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Ethical principles as ways to authentic fulfillment

(Jove Jim S. Aguas, *The Good and Happy Life: Introduction to Ethical Systems and Theories with selected Primary Texts*, Manila, Philippines: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House 2019, 452p.)

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I have read a lot of books on Ethics and this is among the more comprehensive ones. By its title, the book offers to answer basic questions in life. By opening with simple and plainly talked about questions, Aguas made Ethics a more welcoming subject matter. Indeed, “What is a well-lived life and how do we attain the good life?” (xv). The good life, rather than life by itself, is more important. Drawing from his understanding of Ethics as a philosophy professor for more than three decades, he uses the notion that a well-lived life is a happy life as a pin in navigating around varied concepts.

The inclusion of both Eastern and Western ethical theories and systems makes this book commendable and admirable. The work spans the history of philosophy from the ancient Greek and Chinese thinkers to Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to Max Scheler. The book would delight readers who are expecting a panoramic view of Ethics. Those chiefly seeking primary references in Ethics will conveniently find them in the selected primary readings. Each part of the book is linked to the overall picture as the interrelationships between different trends are presented. By placing each philosophy in its cultural context and considering it with the earlier ideas of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle or their counterparts in the East such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Yang Chu, and Gautama Buddha, Aguas allows his readers to go back to the comprehensive teachings and principles on Ethics. The underlying supposition that studying ancient thought to contemporary thoughts constitutes a coherent whole, although one with many variations does have its limitations, especially when it is just an introduction. The author maintains no perceptible bias or prejudice towards any ethical system of philosophy.

The book has three parts. The first part is a general introduction

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focusing on *Ethics and Ethical Theories*. The second discusses the *Philosophies of Ethics* from the classical or ancient period up to the contemporary period. The third, *Selected Primary Texts*, is a collection of excerpts from primary reading materials, enabling a closer look into the ethical theories and systems. The thematic-historical approach of the book covers a wide range of philosophical positions. It allows the reader to appreciate the diversity of cultures and ways of thinking that inform ethical systems. Studying Ethics from the perspective of history will make the readers better appreciate and appropriate Ethics in everyday living.

The section on Christian Ethics with the Thomistic-Wojtylan Ethics makes the book unique and distinct (23). I like his distinctions on the different views on Ethics like the normative and non-normative, general and applied normative, scientific and meta-ethics, scientific or descriptive Ethics, absolutism and relativism. The three meta-ethical positions, namely: naturalism (autobiographical, sociological, and theological), non-naturalism, and emotivism or non-cognitivism is clearly defined in the book (9-10). Starting with a comprehensive view makes a solid grounding. Aguas was able to explain this extensively. Some Ethics authors do not include this nuancing anymore.

He classifies ethical theories into Teleological and Deontological theories. The basic idea of Teleological theory is that an action's rightness or wrongness depends upon its consequences. Under Teleological theories are Hedonism, Epicureanism, Egoism, Classic Utilitarianism, Act Utilitarianism, Instrumentalism, and Pragmatism. In contrast, Deontological theories point to duty and intent as determinants of the rightness or wrongness of an action. Deontological theories include Divine Command Theory, Natural Law, Social Contract Theory, Natural Rights Theory, Categorical Imperative, Prima Facie Duties, and Virtue Ethics (10-13). Indeed, all Ethics teachers and students must be aware of these basic categories to approach many ethical theories.

Aguas provides a complete section for common ethical theories, actions that are judged as moral or immoral based on common standards or norms. I find his selection also as most valuable and popular: Ethical Relativism, Conventional Ethical Relativism, Cultural Relativism, Ethical Subjectivism, Ethical Egoism, and Utilitarianism (13-21). Acknowledging these common ethical notions prepares the reader for the different philosophies of Ethics. This extensive treatment of common ethical theories is another feature that makes the book inclusive and open. Aguas sets definitive parameters in looking at other views, promoting respect for other's views.

He then presents schools of Ethics through different historical periods: Ethics of Eastern thought, Ethics of Ancient Greek Philosophy,

Ethics of Medieval and Modern Philosophy, and Ethics of Contemporary Philosophy. The systematic organization allows one to understand the beautiful development of theories over time. The book covers some of the world's most original and influential thinkers and shows us how to understand their famous works and teachings. The Ethics of Eastern Thought highlighted four major representatives: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. The Ethics of Ancient Greek Philosophy covers Socratic Ethics, Plato's Ethics, Aristotelian Ethics, Epicureanism, and Stoicism. I call them the fruits of the great century of Athens. These Eastern and Ancient Greek thoughts are primary representatives when one wishes to study Ethics with a worldview; distinct approaches but the same goal or same questions with different answers but the same end.

