Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):
    *Reason and Spontaneity* by A. C. Graham
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Though best known for his contributions to the study of classical Chinese thought, A. C. Graham did write a nonhistorical philosophical work, *The Problem of Value*, a quarter of a century ago. That was a study reminiscent of Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind* (1949) and R. M. Hare's *Language of Morals* (1952). But its scope was unusually wide for the period, ranging from the logical grammar of morals to that of poetry, myth, cosmology, mysticism, and Zen. The present book, a sequel to it, is the result of Graham's philosophical development since.

In this fascinating book, A. C. Graham advances a proposal and an empirical thesis. The proposal is to ground all values, whether prudential, moral, or aesthetic, in the imperative 'Be aware'. The empirical thesis concerns causal connections between awareness and motivation. His project is to construct a general theory of value by bringing these components to bear upon each other, and to apply the theory to a wide variety of topics: fact and value, reason and spontaneity, hedonism and egoism, cultural and individual relativism of values, science and poetry, the sacred and the obscene, the rational and the irrational. The application opens up a series of new vistas on this array of topics. The thinkers and writers drawn on or discussed include Hume and Kant; Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Kuhn; Nietzsche, Sade, and Chuang-tzu; Jesus, Freud, and Marx; and Monod, Eliade, and Breton.

In the course of developing the theory and elaborating on its implications, Graham provides a wealth of phenomenological observations, many of them remarkable for their subtlety, vividness, and penetration, about the ways in which awareness interacts with psychological propensities. The book demands a great deal of effort from the reader as it is packed with ideas, is not without leaps of thought and imagination, and is stylistically dense as well as elegant and forceful. Yet the book is well worth the effort, if only for the wealth of phenomenological descriptions and insights found in it.

The readership of *Philosophy East and West* will note with interest how Chinese thought, especially the philosophy of Chuang-tzu, inspires, informs, and enriches Graham's project. In his book we have a palmary example of how an understanding of philosophizing done in a particular culture can lead to new perspectives on philosophical issues. That it can do so is a claim heard often enough, but how it can is seldom demonstrated.

The book consists of three parts. In the first, Graham lays down the theoretical foundation; in the second, he applies the theory to interpret the functions of science, art, and cosmology; in the third, he discusses Nietzsche, Sade, Chuang-tzu, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism to illustrate his theory. In the middle of the second part he bursts into poetry, which evokes organic
imagery and at once demonstrates the power of his aesthetic theory. I will first review Graham the philosopher by considering his development of some main implications of his theory in part one, and then turn to Graham the Sinologist to sketch how his expertise in this area contributes to his philosophizing. Since his treatment of Sinological topics occurs mainly in parts two and three, my review of it will also provide glimpses of those parts.

Here is a sampling of the implications of Graham’s value theory as he elaborates on them. The first one concerns the Humean injunction against deducing prescription from description. The principle of awareness is authoritative. We cannot flout it in practice, since to do so we would have to relinquish nothing short of human agency. Without awareness we could not be said to make choices or do anything on our own responsibility (p. 1). But ‘Be aware’ does not dictate a course of action to choose other than attending, learning to attend, or perhaps setting out on a fact-gathering mission. If, as Hume claimed, description does not imply prescription, with all the facts gathered and marshalled before us we still have no grounds upon which to choose a particular course of action. This situation, Graham holds, can be theoretically overcome by the following formula:

1. In awareness of everything relevant to the issue, I find myself moved towards X, overlooking something relevant I find myself moved towards Y.
2. Beware of everything relevant to the issue.

Therefore let yourself be moved towards X, not Y. (See p. 7)

In other words, given the connection between awareness and psychological propensity described in (1), the choice of X as end dictated by the conclusion is a necessary condition for obeying the imperative ‘Be aware’ (2).

Note, however, that the form of this practical syllogism is analogous to the following invalid schema:

1. If you do X, you will do Y.
2. You should do X.

Therefore you should do Y.

