? There are different schools of thought about eudaimonia, so our reverse engineering must allow for these differences—a Ferrari has different aspirations from a Ford, after all—while still seeking as universal a canon as possible.

Eudaimonia is the state of goodness, flourishing that goes beyond biological fitness, but fitness is a precondition for it. We do not *decide* to maximize fitness; that has been elected for all living things; but though we are constitutively set up to care about fitness (no surprises there), we—and we alone—have a perspective that looks beyond fitness. Since fitness must come first, the sad fact is that "For many persons, realizing their complex talents and interests is not in the cards" (p58). That's where political and economic preconditions come in. Now we can cast an engineer's or ecologist's eye over the totality of circumstances and see what is necessary or conducive to flourishing, to eudaimonia. Some social systems are systematically eudaimonia-thwarting, and this is an objective fact that can be uncovered in the process of seeking wide reflective equilibrium for our evaluations. Here is where the chasm between *is* and *ought* is bridged, and Flanagan is alive to all the difficulties. In order to escape what he calls "the internalist objection to eudaimonics" (p118), he looks at an example of what he calls "local chauvinism" (p137): the "many non-Jewish, middle-class women in Nazi Germany" who "were excellent wives, mothers, and so on, . . . . Such women had to know about, and in some cases agree with, the views of many of their fellow German Catholics and Protestants, even if we suppose they knew nothing about the actual Holocaust. Did such women flourish? Were they eudaimon?" No, in spite of the fact that within their Space of Meaning, they satisfied all the norms. Can we find the leverage to support this cross-cultural verdict? Flanagan thinks we can, and does a persuasive job of showing how, by describing and justifying a move from narrow reflective equilibrium to wide reflective equilibrium. An interesting comparison here is with J. M. Balkin's book, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (Yale Univ. Press, 1998). Balkin, a professor of law at Yale, arrives at similar details in his account of the process that, he argues, can dispel what he calls Mannheim's Paradox of Ideology: "If all discourse is ideological, how is it possible to have anything other than an ideological discourse on ideology?" (Balkin, p123). (

I am surprised, by the way, that Flanagan, whose reading on these topics is admirably broad and deep, has somehow not come across this soul-mate.) Whether or not either Flanagan or Balkin solve this problem, it is everybody's problem, as Flanagan makes plain: The alternative idea that we might appeal to being good "in God's eyes," for instance, "is not a tactic available to the naturalist. It is predictable perhaps, but it is immature, epistemically and emotionally irresponsible." (p138).

The whole book is an exercise in tight-rope walking, avoiding self-defeating appeals to mysterianism (incommensurability, thick description, ineliminable subjectivity, . . .) on one side and scientism (reductionism, oversimplification, . . .) on the other, and much of the value lies in the originality of the details in Flanagan's excursion. There is an insightful discussion of Rawls' retreat from universality, an interesting attempt at a dialogue between Buddhism and science, including a proposal to tame the concept of *karma* (more specifically what he calls *karmic causation*), and a particularly surefooted exploration of the pitfalls of subjective well-being research, distinguishing normative, methodological and empirical problems. To those who would simply flee the project of measuring happiness (eudaimonia) objectively, this chapter is a gentle rebuke: try it—you'll like it. As so often in such matters, the task is difficult but not impossible, however ideologically convenient it would be to assume the worst. I also recommend his skeptical measure of the famous 1988 paper "Illusion and Well-Being," by Shelley Taylor and Jonathan Brown, ending with "a caution against buying into any hyperbolic or global assessment of what the research on 'positive illusions' reveals." (p176) Flanagan knows his way around the experimental literature, the meta-analyses and other cautions, so he sets a good example of this philosophical role.

His take on religion is particular refreshing. He is a former altar boy, now a "cultural Catholic" who is very taken with Buddhist doctrines and meditation practices. (He tells us that he spent a week in silent retreat while writing the closing chapter, and he recommends this to all). His gentle criticism of the Dalai Lama—who can't let go of rebirth, which is a deal-breaker for Flanagan—is balanced by not so gentle criticism of scientists whose own efforts at ecumenicism fail: "There are also, alas, many scientists who have simply not thought their science through and thus believe that it is epistemically responsible for them to believe in a creator God. It isn't." (p103) And, for good measure, he has some trenchant remarks for his fellow Catholics, cultural and otherwise: "Go to Mass, meditate and pray in a Catholic way if you wish, consult the right saints depending on your needs, have fun, etc. This is a reasonable way of affirming your identity, you can find wise moral guidance in places, and you can drop all the hocus-pocus stuff. That stuff is silly, unbecoming to thoughtful souls, and can be dangerous." (p105) And this: "Morals are not about what God thinks is good or even what God commands, nor are morals about serving God's purposes or doing God's will. These ideas are out there, but they are childish ideas that are epistemically unwarranted." (p126)

One recommendation about religion left me unconvinced, however. Flanagan distinguishes between asserting on the one hand, where truth and evidence must be the touchstone, and expressing/saying on the other, when, he thinks, we can just let it rip since "we are only talking about stories" (191) Is this stable, or is it subtly or not so subtly corrosive? Anybody who thinks the answer is obvious has not, I think, taken the question as seriously as it deserves. Consider: "You can say 'a miracle occurred' you just can't responsibly assert it."

(p197). What if those who hear you don't recognize the distinction? This is bound to be true if they are children, or just docile or gullible. Can you hold yourself blameless if you know in your heart that you are *just* saying/expressing this? I don't think so, but again, the issue is complicated. I am currently engaged in a research project in which we are interviewing clergy who seem to fit Flanagan's model: basically naturalists (and hence atheists) who nevertheless express the myths to their congregations—without saying, of course, “*these are myths, not assertions!*” Will these interviews uncover defensible justifications for persevering in these practices? We are keeping an open mind.

It would be a shame if this book were ignored or underestimated by philosophers because it is written for everyone, not just philosophers. There is an ill-recognized pressure in philosophy to be hyperskeptical if not hypercynical, and to deem various optimistic projects to be hopelessly naive. Flanagan is a refreshing antidote to that. Go ahead, show how naive he is, if you can. I think you'll find he's covered the bases better than you imagined possible.

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