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Review of “Living Philosophy: An Introduction to Moral Thought, 3/e”

Gregory Lawrence Bock
University of Tennessee

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Book Review

Living Philosophy: An Introduction to Moral Thought, 3/e. Ray Billington. London and New York: Routledge. 354 pp. Prefaces, indexes, notes, glossary. ISBN: 0-415-28447-3. Price: \$27.95.

What is a *living* philosophy anyway? One might be tempted to interpret the title of Ray Billington's book in a number of ways in the context of moral philosophy, but the actual meaning of the term might be surprising. Billington contrasts living philosophy with analytic philosophy (xvii) and calls the former the philosophy of experience (not to be confused with empiricism). He says, "The standpoint of this philosophy is extremely simple. It is that, as far as I am concerned, there is or can be only my experience, but there is *all* my experience – thinking and feeling, willing and loving, believing and hoping, and so on, both in public and in private" (318-319). Apparently, this also includes preparing and tasting fine foods – the author's website (www.livingphilosophy.co.uk) features a page dedicated to Italian foods, which is explicitly linked to his philosophy of life. Not a bad philosophy to have!

On the other side, analytic philosophy – the author explains – overemphasizes linguistic and conceptual analyses and eschews questions that do not lend themselves to the rigor of logic, which – he claims – leaves out many of life's fundamental questions. In his view, philosophy is a guide to life, meaning "the wise man learns from his experiences in life and behaves accordingly. As these experiences are confirmed or modified by subsequent experiences, so his philosophy is strengthened" (318). Billington illustrates the uniqueness and vitality of his philosophy by applying it to the problem of free-will; he says that by experience we know that we are free. No matter what sophisticated arguments the determinist might construct, they will never overturn the evidence of experience (319). With this approach, many so-called intractable problems in philosophy simply disappear.

Although *living philosophy* defines the approach taken by the author, the book is primarily an introductory textbook to moral thought whose stated aim is to introduce and explore various moral theories and issues. Billington admits to not being entirely neutral in this (xii); occasionally he will argue for one side in a debate and sometimes very passionately, such as when he argues against Christian theism as a channel of God's will (196-198). Nevertheless, he justifies this lack of objectivity in the following way: "If...philosophy is a living, vibrant entity, the most sure basis for the appreciation of what is worthwhile in life, then it would be quite artificial, I think, for me to neutralise...myself when discussing these issues" (xii).

The book is divided into four sections:

(1) "General Theory of Ethics," which introduces the reader to philosophy and ethics by

discussing the purpose of philosophy, the scope of ethics, the distinction between fact and value, and our knowledge of right and wrong;

(2) “Approaches to Ethical Theory,” which explores two answers to the question of whether the ends justify the means (Kant and Mill) and the relevancy of existentialism and freedom to ethics;

(3) “Issues in Moral and Practical Philosophy,” which discusses topics like morality and religion, eastern perspectives and cultural relativism, politics, environmental ethics, bioethics, and education;

(4) “The Moral Agent,” which explores aspects of moral maturity and the role that philosophy plays as a guide to life.

As a textbook, *Living Philosophy* has many strong points. Students will benefit from Billington’s passionate and accessible writing style and will be drawn to his living philosophy approach. Some of the greatest pedagogical strengths of the book are the many case studies at the end of the chapters – a goldmine for classroom discussions. These cases include not only the standard ethical dilemmas (such as whether the U.S. was right to use the atom bomb on Japan), but also many thought-provoking questions such as asking why people take up crime or whether monogamy is the most natural sexual lifestyle. I especially appreciated the succinct debate outlines in which he details the opposing points of view on particular issues by creating two columns – for and against – and listing arguments and opinions in a back and forth manner. Take the debate over capital punishment, for instance. The first column starts with “The concept of ‘an eye for an eye’ leads logically to this form of punishment,” and a response appears in the second column: “How does eye for an eye apply to other crimes such as rape or burglary or fraud?” (136). The mini-debate continues with six more exchanges.

The only pedagogical weakness of this book is that it is not comprehensive enough for an introduction to ethics course. First, it gives adequate treatment to only two normative theories (Kant and Mill), leaving out other relevant theories like virtue and feminist ethics. Second, it includes only a small sampling of the ethical issues that are standard in an introductory course – too few to satisfy most instructors, I would think. One could respond that plenty of issues are raised in the case studies; nevertheless, very little space is devoted to deeply exploring them.

The chapter entitled “Environmental Ethics and Bioethics” illustrates the second problem. First, I find it odd that these two topics share the same space. Each one represents an area rich enough to warrant its own book, let alone its own chapter, and Billington unsuccessfully attempts to cover them both in only twenty-three pages. Second, and partly because of the limited space, he only explores one bioethical issue in any depth: genetics. Granted, this is an important issue in the field of bioethics, but I think there are other more relevant and provocative issues that should be included, such as abortion and euthanasia.

On the other hand, this book addresses topics that do not normally appear in an introduction to moral theory like chapters on political and educational philosophy. Of particular interest is the chapter on the ethical theories of eastern religions, which brings a much needed perspective to our heavily western and secular ethics curriculum. An instructor that is looking for a textbook that approaches the subject from a different angle and one that is broader in scope might find this one very suitable.

There is much in the book to be commended, and much of it is due to Billington’s vibrant philosophy-of-experience approach, which draws readers in and makes philosophy compelling. For this reason, *Living Philosophy* would be a good choice for lower-level undergraduates, but I believe it would need to

be supplemented with additional materials. I look forward to seeing what changes the fourth edition brings.

Gregory Lawrence Bock
University of Tennessee
Walters State Community College