Obligation is not transitive. For example, given that you cannot jump in and try to save the drowning boy without swallowing some brine, your obligation to try to rescue him does not obligate you to swallow any brine.3

Implicit in the principle of awareness are noteworthy conceptions of freedom, responsibility, and human agency: other conditions being equal, the more aware we are of relevant factors in ourselves and our environment, the freer, the more responsible, the more our own our acts will be. These rather Spinozistic conceptions are contrary to the strong trend in the Western philosophical tradition to assume that freedom and responsibility do not admit of
difference in degree. Although Graham only touches on this line of thought (pp. 7, 10–11), his remarks suggest that it is misguided to look upon human freedom with Plato, Descartes, and Kant as consisting in some sort of metaphysical exemption from physical causation. They also suggest that there is more to human freedom than the absence of physical constraint and mental duress. Buddhism, we recall, correlates emancipation and enlightenment, treating them as the ideals we can approximate in stages. Chuang-tzu does the same.

A second major implication of the awareness theory of valuation has to do with the relative roles of reason and spontaneity in human life, the topic highlighted in the book's title. On this topic an issue has been joined between the rationalist like Kant who seeks to establish an ethic on the basis of reason alone in total detachment from inclinations, and the romantic who embraces the free play of impulse. According to the awareness theory of value, neither position is tenable. Against the rationalist Graham points out that without inclination reason has nothing to engage with (p. 10), that the role of reason vis-à-vis spontaneous inclinations is limited to criticizing and guiding in the light of awareness, and that the rationalist aspiration to identify oneself with the rational and divorce oneself from the spontaneous results in a disintegration of personhood and assures continued vulnerability to irrational forces such as Nazism (pp. 151–155). The idea here is basically Freudian: just as one cannot effectively deal with one's suppressed emotions, the culture which regards itself as having transcended the spontaneous remains vulnerable to the destructive potential of the spontaneous. Graham criticizes the romantic for disregarding the crucial role reason has to play in choosing ends as well as means and sanctioning the temptation “to shrink from dispiriting reality and be seduced by the value of a vivid local awareness into welcoming some ecstasy unsustainable in fuller awareness of its nature and consequences” (p. 161). It is clear that against romantic irrationalism Graham is advocating a type of rationalism, which he calls the ‘Reason as Guide’ position as distinguished from ‘Reason as Master’, the ideal of Kantian rationalism. At the base of these two criticisms is a conception of the human being in whom reason and spontaneity are integrated by the principle of awareness:

Like the animals, I am an organism which spontaneously senses, analogizes to the already experienced, and tends towards or away. Unlike them, I am self-conscious, can detach myself from spontaneous process in order to analyze and criticize perceptions, analogies and reactions, choose ends from my spontaneously emerging goals, choose means to my ends. In becoming self-conscious I require an imperative by which to choose between spontaneous tendencies as they veer with changing awareness, but only one, ‘Be Aware’. (P. 151)

How does the notion of spontaneity in this account relate to the familiar puzzle about the relation between mind and body? On the one hand, the
spontaneous contrasts with the voluntarily controlled and the deliberate, which result from considered choice, analysis, and criticism. Thus breathing is ordinarily spontaneous, but not when I am blowing into the pulmonary-function testing machine (p. 14). On the other hand, the spontaneous in us is our link to nature, and all nature, whether biological or merely physical, Graham assumes, is spontaneous. Thus he can speak of much of human behavior, from orgasm to contemplation, as sharing the spontaneity of physical events (pp. 7, 144). On Graham’s view, are deliberation, considered choice, and voluntary control themselves spontaneous or not? Even if they are not, at least certain biochemical phenomena in the brain without which we cannot consider anything must be spontaneous. This problem points to a need to clarify the concept of spontaneity further.5

Another major implication of the awareness theory of value concerns egoism. The egoist challenges the moral philosopher: “I care about what I want. As for other people, I care about them only insofar as they can give me what I want for myself. Can you show me to my satisfaction why I should care about them otherwise? Can you justify morality?” The awareness theory tries to meet this challenge by putting the burden of proof on the egoist’s shoulder: “Why should your interest count while others’ interests do not?”6 The imperative ‘Be aware’ is neutral between oneself and others, between what is important from one’s own point of view and what is important from others’, just as it is neutral between how things look now and how they will look at some time in the future.7

Of critical importance in this connection is Graham’s observation that one cannot be aware of others’ feelings without a readiness to experience them as one’s own. Just as to recollect my anger is to relive it by remembering the situation which provoked it, so if my wife tells me she has just learned she has cancer, “I may hear in imagination the doctor’s grave voice, but I do not imagine the fear, I feel the chill of it” (p. 17). This cognitive capacity for awareness of others’ feelings from within lies at the heart of a direct concern for others. Graham remarks:

