**Stephen Holland’s review of Patricia Marino’s *Moral Reasoning in a Pluralistic World***

That people subscribe to diverse values and principles creates a dilemma between pluralist and reductionist approaches. On the one hand, pluralism accommodates diversity: this captures the fragmentary character of our evaluative lives; but how are disagreements to be prosecuted, let alone resolved, given a plurality of moral viewpoints? On the other hand, evaluative complexity is reduced by developing systematic moral theories which unify disparate values. This provides methods for criticizing opposing moral views and the promise of resolving disagreements; but there’s no consensus on moral theory, and unification of values is at odds with our experience of evaluative diversity.

This is a general dilemma but it arises specifically in Bioethics, where the methodological problem is how to prosecute bioethical disputes in a sufficiently inclusive way to acknowledge diverse moral viewpoints, whilst being theoretically robust enough to resolve them. That Bioethics is a global discipline only exacerbates the problem. So, in addressing this dilemma Patricia Marino’s book *Moral Reasoning in a Pluralistic World* is relevant to Bioethics, hence the frequent references to bioethical examples – the AZT trials, refusing blood transfusion, abortion, etc. – and bioethicists (e.g., Beauchamp and Childress; Gert, Culver and Clouser). That Marino’s position in response to the dilemma applies to Bioethics is explicitly stated (152).

Marino takes a pluralistic approach. She advocates ‘conviction ethics’: moral theorizing starts with, and is answerable to, our considered moral judgements. This grounds pluralism about values and principles, which entails that there are evaluative conflicts and dilemmas. Attempts to reduce evaluative complexity by insisting on ‘rich coherence’, systematization, or unification of values, are misguided. Nonetheless, a role for moral reasoning is retained in terms of ‘case consistency’ and ‘pluralist coherence’: one’s judgement should differ between cases if and only if there are morally relevant dissimilarities between them. Moral progress of two sorts is accommodated: we are obliged to bring about that world in which values are maximally honoured – i.e., there are the fewest dilemmas – and we ought to expand our circle of moral concern.

Principlism is an obvious point of contact between this position and Bioethics. Marino defines principles as ‘general’ when they are formulated without proper names or indexicals; e.g., ‘one ought to keep one’s promises’. She defends principle pluralism, and recommends prioritization of principles as opposed to lexical orderings. The lengthiest discussion of Bioethics methodology distinguishes her approach from principlism (133-7). The difference between her proposal and Gert, Culver and Clouser’s is fairly straightforward – they advocate considering the ‘harm that would result from a public rule’ when deciding how principles apply – but how Marino’s approach differs from Beauchamp and Childress’ seemed more opaque.

Since principlism is akin to Marino’s position, principlists might look to her book for support. But they should be wary because Marino seems to presuppose principles. For example, she states, ‘if values are plural, then on the face of it we’ll need multiple principles’ (25). But this slide from value pluralism to principle pluralism is highly contentious because anti-generalists – notably, particularists – disavow principles. There are mentions of particularism (122-4; fn. 12), but no sustained engagement with the fact that, ‘particularists reject the importance of general principles altogether’ (124). By simply assuming there are general principles, Marino begs the question against the particularist, which is ironic since she frequently charges systematizers with begging the question against the pluralist.

Marino’s anti-systematization is more compelling. The basic problem – systematic moral theories don’t reflect our lived experience of diversity, conflict and dilemmas – is reiterated without being laboured. This insistence that moral theorizing must be grounded in our ordinary ethical experience is admirable and well sustained. For example, much use is made of moral phenomenology, such as the ‘remainder’, i.e., the residue of distinctively moral unease which remains after acting in a dilemma. Another strategy is to undermine motivations for, and putative benefits of, systematization. For example, Marino demonstrates, *contra* systematizers, that pluralism does not impugn autonomy, we don’t need systematization to avoid being ‘divided selves’, and systematic moral theories aren’t less arbitrary than pluralistic views.

