

Essays in Philosophy

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Book Review

The Continental Ethics Reader, edited by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton. Routledge, 2003. 320 pages. Hardcover \$106, paperback \$36.95. ISBN 0415943302.

The aim of this anthology is to remedy the gap in the numerous anthologies on ethics currently available that either omit the work by Continental philosophers or restrict their contribution to the works by a few Existentialists. In undertaking this task Calarco and Atterton have succeeded adequately. This text is the first of its kind, and based on the broad selection of materials they have compiled, it is sure to find use not only in philosophical class rooms, but also in literary and culture studies classes as well. Aside from the brief general introduction, each selection is accompanied by a short résumé of the author's life and work, where the selected piece fits in with that body of work, and what the principal argument of the piece is. These introductions are clearly aimed at orienting those not already acquainted with the field, and will prove somewhat useful for introductory courses. The anthology does have limitations, however, but it is premature to discuss these before at least some examination of the selection of materials. So let us first turn to these selections, which are grouped in five parts according to generally recognized schools in Continental philosophy.

The first part is on Phenomenology and presents a fair selection of texts from this tradition. It begins with the most famous section from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, namely the so called master-slave dialectic in the section on "Lordship and Bondage." It might have been nice to include the previous section on desire, but the selection itself, though dense, is adequate and points the way to the mediated constitution of the self that undergirds Hegel's ethics. The only serious question here is: why not include something of Hegel's actual ethical philosophy from the section on Spirit? Such an inclusion would have given the abstract discussion some substance, and is a significant contribution in itself. Following the selection from Hegel is a brief selection, paragraphs 43-44, and 48-52, from Edmund Husserl's (in)famous fifth meditation in the *Cartesian Meditations* concerning the empathetic constitution of the other. The selection reviews how it is that one comes to know that another person is not like other objects in the world, such as rocks or trees, and it is superbly edited, since it skips over the intermediary sections that cover issues not directly relevant to this topic. Furthermore, since Husserl never developed an ethical position explicitly, this is perhaps the best selection available. My only concern is that a teacher will have to guide students through the Husserlianese that is everywhere in the piece. Following Husserl are a series of selections from his famous students. The first is a selection from Max Scheler's *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*. Here again the selection is well chosen, for while it leaves out the discussion of the role of feelings in relation to values in Scheler's ethics, it nicely explains the order and relation among the values themselves, and so makes an excellent choice for an anthology. A selection from Husserl's most famous student, Martin Heidegger follows Scheler. The choice is paragraph twenty-

six from *Being and Time*, which concerns the relation *Dasein* has with others, viz. that *Dasein* is always with other, and that even solitude is only a modification of this prior “intersubjective” relation. In itself, the piece has little to do with ethics directly, much like the selections from Hegel and Husserl, but it serves as a nice counterpoint to the work by Husserl before it, and Levinas, which follows. Like the choice from Husserl, however, a teacher will be necessary to guide students through the notorious, if in this case somewhat attenuated, Heideggerianese. Finally, the selection from Levinas, the 1957 essay “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” is likely to be the best single excerpt available to summarize his thoughts on ethics, and serves equally well as a culminating point for almost all the essays in the first part.

The difficulty with the groupings in the first part, however, should now be clear. Only the work by Scheler and Levinas explicitly concern ethical topics. The selections by Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger all concern a meta-ethical topic: whether individual selfhood is primary or whether the other, understood broadly so as to encompass sociality, is. The rationale for the selection of these authors is clear, since they make up the background to which Levinas is responding, but it also points to the inadequacy of the groups themselves. Why not group them under a selection entitled: the ethics of alterity? Since Scheler has very little to do with this group, perhaps it would have made more sense to include his selection in another part. Unfortunately, the same grouping problem continues in the next part.

