PERSPECTIVES IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

An Interview with ROBERT LOUDEN

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ethic@: Would you please introduce yourself to the readers of ethic@ and tell us why you chose to study philosophy and what your main interests in it are?

Louden: My name is Robert Louden. I'm visiting here in Florianópolis for the first time. I live in the United States, where I teach at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine. Maine is in the northeast corner of the US, right underneath Canada. Why did I choose philosophy? I am a little older than both of you, and grew up in California (on the West Coast), in the late 1960s when the Vietnam War was going on. It was a very interesting time in the United States in the sense that there was a lot of questioning going on about the direction that our society should take, as well as about government policy concerning the war in Vietnam. As far as I know (and I'm not sure any of us really knows for sure why we make basic career choices and life decisions), I got into philosophy as a result of arguing with my parents and their friends about the war. My parents are both republicans, *conservative* republicans, and when I was younger I was much more on the left. So I was opposed to the war, and my father in particular defended the war. But my father is a very intelligent man. He worked as a computer scientist, and has published several books about computer programming. These discussions about the Vietnam War and US society started when I was about thirteen, and at that time he had a definite intellectual advantage over me. But I would go into the town library at night to read some history and so forth, in order to try to get ready for the next night's argument. We were also neighbors with two different ministers, both of whom were friends of the family. So they would come over sometimes for a drink or something. They were a little more liberal than my parents were, and when the discussion turned to the war and contemporary US social issues, there would inevitably be strong disagreements. Somehow I found listening to this clash of opinions very interesting. I could see that people were presenting positions that mattered a great deal to them (they often became very emotional and agitated), and that

they were sure that they were right. But I also could see that the other people present weren't usually satisfied with the arguments that they heard. It was also not at all clear to me what made one position right and the other wrong – e.g., there didn't seem to be any sort of objective empirical fact that clinched one side's argument, nor (as far as I could see) was there any sort of mathematical-type proof that won the day for either the conservatives or the liberals.   In other words, what struck me early on about such debates is that, while people are often very sure that their position is right, it's not at all clear what (if anything!) makes their position right.

So, I think that it was primarily arguing about social, political and religious issues with my parents and their friends when I was young that first got me into philosophy.   At a fairly early age, I became interested in a variety of interrelated philosophical questions concerning normative (particularly moral) issues.   How (if at all) can they be rationally supported?   What (if any) role do empirical facts play in supporting them? What (if any) is the proper place of emotions in ethics?   To what extent are normative moral positions objective?   When I was an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I started out as a Politics major, and ended with a double major in Politics and Philosophy.   It was at the end of my junior year that I got seriously interested in the study of philosophy.   Over the summer, I decided to apply to graduate school in philosophy.   I chose the University of Chicago, in part because the faculty there did a lot of work in ethical theory.

My main philosophical interests have always been in ethics, though when I say *ethics*, I mean primarily *ethical theory*, as opposed to *applied ethics*. There has been, as you probably know, a big boom in applied ethics over the past twenty-five years or so in the United States.   I do find a lot of it interesting, and as I explained a moment ago, it was primarily through reflecting on arguments about certain issues in applied ethics and politics that I first got interested in philosophy. But I think that philosophers who are serious about ethics really do need to look at basic issues of theory.   Theory, and I would add, history.   I have always been interested in the history of moral philosophy. The discipline has unfortunately not made much progress over the centuries, and I continue to find certain earlier efforts (particularly in the Greek and German traditions) more convincing than many more recent ones.   Also, I have always been interested in issues concerning moral relativity -- whether moral thinking properly changes across time and space, and/or whether there are some core principles that remain constant throughout time and space. (My own view is that both occur: there is such a thing as

moral progress – ethical thought is not static. But there are certain universal norms as well.) This is an additional motive for studying the history of ethics.

***ethic@**: Would you please tell us a little bit more about the current situation of philosophy in North America, and especially, whether ethical studies still are in the mainstream there?*

