

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

The emergence of applied ethics as a distinct discipline some forty years ago is frequently taken as an indication that a sharp line of demarcation separates theoretical and practical ethics. Whereas theoretical ethics seems primarily concerned with conceptual issues and the inquiry into the fundamental moral principles and their justification, applied ethics has been assigned to tackle the intricate moral problems that bedevil life in today's technology-driven, highly-differentiated society and its frequently conflicting value systems.

For some, such division of labor is the unavoidable consequence of the sophistication and specialization of modern life, which calls for the ethics specialist equally rooted, and firmly so, in the traditions of ethical thought and in the scientific and technological contexts out of which the moral problems arise. Such experts are supposed to pay close, almost exclusive, attention to the practical implications of the moral issues under scrutiny and, finally, unite all interested parties in a moral consensus on the basis of which normative recommendations can be issued that henceforth will guide moral practice.

For the critics, such endeavors are either unrealistic or trivial, and in any case the results produced so far have not met the high expectations applied ethics itself has generated. For them, any consensus on moral concerns is likely to be shallow and only representative of the smallest common denominator the various parties can find. In most cases, it gives the stamp of moral approval to what is going to happen anyway.

Evidently, both characteristics are simplistic and unfair. They overemphasize certain aspects at the expense of others and paint a highly distorted picture. Above all, they ignore that theoretical and practical ethics lie on a continuum that leads from the particular to the general, from the application of values to the analysis of moral concepts, from shared moral beliefs to justified moral principles, and vice versa. This in itself is a complex and highly ambitious undertaking that renders any sharp demarcation between the two fields obsolete.

Maureen Sie's book is an excellent case in point as it defies simplistic categorization. It is too directly focused on major questions of theoretical ethics to accommodate a pedestrian definition of the notion "applied" in ethics. It identifies too many implications for well-established practices in law and politics, medicine and psychiatry, education and even cross-cultural discourse to belong exclusively in the "theoretical" domain of ethics. Instead, it admirably confirms the truth of Aristotle's insight that practice informs theory and theory illuminates practice.

Sie's penetrating analysis of the concept of (moral) responsibility offers novel and exciting perspectives on our shared but conceptually opaque practices of expressing moral indignation, apportioning blame, and meting out punishment, and how we may be able to justify them from a moral point of

view. While similar studies tend quickly to get entangled in the abysmal debate between the defenders of free will and the advocates of determinism in its various forms, Sie succeeds in steering clear of its (metaphysical) traps and (empiristic) pitfalls without ignoring the issue altogether. Instead, she unravels the various layers of responsibility and explores its presupposed but theoretical obscure distinction between normal and deviant behavior, well-functioning and incapacitated human beings. Central to her argument is the question whether we have good reasons to assume, as we commonly do, that exemplary blame-worthy actions, as she calls them, exist and what they tell us about responsibility. Sie plausibly suggests a solution that can afford to bracket some of the more intractable issues of the free-will debate in the interest of a better understanding of the relevant moral practice. She demystifies the sometimes elevated discourse about freedom and necessity and renders it answerable to concrete moral issues.

An editorial foreword is not the place for a succinct summary of a complex and highly demanding argument. In the present case, it is not even necessary to offer the reader a preview of the main argument or a sympathetic appraisal of the book. Both have been superbly provided in Sie's own preface and in Paul Russell's foreword, and readers are well advised to start from there. What my introductory remarks try to achieve is little more than to raise the reader's level of intellectual curiosity for a book that (as this series intends) brings moral theory and vision to bear on the pressing issues of contemporary life.

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