

In face of the facts

Moral inquiry in American scholarship



Edited by
RICHARD WIGHTMAN FOX and
ROBERT B. WESTBROOK



WOODROW WILSON CENTER PRESS
AND



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 1998

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1998
First paperback edition 2002

Typeface Sabon.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 62133 X hardback
ISBN 0 521 62887 3 paperback

Contents

Acknowledgments	Page ix
Introduction: Moral inquiry in American scholarship <i>Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook</i>	1
1 Pragmatism, science, and moral inquiry <i>Elizabeth Anderson</i>	10
2 Political theory and moral responsibility <i>Jean Bethke Elshtain</i>	40
3 Moral inquiry within the bounds of politics; or, A question of victimhood <i>Marion Smiley</i>	57
4 Moral confidence: Three cheers for naturalized ethics <i>Owen Flanagan</i>	83
5 Fighting (over) words: Speech, power, and the moral imagination in American history <i>Jane Kamensky</i>	112
6 “Of the standard of moral taste”: Literary criticism as moral inquiry <i>Wayne C. Booth</i>	149
7 The moral force field of Haitian Vodou <i>Karen McCarthy Brown</i>	181
8 Snakes alive: Resituating the moral in the study of religion <i>Robert A. Orsi</i>	201

9	Social science and the moral revival: Dilemmas and difficulties <i>Alan Wolfe</i>	227
10	Religion, morality, and other unmentionables: The revival of moral discourse in the law <i>Joan C. Williams</i>	251
	Further readings	283
	About the authors	289
	Index	291

Introduction

Moral inquiry in American scholarship

RICHARD WIGHTMAN FOX and
ROBERT B. WESTBROOK

The phrase “moral inquiry” is bound to give some readers a start. Moral inquiry will suggest the morals squad, the righteous fervor of self-appointed judges, the closed-mindedness of petty dispositions and pinched spirits, the restoration of Victorian constraint after nearly a century of ever-expanding openness, exposure, and toleration. Moral inquiry implies moralism and poses a menace to a modern ethic of live-and-let-live pluralism. Ironically, many critics of such open-ended pluralism will themselves find fault with “moral inquiry,” since it implies that human deliberation is supposed to settle moral questions—questions better left to faith, revelation, or the dictates of unchanging natural law. Bitterly opposed to one another, both camps agree that the moral life, as they see it, is only threatened by the intrusions of inquiry.

The coupling of “moral inquiry” with “scholarship” will also cause some readers to recoil. In their view the terms are mutually exclusive since scholarship should be based upon the dispassionate pursuit and assessment of fact, not preaching or even deliberating about values. Modern scholarship has been premised, they will say, upon the repudiation of earlier generations’ joining of moral zealotry with supposedly scientific but actually parochial investigation. To speak of moral inquiry in the same breath with scholarship is especially risky in this day and age, some will add, because partisan appeals to “political correctness” of both the right- and left-wing varieties are liable to divert universities from the free pursuit of the truth. Inquiry and scholarship, as they see it, are only undermined by the concerns of the moral life.

What the fearful and wary on all sides here share is the conviction that facts and values can and should be sealed off from one another and that scholarly inquiry—and scholarly institutions such as universi-

ties—will traffic only in the former. Insofar as scholars examine the moral life, they should ask only “how do we (or they) live?” (a question of fact) not “how should we (or they) live?” (a question of value). And they should resist any temptation to ask whether the first sort of question might bear some relation to the second, for it does not and cannot.

This common view of the university as a haven for disinterested truth-seeking and of the scholar as a pursuer of facts, not a professor of values, still reigns throughout much of academia in the United States. But it has recently come under criticism—and not only from politicized forces of the left and right, each of which aspires to supplant value-neutrality with an ideological alternative of its own. Dissatisfaction with the fact-value split is growing even among those with scant desire to take sides in the “culture wars” that wrack contemporary America.

A quick tour of some recent American intellectual history suggests the sources of this disenchantment. A generation ago scholars in many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities were united in a commitment to common “scientific” methods and goals: to conduct research and come to verifiable truths about an ever-proliferating range of topics. Researchers were to be detached, dispassionate; objectivity depended on impersonality and neutrality. Political, religious, social, or moral concerns were to be kept at bay lest they contaminate the professional sifting of evidence. Much sport was made of the genteel amateurs of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries who routinely injected their historical, literary, or sociological works with sentimental hopes about the moral advance of civilization and with celebratory gestures about the greatness of this nation or that great leader. Modern-day scholars by contrast checked their beliefs and values at the academy’s door.

