



The Human Origins of Standards of Behaviour

From Morality to MetaEthics

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Emeritus Professor Fred Fastier was the inaugural Professor of Pharmacy at the University of Otago and served the Medical School for forty years from 1939, winning international recognition for a long list of academic publications. After retiring from teaching, Fred became a full-time student again, gaining an M.A. in philosophy. In this book he explains that he became increasingly interested in ethics and especially in the classical expositions of the subject. He was greatly influenced by the 19th Century American pragmatist, C.P. Peirce.

This reviewer's heart leapt for joy when he read that the author did not causally equate morals and ethics as seems to have become the mode. 'Ethics' is the theoretical consideration of how we *ought* to act, while 'morals' is the quality of the behaviour of what we *actually* do. Fred sets this out (on page 7) by allowing that a person could profess 'high ethical standards' while exhibiting 'loose morals'.

While ethics prescribes specific behaviours as appropriate to our moral activity, meta-ethics takes us up one level of investigation and asks what is there about a particular behaviour that would qualify it to be ethically desirable. Ethics is normative ('do this') — while meta-ethics is analytical ('why you should do this.').

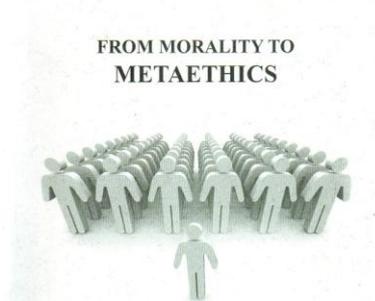
The book is just on 100 pages long with the last thirty given over to Appendices and Index. The first thirty pages consist of prefatory pieces including 'The Impact of Science' — a set of lush mini-essays which deliver us to the door of meta-physics, a sort of top-down view of scientific knowledge.

The stepping-stone through this door is the notion of freewill. A purely mechanistic (reductionist, materialist) view of the brain and mind (Fred comes uncomfortable close to eliding these) would deprive us of freewill and render any notion of ethics untenable. I think that that is why a large number of pages is given over to scientific facts — to show that either there *is* room for freewill within scientific knowledge (for example through emergent properties) or that scientific knowledge will always be incomplete. I suspect that that is one of the reasons why, in the author's scheme of things we need to take on the history of science in such detail — to show that science, though very powerful, is an empirical regime that cannot provide all the answers. But see also the longish article on page 8 of this Newsletter. (The other reason, I suspect in this word-processing world in which I too, move, is that he had a lot of good material already on hand!)

In the chapter 'Justification of Sanctions' (which, like all chapters, is given a number only in the Contents!) Fred takes us through the development of the various bases for ethics — natural law, positive law, social contract, criminal law, civil law and ends with three curios 'vice', 'harm' and 'hazard'.

The next chapter comments on Hume's ruminations on the confusion so often made between 'ought' and 'is' — you can't, says Hume, automatically know *what to do* just because you know *some facts* about the world. Its then an easy road to asking where in fact we get our ethical values from — and the SoF audience which Fred justifiably reckons will like this book will delight in his distinction between fideists (obedient to doctrine), humanists (values are natural) and pragmatists (hey, stop arguing and just get on with it — my characterisation, not Fred's!). Tertullian's 'I believe in order that I might understand' gets short shrift — its 'the work of a dimwit'.

Other sources of ethical values are surveyed and evaluated. In the end we are left with a set of opinions that suggest, to this reviewer, that we humans just muddle on and get it about right — most of the time



Noel Cheer, Titahi Bay