Stan Van Hooft ed.


This volume purports to be the “reflections of leading contributors to debates on the most important current themes in virtue ethics” (p.1). This is an ambitious goal and although it contains some high profile experts in the areas it covers, it doesn't really provide the space and time to get into all of the “important current themes in virtue ethics.” The volume does, in fact, cover a great deal of the philosophical terrain and some of the chapters are quite good. But there are at least three potentially problematic issues with the collection. First, although there are some very important contributors to discussions on contemporary virtue ethics (such as Michael Slote, Christine Swanton, Timothy Chappell, Christian Miller, Heather Battaly, and Nancy Snow), many others are relative newcomers to the field—and although some of their contributions are often worthwhile, they lack, at times, the insight of the more seasoned expert. Second, the title uses the definite article as if this volume should be the “place to go” for help in the traditional sense of an *Enchiridion*. But the reader will disappointed to discover that these contributions are selective in the sense that the contributors often engage specific normative perspectives without acknowledging that other traditions can, and have made significant contributions on the topic at hand. That is, the materials collected here, although they attempt to cover the spectrum of virtue ethics, fail to engage much of the wider tradition of virtue ethics. And third, the volume seems more of a “sampler” than a “handbook.” The book is more of a loose collection of materials on virtue-related topics rather than a comprehensive and unified approach to current themes in virtue ethics. As a result, it suffers from the same affliction that undermines many “collections” in the sense that there is no one unifying theme to the tome. What it covers in terms of topical breadth, it loses in terms of unity.

The volume is divided into four major sections with a total of 41 entries. These various entries fall under the headings of (1) normative theory, (2) types of virtues, (3) applied ethics, and (4) the psychology of virtue.

The first section is one of the stronger elements of the book. One finds here discussions engaging thinkers from Aristotle and Hume to Mill and Nietzsche. The larger framework of virtue ethics—and the ways in which ethicists operate within those frameworks—is a helpful map for those coming to normative theory for the first time. Michael Slote’s essay on “Virtue Ethics and Moral Sentimentalism” offers a Humean account of the virtues that is grounded
in naturalism and aims as a corrective to more Kantian accounts of virtue. And Christina Swanton's chapter, “Nietzsche’s Virtue Ethics,” is an interesting interpretation of Nietzsche in that she argues that his theory is not merely a kind of aphoristic nay-saying to conventional morality but has an internal coherence that could best be described as “virtuous egoism.” But one wonders why such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas and, more recently, Alasdair MacIntyre, do not figure more prominently in this section while Kant seems to take a more prominent role than perhaps he should in this specific tradition of normative theory. The lone exception to this tendency is Glenn Pettigrove’s chapter on “Virtue Ethics, Virtue Theory, and Moral Theology.” Pettigrove delineates what he calls “Thomistic virtue ethics,” “narrativist virtue ethics,” “neo-Augustinian virtue ethics,” and “divine motivation theory.” But one should be quick to point out that these four are not mutually exclusive theories where the lines of demarcation are hard and fast.

The second section is one of the more oddly configured—but also interesting—sections of the book. It includes essays on both individual virtues as well as different religious traditions of ethics. Here we find entries on the intellectual virtues, integrity, humility, love, courage, wit, forgiveness, and justice. None of these topics is surprising. Of particular note is Heather Battaly’s piece on the intellectual virtues. This contribution is a tour de force of both historical and contemporary issues covering everyone from Aristotle to Sosa and seriously engaging the most important questions regarding reliabilism and responsibilism as well as whether we should even make the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues. If more of the contributions were in this vein the volume would have been much stronger. One might expect to find materials on practical wisdom, self-control, and hope. Of course, in a volume of this size and scope some selectivity is to be expected. Yet, even here there are a few oddities. Rather than consider the larger meaning of “love,” Michael Martin’s contribution focuses exclusively on human sexuality—certainly the virtue of love should include within its scope friendship and familial love as well. And Jeanine Grenberg’s contribution on humility takes a Kantian perspective which is not at all surprising and helpful but some engagement with other authors on this topic such as Augustine or Aquinas would give the reader a better historical perspective on this virtue. One might also ask why one would take a well-known deontologist such as Kant—where the virtues are of secondary importance—and use him as the primary interlocutor on this topic.

The other materials in this section address an important gap in the literature: non-Christian religious traditions and the virtues. Here we find entries on