

Philip Pettit, *The Birth of Ethics: Reconstructing the Role and Nature of Morality*, Kinch Hoekstra (ed.), Michael Tomasello (comm.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 400 pages. ISBN: 9780190904913. Hardback: \$36.95.

When confronted with the question “What is money?”, it not uncommon for economists to offer a tale of its imagined origins. The tale begins with a rudimentary barter society in which goods are exchanged freely between equals. Many members, though, covet goods held by others who desire nothing of theirs, a circumstance giving rise to market friction. In the face of this, some widely sought-after commodity, like cigarettes or gold, emerges as the common currency for societal exchange. Members then strive to accumulate the favored commodity, thereby securing the means to purchase with ease more of the goods they want. We can then begin to speak of the *price* of goods, expressed in terms of a quantity of the commodity. Such is the tale of the birth of money – a tale that aims to answer the abstract question “What is money?” not by listing necessary and sufficient conditions, but by supplying a naturalistic account of the role it evolved to play.

In *The Birth of Ethics*, Philip Pettit aims to do for morality what the economist’s tale does for money, explicating the concept through an imagined natural history of its evolution. The hope is that by recognizing the various pressures that would force a society to adopt something like our notion of morality, we might demystify and come to better understand it. The book departs methodologically from mainstream analytic metaethics, much of which aims to understand morality by providing a reductive analysis of it. Instead, it seeks philosophical insight in stories and in speculative natural history, much as Plato, Rousseau, and Hume might, thereby displaying a refreshingly expansive understanding of what philosophy can look like. While the tale of morality’s birth occupies the bulk of this volume, the book also contains a useful and engaging exchange between Pettit and developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello in which issues are raised about whether Pettit’s method of hypothetical history is in some way in competition with the scientist’s goal of giving an actual natural history. My review will focus on the main body of the book.

The tale commences in Erewhon, an imagined land populated by creatures exactly like us, but for their lack of moral concepts and practices. Denizens of Erewhon are stipulated to be broadly self-interested and possessed of basic linguistic capacities. The linguistic capacities enable them to deliver reports – “The berries on the hill have ripened” or “I want some ripe berries.” The self-interest engenders concern for knowing who is credible and for being seen as credible by others – obtaining ripe berries at significant scale necessitates cooperation and trust, both of which are imperiled by unreliable reporters.

Under the circumstances, *avowing* and *pledging* emerge as modes of communication beyond the mere issuing of reports. Members avow their belief that the berries have ripened, or pledge their intention to forage tomorrow. The distinctive feature of these linguistic tools is that they foreclose the possibility of appeal to particular excuses – it's less easy to excuse an individual's misreporting the location of the berries when she has made an avowal, and it's less easy to excuse her change of mind about the plan to forage tomorrow when she has made a pledge. This matters because by foreclosing the possibility of appeal to certain excuses, an individual exposes herself to increased reputational risks – she renders it more likely that her credibility will suffer if her report turns out to have been unreliable. This willingness to expose herself to reputational risk invests her words with increased credibility, and according to Pettit, “It is bound to be appealing for each [individual] in Erewhon to give the words [they] utter as much credibility as [they] can.” This is because investing words with credibility “is likely to get others to rely on [them] . . . [a]nd it will enable [them] to prove reliable in living up to those words, thereby improving [their] general reputational stock” (pp. 91–92). These benefits of trust and reliance are central to the development of morality, and they are further secured, according to the story, with the emergence of co-avowal and co-pledging, which enable members to speak on behalf of one another.