As long as I remain detached from you, I see your actions as aids or obstacles to mine, as means to my ends. But in so far as I achieve awareness from your viewpoint I feel the pull towards your goals, and even when I resist, I do so very much as I push away inclinations of my own which are dangerous to my long-term ambitions; a choice between your goals and mine belongs among my choice of ends. (P. 20)

This reads like a felicitous commentary on the Kantian principle: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only.”8 While Kant considered this principle as the moral requirement of rationality divorced from inclination, Graham would make sense of it as an implication of the principle ‘Be aware’,
believing that we would automatically satisfy the Kantian injunction when we act in full awareness from all relevant points of view.

The criterion of relevance as the concept is used in the injunction ‘Be aware of all relevant factors’ is strictly causal, X being relevant if and only if awareness of X makes a difference to response (p. 6). And this has a consequence which Graham does not make quite clear: the egoist, who by definition lacks the capacity for awareness of others’ feelings from within, does not violate the moral principle of awareness. He is instead exempt from it. His defect is not moral but cognitive (pp. 18, 29). He has found a loophole in the awareness theory and slipped through, only at the cost of being a walking solipsist in total emotional isolation from the real people around him. A keen awareness of the solipsist’s psychological profile would surely repel casual garden-variety egoists from philosophical egoism in revulsion.  

What assurance is there that the inclinations chosen in obedience to ‘Be aware’ will in fact be moral? Graham does not seem to provide any. For one thing, since, as we have just noted, the criterion of relevance is strictly causal, something relevant to one person may be irrelevant to another of a different personality. For another thing, even in full awareness of the same set of factors, some people may respond morally, others immorally. It is not obvious that this difference in response will disappear when the set is comprehensive of all relevant factors. Note that Graham’s theory does not presuppose native human goodness (p. 29). Nor does the capacity to be aware from others’ points of view, being a cognitive and not moral one, resembles practical wisdom as Aristotle conceives of it, which requires proper habituation and involves virtues of character. Are we then to redefine ‘moral’ so that the inclinations chosen in obedience to ‘Be aware’ turn out to be describable as moral? Such a move would be tantamount to calling for a new ‘morality’ while depriving Graham’s theory of explicative power.

Having raised this potentially serious question, I must hasten to add that I am not quite sure just what sort of assurance is needed for the thesis that morals can be grounded in the awareness principle alone. Clearly there is no question of proof here as in the formal or the experimental sciences. Perhaps what is required is a piece-by-piece analysis of stinginess and generosity, cowardice and courage, and so on along the line of Graham’s account of cruelty. He does show how cruelty as in Nazism (pp. 162–163) or Sadism (pp. 22–23, 171–184) involves a distortion and imbalance of personal points of view.

The very project of grounding morals in ‘Be aware’ involves a repudiation of the notion that moral injunctions are unconditional. On Graham’s theory, rational moral injunctions are mere rules of thumb, no more valid than the empirical generalizations on which they are based to the effect that compliance with them usually widens and deepens awareness. Therefore it is
morally permissible to kill or betray one's friend provided that it is in obedience to 'Be aware'. The theory is thus open to the objection that its notion of awareness must bear too great a theoretical burden.

So much for the sampling of the implications of the awareness theory. Let us now turn to Graham the Sinologist and see how his expertise in Chinese philosophy and philosophical literature affects and even informs his philosophizing.

A large number of observations dot the book which likely are prompted, stimulated, or enriched by Graham's intelligent responses to particular images and ideas in Chinese philosophy. Typically he eschews explicit references to thinkers and texts in such cases, presumably for fear of distracting the reader from philosophical points he is making. Thus in his insistence on the centrality of empathy and analogizing between personal points of view in the human world (p. 15) we may discern echoes of not only the Christian golden rule but also the Confucian analects: "Virtue never stands alone. It is bound to have neighbours" (4.25) and "The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of benevolence" (6.30, trans. D. C. Lau). His caveat that the awareness theory of valuation is independent of the issue about the goodness or badness of human nature (p. 29) reminds us of Mencius and Hsün-tzu as well as of Hobbes and Shaftesbury. Confucius’ talk about eagerness to observe the rites (1.15, 13.4) and his comparison of moral concern to amorous attachment (9.18, 15.13) in the Analects may have prompted Graham to remark:

It may seem curious to suggest that even a religious or civil ceremony is subject to the pleasure principle. Yet to the extent that a rite is expected to nourish attitudes valued for themselves, adoration, faith, hope, repentance, civic pride, martial spirit, fellowship, you prove yourself a full participant by your joy and zeal. . . . (P. 71)

And developing the theme of parallelism between a community and the ecosystem of nature (pp. 98–99), Graham may have had in the back of his mind the image of an agrarian commune (chapter 80) and the “subjectivized” picture of the cosmos in the Lao-tzu.

