



Review: [untitled]

Author(s): William Day

Reviewed work(s):

Emerson's Ethics by Gustaaf Van Cromphout

Source: *Ethics*, Vol. 111, No. 4 (Jul., 2001), pp. 830-832

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2675760>

Accessed: 10/01/2009 17:42

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ethics*.

genuine highlights, he offers an interesting account of how to solve the regress problem of epistemic justification: beliefs that are not positively justified may nevertheless, in a given context, be responsibly held, and such beliefs may themselves, in the given context, confer positive justification on other beliefs. Here as elsewhere, Timmons is careful, sensitive to existing options, and imaginative in his central offerings. Yet we might ask why anyone *ought* to believe the views he sets forth. What is the status of the reasons that *justify* his epistemology, or semantics, or ontology? If there are no outlook-independent normative standards, then the merits of his views depend crucially on the outlook one happens to inhabit. And, according to Timmons, there are no outlook-independent criteria for assessing the comparative merits of any outlook. If irrealism is true, then there is no such thing as normativity, really—that is not part of the world that science investigates. And so no such thing as *reasons*: for accepting philosophical naturalism, contextualist epistemology, or antirealism in ethics. There are reasons within an outlook, but no basis for correctly thinking one outlook more justified or correct than another. Thus if Timmons's central message is true, then there isn't really any reason to believe his central claims (or those of any other philosopher). Or what reasons there are will depend entirely on the outlook one inhabits; those occupying a realist outlook cannot be said to be making a mistake, except from the irrealist point of view. But that won't strike realists as very worrying.

Timmons's book is in so many ways a vital, important, must-read contribution to contemporary metaethics. In my view, however, the finely integrated network of views that receives expression in this work is ultimately hoist on its own petard. That said, anyone interested in metaethics *ought* to read this book. Period.

RUSSELL SHAFER-LANDAU
University of Kansas

Van Cromphout, Gustaaf. *Emerson's Ethics*.

Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999. Pp. xii+182. \$29.95 (cloth).

Is it a surprising fact about Emerson's reception that until now, as Gustaaf Van Cromphout writes, "no book has examined his ethics as such" (p. 2)? I think not; but the reason it is unsurprising is not that Emerson has little to say about the moral life. On the contrary, what *is* surprising is that so many moral philosophers continue to overlook Emerson's singular body of writing. Their excuse cannot be, or should not be, simple obliviousness. For the past score of years Emerson has been recommended to the community of moral thinkers in books by Stanley Cavell and Russell Goodman, and by literary scholars, such as David M. Robinson, who have ventured into this philosophical territory. But that their books do not count for Van Cromphout as examinations of Emerson's ethics "as such" has to do, I imagine, with what Van Cromphout conceives a book on ethics as such to be, and with what he conceives Emerson's writings on ethics as such to be.

Emerson's Ethics is a survey of Emerson's pet themes or master words as they bear on nineteenth-century debates in ethics. These themes are addressed in chapters fittingly titled "Self-Realization," "Others," "Everyday Life," "Nature,"

and "Literature." They are introduced by a chapter ("Beginnings") devoted to a pair of moral essays written by the young Emerson while a student at Harvard. This chapter lays out the early influences on Emerson's moral thought, from his study of the life of Socrates to his initial attraction to Thomas Reid's idea of a common moral sentiment. It is followed by a second introductory chapter ("Metaethics") intended to clarify Emerson's approach to thinking about ethics, and to show in particular the early and sustained Kantian influence on Emerson's moral understanding.

Beyond the first chapter, though, Van Cromphout rarely draws attention to the date and public occasion of the writings he cites. This practice becomes problematic as he makes his case for Emerson's Kantian morality. It is past controversy that Emerson was familiar with Kant's main ideas. As Emerson explains in "The Transcendentalist," the New England transcendentalists adopted their name "from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg," and he goes on in the same sentence to offer a neat summary of Kant's innovative response to British empiricism. But why argue that Emerson, the epistemologist of self-reliance, relied on Kantian innovations? For Van Cromphout, "Emerson's ideas often gain focus and clarity when read in the light of theoretical insights or interpretive analogues provided by Kant" (p. 43). This has the sound of a backhanded compliment at best, as if Emerson is not only an unoriginal Kantian but a vague and shallow one at that.

