

Review of Robin Attfield, *Ethics: An Overview*, London and New York, Continuum (Now Bloomsbury), 2012

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Attfield's ethics textbook is a key resource for students of ethics, and covers history of ethics, value-theory, normative ethics, applied ethics, meta-ethics and free-will. Historical sections are used to explain how stances like virtue ethics and consequentialism came to unfold, and issues of human responsibility to be debated. Theories of value as supplying reasons for action inform the study of both normative ethics and meta-ethics. Normative theories are applied to sustainability, medicine, treatment of animals and the environment, development, and the ethics of war. The companion website will assist instructors and students alike, particularly with more challenging topics such as meta-ethics.

Keywords: Ethics; Robin Attfield; Value; Responsibility; Rightness; Virtue; Future Generations; Free Will

Introduction

This book (Attfield, 2012) covers the whole field of ethics in outline and six specific areas in particular: history of ethics, value-theory, normative ethics, applied ethics, meta-ethics, and issues surrounding responsibility and free-will. It has been carefully designed for the teachers and students of all countries where English is spoken, particularly for students of second and third year undergraduate and magistral levels at university, and if used together with the accompanying "companion website" (see below) it will prove invaluable, whether in the role of textbook or in ancillary reading. It does not claim to be a comprehensive treatment of ethics, or an undertaking that would in any case be out of the question for a work that would fit into your pocket or handbag, and it explicitly omits important tracts of the history of ethics and of moral psychology. Besides, it pays more attention to the analytical tradition in all its varieties than to the approaches of continental ethicists, but this probably enhances its clarity and accessibility. (Attfield has previously written weightier and more comprehensive works on ethics, including *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (Attfield, 1995), to which frequent cross-references are made in this book for readers seeking greater breadth or depth of coverage; and that book remains available from its original publishers, Rodopi of Amsterdam.) Instead of claiming encyclopedia-like coverage, *Ethics: An Overview* focuses on stimulating and ongoing debates, especially ones in applied ethics (ranging from medical ethics to the ethics of war and peace), and at the same time provides a good grounding in normative ethical principles and virtues, and in their status and basis. There again, it also offers suggestions for ways of taking study further, for example through the useful study questions and reading lists with which each of the twenty-eight sections is equipped. In other words, it encourages students to become their own philosophers.

How the Arguments Unfold

Although the first chapter is entitled "History of Ethics", it does not pretend to give a continuous history, but focuses on the significant contributions of five leading historical figures—Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Kant and John Stuart Mill—to clarify key themes related to contemporary ethical thinking. A lifetime's study and teaching experience has enabled Attfield to focus on key themes, explain and analyse them in some depth, and trace lines of development towards contemporary thinking. For example, the section on Aristotle is used to supply the historical context of virtue ethics, discussed in the chapter on normative ethics, where the consequentialism of Mill, already introduced in the opening historical chapter, is further developed and defended in a manner that takes seriously the good of nonhuman creatures as well as human well-being.

The second chapter takes three of the key longstanding themes of ethics—pleasure, happiness and eudaemonia, or "flourishing"—and discusses them as possible answers to questions of value-theory and as the bases of theories about the Good Life. The third chapter on Normative Ethics applies what has emerged in the second chapter about value to issues of moral standing, right action and rights. This is where we find discussions of deontology, contractarianism and, as already mentioned, consequentialism, and where the strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics also emerge. Recent work on ethics has given rise to a potentially bewildering proliferation of varieties of consequentialism—no less than six forms need to be explained—and Attfield's book is a reliable guide through the labyrinth. This allows him to uphold a consequentialism of practices (social practices such as promise-keeping and truth-telling), or "practice-consequentialism", on a basis that is not confined to human good alone, but which, in line with chapter two, rests on the good of all living creatures ("biocentrism": see

LaFollette (2013)). This approach is likely to resonate with many readers, particularly those concerned to embrace a theory sensitive to a broader and ampler environmentalism than one grounded in the good of our own species and nothing else besides.

In “Moral Sciences”, as the study of modern philosophy has long been called at Cambridge University, where I found myself studying during the 1960s, the field of ethics plays a prominent role, as this name would suggest. At that time, the study of practical applications of ethics was in abeyance, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, but, as Attfield explains, events like the Vietnam War and concerns such as those of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) restored applied ethics to the kind of centrality in ethics that it used to enjoy in the days of Kant and of Mill. The ordinary general reader, through looking at the interesting fourth chapter of this book on “Applied Ethics”, would discover a brief outline of how and why ethics has again come to be understood as a practical as well as a theoretical undertaking across the last four decades of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first, and in some measure as the kind of aid to practical decision-making conjured up by phrases such as “Moral Sciences”. The chapter covers six major areas: intergenerational and population ethics, medical ethics, animal ethics, development ethics, environmental ethics (see also Attfield, 2003), and the ethics of war. (Business ethics is sadly omitted, although Attfield has written on the ethics of work and employment elsewhere (Attfield, 2001)). This chapter in particular is accessible and easy for the general reader to grasp and benefit from, even for those not taking degrees in philosophy or ethics. However, a rather greater commitment to the serious study of philosophy proper is needed to deal with the detailed and rigorous analysis of concepts and theories present in some of the other sections. But nothing less is to be expected of students who have chosen to study philosophy and for whose needs this book is designed. Since the days of Socrates, philosophy has never been an easy option, and this book reflects the challenges implicit in its study, as well as a helping hand along the road to addressing those challenges.

