

Stephen A. Brown

An Antidote to Value-free Conceptions

Alan Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998.

The principal claim of Alan Gewirth, that all agents must, on pain of contradiction, accept a supreme moral law, has profound implications not just for philosophy, but for social and political thought, sociological theory, and jurisprudence. However, compared to two of his contemporaries, Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, Gewirth's work has received scant attention outside the fields of analytic moral philosophy and natural law theory. In this review of Gewirth's latest work, I will outline Gewirth's overall philosophical project in order to appreciate *Self-Fulfillment* within his ethical system before concluding with reasons for the relative obscurity of Gewirth's thought.

Self-Fulfillment can be understood as the third book in a trilogy exploring Gewirth's ethical thought. The first book, *Reason and Morality*¹ received a great deal of critical attention from philosophers interested both in morality and in the epistemology of rights because of its two main theses. The first is that every Prospective Purposive Agent (PPA) must acknowledge that his generic features of action, which are freedom and well-being, are necessary conditions for the proximate success of his purposes, and that he should value them as such. Gewirth's dialectically necessary method, which deduces its conclusions from statements and propositions which every PPA is necessarily committed to accepting, states that the PPA must accept therefore that not only must he have freedom and well-being, but that he must also make a claim-right to them. This claim-right is correlative with a strict obligation on the part of other Prospective Purposive Agents (PPAO) not to interfere against the PPA's will with his freedom and well-being.

¹ Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality*, 1978, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Gewirth's second thesis, like his first, proceeds entirely from within the perspective of the PPA, and is still concerned with what the PPA is logically committed to, given that he must value and claim rights to his freedom and well-being. The reason why the PPA has rights to the generic features of action is that he is a purposive agent. These rights cannot be based on any other factor, such as being a citizen of a specific society or being named Wordsworth Donisthorpe, without depriving agents who do not belong to these categories of rights fundamental to their agency. Because the PPA has these rights on the basis of being an agent, he is logically committed by virtue of the logical principle of universalisation to the moral claim that all other agents have the same rights for the same reasons as he does. From this, Gewirth derives his supreme moral principle: that all agents must, on pain of contradiction, accept that every PPA should act in accord with the generic rights of the recipients of his actions. Gewirth calls this the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC).

Unsurprisingly, such ambitious claims received much critical attention in the sphere of moral philosophy. Criticism was levelled at all parts of Gewirth's system, with the most attention being levelled at the claim that the PPA must claim rights to freedom and well-being. Bernard Williams' own objection took the point of view of the amoralist and asked why anyone could not simply eschew moral terminology and language, thus bypassing the claiming of rights and the recognition of obligations for himself, or for anyone else.² Deryck Beyleveld took on the unenviable task of collecting and responding to all these criticisms in one volume and concluded that no objection so far has succeeded in refuting Gewirth's argument.³

² Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 1985, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. See Gewirth, 1978, pp. 89-95 for his refutation of this position. Gewirth has complained that Williams's objection, like many others, has not taken account of the fact that he has countered their criticisms either in *Reason and Morality* or in the many papers published subsequently. Some of these were collected in Alan Gewirth, *Human Rights: Essays on Justification and Applications*, 1982, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

³ Deryck Beyleveld, *The Dialectical Necessity of Morality: An Analysis and*

Away from moral philosophy, only natural law theory has attempted any application of Gewirth's ideas. Beyleveld and Brownsword have used Gewirth's argument to the PGC as a foundation for a non-arbitrary conception of natural law, concluding that a law not based upon or compatible with the PGC is an invalid one.⁴

Gewirth's second book in the trilogy, *The Community of Rights*,⁵ elaborates the idea of positive rights⁶ discussed briefly in the earlier book. The aim of this book, however, is to specify the social and political conditions necessary for the PPA both to maximise his productive agency, and to fulfil his obligations to the PPAO. These conditions include a welfare state committed to the PGC, a right to employment, and an economic system dedicated to economic democracy rather than capitalism. The relatively recent publication of this book means it has so far received little critical scrutiny.

