Review of “Ethics: Contemporary Readings”

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Book Review


This edited collection from the series "Routledge Contemporary Readings in Philosophy" is Harry Gensler's fourth book, that is presented as a complement to his previous _Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction_ (Routledge, 1998). The three co-editors, Harry Gensler, Earl Spurgin, and James Swindal, teach philosophy at the John Carroll University in Cleveland. In their co-edited anthology, we find selected texts by 35 philosophers and authors, from Aristotle and Hume to Kant. But instead of adopting the usual chronological approach, the co-editors have grouped these texts into a thematical presentation. Thus, the passages from Aristotle's _Nicomachean Ethics_ only appear on page 240, and not in the beginning. While I will not dare any comment the classic writings of Hume, Nietzsche, Rawls, or Sartre _per se_; I would rather like to give a few remarks about the selected themes and the organization of these five parts.

In his opening chapter, Harry Gensler discusses some principles in moral philosophy and logics, which are linked to current problems and issues like subjectivism, racism, cultural relativism. In the following piece, Spurgin and Swindal bring a concise mapping in the history of philosophy. Having in mind the need for a short presentation targeting undergraduate students in ethics, their approach was to provide a selective "Who's Who" in the discipline, with short biographies of a dozen of philosophers and trends, from the works of Socrates and Plato to Kant and John Stuart Mill, but including as well some accurate references to Epicurians and Stoics, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, plus lesser known figures like John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham (p. 31). Of course, these bios pave the way for the texts to follow in the book's five sections; for instance, Mill's utilitarianism is presented and discussed in many places (pp. 39, 197, 203). In their conclusion, Spurgin and Swindal mention that these philosophers "represent significant departures from medieval ethics as well as some of the major ethical debates in the modern era" (p. 40).

The first part of _Ethics: Contemporary Readings_ presents three selected approaches for a general introduction to the study of morality, namely Cultural Relativism, Ethical Claims, and the "Moral Law", taking for instance from Thomas Hume (his notion of "Ethical Claims"), C. S. Lewis ("The Moral Law Is From God"), and selected passages from the _Bible_ that present supernaturalism with the idea of "Love of God and Neighbor" (p. 77). In that latter part, perhaps the most important of the whole book, we have a presentation of "The Ten Commandments" followed by excerpts from the _Old Testament_ and the _Gospel_, plus two appropriate paragraphs taken from the _Epistles_ from Paul, who mentions that "non-believers can know the moral law" (pp. 77-80). But first, we find anthropologist Ruth Benedict's famous postulate on
Cultural Relativism, stating that "Normality is culturally defined" (p. 45). Each chapter gathers selected passages from one single author; sections combine five or six thinkers. The texts presented here are always gathered in order to address an issue and its understanding from an ethical perspective, for instance racism, mainly in section one. The various texts provide diverse points of view for a single issue, in this case racism, explained from distinct approaches: Cultural Relativism ("racism is good in a society that approves of it", p. 2), or relative to what one feels and believes ("subjectivism"), or decided by God ("supernaturalism") (p. 3).

The following sections re-use the same pattern for other issues. The second part explores what is termed as "metaethical views", with some more facets of morality, drawing from intuitionism, emotivism, and prescriptivism. That section begins with G. E. Moore's discussion on the "Irreducible Ethical Truths" (p. 85). For instance, a lesser known author such as A. J. Ayer argues that "ethics is based on emotions" (p. 103); then, Australian philosopher J. L. Mackie (1917-1981) is quoted in the following chapter when writing that "values are subjective" (p. 108).

In the third part titled "Ethical methodology" (I would probably have chosen a less misguiding title like "the logics of ethics"), all selected texts have in common to highlight the basics and fundamentals of ethics according to William Frankena, Habermas, Kant, but also Nietzsche and Martin Luther King Jr.'s impressive piece on "Racial segregation" that answered the official speeches from 1963 questioning Civil Rights movement in the USA (p. 178). The editors included psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's piece on "Moral Education", in which he discusses his own theoretical position as compared to John Dewey and Jean Piaget (p. 187). Many texts, such as this one, succeed in presenting and comparing the position of two or three authors, which is always useful for students. However, when referring to "Ethical methodology", there is no clear discussion on methodology in the sense used in social sciences ("how to do a research or how to write a thesis").

Virtue ethics and utilitarianism are discussed in the substantial Part 4, with — among others — contributions of John Stuart Mills (on utilitarianism), John Finnis (about nonconsquentialism), John Rawls (for distributive justice), Aristotle (for virtue ethics). This is the more "classic" section on ethics, with more familiar names and usual sub themes. The last section on applied ethics might perhaps appear more debatable and controversial, with two essays related to abortion (a defence and a criticism), but also chapters about animal rights (with Peter Singer's "Animal liberation" movement), famine relief (understood with Kantian ethics), and an fine piece that introduces a defence of land ethics (in a wider environmental ethics perspective) by J. Baird Callicott. In one of the most instructive chapters of the book, Callicott brings a good mapping that draws from Homer, Darwin, and Aldo Leopold, who introduced the concept of "land ethics" (p. 302). All these topics remain among the most central issues for which ethics are needed in our society. After re-reading it, I still believe it is the most relevant section of this book. At this point, it is just too bad we have no general conclusion as such at the end of the book.

