

HEATHER DYKE

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics seeks answers to questions about the moral status of human actions and human lives. What should I do, and what should I not do? What sort of life should I lead? Actions and lives are temporal things. Actions are performed at certain times, are informed by past events and have consequences for the future. Lives have temporal extension, and are experienced from a sequence of temporal perspectives. Thus, one would think that answers to ethical questions should take some account of their temporal features. Yet there has never been a systematic study of the relations between time and ethics. In 2001 a conference was held at the University of Otago in New Zealand on the theme of Time and Ethics to explore issues that emerge at the intersection between these two fields of study. This volume contains revised versions of some of the papers presented at that conference.

The essays are collected into three parts, each with its own unifying theme. Part I focuses on parallels between reasoning about time and reasoning about ethics, and shows various ways in which thinking about each of these fields can inform what we should say about the other. Part II looks at the ethical significance of temporal location. Actions, reasons, preferences, consequences, events, pains, persons and (arguably) the possession of a truth-value by a truth bearer, all have temporal location, and this fact turns out to have considerable ethical significance - or so the essays in this section argue. The essays in part III examine issues that arise out of the consideration that persons are both temporal and ethical beings. For instance, given that we typically continue to hold people responsible for their actions at times other than the times at which those actions are performed, we need an account of personal identity over time that can support this moral practice.

It is nice if an introduction to an anthology can provide an overview of the main issues, problems, arguments and positions that are characteristic of that anthology's area. However, this anthology is forging new territory, so that an overview of it before it has been established would be premature. A better introduction to the area can be provided directly by a look at the issues discussed by the essays themselves. What follows is a brief outline of the content of each contribution to the volume.

### PART I: AT THE TIME/ETHICS INTERSECTION

In the first essay in this section I compare the theoretical territory in the philosophy of time with that in meta-ethics, and argue that a particular position in the philosophy of time has a counterpart in meta-ethics that has been overlooked. The theory known as the new B-theory of time involves a particular combination of

semantic and metaphysical theses. It holds that tense cannot be eliminated from language, but that there are no tensed facts corresponding to this irreducible feature of language. I argue that a parallel position can be developed with respect to moral truths and moral facts, and that this position is immune to many of the criticisms currently laid at the door of moral realism. One implication of this parallel treatment of tense and morality concerns the role of tensed and moral beliefs in practical reasoning. B-theorists argue that tensed beliefs are not only irreducible, but also indispensable for successful and timely action, despite the fact that there is no tensed reality to which they correspond. By parity of reasoning, I argue that moral claims are not reducible to non-moral claims, but, nevertheless, are indispensable in practical moral reasoning, despite the fact that there is no distinctively 'moral' reality to which they correspond.

Thomas Nagel is one of the few philosophers to have noted and written about some of the connections between time and ethics, most notably in *The Possibility of Altruism*. There Nagel argued that there is a parallel between the recognition that the present is simply a time among others and the recognition that I am merely an individual among others, and furthermore, that each of these has significant ethical implications. To come to see that the present is simply a time among others is to acquire grounds for taking account of my desires at other times when deciding what I ought to do. To come to see that I am merely an individual among others provides me with grounds for altruism. In that work, Nagel concluded that the only acceptable reasons were timeless (in the case of prudence) or agent-neutral (in the case of altruism). He subsequently abandoned the latter position, but it is not clear whether he retained the former. The essay by Ramon Das focuses on Nagel's argument for the first of these positions. According to Das, Nagel's argument for prudence, suitably modified, can support the conclusion that there are *some* reasons that a person must hold to be timeless if she is to avoid a kind of dissociation from other temporal stages of her life. He argues that Nagel's putatively formal argument actually presupposes certain particular values, and that these values play a central role in the notion of personal identity that is necessary to understand the practical significance of the present's being merely a time among others. Once the implicit appeal to these values has been made explicit Nagel's argument may be able to do what it was originally intended to do (viz., establish that the only acceptable reasons are timeless) albeit only with respect to reasons that derive from these values.

