

## CRITICAL NOTICE

### A New Pluralist Theory

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*Concern, Respect, and Cooperation*

By Garrett Cullity

Oxford University Press. 2018. 336pp

Garrett Cullity's *Concern, Respect, and Cooperation* is a highly sophisticated work of philosophy that carefully explores and boosts the reader's confidence in a great many commonsensical moral commitments at the same time as laying out a powerful and original ethical theory. This a pluralist theory of the general kind W. D. Ross outlines in *The Right and the Good* (1930). Whereas Ross suggests that there may be seven grounds to all of our moral duties, Cullity locates just three, and only one of them – a ground that provides us with duties of *concern* – overlaps with Ross's list (Ross separates duties to benefit from duties not to harm at a fundamental level, but Cullity does not follow him in doing this). Unlike Ross, Cullity takes one fundamental class of moral reasons to be reasons to *respect* other agents, and one fundamental class of moral reasons to be reasons to cooperate in collective actions. In sum, there are, according to Cullity, three categories of *prima facie* moral duty: duties of concern (grounded in the welfare of others), duties of respect (grounded in the self-expression [autonomy] of others), and duties of cooperation (grounded in collective actions that either call for initiation or joining in, or call for prevention or not joining in).

Despite the sparseness of the moral pluralism defended in Cullity's book (compared to Ross's pluralism, that is), the normative and evaluative landscape is neither flattened in the way that ethical particularists worry is always going to happen whenever someone defends a substantive ethical theory, nor is the reader left to fend with a chaotic swarm of first-order ethical claims with no principled explanations provided of what might make such claims true. Cullity derives and defends many subsidiary norms. He intends for his theory to have more explanatory power than Ross's. And he draws on and responds to a wide swathe of the literature in ethics, reflecting many developments since Ross wrote his book, especially in recent decades. Naturally, some important

topics are left out or discussed only briefly, but it's surprising how much of the terrain of the moral landscape is non-superficially covered in this one book.<sup>1</sup>

I will focus on one of the most original aspects of Cullity's moral pluralist theory, and that is the idea that one of three separate foundations of interpersonal morality is the domain of reasons of respect. Cullity contends that such reasons are grounded in self-expression – “self-expression” being used in a broad sense to refer to any expression of rational agency, rather than in the ordinary sense according to which the writing of a poem is likely to involve self-expression but the brushing of teeth is not. Cullity's account of how self-expression (supposedly) functions as a fundamental source of moral reasons is original in itself, but it might also be said to contribute more than any other individual element to the originality of Cullity's ethical theory as a whole.<sup>2</sup> This is because the other two fundamental sources of moral reasons are closely related to value, and welfare in particular (cooperation-based reasons might not appear to be welfarist on a narrow conception of welfarism, but that might just mean we shouldn't endorse a narrow conception of welfarism).

On the other hand, self-expression, as Cullity intends us to understand it, isn't tied to welfare, insofar as it is considered to be a source of moral reasons that is independent of concerns about welfare. Amongst the types of reasons that involve responses to self-expression are moral reasons not to interfere with people's agency, even when the consequences of their acts will be bad for themselves. To use Cullity's own example: if he is relaxing on a beach, deciding to paternalistically stand next to him to shield him from the sun with an umbrella may lead to him being less sunburnt, but it fails to respect his authority to direct his life in his own way (47). Rejecting the idea that the ground of the relevant duty here is autonomy (for it matters not that the sunburnt is unchosen), Cullity writes, “what is important here is not that what I am doing is the object of a deliberate choice. It is, more simply, just that it is attributable to *me*. Lying in the sun is something I am doing – something I have made part of *my* life (deliberately or not). I am

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<sup>1</sup> I need to be selective here, but many claims in the numerous parts of the book I will not be able to discuss, such as in the chapter on moral virtue (Ch. 7), seem quite compelling to this reader – Cullity's reason-centered account of the moral virtues is rich and thorough, and may be largely correct (although I should note that I was already inclined to think this partly because I have in the past also promoted the idea that the correct way to understand virtues is as involving responses to particular classes of reasons [Star 2015, Ch. 3]).

