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For Society – Against Morality?

On David Copp's Attempt to Put Society at the Centre of Ethics

Abstract: Morality and society in moral philosophy are rarely brought into direct contact, at least not at a fundamental level of justification. David Copp develops an account of practical and moral rationality that could constitute a radical change. According to Copp moral theory has to be 'society-centered' rather than focussing on the individual. This article is devoted to the moral content and structural features of a socially centered moral theory, and along those lines to its critical assessment. Concluding, it will seek to present an argument why moral philosophy ought not place society at the centre of its view.

1. Sociological Abstinence in Moral Philosophy

Morality and moral norms seem of fundamental importance to any society, alongside other norms – comparable examples at a general level being conventions and legal norms. Morality's main social function seems to lie in the regulation or even harmonization of social conflicts; and if one is impressed by the idea of human beings' capability of throwing each other into a 'state of nature', morality may well be the most important counterforce to overall war and widespread agression. T. Parsons at least seems to have been impressed by the Hobessian "problem of order" (Parsons 1937, 89–94), shifting sociology into a nearly philosophical perspective to be captured by the (Simmelian) question of 'how society is possible'. David Copp is reminding us of this question at the beginning of his article in this issue (Copp 1997, 189). If seen globally, morality must be part of the integrative structure underlying any human society, a fact that may even be too much of a truism to make it an interesting object for social scientists.[1]

Given such an *explanatory* link between what morality is about and how

[1] There are other options as well, however. Morality does not loom large in Parsons' own reference to transcendental "values" as an integrative force for societies; religion and overarching societal aims being more important (Parsons 1937, ch.19).

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societies may be constituted (notwithstanding how they are spelled out in detail), one may find it surprising, that the concept of a society and of functional relations between society and morality hardly find any attention in present day moral philosophy. It is granted that the aims of moral philosophy are *normative*, whereas in the end it is a complex *fact*, that morality 'makes society possible'. However one may nevertheless find it strange that what is of utmost importance under a factual perspective should be of total irrelevance under a normative one. Moral philosophy, which neglects morality's functional contribution to the integration of society may be defective in the light of its own objectives. In any case, moral philosophy could be legitimately asked for a justification of its sociological abstinence.

To begin by way of conceptual clarification let us ask whether there are necessary links between society and morality. Let us first look at the objective side of morality. Morality must cover norms regulating the behaviour towards others, other individuals admittedly, and it is other individuals as well as a certain structure which make up a society. Moral norms cannot provide this structure on its own, however, as according to ordinary morality we think that on purely moral terms we should behave *in the same way* towards people from China as towards our neighbours within a Western society, or even towards our fiancee. According to a widespread understanding of morality, morality transcends the borders of the special society we actually live in. Of course, moral philosophy is not necessarily bound by the perspective of ordinary morality. But in any case only two alternatives seem to exist: either, as in ordinary (modern) morality, moral norms are truly universal and envelop the whole of humanity, then they cannot play an important part in the construction of a *particular* society; or moral norms are indeed more strongly involved with the upholding of our specific societies, in which case its *universality* would be put into doubt. It seems improbable that at the same time morality will be socially fundamental and humanly universal. Looking ahead to Copp's approach we are helped to the hypothesis that morality's universality will suffer if it is socially constructive.

Secondly, let us look at the *foundational side.* This aspect is of much greater importance as all that can be said on 'morality' or 'society' within ethics is (at least partly) based on normative reasons, all structural aspects of moral norms being consequences of more fundamental reasoning. How could society itself provide basic reasons for morality, or play a constructive role in moral reasoning? Under the ethical perspective this means foremost how facts of society could play such a role. How moral norms should construct social relations and thus indirectly build up a society, perhaps supported by institutions, is the usual way of proceeding in ethics, which then is in itself relevant for, but not depending on society. Or, so far as facts of society are relevant they play a merely *restrictive role.*

Alternatively there is, of course, the Hegelian idea that normative morality should interrelate more fundamentally with its factual counterpart, enlarging on the restrictive condition for what is a 'reasonable' way of living. "Reasonable" for Hegel appears to be closely connected with the requirement of 'realisability', thus he wants to bring normative reasoning as close as possible to what 'really happens' in society. These attempts often are (rightly) criticised through pointing out the problematic consequences of Hegelian politics. The still most forceful objection, however, makes use of the fact/value-distinction, making explicit the conceptual gap between what is and what should be. It is nothing more than a confusion to think there could be a 'deep' integration between what is and what ought to be: one side has to have the last word at the most fundamental level. The confusion is sometimes also articulated in demands that what ethics has to do is to *actually* move us to action, or to *really* change things. As in Hegelian politics, ethics is endangered to lose its normative grasp if such phraseology is taken literally.