The next stage is marked by the arrival of prescriptive concepts. An individual must, if she is to make an avowal or pledge behind which she can stand, see it as appropriately backed by evidence or by her desires. This inspires members to speak in terms of what one *ought to* believe, and what one *ought to* desire. Now, the question “What ought I believe?” can be expected to admit of the same answer across persons, as evidence for one individual constitutes evidence for any individual. But because what is attractive to one is not necessarily attractive to others, there's no reason to expect that what is ultimately desirable to one will be so to others. The question “What ought I do?” thus cannot be expected to elicit consensus. Those in Erewhon thus face a problem of coordination in the case of action that they do not face in the case of belief, for when a person speaks of a course of action being desirable, she cannot expect that the course of action will be desirable to all others. Here, members begin to appeal to an “interpersonal, convergent perspective” that focuses on considerations likely to seem attractive to all (p. 189). By “transcend[ing] the perspectives of different persons” the society “develop[s] the concept of what is multilaterally desirable,” which “converges on the concept of the morally desirable that figures prominently in common usage” (p. 197).

In order to gain compliance from others as they attempt social cooperation, those in Erewhon begin to “censure those who flout . . . moral judgments or

standards and commend those who conform” (p. 197). In other words, a system of interpersonal regulation emerges, which Pettit equates with the practice of holding one another responsible. And with this, the genealogical tale has ended. The concepts of moral desirability and responsibility are being deployed in Erewhon, and thus, ethics is born.

Pettit characterizes *The Birth of Ethics* as an attempt to “demystify the appearance of ethics in naturalistic terms” (p. 51). But we might pause now to wonder what exactly about ethics is in need of demystification. Pettit says relatively little on this matter, yet the issue is of utmost importance. For whether the account succeeds will depend upon the intellectual discomfort it sets out to relieve. Perhaps we find ourselves gripped by an egoist ideology that renders baffling any suggestion that a person would act from considerations other than her own advantage. Pettit’s account would help us see our way out of this. That a person might go with, or be expected to go with, the moral option rather than the one that bestows maximal self-benefit is rendered plausible once we reflect on the evolution of practical concepts in Erewhon.

But there is, one might think, more that is in need of demystification. It is a familiar philosophical theme that the moral person does not simply deploy concepts that require self-sacrifice, but that she finds on her practical radar a concrete other person, whose presence demands regard of a special sort. It is this thought that Rousseau, Fichte, and Hegel sought to understand, to explicate, and to vindicate, when they wrote of a person’s *recognition* of another. The issue here concerns not merely how such recognition is possible, but also what it would even *mean* for someone to so appear in another’s practical thought.

To elaborate, consider the overall shape of Pettit’s account, stripped of its nuance. Certain practical concepts emerge in Erewhon, originally as a consequence of their propensity to encourage trust, cooperation, and coordination. Individuals deploy these concepts *not* with a view to these benefits, Pettit says, but out of a sense of integrity (pp. 241–252). That is, the evolutionary process is such that the notion of personhood itself becomes tied to one’s being gripped by moral notions. “The demands of morality,” Pettit writes, “are nothing more or less than the demands of personal integrity” (pp. 250–251). But it is here that we might ask: What about the demands of The Other? For it seems as if a person might be gripped by Pettit-ian ethics out of a sense of personal integrity, acting on thoughts about what is desirable from a shared perspective and responding to others’ attempts to prod her with expressions of praise and blame, but not yet register concrete other persons in the way that recognition theorists think is characteristic of morality. What is it, then, that this imagined person lacks? And how might she come to acquire it? Is the need

for coordination and cooperation sufficient to generate it? If so, how? It thus appears that there is more that needs to be accounted for.

Or perhaps not. We might imagine Pettit responding that obscure notions like “recognition” are precisely the kinds of things his project of demystification targets. Once agents in Erewhon are deploying the concepts they do, perhaps Pettit thinks the onus falls on the philosopher of recognition to specify what more they could possibly want from an account of ethics. Either way, there are fascinating discussions to be had about what sorts of philosophical concerns inspire a genealogical account of the sort attempted here, and what such an account can reasonably hope to accomplish. Pettit tends to focus on the method’s ability to address concerns of philosophers who seek understanding in naturalistic reduction. But much of the joy of this innovative and engaging book consists in thinking more broadly about the ways in which it either alleviates or leaves in place a broad range of anxieties that we bring with us when we do moral philosophy.

Paul Schofield

Philosophy Department, Bates College, Lewiston, ME, United States

pschofie@bates.edu