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Common Morality: Deciding What to Do (review)

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume 74, Number 1,
March 2006 , pp. 221-224 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



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the eighth century or from Switzerland to inter-war Egypt. Fortunately, Smith brings us down to earth just often enough by providing firm theoretical and thematic stepping-stones over the shifts in time and space. Indeed, these very unnerving shifts become, through his skill, a means of widening horizons and shaking sterile preconceptions.

Throughout the book, its author draws deeply on concepts which have been at the core of his recent work: those of *ethnie* and *ethnohistory*. In chapter 7 he emphasizes the need to combine “constructivist” and “continuist” models of the connection between the history and the nation in order to understand how “ethnohistories” function to underpin the sense of national identity (167–169). He stresses the importance of distinguishing between professional history and ethnohistory (the former denoting enquiry and the use of documents and artifacts and the latter drawing on myth and memory). It might be argued, of course, that the work of professional historians, too, is shaped, even if at an unconscious level, by ethnohistory. Occasionally, the emphasis on *ethnie* seems to have inhibited discussion of other elements; for example, the significance of religious *difference* as a crucial factor in shaping particular nationalisms. For example, since different religious traditions have produced specific ideas of history and specific approaches to historiography, analysis of how these differences are reflected in different ideas of nationhood and types and manifestations of nationalism might be enlightening. However, such analysis would, no doubt, require a separate volume.

Once again, Anthony Smith has succeeded in thinking “outside the box” of fashionable critical theory while, at the same time, engaging with it on its own terms. He combines balanced erudition and an important contribution to knowledge of the dynamic relation between religion and nationalism with a deep commitment to his subject and a passionate awareness of its implications for the future of social, political, and cultural relationships.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj034

Advance Access publication January 19, 2006

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Common Morality: Deciding What to Do. By Bernard Gert. Oxford University Press, 2004. 179 pages. \$25.00

Common Morality fits into that special, useful genre of philosophical scholarship that lays out the comprehensive conditions for moral reasoning in a manner accessible to students and intelligent laymen. One of the reasons it reads so well is that it is the fourth restatement of Gert’s descriptive account of morality, which he has been developing for the last forty years. (The first three were *The Moral Rules: A New Rational Foundation for Morality*, Harper & Row, 1970; *Morality, A New Justification of the Moral Rules*, Oxford, 1988; and most recently, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*, Oxford, 1998). Not only is this printing the most succinct of the four, it addresses some important objections that ensued following the earlier renditions.

Gert's thesis is that "common morality" is the best of all the available options for describing the reasoning system that we both would want to use and, in fact, implicitly do use when deliberating on what we *ought*, morally, to do. Gert argues that common morality both explains why there is so much cross-cultural widespread moral agreement as well as provides a method for separating the plurality of sensible solutions to quandaries, over which there is widespread disagreement, from the irrational ones. What distinguishes "common morality" from its alternatives is that its procedural constraints are based exclusively on noticeable universal features of human nature, like the human propensity to err, our capacity for reasoning, and our vulnerability, which together indicate both our insecurity and a way for us to become more secure than we are in the state of nature. In other words, Gert argues, common morality is the moral system that reflective, rational people would want to use because it protects us and everyone for whom we would hypothetically be concerned by calling attention directly to the *purpose* of morality: to guide behavior by shielding ourselves and each other from the harms from which all rational people would want to be free: death, physical pain, debility, enslavement, and the lack of pleasure (7). These protections are secured by ten clear *rules* to which abidance is not too onerous but whose effects are significantly beneficial to require of everyone (26–57). These rules are, in turn, supplemented by more costly and more beneficial moral *ideals*, encouraged but not required of moral agents, which can, from time to time, override the moral rules when the two come into conflict (22ff.).

In Part I Gert employs a "two-step" procedure for filtering out unjustified violations of the moral rules. The first stage involves making explicit the morally relevant *facts* in a particular quandary by asking a series of probing questions, for example, which rules are being violated? what harms will likely accrue from these violations? what are the intentions of the prospective violator? could such a violation ever be justified based on the particular relationship between the violator and the violated? One of Gert's major points in this book is that, surprisingly, most moral disagreements are based on disputes over these facts and not primarily over what we value—because human nature to a large degree already governs what we basically value. (Gert enumerates four exceptions to this claim on page 13.) Part I of the two-step procedure equips us with the capacity to present to ourselves a flowchart for determining at each stage of deliberation whether our proposed course of action is rational and/or moral. To this end Gert provides the reader with two useful algorithms for testing his or her own rational deliberation (151–152). The second stage in the two-step procedure involves polling moral agents to determine whether or not there is a consensus among them for estimating the consequences of allowing particular moral violations to stand (74ff.). Society may not consistently endorse the moral rules, but when it does not there will be pragmatic explanations for the exceptions.

