

ETHICAL THEORY IN THE AGE OF ITS AUTONOMY

THE BLACKWELL GUIDE TO ETHICAL THEORY

EDITED BY HUGH LAFOLLETTE,

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In recent times, no field, save perhaps for the scientific and composite “neurophilosophy”, has taken such strides toward autonomy from within philosophy’s domain as ethics. It is hard to speak of an identical path that ethics would have shown in the three dominant philosophical linguistic traditions (English, French and German), albeit the similarities do outweigh the differences. The French tradition has given greater space to theological discussion under its heading. The German has raised ethics to the summit of pragmatic thought. While this also characterizes the English-language tradition, what a work such as *The Blackwell Guide to Ethics* (henceforth referred to as *The Guide*) shows is the fundamental, though not always manifest, importance of feminist thought on redesigning the scope of ethics. To this, one could add the awareness and critique of a certain speciesism.

What is common to all of these traditions is how ethics has come unto its own in the retreat of philosophical urgency from either changing or reforming society and the world, to whose execution it had still been committed well into the 1980s. With the political arena receded, it has become clearer how ethics is in some ways the consummation of the philosophical enterprise in the name of bettering human welfare. Given that ideology critique was not always conditioned by the Good or the Right, it is debatable whether it was a waste of time. Regardless, ideology critique is far from what its critics reproach it of being in hindsight, namely an irresponsible philosophical flirt with tyranny, to not nothing of a mere extension of ideology. While moral philosophy – and not political theory, or politics – is the crucible of ethics, what appears at this point in time is the emergence of a field of thought with

a continually developing program. Ethics is devoted to the quest of forming individuals in communities of various types who manage to negotiate through the fraudulent and corrupt mindset of mere self-interest and power to achieve a sense of rightness.

No moral philosophy has shown a more dramatic flair in this logical unfolding than perhaps that of Emmanuel Lévinas. In France and the Anglo-world alike, Lévinas's star rose slowly in the post-WWII years, only to skyrocket in the mid-1980s – which it has not ceased doing since. Despite its peaceful intensions, it is the ethics of a warrior, if not that of war itself: of the “just war” Lévinas proclaims at the end of *Otherwise than Being, or beyond Essence*. For all its religiosity, Lévinas's ethics expresses a carnal philosophy, not unlike the *Song of songs*, to whose praises of love he harks back at least as much as to the Christic *agape* and *caritas* often evoked in his work. As William R. Schroeder writes in *The Guide's* section on “Continental Ethics”, “in heterosexual erotic love, [...] to caress [the other] is not to know or master another, but to meet him or her in a way entirely different from knowledge. In the caress one loses and risks oneself, and this risk is an essential element in ethical response.” (392)

Yet its positing of a “Wholly Other” as conditioning this duality of the heterosexual caress – among other gestures and, while on the matter, why not through homosexual interaction? – remains difficult to sustain from a critical philosophy's standpoint. Lévinas's conception of the Other maintains its insistence through the activation of a figural framework to whose graces the philosopher is encouraged to surrender out of a sense of hospitality and responsibility for Its well-being, or indeed death. As such it subjects the possibilities of questioning imputation and the foundations of justification to a transcendent point of view. With such exteriority it is hard not to see ethics undermining philosophy itself – as Alain Badiou astutely observed in his severe critique of the new-found autonomy of ethics (an argument similar to that of other French critics of ethics, like J. Rancière and C. Castoriadis). In Badiou's words, “ethics is for Lévinas *the new name of thought*, which has dumped its ‘logical capturing’ (the principle of identity) in a prophetic submission to the Law of foundational otherness.” (*L'Éthique. Essai sur la conscience du mal*, Paris: Hatier, 1993, 20).

If Lévinas's ethics marks the overcoming of the way philosophy has thought of the practical and the pragmatic since Aristotle, feminist ethics has worked from within a space similar to the one Lévinas tried to evacuate. The task of positing a sexuated ontology becomes possible

already in Lévinas's *Existence and Existents*, first published in 1947. For all the renewed importance granted to rules, guidelines, methodology and argumentation theory in the new ethical theory, feminism has kept alive the political epiphany that has led the drive toward an autonomy ethics had hitherto never shown or even hinted at as being its destiny – as far as its historical tie to philosophy is concerned.

