

# Review of Thomas Hurka's Drawing Morals - Essays in Ethical Theory, The Best Things in Life, and Underivative Duty - British Moral Philosophers from Sidgwick to Ewing

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**Thomas Hurka**

*Drawing Morals – Essays in Moral Theory.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

xi + 276 pages

\$99.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-974309-4)

**Thomas Hurka, ed.**

*Underivative Duty – British Moral Philosophers from Sidgwick to Ewing.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

225 pages

\$65.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-957744-6)

**Thomas Hurka**

*The Best Things in Life – A Guide to What Really Matters.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010.

vi + 200 pages

\$18.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-533142-4)

Thomas Hurka has never quite gained the recognition he deserves. Of course, he is Chancellor Henry N.R. Jackson Distinguished Professor of Philosophical Studies at the University of Toronto and his CV contains a long list of articles published in the best philosophical journals and a number of books by the most prestigious academic presses. And yet, his work has never been at the centre of the most intensive debates in moral philosophy. I hope that the publication of the three excellent books reviewed here will play its part in changing this unfortunate state of affairs.

On the surface, these three books seem very different from one another. *Drawing Morals* is a collection of fifteen previously published articles by Hurka. These essays cover a wide range of topics in moral philosophy from population ethics to more abstract value theory, the notion of desert, capital punishment, nationalism, and just war theory. *Underivative Duty* is, in contrast, a collection of articles edited by Hurka. Its articles have been written by a close circle of leading moral philosophers who are united by their interest in English moral philosophy written between 1870 and 1950s. Finally, *The Best Things in Life* is a wonderful short book written for a general audience. This easily accessible book explores the many things that are good for us.

Despite appearances, Hurka's work in these books is highly systematic. The unified theme of his work is best explained in the article 'Normative Ethics: Back to the Future', which opens the *Drawing Morals* collection. Hurka begins this essay by openly declaring his love of the moral philosophers who worked in England in the late 19th and the early 20th Century. This group of brilliant philosophers included Sidgwick, Moore, Rashdall, McTaggart, Ross, Pritchard, Broad, Ewing, and many others.

Even if they disagreed about many things, the majority of these philosophers shared a view about the fundamental nature of morality. Their basic metaethical conviction was that there

are objective ethical truths and that these *sui generis* truths cannot be derived from the truths about any other subject matter. This led many of the British Intuitionists to attempt to formulate a small number of more general ethical principles which would cohere with our intuitive ethical judgments about individual cases. Thus, on this picture, all moralizing is done within the autonomous ethical realm. Its purpose is to make explicit the ethical understanding contained in our shared moral sensibility.

Since the 1950s, this view of moral philosophy has been viciously attacked from many directions. Moral error theorists have claimed that there are no ethical truths at all; contemporary naturalists have argued that ethical truths just are a type of natural truths; constructivists have tried to generate the moral truths by using procedures offering an Archimedean point of view; and particularists have attempted to show that our moral intuitions cannot be captured by a finite number of general moral principles. Given this barrage of objections, it is no wonder that the views of the Hurka's heroes fell out of fashion during the second half of the 20th century.

In this context, non-naturalist realists have two ways of reacting to the previous set of challenges. The reactive response would be to explain in detail case by case what is wrong with error theory, naturalism, constructivism and particularism. The problem with this route is that it will lead to very little new ethical understanding. I am happy to report that this has never been Hurka's approach.

Instead, Hurka has been defending the basic theoretical framework of the British Intuitionists in a much more constructive way. Much of his work can be read as an attempt to specify what new moral understanding can be achieved within that framework. This way of defending a certain way of doing moral philosophy contains an insight that has often been overlooked in moral philosophy. Views in both metaethics and normative ethics should also be evaluated by how fruitful they are in ethics more broadly. If certain otherwise controversial theoretical assumptions lead to a general research project that can shed light on many different ethical problems, then this must count as one reason for accepting those assumptions.

In what follows I shall discuss each of the three books under review in turn.

