Encyclopedia of ETHICS

Lawrence C. Becker
Editor

Charlotte B. Becker
Associate Editor

Volume I
A–K

Garland Publishing, Inc.
New York & London
1992

Gewirth, Alan (1912–)

In a century driven by moral skepticism, a disinterest in systematic philosophy, and a reluctance, until recently, to apply philosophical analysis to practical problems, Alan Gewirth has set forth a powerful moral vision that is rationally compelling, is systematic, and applies to a wide range of individual, social, political, and legal problems.

Educated at Columbia University in the 1930s, Gewirth has taught at the University of Chicago since 1937. Following military service in World War II, he resumed teaching at Chicago in 1947. In 1975 he was named the Edward Carson Waller Distinguished Service Professor of Philosophy and, in that same year, was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Gewirth's published works range from ancient philosophy to the philosophy of science. They are concentrated, however, in three main areas: Descartes' (1596–1650) theory of knowledge; Marsilius of Padua (d. 1342?) and medieval political philosophy; and moral theory. His original work in ethics began appearing in the 1960s in a series of interrelated articles. That work can be found fully developed in *Reason and Morality* (1978) and *Human Rights: Essays on Justification and Applications* (1982).

Working in the rationalist tradition, Gewirth addresses head-on the most important and difficult question in ethics—whether a substantial moral principle can be rationally justified—by constructing an intricate, unrelenting web of arguments that proceed from nonmoral, factual premises to normative, prescriptive conclusions. Those conclusions purport not simply to be true, moreover, but to be true in the most compelling sense, namely, that their denial leads to self-contradiction. Thus if it succeeds, the argument constitutes a noncircular resolution of the "is-ought" problem.

Perhaps the most original and important part of Gewirth's theory is what he calls its "dialectically necessary method." Taking human action as the basic subject matter of ethics in that ethics has as its primary function the justification and prescription of rules for human conduct, Gewirth explicates the normative structure of human action from the perspective of the actor or agent. This indirect method of justification is thus "dialectical" —justification takes place within the phenomenon of human action, proceeding from the beliefs and claims of the agent—but "necessary"—those beliefs and claims are inherent, if only implicitly, in the normative structure of conative action, a necessary feature of the human condition, and are replete with normative implications. In its full scope, then, the argument is a long and complex unpacking of the necessary content and normative implications of human action, first as they apply to the agent, then to others. Yet in its premises, the argument depends only upon the internal perspective of the agent, not upon other-regarding sentiments or motives, intuitions, prudential consent, or any other such devices.

In barest outline, Gewirth argues that agents, in acting, implicitly but necessarily make claims about themselves, claims they must admit, on pain of self-contradiction, apply not only to themselves but to all others as well. And what are those claims? Here the argument has shifted slightly but importantly over the years. In an earlier version, Gewirth argued that all conative action exhibits the generic features of voluntariness and purposiveness in that it proceeds, at least by implication, from some choice and toward some seeming good; and that because this good justifies the act to the agent, he is involved, again by implication, in making a right-claim to perform it. But this "voluntariness and purposiveness which every agent necessarily has in acting, and which he necessarily claims as rights for himself on the ground that he is a prospective agent who wants to fulfill his purposes, he must also, on pain of self-contradiction, admit to be rights of his recipients," who are relevantly similar to him in being prospective agents. From here Gewirth went on to derive rights against coercion and harm, reflecting the respective generic features of action, voluntariness and purposiveness.

In later versions, however, the agent, by his action, is said to claim not only the right to act voluntarily and purposively but the right to have "as necessary goods the proximate general necessary conditions of his acting to achieve his purposes." Those "necessary goods" translate into rights to "freedom and well-being," the latter consisting in having the "general abilities and conditions required for agency." Because those goods are the agent's "due," others are obligated, on this later version, not simply to not interfere with the agent but, in certain circumstances, to affirmatively assist him in realizing his purposes. The rights Gewirth derives, therefore, are not simply the negative rights of the classical liberal tradition, as in an earlier version, but the positive rights of the modern "supportive state" as well, which he goes on to defend.

In either version, however, the arguments culminate in what Gewirth calls the supreme principle of morality, the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC): "Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself." But unlike the Golden Rule, or Kant's Categorical Imperative, the PGC is substantive, drawing its substance from the normative structure of human action, and is couched in the modern language of rights, not the older language of duties. At this time, it is probably too early to judge the full power and scope of Gewirth's contribution to moral philosophy, although his work has been the subject of a number of symposia in recent years, and its influence continues to grow, both in philosophy and beyond. *See also*: Duty and Obligation; Kant; Rights.

Bibliography

Works by Gewirth

Gewirth, Alan. "Economic Rights." *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 169–93.

———. "The Epistemology of Human Rights." *Social Philosophy and Public Policy* 1 (1984): 1–24.

———. *Human Rights: Essays on Justification and Applications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

———. "Why Agents Must Claim Rights: A Reply." *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 403–10.

———. "Symposium on *Reason and Morality*." *Metaphilosophy* 11 (1980): 54–69.

———. "The Basis and Content of Human Rights." *Georgia Law Review* 13 (1979): 1143–70.

———. *Reason and Morality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

———. "Action and Rights: A Reply." *Ethics* 86 (1976): 288–93.

———. "Ethics." In vol. 6 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 15th ed., 967–98. 1974.

———. "The 'Is-Ought' Problem Resolved." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1974): 34–61.

———. "Moral Rationality." The Lindley Lectures. University of Kansas Press, 1972.

———. "The Normative Structure of Action." *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1971): 238–61.

———. "Categorial Consistency in Ethics." *Philosophical Quarterly* 17 (1967): 289–99.

———. "The Generalization Principle." *Philosophical Review* 78 (1964): 229–42.

———. *Marsilius of Padua and Medieval Political Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1951.

———. "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes." *Philosophy* 18 (1943): 19–38.

———. "The Cartesian Circle." *Philosophical Review* 50 (1941): 369–95.

Works about Gewirth

Beyleveld, Deryck. *The Dialectical Necessity of Morality: An Analysis and Defense of Alan Gewirth's Argument to the Principle of Generic Consistency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Regis, Edward, ed. *Gewirth's Ethical Rationalism: Critical Essays with a Reply by Alan Gewirth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Roger Pilon