It thus lies much to its credit that *the Guide* tackles the catalytic, though incomplete role feminist ethical theory has had on the way we think of our actions and the way we evaluate the nature of the ethics now declaring autonomy. Alison M. Jaggar, Professor of Philosophy and Women Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, writes that “some feminists are among [the] most outspoken challengers [of] a particular understanding of ‘ethical theory’ [as covering] a wide range of intellectual enquiries, all of which share an interest in morality in general rather than in immediately practical ethical concerns.” (368) In addition to using the categories of gender and sexual difference, Jaggar goes on to stress that feminist ethical theory has an additional, fundamentally critical aim, which is to reverse the devaluation of women in Western culture, at the very least. As she writes, one of its contributions is to “enlarge the domain of ethics to include ethics itself: [feminists] undertake the analysis of ethical analysis, the ethical theory of ethical theory.” (372) To that extent, they are among the few in either the English-language or German tradition to be doing so.

The views Jaggar espouses have hardly been enshrined in a consensus. *The Guide*'s editor, Professor Hugh LaFollette from East Tennessee University, remains skeptical regarding the remedies put forward to deal with the disparities within ethical theory regarding sexual difference. To them, he adds the “care ethic” presented by Michael Slote in his contribution on “Virtue Ethics”. Oddly, Slote's idea gives short shrift to the modern re-actualizer of virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre and the political ends of his moral theory, to say nothing of Martha Nussbaum's politics, barely visible in a passing reference. In the meantime, Slote aims his discussion at the very heart of MacIntyre's concerns with personal traits of honesty and virtue. This is why LaFollette's comment may well be accurate, despite its succinctness, when claiming that “the care perspective [whether thought of as feminine or not] must be supplemented by a capabilities approach that first arose in, and now informs, debates about Third World development.” (10) As a statement on feminist ethics, however, LaFollette claim falls short of addressing the limits expressed through ethical thought in general—a

limit that excludes considerations on the political and economic order in societies seemingly free enough to discuss ethics. Yet that this issue of the relation between ethics and politics be present right in the introduction makes *The Guide* well worth its sizeable existence.

I

As an account of the rise and pretensions of “western ethics” so-called and of its problems, shortcomings and challenges, the *Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* is an impressive handbook. It is written from the perspective of the English-speaking world. Yet it is hardly limited to it. The selection of contributors made by its editor, Professor LaFollette, is challenging in the international perspective it does give. But just as the pretensions to carve out a space of thought autonomous of the requisite to refer to the broader philosophical universe eludes the ability of ethical theorists to ground the field, so also is the international perspective established to show premonitions over future developments, instead of linear causal links between the past and present.

The Guide is split in two parts, Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics. Often with compendia of this sort, readers can ferret out the methodological or even ideological stance of a book by the organization of the “Meta” section. Here is where the backbone is laid for the other less predictable variations that are declined as more local developments. Prof LaFollette has made sure not to succumb to such simplifications, although his choice of meta-ethical topics is by no means consensual. After establishing the first subsection on “the Status of Ethics”, in a discussion on moral realism and relativism, and then examining the grounds ethical theory seeks and claims in the second subsection, his invited contributor, John Caputo almost sinks the edifice of an autonomous ethical theory. His “The End of Ethics” specifically spells out a thinking space in an appeal to anti-theory, to which we return in due course.