In the 1950s and 1960s this ideal of impassive value neutrality came under fire—first by a few pundits on the right (William Buckley Jr.’s *God and Man at Yale* was the key document), and then by many on the left, including many professors.¹ Not only did the critics observe the failures of academics to abide by the positivist, “objectivist” ideal, but

¹ *God and Man at Yale* was published in 1951 by Regnery. The “anti-textbooks” published by Pantheon were a pivotal expression of the left-wing academic assault on the “liberal” ideal of value neutrality. See, for example, Theodore Roszak, ed., *The Dissenting Academy* (1968), Berton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (1968), and Philip Green and Sanford Levinson, eds., *Power and Community: Dissenting Essays in Political Science* (1970).

they also questioned the ideal itself. No scholarship, they argued, was disinterested, least of all the prevailing wisdom, much of which thinly disguised a liberal ideology serving powerful interests beneath a veneer of disinterestedness. Since every perspective was interested, the argument went, every scholarly work should explicitly embrace its own position and expose those of others.

Yet few of these critics were relativists. They considered their own values, whether grounded in the truths of Christian revelation or Marxist history, superior to all others. Such critics assaulted the fact-value distinction by raising their own values to the status of objective, disinterested, “foundational” fact—an approach that remains characteristic of conservative critics of the academy. Ideological unmasking and the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” of both the right- and left-wing varieties, were applied to others but not to one’s own position.

In the past two decades we have witnessed the crumbling in some quarters of this campaign to have one’s cake and eat it too. In our own time, under the influence of a postmodern sensibility and a declining faith in social progress and shared civic commitment, scholars have turned more and more to the view that all knowledge—including their own—is perspectival and that since each perspective is a product of discrete historical forces and particular interests, no perspective can ultimately be deemed superior to any other. The new catchwords are “localism,” “particularity,” “situatedness,” “positionality,” whereas “objectivity,” “universality,” and “cosmopolitanism” draw a yawn at best and more typically elicit a look of amazed condescension, as if to say “right-minded thinkers gave those up years ago.” If earlier left- and right-wing critics questioned the value-neutrality of liberal academics while fashioning their own values into facts, the current critical tendency, particularly in the humanities, is to reduce all facts to incommensurable and competing values, and consequently to diminish moral deliberation to little more than a struggle for power. Ironically, such postmodernism has brought us full circle to renewed skepticism about the capacity of scholarly inquiry to address ethical questions, a skepticism as thoroughgoing as that of earlier positivists.

Some scholars, however, have sought to recast moral inquiry by sustaining the logical distinction between facts and values while refusing to banish values from scholarship. These scholars are unhappy with the fact-value split that still holds sway in American social science and with the erasure of the distinction between them that reigns in many human-

ities disciplines. They aim not to abandon the logical differentiation between facts and values nor to reduce one to the other but rather to foster the traffic between facts and values and hence between scholarly inquiry and moral judgment. Often calling on the forgotten legacy of pragmatists such as Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, they have followed Dewey in abandoning the “quest for certainty” while resisting wholesale skepticism. And they have affirmed the fallible yet still “warranted” assertions that might provide a link between inquiry and moral deliberation. Fruitful inquiry, such scholars argue, is attuned to the moral dimension in all inquiry, and astute moral judgment is alert to the estimate of causes and consequences and to the appreciation of the fabric of lived experience that only inquiry can provide. Inquiry cannot free itself of values, and moral judgment without inquiry is impoverished. Not only does the moral life have nothing to fear from scholarly inquiry and scholarly inquiry nothing to fear from the moral life, but both are the richer for their marriage.

This latter view is gaining ground in American scholarship. Amidst the battles over postmodernism in colleges and universities and the struggles over a more general crisis of values in the wider public realm, scholarly work has emerged that places itself between or, better yet, beyond claims to moral certainty on the one hand and positivist and postmodernist moral skepticism on the other. Although we are both historians, we have done enough piecemeal reading across the artificial boundaries that separate one scholarly community from another to identify scholars in other disciplines who have neither exiled moral concerns from their scholarship, nor treated every exercise of the moral imagination as a power play.

Longstanding though this interest was for us, it took on particular intensity after the untimely death in early 1994 of our friend Christopher Lasch. His writing was exemplary of the sort of moral inquiry we had in mind. So with a friend equally bereft by Lasch’s death, Jean Bethke Elshtain, we gladly accepted the generous invitation of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars to put together a conference that would assess the scope and character of moral inquiry in contemporary American scholarship. The essays in this volume are the product of that conference, which took place in May 1995. In addition to the contributors to this book, other incisive commentators, critics, and troublers of the intellectual peace attended the conference: Casey Blake, Fred Dallmayr, Thomas Haskell, Stanley Hauerwas, Amelie Rorty, and Joan Tronto.

