

## Recent Introductory Texts in Moral Philosophy

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**How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics**, Louis Pojman, Thompson Wadsworth, 2005 (ISBN 0-534-55657-4), xvi + 224 pp., pb \$35.95

**Applying Moral Theories**, 5th edition, C. E. Harris, Jr, Thompson Wadsworth, 2007 (ISBN 0-534-50590-2), vii + 221 pp., pb \$56.95

**Moral Philosophy: Theories and Issues**, 3rd edition, Emmett Barcalow, Thompson Wadsworth, 2003 (ISBN 0-534-52648-9), xix + 356 pp., pb \$68.36

**Basic Moral Philosophy**, 3rd edition, Robert L. Holmes, Thompson Wadsworth, 2003 (ISBN 0-534-58477-2), xiv + 240 pp., pb \$54.95

This review surveys a number of recent introductory texts in moral philosophy. For readers of RRT, such a review will be of interest not so much for primary course texts (none of these works addresses religious or theological ethics as its primary subject) but rather for secondary texts, providing students with supplemental guides to the contours and conceptual landmarks of Western moral thought, both past and present.

These texts are guides in the sense of providing introductory surveys to the range of usual methodological themes (What is ethics?, How are moral claims justified?, etc.) and standard moral philosophies (utilitarianism, deontology, virtue, etc.), yet they are also critical in the sense of not attempting to be 'neutral' in presenting the themes discussed – the authors present their own critique of each traditional theme, proposing their own views along the way. Thus, these texts will be of

interest not just to students at the introductory level but to all levels of readers in moral thought.

Three of these texts are concerned with 'purely' philosophical ethics, rather than applied ethics. Thus, the Pojman and Holmes texts have no case studies to which to apply the philosophical theory, and the Harris text provides about forty brief case studies in an appendix, although Harris does not discuss these himself. Barcalow is much more a work in applied ethics, with numerous applications and case studies, though also the least satisfactory philosophically.

Common to these books is their publisher: all four texts are published by Thomson-Wadsworth. Indeed, Wadsworth publishes a wide range of ethics books, including other introductory books. It is worth noting the substantial Internet support Wadsworth makes available to both students and teachers using specific titles from their list, although, of the books reviewed here, only the texts by Pojman and Harris are supported by these Internet resources.

I begin with the text by Pojman, latterly of Clare College, Cambridge. Pojman's motivating concern is 'to build a better world'; consequently, his introduction to ethics begins with the questions, 'Why do We need Morality?' (Chapter 1) and 'Why be Moral at all?' (Chapter 2). He identifies five different reasons we need morality, with their collective goal being 'to create happy and virtuous people, the kind that create flourishing communities' (p. 9). To realistically achieve this requires a moral life based on a moderate dose of ethical egoism (EE) (the view that one should maximize one's own good) along with a strong dash of altruism, such that we are appropriately concerned for ourselves while recognizing that 'the commitment to the moral way of life may cause us to sacrifice self-interest in favor of rules aiming to promote the total social good' (p. 23). To pull off this marriage of egoism and altruism, Pojman provides insightful analysis of both, along the way particularly critiquing Ayn Rand's anti-altruist version of EE.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Pojman examines the debate between relativism and objectivism. Relativism is the product of combining 'anarchic individualism' with 'conventionalism', both of which are individually problematic and jointly even more so. Pojman adopts a position he calls 'moderate objectivism', which he describes as a non-absolutist version of Natural Law Theory (NLT). Though fully aware of both anti-foundationalist claims and potential charges of cultural myopia, Pojman nonetheless identifies a 'core morality', a set of universal moral principles 'consisting in those rules which are necessary for human survival and flourishing' (p. 78). Pojman makes a helpful distinction between ethical relativism and ethical situationalism, suggesting that the latter is often confused with the former. Pojman himself rejects the former while accepting the latter: 'Ethical situationalism states that objective moral principles are to be applied differently in different

contexts, whereas ethical relativism denies universal rules altogether' (p. 82).