Part two of the anthology is on Existentialism, and begins appropriately with Kierkegaard’s work, taking the section “Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?” from *Fear and Trembling*. It presents the relation of religious demands to the ethical law, and, like the selection from Nietzsche after it, the piece also presents a position beyond good and evil. The difficulty, of course, is that it neglects the dimension of ethics proper as well as that of the aesthete, which interestingly falls beneath good and evil. Still, the selection is well chosen for a single piece. The first ten sections taken from Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals*, follows, and like the excerpt from Kierkegaard, is an excellent choice in itself—being one of the clearest in his whole *oeuvre*—but fails to present an outline of his whole thought. Particularly, one gets no sense of Nietzsche’s affirmative position—i.e. the creative “yes” of the child. Such a selection would have been helpful not only in providing a fuller account of Nietzsche, but it would have dovetailed nicely with the later selections from Sartre and Foucault. A lengthy selection Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* follows, and unlike the previous two selections does a nice job both in outlining Buber’s ethical position on the priority of the relation of self to the other, and in providing a counterpoint to Sartre, who follows. The selection from Sartre is from his essay “Existentialism is a Humanism,” and it is nice to see a correct translation of the title for once. There are numerous phases to Sartre’s incomplete writings on ethics, and this one, which emphasizes what Charles Taylor has called the ethics of authenticity, is a good choice for an anthology. Furthermore, since it emphasizes an individualist or subjective approach to ethics, it is dialectically related to Buber and Levinas, before it and the second selection from Heidegger, which follows. The placement of Heidegger’s 1947 “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” however, is a bit puzzling. The work is well after Heidegger’s turn (*Kehre*), which is almost never put after 1938, and so bears little relation to the movement of existentialism. In fact, it is here that Heidegger most clearly takes up Sartre’s position in order to reject it as missing the point. Though there is talk of “ek-sistence,” this borders on equivocation with what is usually taken to be Heidegger’s earlier existential position in *Being and Time*. The piece itself does provide a nice account of Heidegger’s possible fundamental ethics, but this raises a second point of concern. The

introduction to the piece is the shortest in the book, but it should probably be the longest, since it ought at least make mention of Heidegger's notorious support for the NSDAP, along with his later statements concerning the equivalence of gas chambers and agriculture, or that Jews merely succumb but do not die (read: do not have fundamental death) in gas chambers. To omit all discussion of the topic appears irresponsible—especially in an anthology on ethics. If a second edition appears, this is an oversight that must be remedied.

If the first two sections had a few difficulties with coherence at an ethical level, it is with the third section that the problem becomes serious. The first selection is Walter Benjamin's 1921 essay "Critique of Violence." The selection is well chosen for exhibiting how Benjamin understood the employment of violence, but this topic seems to be a question of applied ethics, generally, and specifically in Benjamin's context, it is principally a political question (though it has some religious resonance as well). Does such a narrowly focused question deserve a place in this anthology, especially since it is more political than ethical? A similar question could be posed for the selection from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* entitled "Enlightenment and Morality." In itself, the selection is excellent in exhibiting the argument that Enlightenment instrumental reason finds its fullest expression in Sade's *Juliette*. Certainly, then, it can be read as a meta-ethical critique on the use of (instrumental) reason for determining morals. But it provides little by way of an ethical position. Also, we find here a discrepancy in the audience the editors have in mind (i.e. introductory students), and those who would be able to read the text, since there are numerous phrases in other languages (e.g. French and Latin) that ought to have been translated, at least in the footnotes, to maintain an introductory focus but were not. A selection from Herbert Marcuse's 1964 *One-Dimensional Man* follows, and like the preceding excerpts does an excellent job in capturing the central thesis of the work, in this case how the progression of alienation in late capitalist societies through the use of reason in its technological capacity has reached such a point that the space for a critical consciousness has been abrogated, making for a one dimensional existence. Like the two preceding essays, however, the question that must be asked here is whether this is really an ethical and not a political essay. It might be argued that it is meta-ethical, again, insofar as it addresses how our positive freedom (i.e. the freedom to achieve our goals) has been cramped, but does that warrant its inclusion in an anthology on ethics? The last selection in this part is Jürgen Habermas' essay "On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason," and is excellent both in providing a succinct exposition of Habermas' form of discourse ethics and in relating directly to the topic of ethics. Its inclusion in the anthology is certainly a strong point of the book.

The part that follows the selections on Critical Theory is devoted to Postmodernism, and makes for an interesting if sometimes odd collection of works. The first selection is Bataille's 1933 essay "The Notion of Expenditure," and while it is one of his earlier pieces, it has the merits both of (relative) clarity, and concision in presenting what he will later call a general economy. The piece, however, seems to address questions of ethical psychology, or perhaps serves as a political critique. What is certain is that it is unclear how exactly it bears on ethical questions. The piece by Levinas that follows, "Substitution" from *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, by contrast, is certainly an ethical work. It is a nice selection for exhibiting how the self only attains identity through relation with the Other, and so places the self in an position of responsibility for the other. Both selections from Levinas are excellent, and certainly a highlight of the anthology. Following Levinas are two brief excerpts from Jean-François Lyotard's 1983 *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. These