After treating Applied Ethics the focus moves on to Meta-Ethics, and to cognitivism, realism and competing theories. Some teachers and courses may prefer to skip this more challenging chapter. But in doing so they will miss much of the fun of doing moral philosophy. For example, does language about what ought to be done collapse when it fails to motivate, and should it be replaced with ought-language which is less demanding? The section on “internalism” and “externalism” guides the reader past numerous pitfalls and man-traps and towards some tenable answers, adopting elements of both of these opposed stances or positions, despite their apparently intractable opposition. And this approach turns out to cohere with the account given in this chapter of what there is reason to do, and why we ought to do what morality commends. Even meta-ethics, it turns out, can prove rewarding.

The final chapter, which concerns issues surrounding Free Will and Responsibility, is given a historical structure, enabling the reader to discover how awareness of the problem of human freedom first dawned, and later developed in recognizable ways with a clear continuity from this ancient awareness right through to the present. The first section returns us to Aristotle, with his admirable analysis of deliberation and of choice, and then to the Hellenistic philosophers Epicurus, who noticed the

problem just mentioned and attempted to solve it, and the Stoics, who struggled against all-comers in their efforts to reconcile their ethics and their determinism. Subsequent sections concern early modern debates involving Hobbes, Hume, Kant and Thomas Reid, all seeking to understand how human freedom can co-habit with laws of nature, and then the debates of the more recent period, when Darwinian evolution came on the scene, and later quantum indeterminacy as well, and depict the attempts of Patrick Nowell-Smith, to give a compatibilist interpretation to “could have done otherwise”, well-rebutted, as Attfield argues, by the counter-analysis of J.L. Austin. Compatibilism claims that belief in human freedom and determinism are compatible, but is itself found to generate insuperable problems. The final section indicates implications of even more recent thought, including Mary Midgley’s exposition (Midgley, 1994) of how mammalian evolution prepares the way for the kind of contextually constrained freedom necessary for ethical decision-making, and thus for the presuppositions of ethical discourse.

What the Companion Website Adds

The book’s “companion website” (<http://philosophy.attfield.continuumbooks.com>) includes endorsements from leading philosophers, and resources for students and their teachers. It is here in particular that students are encouraged to do ethics for themselves. For every section there are bullet-point summaries, sets of learning objectives and essay titles, together with related lists of reading. There are also powerpoint presentations consisting of slides for the use of instructors, once again one display for every section. (It would be quite easy for a bilingual teacher to translate one or more of these powerpoint displays into their other language; one lecturer in a Spanish-speaking country is currently using some of these materials in this way. It is of course even easier for teachers of English-speaking students to download and use the powerpoints, if equipped with copies of the book for the sake of the continuity that it offers and of the availability of the complete argument therein.) For some chapters there are case studies, charts and, for the section on Aristotle, Multiple Choice Questions. The various sections of the book and the website could be used either separately or as part of longer courses, and could be taken in various orders of succession, according to local needs and syllabuses. Other books by Attfield, especially *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics*, used in combination with the same companion website, could be used to clarify issues further (including challenging issues such as those of meta-ethics), and to assist study and written work.

As I have contended above, some sections of this book are perforce challenging ones. However, instructors who deploy the resources of the companion website in their teaching, and in particular its powerpoint displays, will discover how the book’s themes can be encapsulated in nuggets of illuminating prose, capable of grabbing the attention of students and inspiring them to studying the text and some of the suggested further reading. Taught in this way, even meta-ethics can come alive, and its importance be recognized.

Conclusion

This book certainly includes some challenging sections, such as those on meta-ethics, but its various chapters interlock well into a textbook, eminently usable for a variety of academic

courses on ethics. Besides its uses as a textbook, and it throws new light on ethics in at least three ways. Firstly, the historical sections (found in the first and last chapters), illuminate the origin and development of crucial ideas, and give a much-needed perspective to the central chapters with their thematic expositions and arguments. Secondly, the study of moral standing and of intrinsic value in the second chapter allows the reader to grasp how normative ethics need not be confined to the interests of contemporary human beings, but can take into account the impacts of our actions, our omissions and our policies on future generations and on non-human species. Thirdly, the chapter on applied ethics shows how ethicists in six different fields have advanced the application of ethical theory to key fields of practice, and in places itself contributes to that application. While the section on medical ethics is a paradigm of exposition and shows how the theories of the rest of the book can be related to clinical practice of an ethical kind, the sections on development ethics and on environmental ethics (perhaps the fields for which Attfield is best known) bring to the reader's attention contributions of his own, buried away in learned journals or in earlier and longer books.

I am certain that all this excellent material would have been an enormous help to me as a student at Cambridge, and later at London University, when I was under pressure to understand ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and their continuing influence, and to deal with complex ideas in later modern philosophy, such as those of Hume, Kant and Mill. Many of the debates discussed in this book had not then taken place, but many of both the historical and the thematic sections of this

book could enlighten students of any decade. Students new to philosophy, or with limited experience of studying this subject, often need the kind of assistance available in this volume, especially when they face deadlines, or are puzzled by perplexing concepts, theories or arguments. Moreover, even forty years on from my first forays into philosophy at Cambridge, the material presented in this book opens up new vistas into this often difficult and controversial subject. Attfield's book has been enthusiastically received by Mary Midgley and other leading philosophers, such as Dieter Birnbacher (Düsseldorf) and Vittorio Hösle (Notre Dame, Indiana). In my view it fully deserves their enthusiastic welcome.

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