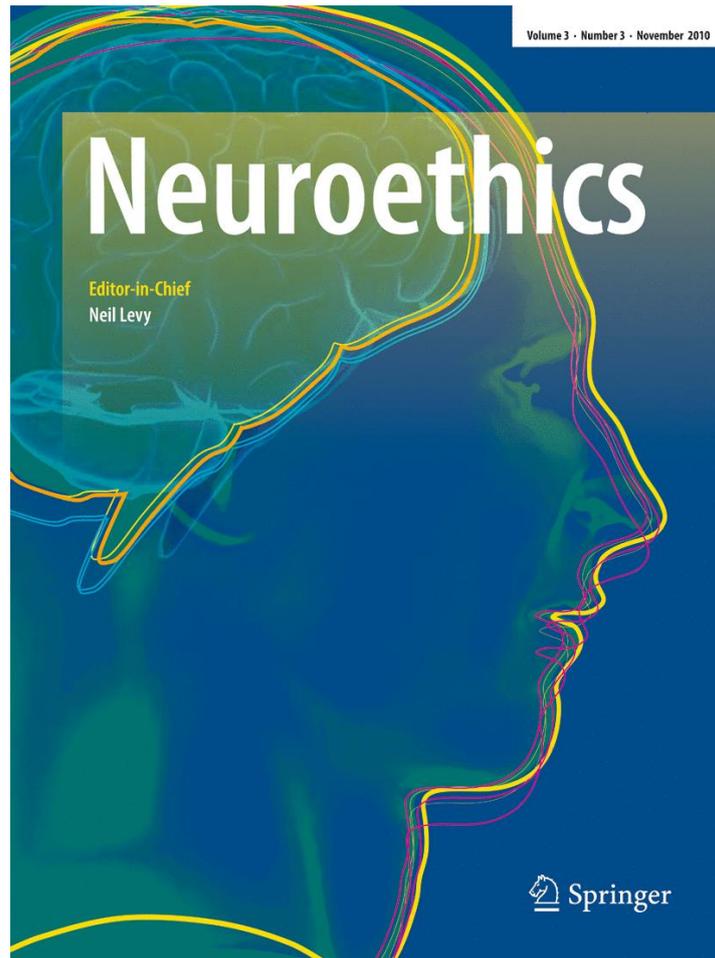


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Appiah and the Autonomy of Ethics

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Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Experiments in Ethics* is an impressive and admirable book. It offers an interpretation of the history of philosophy that makes the current trend toward empirically informed ethics seem part of a grand tradition rather than a foolish move by cheeky upstarts. It also conveys effectively what is grand about the history of philosophical ethics in a way that makes it seem deep and meaningful rather than stuffy and old. On the whole, the book made me hopeful about the long term future of ethics and excited to see how it will develop in response to its own experiments in method. The book is also written in an engaging and accessible style that will appeal to a broad audience, which is appropriate given the author's views about the real importance of philosophy. The downside of accessibility is that the details of the particular philosophical positions Appiah is defending are not always as clear as they might be. My comments focus on his views on the autonomy of ethics; my aim is to raise some questions about his claim that ethics is not autonomous and to

argue that despite the relevance of empirical sciences to ethics there is still a gap between ought and is. At the end I turn to the implications of this question for the role of philosophers in ethics.

One of the most impressive and admirable things about Appiah's latest book is the way he formulates and tackles the question of how to merge the scientific and ethical points of view that we can have on ourselves. Far from settling for easy answers to this fundamental question, Appiah takes a middle path between two simpler extremes, a task that is, in my opinion, as necessary as it is difficult. As Appiah puts it,

We need to explore the relationship between the perspective of the cosmic engineer and the perspective of the agent she engineers; and... we need to be able to live with both perspectives (120).

The need to find a way to live with both perspectives is highlighted currently by the trend in philosophy toward empirically informed ethics and experimental philosophy, but, as Appiah acknowledges, this is not a new problem. It has strong roots in Kant who put it in terms of reconciling the *Sinnenwelt* (the "world of the senses," as Appiah puts it) with the *Verstandeswelt*, (the "world of the understanding", 123).

