

Paying Attention

NOTE from Trevor Curnow Book Review Editor

Mike Cross died in June, 2002, at the age of 52. He had been at St. Martin's College (Lancaster, UK) since 1980. Before then he was a schoolteacher for several years. He was erudite, funny, dedicated, organised, popular and stylish. He loved his family, his friends, his philosophy, his garden, France and a few beers. He was good to work with and to be with. We're going to miss him.

Robert Gibbs

Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities

Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2000.

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reviewed by Mike Cross

This is an enormously difficult book. It will - probably require more than one reading. That, at least, is the view of the author. Don't let him scare you away. The effort will be rewarded. Robert Gibbs explains that his book offers an ethics at whose heart is responsibility rather than principles of autonomy or rational deliberation or optimal benefits. The offering takes the form of a combination of philosophical and religious ideas in which writings from major representatives of continental philosophy, American pragmatism, and Jewish thought are brought through Gibbs's judicious selectivity into a kind of attentive encounter with each other. Gibbs achieves this by drawing into dialogue primary texts from, among others, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jiirgen Habermas, William James, the Bible and the Talmud and connecting them with his own commentary. The attentive encounter is important because it is an approach that in itself reflects the ethic of responsibility that Gibbs is explicating. It is an ethic that, in various ways, involves attending to and co-operating with others. Although the book investigates many manifestations of responsibility, the central notions of attentiveness and co-operation will be the focus of this review.

Gibbs is direct. Our starting point for exploring this ethic of responsibility is not an autonomous individual, understood as one 'who confronts life and makes his own decisions, reasoning according to principles' (p. 29). Our starting point is a conversation in which the primary responsibility is not speaking to the other person but listening to her. Indeed, listening is the origin of responsibility and at the same time, and because of that, the beginning of ethics. Moreover, this responsibility for listening is not undertaken on the condition that the listener will get a turn to be a speaker. For Gibbs, 'the listener position is simply never overcome' (p. 35). By casting responsibility in this way, Gibbs is able to argue that this is an ethic 'that is not

derivable, nor even consistent with the claim of autonomy' (p. 31). Of course, from another perspective autonomy and responsibility are not incompatible.

From listening, responsibility develops into speaking. This is described as the need to respond to the other person. Invoking the work of Levinas, Gibbs shows us that responding to the other person indicates that one is responsible for the other person. However, responding to the other person involves coming near to the other person and that in turn can leave one vulnerable to the other person. Speaking leads to writing where, drawing now on the work of Derrida, we are shown that there are further risks. For example, when something is written, it is no longer in the control of the author. Indeed, neither should it be for, returning to the work of Levinas, the reader has a responsibility to interpret and it is the interpretation that constitutes the meaning of the text.

So it is that responsibility arises in attending as a listener and as a reader. Speaking and writing are responsibilities that make attending possible. However, in addition to listening, speaking, writing and reading there are other responsibilities. There is, for example, a responsibility to reason which is regarded as a particular aspect of knowing. The responsibility to reason or to know is occasioned by the demand for justice. Since it is occasioned by the demand for justice this must be a certain sort of knowing. The sort of knowing that justice requires is the product of a social performance rather than the product of an isolated consciousness.

In order to clarify the conditions that will yield the sort of knowing that justice requires, the work of Habermas is introduced. In this work, certain pragmatic conditions provide the foundation for and are constitutive of the fundamental principles of discourse ethics. The essential conditions are that there must be an environment of mutuality in which the authority of everyone in the community to interpret principles of justice is protected. Everyone must be able to participate freely and equally in a co-operative search for truth for the only valid moral rules or principles are those which everyone agrees are the product of the better argument.

The assumption is that people will attend to what is being said and will co-operate in interpreting what is being said. This is both an idealising and a necessary assumption. It is an idealising assumption because neither attentiveness nor co-operation is purely untrammelled. It is, however, a necessary assumption because whenever we enter into a conversation we always hope that both attentiveness and co-operation will be untrammelled and without that hope the conversation would not take place. Seeking to obtain the conditions for which one hopes becomes, therefore, a responsibility. That responsibility initiates and controls the conversation.

