



Book Reviews

Experiments in love and death. Medicine, postmodernism, microethics and the body

By P. Komesaroff. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008. xxviii, 274 pp. (incl. index). RRP A\$49.95 (incl. GST) (Paperback). ISBN 978-0-522-85566-1.

There is much to admire in this book. Komesaroff's aim is to rescue ethics – in particular, medical ethics – from the scientific turn it took under the influence of Enlightenment modernity. When the Enlightenment thinkers exulted science as the highest form of progress-generating

knowledge, the discipline of ethics was 'scientized', that is to say, it was turned into the systematic and unified search for a rational justification for universal rules of good conduct. Utilitarianism – the theory which says that all that matters ethically are the likely outcomes of a proposed act or policy – and Deontology – the theory which says (in its purest form) that all that matters ethically is the sense of rational duty out of which an act or policy is done – are examples of such 'scientific' approaches to ethics.

Komesaroff thinks that the two most important reactions to the Enlightenment project of scientizing ethics were, on the one hand, a variety of Aristotelian-style theories and, on the other, the discourse ethics of Habermas. (And, in a few pages, he gives a really good summary of the main themes of 'post-modernity', that movement which threw the whole project of 'modernity' into question.) His own approach is a hybrid of the Aristotelian and the Habermasian, with a little too much of the latter's insistence on process at the expense of judgement and not quite enough of the former's enduring insights into the nature of ethical judgement for the likes of this reviewer. For instance Komesaroff is right to say that our ethical reflection and 'discourse' does not naturally follow any rigorous theory but wrong to say that 'in ethics there is no truth and falsity': after all, as he himself points out, caring for his mother *is* the right thing for him to do!

That said, in one important respect Komesaroff's approach is spot on. He follows Aristotle in treating ethical enquiry as being about particular cases: in fact, Aristotle used the clinical encounter of doctor and patient as a model for *explaining* the particularity of ethical inquiry. 'Microethics' is the term Komesaroff uses to distinguish this approach from one which stresses abstract, universalist rules. And so, in this book, we are offered careful, detailed, sensitive accounts of a series of particular clinical encounters. The cases make interesting reading. And they have more potential to deepen our ethical understanding than does any amount of talk of maximizing good outcomes or treating others as 'rational beings'.

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