The problem, more specifically, is this: how do we go on engaging in our ethical practice—a practice that involves reflection on our reasons for being and doing this or that—when we are confronted with an explanation for this practice and its objects of focus (reasons, values, principles, virtues) that seems to

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undermine what we took ourselves to be doing? To take one of Appiah's examples, how do we resolve "the dissonance between viewing moral sentiments as, in some measure, constitutive of moral judgment and viewing them as a device that nature has bequeathed us for social regulation"? (116). How do we maintain our conviction that there is a difference between right and wrong, between what's worth doing and what isn't, between good ways to be and some not as good ways, if we believe that our judgments about these things have natural explanations that make no reference to what we take ourselves to be judging?

Appiah's solution to the problem is Aristotelian in spirit. He says that from the ethical point of view we can acknowledge that the answers to questions about what's worth doing derive from our human nature and that this thought is not undermining. The scientific point of view does not undermine the ethical point of view, it "underwrites" it (189) by helping us muddle toward the truth about what makes a good life for a human being. Appiah's picture of how this muddling process goes has many features that (though not uncontroversial) make it attractive to ethicists interested in the empirically informed approach: pluralism, non-codifiability, complexity and messiness. Though we cannot expect to find universal principles or algorithms for making ethical choices, we can use "anthropological, sociological, historical and psychological knowledge" to "explain what we are responding to, how easy it would be to stop responding as we do, and what we might be like if we responded differently" (161). In terms of method, then, Appiah forges a middle path between a reductive or scientific approach that assumes we do without philosophical ethics altogether by reading the ethics off the science and a puritanical, *a priori* approach to ethics that rejects the possibility that science can usefully inform our enquiries at all.

I count myself among those interested in the empirically informed approach to ethics who find Appiah's middle path inviting. But middle paths are difficult to locate and they have a tendency to merge with the well trodden extremes. Just what is the relationship between descriptions and explanations of human beings on the one hand, and our values and reasons on the other? To deny the is/ought gap and the autonomy of ethics, as Appiah does, might mean accepting that claims about our values and reasons *follow from* claims about what we are from the point

of view of science without the addition of extra (normative) premises. This would be a strong version of the thesis that ethics is not autonomous from science and one I think Appiah would reject. But what does it mean to deny the autonomy of ethics if it doesn't mean this? If it means that empirical facts are relevant to the correct application of norms, then it isn't something any plausible ethical theory has ever denied. Appiah is striving for a middle path here and I will argue that the best middle path is one that preserves what we might call the *epistemological* autonomy of ethics, according to which while the empirical facts are relevant to ethical judgments, we cannot derive an ought from a list of statements about what is.

A crucial component of Appiah's characterization of the ethical point of view is the need for justification and he claims that the outsider's perspective (the perspective of the scientist) does not answer this need (153). He is right to say this. The fact that evolution can explain my revulsion to killing one person to save the lives of others does not by itself justify my action from my own point of view if for no other reason than that evolution can explain lots of other attractions and repulsions that I don't regard as any good (a taste for sugary desserts, for example, or implicit biases against people who look different from me and mine). Appiah discusses other examples that illustrate the same point. Take for instance his discussion of the emotional domain of purity. In his discussion of the emotional module that gives rise to norms of purity through the emotion of disgust, Appiah asks whether purity based intuitions should have purchase in reflection (140). This is a good question. If, for example, the disgust response is at the heart of much homophobia (a prejudice that may be natural but that does serious harm), we should ask ourselves whether disgust is an emotion whose influence we should reject in our explicit ethical deliberation.¹ However we decide to answer this question about the case of purity, the point here is that the question makes sense—we require further justification than "it's our nature."

