

Encyclopedia of Ethics



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Ethics, Vol. 103, No. 4 (Jul., 1993), 807-810.

Stable URL:

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BOOK REVIEWS

Becker, Lawrence C., and Becker, Charlotte B., eds. *Encyclopedia of Ethics*. 2 vols. New York: Garland Publishing. Pp. xxxii + 1,462. \$150.00 (cloth).

The *Encyclopedia of Ethics* is a monumental achievement. Six years in the making, it consists of more than one million words, divided into 435 articles, by 267 authors. Lawrence Becker and Charlotte Becker, assisted by an editorial board of fifty consulting editors, have produced an encyclopedia that has no modern rival and will be the standard work of reference on ethics in the English language until at least the end of this century. The critical remarks that follow should be read against the background of my admiration for this indisputably major accomplishment, to which every scholar and student in ethics will want to have ready access.

What should an encyclopedia of ethics be? The first decision anyone embarking on a work under that title must ask is, Will it be an encyclopedia of different ethical ideas and practices, as recorded throughout history and in different cultures today; or will it be an encyclopedia of ethics in the sense of moral philosophy, that is, in the spirit of Henry Sidgwick's understanding of the study of ethics as the attempt to obtain "systematic and precise general knowledge of what ought to be" (*The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. [London: Macmillan, 1907], p. 1)? The only other major encyclopedia of ethics with which I am familiar, the *Encyclopedia of Ethics and Religion* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), edited by James Hastings and published in 1908–26 leaned toward the former definition of its role. The present is slanted in the other direction. It is, as the editors say in their introduction, "a reference work in philosophy addressed to an audience of scholars and university students" (p. vii). They add that it is also "fully accessible to others with a serious interest in the field" (p. vii). Although that claim is generally accurate, the chief target audience is clearly staff and students in university departments of philosophy and in related disciplines like bioethics or environmental ethics.

The next decision is the extent to which the encyclopedia will be international in scope. Here the editors tell us that the core of their work is ethics "as it is practiced among English-speaking academics" (p. vii). If that was the editors' intention, they have failed to avoid incorporating a distinct American slant into their work. With all but five of the fifty-member board of consulting editors drawn from American universities, this is not surprising. I cannot imagine anyone but an American editor thinking that the entries for Ralph Waldo Emerson or Josiah Royce should have more space than that of W. D. Ross. The American perspective also colors the content of several articles. A reader of Gertrude Ezorsky's article on "Discrimination" could easily gain the impression that this is only an issue in the United States. The essay on "Mass Media" by Virginia Held repeatedly refers to U.S. practices. The author of "Reproductive Technologies" discusses whether there is a right to reproduce by referring to the U.S. Constitution, but to no other constitutional document or tradition; she gives the views of the American Fertility Society, but of no other professional association; and she mentions that until recently no registry

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of in vitro fertilization results existed in the United States, but says nothing about whether such registries exist in other countries (they do).

English-speaking academics working in ethics belong to the tradition of Western philosophy, and the editors take this tradition as part of the core of their work. The *Encyclopedia* includes within its pages what is, in effect, a book of 60,000 words on the history of Western ethics, written in thirteen parts, by different authors, from the pre-Socratics to the present time. There are also individual entries on some quite minor historical figures in the Western tradition. There seems to be a predilection for German philosophers who wrote on ethics, lived in the eighteenth century, and were called Christian: for otherwise it is not easy to see why Crusius, Thomasius, and Wolff all needed their own entries, rather than a brief mention in the historical essay on that period in Western philosophy.

Beyond the concentric rings of its American/English-speaking/Western core, the *Encyclopedia of Ethics* includes survey articles on both the history and the current status of philosophical ethics in other parts of the world and individual entries on many historical figures outside the core. The coverage here is uneven. Chinese philosophy does best. In addition to a fine survey article spread over twenty-four columns and articles on Confucian and Taoist ethics, there are separate entries on several Chinese thinkers, including Chu Hsi, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Hsün Tzu, Lao Tzu, Mencius, Mo Tzu, and Wang Yang-Ming. The last of these, a late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Chinese exponent of an interpretation of Confucian ethics, is discussed over five and a half columns, which is more space than is allocated to Confucius himself. In contrast, Islamic ethics seems to have been a victim of recent American hostility toward nations that profess that creed. If that remark is not intended altogether seriously, it is difficult to see any other reason why the survey article on this philosophically strong tradition should be not much longer than the article on just one figure in Chinese ethics, the aforementioned Wang Yang-Ming, and substantially shorter than the article on "Soviet Ethical Theory," a tradition which lasted for a much briefer period, is now little more than a historical curiosity, and for philosophical richness ought not to be mentioned in the same breath as the Islamic tradition. On top of this, the only Islamic figure to be granted a separate entry is Mohammad. Major Islamic philosophers like Ibn Sina (Avicenna to the scholastics), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and Miskawayh do not rate individual entries and receive only the briefest of mentions in the articles on Islamic ethics and (in the case of the first two) virtue ethics.

The treatment of Indian ethics falls in between that of Chinese and Islamic ethics. In addition to a general article on "India" there are essays on "Hindu ethics," "Jainism," and "Buddhist ethics," as well as on Buddha himself. Apart from Buddha, Gandhi is the only Indian figure on whom I could find an individual entry, but that may reflect the nature of the tradition. Jewish ethics is discussed in a more substantial survey article than that on Islamic ethics, but of historical Jewish ethical thinkers, only Maimonides receives an individual entry. Kwame Appiah contributes a tantalizingly brief survey of the ethical traditions of sub-Saharan Africa in an article entitled "Africa." At this level of generality, the line between descriptive anthropology and ethics becomes very hard to draw.