<sup>2</sup> Competitors here for most original individual aspect of the theory include the idea that two of his fundamental moral norms are norms of *presumptive* fitness, and the two novel ways in which Cullity explains the derivation of many non-fundamental moral norms (in addition to a more standard way of explaining such derivations) in Part II of his book.

leading a life of my own: *that* is what calls for non-interference.” (48) Importantly, self-expression also limits what we may do to others in order to benefit or prevent harm to ourselves or other people. Whereas Ross relies on the commonsense asymmetry between benefitting and harming to provide a bulwark against consequentialism (claiming duties to benefit are generally weaker than duties not to harm), Cullity appears to wish to provide a more solid bulwark against consequentialism by recognizing the fundamental importance of self-expression.

While some reasons are either grounded in or give rise to value, reasons of respect (grounded in self-expression) are not; they are instead tied to *importance*.<sup>3</sup> This has both metanormative and normative theoretical implications. I wasn't completely convinced by Cullity that there is such an independent source of reasons, not directly related to value, and I'll explain why, but I'm also not going to try to argue his theory is definitely wrong on this score. I will finish by considering a separate issue concerning a special type of justification that he provides of his three foundations, an issue that also makes one wonder about value-based alternatives.

I have been describing some of Cullity's ideas about the foundations of morality by talking about *reasons*, and this is fine up to a point, since Cullity doesn't deny that normative reasons play a crucial role in deliberation and justification but, strictly speaking, Cullity thinks fittingness has a certain metaphysical priority (“Reason relationships derive from fitness relationships,” 36). His three fundamental moral norms are stated in terms of certain responses in actions, emotions, thought, and speech being (presumptively) fitting or “called for.” That being said, he might agree that, with a few exceptions, he could have done everything he wanted to do at this level of his theory utilizing the concept of a reason (the notion of a presumptive normative status, for instance, doesn't need to be cast in terms of fittingness, and was originally cast in terms of reasons, in an important earlier paper where Cullity [2006] introduces the idea of a presumptive reason).

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<sup>3</sup> Cullity explains the relation between importance and value by saying “importance is what something has when it calls for either making or not making an active response. It has value when it calls for a response of a positive or negative orientation – favour or disfavour. So value is not the only kind of importance.” (36) And much later he sums up how important respect for self-expression is for his theory as a whole: “The theory I have set out ... makes evaluative claims that are determinatively prior to its deontic claims; but its axiology is not confined to assigning value to states of affairs... it cannot be classified as a version of the classical non-consequentialist view. It belongs to a broader category, to which that view also belongs. This is because of its treatment of the morality of respect. Even when your self-expression is not good it can have importance, calling for respect, which need not be an orientation in favour of what I respect. So *value* is too narrow a category for what is foundational to this theory. Its foundational norms make attributions of importance, and value is only one kind of importance.” (159-60)

There are two main reasons Cullity says he chose to go with fittingness (35). First, it is generally accepted that if you have a reason to X you *can* X, but fittingness is like value insofar as we take a response to be fitting independent of considerations concerning whether or not the relevant agent can do the act (even though fittingness is like reasons in other respects). I don't think this consideration is persuasive, because assuming an ethical theory has to introduce provisos regarding what agents *can* do at some point or other, we could use fewer concepts in the end if we replaced every occurrence of "A is a fitting response to B" with "B provides a reason to A for agents that can A" (in which case, we'd end up not needing fittingness at all). Second, he is concerned about the wrong kind of reasons problem for the buck-passing account of value. I tend to think that if you are a buck-passer, you should move to focus on fittingness in the way he and others suggests you should. But what if you instead think value (or betterness relations, say) are metaphysically prior to reasons (and fittingness)? This seems like an alternative that should be taken very seriously.<sup>4</sup>

This is the point at which it turns out that including self-expression as an independent foundation of morality makes a significant metanormative difference. Whereas the other two foundations – welfare and worthwhile collective actions – can be described in terms that would be quite compatible with a value-first approach, self-expression is a source of reasons that are not directly tied to value at all (52).<sup>5</sup> So, regardless of what one thinks about the two of his arguments I just mentioned (concerning the relation of value to fittingness and the reason implies can principle), Cullity cannot afford to be neutral with respect to rejecting the value-first approach. More positively, one might say that if one finds his contention that there is an independent fundamental norm of self-expression convincing, then one will also find one has located a reason to reject the value-first approach.

