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Three Challenges to Ethics: Environmentalism, Feminism, and Multiculturalism.
James P. Sterba. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 160 pages, \$14.95
softcover.

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James Sterba has written a provocative and tightly argued essay intriguingly titled, *Three Challenges to Ethics: Environmentalism, Feminism, and Multiculturalism*. He attempts to demonstrate that traditional Western ethics is in trouble on three major fronts. The environmentalists, the feminists, and the multiculturalists are not just on the horizon, he warns. They have already landed. Their swords are drawn against what Sterba sympathetically agrees are major flaws in Western ethical thinking.

By “traditional Western ethics,” Sterba implicitly includes Judeo-Christian religious ethics. But he emphasizes three great secular traditions: (1) the *ethics of virtue* (construing “virtue” as a positive character trait) associated with Aristotle and, more recently, critical studies by Alasdair McIntyre; (2) the *ethics of duty* associated with Kant and W.D. Ross, and, more recently, John Rawls; and (3) the *ethics of utility* associated with Bentham, J.S. Mill, and, more recently, the bureaucratic calculus of twenty first century cost-benefit analysis. Sterba acknowledges that these religious and secular approaches to ethics are not exhaustive. Nonetheless, they have proved resilient, influential, and, until recently, more or less sound.

Specifically, Sterba contends that the environmentalists, feminists, and multiculturalists are rightly offended by traditional ethics’ allegedly human-centered, male-dominated, and European-oriented biases. These flaws lead inevitably to a variety of injustices, including regularly valuing people over penguins (or over other non-human animals and, of course, plants); valuing the roles of men over those traditionally held by women and so, in a variety of ways, discriminating against women; and, finally, downplaying or ignoring the ethical contributions of cultures other than those of European lineage, thus committing the embarrassing sin of ethnocentrism (especially Euro-centrism) in much of Western moralizing.

In addition, Sterba agrees these deficiencies can no longer be skated over. Yet they need not be fatal. Sterba offers a solution. But how sound is it? To find out, one must be exceedingly patient. Several of Sterba’s chapters are drawn from his

previously published articles and, unfortunately, the overall design of his essay is neither seamless nor compelling. He takes far too much for granted.

For example, after diagnosing its flaws, Sterba sets out to preserve what he takes to be the best elements of traditional Western ethics, namely, its emphasis on reason, universal moral principles, and the pursuit of justice. This salvage project he seeks to accomplish by radically reforming traditional ethics so that it incorporates a number of pluralistic liberal values which he wholeheartedly endorses. What are Sterba's remedies for repairing ailing traditional ethics?

First, in the case of environmentalism, he advocates adopting a problem-solving approach that allows us to favor nonhumans over humans in a wide array of difficult circumstances. This would include cases where not all species can be equally sustained or protected during the construction, say, of an interstate highway system. But Sterba downplays a hornet's nest of resulting ambiguities. He fails to provide a clear and distinct criterion by which human interests may be balanced, for example, by the interests of the Pennsylvania brown bat imperiled by the highway construction site. He also ignores the implications of evolutionary biology on the behavior of one species naturally dominating or competing for science resources against another. This lends his commentary an air of naïve utopianism.

Second, in the case of feminism, he advocates banning what he calls the "gendered family." He hopes this will rid the family unit of allegedly suffocating patriarchal structures. These patriarchal structures will ultimately need to be replaced by the morally cleansing ideal of genderless (and sexless?) androgyny. Sterba's intended result? No unjust distinctions in the tasks, roles, or functions of family members will ever again arise from psychological or biological conditioning based on sexist or gender-linked assumptions or stereotypes. The latter he supposes are largely due to enculturation (nurture), not genetics (nature). But surely Sterba reaches a hasty conclusion in claiming all this for androgyny. It is far from clear on current anthropological, psychological, or sociological evidence that androgyny is even possible in the idealized sense he requires. Can little girls be raised not to think, act, play, or imagine in girl-like ways (even relative to a given culture)? This remains an open question. What's more, family-centered research on pathological behaviors is mixed, at best, in showing that patriarchal family structures are dysfunctional or damaging to young girls or women. So Sterba's starting point waits on more rigorous proof from the social or biological sciences. Finally, suppose that androgyny were possible to implement, as Sterba assumes. That an androgynous family restructuring would somehow automatically eliminate role bias against women (or, for that matter, men) arguably downplays the competitiveness, cleverness, and greed of the human animal.

Third, in the case of multiculturalism, Sterba prescribes adopting an ethics that is totally secular and pluralistic. In this way, his reformed ethical system would better appreciate and tolerate the often conflicting Western and non-Western ideals, cultures, and concepts which sometimes clash over fundamental questions like: What is a life worth living? But who ought to decide, in a democratic society, which totally secular ethics should be imposed on the citizenry? Would self-proclaimed professional ethicists, like Sterba, somehow convene and decide for the masses what the preferred moral system or systems ought to be? (Recall that Sterba advocates ethical pluralism, so no single moral yardstick will do.) If so, wouldn't Sterba's secular ethical pluralism likely lead to even greater moral confusion than we observe in the broader society today? Furthermore, what impact would Sterba's exclusion of religious ethics have on the historically legitimate role of religious

ethics in shaping the moral education of our youth? For example, the Golden Rule (which is typically promoted as universally applicable to all peoples and cultures), or the Sixth Commandment (which condemns all murderous acts regardless of the victim's race, creed, or color) clearly possess the potential to promote intercultural tolerance and harmony, too. This Sterba studiously ignores.

Finally, Sterba is bothered by the fact that Western cultures, and specifically North American culture, have committed atrocities such as the institution of slavery, or the subjugation of American Indian tribes. To be sure, atrocities have also occurred in non-Western cultures — from Africa's slave-trading Ashanti Empire of the seventeenth century, to China's murderous suppression of the Tibetan peoples in the twentieth century. Oddly, these sorts of non-Western barbarisms escape Sterba's notice entirely. Admittedly, when European settlers arrived in North America with (at various times) superior technology, dreams of conquest, and a thirst for religious freedom, the results were often disastrous for indigenous peoples. Yet Sterba begs the question if he thinks he can justifiably pin these atrocities squarely on traditional Western ethics. He commits the mistake of blaming dominant ethical traditions (whether religious or secular) rather than blaming the morally weak or defective individuals or institutions who failed to live up to the ideals of their traditions. Again, Sterba ignores the fact that the morally deficient choices of misguided men and women — acting freely and often selfishly — are a significant contributing cause of much of the misery and injustice he mistakenly ascribes wholesale to traditional Western ethics. But if so, there is no need for Sterba to attempt a radical reformation of traditional Western ethics after all. Indeed, the wind spills out of his sails precisely because he is shipwrecked by hasty conclusions, oversimplifications, and doubtful assumptions about human nature and the root causes of social injustice.

BOOKS RECEIVED FOR REVIEW

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