Inevitably, given the way in which ethical theory has developed in every literate culture, most of the articles are about the views of men on ethics. Only four women receive individual entries: Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Weil, and Mary Wollstonecraft. To draw attention to some less well known contributors, an article entitled "Women Moral Philosophers" by Mary Ellen Waithe contains short summaries of the lives and work of women from Phintys of Sparta to L. Susan Stebbing. The introductory paragraph of this article tells us that twentieth-century philosophers have been omitted, which makes the inclusion of Stebbing odd (she was fifteen at the commencement of the present century). The encyclopedia also includes a substantial article on feminist ethics.

The existence of survey articles as well as individual entries makes for a certain amount of repetition. Thus you can read about G. E. Moore's view of the indefinability of good in "Analytic Philosophy and Ethics" (Bernard Gert), "Moore" (Tom Regan), "Naturalism" (E. M. Adams), and in the appropriate article in the "History of Western Ethics" series (Alan Donagan). Although this kind of overlap is not easy to eliminate, one wonders if at least the historical survey articles could have been written in such a way as to avoid giving so many summary accounts of the work of figures dealt with elsewhere in the encyclopedia.

Once the scope of the work had been settled, the editors must have had some interesting decisions in deciding what topics to include. In their introduction they tell us that at one point they had a list of over 1,200 possible articles, which was pared down to 370 before it grew again to over 450. The range of possible articles on issues of ethical significance is almost limitless, and any choice could be criticized. Still, I cannot help wonder what the underlying principles of selection were. Why was "Bargaining" thought to require an article, while usury, which for four or five centuries was a central focus of Western ethical debate, does not even appear in the index? Nor is there an entry on the slippery slope argument in ethics: it is mentioned in one or two places, but does not receive the extended discussion that its importance in applied ethics would indicate. Sometimes the weighting appears to be toward topics of special interest to academics: at least I assume that is why there is a long article on ethical issues in the library and information professions, but none on the ethical issues of the allegedly oldest profession—prostitution is treated only incidentally, in articles on topics like libertarianism, rape, and sexual ethics. Similarly, "Plagiarism" rates an article, but blackmail does not. I welcome, however, the inclusion of an article on the neglected but important topic of agricultural ethics.

Despite these few questions that can be raised about particular inclusions or omissions, the *Encyclopedia* contains a generally comprehensive selection of entries on contemporary topics in applied ethics. It is also very strong on biographical entries on historical figures, especially those in the Western tradition. If it has a weakness, it is in allocating insufficient space for in-depth discussions of the major current issues in metaethics. Why, for example, should the article on "Skepticism in Ethics"—surely one of the central issues in ethics—be limited to two and a half pages? This is considerably less than the article on "Psychoanalysis," and even "Skepticism in Ancient Ethics" is described in a separate, slightly longer article.

To assess the quality of so many articles is more difficult. Many are clear and comprehensive summaries of the current state of an issue or a field. They will be a valuable resource for students and will be read by professional philosophers, not only for reference, but also for their intrinsic interest. Among these I single out (while hastening to add that this is not a complete list) Brian Barry on equality, John Broome on economic analysis, J. Baird Callicott on environmental ethics, Russell Hardin on rational choice theory, Alison Jaggar on feminist ethics, and David Lyons on Utilitarianism. There are also many shorter articles of considerable merit. The editors have been very successful in recruiting authors who are acknowledged authorities on their topics. These include Margaret Pabst Battin on suicide, Nancy (Ann) Davis on abortion, Gerald Dworkin on paternalism, Sissela Bok on deceit, R. B. Brandt on the ideal observer theory, Joel Feinberg on harm and offense, Alan Gewirth on rights, R. M. Hare on universalizability, Christine Korsgaard on Kant, Steven Lukes on individualism, Alasdair MacIntyre on virtue ethics, Onora O'Neill on international justice, Tom Regan on animals, Michael Stocker on internalism and externalism, and J. O. Urmson on emotivism.

On the other hand, for various reasons, some articles are less successful. The article on intuitionism discusses the objection that we disagree in our moral intuitions but omits the philosophically more interesting issue of how intuiting any kind of fact about the universe could in itself provide us with a reason for action. The essay on reproductive technologies is already showing its age in its comments on the lack of implementation of the "Warnock [sic] Report" and in its claim that egg freezing is rarely successful. The essay is also in error in stating that Warnock's was the first specially appointed government committee on reproductive technologies to issue a report (the reports of the Victorian government's Waller Committee were published between one and three years earlier).

Finally, I noticed a few flaws that should have been picked up in the production process. The name of the twelfth-century Arabic philosopher is given as Ibn Rushd in the article on Islamic ethics (p. 632) but as Ibn Ruoschd in the article on virtue ethics (p. 1279). The dates of birth also differ. The name of the founder of Islam is spelled Mohammad in the article on Islamic ethics, but Mohammed in the individual entry under his name. No doubt there are more errors of this kind that I failed to pick up. But such peccadilloes should not detract from the debt of gratitude that everyone working in ethics, from senior researchers to first-year students, owe to Lawrence Becker and Charlotte Becker for steering through to completion their mammoth and very worthwhile undertaking.

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