Having decided that self-expression is one of the fundamental sources of fitting responses, Cullity then relies on this idea when explaining *derivative* normative relations of various kinds. I can't possibly hope to go through all of these and demonstrate that the appeal to self-expression

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<sup>4</sup> Cullity has indicated in correspondence that he agrees that this option should be taken seriously and that he isn't, in fact, particularly concerned about metaphysical priority when it comes to fitness and goodness, but rather means to endorse and rely on the biconditional claim that an object is good if and only if a favour-response to it is fitting.

<sup>5</sup> For Cullity, value is one kind of *importance*, but not the only kind (non-interference with self-expression, even when an instance of self-expression has no positive value, is also important). Perhaps we need this separate concept of *importance*, just as we might think we need a separate concept of *fittingness*, and if we do turn out to need these concepts to make proper sense of the ethical landscape then we should be happy utilizing them. But a metanormative theory that doesn't need them would at least be preferable in one key respect, viz it would be simpler.

as a fundamental ground is not essential. But let me mention one key example. Cullity suggests that we might best explain when reactive attitudes like blame and admiration are appropriate by viewing them as justified responses to self-expression, such that we are holding agents accountable (50, 74-79). This is a particularly interesting idea, although it must be said that ethical theorists have in the past got by just fine focusing on actions that people are responsible for without suggesting that we need to ground claims about blame in a particular ground of substantive moral reasons.

By choosing to begin with metanormative issues, I don't wish to give the impression that I think Cullity proposes that self-expression is a fundamental source of fittingness relations (independent of welfare) *for* metanormative reasons. On the contrary, I take it his principal motivation is to provide a normative ethical theory that does justice to the moral landscape (as he sees it) – if doing so has certain metanormative consequences, then so be it. So what is at stake when it comes to the moral landscape? Well, this isn't exactly clear to me. If Cullity were a hedonist with respect to welfare then it would seem more important that he find a way to claim that one set of moral reasons are concerned with benefitting people and avoiding harming them (and other responses of *concern*), and that another, distinct set of moral reasons are concerned with respecting people's agency. Such a move might be crucial for a hedonist who wishes to take moral reasons not to interfere with people's agency very seriously (and I assume here that we do want to take such reasons very seriously). However, Cullity is not a hedonist, but instead accepts an expansive account of wellbeing. He writes “[There are] various goods which are final contributors to welfare – the things it is good for you to possess, for their own sake... [There are at least] six categories of such goods: goods of love, fellowship, enjoyment, achievement, understanding, and freedom.” (45)

Goods of achievement and of freedom (and perhaps some of the others on this list as well) are goods that already essentially involve a person's agency. When he at one point late in his book (161) writes that responses of *concern* have us treat others as *patients*, in direct contrast to the way responses of *respect* have us treat others as *agents* (and responses of cooperation have us treat others as *partners*), I can't help thinking he may be making a mistake, given his own attractive account of wellbeing. If one is properly recognizing the self-standing importance of freedom and achievements to every person's welfare in one's interactions with others, then one can but not treat them as agents when properly demonstrating concern for them. To be sure, a doctor acting out of concern for an unconscious patient (in the ordinary sense of patient) is not focusing on their present agency, but she must remain at least counterfactually sensitive to ways in which her acts and omissions may affect the patient's agency in the future (apart from when

considering cases that are exceptions, such as severely brain damaged or permanently comatose patients).

