

Moral Realism: A Defence

Russ Shafer-Landau

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Russ Shafer-Landau's *Moral Realism: A Defence* is a refreshingly clear, straightforward, and elegant search for the truth about whether there are any objective, universal truths in ethics. The book's jargon-free writing style, clarity in argumentation, and comprehensive coverage of the issues make it an ideal main text for upper-division undergraduate courses and seminars in ethics. It is also accessible to bright students with just a few philosophy courses who are interested in the issues (Shafer-Landau's entry-level *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* would be ideal reading for many such students to get an introduction to the issues¹).

The book has many pedagogical virtues, in addition to being a very strong and creative work of philosophy (it recently earned an "Honorable Mention" in the 2005 APA Book Prize awards). I will sing some of the book's pedagogical praises and note some of the teaching opportunities that it presents and then review and comment on its main philosophical theses and arguments in light of common student perspectives and interests.

An ideal course format for using the book would be to read it in conjunction with "primary source" selections from the moral irrealists and rival realists who Shafer-Landau discusses, taking up various authors' views and arguments as he presents and criticizes them. This would result in something like a topical, non-historical introduction to twentieth century meta-ethics.

In addition to introducing students to the range of issues addressed in contemporary meta-ethics, this approach would also importantly result in students observing the clarity of Shafer-Landau's argumentative and writing style: in reading him, it is nearly always *perfectly* clear what his position is and what the arguments in its favor are, and students will appreciate this. These observations of philosophical style might be useful in teaching clear, simple and vivid writing ("Write like Russ!" might be the mantra), as well as paying explicit attention to philosophical methodology.

Indeed, the book provides an ideal model for how to *do* effective philosophy: students would benefit as much from discussing *how* Shafer-Landau argues for his position as from discussing the arguments themselves. A long list of helpful philosophical "do's" and "don'ts" could be developed in the course of reading this book. These "do's" would include presenting arguments in valid premise-conclusion format so that we can see exactly what claims are in dispute, being attentive to ambiguity and the need to reformulate arguments once ambiguity is recognized, and keeping one's eyes on the phenomena under study, among others.

Since meta-ethics is ethics at the intersections of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical psychology, logic and philosophies of language, mind and science, this book provides a way to engage students with any of these more basic philosophical issues in greater detail. Although it most fits ethics courses, it could be used in creative courses that focus on any “core” topics in philosophy as they bear on questions of moral and non-moral values. So, the book could be used in interesting ways in “Metaphysics and Values,” or “Epistemology and Ethics,” or even “Science and Values” courses.

Insofar as many students tend to have antecedent interests in questions about value, this might provide a valuable way to introduce them to issues in philosophy that, for some students, seem more abstract. Some students, dare I report, find these areas of philosophy even “irrelevant,” and, fortunately, Shafer-Landau’s book can help them see why this is not so. For the many students who don’t initially feel this way, such a course would reinforce the fact that topics in philosophy are inter-related and much methodology is shared.

To turn to the book’s content and arguments, not surprisingly, given the book’s title, Shafer-Landau argues that there *are* universal, objective moral truths. He argues that “moral principles and facts are objective in a quite strong sense: they are true and exist independently of what any human being, no matter his or her perspective, thinks of them” (p. 8); he develops a distinctive version of moral realism that he calls moral “non-naturalism” and defends it from objections from a variety of moral irrealists (*e.g.*, non-cognitivists, expressivists, emotivists, prescriptivists, error-theorists, subjectivists, relativists, constructivists, and contemporary irrealists that attempt to mimic realists) as well as rival, typically “naturalistic,” moral realists.

Shafer-Landau recognizes that terms like “naturalism” and “non-naturalism” do not have a clear meaning, but he calls his view “non-naturalist” to distance it from those who seem to think that ethics is a “science” and its methods and results are “scientific.” He argues that there are *some* similarities between the methods and results in ethics and science, but the differences are far greater than many “naturalists” insist and, furthermore, the prospects for ethics becoming a science look dim. Furthermore, all “ethical naturalists” seem to accept some judgment that is a stretch to describe as “scientific,” *e.g.*, their judgments about which natural properties determine, constitute or are identical to moral properties.

I suspect students would agree with Shafer-Landau’s assessment of the status and future of ethics and so, unlike some philosophers, would not be at all shocked at how he labels his view: since ethics isn’t science, “naturalism” seem mistaken, and since ethics doesn’t depend on religion or theological concerns, “super-naturalism” is also wrong, and so “non-naturalism”—as the remaining obvious option—seems the best candidate category for the truth about ethics.

