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0521780233 - Making Moral Sense: Beyond Habermas and Gauthier

Logi Gunnarsson

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Is it rational to be moral? Can moral disputes be settled rationally? Which criteria determine what we have a good reason to do? In this innovative book, Logi Gunnarsson takes issue with the assumption made by many philosophers faced with the problem of reconciling moral norms with a scientific world view, namely that morality must be offered a non-moral justification based on a formal concept of rationality. He argues that the criteria for the rationality of an action are irreducibly substantive, rather than purely formal, and that assuming that morality must be given a non-moral justification amounts to a distortion of both rationality and morality. His discussion includes substantial critical engagement with major thinkers from two very different philosophical traditions, and is notable for its clear and succinct account of Habermas' discourse ethics. It will appeal to anyone interested in practical reason and the rational credentials of morality.

LOGI GUNNARSSON teaches philosophy at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Among his publications are *Wittgensteins Leiter: Betrachtungen zum Tractatus*, and a number of articles in journals including *Journal of Philosophical Research*, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* and *Dialektik*.

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MAKING MORAL SENSE

Beyond Habermas and Gauthier

LOGI GUNNARSSON
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin



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*For my parents,
Gunnar Ólafs and Ingibjörg Lúðvíksdóttir*

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Preface

Das Schwere ist hier, nicht bis auf den Grund zu graben, sondern den Grund, der vor uns liegt, als Grund zu erkennen.

The difficult thing here is not to dig down to the ground; no, it is to recognize the ground that lies before us as the ground.

(Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik*, VI.31. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe.)

When it comes to the justification of moral views, philosophers tend to think that they need to “dig down to the ground”, to find a secure non-moral foundation for morality to stand on. This is a fundamental mistake. The substantive reasons we have regarding morality lie before us; the difficulty is to recognize them as reasons which do not need a non-moral foundation. The task of this book is to help us recognize the reasons that lie before us as reasons.

I have worked on the issues in this book in two main stages. My attempts to formulate my ideas found a preliminary ending with the submission of my dissertation at the University of Pittsburgh in 1995. Since then I have been thoroughly rethinking my theses and arguments and this work presents my current thoughts.

In writing this book, I have benefited from the generous advice of many people. My greatest debt is to John McDowell. Not only is this work deeply influenced by his writings, but as my dissertation advisor he was an invaluable source of inspiration and criticism in our numerous enjoyable philosophical conversations. Annette Baier, Robert Brandom, David Gauthier and Nicholas Rescher were also members of my dissertation committee and I am grateful to all of them for reading my work so carefully and for the many helpful discussions we had. Since Gauthier’s work is under criticism in this book, he deserves special credit for invariably receiving my arguments

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in the spirit that philosophy lives from criticism. Although James Conant was not on my committee, we discussed my work on many occasions, and I owe him gratitude for those fruitful conversations.

Jürgen Habermas I thank for responding fairly and vigorously to my criticisms of his theory in the discussions we had during my stays at the J.W. Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt (1989–1990 and the winter term of 1992–1993). He also kindly invited me to join his doctoral colloquium and sponsored my research fellowship from Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, which I thank for its support.

Many other people read my work during the years 1992–1995. I have benefited not only from extensive discussions with Joel Anderson, Felmon Davis and Matthias Kettner but also from the comments of these people: Bruce Basara, Donald Bruckner, Raymond Geuss, Bennett Helm, Friedrich Kambartel, Angelika Krebs, Hans-Peter Krüger, Jonathan Mandle, Eric Marcus, Jennifer Whiting, Lutz Wingert, and Iris Young.

The second stage in the development of the ideas in this book began in 1996 with a grant I received from the Icelandic Research Council to work on this project. This grant was renewed for 1997 and I am very grateful to the Council for its support. Since 1996, I have profited from trying my ideas on audiences in many different places. In particular, I want to mention the insightful comments given by Neera K. Badhwar and Bernard Gert, who were my commentators at the 1997 Pacific and Eastern meetings of the American Philosophical Association, respectively.

Of the people who have read, criticized and commented on my work in the last few years, I owe special gratitude to two persons. From the time I joined the Humboldt-Universität in 1997, Jay Wallace has been an especially inspiring and challenging philosophical interlocutor. His penetrating criticisms and resourceful constructive comments have led me to reformulate my arguments and ideas in many places. Mikael M. Karlsson was my teacher at the University of Iceland and has been a philosophical companion since then. Here I not only want to thank him for being an endless source of ideas and objections over the years, but also for his acute and rich constructive criticism of recent drafts of this book.

Since 1996, I have also been helped greatly by comments from the following persons: Róbert Haraldsson, Ulrike Heuer, Jeffrey

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Honnold, Kristján Kristjánsson, Martin Löw-Beer, Katja Vogt, and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. My editor at Cambridge, Hilary Gaskin, I thank for showing interest in the project in the first place and for her professional and competent advice along the way. Likewise, I am grateful to the copy-editor, Leigh Mueller, and the production controller, Caroline Murray, for their careful editorial work.

Material in chapters 8–9 is based on Gunnarsson 1995a and material in chapter 12 on Gunnarsson 1997a. It appears here with the publishers' kind permission.

Although this book is done, I am afraid that I won't be able to stop working on the issues in it. One might say that the book is an attempt to employ practical reasons to recommend a certain way of thinking. About this pragmatic bend and other aspects of this work, I have – ever since I started talking about these topics – been engaged in a continuing dialogue with Eva Klengenstein and I do not expect it to stop. I thank her for reading my material and for her skeptical enthusiasm.