The second part of the work is devoted to the examination of normative ethics according to a threefold breakdown: i) consequentialism, ii) deontology and iii) and alternative views. Apart from its heading, deontology is the most context specific immersion into which ethical theory delves. It can be argued that the idea of “duty” as a guiding force to ethical thought in fact covers up the specificity of

the circumstances in which a theory is forged. Professor James Sterba from the University of Notre Dame, for example, has the difficult task of wrapping the discussions of the book up in a *pros hen* bid: "Toward Reconciliation in Ethics." His discussion begins with a challenge to the most "deontological" of the ethical subsections, Libertarianism, exposed in great detail and conviction by Professor Jan Narveson of the University of Waterloo, Canada. Observing that Narveson's take on libertarianism is steeped in a "negative right of noninterference" set as it is in a broader socio-economic framework, Sterba underscores its failure to meet the challenge of providing a positive version of the right of noninterference. As such, he concludes that "a libertarian negative right of noninterference can be seen to support a right to welfare through an application of the 'ought' implies 'can' principle to conflicts between the rich and the poor." (425). In other words, Sterba edges as close as possible to prove noninterference as being a gross misconduct of economic privilege. His apparent ability to settle the litigation from within the argumentative space of ethics – although it is fair to assume libertarians will reject his criteriological assessment as *ad hoc* – is cause for optimism for the sourest point of ethics, namely the reconciliation between, and tolerance of, multivalent views.

The partially indeterminate end-point of the field of ethics is no more damaging to its thinking space than is gravitation for physics, natural selection for evolutionary biology, or the social contract for political thought. That's because what has bolstered the legitimacy of claims made from within ethics to spread autonomous out from philosophy's wings, is the self-evident, but complicated task of determining truth-value in ethics. One of the tasks of meta-ethics is precisely to analyze to what degree ethics and truth are negotiable.

Michael Smith's discussion on moral realism traces the matter in expressivism and internalism from the carefulness of a minimalist moral theory of truth to the more daring variants approaching the drop into relativism. Based on sentences of the type, "torturing babies is wrong", Smith contends that "what moral realists really believe is that the sentences we use when we make moral claims are capable of being true or false *strictly speaking*, than merely *loosely speaking*." (17) The claim of realism pivots upon G.E. Moore's "Open Question Argument" regarding the relationship between "rightness" and "utility maximization". (24-25) To keep realism in ethics from being merely a pipe dream, it is of utmost importance to confront the sentences isolated or generated within its scope with those of other cultures. Realism

underscores the basic responses we have in our belonging to a habitat with respect to how the practices of others unfold and differ. Smith points out that prior to resorting to a nihilist or relativist position on other cultures, we ought to be convinced that “acts are right or wrong depending on whether, notwithstanding any contingent and rationally optional culturally induced differences in our actual desires, we would all desire or be averse to the performance of such acts if we had a set of desires that was maximally informed, coherent or unified.” (35) This is the statement of a position dubbed the Non-Relativist exigency upon an internalist naturalist moral realism. It clearly is a reworking of Kant’s categorical imperative from the attempt at placing truth prior to duty in a culturally-alerted framework.

Both relativism and naturalism receive distinct chapters in *The Guide*. Simon Blackburn’s survey of relativism directly confronts Richard Rorty’s ironic stance on the conception of absolute ethical truth. (38) As Blackburn also bears out in the early pages of *The Guide*, dealing with cultural and “relativist” differences “piecemeal” leads the ethical theorist into severe conundrums “depending upon the case in hand”. This is a quaint way of saying that the ethical theorist proves to be both a moral thinker *as well as* someone especially attuned to argumentation theory. For as Blackburn stresses, “each issue has to be fought on its merits. There is no problem of relativism, but only individual problems of living.” (43)

For all the sweet talk, relativism does not fail to obscure deeper seated discomfort. For even in the task of Thomas Nagel’s recent excursion against post-modernist relativism, his “quasi-realist” counter-argument steamships toward a “large metaphysical hole” the relativist is purported to embody. The appeal to authority as the last word to dealing with the relativistic dispersion of a moral code brings the matter back to how in fact such coercion could be exercised in the enforcement of ethics on our practical reasonings. Here as elsewhere, there is little denying that the task of identifying, and justifying, the ethical argument asserted as constituting the “reasonable” is what is at stake – over and above any authority’s putative position.

