Review Of "Pragmatic Liberalism And The Critique Of Modernity" By G. Gutting

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Book Review

Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity


Gutting mounts his argument via the explication and assessment of Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor on mind, knowledge, and value. The position that he defends---pragmatic liberalism---"regards both knowing and doing as nothing more than human social practices, governed by norms derived entirely from the deep desires that constitute individuals as members of cognitive and moral communities" (p. 163). Though the position is similar to Rorty's, Gutting is at pains to reject antirealism or decisionism with regard to either knowledge or value. Instead, he endorses "humdrum realism" (p. 32) and "ethical naturalism" (p. 56), the latter in the manner of Hume. There is a real world of mind-independent stuffs, and there are scientific procedures for discerning their natures and properties. The worth of these procedures is proven by their success in supporting prediction and control. But Rorty is right to argue that there are no philosophically discernible 'superfacts' that establish a priori that these procedures work. Cartesian attempts to ground the success of science in prior philosophical knowledge are fruitless.

Gutting's ethical naturalism is likewise more sophisticated than cruder attempts to reduce away all valuations in favor of explaining human behavior nomologically. There are objective enough norms that govern our pursuits. But these norms are constituted not by reference to a Platonic, person-independent good, but only by what we most deeply desire. Gutting accepts from MacIntyre the thought that our deepest desires are often constituted through our immediate participation in historical traditions. But he argues against MacIntyre both that the Aristotelian tradition is not as robust as MacIntyre claims, particularly in the face of modern science, and that there is a coherent liberal tradition in modernity, a tradition that centers on the deep desire not to be taken in by the dogmatic claims of authorities. Indeed, MacIntyre himself subscribes to liberal norms of critical reflectiveness and conversation between local traditions.

From Taylor, Gutting accepts the thought that "freedom, benevolence, and the affirmation of ordinary life" (p. 110) are dominant values in modernity. Taylor is further right to note that there are such things as inescapable value frameworks and deepened understandings of value-commitments (not just shifts of preference). But these points do not support Taylor's claim that these values must have a source in some person-independent good such as the will of God. All these phenomena can be explained by invoking the naturalist idea of healthy, deep desires. Contra Taylor and following Hume, "nature replaces the Christian God as the higher reality in relation to which the drama of our inwardness unfolds" (p. 132); "nothing beyond the natural is required to
make sense of ethics" (p. 159). [End Page 445]

Following Rorty, Gutting distinguishes a thick private ethics of multiple routes of self-cultivation, traced most prominently in conflicting, literary narratives that offer options, not obligations, from a thin public ethics of the toleration of any pursuits that do not harm others. "Public ethics achieves intersubjective validity but at the price of moral thinness. The thinness does not amount, however, to a reduction to the punctual self. The agent of Rorty's public ethics is a socially connected, benevolent self, both a subject and an object of our affirmation of ordinary life" (p. 133).

Gutting concludes with a coda in which he endorses the activities of analysis of our de facto concepts and norms (Kripke, Nagel), historical reflectiveness about how we came to have them (MacIntyre, Taylor, Rorty, Foucault), and conceptual creativity (Deleuze). These activities are all in order, particularly when they check and balance one another. There is no philosophical supertheory that combines and completes them, in such a way that our practices could be philosophically legislated for us from beyond what we already desire and do. "Enlightenment humanism" in the styles of Montaigne, Voltaire, and Hume is to be preferred to the legislative ambitions of "philosophical modernity" in the styles of Descartes and Kant.

*Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* is a wonderful book. The critical discussions are at a very high level: focused, nuanced, and clear. It would make a very good text for a senior seminar built around the critical comparison of Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor. It articulates, with great care and persuasiveness, a decent and humane view. Gutting's sympathetic care in reconstructing positions and his probity in assessing them are (or ought to be) models for us all.

But I find that I nonetheless have three deep, interrelated objections. First of all, Gutting makes much of the distinction between metaphysical theorizing and naturalistic treatments of what we do and desire. But exactly how is this distinction drawn? One way to draw it would be to insist that properly naturalistic treatments use only extensional language. But this would be, for Gutting, too restrictive and reductive, in disqualifying all talk of freedom, say, as a real value that we deeply desire, even when we are not explicitly aware of it. But if we allow such talk of freedom, then how is Kant disqualified as a non-naturalist metaphysician of practical reason?

Secondly, can and ought our deep desires be coherent? T. M. Scanlon, in *What We Owe to Each Other*, has, like other Kantians, argued that there is a difference between desire and inclination. Desires function as reasons for action (in contrast to inclinations, which never do) when and only when they are *taken as reasons* by an agent. These takings are open to rational assessment. Gutting will accept this, but argue that such takings and rational assessings are driven only by what we deeply desire. But are these deep desires simply given (naturally and historically) as inclinations are, or are they constituted as desires through their connections to rational reflectiveness? If the former, then the naturalism threatens to be reductive. If the latter, then the Kantian idea that our possession of rational reflectiveness itself commits us to the open-ended project of ordering and shaping our desires, such that our actions can be generally recognized as reasonable, remains open. This project seems both more than merely natural and contrary to the kind of Rortyan brute value pluralism in the private sphere that Gutting endorses.

Finally, do we need a vision of justice grounded in something more than our desires? Gutting argues that the values of respect and toleration, while not valid from an "absolute standpoint," do have a "perspectival objectivity" (p. 155). This risks reducing these values to something not
mandatory enough, for those who are by desire disposed otherwise. Gutting seeks to mute this risk by referring to what we who are citizens of the rich, North Atlantic democracies desire. But why are the desires of this group privileged? And what do the desires of this group have to say to those who are outside it or on its margins, perhaps even its victims? Gutting's public value commitments seem too weak to support strong criticisms of exploitative practices that may already be in place in the North Atlantic democracies, but may be hidden by distance or ideology. Perhaps there are deliverances of conscience that come from liminal places, either the mysterious structure of rational subjectivity or social marginality, and that claim the allegiance of everyone.

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