Chapter 5 asks whether religion has any relevance to ethics. Contrary to many views today, Pojman answers in the affirmative. On the Euthyphro dilemma, Pojman holds that objective moral principles exist regardless of whether God exists: rational human beings can discover these principles independent of God or revelation. So Pojman rejects divine command theories. Nonetheless, Pojman identifies five particular ways by which religion can enhance morality. He thereby argues 'against the Nietzschean position that God is irrelevant for ethics and against the position that worshipping God is immoral because it violates our autonomy' (p. 103).

Chapters 6–8 bring us to his threefold taxonomy of moral theories: Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue. Pojman observes the distinction (indeed conflict) between 'act' utilitarianism and 'rule' utilitarianism, and surveys a variety of critiques of utilitarianism. He responds to these critiques with 'multi-level utilitarianism', which resolves the act/rule conflict by proposing that, 'We must split considerations of utility into two levels, with the lower level dealing with a set of rules that we judge most likely to bring about the best consequences most of the time [rule utility]. . . . But sometimes the rules conflict or will not yield the best consequences. In these infrequent cases, we will need to suspend or override the rule in favor of the better consequences [act utility]' (p. 126). For instance, under rule-utilitarianism, making a promise creates a moral obligation, thus promising to meet someone at a certain time and place creates a moral obligation to do so; however, one may morally justify breaking the promise under act-utilitarian conditions, such as unexpectedly having to save someone's life on the way to the meeting. Or take the case of justice, which 'is not an absolute – mercy and benevolence and the good of the whole society sometimes should override it [act utility]; but, the sophisticated utilitarian insists, it makes good utilitarian sense to have a principle of justice that we generally agree to adhere to [rule utility]' (pp. 128–9).

Pojman goes on to describe Deontological ethics, though going into more detail regarding Kant than is really necessary for a text of this level (though this is a helpful discussion for those seeking an overview of Kant's three versions of the Categorical Imperative). Pojman sees value in both Deontological and Utilitarian ethics, and so wants to bring them together by commending the method of the late William Frankena, who combined a 'principle of beneficence' (replacing the principle of utility with four hierarchical sub-principles of beneficence) with a 'principle of justice' (though it seems to this reviewer that the principle of justice is a particular instance of the fourth sub-principle of beneficence, namely 'one ought to do or promote good').

Chapter 8 addresses Virtue Ethics. A helpful contribution here is his discussion of the relationship between principles and virtue, describing three models then arguing for the third ('complementarity'), in which 'neither the virtues nor principles are primary; they complement each other' (p. 175). Here he also discusses feminist ethics of care, which he contends is '[Christian] *agapeism* more narrowly focused on special relationships. . . . Both systems though are subject to the same problem: love without the guidance of rules seems blind' (p. 186). On Pojman's view, 'classical moral theory can incorporate the concerns of particularist, care ethics and grant special obligations to family, friends and nation, without denying the universal duties to strangers and future and distant people, which classical ethics emphasizes' (pp. 186–7).

The final chapter addresses human rights. He discusses the moral basis of rights and their importance for protecting our well-being; he then discusses what rights actually are, contending that rights are derivative from universal moral duties, not vice versa as some like Feinberg contend. Consequently, duties, not rights, should take priority in our moral and political discourse. Indeed, excessive claims for rights actually distort the moral domain, for the language of rights can transform every relationship into a legalistic one. 'Everyone prefers rights to duties, for rights give us things, making others responsible for our welfare, whereas duties are onerous because they hold us accountable for our actions and demand things of us, sometimes at considerable sacrifice. However, a society emphasizing our duties to one another fosters responsible behavior, whereas one emphasizing rights tends to foster impersonal, social atomism and adversarial relations' (p. 205). These are much needed points in contemporary Western society.

*Basic Moral Philosophy*, by Robert L. Holmes of the University of Rochester, is a text very alert to religious, especially Christian, approaches to ethics – though in the end remaining unconvinced by religious claims. Holmes uses the first two chapters to introduce students to a taxonomy of meta-ethical positions (with further elaboration in the Appendix). For introductory students in theological ethics or religious studies, I would not recommend this way to introduce a course – it is highly abstract and I suspect would quickly lose most students. Nonetheless, for those already possessing some background in ethics, as a supplemental resource this taxonomy could prove helpful for clarifying conceptual relationships between the various meta-level approaches to ethics.