Taking the question of authority to its ethical consequences is the strategy behind Philip L. Quinn’s contribution on “Divine Command Theory”. His chapter is predicated upon analyzing the defense and objections to schema (S): “Moral status M stands in dependency relation D to divine act A.” In other words, to what degree can the claim that morality depends upon God be “given a precise theoretical formulation.”

(53) With the recent strides ethics has taken, its old harbor in monotheistic religions has not so easily released the ship from customs, as it were. No matter how little “hostility” to monotheism readers of *The Guide* may feel, it seems that imputing responsibility under the name of God more than ever presents a category error. In fact, this chapter is singularly out of place in *The Guide*. It is patently absurd to consider Divine Command Theory as Meta-ethical instead of normative – whereas feminist ethics is conveniently lodged within the latter.

The challenge really facing ethics as it acquires increasing autonomy is the problem of naturalism. Even when ethical theorists are unconvinced by the promises of an essentialist or foundationalist stance, or at least one vying to set foundations of justification, they might very well be tempted by the task of “equating goodness with any of the natural properties of things”—no matter how vociferously opposed G. E. Moore was to the matter. By contrast, the inverse can hardly be held to be true. After all, giving up on naturalism, i.e. denying that ethics is “a department or an application of one or more of the natural or historical sciences,” (James Rachels citing C.D. Broad (75)), does send a number of theorists over to the foundationalist fields. Yet, as James Rachels points out, does the option between naturalism and foundationalism really just amount to undoing Hume’s ought/is postulate? In order words, can we not alternate the terms between ought and is, with one person’s causal sequence being another’s motivic feelings or attitudes? Rachels’s argument questions what the “natural properties” such as goodness and rightness are when espousing an ethical naturalism. He then takes on a perspectival distinction regarding how one conceives of the way facts might influence our attitudes, this latter situation formulated from “within” the human subject’s experience, as opposed to traits that could be localized as natural properties. Whether one agrees with the particular characterization of this progression upon Hume’s distinction, it is difficult to refute the claim that ethical naturalism “leaves out the normative.” (90)

The next step to be considered in *The Guide* involves the meta-ethical preconditions or prerequisites of the normative. To that end, Jeff McMahan’s chapter on “Moral Intuition” makes a fine effort. For on the one hand, ethics in its age of autonomy is preconditioned by the existence of “spontaneous judgments”, i.e. nonreflective judgments, as if they were expressions from what could be called “moral intuition”. On the other hand, McMahan shows that if we rid the field of moral intuition – what neurophilosophers have sometimes analogously done

with what they call “folk psychology” – we wind up circulating in the theoretical realms idealizing objective rules. This emptying out of the field is of little worth in the end, though, since the fingers of the latter lack the dirt of moral predicaments as they unfold in real time. Still, McMahan shows his reserve to adhering to Peter Singer’s extreme characterization of the moral judgments we intuitively make as remnants of older religions, or of the antiquated and regressive as such. However, this is not to suggest that McMahan refuses to “regard [moral judgments] as lacking in normative authority.” (95) The author is led to determine a set of options between what he classes as the *Intuitive Approach* and the *Theoretical Approach*, which must be evaluated on their own grounds. For he considers most arguments outright dismissive of the intuitive approach as being predicated upon *ad hominem* arguments. For the argument most of the time pits two sets of common intuitions, my personal modes of subjectivity, aka “my intuition”, against yours, without offering much truth-value based propositions to sink one’s refuting teeth into.

For all that, McMahan struggles to keep from being thrown into the arms of the intuitive approach by the various failings, if not arrogance, of the theoretical approach. He sees favorable points in the “coherentist” account of moral justification. This holds that “a moral belief is justified solely in terms of its relations, particularly its inferential relations, with other beliefs.” (100) But what he, along with many contemporary moral philosophers tend to endorse is for a coherentist foundational theory of moral justification akin to John Rawl’s notion of “reflective equilibrium.” This is an elegant alternative to the harsh split between approaches insofar as it aims to separate “intuitions that derive from tainted sources” from those that one may regard as more reliable in order to craft a harmonious whole. For the argument is that “insofar as our intuitions are reliable sources of moral knowledge, they are so because they are expressions of, and point back to, a range of deeper, more general values that lie at the core of our nature as moral beings.” (105) Coherentism might just be adequate then as a foundational theory. Yet its limits are also stark: by seeking to delve into deeper reaches our subjectivity might, as Chomsky and McGinn’s conception of moral knowing suggest, bring ethics back to cognitive psychology. It is plain how this retreat would deprive ethics of much of its new found autonomy.

