For an Ontology of Morals: A Critique of Contemporary Ethical Theory by Henry B. Veatch

(Northwestern University Press; 172 pp.; $6.95)

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_For an Ontology of Morals_ is, unfortunately, not likely to receive a fair hearing from the contemporary philosophical establishment, for it aligns itself with neither of the currently dominant philosophical postures—existential phenomenology and linguistic analysis. Indeed, the book attacks the ethical theories which have been derived from these two modes of philosophy, theories which, the author argues, reduce to a common ethical nihilism. Though Veatch does not explicitly range outside the boundaries of ethical philosophy proper, his argument bears on the present crisis in modern culture. In fact, Veatch’s diagnosis of ethical nihilism as the logical outcome of the theories he examines may ultimately be more relevant to understanding the agonies of modern industrial society than are many more pretentious social, economic and political interpretations.

The essential argument is that without an ontological basis ethics is doomed to circularity, necessarily begging the fundamental questions of how a man ought to live. Both the existentialists (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Frederick Olafson) and the analysts (Hare, Stevenson, Foot, Searle) reject any ontology of morals, denying that values exist as objective aspects of nature. For the existentialists, values are imposed on an objectively valueless nature as “the free and arbitrary projections of ourselves as transcendentalsubjects.” For the analysts, values are determined by the conventions and logic of language. Ultimately, both types of ethics reduce values to arbitrary acts of human choice or decision, acts for which there are no “good reasons” in the nature of things. Though the exponents of these philosophies do not see themselves as such, the logic of their position qualifies them as nihilists.

Veatch suggests that these thinkers have of late become aware of the nihilistic drift of contemporary ethics and have invented several strategies to arrest it. Some linguistic analysts have challenged Moore’s refutation of ethical naturalism and have even made irreverent gestures toward that dragon which, since David Hume, has forborne passage to any sort of ontology of ethics—the “is/ought” dichotomy. Thus John Searle, in a now-famous treatise, has shown “how to derive ‘ought’ from ‘is,’” thereby deducing a value from a fact and apparently warding off an embarrassing nihilism. Veatch shows, however, that Searle’s derivation of “ought” from “is” holds good only within the framework of the logic of language, or within what Searle terms “institutional facts,” like the institution of promising. If one chooses to reject the institution—and Searle’s theory puts one under no moral obligation to do otherwise—Searle’s “oughts” have no rational basis. In order to provide such a rational basis, Searle would have to derive values from “natural facts,” or show that institutional facts have a justification in nature, and this Searle cannot do without subscribing to the heresy of an ontology of morals.

At one point, Veatch locates the ethical issues in the larger context of Western intellectual history:

“If does not really seem so far-fetched to say that the distinctive mark of that history has been an ever increasing fascination with, and glorification of, the absolute freedom and autonomy of the human individual; or if not of the human individual, then perhaps of human society; or if not of human society, then of the elusive and mysterious entity or non-entity which we might call the human spirit or Geist. Also, this freedom or autonomy has tended to be regarded as a sort of culmination of a long process of liberation in which man has progressively freed himself from a subjection to all externally imposed laws, whether human, natural, or divine, and has come to recognize himself increasingly as a being who is not subject to law but rather is the source of all law. . . .”

The irony, if Veatch’s argument is correct, is that in making himself “the source of all law,” modern man has rendered the concept of law arbitrary and absurd, thus “liberating” himself from a meaningful universe and preparing the way for a world of pure, unrationa1ized power. In such a universe, everything is “autonomous”—the human will and psyche, the creative imagination, the corporate-technological system—which means that nothing has any justification beyond itself, nor can it be criticized by an independent moral standard. Whatever is is right, which means that nothing has any value, and no mode of conduct exerts a compelling moral claim on human beings.

Those who think that the widespread sense of alienation, boredom, and anomic which plagues modern industrial society will be driven away by revolutionary changes in the distribution of wealth and power, by the amelioration of social evils, and by the liberation of the oppressed have underestimated the spiritual seriousness of the present crisis. The nihilism that Veatch detects beneath the surface of contemporary ethical philosophy may be an objective correlative for the moral emptiness of our civilization.