Chapters 3 and 4 give an overview of virtue ethics. Holmes concludes that, while an ethics of moral virtue is of value in achieving right moral conduct, nonetheless an ethics of moral virtue first requires an ethics of conduct – 'some accounting of what is right in the way of

conduct is presupposed by the account of a particular moral virtue' (p. 47). Consequently, Holmes' greater concern is with conduct ethics, and thus Chapters 5–10 survey the standard themes within conduct ethics – none of which satisfy Holmes.

Chapter 5 provides a critique of EE, a position which Holmes considers self-defeating. For instance, at times it is in the ethical egoist's best self-interest to trust another (for instance, one's doctor, lawyer, or confidant), yet EE prescribes that *that* person be acting in *their* own self-interest, which may, unknowingly to the ethical egoist, conflict with their own best interest. In effect, 'by everyone accepting and trying to follow EE, some will end up not maximizing their good' (p. 68). Then the problem with psychological egoism (the view that we are psychologically constituted such that we cannot act in any other way than to be motivated by EE in all we do) is, first, that it deprives morality of any basis at all, thus eliminating the very concept of morality; and, second, that in fact we are not constituted this way, for human motives can be altruistic and not always self-interested.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine two theistic proposals – Divine Command Theory (DCT) and NLT, respectively. Here Holmes provides helpful taxonomies of DCT (p. 78) and NLT (p. 94), though eventually he rejects both. DCT is unable to defend the assumption that a command by God is necessarily morally right. NLT, discussed by way of the Stoics and Aquinas, is rejected for two reasons: it is unable to adequately specify what is or is not in accordance with nature; and it is unable to bridge the gap between Is and Ought. Problems for NLT arising from these inadequacies are examined via discussions of homosexuality and sexual harassment. Consequently, Holmes rejects natural law as a basis for social, political, or legal theory, and finally concludes that there is probably no need for the idea of God in ethics.

Chapter 8 examines Kant, including each version of the categorical imperative. Holmes's propensity for taxonomies provides a constructive proposal for how to reconcile or integrate Kant's three versions of the categorical imperative (p. 121). Nonetheless, Kant (and deontological theories in general) fail for the same reason that all 'legalist theories' (theories that appeal to 'rules and principles') fail – which Holmes explains in Chapter 12.

Chapters 9 and 10 focus on two forms of Consequentialism, namely Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice, respectively. (EE, another form of Consequentialism, was earlier rejected in Chapter 5.) Holmes provides taxonomies of Utilitarianism (p. 135) and Distributive Justice (pp. 148–52), though he rejects these on the same grounds as he rejects any form of Consequentialism. First, we can never know whether we are acting rightly or not because we cannot realistically predict the actual (rather than intended) consequences of our acts for all the people who may be affected by them, nor predict the consequences for all the acts

available to us in a given situation. Second, we cannot always identify what consequences are to count for culpability. Third, there is inadequate ability to justify the basic rules or principles. Chapter 11 examines relativism, identifying a number of weaknesses then concluding both that 'formidable problems confront relativism' and that one can be universalistic without being absolutist. Chapter 12 addresses the issue of how to justify moral principles, concluding that moral rules and principles are deficient as a basis for the ethics of conduct.

Chapter 13 provides a helpful taxonomy of feminist ethics, concluding though that the claims of feminist ethics 'do not require any radical reconceptualization of ethical theory itself' (p. 210), indeed, even in terms of gender relations, feminist proposals 'could be supported by representative traditional ethical theories appealing to different rights-making characteristics' (p. 208). Nonetheless, it appears to be from feminist ethics that Holmes takes the concept of *nurturing* as a key part of his own formal proposal in Chapter 14, namely 'Deweyan contextualist pragmatism'. Most important is not doing what is right (because we can never absolutely know what is right) but *trying* to do right, whether in the end we actually do so or not – process is more important than outcome, although outcome is not unimportant. Following Dewey, rules and principles do not provide requirements for how to act but rather provide tools for analyzing particular situations, for 'the right and wrong [are] determined by the situation in its entirety, not by the rule as such' (p. 216). Thus, we need to nurture in people 'those tendencies that are capable of guiding them to a realization of their moral potential' (p. 217). These he calls *nurturing goods*, such as caring, considerateness, compassion, sympathy, and love. These enable such deontological considerations as fairness, consistency, and rights. This then is an ethics of virtue, though one which results in an ethics of right conduct as determined by respect for persons in each particular situation. This contextualism though does not make ethics relativistic, for contextualism does not mean that different moral judgments in a situation are equally right, just that context takes priority over rules and principles.