This is why it is so appropriate for LaFollette to have structured the book so as to leap immediately into the possible end of ethics, as aforementioned in reference to John Caputo’s title. For as the latter

contends ironically the singular in human experience is sufficient to offset the claims of ethics as providing guidelines to deliberations on action. "When the sea of singularity gets rough, when the winds of existence blow, ethics generally goes below. When things get difficult and the way is blocked, ethics is nowhere to be found." (127) Caputo joins up with a French post-Nietzschean perspective here. Its own claim should not hasten generalizations about the theoretical courage of the various philosophers working in *The Guide*. For this ineptness is precisely what most of these philosophers seek to prevent from happening to their field.

This temporary *aggiornamento* leads up to the two concluding essays of the part on Meta-Ethics. Both are challenges to the coherence and pertinence of meta-ethics. The first article is by Elliott Sober and deals with psychological egoism. The second paper is a powerful evocation on moral psychology by Laurence Thomas. In these two contributions, meta-ethics proves its capacity to absorb current human social experience by tackling what ethics is on the dimension of human subjectivity and interests, as well as the importance of family upbringing and parental love in the forming of human subjectivity. Inversely, meta-ethics in this composition proves itself unable to tackle the collective finality of the autonomy of ethics, which is the functioning of the State, government and its intuitions according to philosophical principles of justice and political-economic emancipation.

Psychological egotism is clarified by the following formula: "S wants *m* solely as a means to acquiring *e* if and only if S wants *m*, S wants *e*, and S wants *m* only because she believes that obtaining *m* will help her obtain *e*." (130) If the task is to refute the statement, Sober emphasizes that "one need not cite examples of helping in which only other-directed motives play a role. If people sometimes help for both egoistic and altruistic ultimate reasons, then psychological egoism is false." (130) Further contexts attempting to refute hedonism are examined, such as Robert Nozick's "experience machine". This thought experiment depicts various situations on how and to what degree human beings would forsake the toils and difficulty of their lives for the promise of pleasure – then again such "ideal" laboratory-like circumstances do overlook how dismal life can be for most human beings. The debate pitting hedonism against altruism is also examined in the context of evolution theory. Sober's argument aims to establish that "a purely egoistic set of motives is less likely to have evolved than a set of motives that includes both egoistic and altruistic ultimate desires." (147)

Moral Psychology, by Laurence Thomas, is by far the most compassionate contribution, as it traces the development of moral sensibility to parental love. In fact, Prof Thomas's article points to something that Sartre had underscored in another context in his *Search for a Method*, namely that "Today's Marxists care only about adults; when reading them, one would think that we are born at the age at which we earn our first wage. Marxists have forgotten their own childhood." Like with Sartre, developmental psychology is not quite the route taken here to uphold this position. What Thomas introduces instead provides a conceptual description of the idea that "there is a strong congruence between being psychologically healthy and embracing an altruistic conception of morality." (149)

From this perspective, Prof Thomas' article is an instance of what feminist theory has conceptualized as an "ethics of care". Its possibility is found in the distinction between the "robust conception of the moral self" and a fragile conception. (159) The fact that the conception of the moral self, otherwise uttered as "a sense of self-worth", is largely conditioned by the experience of the type of parental love we have received does not mean that determinism from experience is as rigid a reality as determinism from our genetic makeup. Getting to know our experience, "know thyself", is where the freedom in our will might usher in changes to our moral predicament. Morality in this conception is transmitted almost by mimesis, which is hardly a surprise as most of our subjective background is passed on in this manner. When that upbringing is driven by love, Thomas argues that a more complete human being is its result. This connection in turn suggests the Socratic concept that "living morally should be sufficiently attractive in and of itself." (161)

