



Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics

Simon Blackburn

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Writing with wit and elegance, Simon Blackburn tackles the basic questions of ethics in this lively book, highlighting the complications and troubling issues that spring from the very simple question of how we ought to live. Blackburn dissects the many common reasons for why we are skeptical about ethics. Drawing on examples from history, politics, religion and everyday personal experience, he shows how cynicism and self-consciousness can paralyze us into considering ethics a hopeless pursuit. He assures us that ethics is neither futile nor irrelevant, but an intimate part of the most important issues of living--of birth, death, happiness, desire, freedom, pleasure, and justice. Indeed, from moral dilemmas about abortion and euthanasia, to our obsession with personal rights, to our longing for a sense of meaning in life, our everyday struggles are rife with ethical issues. Blackburn distills the arguments of Hume, Kant and Aristotle down to their essences, to underscore the timeless relevance of our voice of conscience, the pitfalls of complacency, and our concerns about truth, knowledge and human progress.

Blackburn's rare combination of depth, rigor, and sparkling prose, along with his distinguished ranking among contemporary philosophers, mark *Being Good* as an important statement on our current disenchantment with ethics. It challenges us to take a more thoughtful reading of our ethical climate and to ponder more carefully our own standards of behavior.

Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics Details

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Lukas op de Beke says

Starts out well, as Blackburn enumerates number of traditional problems for ethics (the failure of the Divine Command theory exemplified in Plato's Euthyphro, relativism, nihilism (think Nietzsche's attack on Christian "slave" morality), psychological challenges, evolutionary debunking accounts etc.

The remainder of the book is spent on trying to find a foundation for ethics and the Good Life. Blackburn covers the usual suspects, utilitarianism, Kantianism, Aristotelian eudaimonistic theories. In the end, this book is really just a decent short introduction.

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Arcadia says

Very concise and accessible introduction to Ethics (spoiler). I enjoyed the arguments of the book more and more as it progressed, however I felt that it was kind of just giving names to moral dilemmas that are already obviously present in day to day life. Might read Kant, ya que Simon Blackburn seems to be such a fan. Thanks Kilius for the recommendation :) It was a good taste of what these intellectual debates include.

Rahell Omer says

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Amir The Fat Bookworm says

I believe, when a scholar is expected to write a book with "Very short Introduction" In its name and is published by Oxford University Press, the earlier mentioned scholar should at least write arguments against thesis he/she had read.

Any scholar (be they a student or professor) would know that Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins, not just only not mention "Humans should act egoistically because genes do" rather he emphasized that this just tells

how genes function. Not how we are or how we ought to be. Also, I challenge the writer to show any respect full figure in science that directly or indirectly, we should act as our biological history, or other animals. Especially when most zoologists and animal experts show that ethics in most animals are comparable to humans and we are not that many ethicists in comparison.

I would email my criticism to Simon Blackburn about this matter, but apparently, he wouldn't be reading my emails as he has shown to be avoidant about reading scientific literature that might look as though they do not meet his philosophical premises.

I found this book hardly ironic, as I find publishing such a poor written essay, ethically compromising at best.

Ryan Scicluna says

A good book but as it states in the title it is a very Short introduction. It has a very good starting point for all those willing to start immersing themselves in the philosophy of ethics. However reading this book alone it is not enough. You must read other books about the subject. Here I listed a list of suggested further reading which in this case if you are really interested into the subject you must at least read a couple more books from.

Suggested Further Reading:

Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche

Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong John Mackie

Ethics and the limits of Philosophy Bernard Williams

After Virtue Alasdair MacIntyre

Relativism and Moral Objectivity G.Harman and J.J. Thomson

Moral Relativity David Wong

Women, Culture, and Development Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover

Living High and Letting Die Peter Unger

The Limits of Morality Shelly Kagan

Moral Luck Bernard Williams

The Lure of the Flies William Golding

Babeltower A.S. Byatt

The Problem of Abortion Susan Dwyer and Joel Feinberg

Civilisation and its Discontents Sigmund Freud

Mortal Questions Thomas Nagel

Thinking Clearly about Death Jay Rosenberg

Death, Desire and Loss Jonathan Dollimore

The Morality of Happiness Julia Annas

Utilitarianism John Stuart Mill

Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point R.M. Hare

Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke and Marx on the Rights of Man Jeremy Waldron

Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory Thoams Hill

On Virtue Ethics Posalind Hursthouse

The Evolution of the Social Contract Brian Skyrms

Morals by Agreement David Gauthier

What We Owe to Each Other T.M. Scanlon
The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory Hugh LaFollette
Ethics and Economics Elizabeth Anderson
Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle
An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation Jeremy Bentham
A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge George Berkeley
Ruling Passions Simon Blackburn
Think Simon Blackburn
Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel Joseph Butler
The Selfish Gene Richard Dawkins
The Extant Remains Epicurus
Essential Works of Foucault Michel Foucault
The Phenomenology of Spirit G.W.F. Hegel
The Histories Herodotus
Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion David Hume
Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals David Hume
Essays Moral, Political and Literary David Hume
A Treatise of Human Nature David Hume
Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals Immanuel Kant
Practical Philosophy Immanuel Kant
An Essay Concerning Human Understanding John Locke
A System of Logic John Stuart Mill
Basic Writings Friedrich Nietzsche
Euthyphro Plato
Conjectures and Refutations Karl Popper
The Foundations of Mathematics F.P. Ramsey
A Theory of Justice John Rawls
Practical Ethics Peter Singer
The Theory of Moral Sentiments Adam Smith
Jumpers Tom Stoppard
Sources of the Self Charles Taylor
History of the Peloponnesian War Thucydides
The Theory of the Leisure Class Thorstein Veblen
The Mating Season P.G. Wodehouse

B. Rule says

Good overview that would be a decent introduction for a layman. I admired its concision and plainspoken approach. I thought he did a good job of summarizing Kant and Aristotle in a couple paragraphs. It was a bit dry at times. Also, the foundation Blackburn lays for moral philosophy to shore it up against the depredations of the Grand Unifying Pessimisms he describes is a pretty thin one.

Kind of a bummer when the conclusion is there is no Reason for moral behavior, and all we have to build upon is a feeling that there is some shared consensus of things that are bad and things that are good. Obviously, if morality is built on nothing more than a nebulous shared intuition of right and wrong, then that consensus may shift over time in ways that make sense (extending rights to disenfranchised groups, trying to

dismantle institutional sexism and racism) and ways that are a little dismaying (rising ethnonationalism, totalitarianism, etc.). But how do we critique positions that put forward a totalizing but repugnant moral vision, if there is no privileged purchase for moral thought arising from virtue, natural law, or otherwise? Maybe that's really where we're left, but I can't help feeling he cedes too much to relativism for my comfort. My moral intuition is that alt-right Nazis are bad, independent of a shared agreement that they are. Because what if that (has already) changed?

booklady says

When I got to the 'joke' about the priest who presented the Truth about eternal life and the promise of salvation and it was received as, "Wow, terrific, if that works for you that's great." on page 26 I knew I didn't need this kind of book on ethics, especially since his witness was used as the butt of the joke and a relativist claim to authority. According to Blackburn, 'The moral is that once a relativist frame of mind is really in place, nothing--no claims to truth, authority, certainty, or necessity--will be audible except as one more saying like all the others.'

Too bad. I hoped this might be a good book.

Regan says

This book is not specific enough about trends in ethics to be of good use in an Intro to Philosophy class, but it provides a sophisticated and non-condescending account of the subject fit for intelligent people looking for the lay of the land.

Reasonable says

After reading *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* by the same author, I expected this one to be a great source of insightful and thought-provoking ideas. It did provide some interesting background on moral philosophy. However, I feel this book didn't quite live up to my expectations. Maybe, because I enjoyed his other book "Think", so much more. I thought I'd share some miscellaneous thoughts on some points raised in the book. Sorry for the heavy use of quotes. They should provide the potential reader a taste of the scope of the book.

From the very beginning, Simon Blackburn admits moral philosophy may not always have any immediate real world consequences. He illustrates the point by stating in the introduction, "A single photograph may have done more to halt the Vietnam War than all the writings of moral philosophers of the time put together."

An interesting idea I came across in the first part of the book was a remark by the contemporary moral philosopher Bernard Williams. 'One Thought Too Many' describes this idea, which is simply that there are times when overthinking or overanalysing a moral decision may not reflect a good moral character. For example, a man faced with a situation in which he can save only one of two people in equal peril, chooses to save his wife. A cost-benefit analysis in such a case is One Thought Too Many. Here are two more noteworthy quotes from the same chapter, titled "The death of God",

“To obey [moral] commandments just because of their power would be servile and self-interested.”

“The events of the fig tree in Bethany (Mark 11: 12–21) would make any environmentalist's hair stand on end.” (Good one!)

In another chapter on ‘Relativism’, I found this interesting example he gave for the fact that the moral climate differs from time to time and place to place. The example is from Herodotus, the great Greek historian. He scorned Cambyses, son of Cyrus of Persia for showing insufficient respect for the Persian laws. He wrote, “Everything goes to make me certain that Cambyses was completely mad; otherwise he would not have gone in for mocking religion and tradition.”