The fact that I am disposed in a certain way in virtue of my nature *could* be a reason for me, but it

¹ The same sorts of questions could be asked about other emotional domains. We might also ask these sorts of questions about nationalistic identity and its relevance to what makes a life go well, a topic Appiah takes up briefly here (pp. 173–4) and more extensively in other work.

doesn't have to be. What would make it a reason? It is a common view in philosophy, and one that Appiah seems to share, that to answer this question we need something that counts as a stopping point in a potential regress of justification.² For Appiah, the stopping point is the set of universal values we apprehend from the ethical point of view (155–156). From the ethical point of view “what we want has to be *worth* wanting: it has to be consistent with human decency and connected with humanly intelligible values” (170).

I think it is true that to quell doubts about what normative reasons we have, we must find something that is worth wanting from our own ethical point of view. The trouble is that some of the things Appiah says lend themselves to the interpretation that universal values are normative for us (they give rise to imperatives or standards that genuinely apply to us) in virtue of their following from the facts about our human nature, whether or not these facts have normative resonance from within a person's ethical point of view. For example:

...since we're human beings, there are only certain values that we can intelligibly pursue. Many of these values will be different; some must be common, or we would cease to be human. When we refer to the *fact* of value pluralism, we're referring to the fact that there is a plurality of real values, intelligible and worthwhile ideals. To insist that the authority of those ideals is undermined by their origins in human nature is to deny the humanity of our humanity (189–190).

At least on one interpretation (an interpretation encouraged by Appiah's rejection of the autonomy of ethics), Appiah's view seems to be that we can stop asking whether something is worthwhile when we find what is essential to our human nature.

Taking this interpretation seriously it might seem that Appiah's Aristotelian picture does reduce ethics to empirical science in a way that makes “it's our nature” the stopping point for justification. According to this kind of reductive naturalism, the scientific perspective is primary and ethics is not autonomous because ethical questions are, ultimately, questions

about our (empirical) nature. On this view, once we learn the facts about ourselves by empirical methods we will know how to behave and how to live good lives. These facts may not be easy to discover, and moving from the facts about human nature to specific judgments about what to do in a particular set of circumstances may be extremely complicated and messy, but ethics (on this view) is ultimately a matter of discovery.

Yet, it is clear that Appiah does not intend a reductivist picture. He is at pains at several points to say that ethics cannot be reduced to science (e.g., p. 128, 149–150) and, as I've discussed, many of his own examples lead to the rejection of “it's our nature” as a definitive answer to normative questions. Fortunately, there is another way of looking at the project of thinking about human nature and the good life that does not make ethics entirely beholden to our natures. We find the basis for this alternative in Appiah's various remarks on justification. Appiah provides the ingredients for a picture of normative justification that includes paying attention to our physical and psychological nature, the lessons of history and our own experience, deciding what is salient, carefully interpreting the information we have, framing and describing our ethical problems appropriately, and discussing these matters with others (or, I would add, reasoning about them on our own) in the hopes of attaining a state of “*greater* certainty” (189). What I want to insist on about this picture is that it is normative “all the way down” and preserves the epistemological autonomy of ethics.

What I mean when I say that this picture of justification is irreducibly normative is that applying any of these standards of justification will require, ultimately, relying on other norms that are not themselves fully justified (or shown to be reason-conferring) by the facts (facts about our natures, our history, what we would agree on in conversation, or anything else). For example, consider applying the publicity constraint, which Appiah discusses in his response to Jonathan Haidt's social intuitionism:

Haidt... offers a sort of plebiscitary account of justification: “A well-formed moral system is one that is endorsed by the great majority of its members, even those who appear, from the outside, to be its victims.” And where's the evidence for that? Certainly this justification doesn't meet the publicity constraint: Does

² This is one of the main assumptions of Christine Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity* [1].

anybody really think a moral system is justified just merely because it has been accepted by most members of a society? (150).

Surely not. Therefore, the publicity constraint is not the same as majority rule. But the publicity constraint can't amount to a requirement of actual consensus either, given the lack of agreement about normative matters. Instead, publicity constraints as they appear in moral philosophy typically require the agreement of others who are being reasonable in some relevant sense.³ Who counts as reasonable is a normative matter that takes us beyond appeals to the facts about what people would actually agree to. Following the process of justification Appiah describes requires figuring out how our commitments—to consistency, to social approval, to morality, to paying attention to the facts, and so on—relate to each other and exactly what they entail, and these are not matters for scientific discovery.