That being said, Cullity recognizes that the welfarist may try to claim that every interference with a person's agency at a particular time would be harming them (47). He finds this implausible, and I concur. But he is also aware of a more sophisticated option for the welfarist and that is that they might instead offer up an account of moral rights according to which we all have rights to not have our agency interfered with, where these rights are grounded in central interests we all share. Cullity provides his own original account of rights (82-86), and it may be that this account is incompatible with the welfarist move I just mentioned, but it wasn't clear to me that it is, and, in any case, it may not be a better account of moral rights than the theory we are imagining the welfarist will provide (making use of the resources provided by the account of wellbeing Cullity himself accepts). One thing one would expect both accounts of rights to have in common is that they view the right of non-interference as non-absolute. Cullity is explicitly committed to rights being overridable in some circumstances (it would be easier for him to distinguish himself from the welfarist if he was an absolutist about rights, but such a view is even harder to square with Rossian pluralism than it is to square with a welfarist approach to rights). I can't hope to adjudicate this dispute here, but I hope I've managed to highlight what I take to be a critical issue at this point, and why it is critical on both a metanormative and a normative ethical level.

Is there, according to Cullity, any further, unifying explanation that can be provided for the three foundations of ethics? A criticism of Ross's original pluralist theory has been that it presents us with a heap of duties with no explanation as to why they are all of one overarching kind, insofar as they are all duties. Cullity is no doubt aware of this line of criticism. Perhaps partly motivated by wishing to avoid it, he further develops Ross's idea that morality is essentially concerned with relationships between all of us (hence Cullity's thought mentioned above that we can relate to others as patients, agents, or partners). While clarifying and making a case for this claim concerning the way in which the three foundations are unified by reference to relationships, Cullity demonstrates an awareness of a danger that lies in this territory: it better not turn out that whatever explains the three foundations becomes something we defer to as itself a separate foundation for certain moral responses. If this were to happen, and relationships were viewed as providing a primary foundation, we would no longer be considering a genuinely pluralist theory.

I won't discuss in detail the particular *form* of explanation that Cullity carefully makes space for in this part of his theory – suffice to say, by distinguishing between various options he comes to think he can rely on one of three types of “non-derivative determination.” I found this section of

the book hard going but interesting. I don't have a problem with the idea that there is room in conceptual space for the kind of explanation he provides (a type of determination he calls "response-determination," and illustrates with an example that involves explaining the badness of pain and the goodness of pleasure by having us try to imagine what it would be like to live a life where we didn't find pleasure good or pain bad [163]). My worry is instead about the substantive details. He sums up the key idea here as an answer to a question: "Why does others' welfare call for responses of concern, why does their self-expression call for respect, and why does worthwhile collective action call for cooperation?" In response, he writes, "...in my view, the most forceful answer is this: Because of the relationships we form when we respond to each other in these ways.... What makes it the case that the response is worth making [with respect to each kind of response] is its contribution to the *valuable* relationship it helps to create between me and the person I treat well. These relationships amount to three *valuable* ways of sharing our lives with each other." (163; emphasis added here)

At this point my question is this: given that we are to conceive of these three types of relationships *as* valuable (when instantiated as tokens, I take it, rather than as abstract types), won't properly recognizing value of this kind have practical upshots, upshots that are normative (morally so), but not in virtue of being justified in response to one of the three sources of moral reasons previously said to be fundamental?

Here I am reminded of something I wrote in my own book, *Knowing Better* (2015). Using a particular ethical theory merely as an example, I imagined a certain kind of defender of rule-consequentialism claiming that the explanation provided by a fundamental rule consequentialist principle of why our acts should follow particular rules is not itself to be taken as having any normative import, but it to be interpreted as merely *explaining* why certain rules should be followed. I provided an argument against this view, writing, "Suppose I am talking to a reliable guardian angel, who tells me that rule-consequentialism is correct, and that an act I am considering doing is required by one of the rules that meet the rule-consequentialist conditions (roughly, one of the rules which is part of the set of rules that will, if most people follow them, make things go best), but does not tell me what the rule is. Wouldn't we be inclined to accept that the fact that the act is required by one such rule is a reason? To bring out why the [merely explanatory] alternative ... seems wrong, just imagine responding to the guardian angel's suggestion that this fact might be a reason to act by saying 'I understand that this fact explains why this rule is one that it is right to follow, but even though I assume rule-consequentialism is correct, this fact, that it is a rule is in the set that will produce the best consequences [if most people follow them] is no reason at all to perform the act.' So far as I can see, this point