Louden: The U.S. is a very diverse country, and this diversity is also reflected in the contemporary philosophical scene. We have people working in just about every possible kind of philosophy imaginable. Some people are interested in African philosophy, others in feminist philosophy; we also have scores of specialists in all the different periods of Western philosophy form the pre-Socratics on, as well as in all of the traditional subfields of philosophy – metaphysics, epistemology, logic, etc. And, of course, we have our own pragmatist tradition that started a hundred years or so ago and is still being done. At present, I would say that ethics is one of the most vibrant areas within North American philosophy. In the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant philosophical work in ethics was meta-ethical. With G.E. Moore and then the logical positivists, there was a lot of concern about the relationship between facts and values, about whether moral judgments had a truth status or not, whether they were cognitively meaningful or not, etc. These are and always will be important philosophical questions, but beginning around 1971 or so, when John Rawls's book *A Theory of Justice* first came out, a lot of philosophers also began to get more interested in specific normative questions. E.g., what is the best way to understand justice? Is this particular government policy (about the war, or concerning civil rights) right? If so, why? And then quickly after that, many people also began specializing in applied ethics. Now, I do think Rawls deserves a lot of credit here, but I would add that the general social and cultural situation also contributed to the shift of focus. There was a war going on, and there were repeated demonstrations against the war. So not only philosophy professors but all kinds of people were saying: 'This is wrong!' And I think that at least some of them also began to reflect more about what makes an action or policy right or wrong.

With applied ethics, if you want one person to congratulate here, so to speak, for initiating the shift, Peter Singer comes to mind. He is originally from Australia, and then studied at Oxford with R. M. Hare. He is at Princeton University in the US now. But here too, it was not just Singer -- there were also things happening in society.

Certain kinds of new medical research were being done, chemicals were being added to food, the natural environment was being polluted, animals were being wantonly killed in experiments, etc. It wasn't just one intellectual in an ivory tower magically coming with a new line of research. So yes, within contemporary North American philosophy ethics is certainly alive and well. For us, it is definitely one of the most active fields of contemporary philosophy. And your new journal, I suspect, is itself partly a reflection of this growth of interest in ethics.

ethic@: Do you agree with the idea presented by Slote, Baron and Pettit in their book "Three Methods of Ethics" that the three main normative ethical theories at present are Kantianism, consequentialism and virtue ethics ?

Louden: Yes, to a certain extent I do. But I would also add a little bit here. When I was a graduate student at Chicago, twenty years or so ago, and people talked about normative ethics, they tended to just talk about two traditions -- what you have called Kantianism (or, more generally, the deontological tradition); and the consequentialist or utilitarian tradition. As a graduate student, I began to get very interested in a third alternative, what we call 'virtue ethics' today. But twenty years ago, it was not yet recognized as a viable position on a par with the other two. In some of my first publications, I argued that it should be. Today, I think most people do view virtue ethics as the third main option in ethics. However, the issue is complicated, for virtue ethics does not always have a distinctive position within normative ethics (i.e., a view about what makes an act right or wrong) that distinguishes it from Kantianism and consequentialism. For instance, some of the people who work in virtue ethics actually are consequentialists in their normative ethics. Last night when I was talking to Darlei, I mentioned a new book by Julia Driver -- *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). She argues for a consequentialist theory of virtue. Other virtue ethicists go in a somewhat more deontological direction, but without putting much weight on the place of rules and principles. In their normative ethics, they are closer to an intuitionist or particularist deontology. To put it more bluntly: virtue ethics is not primarily a form of normative ethical theory -- its main concern is not "what makes right acts right?" So strictly speaking, it might be best to say that while virtue ethics does represent a third option in ethics; it does not necessarily represent a third option in *normative* ethics.

Virtue ethics is not always concerned about the same conceptual issues that consequentialists and deontologists talk about.

ethic@: Since you have studied and published on both Kantian and Virtue Ethics, would you explain to us how you see the relationship between these two theories?

Louden: Well, this is probably what we should call a "minority report" -- by which I mean that while most people believe that Kantian ethics and virtue ethics are very different; I myself don't. Kant's last major work in ethics, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (*The Metaphysics of Morals*), has two parts -- the first part is the *Rechtslehre* (the doctrine of justice or right); the second part is the *Tugendlehre* (the doctrine of virtue). So, half of his last major work in ethics (and it is a *long* book, much longer than the shorter and better-known *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*) is about *Tugend* or virtue! Kant was very concerned with virtue and its place in ethics. I have argued for many years, beginning with my Ph.D. dissertation, that Kant had his own distinctive kind of virtue ethics. As a result, I think we also need to reassess how we understand Kant's ethics. On my view, his actual ethics is quite a bit different from what many people take it to be. Now, to say that Kant is fundamentally interested in virtue and its place in ethics is, I think, indisputably true. But then one needs to also say something about how Kant understands the concept *virtue*. And when we do that, I think it becomes clear that his understanding of virtue differs from that of many of the people working in virtue ethics at present. Obviously, in Kant's ethics there is much more emphasis put on reason and principles and their place in the moral life. Many contemporary virtue ethicists, on the other hand, don't see much room at all for rules and principles in moral deliberation, and they would also put much more weight on the emotions and inclinations than would Kant. For Kant, virtue is understood primarily as "strength of will" – the moral agent's capacity to bring himself to do what is right, particularly in situations where he doesn't feel like doing what is right. However, if you look at a lot of the classical representatives of virtue ethics in western philosophy – say, in medieval philosophy, Thomas Aquinas, and in ancient Greek philosophy, Aristotle -- they too, broadly speaking, place the same weight on reason and its control over the passions and inclinations that one finds in Kant. Kant is not radically unique here at all. He is, broadly speaking, working within the classic Western tradition.