One of the Sinological topics Graham explicitly treats pertains to the Neo-Confucian terms ch'i and li. He maintains that spontaneous analogizing is at the root of all thinking, just as spontaneous inclination is of all valuation. From this thesis he draws valuable lessons for students of other civilizations in general and of comparative philosophy in particular (pp. 52–60). The difficulty of translating and understanding the terms ch'i and li reveals that a concept in any civilization, including our own, is what it is by virtue of its relation to a cluster of concepts held together by analogy. Translating ch'i as 'matter' or 'atoms', or li as 'form' or 'law' is misleading precisely because the Chinese and the English words in each case carry with them different analogical complexes. Thus ch'i is tied to breath, by which everything alive is alive, and
‘matter’ to timber, with which the carpenter builds a house. Although Graham’s handling of this particular case is spoiled by his disregard of the fundamental cleavage between the Aristotelian conception of matter as the potential and the Democritean notion of atom as an indivisible plenum, a lesson he draws is well taken: a task of comparative philosophy is to get to the bottom of the analogical taproots not only of concepts in another civilization but also of their rough equivalents in our own.

Graham draws another interesting lesson from his discussion of ch’i. If the role of reason in evaluating is to criticize inclinations, its role in explaining facts is to criticize spontaneous analogizing processes. In either case, Graham holds, criticism has no decision procedure to follow. A concept, formed by weaving together analogies, is subject to no universal canon. Hence, he concludes, there is “no sense in insisting that a universe is composed of matter and not of ch’i” (p. 58), or that the Chinese concept in the final analysis has proven superior in the wake of post-Newtonian physics. Analogies prove useful or misleading depending on what we want to do with them. Radically different ways of conceptualizing something may prove illuminating when we are just trying to understand our familiar way or searching for a new one.

Graham discusses the Chinese t’ai-chi, the Supreme Pole comprehending yin and yang, to illustrate his thesis that we must recognize an inchoate attempt at articulating a vision of ends for what it is, and not dismiss it as being unscientific, if we are to ward off or overcome the modern predicament of alienation. Both Aristotle and Graham begin with the conditional: “If we choose everything because of something else, our desire will be empty and futile.” But while Aristotle denies the consequent and therefore concludes that there must be ends we desire for their own sake,12 Graham believes the antecedent and the consequent to be real possibilities and finds the essence of alienation in having our desires empty and futile. We can see our actions only as means to further ends which are in turn means to further ends, and so on, and cannot see this series terminating with an end in itself recognizable as our own. To make our actions truly our own, argues Graham, we must resist the temptation to suppose that cosmos-building, the work of spontaneous “mythropoeic” impluse, should be disregarded and the impulse suppressed as contrary to science. For while the function of science is confined to the provision of means, cosmos-building is an often unconscious attempt to articulate or confirm a cosmos of ends. If our search for a way out of alienation is to be successful, we must become aware of inchoate end-cosmologies submerged in various cultures and subject them to criticism, that is, to the test of the principle of awareness, asking if they promote the widening and deepening of awareness.

Graham calls attention to the t’ai-chi as a case in point. In it we indeed find a system of correspondences between the human and the cosmic. But to dismiss the correspondences as scientifically irrelevant is to miss the point of
the system, which is to articulate a cosmos of ends, “to maintain one’s spontaneous rhythm in accord with nature” (pp. 110–111).