II

The most technical aspect of ethical theory is found in the chapters devoted to consequentialism and deontology. In this context, "technical" merely means how much ethics is fastened to argumentation and argumentation theory. This is a reality critics of a theoretical ethics have to face when they appeal to case-by-case analysis. In order to avoid a drop into mere opinion one has to examine the sentences formed to justify certain moral attitudes and the actions, or consequences, they entail.

R. G. Frey's defense of "act-utilitarianism" focuses on the task of maximizing human welfare. Due especially to the importance of R. M. Hare's *Moral Thinking* (1981), this specific domain of ethical theory has been fervent with debate. Frey defines act-utilitarianism as "the view that an act is right if its consequences are at least as good as those of any alternative." (165) This view can be characterized as "consequentialism" insofar as it "holds that acts are right or wrong solely in virtue of the goodness or badness of their actual consequences." (165) Much of the debate spawned by Hare deals with establishing what the best way is to maximize human welfare. Hare's solution, which Frey takes as an indirect consequentialism, is to argue that "we should forego trying to maximize it on each occasion." (166) More than a methodology for practical decision-making, Frey stresses that consequentialism "is an account of what makes right acts right" (174). He also defends himself against claims according to which deontology is allowed to filter into this strategy.

The pendant to act-utilitarianism is "rule-consequentialism". Brad Hooker provides an attractive definition of it: "rule-consequentialism claims that an act is permissible if and only if it is allowed by a code that could reasonably be expected to result in as much good as could reasonably be expected to result from any other identifiable code." (188) Here we have a focus on the acceptance of rules, or "compliance", which however must be offset by the wider costs and benefits of "rule *internalization*". (190) As such, the chapter refers back to the discussion on moral intuition of I.5. Rule-consequentialism partly lends itself to various distribution simulations, the tables of which are numerous in this section. On the other hand as Hooker emphasizes, there is a strong tension leading it to collapse into act-consequentialism when the question of personal sacrifice for the sake of morality comes into play. The fact that rule-consequentialism requires *far less* self-sacrifice, but at the same time relies on "appealing general beliefs about morality", makes it a theory worth incorporating in the eyes of its advocates.

F.M. Kamm's contribution on "nonconsequentialism" finds its sources in the work of Kant and W.D. Ross. It is a doctrine against "maximizing either the good or constraints on producing the good." (206) Unsurprisingly, it is a theory replete with standardized principles, namely the Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE) and the Principle of Permissible Harm (PPH). The discussion lends itself to particularly strong formalization in case studies, such as the "Art Works Case": "If someone

loves beauty, he will be disposed to preserve and not destroy art works. What should this person do if he must destroy one artwork to preserve several equally good ones?" (216) Kamm suggests summarizing the various points discussed as the "outcome modification procedure for allocation". The lasting impression the reader gets from such technical density is evoked by Kamm himself when alerting that "we should be aware that many real life cases in which we can help everyone to some degree are even more complicated." (225) Surely, but it is doubtful whether a complicated theory is what best helps us deal with complicated situations, if *dealing* is really its end instead of *justifying* how we deal with it.

My latter observation can be read as a general reserve on the variants of deontology presented in *The Guide*. By all appearances, doctrines of deontology still dominate the field of ethical theory. This state of affairs is logical and even normal insofar as an autonomous ethics must be able to account for the proximity of its field to questions beyond morality and expressed in key concepts such as duty, justice and rights. Thomas E. Hill's Kantianism is the closest a chapter comes in this collection to being devoted to a single philosopher. Its purpose is to take up Kant's original positions prior to the immense bibliography that has grown from it. In turn, he analyses Kant's justification for moving away from "empirical methods" to examine the fundamental questions of moral philosophy. Thereafter, Hill turns to discussing the "apriori method", the categorial and hypothetical imperatives as well as the question of the autonomy of moral agents and their purported rationality. Kant and the Enlightenment remain the great historical referents to the emergence of ethical theory, and the claim to extract it from historicism.