Finally, I’m going to end this review [of sorts] with these self-explanatory foods for thought. [It’s especially for you moral relativists out there. Yes you know who you are! :)]

“When in Rome do as the Romans do- but what if Romans go in for some rather nasty doings? We do not have to lift the lid very far to find societies that tolerate widow-burning, or enforce female genital mutilation, or systematically deny education and other rights to women. There are societies where there is no freedom of political expression, or whose treatment of criminals cannot be thought of without a shudder, or where distinctions of religion or language bring with them distinctions of legal and civil status.”

Some more great quotes on happiness, the good life and the naturalistic fallacy.

“Just as a lot of crimes are committed in the name of liberty, so they can be committed in the name of the common happiness. Suppose just a little bit more happiness is obtained by trampling on someone's rights. Is justice itself subordinate to the general good?”

”Books, concerts, and bicycles are unnatural, but components of many a good life. Conversely, there is nothing particularly virtuous about con?ning ourselves to 'natural' diets or 'natural' ways of locomotion, or shelter, or sexual behaviour.”

“The healthy life will be one in which everything is functioning as evolution has adapted it to function. That is the 'intended' life for a biological organism. It is life according to the 'natural law' of human life... True happiness in this sense requires some correct relationship with our world. It cannot be gained by stoking up sensations Within. In the same way, a succession of pleasures, a life of endless release of endorphins, perhaps through some chemical stimulation, would not be a life of Aristotelian happiness.”

“It is not the job of moral philosophy, and more than that of a constitution or a government, to make people happy, but only to set a stage within which they can be happy. The American Declaration of Independence talks of ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’, not the achievement of happiness.”

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics (Very Short Introductions #80), Simon Blackburn

Writing with wit and elegance, Simon Blackburn tackles the basic questions of ethics in this lively book, highlighting the complications and troubling issues that spring from the very simple question of how we ought to live. Blackburn dissects the many common reasons for why we are skeptical about ethics. Drawing

on examples from history, politics, religion and everyday personal experience, he shows how cynicism and self-consciousness can paralyze us into considering ethics a hopeless pursuit.

Beatriz Canas Mendes says

Não estava à espera que esta leitura me agradasse. Comecei a ler a introdução à ética de Blackburn sem expectativas, mas acabei por gostar da organização do livro e de como o autor coloca em análise questões do dia-a-dia, sob o escrutínio de teorias de pensadores muito afamados.

Na verdade, qualquer leitor que tenha estudado Filosofia na escola já terá conhecimento da maioria dos conteúdos expostos. O que é, de facto, mais relevante, aquilo que devo destacar é a capacidade de sintetização e compilação de Blackburn.

O ponto mais fraco que tenho a apontar acerca desta introdução à ética é o ocasional devaneio do autor, o que me deixou algumas vezes a pensar "mas o que é que isto tem que ver com o assunto?".

Recomendo o livro a novos alunos de ciências sociais ou humanas.

Crackers says

"No god wrote the laws of good behavior into the cosmos. Nature has no concern for good or bad, right or wrong."

Blake says

This book has vanquished my hopes in Blackburn's treatment of ethics. The criticism goes not for his brevity, but to his inaccuracy in attempts to properly represent the threats to an objectivist ethics and as well the actual strengths of other moral cognitivism.

His stated project is to dispel the myths regarding moral philosophy, but in this book he perpetuates them. His statement of moral relativism is what you would expect to find in media bites, not the works of a moral philosopher. Given his stated intention, one would expect him to opt for the explanation over condemnation, but no, he drops a normative thesis (tolerance, of course) into the relativist's mix and in so doing misrepresents not only the relativist's position, but her opponent's in the form of objectivism.

Blackburn is, of course, a meta-ethical quasi-realist, whose semantic theory contains a realist element, but primarily maintains the expressivist thesis. So those expecting him to fairly represent his opponents, in a book aimed at those who are new to moral philosophy and likely to be swayed by his arguments, will be disappointed.

The middle of the book deals with normative ethics and does so in a similar, but slightly more acrid style. Blackburn's normative thesis has some unique features that almost saved the book in my opinion, but framed as they were by a confused promise to set the public understanding of ethics free from the usual kind of misunderstandings and the failure to deliver on that promise (coupled with an apparent joy in that failure) leaves the book's whole project a mess of inconsistent philosophy.

Riku Sayuj says

Slowly working my way through the Very Short Introduction series. This has been the worst of the lot till now - in fact the series had been pretty good until this one.

Blackburn seems to be unaware that the standards had been set a tad higher in this series and chooses to ramble on about just societies etc instead of focusing on a compact introduction with enough fresh thoughts to send the reader packing on his way to denser pastures. That is what the authors I have read in the series until now had done. In any case, I will continue working through the VSIs. They usually tend to be good.
