

## REZENSION

Bahm, Archie J.: *Ethics: The Science of Oughtness* (Value Inquiry Book Series 8). Amsterdam / Atlanta, GA (Rodopi) 1994. IX + 200 pages. Hfl 60.– / US\$ 35.–.

Bahm begins his book with a preface whose central claim is that “[e]thics is a science”. This claim, although repeated at several places in the book is by no means clear and never sufficiently clarified. In particular, Bahm fails to specify his use of the term “ethics”. This ambiguous term may either refer to meta-ethics, that is to that part of science which investigates the function and meaning of phrases used in ethical discourse and is concerned with the methodology of justification and testing of ethical theories, or it may refer to normative ethics, that is to a moral theory that tells us what is good and what is morally obligatory. Some passages indicate that Bahm has the first interpretation in mind, while others suggest the latter reading. The claim that metaethics is a science, since undisputed, seems not worth stressing, whereas the claim that a moral theory can be established solely on scientific foundations is certainly false. Bahm presents an argument for the first claim but, although he apparently adheres to it, none for the latter.

The book comprises seven chapters, the first chapter dealing with the “Importance of Ethics”. According to Bahm all sciences, technologies and practical affairs involve ethics as do all persons most of the time (pp. 4–6) whence it derives its importance. His erroneous reasons for these assertions will be revealed in due course. Another source of this alleged importance he finds in “our present crises” which he thinks are mainly due to the “neglect of ethics as a science” One may doubt whether the present time is a time of crises; at any rate, Bahm does not present the slightest substantiation of the interdependence of the neglect mentioned, an increase in moral decay (if there be any) and social, economic and political problems. Bahm’s diagnosis is void of any objective foundation and simply reflects his personal feelings.

Chapter 2 contains in its title a question for which it does not provide any satisfactory answer: “What is Oughtness?”. Its first section starts with yet another question: “What is Ethics?” Here the reader is informed that ethics is the “science of oughtness” and that it “includes both theory and practice” (p. 28). That’s all. In vain does the reader look for an explanation of the term and its use. The next section, al-

though bearing the promising title “Oughtness Defined”, is very disappointing indeed. Nothing akin to a materially adequate and formally correct definition is to be found in it. Bahm states that “Oughtness consists in the power that an apparently greater good has over an apparently lesser good” and that “oughtness occurs whenever choices occur” (p. 28). Later, on p. 35 Bahm presents “essential conditions of oughtness”. Although he exposes them at some length his conception of “oughtness” is never sufficiently clarified. An “ought” may meet all the requirements stated here and nevertheless fail to fulfil the necessary conditions for being a moral obligation. If “oughtness” is conceived in such a broad and indefinite sense it should be clear that then ethics is certainly not the “science of oughtness” as Bahm assumes.

The core of chapter 3, “Personal Ethics”, is Bahm’s sketchy presentation of a “wise self-interest theory”. According to Bahm this theory implies that “[a]cts are right when and because they are intended to produce the best results for one’s self in the long run” (p. 63) and that “oughtness and rightness have ultimate foundations in self interest” (p. 68). He hastens to add that “[a]ny reader interpreting ‘best results for one’s self’ as ‘selfish’ [...] is misinterpreting what is meant” (p 69).

This could be true. The subsequent pages do not contain anything that would justify such a verdict. Though it should be added that they do not contain anything to the contrary. The only things to be found are scanty remarks; as the following that “[i]nvolved in determining what is best for a self is the question of how long a self [...] will last” (p. 63). This implies that what is ethically good or wrong depends on some very arbitrary contingent facts, which is a most unwelcome consequence for any ethical theory. In the form presented the “wise self interest theory” remains utterly dark and dubious and does certainly neither provide a clarification of right and wrong nor a moral guide. That at the heart of this “theory” lies an equivocation is indicated some pages later on p. 97. There Bahm maintains correctly that “[p]ersons naturally want what is best for themselves.” From this he concludes that they “naturally try to choose what is best and to do what is best” and that “such wanting involves wanting to do what one ought to choose and do [...]” The only chance this inference has of being valid is if all instances of “best” in the conclusion are conceived of as having a non-moral meaning. Predicates such as “good” do not always indicate a moral evaluation, but are also used in

non-moral contexts: e.g. when comparing two cars one may say that one is better than the other thereby wishing to express that one of the cars is faster or more economical than the other but certainly not implying that the moral status of one of the cars is superior to that of the other. The same must be said with respect to the term “ought”. Not all of its occurrences need express a moral obligation and it would be unreasonable to expect the occurrence in the above quote to do so. So the only assumption that might save Bahm’s theory disappears.