Thus the kind of knowing that justice requires demands an engagement in certain processes. This is a dynamic conception of knowing which denies that knowledge of the truth is a fixed or given property that exists independently of a specific act of knowing. Instead the truth of an idea is to be found in the process by which it is verified. Knowledge is something that we construct not something that fortuitously we just happen to stumble across. So it is that we arrive at a key claim. The truth of an ethical theory resides not in the content of the theory or, at least, not in that alone but in the process of making it true. The theory is true because it is the product of abiding by certain essential conditions.

In order to develop this key claim and to develop further the dynamic processes just described, Gibbs explores James's pragmatic method. The pragmatic method involves understanding a proposition by understanding the consequences of believing it to be true. In the work of James the method for understanding a proposition suggests the pragmatic criterion of truth: a proposition is true if and only if the practical consequences of believing the proposition are useful or, in some more general sense, beneficial for us.

Unfortunately, this version of pragmatism has attracted a number of criticisms. First, there is the problem of what it means for a belief to be useful or, as John Hospers puts it in his otherwise commendable *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, there is the problem of what it means for a belief to work (Hospers, p. 46) Hospers wonders what might be meant by someone who says that 'Christianity works for me.' Does it mean that this person is now happier or more hopeful? Concluding with a series of rhetorical questions Hospers asks, 'What has [a belief] working in a particular case to do with its *truth*? ... What exactly is the relation between its being true and its «working»? Surely they aren't the same thing?' (Hospers, p. 46)

Second, developing the point above, a theory that states that a proposition is true if and only if the practical consequences of believing the proposition are useful can accommodate neither the idea that there can be useful false beliefs nor the idea that there can be useless true beliefs. Thus it is false to believe that all snakes are dangerous to human beings. Yet it is a useful belief to act on because in being wary of all snakes we will be wary of the ones that are dangerous. Then again, certain propositions that we take to be true have no obvious use value whatsoever. Indeed, to ask after the use value of certain propositions would seem to be quite irrelevant to the task of establishing the truth of the proposition. As Frederick Schmitt points out, in order to establish whether it is true to say that snow is white we do not seek to establish whether it is useful to believe that snow is white. In seeking to know whether the proposition is true we examine the properties of snow and that has no obvious connection with the usefulness of the proposition (Schmitt, p. 96).

Third, underpinning the usefulness or otherwise of a belief is the problem of how what it is useful to believe can vary from one individual to another, or from one society to another, or from one epoch to another. It is perfectly plausible to suppose that for person A believing x is useful whilst for person B believing not-x is equally useful. Therefore both x and not-x are true. Consequently, apparently, the pragmatic theory of truth has to contend with the issue of relativism.

These criticisms are unfortunate because they miss the point of what it is that James and therefore Gibbs are attempting to do. It was, nevertheless, useful to rehearse those criticisms because in illuminating what is not the case they will also and not unusually help to illuminate what is. These criticisms assume that James and therefore Gibbs are saying something about the nature of truth itself. Relatedly, as Richard Rorty points out, they reflect a view of understanding the truth that we have inherited from the Enlightenment where the Newtonian physical scientist was regarded as a model of the intellectual. Consequently, it was thought that the understandings provided by physical science should be applied to social, political and economic institutions. Rorty describes this view as the desire for objectivity and argues that 'We are the heirs of this objectivity tradition, which centers around the assumption that we must step outside our community long enough to examine it in the light of something which transcends it, namely, that which it has in com-

mon with every other actual and possible community' (Rorty, p. 36). On this account, therefore, the truth concerning our social and moral lives is to be found by removing ourselves from our circumstances, our attachments and so on in order to examine those things in the light of some ultimate reality.