Aguas then proceeds to discuss the medieval philosophers represented by Augustine and Aquinas. Being a book from a predominantly Catholic and Christian country, the inclusion of this part is essential. Christian Ethics signify the assimilation of Greek philosophy into Christian religious views. Augustine combined the Neo-Platonic notion of the One with the Christian concept of a personal God who created the world and predestined its course (97). Aquinas follows Aristotle's teleological metaphysics, which asserts that all events in the universe occur because of some ends or purposes toward which these events become directed. Most teachings of the Catholic Church regarding morality were from Aquinas. Among them are the distinctions of human acts and acts of man, determinants of morality, law and conscience as norms of morality, and eternal and natural laws. Augustine and Aquinas' Christian Ethics are classic scholastic references for the Catholic Church. This section makes it responsive and relevant to most Filipinos and Christian students.

I agree with David Hume and Immanuel Kant's choice as the two most essential and best representatives of the modern period. Hume's epistemic Ethics, which is provided by reason and matters of fact, is known through human experience. He provides a descriptive Ethics rather than a prescriptive one (111). Morality is natural to man, and it is based on his natural make-up. It is practical, and it influences and regulates our conduct (112). Kant's Ethics is organized around the notion of a "categorical imperative," which is a universal ethical principle stating that one should always respect the humanity in others and that one should only act in accordance with rules that could hold for everyone.

As an introductory book, Aguas' choice of contemporary ethical philosophies is sufficient. Ethics students need Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill as the founders of Utilitarianism. Bentham claims that the duration and intensity of pleasure and pain are of utmost importance and that it is even possible to measure the right action by applying hedonistic

calculus, which determines the exact utility of actions. The utility (pleasure or happiness) defines what is good. The action with the best hedonistic outcome should be put into practice. The Ethical Theory of Mill is most extensively articulated in his classical text *Utilitarianism*. Its goal is to justify the utilitarian principle as the foundation of morals. Mill focuses on the consequences of actions and not on rights nor ethical sentiments. Students of Ethics will be surprised to appreciate the daily news better when they are equipped with these lessons.

Aguas then continues with two philosophers whose ethical system centers on the idea of God. For Søren Kierkegaard, the ultimate concern of a person is to become a Christian. What is important in life for Kierkegaard is not what one must know but what one must do. Faith is a kind of paradox because the individual can rise above the universal and affirm his individuality. Friedrich Nietzsche is famous for the declaration that God is dead, contending that spiritual dimension is illusory; from the demise of metaphysics, what comes next is the demise of God. The inclusion of Nietzsche's work on *Genealogy of Morals*, "Good and Evil, Good and Bad" makes the collection complete. Nietzsche contrasts what he calls "master morality" from "slave morality."

William James, David Ross, John Rawls, and Max Scheler are all important contemporary philosophers. James's *Pragmatic Ethics* offers a new way of overcoming dilemma; a way of seeing that science, morality, and religion is not in competition. He considers Pragmatism to be both a method for analyzing philosophic problems and theories of truth. Ross' *Prima Facie Duties* was sensitive to cases that involve conflict of duties. *Prima Facie Duties* obligate us to act in certain ways when all things are equal. Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is liberal justice that tries to use the strengths of consequential and nonconsequential ethics while avoiding their dangers. Rawls hoped to offer a workable method for solving problems of social morality. Scheler's major works centered on emotive issues in *Value Ethics*. Values are particular class of ideal objects which are objective, eternal, and immutable. Scheler's theory of Values and Ethics would be incomprehensible without considering his criticisms of Kant's view of Ethics (171-173). Being able to appreciate the distinction of these ethical thoughts will certainly widen one's view. Contemporary Ethics looks descriptively at moral behavior and judgments. It can give practical advice in analyzing and theorizing on the nature of morality and ethics. The Contemporary study of Ethics has many links with other disciplines in philosophy itself and other sciences. This section will make readers appreciate each philosopher's ethical perspective in its historical context and culture. It may not be that exhaustive, but at least Aguas gives the readers a taste of Contemporary Ethics.

In the last part, he put together an appropriate set of primary texts from each philosopher or period discussed in the book. Each primary text was summarized and sufficiently introduced. Providing sample readings from the different periods and persuasions discussed will enhance the readers' chance to read the original ethical views directly. Supplementing an introductory text with such materials gives the readers some flexibility to read further and validate any topic that interests them. It allows the readers to conveniently access a glimpse of the original philosophers' writings, whenever needed. The orderly presentation of ideas is a laudable aspect of the book. Though still limited by space, it is an inclusive set of reading. It is universal, open and neutral. Aguas neatly gathered definitions of Ethics, collected ethical theories, and organized them into one book.

I would say that Part III is a very good resource for teachers since it provides the primary source that contains the basic teachings of each of the philosophers discussed (181-444). Although nothing compares to reading the complete primary text of each philosopher, those who are pressed for time or who do not have access to libraries will find this section a good source of confidence. Since it is well-organized, it can still be useful for teachers who may use a different approach or find Part I (3-27) and Part II (31-176) different from their syllabus.

This book is an added treasure to already developed yet flourishing literature in Ethics. I highly recommend it as a textbook in tertiary level, in particular for philosophy major students and graduate school students. Due to the author's accessible style, this is also a good reviewer for scholars and experts in Ethics and for everyone interested in understanding the legacy and continuing relevance of ancient thoughts to contemporary thoughts about Ethics.