Christine Swanton, *Target Centred Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 368 pages. ISBN 9780198861676. Hardback: £65.00.

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Christine Swanton’s book is an ambitious and stimulating attempt to systematise a non-eudemonistic branch of virtue ethics that she calls ‘target centred virtue ethics.’ By discussing views from the analytic and continental traditions alike (e.g., Hume, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Williams, McDowell, etc.), Swanton’s new book provides a resourceful metaphysical framework for her ethical theory as well as insightful discussions of its application to a range of theoretical issues. As such, the book is of interest to anyone working in metaethics, normative theories, and applied ethics.

The book consists of three parts, dealing with aspects required to build a systematic moral theory: a metaethical framework (*Part I: Metaphysics*, pp. 15-120), the theory itself (*Part II: Nature*, pp. 121-238) and its application to a sample of relevant cases (*Part III: Application*, pp. 239-318). This work is driven by Swanton’s conviction that “the time is ripe for alternative structures within which virtue ethical views can be expounded and defended” (p. 3). *Target Centred Virtue Ethics* is an excellent presentation of an alternative to existing theoretical models of virtue ethics.

The main features of Swanton’s virtue ethics are sketched in the introduction to the book, which is an essential key to understanding her proposal. Here, she delineates her three main theses. First, she introduces *Thick Concept Centralism* (TCC), the idea that the “concepts of right and ought are not logically prior to and independent of … thick concepts” (p. 5) such as “kind, just, callous, generous, humiliating, manipulative” (p. 5). Her second thesis is the *Centrality of Virtuousness* (CV), namely the idea that “rightness and/or excellence are understood through the virtue/vice notions” (p. 5). Finally, a third thesis is *Target Centredness* (TC), the idea that “what counts as good and correct forms of responsiveness to the world … is determined by the targets of the virtues” (p. 7). These three claims build the structure for Swanton’s non-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Part I constructs the metaethical basis for a normative theory that aims to be objective, response-dependant and in line with “non-scientistic naturalism”. Here, Swanton adopts Heidegger’s hermeneutic ontology to unite the claim that ethics is objective with the fact that its existence is not independent from human beings. The basic idea, borrowed from Heidegger, is that the mode of existence of ethical reality – the “worldhood of ethics” – needs to be accessed through the proper forms of intentional access – the right “*logos*”. Moral entities in the world exist only “as meaningfully engaged with by human beings” (p. 21): human beings are endowed with the ability to give meaning to different objects in the world through the structure that Swanton calls the ‘a as b structure’. Every existing entity ‘a’ is always intended by human beings ‘as b’, through a *logos*, an intentional form of meaningful interpretation. In the case of morals, a given fact ‘a’ becomes ethically relevant (it is seen *as* ethically relevant) when it is accessed through the *logos* of ethics.

This first part of Swanton’s book offers an excellent exposition of a creative theory which combines elements of the so-called ‘continental’ tradition with admirable rigour and clarity. In line with the hermeneutic authors whose concepts she adopts, this first part of the book takes the form of an exposition rather than a defence. The detailed and thorough presentation of Swanton’s framework makes the theory fascinating and often convincing. However, an analytically minded reader will rarely find clear-cut arguments to establish her views. If someone is not inclined towards a hermeneutic ontology from the start, I doubt that they would be convinced by Swanton’s discussion.

Part II contains the description of Swanton’s normative theory and is the richest portion of the book. She opens this second part with an exposition of the problems besetting eudaimonistic virtue ethics, including the well-known charges of egoism and indirection. In conformity with TC, Swanton affirms that, in her view, “what makes traits virtues is determined by their targets or aims, and what motivate an agent at both fundamental and everyday levels are these very features” (pp. 134-35). This dovetails with her claim that ethics is objective and that its existence depends on human beings’ ability to give meaning. By affirming that ethics has this nature, Swanton grounds the normativity of virtue in something that is neither individualistic nor self-interested. In Swanton’s account, virtue is not always conducive to human flourishing: there are virtues that have to do with appreciation of states of affairs, with bonds, with status, and so on. A thorough discussion of a number of intuitively plausible virtues supports Swanton’s case that a pluralistic and target centred view like hers is not vulnerable to many of the critiques usually levelled against standard virtue ethics.

This take on virtue explains why Swanton’s book begins with a long metaethical discussion: her target centred virtue ethics needs an exposition of the nature of ethics in order to explain how it is possible that virtues have independent features that are not invented by human beings (targets, fields, profiles, etc.) but, at the same time, need human beings to be recognized and valued. Here, however, Swanton’s discussion leaves a central question unanswered: how do we know for sure which character traits are virtues? How do we find out their targets that we have to hit to be virtuous? Throughout her discussion, Swanton appeals heavily to her own and her readers’ intuitions to lay down a basic understanding of virtues and vices. She talks, for instance, of “pathological altruism” (p. 197) as a vice, assuming that everyone will agree on what the target of a virtue like altruism is and will, consequently, support the view that altruism becomes pathological when it is excessive. But how can I know that what I take to be pathological altruism is a vice? How do I know where the target of altruism lies? Swanton’s strategy seems, in line with much contemporary analytic ethics, to rely on intuitions. However, intuitions are notably divergent. This becomes especially true in the case of some of the traits that Swanton considers virtues such as “the virtue which we call being well disposed in relation to doing your share” (p. 293) or the “virtue of being disposed to getting things right in relation to issues of sentimentality” (p. 275). These virtues supposedly disclosed to us all through the *logos* of ethics are at least controversial. Are they really virtues? What are their targets? How do we hit them? If our own intuitions are all we need to reply to these questions, I strongly suspect that a number of readers will disagree with Swanton’s list of virtues.

Swanton’s approach becomes understandable, however, if we keep in mind that she considers ethical theories to “offer frameworks or maps” (p. 11) and “not … an accurate portrait of the world” (p. 12). What an ethical theory has to do “is to offer the right kind of map for navigating the ethical world” (p. 12). Considered in this way, her analysis of virtue as having a series of characteristics (such as a target, a field, a profile), is a kind of guide that we may use to reflect on character traits and features of our moral lives that we want to improve and understand. Our particular situations and our own intuitions will allow us to decide how to act in the world that the theory is helping us to navigate.

Finally, part III of the book presents various “theoretical issues in the application” (p. 10) of Swanton’s virtue ethics. By exploring several interesting philosophical points including the relationship between virtue ethics and consequentialism, the codifiability of virtue ethics, and the interactions between ethics and epistemology, this third part of the book clarifies important aspects of Swanton’s theory and reinforces its theoretical structure. Here she shows, for instance, that there is a reasonable via media between extreme positions on the nature of the right action in virtue ethics (pp. 254-55) and that particularism in ethics is compatible with the presence of rules (as long as they are neither “mechanically applied” nor “universal and formulaic”) (p. 264).

These are only a handful of the many aspects discussed in Swanton’s stimulating book, whose richness is hard to overstate. A lot is to be commended in Swanton’s detailed and full-scale work, which offers an incredibly wide range of thorough philosophical reflections. Many of these have not been touched on here, including the relationship between ethics and psychology, the role of growth in the development of virtue, the relation between basic and differentiated virtues, and much more. Swanton’s *Target Centred Virtue Ethics* is an excellent and systematic account of a non-eudemonistic virtue ethics which will remain on the map for years to come.

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