

Swimming Against the Tide in Contemporary Philosophy. By Henry B. Veatch.

Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990.

In the past several years a number of economists centered at George Mason University have claimed to find an affinity between Austrian economics and certain types of Continental philosophy. Their views have not gone uncontested: Murray Rothbard and Hans Hoppe have assailed the “hermeneuticists” with characteristic vigor. I fear I am no unbiased witness, as I have played a minor part in the controversy.

Henry Veatch, a distinguished Aristotelian philosopher, advances in this excellent book an interpretation of modern philosophy which illuminates the controversy over hermeneutics. In addition, he presents a carefully conceived defense of Aristotelian ethics. Economists interested in welfare economics will find Veatch’s discussion of ethics of substantial albeit indirect help to them. Often welfare economics conceals utilitarian premises, and Veatch subjects this ethical system to penetrating scrutiny. Although the book is a collection of separate essays, it is remarkably unified.

Like his master Aristotle, Veatch proceeds by a dialectical method. He means by this an analysis of the insights and errors of non-Aristotelian philosophers in order to “remove the obstacles” to what he deems the correct position (p. 6). It soon transpires that the rival philosophies contain much more error than insight.

Since Descartes, modern philosophy has refused to use as its starting point commonsense knowledge of the world. Descartes’s methodic doubt changed the criterion of truth and had the effect of “transforming the everyday world . . . into a world that is largely unrecognizable by the commonsense and common experience of mankind” (p. 38).

Descartes and his rationalist successors failed in their quest to prove the existence of the external world and discover its nature through the use of deduction. Their empiricist counterparts were equally unable to show how one can gain knowledge of the real world if one is restricted solely to ideas or sensations.

Philosophy faced an impasse. Immanuel Kant claimed to have found an escape that would end the stagnation of philosophy and permit it to progress as a science. Veatch believes that the transcendental turn, as he calls Kant's proposal, was a disastrous mistake. Nevertheless, it has dominated subsequent philosophy.

In brief, Kant thought that we cannot know things as they are in themselves. Instead, the mind imposes a grid consisting of the categories and the intuitions of space and time upon reality. Although we cannot know the real world, we can know appearances, since our minds have created them.

Veatch finds in this turn to the subject the basis of relativism and irrationalism. Kant thought that everyone used the same categories. He claimed to derive them by a "transcendental deduction"; if he was right, people have no choice in their application of concepts to experience.

Kant's successors made the categories changeable and relative. This more radical form of the transcendental turn has an unbreakable hold on modern philosophy. Veatch uses the turn to explain Quine's philosophy and, more generally, contemporary philosophy of science. A "theory or hypothesis in science is accepted, ultimately, for scarcely any other reason than that it enables us to introduce at least some sort of order and intelligibility into what otherwise would be a sheer welter of experience" (p. 53).

The culmination of the turn lies in the utter irrationalism of the Deconstructionists. He sees this movement not as a mere Continental fad. It carries to an extreme tendencies present in modern philosophy from its inception. Deconstruction totally rejects external control over textual interpretation. The transcendental turn can at last go no farther.

Veatch argues that this movement has malign ethical consequences. Both Deconstruction and the pragmatism of Richard Rorty lead to "that total permissiveness that Nietzsche talked about so confidently and so brashly" (p. 92; question mark omitted).

Veatch's probing account of modern philosophy will seem familiar to readers influenced by Ayn Rand, who gives a similar account of the errors of modern thought. Although so far as I am aware the two did not know or influence each other, a number of Randian philosophers esteem Veatch highly.

Though Veatch's analysis is impressive in its scope and unity, a few doubts—not I hasten to add, Cartesian ones—come to mind. First, one gets the impression from Veatch's discussion that Descartes arbitrarily rejected commonsense beliefs. But would not Descartes respond that the skeptical issue he addressed is a genuine problem? How do we know that our experience gives us knowledge of the real world? Veatch I think would reply that all attempts to justify knowledge which start from doubt of commonsense have failed. Either we take as given that we perceive real things or we wind up in skepticism. *Tertium non datur*.

The effectiveness of this response depends on Veatch's success in showing that once skepticism is allowed in the door, it cannot be expelled. His criticism of Kant's transcendental turn is especially vital, since he sees the turn as basic to contemporary philosophy.

Veatch's evaluation of Kant, however, strikes me as disputable. He takes Kant to be saying, in effect: "We do not know reality: all that we know are appearances." Veatch rightly takes this view to lead to relativism and skepticism.

But this interpretation of Kant depends crucially on the equation of reality with things-in-themselves. Since the phenomenal world includes everything governed by the categories, it might be argued that the phenomenal world just *is* the commonsense world. If so, Kant did not then deny realism but affirmed it. I do not mean to endorse this view of Kant: there is a great deal to be said for Veatch's interpretation. But if the realistic view of Kant is right, Veatch needs to show that Kant's deduction of the categories fails. Otherwise, his indictment of the transcendental turn collapses.

In "Is Quine a Metaphysician?", Veatch attempts to use one of Quine's own arguments against him. The theme of the piece is that Quine has made Kant's transcendental turn. He imagines a Quinean objector who protests against his translation of "Quinese" into "Kantese" on the grounds of the radical indeterminacy of translation, a famous thesis of Quine's. Veatch replies by citing another Quinean view, the inscrutability of reference.

Veatch has misread the passage he quotes from *Ontological Relativity*. He thinks Quine claims that because "it makes sense to say even of oneself that one is referring to rabbits and formulas and not to rabbit stages and Gödel numbers, then it should make sense to say it of someone else" (p. 79, citing Quine, *Ontological Relativity*). But Quine's point is just the opposite. He thinks that because it does *not* make sense to say of someone else what he refers to, it does not make sense for someone to say it of himself.