If we take care of "is" and "ought" as two logically irreducible dimensions of thought, arguments for 'the social' within ethics can come from two alternative positions. If arguments come from the factual side, they play the restrictive role already mentioned: the moral 'ought' has to take care of what can be, and what is possible may be restricted by facts of society. If arguments are advanced from the normative side and propound to be relevant for society, they normally do so because of their claims of universal validity, whether in a merely formal sense of propositional truth or in the sense of universal moral claims. Not rarely are 'social' concepts in ethics ambiguous according to these two sources. Motivation for binding what is morally right to a 'moral code', for example, can be motivated by the idea of factual restraint (morally right can only be what *is capable* of being right throughout a society) or by the idea of normative universalisation (what is morally right *must be* right throughout a society). There are, as in rule-utilitarianism, attempts to amalgamate these two approaches with regards to the normative side, but even then an ambiguity relating to the question of relative weights remains.

All of this can be put into the following message: morality *has* to be uncompromisingly normative and *it is society*, if not compatible with morality's ends, that has to change! Morality loses its teeth if it listens too intensely to society's own claims. Instead it has to talk to it. Morality may be of great importance to society, but not vice versa. Thus at least the ordinary Kantian and even utilitarian philosopher may argue. Let us see, however, whether this conclusion can be retained if confronted with the elaboration of the (as it seems) contradictory position taken by David Copp in his recent book *Morality, Normativity, and Society* (Copp 1995).[2]

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[2] Copp 1997 (this issue) gives an introduction to the most central part of the book's theory, starting in an unusual way for moral philosophy with a discussion of "the concept of

2. Putting Society at the Center of Moral Theory

My interest in dealing with Copp's approach arises out of its being original and different. Different in which way? One well-known tradition of placing if not society so at least some conception of social relations at the heart of a moral theory is contractualism. In broadest terms, *moral* contractualism could be characterised by the idea that moral norms should be seen as resulting from a kind of agreement amongst those being the object of the norms. Seen from the individual's position the contractualist understanding of a moral norm makes the acceptance of this norm conditional on the acceptance by all (or most) others. ("Acceptance" may mean different things, but in the end a practical benefit has to dominate.) The spirit of contractualism is *constructivist* and *reformative*: what the content of moral norms is, is up to the agreement amongst those contracting, their interests and the conditions governing their agreement. Metaethical non-cognitivism concerning moral sentences (linguistic level) or a skepticist or anti-realist attitude concerning moral matters themselves (epistemo-ontological level) are similarly in harmony with contractualism's reformativist intentions. The easy combination of the one with the others can be seen in Hume's moral psychology and its present-day reformulation by J.Mackie (1977) or D.Gauthier (1986).

On the face of it Copp's approach does not fit into this well-known pattern. The two major components of his account are a so-called "standard-based theory" of normative judgements, which he takes to be "cognitivist", and a "society-centered theory" of morality, which may come close to but is not identical with contractualism. The first component is *metaethical* and holds that a moral proposition is true if backed up by a justified moral standard, the second is *normative* and holds that a moral standard is justified for a society when it would be rational for society to choose it as part of a moral code. The difference to the usual contractualist package is evident on two levels.

What is different with regards to the first, metaethical level – the "standard-based theory" – is Copp's attempt to a hybrid account of moral propositions, making the dependency of propositions on standards compatible with a cognitivist analysis. What is different on the second, normative-ethical level – the "society-centered theory" – is a holist decision procedure instead of an individualist mode of decision-making involved in the contractualist tradition. For contractualists a morality is normally justified if it is rationally acceptable to *each member* of a relevant collective, whereas in the "society-centered theory" it is society *as a whole* which subscribes to or rationally chooses a

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society" (190). I will give a further and more detailed statement of the argument in Copp's book in what is to follow, as it may be interesting to contrast the different reformulations of the same parts and of different weighing and highlighting within the overall argument. In any case I have to present the argument in my own words in order to comment on it critically. – Simple page references all refer to Copp 1995.

morality. Given standard criticisms of contractualism both differences signalize improvement. A cognitivist metaethic fits descriptively better with morality as it is; the holist rational decision meets a standard objection to contractualism, which says that it cannot do better than giving us a set of norms incorporating an instrumental attitude instead of, as one would prefer in a morality, norms of intrinsic validity. By being cognitivist and holist, Copp's account would evade both kinds of criticism, although basing itself merely on facts about human individuals (or being, in philosophical terms, 'naturalist'), as does contractualism in the Humean tradition. I will now consider more closely, how the metaethical and the normative theory are meant to work.