Adherents of the objectivity tradition have to espouse the correspondence theory of truth. From that perspective one is likely to wonder at the relationship between the intrinsic nature of truth and usefulness and if usefulness is a criterion that into replace correspondence to reality, then one might well wonder about the issue of relativism. However, Gibbs is not promoting a theory of truth in that sense. He is not making an epistemological point about the nature of truth a such. Indeed, Gibbs does not even make the move from the method for understanding a proposition to the pragmatic criterion of truth. Thus Gibbs concentrates on the question of 'What concrete difference will believing the proposition to be true make to anyone's life?'. He is himself, therefore, focused clearly on the pragmatic method, about the question that the community should ask itself and in so far as it is a question that the community should ask itself, he is making an ethical point about how we can understand what it is that justice requires.

Essentially, therefore, what Gibbs has done is provide us with an account of the necessary elements of a community whereby people can interpret principles of justice through the application of the pragmatic method. These elements, free and equal participation, mutuality and hence attentiveness and co-operation are in themselves at the heart of an understanding of justice in that they invoke notions of equal treatment and universal welfare. Justice is enacted through these terms.

However, this smacks of circularity. In order to understand justice we must do things that are just. Well, we have to start from somewhere and wherever that point might be involves making an assumption about something. On this count the objectivist position is no different from that of the pragmatist. The objectivist assumption is that the search for the truth concerning our social and moral lives requires detachment from those lives. The pragmatist assumption is that such detachment is either not possible or if possible, then not desirable. Our starting point must be the understandings that we currently have and which, on a pragmatic understanding of truth, we are currently prepared to endorse because they are, in some sense, useful. Thus, for example, when attempting to reach agreements with people, attending to what they have to say is better than ignoring them. The pragmatist's position is clear. By acting in accordance with procedures that we already take to be just we develop further our understanding of justice.

Of course, the objectivist has a response to the pragmatist's position. Whilst many of the criticisms of the pragmatist's position encountered so far can be seen to be irrelevant, the absence of detachment and the emphasis on the current understandings of the community and the development of further community understandings means that the issue of moral relativism has still to be addressed.

If valid moral rules or principles are those for which agreement by everyone in the community have been secured, then it is clearly possible that different communities could secure different agreements. However, in accepting that possibility it does not follow that there is no way of judging that one moral code is any better or worse than any other. That only appears to follow because there do appear to be different moral codes, or codes that differ in certain respects, and people can disagree. Yet, when two parties disagree we don't usually take the fact of the disagreement as proof that both parties are, therefore, correct. Certainly pragma-

tists cannot accept the view that all beliefs are equally valid. Where, as a result of the processes described, there are agreements about beliefs, where those agreements represent an endorsement of those beliefs by the community, then those beliefs will be privileged over any alternatives. It follows, therefore, that the pragmatist does not have to be committed to the potentially contradictory normative view to the effect that no one should pass judgment on the morality of others. Indeed, pragmatists may feel themselves to be on strong ground. Although this is not a claim that Gibbs makes, by embracing free and equal participation in arriving at agreements, pragmatists are making a claim about the efficacy of democracy. Consequently, concerning the issue of relativism, what rather uninterestingly remains amounts to an acknowledgement of the fact that different communities can differ morally. This is moral diversity rather than moral relativism.

For Gibbs the critical point is that 'principles of justice require a procedure of people sharing meanings, indeed reaching understanding together' (p. 145). Therein lies the significance of the identification of the elements of a community that will enable people to interpret principles of justice. Whilst Gibbs does not explicitly discuss this point, it is the case that shared meanings will not be produced by any old community. For example, it is hard to understand how the atomization, competition and isolation of laissez-faire liberal communities could be conducive to the production of shared meanings. Not much by way of attentiveness or cooperation is to be found there. Gibbs's achievement resides in bringing together conceptions of both the forms and the terms of association that are necessary for the understanding and the practice of an ethic of responsibility. Regarding the forms of association, we therefore have an understanding of the nature of the relationships between an individual and the other individuals who constitute the community that are required. These relationships reveal the terms of association, that is, the understandings that people have about their community which in this case involves understandings about the community's notion of justice. However, echoing Gibbs's view of his own work, in order to appreciate those understandings fully, we are required to pay attention.

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[Back to current electronic table of contents](#)