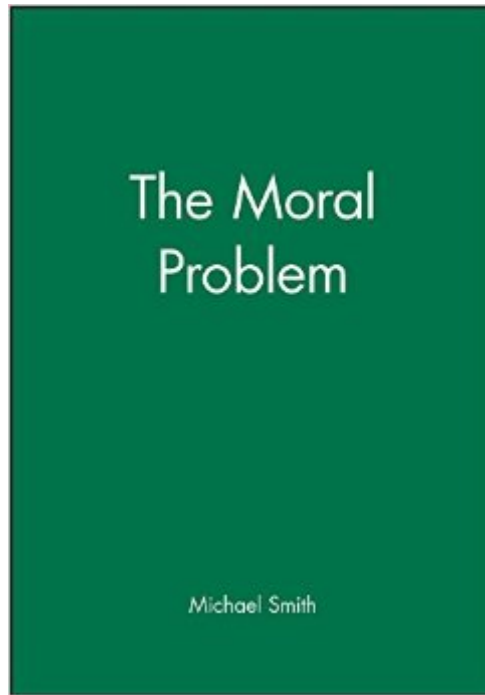


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The Moral Problem



Synopsis

This widely anticipated volume offers a systematic introduction to and striking analysis of the central issues animating current debate in moral philosophy.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is the most exciting book that I have read in a long time. Prime virtues of the book are clarity of exposition, and breath of topics covered. Smith shows how many controversial issues in contemporary meta-ethics come together in what he calls 'the Moral Problem': three of our intuitions - three platitudes about moral judgement and human action - seem to be inconsistent. Most current ethical theories deal with this apparent inconsistency by rejecting one of the three platitudes. Smith, on the other hand, provides a very elegant solution to this moral paradox by showing how the three platitudes are both consistent and true. Platitude 1: moral judgements have a truth value (objectivity of moral judgements). Platitude 2: moral judgements constitute reasons for action (practicality of moral judgements). Platitude 3: desires are constitutive of reasons for action (folk psychology). 1 and 2 entail that beliefs - states that have a truth value - constitute reasons for action, contrary to 3. 2 and 3 imply that moral judgements are (or express) desires - states that do not have a truth value - contrary to 1. 1 and 3 result in the conclusion that desires have truth values, contrary to 2 - as reasons for action are constituted by non-cognitive states, i.e. states without a truth value. As will be clear to those familiar with contemporary meta-ethics, proposing a solution to this problem requires an analysis of rival solutions as given by for example expressivism, cognitivism, and error theory.

Smith gives such an analysis and forcefully argues that these solutions are flawed. His own solution starts by pointing out that - although platitude 3 is indeed a platitude and should be retained - it is not the whole story about human motivation. If you want to find out more about these issues, this is the book to read.

Smith's book, "The Moral Problem" represents an attempt to defend moral realism without relying on any non-naturalistic properties. In the end, I don't think Smith's attempt is successful, but his discussion of the underlying issues will be of interest to anyone who cares about meta-ethics. His discussion of Humean psychology and internalism about reasons are particularly interesting. The view that Smith arrives at it is something like the following: for an action to be morally right is for it to be the action that an ideally rational, and completely informed version of yourself would recommend to you. The main trouble with the view comes in how the "rationality" is to be cashed out. If rationality is understood to include responsiveness to moral reasons, then the view turns out to be trivial. If rationality excludes these things, then it's unclear whether Smith's formulation would result in a plausible moral theory. Smith seems to think the truth of moral realism hangs on whether everyone's desires would converge under certain idealized conditions. I see no reason why that should be the case. Anyway, this is the sort of defense that will appeal to people who want to accept realism, but are suspicious of non-natural properties of the sort G.E. Moore embraced.

This is influential whether you agree with it or disagree with it. It's also a good starting point for those interested in furthering their understanding of ethics and morality. However, I wouldn't recommend it as a starting point for beginners. As far as the readability of the writing and the quality of writing are both great. No one should have problems understanding the material due to Smith's writing.

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