## PART II: THE ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TEMPORAL LOCATION

The essays in this section address the question of whether temporal location itself can have ethical significance. In the first essay Quentin Smith examines the implications for morality of combining a consequentialist moral realism, where the moral worth of an action is a function of the value of its consequences at later times, with the hypothesis that the future is infinite. Smith calls on empirical evidence (the observation of two supernovae in 1998) to support the hypothesis that the future is infinite. He then combines this claim with moral realism and aggregative value theory, and argues that the inevitable conclusion is the truth of moral nihilism,

where this is taken to mean that things have value, even though no action is better or worse than any other action. The intuitive idea is that the sum of an infinite universe's value is infinite, so no action can increase or decrease the total aggregate value of the universe.

In the second essay Michael Zimmerman considers the difference between the time at which a crime is committed and the time at which punishment for it is initiated, and asks what relevance, if any, this has for the moral justification of the punishment. He first considers whether it could ever be morally justifiable to punish someone for a crime before they have committed it, and shows that it is not as easy to dismiss this possibility as one might initially think. He then explores the question of whether there is a difference in the moral justification of punishment that is initiated soon after the commission of a crime, and punishment that comes a long time (fifty years, say) after the crime. Many people feel uneasy about whether delayed punishment can be so easily justified as timely punishment, and Zimmerman considers the possible reasons for this, paying particular attention to the question of what the offender deserves. He concludes that it is right to be sceptical of the justifiability of delayed punishment, but furthermore, that similar considerations suggest that we ought also to be sceptical of the justifiability of timely punishment. According to Zimmerman, desert plays a central role in the justifiability of punishment. But the extent to which luck pervades our lives has a significant impact on the question of what we deserve, enough to raise doubts about the justifiability of punishment, whether timely or delayed.

The question of what our moral responsibilities are depends, to some extent, on how our actions affect other people. But which other people? Should we take account of people who exist at times other than the present, when deciding what our moral responsibilities are? How much weight, for example, should we assign to how our actions will affect people who don't exist now, but who will exist in the future? Alternatively, how much consideration should we give to how our actions affect past people? In her essay, Janna Thompson addresses the second of these questions. Unlike future people, the life experiences of the dead cannot be made better or worse by what we do. Even so, the idea that we have obligations of some kind to past people is a common one. Most of us agree that it is wrong to falsely impugn the reputations of the dead, that we ought to keep promises made to them, and that we ought to respect their bequests. According to Thompson, it is not right to say that the dead can be harmed by what we do, but there are some obligations, entitlements and interests that can survive the death of those who had them. They survive because they continue to have a legitimate moral claim on us. The dead, like the unborn, do not exist now, and for that reason, moral theories that focus solely on the rights or interests of interacting individuals have difficulty accommodating them. Thompson argues that we do have duties in respect to past generations, and the way in which she argues for this position has implications for a theory about duties to future generations.

The focus of Andrew Moore's essay is the temporal location of pain. Does it make any difference to my overall well-being whether a painful operation is located in my past or my future? Moore is careful to distinguish this question from the related and much discussed question of whether we are justified in taking (or have

reason to take) different attitudes to past and future pain. Most people would probably assent to the view that if your pain is in the past rather than the future, then you are better off. The rival view would be that the mere difference in temporal location of your pain never makes any difference to your overall well-being. Moore labels the former view 'relativism' and the latter view 'neutralism'. He examines the implications of relativism and neutralism for the metaphysics of time, and the relations that each stands in to the main rival theories of well-being. He then assesses the truth of both relativism and neutralism. Finally he considers whether any difference of well-being really is at stake in puzzle cases involving the temporal location of one's pain.

Peter Caws asks whether the temporal location of moral propositions has any implications for their truth-value. He compares moral propositions with those in the natural sciences, and in mathematics and logic, and for each of these considers whether, if they are true now, it would be right to say that they have always been true. The following three propositions are taken to be true now, but what were their truth-values at the time of Socrates?

- (1) DNA is the carrier of hereditary properties.
- (2) 13 is a prime number.
- (3) Slavery is wrong.

