

Henry S. Richardson. *Articulating the Moral Community: Toward a Constructive Ethical Pragmatism.* Oxford University Press 2018. 328 pp. \$49.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190247744).

Henry Richardson has authored a text that demands attention. Richardson takes a seemingly simple question, ‘Who gets to specify moral norms?’ (xi), and subjects it to a penetrating examination in his search for an answer. In the process, he casts aside established historical responses while articulating his vision of a Constructive Ethical Pragmatism (CEP).

Articulating the Moral Community starts with a preface that lays out the decades-long path that Richardson took to bring the book to completion. Therein, he also dutifully thanks the numerous scholars who helped him refine the project. The book is divided into three parts, comprised of two, six, and four chapters, respectively. Richardson supplements the chapters with numerous footnotes, a useful list of references, and a detailed index.

Part one, ‘Preliminaries,’ sets out the rationale for CEP. The introductory chapter sketches the general outline of the book. Richardson argues that the overriding assumption guiding his project is that new moral norms occur in the shadow of established ones, and only when two similarly situated individuals are obligated to each other and seek to remove a disjuncture that binds them both (24). Chapter one, ‘Constructive Ethical Pragmatism,’ outlines the central features that make CEP attractive as an alternative to other moral theories. Chief among them is its practical nature. Richardson urges that CEP can help ‘us reconcile contingently clashing commitments’ (40), without having to fall back on a priori principles or looking forward to slippery consequentialist theories of morality.

The second part, ‘The Moral Authority of the Moral Community,’ provides the specific steps necessary to conceive of CEP’s ability to generate new moral norms. Chapter two, ‘The Ideal of the Moral Community,’ explains the range of said community: to wit, that it is composed of ‘the open-ended set of all individual persons (beings who can wrong or be wronged by another), structured in an elementary way in terms of dyadic duties and rights’ (75). The third chapter, ‘Authoritative Input: Dyadic Duties and Rights,’ deals with the first stage, *input*. Richardson concludes that ‘two morally competent individuals ... can articulate a new candidate moral norm that, while not yet affecting anyone else’s rights, duties, or permissions, affects their own’ (115-16). Chapter four, ‘The Unity of the Moral Community,’ serves as a bridge between the discrete actions of dyadic pairs and the large moral community to which they belong. It achieves this via the suggestion that ‘whenever intelligent beings understand each other and interact, they can exercise their conscientious discretion in ways that provide the germ of a new practice’ (126). The question remains however: how does this germ grow?

The fifth chapter, ‘Introducing New Moral Norms,’ answers that question by laying out the second stage, *selection and convergence*. This stage differs from the first in that the individuals involved in articulating potential moral norms now ‘judge that this resolution would be appropriate for others similarly situated’ (136). If Richardson’s first stage was somewhat static and context-focused, the second stage is forward-thinking and geared toward the moral community writ large. Chapter six, ‘Working It Out Together: Joint Moral Reasoning,’ serves as a somewhat curious pause in the overall discussion. Therein, Richardson argues for a form of moral reasoning necessary in all three stages of CEP. He contrasts his approach with others which remain too abstract or too situated, urging that it is: (a) ‘responsibly conducted’; (b) predicated on ‘openness and explicitness’; (c) suspicious of ‘deference to authority’; and (d) framed with an eye towards ‘generality and inclusiveness’ that extends

beyond any contextualized, dyadic, interaction (169). This form of reasoning is also inherently *practical* in a pragmatic sense. It aims not to settle, once and for all, matters of dispute; rather, it seeks to figure out what to do ‘in situations where moral issues are at stake’ (175).

The seventh chapter, ‘Ratification of New Moral Norms,’ deals with the aforementioned endorsement of new moral norms. This signals the end of the process given that the moral community now ‘adopts or endorses a candidate norm that is already being generally followed’ (187). The *ratification* stage differs from the prior one in that it is reflective of shifts that can and do occur once interested others have adopted what were once only provisional (indeed, hypothetical) moral norms. These shifts are described in a somewhat casual way. To Richardson, what is required for endorsement of a new norm is that it has ‘become broadly and inclusively an object of *mutual recognition of acceptance*’ (191). Left unstated is what, exactly, counts as broad or inclusive enough.

Part three, ‘Defending and Extending the Account,’ provides a proactive response to criticisms of Richardson’s approach to moral authority. Chapter eight, ‘Reasons, Indeterminacy, and Compromise,’ deals with two philosophical objections to CEP. The first, a metaphysical one, is the assumption that moral sense-making is predicated on first order principles and/or on the strength of the principle so invoked (202). Richardson responds that CEP regards such approaches dubious, especially in cases where decisions are of equal potential value.

The second objection, predicated on a form of moral psychology, supposes that moral choices are predicated on their relationship to fulfilling desires. While Richardson grants that we have desires, or preferences, he argues that those are of lesser importance than assessing ends and means; in cases of practical reasoning, we assess things ‘in terms of what is sought for the sake of what’ (209). ‘Noneternal Moral Principles’ functions as a response to a variation on the metaphysical challenge in the previous chapter. Richardson’s reply to those who would endorse eternal forms is, in short, a retort the classic pragmatists would endorse. The way to work towards moral principles ‘by which we ought to live is not doggedly and exclusively to pursue a priori conceptual inquiry, but to work with our considered moral judgments at all levels of generality, finding acceptable ways of reconciling them when they clash’ (237). Chapter ten, ‘Objectivity and Path-Dependence,’ is an argument against the view that CEP would introduce objectivity-jettisoning moral relativism. Quite the contrary. Richardson notes that persons deliberating in a specific context do so against the backdrop of existing, objective, standards. Participants don’t, therefore, deliberate to fix a rip in the fabric of objectivity; they work to resolve an issue of discontinuity ‘sincerely and conscientiously’ (246). As the process moves forward, from input and toward ratification, the process necessarily moves beyond them and towards the social functions of the moral community of which they are a part. In the conclusion, Richardson suggests the merits of his approach. CEP is problem-solving in nature, given that it supplies new answers where existing ‘objective moral norms give rise to practical indeterminacies’ (261). CEP is also human-centered and optimistic, rather than idealized and restrictive. Richardson argues that his approach ‘reconcile[s] the objectivity of morality with the possibility that the reflection of intelligent persons can, over the course of history, fill out the content of morality’ (272).

Even this somewhat detailed overview of the book can’t do justice to the breadth and depth of Richardson’s reasoning. As a project years in the making, *Articulating the Moral Community* ranges across topics and examples, integrating scholarly sources and responding to critical challenges with a level of vigor that rewards, no less requires, close reading. There are also wonderfully dry moments of humor and a particularly self-effacing awareness of the pitfalls of academic philosophizing.

Some of those same strengths might also be sticking points for some readers. Richardson insights are sometimes obscured by the intricate superstructure of his book. Chapters refer back to

other chapters far too often. The three stages of the CEP are laid out in slightly different ways in subsections of several chapters. Examples are doubled up in ways that distract from the main thesis and/or seem so carefully chosen as to be cases that only serve to prove the rule. Richardson occasionally trips over his generally lucid prose. There is also an apparent discontinuity in the introduction, where the second chapter is framed as being in part one and not, as is the case in the body of the book, part three. There is also, finally, a lingering sense that this book, while speaking to the whole of the moral community, will only find a readership in the halls of academia.

In the end, and in spite of these minor criticisms, this book does a great service to the idea that moral communities are not, or shouldn't be, based on petrified first principles or loose appeals to consequence. Richardson provides a vision of the moral community that is reasoned and revisable. *Articulating the Moral Community* is a challenging read that is worth the effort.

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