Indeed, Emerson has rarely appeared so moralistic, so Christian—in *that* sense so Kantian—as the man who emerges in the chapters on "Metaethics" and "Self-Realization." He is presented as declaring that "in the eyes of God, not the *actions* but the *principles* of moral beings are regarded" (cited on p. 68); "When we say that we are free we rest on a conviction that is too mighty for reason and must stand whether reason can sanction it or no" (cited on p. 51); and "you cannot conceive yourself as existing . . . absolved from this [moral] law which you carry within you. It can't be defined but it is understood by us all" (cited on p. 53). Where do we find this quasi-Kantian Emerson? Not too surprisingly, each of these passages is taken from his early sermons. (Emerson was a Unitarian minister before leaving the church and the strictures of its formal teaching in 1832.) Yet Van Cromphout's argument is not a historical developmental one; he offers these sentences as representative of Emerson's timeless "metaethical" views. Van Cromphout fails to observe that, to mention one development, the Emerson of "Fate" (published in 1860) does not locate the voice countervailing human freedom in (theoretical) reason alone, as Kant does. The countervailing voices are multiple—naming them occupies fully the opening third of "Fate"—and the victory of words and mood is scarcely a one-sided affair. I do not mean to deny—in fact, I want to champion—Van Cromphout's claim that recognizing Emerson to be responding to Kant is important to our understanding of him (p. 43). But Emerson's response to Kant is rarely an aping of his teaching. More typically Emerson will revise Kant's thought or present even a deliberate overturning of it. (Illustrations of this claim can be found in various places in writings about Emerson by Cavell and Goodman, whom Van Cromphout consistently misreads on this point. I argue its pertinence to understanding Emerson's essay "Art" in "Knowing as Instancing," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 [2000]: 99–111, pp. 102–6.)

Later chapters of *Emerson's Ethics* tend to right the balance toward Emerson's more mature and representative writings. Van Cromphout gives a fine description in the chapter called "Others" of Emerson's "ethics of influence" (pp. 93–

94), his mapping of the dynamics of discipleship and independence. And the closing chapter ("Literature") does at last highlight what Emerson regards as the moral centrality of expressive originality (pp. 154–61). The wonder is that these elements should appear so late and so briefly in a book whose intent is not to catalog Emerson's moral career but to examine his ethics "as such." It leads to wonder, because such concepts as influence, discipleship, independence, expression, and originality (in addition to concepts like "Man Thinking," self-reliance, experience, and fate) *are* the central concepts of Emerson's ethics as such. Van Cromphout's book is guided by an unimaginative, though familiar, notion of what philosophical ethics must be, and so of what Emerson's moral writing must look like if it is to be found saying something cogent about how a human life can be lived. He is to be admired for his mastery of the early Emerson as well as of Emerson's philosophical near contemporaries and the vocabulary of modern ethical discourse. But the question is whether Emerson's words require Kantian or academic precision to be found ethically illuminating, or whether ethical illumination requires in this case nothing less than attention to the literary precision that one can argue is revealed in every word.

WILLIAM DAY
Le Moyne College

Varner, Gary E. *In Nature's Interests? Interests, Animal Rights, and Environmental Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. 154. \$39.95 (cloth).

To matter morally, actions must matter to someone; they must make a difference to someone's interests. Animal-liberation theorists, from the early 1970s on, attacked "anthropocentrism" by arguing that nonhuman animals have interests, and that having interests is sufficient for being a "moral patient" (i.e., roughly, something whose interests ought to be weighed in deciding what is to be done). The aim of that argument, made by Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and others (including myself), was to establish the moral claim of nonhuman interests on humans who are moral agents. It was assumed, more or less explicitly, that talk about moral claims, rights, and so on, made sense (if they made sense at all) for creatures that had interests, and not for things without interests.

This view soon came under attack from various directions. Some, such as R. G. Frey, doubted that language-less creatures could even be said to have interests. (Donald Davidson defended a similar view in the context of philosophy of mind.) Others suggested that animal liberation's 'sentientism' (John Rodman's term), or 'extensionism' (J. Baird Callicott's term), was an inadequate basis for a truly environmental ethics. These latter views coincided, more or less, with Arne Naess's critique of "shallow" (anthropocentric) environmentalism, in calling for a new model of "thinking like a mountain" (in Aldo Leopold's famous phrase). This supposedly "deeper" environmentalism typically conceived of itself as "holistic" instead of individualistic and derived much of its plausibility from the difficulties of extending animal-liberationist models of "welfare" and "rights" to animals in the wild, to species as a whole, and to wilderness.

Gary Varner's trim but meaty treatise aims to defend the idea that moral