In the end, Holmes's account of the virtues is helpful, yet he leaves the principles side underdeveloped. His proposal 'acknowledges the relevance . . . of rules and principles' (p. 217), yet, given his earlier comments, this acknowledgment comes as a surprise to the reader, leaving readers (and students) with an unclear account of just when and how rules and principles come into play. Pojman's account of the relation of rules and principles to virtue is clearer and, to this reader, much more satisfying. Holmes's numerous taxonomies are recommended for students wanting to better understand the nuances of various theories.

*Applying Moral Theories*, by C. E. Harris of Texas A&M University, appears in its fifth edition in 2007, although for this review the

publisher provided only a copy of the fourth edition, published in 2002. Consequently, this article will review the earlier edition, though with periodic comments added to indicate changes in the forthcoming fifth edition.

Chapters 1–4 are concerned with issues of method. Chapter 1 asks ‘What is Ethics?’ Harris holds that an important part of ethics is making distinctions. Thus, he identifies three types of claims made in moral arguments (factual, conceptual, and normative claims) and examines the nature of moral statements, including how moral statements differ from other factual statements such as those of aesthetics and etiquette. Harris also introduces what he sees as the two fundamental types of moral theories, consequentialist (including egoism and utilitarianism) and non-consequentialist (including natural law and respect for persons); then distinguishes ‘good’, as a general term of moral commendation, from ‘right’, which he takes to mean ‘morally obligatory’.

Chapters 2 and 3 concern meta-ethics, considering subjectivist and objectivist theories, respectively. (These two chapters have been combined into a single chapter for the forthcoming fifth edition.) Harris supports ‘limited relativism’, whereby ‘we can judge a moral belief by whether it is internally coherent and agrees with universal criteria for a legitimate morality [for which Harris provides two criteria]. In applying these criteria, we must approach cultural differences individually, neither holding that there is necessarily a single correct moral belief on the topic, nor holding that differing moral beliefs are always equally valid’ (p. 33). In terms of objectivist theories, Harris surveys and rejects three such theories – moral intuitionism, divine command, and moral realism. Unpersuaded by objectivist theories, he proposes a way through the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy by distinguishing between rationality and truth, contending that the central issue in ethics is not truth but rationality – which theory is most rationally defensible.

Chapter 4 examines how to evaluate moral theories by internal and external criteria. Internally, Harris proposes that any moral theory contains three structural elements: moral standards (crucial concepts and concerns for that theory), derivative moral rules (of personal and social ethics), consequent moral judgments (actions as obligatory, permissible, impermissible, or supererogatory). Externally, Harris proposes four criteria for evaluating any moral theory: consistency and coherence, justification, plausibility, and usefulness.

The next four chapters survey four moral philosophies, these being chosen not on the basis of representing the range of historical moral theories but rather as the theories he considers to be of particular influence today, namely egoism, natural law, utilitarianism, and ‘respect for persons’. It is a significant pedagogical strength of this book that to each of these theories Harris applies the internal and external criteria

developed in Chapter 4. On the basis of these criteria, Harris rejects EE and natural law theories outright, while indicating some sympathy for utilitarianism (though I would suggest that his two objections to utilitarianism are met by Pojman). In Chapter 8, Harris throws his support behind the 'respect for persons' position, the central principle of which is the equal dignity of all human beings, comprised of two sub-principles: a universalization principle (that an action is right of you can consent to everyone's adopting the moral rule presupposed by the action); and a means–end principle (an action is right if you treat people as ends rather than as means).