Throughout Gewirth's three books, the same modified individualist method has remained. I call this modified individualism because even though Gewirth's method proceeds from claims made by the individual PPA, the conclusions oblige the PPA to behave and view himself as a social being. He must not only value his own generic rights, but also respect in a negative and positive way the rights of others. In so doing, Gewirth refutes those objections to the concept of rights as too individualistic or egoistic. In his latest book, Gewirth attempts to do exactly the same thing with the concept of self-fulfilment, by locating it within his larger ethical theory.

Gewirth claims that *Self-Fulfillment* can be understood independently of *Reason and Morality* given that it contains a

Defence of Alan Gewirth's Argument to the Principle of Generic Consistency, 1991, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

⁴ Deryck Beyleveld and Roger Brownsword, *Law as a Moral Judgement*, 1986, Sweet and Maxwell, London.

⁵ Alan Gewirth, *The Community of Rights*, 1996, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

⁶ Meaning the right to help and assistance as opposed to the negative right not to have your freedom and well-being interfered with against your will.

summary of the earlier theory. However, given the richness and complexity of the argument contained in *Reason and Morality*, this is misleading. The reader will gain far more from *Self-Fulfillment* with a knowledge of the earlier book.

By locating self-fulfilment within his own ethical theory Gewirth hopes to rid the concept of value-neutrality. Because different cultures in differing socio-historical epochs have or have had widely varying notions of what constitutes self-fulfilment, it has been deemed desirable to posit a value-neutral definition of the concept so as not to reflect the particular philosopher's own prejudices concerning what constitutes an agent's 'best' or 'highest' capacities and attributes.

A value-neutral conception of self-fulfilment, however, lacks the irreducibly value-laden intellectual tools necessary to differentiate between self-fulfilled sinners and self-fulfilled saints. I would argue that the unwillingness on the part of some philosophers, whose work touches upon these issues, to posit criteria of what constitutes a person's 'highest' and 'best' capacities, or indeed the method of the actualisation of those capacities — which requires defining 'good' and 'bad' behaviour and actions — reflects not merely a sensitivity to the diverse social, political and moral systems, but a belief that it is impossible to specify moral and immoral intentions and actions in a non-arbitrary way. This belief, if true, would mean that the attempt to derive universal moral values is an invalid enterprise.

So the fundamental problem of deducing invalid moral judgements is only a problem if it is impossible to demonstrate the truth or falsity of ethical statements: in short, if moral propositions fall short of achieving the status of knowledge. However if Gewirth's dialectical analysis in *Reason and Morality* is correct, and agents must, on pain of contradiction subscribe to the PGC,⁷ then his

⁷ Gewirth does not attempt to prove the truth of the PGC, merely that all agents should espouse it. The only assertoric value-judgement Gewirth can be said to prove is 'all PPAs ought to live in accord with the PGC'. This is why the argument is *to* the PGC.

argument offers a morally valid underpinning for the concept of self-fulfilment.

This then is the problem of outlining a theory of self-fulfilment. Gewirth, in using his earlier work to solve this problem, makes a distinction within self-fulfilment between aspiration-fulfilment and capacity-fulfilment. Aspiration-fulfilment is concerned with one's ultimate goals and is designed to answer the question 'what will satisfy my deepest desires?' Capacity-fulfilment seeks to answer the question 'how can I make the best of myself?' After outlining and critiquing aspiration-fulfilment, Gewirth rejects the concept in favour of capacity-fulfilment because both self and fulfilment are not exclusively defined by being aspirational or the having of aspirations. The agent's aspirations, as well as possibly being erroneous or inimical to fulfilment, may fail to fulfil the self in the capacity-fulfilment sense of developing to his best.⁸