We asked each of the contributors to describe and assess the course of moral inquiry in his or her discipline and invited them to situate their own work in relation to that story. We tried to cast our net widely, but we could not accommodate every relevant discipline, or treat the full international context of contemporary scholarly life.² This selectivity, and the happenstances that affect any effort to persuade a bunch of busy people to get together, led inevitably to some regrettable omissions. Most regrettable perhaps is the absence of an essay on the work being done at the intersection of biology and ethics, work that has attracted the interest not only of scholars but of a wider public audience.³ Nonetheless, we managed to arrange for contributions on philosophy, political theory, public policy analysis, psychology, history, literary criticism, anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and legal theory. Anyone familiar with the unforeseeable forces shaping collective projects like this one will understand why we are tempted to draw upon a formulation of Richard Nixon and accept the responsibility for the disciplinary omissions, but not the blame.

Each of the chapters that follow offers readers its own particular riches, and we will not attempt to summarize those here. Nor can we—with the contentious, sometimes heated, exchanges that marked the conference still ringing in our memories—begin to suggest that the contributors share a consensus about the nature, purposes, and virtues of moral inquiry. Some of them (Alan Wolfe is perhaps the clearest example) have moved but a modest distance, and even then cautiously, from the ruling assumptions of value-free science. Others, like Joan Williams, are closer to postmodernist skepticism. These differences are sometimes explicitly aired in the essays, a debate we have encouraged. But despite their differences, the contributors occupy common ground worth noting, common ground that points to the promise of moral inquiry that is interdisciplinary—must be interdisciplinary—if it is to realize its possibilities.

² We are well aware that the “American” of our subtitle is often one of those “thick evaluative” adjectives to which Elizabeth Anderson directs our attention in her chapter. In describing the scholarship of our contributors as “American,” we intend not to claim it as a peculiarly local knowledge but only to mark “where it is coming from” in the most literal geographical sense and to suggest that some of the moral concerns that animate the essays have a particularly American cast.

³ See, for instance, two widely discussed recent efforts to bring Darwinism back into ethical discourse: Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); and Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

We have given pride of place to Elizabeth Anderson's essay because we think it provides a philosophical charter for interdisciplinary moral inquiry that all of our contributors would endorse. As Anderson notes, the fact-value split institutionalized itself in the academy as a divide between the human sciences, which were assigned the realm of fact, and philosophy, which patrolled the precincts of value. (It did so, that is, after the heyday of logical positivism, in which even philosophy was banned from this neighborhood.) Once we call the fact-value split into question, as Anderson does, we can dispute as well the institutional division of labor between philosophy and the human sciences. In a complaint echoed by Jean Elshtain, Marion Smiley, and Owen Flanagan, Anderson criticizes the renewal of substantive moral inquiry in philosophy marked by the 1971 publication of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* for committing philosophy to an excessively abstract conception of the enterprise, a conception that preserved what Flanagan terms "Kant's dogma" separating normative ethics from the empirical investigation of the particulars of concrete moral lives.⁴ As Anderson says, "this conception of moral inquiry preserves the fact-value dichotomy because it takes empirical inquiry into the facts and experiences of living up to the ethical norms embodied in actual social practices as irrelevant to the justification of the moral principles that 'apply' to these practices, and because it assumes that the actual state of these practices has nothing to do with whether the norms they embody are reasonable or apt."

Against this abstract, disembodied form of moral inquiry, Anderson offers an alternative "pragmatism," which accepts the logical distinction between facts and values yet argues for an evidential (and hence defeasible) connection between them.⁵ For pragmatists, she says, "empirically grounded knowledge and forms of understanding bear upon the justification of ethical principles themselves. The most important source of empirical knowledge relevant to ethical justification comes from our experiences in living out the lives our ethical principles prescribe for us. We might find life in accordance with the principles we *think* are valid to be deeply unsatisfactory, to pose problems that are intolerable and irresolvable in terms of those very principles. Or we might find lives lived

⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁵ In an academic culture now filled with competing and often incompatible "neopragmatisms," Anderson's neopragmatism has the rare virtue of being consistent with the arguments of the pragmatisms of James and Dewey.

in accordance with fundamentally different principles to be profoundly attractive or appealing. This is different from having the armchair intuition that one approves of such lives. . . . The evidence pragmatists care about is gathered not from armchair reflection, which takes place from an observer's point of view, but from living the lives themselves from the point of view of agents." Consequently, such philosophers will be terribly interested in the portraits of moral lives that those in the human sciences can offer them, and those engaged in humanistic and social scientific inquiry who offer such portraits are making an invaluable contribution to moral inquiry. Thus Anderson's subversion of the fact-value split and her pragmatist conception of moral inquiry "urges us to view social, scientific, humanistic, and ethical inquiry as interconnected aspects of a joint enterprise."

