We don’t know what we’re doing in normative ethics. That’s one of the judgments passed by skeptics of ethics as a discipline. Although there are good reasons to resist this claim, there is no better support for it than a thorough examination of the debate between moral theorists and anti-theorists in ethics. Nick Fotion’s book *Theory vs. Anti-Theory in Ethics* provides a wide examination of this debate, a diagnosis of what’s behind it, and gives recommendations for moving ethics beyond it. When this debate wound down a couple of decades ago, there was no clear resolution to it. Leaving matters in suspense has meant that moral theorists have avoided a thorough reworking of moral theory’s aims and methods. Fotion’s book is valuable for taking the overdue measure of giving this old debate a thorough review. It is also valuable in that it enables us to better assess moral theories, and to think of how they might be improved. Some of his observations and recommendations are, without a doubt, worthy of further consideration. But there are several aspects of this book that will unnecessarily challenge and perhaps frustrate its readers.

*Theory vs Anti-Theory in Ethics* aims to highlight the errors of two opposing schools of thought in ethics. The term ‘moral theory’ covers approaches to ethics we’re most familiar with, such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism. Saying that such theories promised more than they can deliver is an understatement. They claimed that in order to have moral knowledge, in order to successfully guide our moral actions, we must rely on their supposed supreme principles. Anti-theorists argued that such theories are unneeded on both counts, stressing that humans are, and have been, able to morally get by without any aid of any finely devised theories.

Fotion’s central claim is undeniable: moral theory and anti-theory don’t exhaust the options for theories of morality. Their underlying agreement concerns what he calls ‘strong theory’. A strong theory purports to cover everything in the moral domain. It is supposed to be complete. It does so by generating norms from its supreme principle or decision procedure. Strong theory also aims to exclude all competing theories. Moral theory works off of, and anti-theory disputes, this assumption. These theories, while certainly contrary to one another, aren’t contradictory. The shortcomings of moral theory are no more evident than when we examine their results alongside their aspirations. Each group of moral theorists proceeds as if their theory is clearly right and their opponents are clearly wrong, even while ‘there is no agreed assessment procedure that can tell us that this theory is better or worse than another’
One negative result of believing in strong theory, according to Fotion, is that its proponents not only become blind to the attractions of other theories, and intolerant of what other theories offer, they become deluded about the gains their own theories have made.

On several points, then, Fotion agrees with anti-theorists. However, by showing that strong theory is not the only kind of theorizing for us to do, he opens the possibility for a different theoretical approach to morality. It is what he calls 'weak theory'. Weak theory eschews exaggerated claims at the outset. Of weak theory, Fotion states, 'a theory does not have to claim to explain everything and it does not have to make claims that it is the correct theory' (p. 4). Instead of aiming to exclude other theories, weak theories endeavor to understand the moral domain by giving other theories a more considerate hearing. Models for weak theories include what he calls 'local theories', such as just war theories, media ethics theories, and stakeholder theories, among others. Such theories aim to treat a limited range of moral cases, and stay in contact with the subject they are about. Fotion convincingly argues that such limited theories have had more success than their strong theory counterparts.

Fewer ethicists today are wedded to a given moral theory than their counterparts decades ago. So how much of what Fotion claims about moral theory's shortcomings may be regarded as news? Nonetheless, there are many moral theorists who persist in carrying on as predecessors had before, ignoring the many blows anti-theorists landed. Fotion’s book should at least serve as a reminder to them of their theory’s fundamental problems. At best it can give moral theorists an opportunity to make fresh attempts to meet the criteria of a successful moral theory, or perhaps forthrightly scale back their criteria, either along Fotion’s lines or along other ones.

Let’s turn to what Fotion does to weaken his case. There were several points in the book where I was unsure of what he was doing. For one, his way of using the term ‘theory’ is peculiar. After laying out the several criteria of moral theory, then comparing local theories against them, he wonders if the latter are really theories. About just war theory he states, ‘There are several considerations that suggest that, after all, just war theory is not really a theory’ (p. 94). Also, after examining other local theories, Fotion states, 'local theories fail to meet several of the criteria that, allegedly, theories are supposed to meet' (p. 149). Later, about Rawls’s theories he states, ‘So if completeness (or comprehensiveness) is an essential virtue of an ethical theory, then Rawls’s theories are not really theories. But then what are they?’ (p. 160). The natural response, it seems to me, is to say, of course they are theories. They are just theories of more limited domains. Fotion’s way of speaking cedes far too much to the terminology of moral theorists, as if only what they do might be considered ‘theory’.