Lewis Vaughn. *Deciding What's Right: A Practical Guide to Moral Theory*. W. W. Norton 2024. 256 pp. $48.75 USD (Paperback 9781324071334).

Lewis Vaughn, in *Deciding What's Right*, has provided an accessible and useful introduction to the contours of moral philosophy, ethics, and ethical decision-making. Written primarily for students who are new to the philosophical study of moral theory, Vaughn offers his readers foundational knowledge about ethical concepts, moral theory/ies, and moral reasoning, along with a new framework—grounded in a tripartite principlism—that can be used to understand complex moral issues and, subsequently, to engage in deliberate, well-reasoned, defensible ethical decision-making. Ultimately, the book presents keen insights about moral philosophy to newcomers, and it demonstrates terrific potential to accomplish its primary aim: to "help students not only understand ethics but become more confident in *doing* ethics" (xi).

Functionally, Vaughn's book can be divided into three parts. The first section introduces readers to moral philosophy and ethics, insofar as they have manifested in the West. At the outset (Chapter 1), Vaughn lays the groundwork for what ethics is, how it has been studied, how it connects with religion and beliefs about morality, and why it matters—not just academically, or philosophically, but practically as well. A strength of Vaughn's approach, especially in this earliest chapter, is accessibility: complex ideas, foundational arguments, and philosophical ideas are presented clearly and without (over)reliance on potentially disorienting academic or philosophical jargon. The text is very readable. Building on his foundational discussion of ethics and the moral life, Vaughn moves on to summarize, in just as accessible a manner, four distinct perspectives of moral judgements: moral objectivism, cultural relativism, subjective relativism, and emotivism (Chapter 2). Here again, Vaughn delineates ideas foundational to moral philosophy without getting too technical or too enmeshed in theory. In other words, Vaughn astutely helps his readers get comfortable dipping a toe in the philosophical waters before diving into the deep end. Proceeding from his review of moral judgements, Vaughn moves on to introduce philosophical argumentation, specifically as related to moral arguments (Chapter 3). Especially helpful to the newcomer, Vaughn goes beyond a cursory review of what constitutes good arguments—clear premises, strong and valid conclusions that are supported using carefully applied deductive or inductive logic—and offers a brief but useful overview of common argumentation pitfalls, or fallacies. As any useful introductory text focused on the study of logic might do, common fallacies such as *begging the*

question, *equivocation*, *appeal to authority*, *slippery slope*, *appeal to emotion*, and *straw man* (among others) are defined and illustrated by example. This chapter's emphasis on moral arguments, moral reasoning, and "considered moral judgements" (53) is an undercurrent that runs throughout the remainder of the text.

The second section of the book provides an overview of moral theory/ies along with a framework for evaluating a moral theory's usefulness (Chapter 4). Subsequently, Vaughn presents a more in-depth review of several predominant theories, along with discussion of their relative strengths and limitations. In this section, Vaughn considers much of the terrain that would be expected of an introductory moral philosophy text: ethical egoism (Chapter 5), utilitarianism (Chapter 6), Kantian ethics (Chapter 7), and natural law theory (Chapter 8). Each of these chapters provides a useful overview of the theory, delineates how the theory is and/or might be applied to ethical decision-making, evaluates the theory, and considers what might be learned from or borrowed from the theory in an applied setting. The patterned approach that Vaughn uses to review ethical egoism, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and natural law theory is functional and supports comprehensibility.

This second section of Vaughn's book is extended to include a review of social contract theory (Chapter 9), feminist ethics and the ethics of care (Chapter 10), and virtue ethics (Chapter 11). The first two of these chapters are slightly different in form, compared to the previous chapters, as both lack an explicit focus on evaluation and application. Forgivable as that is, one lament about Vaughn's treatment of these latter three topics taken together—although they clearly need to be included in his text—is that they are not sufficiently introduced in Chapter 4 alongside the other theories that are discussed in this section. The curious reader might be left wondering how social contract theory, feminist ethics, and virtue ethics fit specifically within the consequentialist versus non-consequentialist schema that is used to introduce and situate each of the other theories of morality. Cognitive dissonance notwithstanding, Vaughn carefully reviews each of the theories mentioned and considers each theory in light of its affordances and constraints. To the student heretofore uninitiated in moral philosophy or the study of ethics, the text up to this point provides a rather solid foundation for understanding the nuances of ethics and ethical decision-making.