3. Standard-based Theory

Copp defines "standards" as including norms, rules, ideals, or whatever is "expressible by an imperative" (19-20). Standards are not propositions (19) but basic points for propositions. Normative propositions are true relative to standards. There are two main kinds of normative propositions. "Type-one normative propositions" entail that the related standard has "currency" in the relevant collective, "type-two normative propositions" entail that the related standard is "appropriately justified" (23). Moral propositions are a kind of type-two normative propositions, i.e. they are normally thought to be true depending on an appropriate justification. As we have already seen, justification of moral standards means being part of a rationally chosen moral code.

Several problems arise from these distinctions. Firstly, to be judged as 'appropriately justified', standards have to meet criteria of justification which require a higher order standard. A *regress* of standards seems to be implied then with the definition of type-two normative propositions. Secondly, law and etiquette are mentioned as illustrations of type-one normative propositions (22), claims of rationality and morality seem to fall into the type-two category (23). If this is so, what distinguishes *rational* and *moral* propositions and standards? Third, what kind of property is necessary for a moral standard to be justified? The distinction between de-facto currency (type-one) and the normative quality of being justified (type-two) provides some room for doubt concerning the ontological status of what it is that qualifies a standard as 'justified'. How can moral standards, despite their high degree of idealization[3] be linked to empirical claims about societies?

Copp provides answers to all three of these problems, the first one proba-

[3] See for example: "[Slavery] would be wrong even if no prohibition on slavery had any social standing and even if no one subscribed to any such prohibition." (25)

bly being the most challenging. His answers are careful and explicit, but what is not easily discernable is how they fit together coherently. His answer to the "regress argument" is that there is indeed a regress of ever higher-order standards but that this regress is not viscious (ch.3). His answer to the problem concerning the distinction between moral and other normative standards lies in the central claim of "society-centered theory", i.e. that moral standards are those meeting a society's needs and non-moral values most adequately (ch.5). His answer to the "queerness objection" is a kind of naturalism. What best serves society's needs and values depends on empirical facts (ch.11). Whether these claims and meta-claims fit together coherently is a difficult question, depending most importantly on what society-centered theory really boils down to. What seems plausible is that naturalism provides an answer to the queerness objection. On the other hand I do not think Copp has adequately met the regress objection or that his theory has the potential meeting it, but will not deal with this here. I will deal with the definitional problem and by doing this will lead into the second part of the book, the "society-centered theory". But before doing this I will close discussion of the "standard-based theory" by making some short critical remarks on its claim to cognitivism.

Can an analysis of normative language that analyses normative propositions as *true relative to a standard* really be cognitivist? Copp answers this in the affirmative by producing a complex fourfold argument (16-18), which I do not find convincing. It is however impossible here to go into the details of this argument. In the heyday of linguistic analysis 'cognitivism' was identified with statements concerning propositional structure, and indeed moral language is most easily analysed propositionally. Despite its explicitly epistemological title, classical metaethical cognitivism neglected the epistemological aspect of its analyses, or simply presupposed something of epistemological relevance. Not so the "standard-based theory", which holds that moral language is propositional and *at the same time* that these propositions are true only relative to standards. But does both fit together? Truth relative to a standard (i.e. a norm) is not normal truth. If it is true that it is raining it is true because of the rain, not because of some standard. "True relative to a standard" is not truth in the ordinary sense but some kind of social correctness. (Perhaps even some empirical fitting of norms?) At best, then, a standard-based analysis of morality would be 'cognitivist' in the thinnest sense possible, i.e. that of moral language showing propositional structure.[4]

Secondly, I wonder whether it is coherent to combine the concept of a standard with 'cognitivism' even in this purely structural-linguistic sense. As Copp makes clear, standards are not propositions (19), but rather "expressible

[4] It is not relevant for this conclusion that some standards may be justified or in a sense may correspond to natural facts, i.e. the fulfilment of society's needs and values. Moral propositions are taken to be true to standards, not natural facts or states of justification.

