New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Needs in moral theory*

In her wonderful book *Needs and Moral Necessity* (Routledge 2007) the late Dr Soran Reader (she died of cancer aged 49 in September 2012) presents ethics as a practice, prior to its displaying (let alone being dependent on) any kind of theory; she then explains the three types of moral theory that are currently canvassed by philosophers, namely consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics, and finally she argues for a fourth theory, which acknowledges the place in our lives of needs, her own distinctive project.

There is no point in insisting on one of these theories exclusively over against the others, though philosophers regularly do so, refuting or sidelining those they dislike. For one thing, the consequences of a moral decision may often suffice in everyday circumstances to confirm that it was the right or the wrong thing to do, with no call for further discussion. Then, even if consequentialism, or utilitarianism as it used to be called, is the most common ethical position in a consumerist society like our own, in which results, outcomes and cost-benefit analysis are what matter, people nevertheless often do things purely out of a sense of duty. On many occasions, after all, some course of action would strike most people as obviously the right one in the circumstances, whatever the consequences: to seek to explain why it was the thing to do would sound odd. Thirdly, as we reflect on our moral development, we have to weigh up the kind of person we seem to have become by the choices that we repeatedly make (or avoid). There is plenty of room for utilitarian, deontological and virtue-ethical considerations, either overlapping or each on its own, depending on the situation. Fourthly, however, as Dr Reader contends, we are naturally such needy beings that our neediness cannot be left out of the picture but offers one further perspective on our moral life.

In the history of moral philosophy, true enough, the very idea of human neediness has little place. Perhaps because of philosophy's remote origins in Plato, since needs are naturally tied to the body, they have perhaps seemed too raw, contingent and constricted for philosophical analysis in comparison with such alluringly abstract theoretical entities as consequences, obligations and virtues. That may be a plausible explanation. However, as well as moral agency and autonomy we should consider the place in our lives of our dependency on one another and what we may label moral 'patiency'.

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In 2007 Dr Reader set up the Centre for Ethical Philosophy at Durham University to deal with the moral significance of needs. It is a very simple insight, when you think about it. To do good — to be moral — we must pay much more attention to the perspective of those who suffer, the victims or the 'patients' (as we may say), including ourselves.

As Dr Reader argues, the position of the agent is central in traditional philosophical discussion: the person working out what to do, deciding for or against some course of action, imagining or predicting the effects, and so on. Less commonly, the perspective of the bystander seems appropriate to some philosophers for examining what moral agents might do or have done in particular circumstances. Besides these, as Dr Reader reminds us, there is the position of the person who is being acted on: the 'patient'. Our ethical and political thinking, Dr Reader maintains, tends — unconsciously for the most part of course — to speak from the position of the agent or sometimes from that of the would-be disengaged bystander.

Research and reflection have been, and commonly still are, premised on this longstanding and pervasive bias in favour of agents or perpetrators, overlooking the place of vulnerability and dependence in moral life. We are not only moral agents, we are also and even more basically what we might call moral 'patients'. For Dr Reader, this idea of 'patiency' includes subjectedness, passivity, affliction, suffering, and victimhood: the kind of thing which we experience in one way or another in everyday life and which is as constitutive of the people we are as agency. What is done to us is as important morally as how we act. As Soran Reader argues, the role played by various forms of human neediness demands to be brought out into the open; they are as decisive in the practice of virtue as intentionality, obligation, calculating outcomes and the other more familiar and much discussed elements of the moral life.

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