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Jan Österberg

# Towards Reunion in Ethics

 Springer

Jan Österberg  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Uppsala  
Uppsala, Sweden

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## Editorial Note

This is a posthumous publication. At the time of his death in July 2011, Jan Österberg had nearly completed the manuscript. A final section, 7.6, called “Envoi,” remained unfinished. This uncompleted section has been appended at the end of the preceding Sect. 7.5. In other respects, the editorial changes made prior to publication are only minor. They mainly consist in the correction of incomplete or faulty cross-references and typographical errors.

Uppsala, May 2018  
Erik Carlson and Rysiek Sliwinski

# Preface

A person living quite alone, like Robinson Crusoe before he met Friday, does not need a *moral* code; in order to survive and lead an acceptable life, he needs a *prudential* code, a set of rules for the guidance of his private life. But people who do not live alone but interact with each other need a moral code, a set of rules for the guidance of their common life; otherwise, their lives will be, in Hobbes's words, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The question is: What moral code is the most reasonable one?

For almost three centuries, the main answers to the question have been those provided by consequentialism and deontological ethics. A lot of eminent philosophers on each side have tried to persuade their opponents to come over to their side, but in vain. The present essay is an attempt to decide the point at issue in this Homeric struggle.

Two convictions have formed the shape of my essay. One is the conviction that consequentialism and deontological ethics really are the main competitors in the moral field. (To some extent I try to defend this conviction in Chap. 1.) The other conviction is that neither of the moralities, which have survived for so long, can be wholly wrong; the true morality must be some compromise between consequentialism and deontological ethics (what compromise I try to spell out in the last chapter).

The task that I have set myself is, of course, a rather hopeless one. The ground that I tread on is everywhere mined with deep philosophical problems. In order to do justice to these, I should have devoted at least a chapter to each of them, instead of, as now, a few pages. But sometimes it may be defensible to launch an attack without caring too much about the supply lines, or so I hope.

My essay has a feature which distinguishes it from at least many other works in moral philosophy: it is (to some extent) occupied with the psychological, sociological, and historical background of the moral theories discussed. Thus, for example, I set forth my conviction as to the origins of consequentialism, discuss what psychological features of human nature have determined the shape of deontological ethics, and point out the gradual development of common-sense morality. The reason is that moral theories are variously embedded in social and psychological contexts and

are better understood if the contexts are made explicit. (To some extent, the same is true of scientific theories. Thus, witness the recent trend among philosophers of science to describe the historical background of scientific theories.) To forestall a possible misunderstanding, I want to stress that, in my opinion, this contextualization has no relativistic implications whatever.

Henry Sidgwick thought that the *prima facie* reasonable moral theories are those of intuitionism, utilitarianism, and ethical egoism. He further thought that intuitionism (roughly, deontological ethics) had to give way to utilitarianism (roughly, consequentialism), together with ethical egoism the two main competitors in the moral field. In an earlier book, *Self and Others*, I argued that ethical egoism is not a plausible moral theory. In the present book, I will argue that deontological ethics does not have to give way to consequentialism. Once more, I thus find myself having written a Sidgwickian book. This testifies either to my own narrowness of mind or to the enduring value (interest) of Sidgwick's view on ethics.

Uppsala, Sweden

Jan Österberg

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