Contractarianism is an attempt to provide a historically-rooted opposition to Kant, stemming from Hume, Rousseau and Hobbes. It is the closest that politics comes to confront ethics head-on in this volume. While Geoffrey Sayre-McCord argues convincingly that contractarian debates have been rekindled of late, the constructive work on politics for which ethical theory and awareness has been responsible is to be found in the question of "rights". But rights is otherwise in need of a theory, as the cases of foreign intervention, state-sponsored torture, civilian deaths and imperial wars have been justified of late all in the name of human rights. University of Toronto Professor L. W. Sumner argues that "the purpose of rights is to promote some independently defined value such as welfare or autonomy, and rights are to be

recognized as legitimate only to the extent that they serve this purpose.” (304) This is the point where ethics joins up with the need for judicial interpretation of rights.

Rights is also a hot issue in the Eurozone, but William R. Schroeder’s contribution on Continental Philosophy aims to set another historical record straight, namely about the provenance of much of the English-language debate on ethics today. He argues that “Continental ethicists have blazed some of the trails that are producing a virtual revolution in current ethical theory in the Analytic tradition.” (375) Schroeder’s broad sweep is constrained by the most celebrated names, however. It wastes no time repeating the now clichéd and refuted claims on how French thought would have laid ethics to waste by promoting a post-humanist framework rid of liberty and responsibility. By treading back to Hegel and steaming forward through Nietzsche, Scheler, Sartre and Lévinas, Schroeder manages to show how ethics has circulated amidst three spheres in which “persons can experience themselves as realized/expressed (or alternatively as foreign or alienated) : in relation to things, to their own willed actions, and to communal life generally.” (379) This Hegelian space, however, encountered variations as Sartre’s thought declined through the Continent. It has culminated in Lévinas’ vociferous rejection of political action, which the latter sees as inherently a-moral. This did not keep Lévinas from espousing a certain messianism about the nation-state.

Pragmatic ethics emerges out of the social, religious and political thought of early twentieth century American thinkers such as William James and J. Dewey. Its leading contribution to the field of philosophy, which is reinforced by advances in the field of ethics, is the status of habit in the formation of the good character. As the contribution’s author, Hugh LaFollette writes, “many philosophers believe, or speak as if they believe, that everything significant about us involves conscious deliberation. Not so. [...] Deliberation is vital. However, [...] its central role is normally not to *directly* guide action, but to shape, change, and reinforce habits, and therefore to indirectly guide action.” (401) Habit still holds a very enticing theoretical role, standing somewhere between nature and the social.

Habits also emerge as a species trait within the specific tendencies or preconditions of social and experiential parameters. Some moralists and certainly a number of religious thinkers might wish to draw moral contours to habit as such, with sin and evil arising with the corruption of habit in general. Professor LaFollette argues contrariwise, when

espousing morality as a habit with a structure similar to other habits. This is certainly a bit of Dewey's input at work here, which offers precaution with respect to "overrationalizations" of habit. (407) Also part of Dewey's way of thinking, as well as Aristotle's, is how habits can be changed through deliberation: reading, thinking, discussion, or seeking out moral examples. "Deliberation amplifies relatively small environmental changes, so that we can evaluate, and perhaps change, our habits *relatively* independently of dramatic external forces." (410)

Pragmatic ethics, as the aims of early pragmatism itself, has been edged out from the perimeters of what theory would try to define as a theoretical space. LaFollette sets down some of its general traits: "employs criteria, but is not criterial"; "tolerates without being irresolute", and most importantly – but, then again, notice my own bout with the centripetal theoretical draw – "is relative without being relativistic". All of these statements reinforce the continued interest in pragmatism found in such thinkers as Hilary Putnam and Stanley Cavell, but also seen in a Continental "poststructuralist" like Gilles Deleuze, due especially to its lines of reasoning that "redesign the relationship between theory and practice" (418).

