

reviewed by

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QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW to lead one's life and how one should relate to others have of course been important issues for philosophers since antiquity. However, for some time during the last century, it at least appeared to many that such issues were about to be relegated to just being a part of the history of the subject, the idea being that philosophers should be preoccupied with non-normative aspects of ethics instead. Quite a few of the philosophers featured in this collection of 18 interviews with leading normative ethicists entered philosophy at this time and then played a part in the growth of normative ethics into a central philosophical discipline once again.

It should be said straight away that the interviews featured in this volume are not individualized; rather, the participants have all been asked to answer the same five questions. Although there are great differences in style between them (some are quite general, some focus almost exclusively on the person's own work; some are quite long, some rather short; some answer the questions one by one, some integrate their answers), there are no follow-up questions, a fact that makes the interviews a bit more like essays on five themes than real interviews – not that there is necessarily anything wrong with that. Three of the interviewees are women (which is not much, but at the same time just represents the state of the discipline). All but two of the interviewees come from the English-speaking world, and the focus is on the development of normative ethics in the UK and USA especially.

The first question is biographical, about why these people were drawn to philosophy in general and normative ethics in particular, and, as one might suspect, the answers are quite diverse. Some are deeply personal, like Torbjörn Tännsjö's account of how events in his own life led him to form an enduring concern about the moral status of killing. Some might be difficult to understand for people outside of philosophy, like Fred Feldman's story about how he was fascinated by the puzzle of contrary to duty imperatives, as laid out by his teacher Roderick Chisholm, and of how his interest in that logical puzzle drew him into decades of work on topics within normative ethics. Some, like Jeff MacMahan, clearly consider normative ethics the most important discipline within philosophy, thus being strongly committed to it, while others, like Onora O'Neill and Janet Radcliffe Richards, recognize when looking back at their careers that they have been doing much of their

work within the field, but that this is just how things happened to turn out. Even though there is not a lot of diversity in the cultural backgrounds of the interviewees, their answers to this question in particular still showcase what a range of temperaments, personalities, and interests can still bring people to a subject like normative ethics.

The second topic concerns the role of normative ethics within moral philosophy in general and this is where quite a few interviewees become rather programmatic, which in fact is one of the more interesting parts of this book. Philosophers in the analytic tradition – and normative ethicists are no exception – usually tend to dive straight into the action and spend little time on the methodology of the subject or on couching the investigation in its broader context. Perhaps this is simply due to the fact that it is just so very hard to say substantive and detailed things about such matters, but this also means that this type of book, where broader brush strokes are possible, actually provides a good opportunity to talk about methodology. Of course, many philosophers today would agree that our everyday intuitions provide some kind of starting-point, but even then the question remains how to proceed from that. Ingmar Persson argues that even if you should start by identifying core components of common sense, normative ethics can still be radically revisionist. The method he suggests is largely destructive: by subjecting parts of common sense to rational scrutiny, much of it will have to be rejected. Presumably, what is left standing forms the basis of the ethic that we should adopt. In contrast, Thomas Hurka outlines a structural approach which largely aims at systematizing everyday thought rather than restructuring it, and John Skorupski seems rather sceptical about the prospects for producing a better structure of thinking that can then be applied to more specific issues; in fact, he thinks that even if the normative sources of common-sense morality cannot be philosophically reconciled, this does not mean that any of them should be given up.

The next question is about the impact that the sciences might have on ethics. This is an issue that has gained more and more significance in recent years with the rise of experimental philosophy. Today, many philosophers clearly think that even normative ethics should be thoroughly informed by the sciences in general and moral psychology and evolutionary theory in particular. However, the majority position is still that, while there are aspects to which the sciences are relevant, normative ethics is essentially about another domain than what the sciences deal with and therefore can, and perhaps even ultimately must, be done from the comfort of one's armchair. Most of the philosophers participating here represent the more traditional approach, according to which the empirical sciences still have fairly limited bearing on normative ethics. Michael Slote is perhaps the clearest exception, and his piece is really one long argument for psychology as a starting-point for normative ethics; he especially emphasizes the findings of Carol Gilligan and suggests that care ethics should not just be seen as localized theory but should be

explored as a general approach to ethics. Roger Crisp cites the work of Stephen Stich and John Doris approvingly and emphasizes the role of history and social anthropology in coming to understand the role of morality in human society, but even on his picture the role of the sciences would still seem to be located mainly in the background. Peter Vallentyne notes that normative economics and social choice theory should be of interest to philosophers, but then again, these are hardly empirical sciences. The most radical suggestion is probably put forward by Elizabeth Anderson, who suggests that we should conceive of both normative ethics and the social sciences as elucidations of our self-understandings, which would mean eschewing the idea that these two disciplines are primarily located at different sides of the fact/value distinction; instead, there should be a reciprocal relation between the two. Methodology aside, there is, however, one type of impact that most philosophers should be able to agree on, as noted by Peter Singer: advances in embryology and medicine have already opened up new areas of normative discussion and will in all likelihood continue to do so.

The fourth question provides an opportunity for the interviewees to put forward their ideas about what parts or topics in normative ethics are the most neglected. While some do make specific suggestions here, like Gerald Dworkin arguing that the pragmatics of moral statements need more study (in spite of the long history of thought on moral language, the focus has been almost solely on the semantics and syntax), but many of the philosophers represented are more careful or general in their answers. Jan Narveson half-jokingly suggests that more things need to be neglected, because there is just such an immense amount of work being done today that almost no issue is really neglected. Specific issues aside, Wayne Sumner notes that normative ethics seems to operate with a rolling wall of about 30 or 40 years and that philosophical works then simply fall into collective neglect; ultimately, when a century or so has passed, parts of the past will come into view again, as parts of the prehistory of the subject. Of course, one might argue that at least in normative ethics, the fact that people now rarely look further back than the 1970s is mostly because several decades in the twentieth century were simply lost time for normative ethics. Nevertheless, Sumner's point still brings out the fact that even if this is to some extent true, it is also no doubt in part a construction of history that serves as an excuse for not studying certain philosophers (Sumner specifically mentions the work of Richard Hare).

Finally, the last question is about what the most important task for normative ethics is and what the prospects for progress are. Perhaps not surprisingly, since an answer to the first part of the question risks coming out as self-serving and an answer to the second part risks coming out as purely speculative, this is a question that most of the interviewees deal with fairly briefly. David Heyd worries about the fragmentation of moral philosophy – the increasing movement towards more and more sub-fields and more and more specialized research – and argues that an

important task is to bring normative theory and applied ethics into a dialogue with each other, since at the moment they seem to be drifting apart. Larry Temkin is rather optimistic about how substantial progress can be made regarding particular applied issues, although when it comes to both the deeper theoretical issues and the prospects for normative ethics helpfully guiding political decision-making, he settles for simply expressing hope, albeit a very faint hope in the latter case.

All in all, this is a very stimulating light read; perhaps not light enough to be fully accessible to those who have no background in philosophy or normative ethics at all, but definitely accessible to philosophy students, while still potentially rewarding for those doing research within the discipline. Given the format of the book, it goes without saying that nothing is ever fleshed out in any great detail, but with such a strong list of philosophers it also goes without saying that there is a lot of value to be found here both in terms of understanding the subject as a discipline and in terms of the inclusion of a wide range of thoughts and suggestions on a wide range of issues.