In discussing capacity-fulfilment, Gewirth employs three different moralities: universalist, particularist, and personalist.⁹ Universalist morality requires that all persons be treated with egalitarian, impartial, affirmative consideration. Particularist morality is a set of rules or directives which sets requirements for action and purports to be categorically obligatory. Particularist morality acknowledges a plurality of moral systems, but an egalitarian universalist morality has a privileged status in relation to these because it has a necessary rational cogency that others lack. Personalist morality consists in counsels and precepts for living a good life (defined in terms of fulfilling one's intellectual, aesthetic and other capacities). Gewirth finds this morality more problematic than the other two because it solely considers the needs of the isolated agent and cannot move from that to the capacities of others except in so far as they affect the agent. For example, if friendship is important to a good life, the agent must treat his friends well, but only because they are instrumental to his individual fulfilment. By distinguishing these different moralities, Gewirth is able to reach three conclusions:

⁸ Gewirth, *Self Fulfillment*, 1998, pp. 19–58, 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52–54.

1. Within universalist morality, the self-fulfilled person must be a reasonable self who respects the generic rights of others as well as his own. Society should reflect this morality by upholding equal rights.

2. Within personalist morality, the self-fulfilled person is able to make effective use of the practical capacities of freedom and well-being. This involves being a self who can control his abilities through his unforced choice while having knowledge of relevant circumstances, including self-knowledge, in order to fulfil his purposes. This fulfilment of purposes reflects those virtues available to that agent.

3. Within particularist morality, self-fulfilment requires deep interpersonal preferential relations of love, friendship and familial devotion.¹⁰

Gewirth discusses capacity-fulfilment in relation to morality and then to the good life, and throughout these chapters, all three moralities are refined and underpinned by his argument to the PGC, and in this sense, the argument succeeds or fails in relation to the validity or otherwise of the thesis presented within *Reason and Morality*. As well as providing references to the relevant passages to the earlier book, Gewirth does not ignore or fudge the lively debates and controversies surrounding his work but gives concise and accurate summaries of both his critics' positions and his own responses to them.

However, the book does not fail to cover new ground. Gewirth's discussion of self-fulfilment provides much new intellectual fodder for the seasoned Gewirthian as well as the reader new to his thought. Indeed, the book perfectly demonstrates Gewirth's analytical rigour on a subject which often conspicuously lacks it. Furthermore, whereas Gewirth's previous works have frustratingly only contained passing and cursory reference to his most illustrious

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

intellectual ancestor, Immanuel Kant,¹¹ this book, in the final section on ultimate values, rights, and reason, provides an enlightening comparison of Kant's derivation of the categorical imperative with Gewirth's argument to the PGC.¹² Similarly, Gewirth's long-awaited thoughts on John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*¹³ are finally elaborated here, including his discussion of the incompatibility of Rawls's veil of ignorance and the original position with his own view that morality is derived from the knowledge of one's particular ends and purposes.¹⁴

In conclusion, I argue that *Self-Fulfillment* is bold in scope and rigorous in execution. It is a beautifully written work with a clear, candid argument, untainted by ambiguity, sleight-of-hand, or the fudging of argument. The major difficulty this book will face is its reception by those unconvinced by *Reason and Morality*. I began this review by lamenting the ignorance or disdain on the part of much of philosophy and social and political thought to Gewirth's work as a whole. Much of this I believe to be because many of his critics have paid insufficient attention to what Gewirth actually said, but it may well also be because of the very boldness and ambition of his project. If I am correct in asserting that much influential modern philosophical and social and political theorising is characterised not by a healthy scepticism, but by an uncritical belief that the Holy Grail of moral philosophy — the discovery of moral knowledge and truths — is rationally unattainable, then Gewirth's project, irrespective of its success or failure, will not achieve the recognition and critical attention such a project deserves within social and political thought.

Stephen Brown, BA in Sociology and Philosophy (Hull), MA in SPT (Sussex), is currently working on an MPhil on Gewirth and the Political Community.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1959, trans., L. W. Beck, Library of Liberal Arts, Indianapolis.

¹² Gewirth, *Self Fulfillment*, 1998, pp. 218–226.

¹³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

¹⁴ Gewirth, *Self Fulfillment*, 1998, pp. 57–58, 190–192, 208–209.