In Chapter 9, he then goes on to examine virtue ethics, providing a helpful taxonomy, identifying a wide range of virtues and allocating each to one of four categories of virtue types. The fifth edition adds extensive discussion of Aristotle and feminist ethics of caring. Harris sees importance in virtue for self-actualization (career, lifestyle, relationships) and for developing the quality of society (such as good citizenship), but sees less importance in virtue for ethics: though virtues are desirable, 'virtue ethics do not rate high by the criterion of usefulness' in ethical decision making (p. 198).

As important as respect for persons is as an ethical orientation, I am unconvinced that this approach provides an adequately comprehensive, or sufficiently nuanced, basis to address numerous sorts of moral issues. Nonetheless, the structure of Harris's discussions of the various philosophical traditions in Chapters 5–9 are pedagogically useful as supplementary readings. Surprisingly, though, Harris does not discuss deontology and provides only a couple paragraphs on Kant, which are considerable weaknesses for an introductory text. The case studies are helpful for discussion or short articles.

*Moral Philosophy: Theories and Issues*, by Emmett Barcalow of Western New England College, is, for this reviewer, the least philosophically satisfactory of the works reviewed here, lacking the analytical insight of the other three texts. For instance, Barcalow provides chapters describing the various traditional philosophical positions (egoism, utilitarianism, deontology, virtues) but offers no relative assessment of each *vis-à-vis* each other, nor discussion of how to relate them or assess their relative merits (as the other three authors do). Likewise, his sections on assessing moral theories simply identify numerous questions to be asked of theories (pp. 6–27, 200–1), but again he does not systematize these, or analyze their relative merits, as do the other three texts. This text covers far more practical or applied ethics than the other texts, but the analyses are hampered by being more descriptive than analytical. Not a text this reviewer would recommend.

Some comparative comments are now in order. In terms of substantive moral philosophy, Pojman's proposal is equal parts virtue and conduct, while Holmes emphasizes virtue over conduct and Harris emphasizes

conduct over virtue. Pojman's view of conduct favors a 'moderate objectivism' (or what he also calls 'non-absolutist natural law'), whereby common human nature enables us to identify a core set of universal human rules, their applicability being contextual or situational but not relativist. Holmes's view of right conduct is highly contextualist, though he too abjures relativism. For Harris, right conduct depends not on assumptions of objective universal principals but on a subjective universalization principle as a moral standard of the respect for persons. Although none of these authors discuss 'post-modernity' *per se*, it is interesting to see all three authors rejecting relativism yet not proposing absolutism, as if postmodern critiques of pure objectivism and absolutism have been accepted in part but not whole heartedly; consequently, all three authors have proposed variations of what could be called 'non-relativist contextualism'. It would make a useful student assignment to compare the accounts of relativism between Pojman and Harris in particular. Equally of note is their collective rejection of EE. Another useful assignment would be to compare their reasons for this rejection.

In terms of religion, Pojman is the most religiously sympathetic author, reflecting his own Christian faith (which is apparent through principals and judgments rather than by explicit theological categories). Here I would offer some support to Pojman by way of suggesting that a realist emphasis in the style of John Rist, along with a divine command account in the style of J. E. Hare, could support Pojman's contextualist natural law sympathies (natural law and divine command not being necessarily exclusive of each other as is often assumed). Barcalow sees some limited value in religion, namely to provide personal meaning and to motivate equal valuation of all persons. Holmes is clearly knowledgeable about Christian thought but unpersuaded, though his rejection of divine command and natural law theories is useful reading for students (even if one disagrees with him). Harris discusses Christian views in his discussion of divine command and natural law theories (which he rejects), but appears less familiar with Christian thought than Holmes. Both Holmes and Harris note that one can reject divine command and natural law theories and still be committed religious adherents, for forms of moral realism are also available to religious believers. In terms of other types of normative claims, Pojman discusses these more extensively than the others, discussing the relation of ethics to law, religion, and etiquette, although, unfortunately, none of the texts address the difference between ethics and prudence (or between righteousness and wisdom, to use theological language). Of the texts reviewed here, I particularly commend Pojman's, and I will certainly use it in future introductory courses, though a significant weakness is the lack of case studies for application of the principles discussed, for which Harris could be used.