Gert's system of identifying violations and then subsequently identifying which preventions of violations are less enforceable than others allows for a plurality of voices and solutions. To be sure while human nature indicates fairly clearly what constitutes pain and suffering, different people will rank different harms differently (91). For example, some people will rank some chronic

diseases to be harmful greater than death. Here, Gert points out that while common morality is limited—neither it nor any other moral system can resolve every controversial dispute—it can indicate the procedure, which has a chronological regularity each time it is applied for avoiding irrational discourse. In this sense Gert's account of morality makes explicit what is in his view already implicit: the presence of a distinctive grammar and system of language apropos to morality that enable conditions for sensible moral reasoning in the first place. Our desire to mitigate the conditions of human vulnerability, for example, cannot be denied any less by rational agents than the fact that the internal logic of sentences yields intelligible meanings can be denied by competent speakers. (15–17).

In Part II of *Common Morality* Gert sets out to justify the system he outlines in Part I. Why would all thoughtful, moral agents adopt the moral system that requires everyone categorically either to follow the moral rules of common morality or be justified in the context of their society for allowing the violations of these rules to stand? Here, Gert emphasizes the trait of impartiality in rational discourse and in doing so distinguishes himself from Hobbes and his contractarian descendents who seek only to justify morality to the rational egoist. For Gert, justification hangs on the conditional requirement that rational agents make judgments about a proposed course of action through exclusive reference to rationally required beliefs, namely the views held by all rational agents, which do not include, for example, religious, nationalistic, or tribal beliefs. Furthermore, Gert also restricts the domain of common morality to other moral agents about whom it is known that they are moral agents with all rationally required beliefs and knowledge (85). While it is never irrational to act morally, it can be rational to act immorally if there is an objective estimation, based on the facts, in which such can be accounted for consequentially (86ff.). Self-interest and morality can conflict with one another, and it can be rational to follow either; however, it *can* be irrational to act immorally, depending on the nature and degree of the harms that I, as an agent, stand to accrue in individual cases. This conclusion, though incomplete, is still comprehensive enough to rule out many superficially ambiguous courses of action as either irrational, immoral, or both.

Common Morality is not without its weaknesses, most of which, in spite of the author's claims to the contrary, are related to the grandiose ambition of the project contained in a mere 179 pages. At times Gert seems to assume that moral agreement is more widespread than it in fact is, in particular with respect to his faith in our prospects of reaching consensus about when violations of the moral rules are justified. But there are areas in which one might also take issue with the rules themselves. In particular, one might take issue with the stark threshold, Gert affirms, beyond which the obligatory rules give way to the recommended ideals, giving the impression that morally demanding altruistic behaviors, such as acts of heroism, are never required, a conclusion that moral heroes themselves often contest. Such a move precludes the possibility that that some "ideals" could be considered optional at one point in an agent's moral development but required down the road. The upshot of this hard and fast division is a moral theory that all but neglects virtue ethics and instead places its attention on the standard, "deontic" tendency, now held to be controversial, in which moral

judgments are based strictly on the performance or nonperformance of specific acts. Finally, religious studies scholars may be interested to know that Gert's view bluntly dismisses religion as irrelevant to ethics; not only does religious belief have no justificatory appeal in his view, it stands not in a mutual, but subsidiary, relation to morality (x). The idea that some universal truths may have different justifications for subscribers to different traditions at various local levels remains entirely unconsidered in this work.

Still, *Common Morality* is, overall, to be commended for its clarity, reattention to the moral facts, and inclusiveness of other major historical contributors to our understanding of ethics (Kant and Mill, in particular). Moreover, there is a refreshing honesty about Gert's style, which is no doubt connected to his denial that the moral rules, setting aside the issue of whether or not they are exhaustive of moral requirement altogether, will procure for the moral agent a single right answer for every possible moral situation.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj035

Advance Access publication January 10, 2006

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Doubly Chosen: Jewish Identity, the Soviet Intelligentsia, and the Russian Orthodox Church. By Judith Deutsch Kornblatt. University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 203 pages. \$29.95.

Since the death of Stalin, a significant number of Soviet Jews converted to Christianity in the Russian Orthodox Church. Such a move is difficult to comprehend at first glance, given the legacy of antisemitism in Russian culture and the Russian Orthodox Church; alienated from other Jews, neither were such converts fully accepted by Russians. Moreover, in the Soviet Union any expression of religious faith was regarded as dissident behavior and brought activists into conflict with the authorities. Given all these negative consequences, why would Jews seek to become Russian Orthodox? What are the implications of such conversions for an understanding of Russian Jews in the Soviet period and, more broadly, for the interplay of ethnic and religious components of Jewish identity? These are the questions Kornblatt seeks to examine in *Doubly Chosen* based upon thirty-five interviews with Jewish converts to Russian Orthodoxy. Kornblatt, a professor of Slavics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a specialist in Russian religious thought. Her monograph approaches the thorny issue of Jewish out-conversion with remarkable sensitivity while offering some provocative insights into the relationship of national and religious identity.

After an introductory chapter that discusses the nature of the problem and the methodology, Kornblatt provides a background sketch of the formation of Jewish identity in Russia and how this differs from Jews elsewhere. Most significantly, the overall effect of Imperial Russian and, particularly, Soviet policies toward the Jews resulted in a strong separation of national and religious identities. This is reinforced linguistically, where the term Jewish (*evreiskii*) has only