Veatch also finds contemporary moral philosophy radically unsatisfactory. He draws the customary distinction between teleological and deontological theories. The latter fail utterly; the former require revision along Aristotelian lines.

Veatch approaches ethics with a fundamental assumption. No ethical judgments are self-evident. Claims that people have rights or obligations require justification: they cannot be simply taken as obvious. I wonder whether this is correct. Are there no particular judgments, e.g., "Torturing small children for fun is wrong" that are more clearly true than the premises of any theory supposed to justify them? Veatch is no doubt right that the judgment just given is not self-evident, if by that he means that no logical contradiction results from the statement's negation.

But self-evidence in this sense, and "obvious" truth, are two quite different things. Veatch moves too quickly from one to the other. If we can take our ordinary commonsense judgments to be true in epistemology, why may we not do the same in ethics?

But even if Veatch has insufficiently justified the need for justification, he raises penetrating objections to the particular theories he discusses. Utilitarianism fails because of a flaw in its starting point. Its advocates tell us to maximize happiness, understanding happiness as the satisfaction of desire. But why is it good to satisfy desire? Unless a utilitarian can first establish this, he cannot arrive at an ethic. Appeal to the Principle of Universalizability avails nothing. If someone argues "I want to satisfy my desire; but if it is good to satisfy my desire, it is good to satisfy anyone else's," he has begged the question. *Is it good to satisfy desire?*

Deontological theories fare no better. "[T]here is no basis whatever for the rights claims that are the very basis and starting point of modern teleological ethics" (p. 111). Kant's categorical imperative lends no help, because it is a purely formal principle. Gewirth's principle of generic consistency suffers from a failing like that of utilitarianism. Even if Gewirth is right that the nature of action compels us to claim certain rights, we cannot generate an ethics by universalizing the claims. The rightness of the original claims has not been shown: without an "ought" from which to begin, nothing is available to universalize.

Some theories are in even worse shape, since their advocates advance no arguments at all in their defense. He includes Robert Nozick among this group.

What then is the answer? Veatch locates it in "obligatory ends" (p. 101). These are desires that an individual ought to have. They qualify as ethical by passing the "Euthyphro test": one desires

them because they are good. They are not good because they are desired.

Now the question of course becomes: how are obligatory ends established? Veatch once more returns to Aristotle. Human beings have a nature, and what perfects that nature is an obligatory end. Once one obtains, "I ought to perfect my nature," the Principle of Universalizability does the rest. Everyone ought to perfect his or her nature. Thus ethics has been established on a rational basis.

Veatch's relentlessly pressed case arouses both admiration and doubt. As with epistemology, the form of his argument is this: approaches *A*, *B*, — etc. will not work. If, then, we want an objective ethics we must proceed in the way Veatch specifies.

But to argue that unless one adopts his view, one will end up on an unwanted position begs the question. If one accepts Veatch's contention that ethical judgments are not self-evident, why take for granted that an objective ethics can be derived?

Veatch might deny that he has argued solely by elimination of alternatives. On the contrary, he has argued directly for the truth of his view. But the system of natural ends he favors depends on a controversial principle: a human being ought to fulfill his natural end. Though I cannot now argue the point, I think the principle requires more defense than Veatch gives it here or in his earlier books.

Veatch also is open to objection for not being Aristotelian enough. Why does he combine his natural-end ethics with the Principle of Universalizability, a Kantian device? It is not obvious that a moral system must use this principle, nor is it a truth of logic. Veatch recognizes that some libertarians have challenged the principle, but he discusses only those who abandon morality altogether along with universalizability. He never considers genuine moralities lacking this feature (pp. 183, 186–87).

With characteristic independence of mind, Veatch maintains that all rights are negative. There is "no warrant for supposing that as human beings we have any positive rights at all" (p. 326). This is well said, but, unfortunately, Veatch's argument for negative rights fails. He then is left with no justified rights at all.

His defense of rights is that if "I ought to do something then I have a right not to be interfered with" (p. 325). How can this be justified on Veatch's own ethics? He argues that each person ought to pursue his natural end. But nothing in this principle forbids someone from interfering with someone else's pursuit of his end.

The principle also fails without reference to Veatch's ethics. Suppose one has a duty to make the best use of his talents. Someone

correctly decides that obtaining a job as a bouncer at the W. D. Ross Bar will be a major step forward. Does this prevent others from competing for the job?

He makes one or two other dubious claims about moral theory. He argues that amoralism is self-referentially inconsistent if the amoralist tries to give reasons for his refusal to pay attention to morality. If the amoralist says he ignores morality because there is no such thing, is he not claiming justification for his conduct (p. 189)?

He is indeed, but he need not claim moral justification. To assume that justification must be moral begs the question. The amoralist can view his ignoring morality as analogous to the denial unicorns exist. He is an amoralist, not an arationalist.

Also, Veatch's account of Philippa Foot is inaccurate. She claims that certain terms, e.g., "courageous" or "rude," can be applied only in particular circumstances. Avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk while walking could not be courageous, if this is all there is to the story. Veatch agrees with her but thinks her argument rests on "mere linguistic rules" instead of a genuine connection with reality (p. 147). This imputes to her a conventionalist view of language she takes pains to argue against. Also, he wrongly supposes that she accepts universalizability.

As will be apparent, I do not invariably agree with Professor Veatch. But he is sometimes profound, usually first-rate, and always provocative.

David Gordon
Ludwig von Mises Institute