by an imperative" (20). Given the usual alternative, standards fall in the non-cognitivist slot. The puzzling problem now is this: how can normative (moral) language be propositional *as well as* non-propositional, its analysis both cognitivist and non-cognitivist? Copp does not address this puzzle explicitly, but I cannot imagine that it could be solved along his lines. If "stealing is wrong" expresses a kind of imperative and "you shall not steal" is to be concluded from it, "you shall not steal" must itself be a kind of imperative. Perhaps Copp wants to say that it is open to factual truth whether some actions are covered by a standard or not, as for example John's action in "what John did was stealing". But the latter is a factual statement, *given* the concept (standard or not) of stealing, and the truth involved is an empirical truth.

Copp's labeling of his analysis (which is based on standards) as 'cognitivist' is in my view doubly misleading. Whilst he is suggesting some original usage of truth-claims within the normative realm, the term "true" in his theory boils down to nothing else but "meeting a standard", or something similar. He also believes that his standard-oriented meta-ethics can give sense to the propositional structure of normative and moral language. Instead, on pain of incoherence it has to spread the imperativist interpretation of standards to the whole of the normative language, thus providing an overall non-cognitivist analysis.

4. Society-centered Moral Theory

The second, much more extended and ambitious part of Copp's book is not burdened by this tendency to non-cognitivism which prevails in the first part.[5] This second part puts together several elements which as a whole are meant to show that those standards are moral standards and as such are justified in that it would be rational for a society to choose them. The idea of justification involved here is obviously wide-ranging and complex, as is Copp's merging of several stages in the overall argument. I will give a sketch of the major elements and then discuss them critically.

Copp begins with the definitional problem of what distinguishes moral from other (type-two) standards (ch.5). After running through the well-known 'formal' and 'material' accounts of a definition, he suggests what he calls the "attitudinal conception" of moral standards. The first exposition of this conception outlines that those standards are to be taken as moral ones that one "subscribes to", which means that one wants to make "conformity with the standard a policy", and wants "conformity to be a policy for others in

[5] Copp is at pains to point to the logical independence of these two parts of his overall argument (5, 74, 218). There is some congruence, however, in so far as the normative theory provides an explanation as of what it means for a type-two standard to be justified. In any case the normative theory is not dependent on a cognitivist meta-ethics.

one's society" (82). What runs together in this definition is something familiar with something not so familiar but highly important for the rest of the book. One should be careful, therefore, to keep the two elements apart.

The two elements could be made more explicit by calling them the 'personal relevance condition' and the 'social relevance condition' for moral standards. These are not Copp's own terms, but they may prove of some help. He specifies two kinds of attitudes by way of definitions of what it means "to subscribe to a standard" and "to subscribe to a moral standard" (84). In simplified form, 'subscription to a standard' comes down to a certain extent of behavioural conformity in oneself, whereas 'subscription to a *moral* standard' constitutes subscription to a standard plus the *desire in conformity to the standard by others.* Conformity is in the foreground of the according definitions ((D2), (D3)), even if other behavioural aspects are added. In the light of the following the most important among these appears to be *the desire that a standard has "currency" in one's society* (88). What seems special in this attitudinal account of moral subscription is not its formulation of a personal relevance condition, but indeed the social relevance condition. I will come back to Copp's reasons for this in the last part of this article.

Having outlined his definition of moral standards, Copp turns to the task of justification. What for him 'justification' could be, though, is more or less implied in the definition of moral standards. Copp makes this explicit by stating a "justification thesis" according to which a system of standards or a "moral code" is justified, if a society is rationally required to select this system or code among others (104). It appears, that what 'a society' is rationally required to choose or select is not a simple affair. A range of problems arise if one wants to specify this idea of justification further. What is a society? How can a society choose rationally? How can it choose at all? What is the basis to choose from? Copp is dealing with all of these questions extensively, even if in a (somehow) disproportionate manner.

Ethically the most important question is *why* moral norms have to be identified with norms which *a society would choose* rationally at all. Whether it makes sense to think of a 'society' as 'choosing' moral norms is important only subsequently. Copp clearely has something to say on this fundamental question (104-5, 112-3, 114-20) and I will deal with it it in a moment. His overall argument, however, strikes me as rather disproportional. The weaknesses of his whole approach do not lie in the carefully worked out details of its components but in the way Copp has placed them together and in the defence of their ensuing (in my view) nasty consequences.