Philosophers with a penchant for categorization should remember that labels are only labels, especially since Shafer-Landau agrees with ethical “naturalists” that moral properties supervene on physical properties; thus, his moral non-naturalism might not be as radical as the name perhaps suggests.

In the first of five parts of the book Shafer-Landau develops a presumptive case in favor of his brand of realism. His *prima facie* case depends on the presentation of a wide range of phenomena that seem true of moral judgments and the claim that “non-naturalist” realism best fits the phenomena.

An interesting exercise to do with students would be to develop this list, think about which, if any, of these claims indeed seem true about what it’s like to make moral judgments and then think about Shafer-Landau’s initial assessment that realism has the upper hand. Such an exercise would keep students grounded in the subject matter and help them realize that philosophical theories are indeed *theories*, *i.e.*, devices to try to explain and understand some identified phenomena, not merely views developed out of nowhere that answer to nothing.

Many of the main issues addressed throughout the book are ones that students will find familiar, interesting and have much to say about: *e.g.*, questions about what, if anything, would *make* a moral judgment true (this is the focus of two chapters in part 2, Moral Metaphysics, where he develops his “non-naturalistic” moral ontology), how anyone might know (or even reasonably believe, if there are moral beliefs) a moral claim (addressed in three chapters of part 5, Moral Knowledge, where a creative hybrid moral intuitionism/reliabilism is developed), and what difference recognized moral disagreements should make for our moral thinking and practice (discussed in chap. 9, “Rationality and Disagreement”). Metaphysicians and epistemologists, and their students, will greatly enjoy these chapters; there are many provocative theses and arguments in each.

Other main issues I suspect are ones that many students will find unfamiliar and, perhaps, a bit unbelievable. There are places where students’ philosophically untutored (or uncorrupted) intuitions provide a strong basis for challenging the basis for many meta-ethical debates.

First, part 3, Moral Motivation, discusses arguments to the effect that since moral judgments are necessarily “motivational,” they are not, strictly speaking, *beliefs* so, therefore, moral realisms are false. I suspect that many students would not be impressed with this kind of argument: their observations of people’s moral psychologies suggest that there’s nothing odd about people not being “motivated” by their moral judgments; in fact, it happens all the time.

A second set of issues, addressed in part 4, Moral Reasons, is the question of whether someone who accepts a moral judgment has “reason” to comply with it: the argument against realism is that since reasons are “relative” to persons’ interests, and moral obligations and permissions allegedly depend on “reasons,” moral principles cannot be like what realists say they are like: necessarily true and applicable to all moral agents.

Many students will be inclined to respond that this argument depends on what you mean by a “reason,” and they might have a hard time seeing what could make one meaning of the term *the* correct meaning: there are just many senses of having a reason. And they will be very skeptical of much-discussed positions that imply that, for vicious characters who have no interest in not harming others and so, allegedly, have no “reason” not to harm others, it is, therefore, *not true* that they ought not harm others.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Shafer-Landau’s book is the fact that it specifically addresses meta-philosophical concerns, in particular the nature of intellectual “oughts” and “shoulds” involved all kinds of reasoning and debate. For those who think that we *ought* not be convinced by Shafer-Landau’s case for moral non-naturalism, or that we *should* accept another, perhaps, irrealist view, the challenge for them is to explain *why* their judgment is true and what *makes* it true. It might very well turn out that better responses here suggest a kind of *intellectual* or *epistemic* non-naturalism; if such a view is palatable, if not plausible or even (perhaps) *rationaly undeniable*, then perhaps the same should be said for moral non-naturalism also. The fact that Shafer-Landau’s book leads readers to think about the nature of thinking, and reason about reasoning, provides all the more reason why it should be read and discussed.

Note

1. See Winfried Corduan’s review of *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* in *Teaching Philosophy* 27:4 (December 2004): 391–92.

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An Invitation to Feminist Ethics

Hilde Lindemann

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Attempting to incorporate feminist perspectives into ethical theory and ethical problems classes has always been a challenge for me. In the past, I have usually photocopied several articles to try to put together a unit on feminist ethics, and I worried that presenting feminist material in this way would create the impression that it was somehow less valuable or of less importance than the content of the other books. Thankfully, Hilde Lindemann has written a book that is deliberately short and inexpensive so that it can act as a supplement to other texts in undergraduate ethics classes while still standing on its own.