1. As mentioned earlier, *Drawing Morals* contains fifteen articles by Hurka. These articles cover a large number of central topics in moral philosophy. They have been previously published in some of the most prestigious philosophical journals including *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Ethics*, *Noûs*, and *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. All these essays are admirably clearly written. They also frequently provide illuminating historical background for many contemporary ethical debates. Furthermore, they are consistently thorough in their argumentation, often original and in some places even entertaining. For reasons of space, I can discuss briefly here only three of these essays.

"The Value and Population Size" is an important early contribution to the so-called population ethics. Almost everyone agrees that human wellbeing is important: given this, we all prefer to have as much of it as possible. This line of thought quickly leads to well known paradoxes. If we maximise the total amount of wellbeing, we end up creating a huge number of

not very well off people. If we try to maximise the average amount of wellbeing instead, we will only need a few people with a high level of wellbeing.

In order to avoid these paradoxes, Hurka suggested in 1983 that the value of human wellbeing varies depending on how many people exist. In small populations, additional wellbeing has more value and so more individuals should be created. In large populations in contrast, adding more wellbeing no longer makes the state of affairs better and so no new individuals are required. It is evident how Hurka here follows his own methodological guidelines. The value of wellbeing in different contexts is here assessed on the basis of our moral intuitions about population sizes. All theorizing is done within the ethical perspective.

Of course, Hurka's article was not the final word in population ethics. It was soon shown that Hurka's variable rate view on its own leads to other paradoxical consequences. However, this objection was pre-empted by Hurka in the original essay. He openly admits that any single ethical principle is unlikely to capture all our population-intuitions on its own. Even if this were correct, more work would still be needed to show that a small non-paradoxical set of moral principles could be constructed by using Hurka's method.

Perhaps the most original and interesting part of Hurka's work has been his theory of virtues and their value. Much of the current literature on virtue ethics accepts the following three theses: (i) virtues are stable character-traits that are conducive to human flourishing, (ii) we can only make sense of virtuous acts and attitudes in terms of the virtuous character-traits, and (iii) virtues are the greatest good.

In 'How Great a Good Is Virtue?' and 'Virtuous Act, Virtuous Disposition' Hurka attempts to challenge these widely accepted theses. On his view, virtuous attitudes are the basic starting-point. They can be defined as those attitudes to goods and evils which are intrinsically good. Here, intrinsically good attitudes consist of a love of good things and a hatred of bad ones in proportion to their value/disvalue. So, a motive to do an act is courageous if it strikes the right balance between wanting to pursue a good outcome (loving the good) and wanting to be safe from harm (hating the bad).

By using this account of virtuous motives, Hurka achieves two things. Firstly, the view can be used to understand virtuous character-traits in a novel way. They just are dispositions to have virtuous motives. Secondly, this view can be used to undermine the idea that virtue is the greatest good. This conclusion follows from the highly plausible principle that a loving attitude towards something that is good cannot have more value than the object of the attitude. If this principle were not true, then, for example, a teacher's desire for her student to acquire a certain piece of knowledge could have more value than the fact that the student comes to acquire it. If we want to avoid this awkward conclusion, then we had better think that the objects of virtuous attitudes are more important than the virtuous attitudes themselves.

Given how thoroughly Hurka argues for these unusual views about virtues here and in his other works, his perfectionist theory of virtues would certainly deserve to be discussed more in virtue ethics. Likewise, Hurka's essays on value theory, autonomy, desert, capital punishment, nationalism, and just war collected that are here deserve to be studied more closely.

2. In 2008, Hurka organised a conference on British Moral Philosophers from Sidgwick to Ewing at the University of Toronto. Most of the articles collected in the book *Underivative Duty* were first presented at that conference. These articles are from ten philosophers who are both leading experts on this period of the history of moral philosophy and also leading contemporary ethicists.

In the first introductory article of the collection, Hurka explains the basic interests and views that were shared by the philosophers who are the focus of the collection. These philosophers are Hurka's heroes, already mentioned above: Sidgwick, Moore, Prichard, Ross, Ewing, and several others working in England between 1870 and 1950s. Metaphysically, these philosophers were often non-naturalist realists. In normative ethics, many of them believed there to be a set of basic and distinct moral values and duties. They were also often interested in the conceptual relations between different ethical, normative, and evaluative concepts.