To bring the rest of the argument into view: Societies are multigenerational populations of persons, interconnected by different kinds of relationships (142). How one can make sense of the idea that a society can make a choice brings with it the typical problem of how to reflect what in the end

would be an action of the whole society back into actions or some other characteristics of its members. Copp takes what, on the face of it, looks like a sensible middle position between "individualism" and "organicism" (149), arguing that society's preferences and choices "supervene" on relevant preferences of its members, i.e. are neither reducible to them nor are wholly independent. Copp also deals with the well-known problem raised by Arrow's theorem that there is no such thing like a social-choice function mapping individual preferences on a collective social choice under weak conditions of rationality (155–9), answering it by distinguishing between the ("political") level of explicit decision processes and the ("metaphysical") level of what a hypothetical consensus on the basis of given individual preferences could look like. The conditions such a consensus has to fulfill can be much weaker than those of a *political* collective decision (156). It is also important for the concept of *societal choice*, firstly, that a group choice can be only "nearly unanimous" but nevertheless be the group's choice (160); secondly, that societal choice of a moral code is idealising regarding the costs implementing a code in society, thereby pulling together choosing and preferring a code (162); and thirdly, that the rationality of a group's choice is – by way of what Copp calls an "extension thesis" – structurally comparable to an individual's choice (162–5).

Choices have to be made on the basis of something. Copp develops what he calls a "needs-and-values" theory to provide such a basis. He does so in a two-stage process. First he develops the theory in the style of the usual individualist welfare theory (ch.9), explaining that needs and non-moral values provide reasons of their own ("self-grounded") for individual rational actors. Then he extends this explication onto the societal level, trying to give a (non-individualist) notion of society's needs and values. Though non-individualist, society's needs are listed in a roughly analogous manner to an individual's needs ("extension thesis"!). For example, society 'needs' the continued existence of its population and, instrumental to this, a certain amount of cooperation and coordination among its members (193). Also, in order to exist it is obviously important that a sufficient amount of its members not only survive but that their basic needs themselves are met. "Values" on the individual level is Copp's term for what normally runs under "ideas of a good life" or the ideals underlying prudence, as for example the values of a profession or aesthetic values (177-80). Copp admits that, in contrast, "societies have few values" (192, 206), and in effect deals with values only in relation to animal welfare.

Having brought together all these elements, justification of a moral code relative to a society then builds on the fact that society needs a "social moral code" and that a (certain) moral code fulfills this need (195). Copp tries to make this plausible (firstly) by pointing to the need for cooperation and

to the hypothesis that the currency of a moral code would assist in fulfilling this need, (secondly) by pointing out that its positive function could not be substituted by a legal system, and (thirdly) by showing that the moral code being justified in this way will include "rough equality" in the fulfilment of needs among its members (194–203).

If we now have an idea of what a society-centered moral theory consists in, we still do not have a better understanding of the *two most important questions* such a theory has to address: why one should think of justifying morality in a "society-centered" way at all, and whether what results has any (even if rough) similarity with what we understand as a morality. Copp is certainly aware of these questions, the first being the more important one. As the 'moral intuitions' of ordinary morality are nothing but socially given facts, they cannot disprove a moral theory in detail. It does not make much sense to substitute the probing of the internal logic of the justificatory idea by a debate on whether the justification is more or less in harmony with our intuitions. However, should a justification miss the mark resolutely this would also be of interest. *And that is the case*, in my opinion, with a 'society-centered' morality. I will first consider the normative question.

5. How Equal is Rough Equality?

To have a view at the *kind of morality* that would be justified in a society-centered theory, we first have to deal with two problems: first the question, why Copp considers societal values to be insignificant for justification,[6] and secondly, how to make more clear what societal needs are (the definitive grounds for justfication). As individuals also do possess values, why can values be excluded in the basis of justification? As no clear-cut reason is given, my hypothesis is that Copp presupposes a nearly unanimous consensus as being necessary to turn individuals' values into societal values and that he thinks that such a consensus is a rare occasion. In the absence of a better explanation of what it means for 'a society' to 'have' values (than simple quantification) that may be so. But then Copp has to hold that *values are less relevant* than needs, otherwise he could not simply skip values. Why, however, should we suppose that?[7]