generalizes to other ethical theories, and the relation they would stand in to our reasons if correct.” (Star 2015, 30-31). The point of this thought experiment is that it’s not so easy to prevent explanations of moral reasons from being recognized as reasons themselves once we accept that an essential role of reasons is that they guide the deliberation of agents, and we can conceive of situations where we might not have more familiar guides to rely on, rather than underlying explanatory facts.<sup>6</sup> Adapting my earlier thought to the present discussion, the question becomes: why should we think that on Cullity’s view that relationships *explain* all of our moral reasons, facts about (possible) particular relationships don’t themselves directly provide us with any moral reasons? After all, facts about such relationships might be responded to *as* reasons, especially in contexts of partial moral ignorance.

I can think of two things that might be said here to avoid the view that the relationships are themselves valuable in a way that has direct moral import, and both of them seem problematic. First, it might be said that with respect to these key relationships, we are talking about a type of value that never in itself gives rise to (or goes together with) normative reasons. This would make it quite mysterious. Second, it might instead be said that these relationships are to be understood as having distinctly *prudential* value. Fellowship, after all, is something that Cullity includes in his list of the types of goods constitutive of the good life. Why do I think this would be problematic for him? There are, of course, more general reasons to worry about any theory that ultimately provides an explanation for moral demands in terms of prudence,<sup>7</sup> but in the present context, it’s particularly worth emphasizing that *if* the value of relationships lies in what they provide to each of us as individuals, *welfare* looks like it plays a much more important role as a foundation of morality than the other two foundations do; an asymmetry is established between it and the other foundations, insofar as we take it that it has this special kind of unifying value that they don’t have. And the welfarist alternative that I have been discussing – the option that

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<sup>6</sup> For a defense of the alternative view, see Mark Schroeder’s (2010) discussion of why he thinks the Humean can have desires play a foundational role in explaining what normative reasons are without the desires themselves being referenced as reasons or parts of reasons. At issue here is what we take the function of reasons to be. I think normative reasons are normative guides (whatever else they might also be), hence I think pretty much any fact that can guide conscientious agents to act well in their deliberations is a reason.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it isn’t quite the case that Cullity answers the question “why be moral?” with the answer “because it is good for you,” which would violate a requirement he endorses that he calls Prichard’s Principle (2), but I worry that he at times gets awfully close to doing so, such as when he sums up his theory in the following way: “Treating others with concern, respect, and cooperation makes an important contribution to leading a flourishing life. What I shall be presenting is a theory which gives morality three foundations ... and one telos.” (21)

we might locate the source of all moral and prudential reasons in welfare, given a rich theory of wellbeing – is likely to now seem even more attractive than it did before.<sup>8</sup>

As much as I think that Cullity's *Concern, Respect, and Cooperation* is a must read for people working on ethical theory, partly in virtue of many complex yet carefully laid out details that I haven't been able to discuss here, I have to admit it left me wondering whether, at the end of the day, we really need to think of moral reality as resting on the three foundations he describes (unified in some non-normative sense by the relationships we stand in to each other), and whether we really need to make use of all the interesting concepts he utilizes or supplies to understand these foundations and how they can supply us with moral reasons (self-expression, fittingness in addition to reasons, importance in addition to value, etc.). This book does give us a very well-worked out and original way of looking at moral reality, but sometimes I wanted to hear more about why Cullity thinks we *ought* to view moral reality in the way that he favors. A better moral pluralist theory might be one that is metanormatively less complex, is broadly welfarist, yet acknowledges that autonomy matters to people (respecting it is often required by being concerned for their welfare), and is such that it more fully and directly acknowledges the normative weight of partial moral reasons that spring from relationships between people. As far as I am aware, such a theory has yet to be constructed.

## References

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<sup>8</sup> I benefitted from hearing a response by Cullity to an earlier version of this critical notice at a symposium on his book at the annual meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in 2021, as well as from our subsequent correspondence, and I am grateful to him for these opportunities to discuss his ideas. I am also grateful to Max Hayward for his very helpful editorial suggestions.