Similarly, to decide whether an experiment in living has been a success or a failure we need to know what are the standards for success. Some might apply the standard of the bright eye and the gleaming coat, others (such as Appiah) might insist that a successful life is a morally good life.⁴ Appiah may try to persuade us with examples of vicious people, but if he succeeds it will be because we are (as most people are) committed to moral values and the traditional virtues. No description of the facts by itself can compel us to think that the standard of the bright eye and the gleaming coat is inadequate if we are not already committed to some other norms that will make it so. This does not mean, of course, that facts are irrelevant to what norms it makes sense to accept; rather, it means that when the facts are relevant, as they frequently are, they are made relevant by other norms. (Note that these other norms need not be ethical norms; they will often be norms of epistemic rationality such as a norm of consistency).

The basic reason for this is that when we reflective creatures ask for a justification, what we need is an answer that already counts as a reason for us (and again, not necessarily an ethical reason). A justifica-

tory stopping point must therefore be something we are already committed to that is not in question.⁵ So, there is a sense in which ethics retains its autonomy.⁶ Normative inquiry and justification is going to be a messy, uncodified process and the facts will be relevant at every level and stage. But the facts about human nature do not by themselves determine what to say in the end. Justification stops not at a body of facts, but at a pattern of normative commitments that can't be improved upon. Importantly, this is not because the science is too young or because the facts are too messy. It is because of the nature of normativity.⁷ To understand what it is to live a good life in a meaningful way we must find reasons to live one way or another that we take to have some authority or pull over us. Reasons get this normative pull when we see them favorably in the context of other norms we have.

To return to the big question, how do we live with these two perspectives—the scientist's and the moral agent's—on ourselves? At times, Appiah's answer seems to be that the outside observer can tell us facts about ourselves that sustain rather than undermine our moral convictions, and that the perspectives of agent and scientist can coexist because the former just provides another way of describing the discoveries of the latter. I have been suggesting that the scientist—no matter what kinds of discoveries he or she makes—cannot answer all of our questions. We live with these two perspectives by recognizing that both kinds of questions—questions about what we are and about what we ought to be—are important in the project of

⁵ Or (as the Kantian approach would have it) something we are rationally committed to caring about. Those of us who are skeptical of Kantian claims about what is rationally required must take the first path.

⁶ It may be more accurate to say that there is a sense in which the normative realm (of which ethics is a part) retains its autonomy. I do not think this is a terribly important distinction for my purposes, since I believe that the most basic norms (the ones people would find most difficult to give up and the ones that are likely to be at the foundation of various normative justifications) are likely to be a mixture of moral, ethical, and epistemic norms.

⁷ Of course there is much more to say here—the question of whether a connection to our commitments (or motivations, as some might say) is an essential feature of normativity cannot be answered in a short commentary. My goal here is to point out what is attractive about the answer I favor and also to show how comfortably this view sits with much of what Appiah has to say.

³ See for example [2].

⁴ In his argument against Aristotelian naturalism, Bernard Williams points out that there are some vicious characters who are nevertheless flourishing by the ethological standard of “the bright eye and the gleaming coat” [3].

figuring out how to live, and by accepting that the norms we use to govern our lives are just not the kinds of things that will be proved by science.

How we answer the question about the autonomy of ethics bears directly on the role of philosophy in ethics, the topic Appiah takes up briefly at the end of his book. Appiah clearly thinks that there is a project for philosophers in all this ethical muddling: “The end of philosophical ethics is to make sense of the project of *eudaimonia*,” he says. Given his view of what we are doing when we engage in the practice of ethics, however, it is not clear what the philosopher’s role is. What does a philosopher do if there are no principles to discover or algorithms to articulate?