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[6] Copp comes closest to something like an argument for neglect of values in the following: "I think that societies have few values of any kind and few preferences over societal options. If I am correct, we can approximate the results of society-centered theory by initially restricting attention to societal needs in attempting to determine the nature of the moral code that a society would be rational to select. Societal needs will do most of the work." (192-3)

[7] Remember, for instance, the central importance Parsons gave to values in Parsons 1937. Copp 1997, 197, includes the strange statement that "a society as such ordinarily has no values". Obviously Copp must mean something specific with "society as such", however

But let us take for granted, that societal justification is based on *societal needs* only. To get clearer about societal needs we now have to remember that Copp wants to avoid both individualism and organicism. His argument is (propounded as the "middle position") that by accepting needs, values and preferences as those of society one evades individualism; by not accepting them as independent of the needs, values and preferences of society's members one evades organicism (149). As mentioned before this appears plausible at first, however becomes rather dubitable very quickly. In any case the crucial question becomes what society's needs are, even if taken as somehow to 'supervene' on the needs of its members. The term "organicism" normally refers to some 'life' or existence of its own of society, which consequently can come into conflict with the life and existence of (at least some of) society's members. The crucial point, therefore, seems to lie in the alternative of two kinds of dependency:

Sufficient Dependency: society's needs are dependent on the needs of its members, to the extent that a *sufficient amount* of members make the existence and prospering of society possible.

Inclusive Dependency: society's needs are dependent on the needs of its members, including all the members of society.

In talking about 'society's needs' we can mean the sufficient or the inclusive conception of needs, which seems to me the relevant alternative on how the individualism/organicism-distinction is related to moral problems involved in the social membership relation. As far as I can see the alternative here is not only exclusive but also exhaustive, and this also seems to be the reason behind our intuition of wanting the positions of individualism and organicism (or holism) to be exhaustive too. The phrasing of the alternative in terms of dependency/non-dependency, as Copp suggests, does not make sense. Instead, what is crucial is whether society's dependency on its members is sufficient or inclusive. And it seems that if society has 'a reality of its own' dependency can only be sufficient and not inclusive. Society's needs then can be fulfilled even if not all the needs of its members are fulfilled. Indeed Copp is coherent by accepting this consequence at several points of his book.[8]

The distinction of the two ways of how the members' needs can be fitted together to make up a society's needs shows that *moral aspects arise already at this fundamental level.* One could clarify this still better by distinguishing a further, more specific form of dependency:

Inclusive Equal Dependency: society's needs are dependent on the needs

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I am at a loss as to what it could be. As for a recent (even if highly theoretical) treatment of the relevance of values to society see Joas 1997.

[8] "... a society needs to ensure that at least a sufficient number of its members are able to meet their basic needs." (193) – "... the ... needs of a sufficient number of the members of a population must be reasonably well served if the society is to do well at meeting its needs." (194)

of its members, including all the members of society on *equal terms* so far as *basic* needs are concerned.

This principle of dependency is clearly also a moral principle (or associated with one), which is taken for granted in large parts of Western societies. (The same of course goes for simple inclusive dependency.) Now, justification according to Copp could not make use of these morally loaded forms of dependency. He had to work with sufficient dependency. Could this be accepted? Hardly, to my opinion.

Sufficient dependency could well be in agreement with the extinction of parts of a society's population, as e.g. in Stalinist Russia, or also with something like the Nazi 'euthanasia programme' of killing thousands of disabled persons to make the German population 'more healthy' or 'fitting for survival'.[9] Certainly Copp is not out to legitimize societies making use of parts of their population to gratify their own 'needs' – as mentioned before he wants his account to underpin "rough equality" in meeting the needs of (I take it) all its members (202–3), i.e. he wants it to justify something similar to the moral principle underlying inclusive equal dependency. But how could he uphold such a position on purely naturalistic grounds, or on grounds using only sufficient dependency?

To formulate the objection in more general terms: what should we think of a justification that makes the moral status of each individual member of a society dependend upon *contingent empirical conditions*? It is not implausible that even a present day society would do better if it cut down on the medical treatment of the elderly, or gave less than "rough equality" to the non-employed, not to speak of the disabled and the deranged. To my mind an 'ethical justification' is worthless if it does not provide us good reasons why we should not violate the basic rights of individuals *in any single instance.* As the society-centered theory, due to its constructive logic, will not help us with this endevour, what would be the benefit of such a theory? Why should we be interested in a philosophical theory that argues for moral norms that fall way behind those already accepted in large parts of Western societies?