In section 4 Bahm tries to clarify the nature of “conditional oughts”. However, since he does not present any thorough analysis but only characterizes them roughly as “something that a person ought to choose or ought to do if all of certain specified conditions occur” (p. 43), he adds to the misunderstandings. This becomes apparent when he gives examples: “If you want to be a member, then you ought to pay \$10.”(p. 44), “If you want to live longer, then you ought to exercise more.”(p. 46), “When whittling you ought to keep the sharp edge turned away from your body.”(p. 68). As it turns out none of these and the other “conditional oughts” cited by Bahm on pp. 43–44 are conditional obligations. A conditional obligation is expressed by an indicative conditional whose antecedent specifies certain conditions under which the moral obligation expressed by its consequent does hold, e.g. “If you are aware of a person’s suffering, you ought to help her.” Bahm, however, misled by superficial linguistic structure, assumes that such a statement as the previous and those cited above are of the same variety, which is questionable, to say the least.

The first statement clearly does not say that if you want to become a member that it is then your moral obligation to pay \$10. And the next does certainly not state a moral obligation to exercise for all those who want to live longer. Anybody acting otherwise than prescribed by these statements violates principles of rationality but none of ethics or morality. Unfortunately for Bahm, this flaw has far-reaching consequences. He thinks that every science and every decision presupposes ethics. Bahm’s train of thought can presumably be construed as follows. He starts from the assumptions that every “conditional ought” pertains to the realm of ethics and that such “oughts” occur in every field of science. On this basis he concludes that “science is saturated with ethics” (p. 179), that “no science is ethics-free” and that “all sciences involve ethics” (p. 4). This however is a *non sequitur* since only “conditional oughts” that express condi-

tional obligations pertain to ethics, and all “conditional oughts” that might occur in and be established by any science (possibly in combination with a theory of rationality) are no conditional obligations at all.

The fourth chapter, “Social Ethics” is primarily concerned with ethical problems pertaining to groups, in particular with the problem of justice. It starts with sketches of definitions, provides empirical information about properties of groups and switches then without further notice to statements of a normative character that tell us what groups ought to do; what their supposed duties are. The status and justification of these statements remain dubious. It goes without any saying that they are not based on empirical observation. Do they follow then from any of Bahm’s other assumptions or are they supposed to be selfevident? Are they independent from each other or not? Anyway, whatever the answers to these questions may be, under some reasonable constraints counterexamples to nearly all of these statements are easily available. Consider e.g. the statement: “When a group depends for its existence and efficient functioning upon support by its members, each member has a duty to contribute a share to such support.” (p. 125). Suppose the group considered be the Waffen-SS or the Ku Klux Klan and you have an immediate counterexample. “A clearer understanding of justice involves treating equals equally and unequals unequally, that is, equally unequally”, writes Bahm on p. 136. This statement seems to express the gist of his views on justice. Then he states that “the problem of understanding how to treat unequals equally unequally [...] is one with which ethics as a science must continue to grapple” (p. 137). However before tackling any such problems it seems reasonable first to explicate the meaning of “(un)equals” and “treating (un)equally” in the present context. Without any such clarification (which is undertaken nowhere in the book) the above statement is void of any content, as is most what Bahm has to say about the subject.

The small chapter “Other Ethical Sciences” tries to establish that economics, political science and social science are all “ethical sciences”. He thinks moreover that also fields of science, as e.g. criminology, psychiatry and engineering, “all deal with ethical issues as part of their normal work”. Moral values may, of course, be part of science as objects of investigation. They are, however, neither capable of establishing a scientific statement nor capable of being established by such a statement. It may be granted

that values are amongst the objects of study of psychiatry and perhaps of criminology, it may be doubted for engineering. In any case does this render none of them an “ethical science” of the sort intended by Bahm. A note on Bahm’s conception of value seems in order here. Not every value is an ethical value. Bahm however, seems tacitly to advocate a view to the contrary as is suggested by the following quote: “Science is not value-free. [...] On the contrary science is saturated with values and ethics. Science (good science) seeks to deal with good problems, to obtain good hypotheses [...] Every decision that each scientist makes is an ethical decision because each decision involves choosing between two or more alternatives and feeling compelled to choose the best” (p. 179). The misapprehension reflected by this quote is, as it seems, his only reason for advocating the view that science is not value-free. However, an experiment that is regarded as “good” from a scientific point of view need not be good in moral terms. One can do good science and do something that is deemed bad from an ethical point of view.

Chapter six, entitled “Ethics Established as Science” consists mainly of a chronologically ordered list of books and articles. The list starts with Spinoza and ends with recent authors. Bahm concedes that “the authors differ in their conceptions of science and of ethics”, so the list’s purpose and value remain unclear; though it is certainly not, as Bahm pretends, “evidence of ethics as a science” (p. 165).

“What remains to be done?” asks Bahm in the final chapter. Here he expresses his opinion that certain religious, philosophical and scientific conceptions are deprecable stumbleblocks in the recognition of ethics as a respectable science, and he repeats some of the errors already mentioned.

The book does not present any new insights. Extensive parts of it are rather trivial. Many assertions are outright false, others are vague, none is argued for carefully. Moreover, all the book’s vagaries and the errors causing them are already contained in earlier publications by the same author, notably in his “Ethics as a Behavioral Science”. For all these reasons the book cannot be recommended.

*Hanspeter Fetz*