

Book Review of Two Books on Sexual Morality

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April 1967

Logic and Sexual Morality. By John Wilson. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1965. Pp. 281. Price 4s).

Sexual Morality. By Ronald Atkinson. (London: Hutchinson. 1965. Pp. 191. Price 30s, paper 12s 6d).

There has recently been a revival of philosophical interest in first-order ethics. We may expect an increase in the production of books for the general public giving the results of work in progress on the subject. Professor Atkinson's book forms part of a series (entitled "Philosophy at Work": general editor—Patrick Corbett) designed to do this. Mr. Wilson states a similar aim. The public for whom the Hutchinson series is designed I take to be composed mainly of academic non-philosophers. Mr. Wilson's book is addressed to the wider paperback-reading public. A consideration of these books may enable us to judge whether philosophical work on the subject has yet reached a stage at which there are results to be published to the layman.

Mr. Wilson's book is divided into four parts. Of these, the latter three (entitled '*Sex and Education*', '*Sex and Society*' and '*Sex and the Individual*') contain respectively a plea that education should be aimed at "developing personality" rather than "indoctrination", an attack on the pressures exerted by the "establishment" and by "the acquisitive society", and a Freud-based discussion of the psychology of men and women leading to a recommendation to the individual to base his own decisions in sexual matters largely on the need to maximize self-awareness. In an epilogue one is told how to do this. The style is eager, chatty and readable, the standard of argument no better and no worse than that to be expected in weekly journalism.

The interest of the book for readers of this journal, and the justification of the title and of the publisher's claim that it contains "a highly unexpected approach by a philosopher, ..." must be found in the first part, entitled '*Sex and Logic*', in which the author claims to establish, by the application of analytic philosophy, certain positions which will be assumed in the latter three parts. These may be summarized as follows:

- (1) Many of our current attitudes to sex are irrational; they arise from "bewitchment", by fallacies or by "metaphysics";
- (2) To explain our "bewitchment", and to discover the morality that is genuinely rational, we must look to Freudian "depth-psychology".

To establish (1) the author tries to convict most of those who moralize about sex of two main errors—confusion of fact and value, and what he names (p. 59) the Fallacy of Discrimination. The fact/value distinction he links with a non-cognitivist view of value judgment, which he outlines on pp. 32 ff. He then uses the distinction to expose equivocal uses of words like 'normal' and 'maladjusted'. These uses are indeed fallacious and their exposure in a book of this kind is desirable; but the means used are open to criticism. First, non-cognitivism is asserted as if it were established truth; there is no hint that it might still be controversial. This dogmatism is especially out of place in a

chapter entitled ‘Who are the Experts ?’, in which the right of various other “experts” to dogmatize is criticized at length. Secondly, his use of the expression ‘value-judgment’ is never adequately explained, with the result that the reader may well be misled as to what kind of non-cognitivism the author in fact holds. The first exposition, on p. 33, appears to present a fairly naive form of emotivism. This is qualified in a later section (pp. 47-49), but too briefly to be of much use to the lay reader (e.g. the main argument of Hare’s *Freedom and Reason* is compressed into 22 lines).

‘The Fallacy of Discrimination’ is the name the author gives to an argument which he sets out as follows:

- “(a) x is an activity which can be of great value or significance for human beings;
- (b) therefore people ought to use discrimination when they do x ;
- (c) therefore we must teach them that they should only do x in forms restricted by rules, precepts, principles, or ideals, because otherwise x will become devalued, meaningless, irresponsible, or positively wicked”.

Arguments of this form (with the addition of intermediate stages) are frequently found in the literature on sexual questions (the author quotes examples at length), and contain more than one fallacy, of which the author concentrates on the ambiguity of ‘discrimination’, which may or may not imply the rejection of one of the items discriminated. The author’s manner is seen at its best in this discussion—the point is made informally but effectively with a wealth of illustrations. The informality has the advantage of drawing the reader’s attention to this specific fallacy, although it does not provide him with a general procedure for locating other fallacies of the same genus. This will not, however, worry the author, whose aim is to argue a case, not to teach logic.

The dogmatic assertion of a non-cognitivist view is perhaps excusable in a popular work not specifically concerned with meta-ethical questions, since it is, or at least was until recently, current orthodoxy. No such excuse can be made for the dogmatism involved in his argument for contention (2). Never in the history of “analytic philosophy” has it been orthodox to hold a psychological (or logical) egoism of this kind:

“the reasons we give for our moral choices must be *our* reasons: that is, they must relate to *our* desires, for these are the desires that (if we are rational) should animate our wills and choices... To accept an ideal, however high-minded, that could not be underwritten in this way would be irrational, and indistinguishable from the acceptance of ideals which we would all agree to be lunatic” (p. 53).

These sentences contain the *whole* of his argument for egoism, which is a necessary foundation for his assertion that

“The whole difficulty with morality is to know what our desires actually are” (p.51)

which *in* turn justifies the importance given to Freudianism in the remainder of the book. That a premiss so essential for him and at the same time so unacceptable to most philosophers should be asserted virtually without argument is alone sufficient to rebut his claim (p. 7) to be attempting “to apply it [modern analytic philosophy] to sexual morality”.

Even if one were to accept his egoism, however, it would not justify the importance he gives to “knowing what our desires actually are”, neglecting by comparison the discovery of means to the satisfaction (particularly the long-term satisfaction) of known desires. It does not occur to him to question whether the “unconscious desires” and “real wishes” that the Freudians claim to have discovered, are properly described as desires and wishes, and whether it is therefore reasonable to pursue their satisfaction.

The declared aim of Professor Atkinson’s book is similar to that of Mr. Wilson’s, viz. “the critical examination of types of argument that are commonly used in connexion with the issues of sexual morality”. Unlike Wilson, however, he succeeds in achieving this aim. The first chapter (entitled ‘Logic and Morality’) gives brief accounts of the distinctions to be used—a much larger armoury than Wilson’s. In the second chapter, arguments commonly used in connexion with sexual morality are classified under heads—prudence, beneficence, justice, natural law, religious authority—each of which is discussed from his own expressed utilitarian standpoint. In the remaining chapters the application of these arguments to specific problems is discussed in detail: there are chapters on free-love, divorce, homosexuality, and contraception and artificial insemination. The discussions are admirably fair, the style academic with a legal flavour, the conclusions moderately liberal. For anyone wanting a sober account and assessment of the arguments that have been commonly brought to bear on these subjects, the book is a good buy.

Nevertheless, it is not, for the most part, “philosophy at work”. Use is made in it of distinctions that are the products of philosophical work (as could be said of any serious discussion of any subject since Plato) and the author is a practising philosopher, but live philosophical issues, though relevant to the subject, are side-stepped. To take one example, an adequate working-out of a utilitarian theory must include criteria to decide who are to be members of the generality whose welfare is the prime moral consideration. No such criteria have yet been convincingly supplied. This question is directly relevant to the rightness or wrongness of abortion, a problem that arises in the course of two of the chapters of this book. Here is a practical issue that really does require “philosophy at work”, but Atkinson’s discussion (pp. 93-4, 166-7) is perfunctory.

Neither book here reviewed shows any conviction that first-order ethics gives rise to questions that are in the fullest sense philosophical. This to me is regrettable.

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The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 17, No. 67, pp. 185-187.

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Oxford University Press on behalf of the Scots Philosophical Association and the
University of St. Andrews

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