As said before, it would be unfair to imply that the author intends such consequences. Nevertheless, Copp did not lay open the ambiguities and dangers involved in his approach. As in indirect utilitarianism we are asked to be content with the dry assurance that "the persistance and stability of the society's population" is "more likely" if rough equality is accepted (202). "Rough equality" may apply to very varying societies, inter alia including the social reality in South Africa or other still semi-racist societies. In 'functionalist terms' India seems to be a not too imbalanced kind of society, but hardly one to which the predicate "rough equality" would apply. Traditionalist countries like India should make obvious how disparate the structural-functionalist and

[9] For a more actual treatment of group/individual conflicts see Hardin 1995.

the ethical side of a society can be (given, of course, that what is ethical is related to the standards of Western morality). Copp seems to draw something positive from the status of his theory being "naturalist" (226-30). There are naturalisms and naturalisms, however. Copp's naturalism is on a grand scale. So the uneasy alternative inherent in the society-centered theory seems to be either chronical vagueness as to its normative content, or the subversion of civil rights. This is not an alternative to be very happy about!

6. Why Take the Point of View of Society – As a Whole?

If moral theory got stuck up in a muddle like this one should ask how it came to it in the first place. Obviously, in Copp's theory problems are due to the attempt to take the point of view of society on non-individualistic terms as the moral point of view. Why should one do that? – is a sensible question to ask even if one is not aware of the consequences just pointed to.

For an answer we have to go back to Copp's introduction of what he calls his "attitudinal conception" of morality (82–93). As I pointed out earlier, his attempt to characterize what is moral brings together two ideas: that (in my terminology) morality has to be relevant for oneself and at the same time for society. I called this the personal and the social relevance condition. A moral attitude was characterised as involving the *desire, that a standard has "currency" in one's society* (88). Strangely enough, Copp does not provide much argument for building this desire into his very conception of what it means to have a moral attitude. So far I am able to depict different reasons in Copp's argument they are the following (the titeling being my own):[10]

Definitional Necessity: Only the desire that a standard has currency in one's society makes it possible to differenciate between a personal and a moral standard (96–7).

Answering Skepticism: The only good answer to the moral skepticist is

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[10] I do not seem to grasp Copp's complete argument. He refers to an "argument from conceptual simplicity" (99) which I cannot make sense of. Also, he appears to hold that if subscription to a code is implicitly also a recommendation of this code for society this is a selfstanding reason for his social definition of morality (113). But that cannot be because the desire that the code have currency is presupposed. Further, I will not discuss the proposal, made in Copp 1997, 196, that the 'function' of morality, "to make society possible" is an argument for the society-centered approach. The argument is much too rough to be discussed satisfactorily, because it is all but clear that morality's dominant function really is to make society possible (it could have other more important functions, and society may be stabilised by other norms and values), and further, and more importantly, it is all but clear why the functional statement is an argument for the corresponding justificatory statement. The best sense I can make of this is that function will ***substitute*** justification, or make it obsolete. Why then should this be an argument *for* justification?

the one that societies are in need of morality (97–8, 106–8), and therefore a societal aspect has to be included in the very definition of morality.

Social Realism: For a person to be realistic in subscribing to a standard as a moral standard makes it necessary that she has a desire in the standard's being socially widespread and enforced (101).

Social Constructivism: A code can only be made a moral code by being subscribed to on behalf of those to whom the code will be relevant (114–6).

By placing these different reasons under titles of my own I may well misrepresent Copp's intentions, or do damage to the spirit of one or other of his formulations. On the other hand his own argument is vague at times and, again, loaded with detail, so that reconstruction is unavoidable. Let us run through these reasons.

Definitional Necessity. As seems clear, one should take care of two different 'social' aspects of a standard: that the standard concerns behaviour *towards others* and that it is *widespread*. Normally the first aspect is involved in the definition of a standard or norm as moral, not the second one (the second being left open as contingent). I touched upon the first in my introductory remarks as those of the 'objective side' of moral standards. Given this distinction vegetarianism can be (against Copp, 96) both a personal and a moral standard. This also is in agreement with the normal usage of the terms involved. In any case all that is needed to mark one's attitude towards animals as moral is concern for their welfare.