One nice thing about this collection of articles is that many of its essays discuss in illuminating detail both the views of the less well-known moral philosophers of the period and the less often discussed views and arguments of the household names. In terms of historical scholarship, all the essays are first class.

By and large, the essays fall into two categories. Some of the contributors have chosen a more historical route: they are motivated by the question of what X really thought. Roger Crisp's investigation of Henry Sidgwick's views of pleasure, Dennis McKerlie's discussion of McTaggart's claims about love and its value, and T. H. Irwin's article on the Intuitionists' interpretations of Aristotle belong to this category.

In contrast, many other contributions of the volume approach the historical figures of the collection through the lenses of contemporary moral philosophy. Here the focus is much more on whether the historical figures could provide additional resources for the contemporary debates. Robert Shaver's discussion of deontology and agent-relative reasons through Ross and Carritt, Philip Stratton-Lake's argument against derivative *prima facie* duties on the basis of Ross, and Olson and Timmons' discussion of metaethical non-naturalism through Ewing belong to this category.

*Underivative Duty* is a worthwhile collection of articles. Its reader is guaranteed to learn more about both an important group of underappreciated moral philosophers and the central debates in contemporary moral philosophy. However, the articles also show how difficult it is to strike a balance between historical exegesis and the contemporary debates in this kind of work. Some of the more historically orientated essays fail to explain what is original and important about the explained theories. In contrast, in some of the more original contributions, the thin connection to the historical figures seems redundant. Fortunately, some essays like Dancy's discussion of Prichard manage to find the right balance between historical clarification and original theorizing. I would have also liked to have seen the work of this period to be subjected to a more critical analysis from a richer set of philosophical perspectives.

3. My favourite book of the three is *The Best Things in Life*. In this volume, Hurka shows that philosophers can write accessible and important books for the general audience if they want to.

The way in which Hurka has used his own philosophical views and the historical debates in moral philosophy to write a 'self-help' book worth reading is exemplary.

The first three chapters investigate different kinds of pleasures, happiness, and their value. The message these chapters is that not all pleasures and pains are alike. We can be in pleasant moods but we also feel pleasure that things are in a certain way. Some pleasures are isolated incidents whereas others lead to other pleasant experiences. To some pleasures and pains we adjust quickly whereas other pleasures and pains retain their significance over time. Some pleasures can be pursued directly whereas others are spoiled by this approach. And, the value of pains and pleasures too depend on the context. Moving from an intense pain to a slightly less intense pain is always important, whereas if you are already living a pleasant life experiencing more pleasures might not be that significant.

Chapter 4 explores the value of knowledge. Hurka highlights the importance of understanding, that is, of knowing general truths that can be used to explain the connections between a large number of more local truths. However, he also emphasises that such knowledge is not enough. We also need to be connected to the world by knowing our own particular place in it. Chapter 5 then uses the example of knowledge to construct an analogical view of achievements and their importance. On this view, activities that allow you to construct and fulfil structured and complex goals are more worthwhile than other pursuits.

Chapter 6 explains Hurka's theory of virtue already mentioned above in a clear and accessible way. However, the book's real highlight is its seventh chapter on love and relationships. On Hurka's view, love is important because it allows us to enjoy all other goods. Love makes us feel good, it allows us to know others as persons, and it helps us to achieve complex goals together. Love is also a way of loving good things such as the happiness of others, and thus it is virtuous. This chapter also explores the often superficial features that attract us to love others and the unique historical qualities that make us continue to love our partners. It even contains a helpful section on when it is time to call it quits. Not only is this chapter philosophically interesting; it also expresses real wisdom.

Finally, the last chapter of this book considers how we should attempt to combine different values in order to live a well-rounded good life. Of course, this book will not give anyone a recipe to live a good life, but it does offer people many useful tools for thinking about their lives. I can only hope that this book will be read by many of those who often vocally claim that academic philosophers are too far removed from the most important practical questions.

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