But it’s easier to disavow one part of a dilemma than to make the other part plausible. Marino’s account of what moral reasoning amounts to given pluralism is based on ‘case consistency’ – the central norm of ‘pluralist coherence’ – i.e., ‘judging in accordance with morally relevant similarities and differences’ (84). Her favourite illustration is framing effects: we are case inconsistent when we judge cases differently solely because of how options were presented or framed, because this is a morally irrelevant difference. The obvious worry is that this only amounts to a demand for internal consistency; i.e., an agent is morally rational provided they judge morally similar cases alike and morally dissimilar cases differently. To her credit, Marino is explicit: ‘two different sets of moral beliefs can each be internally case consistent without agreeing with one another’ (p. 145).

But to recall the dilemma sketched at the start, the problem for pluralists is how to prosecute and resolve disagreements between proponents of worldviews. Moral disagreements in today’s world are dangerous, and the need to address and resolve them urgent. The demand for case consistency seems an insufficient response, which contributes to the sense that the discussion takes place in something of a political vacuum. For example, Marino’s (strikingly long) list of things she won’t be discussing includes, ‘how, politically, we ought to structure our society in response to pluralism’ (10). And this is implicit in the ‘real world’ cases she uses which, apart from the bioethical, are noticeably homely (career versus kids, Aunt Marie’s niece’s romantic life, lying to protect a friend, etc.).

Demanding case consistency might suffice for anodyne problems, but we need a more effective response to more threatening worldviews. A ramification of this criticism is that it diminishes Marino’s case against systematization. A major motivation for systematic moral theories is the need to criticize and resolve disagreement in a dangerously pluralistic world. Crudely, the utilitarian demands something more of proponents of threatening worldviews than mere case consistency. Of course, Marino’s view is that any such theory is incorrect anyway, and she explicitly addresses moral disagreement at various points (notably 126ff.). But it remains difficult to see that reason is ‘useful’ enough when disagreements are ‘intractable’ and the prospects for consensus lie with a-rational processes such as ‘moral persuasion’ (128).

This worry extends to moral progress, which Marino envisages as ‘arranging our lives and institutions so that conflict does not arise’ between our values (112). She cites the bioethical case of parental refusal to consent to a blood transfusion on religious grounds, in which the principles of parental autonomy and beneficence conflict. Progress amounts to arranging the world so as to avoid this conflict; in this case, developing treatments that don’t require a transfusion. But suppose progress is attempted from within conflicting sets of internally case consistent moral beliefs. Adherents to one set will be aiming at a world different from that aimed at by adherents to the other: i.e., that in which more of *their* values are respected. Likewise, Marino’s other characterization of moral progress as the ‘expansion of our circle of concern’: this is valued by some, but not others; and not because the latter are case inconsistent, but because partiality is a feature of their internally coherent set of moral beliefs.

And the worry extends to Bioethics. The methodological problem is how to prosecute and resolve bioethical disputes given a plurality of moral viewpoints. Demanding consistency – case or otherwise – is insufficient because the problem is acute precisely when conflicting views are internally consistent. So Marino’s pluralism seems impaled on the first horn of the dilemma with which we started: the commendable attempt to reflect accurately the fragmentary character of our evaluative lives leaves us with an insufficient methodology for dealing with moral disagreement and progress. Of course, as Marino insists, the alternative – reductionist systematizing – is just as bad in other ways. So at least we are agreed on one thing: dilemmas do exist.

There is much to applaud here. The book is nicely structured, including a helpful first chapter on concepts basic to Marino’s position, and four subsequent chapters which develop her negative thesis – the attack on systematization – and the more positive account of moral reasoning and progress. Implications of her position are delineated in a concluding chapter. Frequent summaries and signposts guide the reader through the text, the writing is lucid, and the insistence on making theory answerable to lived ethical life commendable. There are quibbles. A parochial one is that it would have been helpful to have had ‘Bioethics’ in the Index. Some examples and case studies are overly repeated – I was inured to Aunt Marie’s predicament by the end – but the cost of repetitiveness is met by the benefit of clarity; besides, scholars homing-in on sections won’t be so struck by this feature. Occasionally, the text is overgrown and convoluted, but this is understandable and hard to avoid given the richness of the discussion.