First, even if I am right that ethics has epistemological autonomy, the facts are relevant to the application of norms. One role philosophers have, then, is to apply anthropology, psychology, and other social sciences to ethical problems. This role should not be underestimated and Appiah makes an excellent case for its importance. What conclusions to draw from social scientific research is no simple matter and philosophers can be helpful in figuring it out. For example, in his discussion of virtue Appiah recounts the debate between those who think that the situationist literature in psychology proves virtue ethics to be entirely on the wrong track and those who think it does not. Appiah urges a middle path here too, arguing that we can use the situationist literature to shape our conceptions of the virtues and make them more psychologically realistic. As Appiah demonstrates, philosophers can help to articulate the assumptions of virtue ethics, draw out the implications of the studies, and assess whether these implications are really relevant. Philosophers can also modify traditional conceptions of the good life (or traditional theories of morality) in light of new empirical findings.⁸

Second, if, as I have argued, ethics does possess a certain kind of autonomy, there is another role for philosophers in “the project of *eudaimonia*”. When we take seriously the fact that what ethical conclusions we reach depends on how the point of view from which we attempt to justify them is constructed, we can see the importance of drawing out the implications of the commitments we already have.

⁸ This is my project with respect to the notion of wisdom in *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely with our Limits* (Oxford 2008).

Further, because many commitments can be pulled in different directions, philosophers can help to identify and argue for certain implications that make the most sense in the light of all things considered. For example, a commitment to kindness can be taken to imply duties to a narrow or a much wider circle of others. Philosophers can help to identify the advantages of one over the other.

More controversially, philosophers may also have a role in advocating certain commitments, portraying them in a way that makes them attractive or compelling to those who do not recognize them as their own. This idea runs contrary to Hume’s advice at the end of the *Treatise* that the philosopher is like an anatomist, not a painter, but it is a role that philosophers throughout history have embraced (particularly in the ancient period).⁹ It is also a role that Appiah plays well.

Appiah’s focus in this book is on how to theorize about *eudaimonia*, rather than on *eudaimonia* itself. But theorizing also relies on norms and Appiah does promote some such norms over others. He waxes with particular eloquence against the norms of simplicity in theory construction:

Nobody reasonable imagines that pain and pleasure or the satisfaction of preferences, however meaningless or bizarre, is what life’s all about. Nobody starts out with the notion that “Can I universalize the maxim of this action?” is the only question worth asking... Nobody really holds the narcissistic view that all that matters is what virtues you have... From any of these beginnings, things have to get very complicated if you’re to end with something plausible. It’s like starting with Ockham’s razor—just a sharp blade with a handle—and finding you need to add a beard trimmer, a nail clipper, and a whole host of Rube Goldberg accessories, and then continuing to maintain that all you have is still just a razor (200–201).

Here Appiah is not merely drawing out the implications of commitments we already have, nor is he

⁹ After singing the praises of virtue, Hume cautions “But I forbear insisting on this subject. Such reflexions require a work a-part, very different from the genius of the present. The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter: nor in his accurate dissections and portraitures of the smaller parts of the human body, pretend to give his figures any graceful and engaging attitude or expression [4].”

applying empirical results to normative questions. Rather, he is making the norms of simplicity look downright silly by dramatically directing our attention to what happens when we take this norm too seriously. Appiah makes messiness look attractive by using analogies, thought experiments, examples from literature and empirical research to persuade us. This seems to be a legitimate role for philosophy as long as norms are not simply discovered by applying empirical science. We can use traditional philosophical tools together with results from empirical science to paint a beautiful picture of the norms we think are the best ones to commit ourselves to.¹⁰ Appiah himself

¹⁰ If I'm correct, such arguments will only persuade people who have some commitments that allow them to see the attractiveness of the norm in question. How troubling this is depends on how many of our normative commitments are shared and how flexible we are.

paints a very attractive picture of what philosophy could be and encourages us to turn these skills to the fundamental question of the nature of the good life. I hope we will take his advice.¹¹

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¹¹ I would like to thank Peter Hanks and Neil Levy for helpful feedback on earlier versions of these comments.