The sort of interdisciplinary moral inquiry that Anderson's argument authorizes would find particular riches in what one might call the "narrative disciplines"—such as ethnography, history, literary criticism—since they are especially given to the collection and analysis of those stories that illuminate the moral life. One might well generalize Karen Brown's judgment about ethnography and argue that such moral inquiry requires "a significant collection of rigorous, dense [stories] that give sustained attention to morality as a key component of culture." And it requires stories near to and far from our own experience: stories from Alan Wolfe's middle-class American suburbanites (whose moral lives we all too often presume to know and to judge from our armchairs), as well as stories from Brown's Vodou priestess and Jane Kamensky's Puritans. Needless to say, Wayne Booth's Shakespeare will weigh in as well.⁶ A wide-ranging and open-ended moral inquiry convinced of the evidentiary value of such stories requires scholars—ethnographers, historians, and critics—capable of journeying for a time to that destabilizing "boundary" that Robert Orsi so eloquently describes: "an in-between orientation, located at the intersection of self and other, at the boundary between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other . . . ground that belongs completely neither to oneself or to the other but that has come into being between them, precisely because of the meeting of the two." For it is here alone, as Orsi says, that "one

⁶ As this implies, interdisciplinary moral inquiry rests not only on the work of those who collect, retell, and analyze such stories, but also on that of those who tell them in the first place: novelists, playwrights, autobiographers, memoirists, filmmakers, songwriters, and so forth.

comes to know something about the other and about oneself through relationship with the other.”

In addition to hopes for interdisciplinary moral inquiry, our contributors share a common aversion to moralizing, which might be characterized as moral judgment untethered from responsible moral inquiry. Moral inquiry does not preach or press evidence into the service of pre-established arguments. None of these authors is in quest of—let alone in possession of—moral certainty, unassailable moral prescriptions, or algorithms capable of generating knockdown moral arguments. The purpose of moral inquiry, as they see it, is to enrich moral deliberation, not preempt it. Sometimes—as Marion Smiley’s essay suggests most forcefully—all we might reasonably ask of moral inquiry is a clearer, better set of questions to work with as we struggle to shape our common moral life. At the same time, none of these authors is given to thoroughgoing skepticism about the role of reason in the moral life; they all occupy what Kamensky terms a “capacious middle ground” between certitude and wholesale doubt.

In short, this is a gathering of scholars given to what Flanagan nicely terms “unconfident moral confidence.” Not all the contributors might agree with the criteria that Booth, following David Hume, lays out for sound moral reasoning, but all, we think, would see themselves in Booth’s characterization of Hume: “Radically skeptical about all hard and certain proof, even in so-called scientific matters, and especially skeptical about decisive demonstration of moral and religious conclusions, he nevertheless always distinguishes those who make their practical or rhetorical claims carelessly from those who use a rational discourse to pursue common ground.”

“Unconfident confidants” cannot blink moral conflict, and none here does. We think all would agree with Elshtain that moral inquiry must struggle “to find ways to deal with a multiplicity of moral claims that must be adjudicated both within ourselves and within our societies, and to do so in a way that does not presuppose a final harmony of purposes, ends, virtues, and identities.” The intractable moral divides that afflict modern American culture and politics loom large in these essays. No one here suggests that moral inquiry can solve these conflicts, though no one—even those who focus on the most intractable of disputes—presumes that it cannot at least clarify them. For example, Joan Williams, who speaks of “incommensurable” moral perspectives abroad in American life, hopes that “ever-shifting points of potential translation

and convergence” can still foster “a process of mutually respectful social negotiation across incommensurability, leading to shifting alliances that will depend for their success on how well we understand what really matters to groups of people with whom we profoundly disagree.”

We have every reason to believe, having been witness to conversations among our contributors, that each of them would make particular moral arguments that would elicit conflict with other members of the group. But we are equally convinced that all abide by at least one common moral commitment and that is to inquiry itself and to a community of inquiry in search of truths at once provisional and shared. Far from a neutral, value-free assortment of procedures, inquiry is a morally laden set of practices. As John Dewey observed, inquiry is “absolutely dependent for logical worth upon a moral interest: the sincere aim to judge truly.”⁷ Readers must judge for themselves whether the chapters that follow judge truly; but none may doubt their aim.

⁷ John Dewey, “Logical Conditions of a Scientific Treatment of Morality” (1903), in *The Middle Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 3:19.