Rhetorically, Vaughn uses the first eleven chapters to build up to his articulation of the need for a (more) useful framework that both addresses the limitations of extant moral theories and can be readily applied to the moral challenges and ethical dilemmas of today. Thus, he presents his

framework for *deciding what's right* (Chapter 12): a three-step approach reliant on three prima facie principles of respect, justice, and beneficence. The three-step approach, incorporating Vaughn's principlism, reflects the essence of his argument. He suggests, "In any situation where we need to decide on the morally right action or assess the morality of others' actions, we must identify the relevant principles in each case, specify what actions or rules they imply, weigh and balance them against each other, and choose the morally justified option" (167). Vaughn concludes this second section of his text with a few useful worked examples of how his framework might be applied.

In the final section of the book, which comprises its last four chapters, Vaughn uses his framework to examine four contemporary ethical issues. In particular, Vaughn explores biomedical ethics (Chapter 13), business ethics (Chapter 14), environmental ethics (Chapter 15), and ethics pertaining to the development and use of artificial intelligence (Chapter 16)—topics that are sure to resonate with students at this current moment. In each of these chapters, Vaughn's framework is put through its paces, at least in terms of the first two steps: *determine what principles apply* and *weigh and balance the principles*. Necessarily, he stops short of the third step, *choose the right option*, as that is something that happens when the so-called rubber meets the road.

Said differently, this stopping short on Vaughn's part surfaces his belief that ethics is something we *do*, indeed, that each of us *does*. We are "involved in ethics" (1) throughout our lives, whether we want to be or not. Vaughn asserts, "You cannot escape it. You cannot run away from all of the choices, feelings, and actions that accompany ideas about write and wrong, good and bad—ideas that persist in your culture and in your mind" (1). And earlier, in his prefatory remarks, Vaughn suggests, "one of the best ways to learn how to apply moral concepts and theories is through practice" (xii). Vaughn's conviction on these points is reflected in one terrifically useful feature of the book. This feature—that is, his designed solution for the conviction that ethics is something that we *do* and something that must be *practiced*—is notable. Indeed, it is a feature that sets the book aside from other introductory texts. Specifically, Vaughn includes "exercises" at the conclusion of each chapter. These exercises include review and essay questions that provide an opportunity for interested readers (or instructors) to extend reflections on and consider applications of the main ideas of each chapter. Useful as these review and essay questions are, though, even more beneficial are the numerous "ethical dilemmas" that Vaughn presents throughout. These ethical dilemmas depict scenarios that can, and should, be used to *practice* the chapter's lessons—

thus moving readers themselves to and through the third step of the framework.

Up to this point, I have highlighted many of the strengths of *Doing What's Right* and I have raised only a few minor quibbles. There is one other concern, hinted at above, that I think is worth noting here. While similar to other introductory texts of its kind, at least in this regard, Vaughn does little to acknowledge that his approach—his review of moral philosophy and the concomitant framework he presents—is grounded in the moral traditions of the West. That is, Vaughn does not account for or acknowledge moral philosophy or ethics vis-à-vis Eastern, Indigenous, or other Majority World perspectives. I believe a more explicit recognition of this singular focus on the Western tradition would serve contemporary students well—especially those who are new to the study of moral philosophy.

Complaints aside, Vaughn's introduction to moral philosophy, ethics, and ethical decision-making—to *doing* ethics—is accessible, useful, carefully constructed, and rich in its offerings. It neatly provides a practical guide to moral theory, insofar as the framework it presents can be used straightaway, first to understand and assess complex moral issues and then to engage carefully in principled, well-reasoned ethical decision-making.

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