excerpts are brought together to form a single relatively brief selection, the first covering the notion of the differend, and the second obligation. These pieces are well suited to introductory audiences, since they touch on concrete examples to make rather abstract points. Additionally, there is a nice bit of continuity here with Levinas and Kierkegaard, though little at an ethical level with the selection that follows: portions from a rather famous interview taken in 1983 with Michel Foucault. The interview covers his elusive “aesthetics of existence.” While the editors *do* mention how this is related to some of Nietzsche’s positive claims concerning the need to give style to one’s character, it would have been nice to have read those selections before turning to this piece. The result is that the work sits rather oddly with its surrounding selections. In itself, the piece is probably the best available single source for Foucault’s understanding of the aesthetics of existence, and though it can only provide a jejune outline of what Foucault had in mind, given the limitations of space this is satisfactory for an introduction to his work. Jacques Derrida’s essay “Passions” follows Foucault, and develops (one hesitates to say argues for) what could be understood as a radicalization of Levinas’ position on the Other through an elaboration of the secret. The difficulty, which is also a difficulty that faces the selection from Lyotard, is that it presupposes some earlier work—in this case that on *différance*. While something more by way of introduction would have been helpful for introductory students, the piece is nevertheless well chosen as an introduction to Derrida’s ethics. The selection that ends the part on postmodernism is “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” or what makes up chapter four from Richard Rorty’s 1989 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Since it is the only piece in the work written by an analytically trained, though certainly continentally inflected, philosopher, it is the clearest in the whole book. The difficulties, like the other pieces in this section, are that it seems (a) to bear more on meta-ethical questions (e.g. whether we should be trying to answer standard liberal questions such as “Why is cruelty wrong?”), and (b) to have little ethical relation to the other selections in the part.

The final part of the anthology is on Psychoanalysis and Feminism—a rather *ad hoc* category, so I will treat them separately. The section on Psychoanalysis begins with a selection from Sigmund Freud’s 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and has been entitled “The Super-Ego.” The selection focuses on the role of the Super-Ego and its production of guilt in society. Though the editors have found something crucial to Freud’s account of ethics here, it is not the central point. What the literature on Freudian ethics focuses on, rather, is the problematic status the role of the Super-Ego has in relation to the law, which is to be understood, Freud tells us in *The Ego and the Id*, as a categorical imperative. Freud’s ethics, much like the selection of Lacan’s that follows, then, is something beyond the moral law, and I think that there are better selections from Freud’s work to make this point. The selection from Lacan that follows, “On the Moral Law” is taken from the famous seventh seminar conducted from 1959 to 1960 (the lecture itself was delivered on December 23, 1959). The text is, for all the notorious difficulty of Lacan’s style of writing, relatively clear, though the reader will likely finish bewildered concerning what Lacan’s ethics is. An adequate selection of texts to answer that question would likely require a separate anthology in itself, so as a single selection this is probably the best one could do, since it establishes the relation of *das Ding* to the law as the central concern of Lacan’s ethics. What follows Lacan are the first two sections of the first chapter of *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and it is likely to be the most bewildering selection in the whole anthology for two reasons. First, the discussion of desiring-production and the schizophrenic makes little sense without some understanding of Deleuze’s own conception of being both as univocally predicated and as creative. Here, perhaps a brief discussion of these notions would have gone a long way in

clarifying the text. Second, the relation of this discussion to the topic of ethics is exiguous, even given the brief discussion of anti-fascism in the résumé before the excerpt. The use to which Deleuze and Guattari's work has been put in ethical discussions, for example in gender studies, requires minimally a discussion of de- and re-territorialization, and these notions do not appear here. It would have been nice had both these points been addressed. The section on psychoanalysis as a whole, however, has a relatively nice ethical coherence, since Lacan explicitly understands himself as reworking Freud's position, while Deleuze and Guattari understand themselves as responding critically to Freud.

What finishes out the anthology are three selections from the "French Feminists," namely Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva. The selection for Irigaray is from her 1984 *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and is entitled "The Ethics of Sexual Difference." It elaborates how sexual difference proceeds from the passion of wonder so that men and women can come into a relationship without dominating or possessing each other. The broad line of resonance with Levinas here is clear, and the piece does the job of an introduction well. The selection from Cixous is her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," which examines as well as enacts the possibility of *écriture féminine*. There are ellipses in the selection, but the purpose of the piece is still nicely preserved. Also, the work nicely touches on some of the issues of queer theory—if only briefly. I have concern, however, with the writing style, which would certainly make the piece difficult for beginning students, as well as how this piece relates to the topic of ethics rather than politics. This is a concern (if slightly less so) for Irigaray's work as well, and perhaps this could have been addressed better in the introductions to the pieces. The final selection by Kristeva, "Women's Time" is a well chosen piece, both for its clarity in addressing Kristeva's ambiguous relation to feminist philosophy—at least the first two generations, and for providing a succinct account of many of her central feminist concerns for a third generation of feminism that embraces the multiplicities of each woman in order to move beyond the failures of the first generations. While all three pieces from the feminists share a good deal of methodological overlap with the psychoanalysts and anti-psychoanalysts (Deleuze and Guattari), their continuity at an ethical level is assured by a broad commitment to Levinas, and so have a fairly sustained commitment if considered in this way.