The success of pragmatism relies on the intricate relationship between actions, motives and consequences. As such, instead of repeating the divide pitting acts and consequences against actions and motives, LaFollette shows how actions, motives and consequences might be thought of as connected, if only we were willing to allow them to employ different timelines and scales. One-dimensional conceptualization is a symptom of short-sighted thinking. For "if I lie to you now, I am not just mouthing words, (a) my action springs from my habits (and thus, my motives), (b) I am deceiving you (or at least trying), (c) I am seeking to change your behavior in some way, (d) I am shaping the character of our relationship, and (e) I am strengthening my disposition to like in the future." (413)

This brings us back to recall John Caputo's entry "The End of Ethics". Taking on the modish aspect of the field's heading, his article focuses on the counterintuitive instead of what the "people" would seem to want from the field. This marks the encounter with a radical variant of pragmatism. If there were a doctrine that could justify ethics for Caputo, it would be something like "accidentalism", in which no previously written guide could orient individuals. Steeped in Kierkegaard, his ethics would have been akin to existentialism had it not been focused on the specificity of the Franco-German notion of event – or indeed, the

Levinasian notion of the “Wholly Other”. “The end of ethics means that the business of ethics is to be conducted with a little more fear and trembling than philosophers have been wont to show.” (113) Within its scope not only fall questions like the death of God and end of metaphysics, but living, existing reaction that individuals have toward this fate. Far from legitimating corruption and the “anything goes”, it’s a question here of a “more ethical ethics”. (113) This brings us right back to the wealth of domains discussed within philosophy.

What ethical theory spins in conceptual connections can be seen in the notion of justice as it arises in Jacques Derrida’s work. As of the late 1980s, Derrida began explicitly incorporating Lévinas’s messianism into his research on the ties between deconstruction and the apophatic experience. On the one hand, this idea underscores a certain conviction that justice can never be grounded, and therefore no matter the state of injustice in the world, the task is always to enter into affirmative mode regarding the possibility of justice on a large scale. On the other, we enter into a messianic thought, which perfectly allows the return of theological conceptions of justice – and which is where the relation between critical philosophy and ethics at times grows tense. To show this, Caputo delivers a masterful blend of a critique of the entire moral tradition without letting “all hell break loose”. Nonetheless, as he reassures the reader, “my idea is to make this whole idea of duty tremble.” (122) He even dares, through the cases of schooling and marriage to confront ethics’ other, namely economics. That’s precisely where, Caputo, at least feels that “where we need ethics the most” is where it’s most lacking.

With a project as vast and simultaneously modest as *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* any reader is bound to complain about typological shortcomings and the slant of the organizational framework. My comment would have to do with the benign role attributed to Alasdair MacIntyre, and probably to Nietzsche overall. It is hard to fathom the relevance of any ethical thought today were it not to confront some of Nietzsche’s manifold attacks, wagers, bets, snubs and deliria against “Judeo-Christian morality”. Among the many commentators of Nietzsche to have created his or her own philosophy, MacIntyre’s development of the Aristotelian-inspired “virtue ethics” not only takes on Nietzsche but actually takes Nietzsche as a conceptual personae to prove the legitimacy of thinking through the author’s intention, or at least his or her “honesty”. Yet despite his having brought Aristotle’s ethics back to center stage and the role he allotted to Nietzsche with

respect to the Greek forbear he most omitted referring to, MacIntyre barely takes up a few pages in *The Guide*— even under the heading of the field he virtually redesigned. Perhaps, would it be only in a philosophical program such as the one MacIntyre has been developing that the divide between traditions and fields, which lies at the *need* ethics has felt to be unfastened from philosophy, could be pointed to as a real possible overcoming, and thus ridding ethics of its possible destiny, which it to forever edge close to the mire of relativism. None of these closing comments, however, should be taken to diminish the mastery and value for students and teachers alike of Hugh LaFollette's *Blackwell Guide to Ethics*.