ethic@: Virtue ethicists point out that rules and principles are not the main ingredient in the moral life, and that we should pay attention to the moral qualities of the agent. What do you think of this claim?

Louden: This is a difficult question for me to answer, for it challenges my own commitment to a more Kantian form of virtue ethics. Let's start with the last part of the claim, concerning the importance of the moral qualities of agents. Yes, the intentions (or what Kant calls "maxims"), motives, and conscious dispositions on or from which one acts are all fundamentally important in ethics. People do things for all kinds of reasons, and until we have a solid sense of *why* they are doing what they do, we are not in good position to morally evaluate their conduct. I can tell you the truth because I think it is to my own advantage to do so. Or, alternatively, I can tell you the truth because I think that it's the right thing to do morally. As Kant illustrates in his famous "shopkeeper" example, in both cases I am acting "in conformity with" duty, but only in the second am I acting "from" duty (*Gr* 4: 398). I do think that what is going on on the inside is very important in ethics, and here I agree with the virtue ethics tradition. I think one of its main positive contributions to ethics is the simple but often-overlooked point that ethics is primarily about what's happening on the inside -- not just what we can see and measure and observe from the outside. But yes, I also think that there is a place for principles and rules in ethics. I don't think that each person can or should always act instinctively -- without thinking about what is morally right. Having said that, I also probably differ from some Kantians here. For I think, at least within the Kantian tradition, that the place of rules and principles has been overemphasized and exaggerated. I don't think that Kant ever intended the categorical imperative to be what nowadays is sometimes called a "universal decision procedure" – a step-by-step list of rules to follow in any and every situation. Rather, it was intended as a very broad (and commonsense-based) principle to keep in mind when we are unsure about what to do. And I don't think Kant ever believed it would tell us precisely what to do in any and all situations. It was meant to be something that would help us figure out what our basic duties and obligations are. But even if we know what our basic duties and obligations are (no easy matter!), this doesn't tell us precisely what, here and now, in the particular situation we are in, must be done. For this, as I was arguing in my paper yesterday, we need (among other things) a lot of relevant empirical knowledge and practical know-how about what people are like and the kind of culture that they live in. So, yes, there is

a necessary place for principles and rules in ethics (more generally, for critical reflection), but when push comes to shove, principles and rules don't take us terribly far. I don't think they take us as far as many philosophers believe. And I think Kant continues to be misrepresented and misunderstood on this point.

ethic@: Bernard Williams argues that reflection destroys morality. Do you think this anti-theoretical viewpoint is something promising?

Louden: Anti-theory. . . this was something that a lot of American and British philosophers were talking about in the '80s. In addition to Bernard Williams, Annette Baier (University of Pittsburgh) has also written influential work in this area. Broadly speaking, I see anti-theory in ethics as part of a larger cultural movement. In some ways it is similar to what we find in certain strands of post-modernism, e. g., the kind advocated by the French thinker Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, argues that the "grand narratives" that we find in philosophical systems such as Kant's and Hegel's are myths that we can no longer believe in. So Williams is definitely not the only person expressing an anti-theoretical attitude at present. But the larger issue is whether the demand for theory (which I feel is deeply rooted in human nature) can be made legitimate. I believe that it can -- the desire for theory should not always be repressed. However, *theory* itself is what Lyotard calls a "metanarrative" – an account of how things do (or don't) hang together. I believe myself that philosophy, by its very nature, is about standing back and trying to look at the big picture. The word "theory" comes from the Greek verb *theorein,* which means to see, to observe from a distance. Philosophy by its very nature is a theoretical enterprise. However, we should theorize responsibly. Obviously, there are a lot of bad theories out there, and I think some of the present theories, especially in ethics, are not useful theories. They are too abstract; they are obfuscatory. Here I do accept some of the criticisms made by anti-theorists: a lot of bad ethical theories have been produced. But, again, I am a strong believer of theory. I think that what we need are *better* theories, not the abolition of theories. We need intellectually responsible, clear theories. That's what is most needed.

