

***Jonathan Wolff - Ethics and Public Policy: A Philosophical Inquiry (London: Routledge 2011) pp. 230***

Can academic moral philosophy tell us how to regulate problematic activities like experimentation on animals, gambling, the consumption of drugs, prostitution, the sale of bodily organs or to handle the many issues raised by ill-health and disability? I dare say most people would have their doubts and most moral philosophers would share them. With few exceptions my colleagues show little inclination to pronounce on the issues of the day and even less to participate in the formulation of public policy. Jonathan Wolff is one of the exceptions and this book contains his valuable reflections on more than a decade of service as an academic advisor to public bodies.

In this role, Wolff could have played the Philosopher-King. He could have told the other members of the Gambling Review Body or the Nuffield Council Bioethics Working Party that he was in possession of the correct moral theory – be it Utilitarianism or Kantianism or Virtue Ethics or some more personal creation – a theory which would resolve their perplexities and place their deliberations on a firm foundation. But Wolff very wisely refrained. Instead he presents himself more as an intellectual accountant, on hand to make distinctions, resolve ambiguities, detect fallacies and highlight inconsistencies in the views of his fellow public servants.

Take gambling. Wolff distinguishes three different questions: ‘First, should gambling be permitted? Second, should anyone be allowed to profit from gambling? Third, should it be permitted to encourage people to gamble (i.e. advertise)?’ (56) As Wolff observes, one need not be a philosopher to make such distinctions - one could be a lawyer or even a clear-headed lay member of the Gambling Review Body - but philosophical training does help here. And once one has the training it can be hard to stick to the accountant’s brief.

The Philosopher-King intrudes when Wolff is discussing the idea that consuming drugs is wrong because it distorts the natural functioning of the body. He comments ‘philosophers will always be suspicious of arguments based on what

is physically natural or normal' and 'the fact that a natural system is not fulfilling its natural purpose should not in itself worry us' (74). Here Wolff may well be right but, whether right or wrong, he is deep in ethical theory. There is no consensus of philosophers on this point, even amongst the living let alone the dead. And, what's more, the controversies of the philosophers still have an echo in everyday moral thought.

Take the following example. One who suffers from Body Integrity Identity Disorder might fervently wish to have their healthy left leg amputated and replaced with a prosthesis. Their condition can cause great unhappiness and, it seems, could often be remedied by amputation. Yet doctors are very unwilling to operate. Why so? Not because they doubt the effectiveness of the prosthesis (or the future 'capability' of its recipient (161)). Any loss of function would likely be more than compensated for by the patient's enhanced sense of well-being. It looks as if such doctors imagine that there is something wrong with amputating a healthy leg even though the amputation is desperately desired and will not harm the patient. Wolf must explain to the doctors that they are wrong.

Wolff tells us that, when they attend to matters of public policy, philosophers tend to defend views which are 'so far from current practice as to seem, to the non-philosophers, quite outrageous' (2). There is more than a grain of truth in this. But outrage can be hard to avoid and perhaps we philosophers shouldn't try. Perhaps our distinctive contribution is to point out that there might be nothing wrong with amputating a healthy leg. Or perhaps our contribution should be to demonstrate the opposite. Either way, like Wolff, we'll have left accountancy behind.