Most would be willing to accept that (1) and (2), as well as being true now, were true at the time of Socrates. But (3) poses a *prima facie* problem. Is there some way, without falling into mere cultural relativism, of maintaining that some moral propositions now held to be true were not true at other times? What are the truth conditions for propositions like (3)? Caws rejects emotivist and conventionalist strategies, and focuses on the thesis that moral propositions are true or false in and for the moral community. This shifts attention to conditions of membership in the moral community and to its reach in space and time. He argues that the boundaries of the moral community will be settled by what he calls 'mutual instruction under mutual criticism.' He further suggests that its scope increases with time, so that sub-groups formerly excluded can be included, but once included a sub-group cannot later be excluded.

Krister Bykvist examines the ethical significance of the temporal location of preferences and desires. In particular, he focuses on whether past preferences and desires give us moral reasons to act now. Suppose that, as a child, I had a desire to be an engine driver. Should I now give any weight to that desire when deciding what to do, even though it is not a desire that I hold any longer? Most would say that we should give no weight to these past preferences. After all, why should past preferences give us reasons to act when they have been replaced by new ones? Bykvist argues that past preferences present a problem for any preference-sensitive moral theory (and not just for preference utilitarianism), as any such theory will have to decide what to do when people change their minds and form new ambitions. One obvious solution to the problem is to say that we should be time-partial; that we should simply disregard all past preferences. Bykvist argues that this solution is unattractive, and that we should stay time-neutral, counting preferences no matter

when they occur. He considers and rejects a number of time-neutral theories, and on the basis of these negative results, formulates a list of desiderata that any plausible theory should satisfy. He then presents his own time-neutral theory, and defends it against some objections. He argues that we should adopt a harmony requirement that filters out those preferences that do not express sustained priorities. His theory, he argues, coheres with our considered intuitions about particular cases, and also recognises the importance of a unified life; a life with unity and continuity of purpose.

In the final essay in this section Panayot Butchvarov tackles some problems for any moral theory that is essentially future-oriented. He identifies two major problems for consequentialism. One is epistemic: we cannot know what we ought to do because we cannot know all the consequences of any action. The other is metaphysical: with respect to the totality of consequences and ramifications of any action, realism is questionable. These problems, Butchvarov suggests, are not just problems for consequentialism, but for any kind of moral realism. Butchvarov's focus in this paper is on the second of these two problems, and he appeals to Wittgenstein's distinction between what can be said and what can be shown in formulating his response to it. He labels Wittgenstein's position non-realism, thus distinguishing it from standard realism and standard anti-realism, to which it provides, he argues, a welcome alternative.

### PART III: PERSONS AS TEMPORAL AND ETHICAL BEINGS

The essays in this section address a number of different issues that arise out of the consideration that persons are both temporal and ethical beings. L. Nathan Oaklander's essay addresses an apparent clash between an ontology of temporal parts and our practice of holding people morally responsible for their actions. According to the B-theory of time, to which Oaklander subscribes, all events in the history of the universe exist at the time they do regardless of what time it is; all events, whether past, present or future, are equally real. Many B-theorists, Oaklander included, hold that objects, including persons, are successions of suitably related temporal stages. If this is true, then the person stage that we hold responsible for an action is not identical with the person stage who carried out the action. But the ascription of responsibility surely presupposes identity between the person to whom responsibility is ascribed and the person who committed the act for which responsibility is ascribed. Oaklander explores this apparent problem for the B-theory, and attempts to defend it against the charge that it is incompatible with moral responsibility.

Persons are beings who are capable of empathising with others. In his essay Michael Slote develops the idea that empathy is central to morality. He notes that temporal, perceptual and causal immediacy all play a role in arousing human empathy. It follows, according to Slote, that our temporal perspective on and proximity to suffering are central to morality. Slote develops his account of empathy as central to morality in the light of recent psychological studies of empathy. So for him, morality is firmly grounded in what, as a matter of fact, human beings are like.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1312-6>

Time and Ethics

Essays at the Intersection

Dyke, H.L. (Ed.)

2003, XI, 241 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1312-6