Defending ethical theory was one of the main themes of my first book -- *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* (Oxford University Press, 1992). In the second half I tried to reaffirm the importance of moral theory in light of the critiques of anti-theorists such as Williams. One of my defense strategies

was historical. If you look at the great moral theories of the past, I argued, particularly those of Aristotle and Kant, you will see that what they meant by a moral theory was something quite different from the caricature of moral theory that is assumed in the anti-theorists' critique. The moral theories that Aristotle and Kant developed were not pale abstractions divorced from practice. Among other things, Kant thought that his "supreme principle of morality" came directly out of the ordinary thinking of human beings. It was not something that an intellectual prophet from on high dreamed up and then handed down to the masses. Rather, the moral philosopher's job, on Kant's view, is to analyze carefully how ordinary people actually deliberate in daily life, and then to try and distil the principles that are already implicit in common thinking about real-life problems. We find a similar method in Aristotle. Both philosophers develop moral theories that are firmly rooted in ordinary human judgments.

Does reflection "destroy morality?" Well, I would agree that sometimes it is possible to "think too much" – philosophers and intellectuals generally are prone to this vice. But to assert that reflection *always* destroys morality is romantic hyperbole. On my view, we need *more* reflection in ethics – not less.

ethic@: Bernard Williams also advocates a virtue ethics, but not a Kantian one. So would you tell us a little bit more about the place of virtue in Kant's moral philosophy?

Louden: Well, a good place to start is the very beginning of his most famous work in ethics, the *Groundwork*, because when he starts talking about the good will, he says that "the good will is the only thing in the universe that is good without qualification." Basically what he means by the good will is a morally good person -- one who consistently, for the right reasons, does the right thing, and who is self-disciplined to act this way. From this opening sentence in Section I the *Groundwork*, one can see already that virtue is at the center of his ethics. But again, it is a sense of virtue that involves disciplining the emotions, the passions, and inclinations so that they follow reason's commands, as determined by the categorical imperative. So it's also a more rationalistic conception of virtue than the one assumed by many contemporary virtue ethicists. But again, as I argued earlier, many people over-emphasize the place of rules and principles in discussing Kant's ethics. Over the years there have been so many articles devoted to

the different formulas of the categorical imperative, the application of the formulas to odd situations, etc., that I fear we have lost the forest for the trees. And in the process, people have also under-emphasized the importance of dispositions and the more fundamental project of becoming a certain sort of person (i.e., a good will). The causes of these over- and under-emphases, in my view, have more to do with philosophical fashion than with what Kant himself actually said. But now that virtue is (once more) the subject of attention in ethical theory, perhaps we have a better chance of arriving at an accurate picture of Kant's ethics.

ethic@**: **You are currently working on Kant's moral anthropology. How is it important for moral philosophy?

Louden: Here too the story is complicated. One of the things I talked briefly about yesterday was the interest in philosophical anthropology in Germany in the 1920s and '30s, and then the Existentialist movement that came right after that. One thing that makes me somewhat concerned here is that philosophical anthropology had its chance in the twentieth century. Max Scheler and later Jean-Paul Sartre (along with many others) were all trying to develop a philosophy of human beings, a philosophy of human existence. So philosophical anthropology seems to have had its day and now people are not too interested in it anymore. (Indeed, Michel Foucault – who himself translated Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* into French – used to argue that philosophy "fell asleep" when it first turned to anthropology in the late 18th century.) Sometimes I wonder: "Am I just trying to reinvent the wheel and get people interested in something they've already looked at and rejected?" However, I am interested specifically in what I call "*moral* anthropology" -- not just philosophical anthropology in general. The latter is a broader and somewhat murkier topic, and I do think some of the criticisms made of it (by Heidegger and others) are well taken. But yes, I do believe a moral anthropology is needed today. In part, I became interested in it by reflecting on some of the criticisms that anti-theorists were making of moral philosophy. In a way, what I'm trying to do with moral anthropology is take to heart some of their criticisms of the abstractness of moral theories. As they note, we need moral theories that are more empirically informed; we need to know more about who we are and how we live. And here moral anthropology has much to offer. However, I believe that Kant

knew all this, he understood it well many years ago. He viewed moral anthropology as "the *second* part of morals," but over the years many people have forgotten about this second part. A lot of philosophers who are attracted to Kant's philosophy are interested only in his *a priori* theory. For them, Kant is the man who wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But there is another Kant, the Kant who gave entertaining and well-attended lectures on anthropology annually for twenty-four years. This other Kant is sometimes held to be not serious enough by professional philosophers; not "pure" enough. However, I think contemporary sensibilities have changed a little bit, at least in ethics. People now are much more concerned about empirical issues, issues of moral psychology, issues of application. These are all topics that fall under the scope of moral anthropology.