Answering Skepticism. I agree with Copp that the challenge for justification in philosophy comes from skepticism and that a moral theory has to answer the skepticist (39, 44-9). However, in my opinion 'the skepticist' in philosophy is nothing more than a personification of our desire to have good reasons, or a methodological symbol signifying our doubt that our reasons really are good reasons. The skeptic does not have a standpoint of his own (save a naturalist one) but prospers from the kind of reasons we put forward. So I do not see why skepticism should press us into the kind of theory Copp suggests. The skeptic presses us to give good reasons but does not force us to adopt any particular theory. Things might be different if skepticism were identified with some sort of 'social realism'. But that is a reason of its own, the next on our list.

Social Realism. Copp's presentation of this reason is mildly puzzling. He admits that utopian or esoteric codes can still be moral codes (101), so that a claim to social realism is not to be included in (the definition of) morality. On the other hand he believes that the *realistic* person should subscribe to a moral standard only on condition of this standard being socially enforced and transmitted (101). I cannot see what realism has to do with social currency of a standard. One can prove one's realism by *not expecting* that one's own moral standard will be shared by many others. "Realism" in Copp's usage may stand

for something like the realistic expectation of what can be achieved by moral norms. But even then it has to be linked with some desire concerning the conformity of others with these norms.[11] So, unless we argue towards morality from the egoistic standpoint – which is not Copp's intention – realism does not lead to society-centeredness.

Social Constructivism. I have grave doubts whether this heading describes Copp's idea accurately. Social constructivism, to my opinion, is necessary if one wants social currency to be part of a morality. In effect Copp presents another argument (115-6), somehow combining the idea that a moral standard consists in one's attitude (i.e. subscription) and the desire that the standard is widespread, thus presupposing and not reasoning for this desire (see 116, first para.).

So, if this is all that can be said for a moral theory to be 'society-centered', we can rightly ignore it. What can be said in addition? In principle, it seems that reasons could be either *conceptual*, *moral* or *psychological*, the latter distinction not being all too clear. As could be seen with the 'definitional necessity' reason, there hardly is anything in the first alternative. Morality by conception may be other-directed and so in a sense social, but not necessarily widely shared. Rather we think it a common sense truth that morality *is not* so widely shared. For example, the fact that a moral argument is not widely shared does not render it less good an argument. By 'moral' reasons (second alternative) I am thinking of principles of equality or fairness presupposed in justification. Working as a naturalist, Copp would not accept such presuppositions (see also Copp 1997, 194). So we are left with the third alternative, which I classified as psychological.

Under this category the well-trodden path to a (kind of) society-centered moral theory is (again) contractualism. Thus, in the end we are stuck with two versions of society-centered positions in moral theory, both with their drawbacks and problems. Contractualism convinces by its individualism, which at least in principle provides room for individual rights, but (as mentioned earlier) appalls by its instrumentalism. Copp's holist society-centered view may be more attractive to sociologists – contractualism standing in the individualistic economical tradition –, but shocks us by its weakness towards individual rights. In this it comes close to utilitarianism.

If these observations are at all representative for the argumentative potential involved in a marriage of normative moral theory and social theory, *two conclusions* of this discussion seem obvious to me. First of all, as moral philosophers we should try to present moral arguments depending as little

[11] That self-interested motivation towards morality is hidden in Copp's thinking can be seen from the following: "... to be *realistic* in subscribing morally to a standard, one must desire that it be socially enforced, culturally transmitted, and generally subscribed to morally in one's society." (101) No, only if one wants to have something out of the others' behaviour.

as possible on social (or other) facts, at least at the most fundamental level. Otherwise we end up with criteria which are too wideranging to be used constructively. Secondly, we should try to give the (human) individual and his powers and capabilities as much room as possible, not society, (again) at least at the most fundamental level. To be clear, the capacities for social relations belong to the very human capacities and moral norms only spring from social relations – so no socially damaging individualism is involved with this second morale. One could call 'conceptualism' the first, and 'normative individualism' the second conclusion to be drawn. Both stand in opposition to a naturalist society-centered view as presented by Copp. These positions have to be argued for on their own, of course, but the desaster of society-centered theory should give some plausibility to the priority of the individual in moral theory.

Why then is society *in total* not at the heart of moral theory? The answer would not differ much from the corresponding answer to the same question asked on purely empirical or explanatory terms. Morality is too important for society to be justified from society as a whole. Comparably, explaining society could hardly start from society as a whole. Explanation has to begin with constituent parts, as does justification. So it seems that starting out with individuals from the beginning may be more helpful not only to the justification of morality but even to the answer of 'how society is possible'.

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