I appreciated most of the essays collected in that book since I found cohesion and even discovered some lesser known thinkers, specially among the authors from the USA. Each of the five sections brings the demonstration of one core idea in ethics, followed by a critique or another point of view of that same idea. I liked the interdisciplinary openness of the co-editors who selected the texts, that allowed accurate contributions from anthropology, psychology, and environmental studies to be included as well. But in this case, although this is an anthology, I think it is better to read the book following the sequence brought by the editors, instead of reading separate parts randomly or just a section. Since we already have
314 dense pages, I would not ask for more and would not dare to mention a missing author (even though I was much surprised not to see a single Canadian philosopher quoted anywhere in this book, excepted for one reference related to Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, on p. 256).

However, I do have a few quibbles about the work of co-editors. First, the introduction texts that precede each excerpt are often too short, if not incomplete; we never get more than half a page of presentation for each of the 35 selections. It seems like the co-editors might have kept only for their classes some of the potential uses and interpretations of these chapters. This uncomfortable situation appears clearly after reading a few intros, which are constructed under the same model: a biographical sentence, a one-sentence abstract that highlight one main idea, plus a few questions to guide the reader. I suppose more elements are surely to be found in the previous book already mentioned (*Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge, 1998) as the editors sometimes indicate (see their remarks, pp. 23 and 185), but this newer complementally book has to stand on its own. My second complain would be about the limited pedagogical uses of these numerous texts gathered here. After each text, we find again a set of numbered questions and issues ("Study questions") for a better understanding and — I suppose — a possible discussion in the classroom. But if we totally agree about the fact that philosophers have to formulate the right questions and must always try to raise accurate issues, I felt nonetheless annoyed by these too many unanswered questions that are not debated anywhere here by the co-editors. As a reader who likes the asking, I also appreciate to find a possible answer following each question; and although debating is fine, even though I might sometimes disagree with the answers I am told, I believe a book made for students ought to bring some clear answers and not just a general principle that each text gives an echo and a complement to the previous one(s). In other words, I like to find in introduction books a clear indication (or cross-references, or a system of numbers) stating that this sentence is the answer to that previous question, and so on. Otherwise, we would lack precision if we just said in a textbook: "Here are all the questions on this side, and here are the answers on the other side; now just try to find the links between both sides."

Another problem with *Ethics: Contemporary Readings* is the frequent warning by the co-editors that their excerpts are "sometimes simplified in their wording" (see for instance that same mention repeated in pages 61, 89, 98, 106, 115, 125, 134, 153, 201, 214, 262, 292, 301). As such, I do not mind bringing some simplifications into a textbook if necessary, but I would appreciate to see some indications about which words or passages were changed and what were the previous formulations. Otherwise, it is pointless to gather classic writings into a textbook that would be used and perhaps someday quoted by students as the "real source". In these cases, there is no way to see for sure where the changes were operated in the versions we find here. I only wished to find some editorial signals like these brackets "[...]" in order to indicate that in the original version of this or that classic text, many pages used to separate the previous paragraph from the following one, but the principle of juxtaposing selected excerpts now brings these ideas together in this condensed fashion. To my view, all changes operated from the original source ought to be clearly indicated by the editors of any anthology; otherwise, Routledge would not be better than Reader's Digest Selection.

I also have to say that given its dense contents, *Ethics: Contemporary Readings* is not made to be read from a cover to cover; it is better to discover one section at the time, beginning with the two introduction pieces (that should not be skipped). However, the editors' style is sometimes inappropriate in some of their endnotes, for instance when they are writing just after an excerpt from Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1789) the following advice for the reader: "To appreciate Kant's
point, consider a serial killer who is more effective at his chosen task because he is extremely intelligent." (p. 157). Of course, I am fully aware of the fact that some students need clear examples that are in no way abstract, but I doubt such violent formulas can be seen as elegant or appropriate for college books in philosophy. All in all, given the many questions it raises, I think Ethics: Contemporary Readings is perhaps more appropriate as an addendum for experienced college teachers in philosophy than for students, although it is clear that this edited piece was firstly made for undergraduates coming from various interdisciplinary domains, from American Studies to Ethnic Studies.

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Ethics: Contemporary Readings is designed to lead any student into the subject, through carefully selected classic and contemporary articles. The book includes articles by the leading figures in the field and provides an excellent entry to the topic. The book complements Harry Gensler's Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction (Routledge, 1998). Get A Copy, Kindle Store $36.76. His other works include Consider Ethics: Theory, Readings, and Contemporary Issues, Critical Thinking: Consider the Verdict, You Decide! Current Debates in Criminal Justice, You Decide! Current Debates in Contemporary Moral Problems, You Decide! I would be delighted to hear from anyone reviewing, teaching, or studying this book, and am always happy to receive suggestions for improvements as well as new exercises for reflection and analysis. My email is bnwaller@ysu.edu. Cheers