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Review: Moral Philosophy – A Contemporary Introduction, by Daniel R. DeNicola

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Daniel R. DeNicola, *Moral Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction*. Broadview Press, 2018. 316 pages, including index. ISBN 978-155481354-4 (paperback), \$35.95

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Daniel R. DeNicola's *Moral Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction* begins (pg. ix) with an anonymous reviewer's quote, paraphrased here: "The author of an introductory ethics textbook has an impossible task, creating a work both accessible to undergraduates and rigorous enough for philosophers." DeNicola can of course be forgiven for not achieving this impossible task. Still, some attempts are better than others. After surveying the text content, I explain why I discourage instructors from using this textbook in introductory ethics courses.

Chapter 1 outlines the domain and value of morality and criteria for assessing ethical theories. This and subsequent chapters are flanked by often fascinating, always complex, opening case studies, and open-ended closing questions likely to spark discussion. Chapter 2 explores historical connections between morality and religion, emphasizes divine command theory and its implications, and closes discussing morality without religion. Chapter 3 presents varieties of relativism and distinguishes each from ethical pluralism. Chapter 4 tracks historical debates over natural laws and rights and closes with discussion of Nussbaum's capabilities approach to rights. In Chapter 5 outlines ethical egoism through Hobbes, speculates about the possibility of altruism, and observes difficulties with testing ethical egoism as a theory. Chapter 6 is devoted to the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, as well as exegesis of Mill's work. Kant's deontology is the focus of Chapter 7, with exegesis of the *Groundwork*, followed by brief mention of Ross's moderate deontology. After a short interlude discussing evaluations of ethical theories, Chapter 8 tracks contractualism from Hobbes to Rawls to Scanlon. Virtue theory follows in Chapter 9, with mention of Confucius in passing to Aristotle's contributions, and MacIntyre's recent revival of the theory. Chapter 10 bridges emotions and morality through moral sentiment theories developed by Hutchinson, Hume, Smith, and Haidt. Chapter 11 introduces care ethics, Gilligan contra Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning, Kittay's analysis of the traditional roles of women as caregivers, the provenance of standpoint theory, and its discontents. Chapter 12 motivates particularism via trolley problems, defends ethical intuitionism from critics, and outlines Haidt's social intuitionist model for making moral judgments, after which Chapter 13 surveys standard metaethics positions, and the putative grounds of morality. Chapter 14 reflects on how to remain morally decent in the face of impossible moral demands, provides more criteria for assessing ethical theories, and a glossary defining bolded terms in the text.

As for evaluation, I think this text should not be used in introductory ethics courses. Charity demands careful evaluation, so I will explain. First, though a *contemporary* introduction to moral philosophy there is an absence of contemporary authors. Mill gets nearly a chapter devoted his utilitarianism, yet Singer – perhaps the most famous living utilitarian – is not mentioned as a contemporary defender. DeNicola's instructor Rawls is discussed at length, but neither Nozick nor Habermas – arguably his most famous opponents – are ever mentioned. To be fair, some contemporaries make it into discussion, e.g. Nussbaum, Scanlon. Still, the text falls short of covering *contemporary* moral philosophy.

Second, though a *contemporary introduction* to moral philosophy, DeNicola provides little practical guidance to students. Though he introduces criteria for assessing ethical theories which are

then deployed in later chapters (pgs. 12-3), DeNicola neither justifies the criteria nor explains how to use them. For example, DeNicola claims a moral theory should provide a satisfying account of supererogation. Does this mean one should jettison any ethical theory that does not? Surely not, some criteria carry more weight than others. DeNicola reveals awareness of such subtlety only when *at the end of the book* he observes the earlier criteria suggests no ethical theory presented in the text is better than any other. In response, he – again without justification or explanation – introduces *six further criteria* to avoid the impasse (pgs. 293-4), just before ending the book. Related, other diagnostic tests, e.g. naturalistic fallacy, Moore’s open question (pg. 263), are also introduced in later chapters, rather than earlier when they might be useful to students evaluating ethical theories. DeNicola here violates, I think, the plausible maxim: Introductory ethics texts should not be mystery novels. They should also not be obscure; while DeNicola defines several terms, some seem to have been given little thought, and are likely to generate confusion, e.g. “...*a priori*, that is, by reasoning alone” (pg. 149); “...*reductio ad absurdum* (a reduction of the position to absurdity)” (pg. 232) “...a woman whose...parents are a Latina and an African American, does she have multiple standpoints? (This is...the problem of *intersectionality*)” (pg. 232). Had more guidance been offered in applying assessment criteria, and more care taken with definitions, this *introductory* text would have been vastly improved.

Third, though a contemporary introduction to *moral philosophy*, there is an absence of philosophers outside the so-called analytic tradition. This may suggest that, for instance, Sartre or Levinas had nothing to add to moral philosophy. To be fair, thinkers outside this tradition make an appearance. DeNicola suggests, for example, Heidegger anticipated literature in the ethics of care (pg. 223) while acknowledging this may be a bit of a stretch. Still, including Heidegger here seems forced, and I suspect will be misleading to unfamiliar students. Similarly, Kierkegaard is mentioned as a “religious existentialist” who valorized moral heroes (pg. 282), seemingly without awareness of this label being contentious. To be fairer still, there is no discussion of Franz Fanon, Angela Davis, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, Maria Lugones, etc., oversights suggesting DeNicola is out of touch with recent trends in ethics towards diversifying content. I found this bolstered by DeNicola’s use of the outdated, potentially offensive, term ‘Negroes’ (pg. 139). Though initially following Kant by using the term, there seemed little gained by *DeNicola* using the term in the ensuing discussion. I am honestly quite surprised this made it past an editor.

Fourth, DeNicola’s text reads as an *opinionated* introduction, though this is not made explicit in the text. For example, DeNicola asserts ‘ethicists adhere to the maxim *ought implies can*’ (pg. 10), suggesting this is a widely held principle. This empirical claim is not obviously true (Henne, et. al., 2014). As another example, though DeNicola references Appiah’s *Experiments in Ethics*, he early on rejects descriptive ethics as not being of “philosophical concern” (pg. 9), apparently setting aside the entire field of experimental ethics. As yet another, DeNicola mentions some philosophers (he does not cite) claim empirical evidence (he does not cite) suggests the stability of character is a myth due to environmental influence on decision-making, but then retorts since “experimenters cannot test the same situation for the same person” (pg. 192) no causal relationship between environment and decisions can be determined. This retort suggests those philosophers DeNicola is targeting believe the empirical evidence mentioned established causal - rather than correlative - relationships. I would be surprised if this were so; I suspect a lack of charitable interpretation here. One last example in which DeNicola displays his philosophical predilections: while rebutting those who argue

contractualism undermines supererogation (pg. 168), he never actually explains *how* contractualism is supposed to undermine supererogation, *why* some object on this ground, or *who* these objectors are. These examples suggest DeNicola is pushing a specific line, away from experimental evidence, towards principled ethical theories. This would be more palatable, I think, if DeNicola had spent time engaging with opponents here, rather than asserting them away or perhaps misconstruing their arguments.

Lastly, even if we could put aside the text being an unbalanced, under-cited, opinionated, traditional cherry-picking of ethicists, I still could not recommend this textbook given the existence of superior texts covering similar content, e.g. Landau's *Fundamentals of Ethics*. For DeNicola's text adds little to traditional discussions, and merely rearranges content from others into boilerplate chapters. I can only close by again discouraging use of this text. DeNicola should have known better. Since he did not, we should.