From this brief review of the selections, it is clear, I believe, that the anthology does provide good excerpts from many of the central contributors to the field of Continental ethics, and it is for this reason that I believe it will certainly find use in classrooms that seek to introduce considerations on ethics from a Continental perspective. I have also made clear, however, that I have a number of reservations about this anthology. Many of the selections themselves are simply too short, or perhaps not the right ones to give a fair outline of a thinker's position on ethics. Perhaps these were simple limitations of space given to the editors by the publisher. Still, such an excuse does not annul the fact that one often gets only half or even a third of a thinker's account (in the case of Kierkegaard) on ethics. Following on this point, the introductory essays are often too basic to be helpful even to an introductory student, since they do not provide the requisite *philosophical*, rather than historical, framework for understanding the piece. For such a student, what is said is not enough, and for more advanced students, it is superfluous. Third, and in a similar vein, it would have been nice to have seen a longer general introductory essay that puts the works by these Continental ethicists in some sort of dialogue with their Analytic counterparts, or at least some of the historical figures, such as Aristotle and Kant, from whom both traditions draw. From the review of the selections, it should be clear that many if not most of the essays do not address ethics

directly, but instead address meta-ethical questions such as the source of value, or whether there is such a thing as personal identity. The reason for this focus is central to understanding Continental ethics, since Continental philosophers tend to be generally suspicious about our contemporary ethical language, and fear that even engaging in discussions about the good or the right will commit one to a fundamental mistake that risks, for example, perpetuating the hegemony of patriarchy or the dominance of Eurocentric thinking. An extended discussion on this point would have been valuable in its own right, as well as serving nicely to orient readers not already familiar with this sometimes excessively obscure landscape. Finally, and in my opinion most importantly, is the difficulty in grouping the thinkers themselves, which has been touched on briefly in the above survey of the parts of the anthology, but I would like here to elaborate a more extensive account of what might have been done by the editors, and what professors might find useful for teaching their classes.

Since the anthology is aimed at a broad audience in the humanities, the editors have arranged the selections according to a family resemblance approach, rather than according to ethical schools. While some of these categories clearly involve *ad hoc* groups (e.g. Psychoanalysis and Feminism), the real difficulty is that these fairly normal categories in Continental philosophy serve well at a methodological level but translate rather poorly into ethical groups. If one were to regroup the selections, one would find in that the works by Hegel, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger (both selections), Buber, Levinas (both selections), Derrida, Lyotard, Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva (thirteen in all) are representative of a school of thought that might be called the ethics of alterity. Since there are twenty-six selections in the anthology, exactly half of the book is devoted to this school of thought. Here we see the imbalance of the work. Certainly there are other ethical schools that have something significant to contribute, such as the school of value theory or axiology, but only Scheler's work is representative here. Why not include something from Nicolai Hartman, Karol Wojtola, or Bernard Lonergan, who all contribute to the same debate in valuable ways? The selections from Critical Theory had little to contribute to ethics directly, save the work of Habermas. What could have been done was to replace the section on critical theory with a section on discourse ethics, which would have included, for example, the trenchant criticisms of Habermas by Karl-Otto Apel. Furthermore, it could have included the work by Enrique Dussel, who has perhaps the most significant criticism of the whole ethical tradition (Continental and Analytic) as Eurocentric, and who makes his point from a discourse-theoretical perspective. Since his work also concerns Latin American Philosophy, he would have contributed additionally to a discussion on race theory that is clearly missing in the anthology. Similarly, one could have grouped Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari together under the title of the ethics of authenticity, and this would have provided much more continuity among these thinkers as well as direct which selections would have been better to include. Furthermore, it is no ethical strain to include thinkers such as Freud, Lacan, and perhaps Žižek in a single school, since beyond methodological continuity, one can see an ethical continuity in a concern for the relation of the moral law to the real. Finally, I find the omissions of Alain Badiou and Paul Ricoeur to be serious. One can understand the gravity of such omissions only when one approaches the field from an ethical rather than methodological perspective, since both thinkers provide some of the strongest criticisms of the school of the ethics of alterity, and it would be nice to have a balanced review of that school's contributions. Furthermore, given the rising interest in Badiou's philosophy, the anthology now seems to be a bit dated.

In conclusion, there is much in this book that recommends it for classroom use. Anyone interested in providing an alternative to many of the contemporary debates in analytic ethics, or those who seek to discuss ethical topics in gender studies or literary theory will do well to look to this book. Since it is the first of its kind, however, it is certainly not perfect, and anyone interested in providing a course on Continental ethics would do well to supplement the materials provided here with some of the others suggested above. My recommendation of the book, then, is qualified, or rather specific to its planned use, and I hope to find either a second edition of the work, or a more comprehensive alternative that might merit an unqualified recommendation.

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