Of all the Sinological topics treated in the book, Chuang-tzu is most intimately involved in Graham’s project of grounding all values in awareness. Graham distinguishes irrationalism and antirationalism. Irrationalism refuses to submit spontaneity to the test of awareness. Antirationalism recognizes the authority of ‘Be aware’ but minimizes the importance of the role of reason as a resource for becoming aware and a medium between awareness and action. Graham treats Chuang-tzu’s thought as an example not of irrationalism but of antirationalism. Pointing out that the Taoist’s call for spontaneity has long been mistakenly assimilated to the romantic’s, Graham observes: “Western romanticism extols intensity of spontaneous emotion however much it distorts reality by subjectivity, Taoism the spontaneous incipience of the act when reflecting the situation objectively as though in a mirror” (p. 187). Chuang-tzu’s relativism is grounded in the assumption that no point of view has privileged status, which is a thesis implied by the principle of awareness. As for the issue of the relative importance of reason and of other resources for awareness, Graham wisely eschews a dogmatic pronouncement on it: “Reason as much as and no more than will assist awareness” (p. 8).13

Chuang-tzu’s thought, for Graham, not only provides a living example of the awareness theory of value but also has brought it into light. As readers familiar with Graham’s 1961 book, The Problem of Value, and the 1983 essay, “Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of ‘Is’ and ‘Ought’,”14 will see, the work under review has issued forth from the earlier book as ideas initiated there were further developed, informed, augmented, and organized by “the implicit logic behind the derision of logic”15 in the Chuang-tzu. The earlier book, as the author acknowledged, fell short of answering the question, “By what standards shall I live?” In the present volume he faces the question squarely and makes an energetic attempt at answering it under the inspiration of Chuang-tzu’s “logic.”16 What better example of comparative philosophy, the enterprise to make philosophers from various traditions available to our own philosophizing? This enterprise involves the risk of distorting another culture by looking at it from the perspective of one’s own. But I do not believe Graham has forced Chuang-tzu into a Western “problematic.”

As is common with a comprehensive scheme based on a single insight or model, Graham’s theory with all its unity and simplicity may oversimplify and distort multiple-faceted phenomena like a way of life, morality, and science. I would like to see such crucial concepts of the theory as awareness, choice, reason, and spontaneity explicated further. I am not convinced that the totality of human conduct can be captured by the scheme of ends and means as his consistent working assumption has it. Graham makes the scheme applicable by weakening the concepts of end, choice, reason, and awareness so much that I wonder if even monocular animals or sunflowers cannot be said to
have ends, choose, and be aware (cf. p. 7). These concepts do not serve to distinguish the distinctly human ways of choosing, being rational, goal-oriented, and aware. Nor am I persuaded that the concept of awareness can bear the theoretical burden put on it. Yet, if Graham's awareness has been distorted, our effort to determine exactly how it is distorted could only enrich our philosophical understanding.

*Reason and Spontaneity* is an important book. It offers a wealth of observations of how awareness and motivation interact. As a brilliant example of original rational response grounded in a wide, multicultural awareness it demonstrates the potential of comparative philosophy as a genuinely philosophical enterprise.

### NOTES


2. To cite just one example, “A man may pursue power simply as means to employ others for his own purposes, but someone with the true passion for power will betray, by exceeding any rational design to control those useful or dangerous to his ends, that he does penetrate deep enough inside his subjects for the exhilaration of sensing their wills tense against his own and yield. It would be self-contradictory to say that Stalin treated all men as tools—for exercising power over men” (p. 21).

3. I owe the content of this paragraph to my colleague Clifton D. McIntosh.

4. On one Platonic notion human freedom consists in the soul's contemplation of the Forms in detachment from the body. Descartes' metaphysical dichotomy of mind and body, I think, was partially motivated by a need to safeguard the domain of thought from causal determination.

5. Graham might reply that the problem rests on an illegitimate assumption: “In principle each of us could have two symbolic systems, perfectly corresponding, for objective and subjective approaches to the same universe. What cannot be done is to combine them as one” (p. 103). This thesis on his explication involves the identification of science and technology. Such identification, though obviously worthy of consideration, needs more support than uncritical reliance on Kuhn and a suggestion that the correspondence theory of truth is seductive.

6. Graham writes, 'But if we start from the conception of the rational man who disciplines his spontaneity by an awareness independent of viewpoint, then it is for the egoist to explain why he claims priority for responses from his own viewpoint” (p. 16). This is a little misleading: 'Be aware’ does not call for “awareness independent of viewpoint” but awareness from all relevant viewpoints. For a systematic exploration of problems having to do with viewpoints see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).


10. That this capacity is exercised in being cruel is clear from the passage quoted from p. 21 in note 2 above.
15. Ibid., p. 3.
17. Cf. the passage quoted earlier from p. 151, p. 391 above.