David Wong
Natural Moralities:
A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism.
New York: Oxford University Press 2006.
Pp. 312.
US$45.00 (cloth ISBN-13: 978-0-195-30539-5);
US$24.95 (paper ISBN-13: 978-0-19-538329-4).

In this book Wong proposes a kind of ethical relativism which differs not only from universalism but also from the extreme versions of relativism. Indeed, he denies that there is a single true morality, yet affirms that not all moralities are adequate, since there are objective limits on what may be deemed a true morality. Such limits are determined by universally valid criteria rooted in human nature and in certain functions that all moralities must perform. These criteria, however, are not enough to define 'a morality with content sufficiently robust and determinate to guide action' (xiii), so that there are also other criteria for establishing what may be considered an adequate morality, criteria which are local to a given group and independent of those which are universal. As a result, there exists a plurality of moralities that can be regarded as true.

Wong's case for his 'pluralistic' relativism rests on two elements, namely, the phenomenon of 'moral ambivalence' and a naturalistic conception of morality. Moral ambivalence is the feeling we experience when faced with serious conflicts among an irreducible plurality of basic moral values. Such conflicts can be resolved in distinct ways all of which we recognize as reasonable, and we therefore 'understand and appreciate the other side's viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgments gets destabilized' (5). In Wong's view, conflicting moral positions typically share irreducibly basic values but do not set the same priority among them, so that within a single morality there is a plurality of values that conflict to some extent and that coexist according to a hierarchical relation. For instance, both Chinese and Western moral traditions accept both the values of community and relationship and those of autonomy and individual rights, but differ in the priority they assign to them and, hence, in the way they resolve the tensions between such values. This is why Wong constantly emphasizes that, in general, disagreements between moralities are not radical, i.e., they are not disagreements between entirely different sets of values. In sum, there is a plurality of shared moral values which conflict to some extent and a plurality of adequate ways of resolving such conflicts. Wong maintains that moral ambivalence undermines universalism and that it is best accounted for by a naturalistic conception of morality.

Wong's approach to morality is naturalistic because it is marked 'by a commitment to integrate the understanding of morality with the most relevant empirical theories about human beings and society, such as evolutionary theory and developmental psychology' (xiv). On the basis of such a naturalistic approach, he argues that the general constraints on what can count as a

true morality are its responsiveness to certain compelling human needs and propensities (such as self- and other-concern) as well as its ability to promote both individual flourishing and social cooperation. There are different ways in which these functions can be fulfilled, which fits in well with the phenomenon of moral ambivalence.

After expounding his pluralistic relativism and its naturalistic basis, Wong examines both whether, by accepting a plurality of true moralities, one ends up losing confidence in one's commitments to a particular morality, and how one should act towards those who have (partially) different moral commitments. He claims that we do end up abandoning the beliefs that our morality is the only true one and that moral properties constitute a part of the objective world. Nevertheless, if our own morality answers to the universally valid criteria for adequate moralities, then our moral commitments concern genuine values, so that there is no reason to abandon them. Also, given that it is impossible to realize all the ways of life which are adequate, we can remain committed to our own, which in no way implies dismissing the others. Wong claims, however, that recognition of the worth of other ways of life may also lead us to learn from them by trying to incorporate at least some of their values or ways of setting priorities among values into our own moral commitments. This is possible because a 'living morality' is never entirely determinate, since there is always the possibility that a shift in the balance between two conflicting values may occur either generally or in particular circumstances (237). Still, since such integration has limits, we must constantly face serious moral disagreements among people who need and want to live together. Wong maintains that the value of accommodation proves to be a successful way of dealing with these disagreements. This value represents a general constraint on adequate moralities because it enables stability and integrity within a single society and the peaceful coexistence of different societies. I wonder whether the value of accommodation does not rather form part of the criteria that are local to a given group (in this case, Wong's own), so that those moralities that do not take it into account but satisfy the universal criteria could still be regarded as adequate.

Is Wong's position a form of ethical skepticism? His own answer is 'yes', if by 'skepticism' one means 'that we cannot take our own way of doing things as somehow writ into the fabric of nature, and that others may be equally if not more justified in adopting other views' (261). It is his naturalistic approach which leads Wong to deny that moral properties form an irreducible part of the fabric of the world (33, 62, 202). This ontological ethical skepticism, however, does not lead him to adopt moral nihilism, since he accepts moral truth (79). A morality is true, not because it refers to moral facts or properties, but because it succeeds in satisfying some central human needs and propensities and in performing certain functions. This is precisely why Wong can speak of a plurality of true moralities.

Wong has made a strong case for his pluralistic relativism, which represents a middle way between strong forms of ethical realism and radical kinds of ethical relativism, thus trying to avoid at least some of the pitfalls facing

these positions. The reader will ponder whether Wong's stance constitutes an attractive alternative that adequately accounts for the nature and function of morality.

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Time After Time.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2007.
Pp. 257.
US$65.00 (cloth ISBN-13: 978-0-253-34896-8);
US$24.95 (paper ISBN-13: 978-0-253-21909-1).

Wood's book is a collection of essays, some written specifically for this volume, others dating as far back as 1986. All of them explore the territory opened up by Wood's influential 1989 book *The Deconstruction of Time*. According to Wood, the key philosophical development of the past century is 'not a linguistic turn but a temporal turn' (129). The thinkers associated with this development — Husserl and Heidegger, for example — reject the image of time as a 'great river' (9), and resist thinking of time as a single structure in which all events can be ordered in relations of succession. They claim that there are multiple temporalities, and they replace a single Time with a 'pluri-dimensional, polyphonic temporalization' that is 'neither a concept nor adequately conceptualizable' (51). The essays in this collection explore this pluri-dimensional temporality, and ask what it implies for the practice of philosophy. Those familiar with Wood's earlier work will find few surprises here, since the book defends the same basic position as *The Deconstruction of Time*. It does, however, apply this position to a wide range of topics, and it makes an important contribution by doing so.

The book is divided into four parts. The first, 'Why Time Breaks Down', gives the book's agenda. The first essay in this part, 'Interruptions, Regressions, Discontinuities', gives a particularly good introduction to Wood's work. 'Time', he claims, 'is dead . . . [M]odels of its overarching unity no longer convince us' (12). This does not mean it is impossible to conceive of time as a linear, unifying structure. But such a conception can no longer do what many philosophers would like it to do: give meaning to individual events. Time as we experience it today 'does not supply significance. If anything, it mocks our desire for significance' (13). The other essays in Part 1 explore the implications of this claim. Some of these implications are ontological.