But one problem is that -- as we see with anti-theorists, and post-modernists -- there is much resistance right now, particularly in the US, to talking about what all human beings share in common. Many people are much more interested in talking about "what I, *as a woman* believe", or "what I, *as an African*, descended from slaves, believe". But I think what we need, at least at the beginning, is a more basic kind of moral anthropology that illuminates what we all share in common. Then, at a later stage, we can add more particularistic insights to our data -- how does it look for women, for blacks, etc.

ethic@: **Do you believe that human rights are the best common ground to start with an ethics for mankind?**

Louden: Again, one of the reasons why we need, in my view, a moral anthropology that investigates what all human beings share in common with each other, is to develop a stronger empirical information base to help us deal with conflicts on – and to adjudicate standards at -- an international level. We have different countries, different cultures, different languages. What are the present living conditions in regions x and y, and what are the minimal standards that need to be set by the international community with regard to these conditions? Human rights are supposed to encapsulate claims that apply to everybody, but unfortunately our actions do not always match our words in this area. At the same time, I think ethics is about much more than rights. It's also about duties and obligations. If all we do is sit around and demand our rights against each other, we

are not going to be able to develop morally good communities. We must also bring ourselves to do what we see must be done.   Ethics is not exhausted by rights, but more respect for (not just lip service toward) human rights is certainly needed.

ethic@: Finally, what are some of the current perspectives represented in scholarship on Kantian ethics?

Louden: Sometimes when I'm sitting in my study in Maine, writing my little Kantian thoughts, it's easy to think I'm engaged in an extremely solitary activity. But when I go to conferences I am often amazed to see all the different things that contemporary Kantians are doing, and how they react to and build off of each other's work. Kantian ethics is flourishing at present. In recent years, I have been particularly interested in the more anthropological side of Kant's ethics, and I like to think that this represents a strong development. But it is certainly not the only one. There are lots of contemporary Kantians in the United States who are now looking at different issues in applied ethics – e.g., punishment, issues in sexual ethics, problems involving human rights and international relations. And I think this is also a healthy development. What it involves is (in a different but related way to my own work) trying to bring Kant down to earth more, trying to apply his theory to real issues that concern human beings, and to see what a distinctively Kantian position would say about them. And of course the Rawlsian tradition continues to be strong in social and political philosophy. His work is being extended and applied in many areas. For instance, some of Rawls's students are trying to find better ways to apply his theory on the international plane, among different nation-states, not just within one country, such as the United States. Some work in Kantian ethics also involves looking at other aspects of Kant's philosophy; say, his work in aesthetics and the philosophy of art – developing his remarks on beauty and the sublime for work in, e.g., environmental ethics.   For instance, Professor Maria de Lourdes Borges here in Florianópolis, who studied with Paul Guyer at the University of Pennsylvania -- he has done some interesting work on this, and now some of his former graduate students are developing it further. There are also people working on Kant's religion and ethics. Because the virtue ethics strand in Kant comes out more clearly if one looks in this direction, this is a particularly welcome development. So there are many branches growing from the tree, and it seems to be a very healthy tree. And one thing that has been particularly exciting for me recently is to go to other countries and

talk with other scholars and students about Kant. Here I am now in Brasil, and last month I was in Scotland, at a symposium on the history of ethics and Kant's place in it. It's amazing to witness the global influence of, and continual discussion generated by, the work of this (if I may say so) tiny, stoop-shouldered 18th century Prussian who never left Königsberg!

ethic@: Is there anything else you would like to say to the readers of ethic@ -- any final comments?

Louden: Well, I'm very honored and flattered to be part of this first issue of your new journal. And I wish you great success. Judging from your Board of Editors, it looks like a very solid journal. I look forward to reading online the articles in upcoming issues. I hope you are able to stimulate further contemporary discussions in ethics, both here in Brasil as well as elsewhere.