

being nonrival or nonexclusive). Not surprisingly, the society has some difficulty in the example, choosing to purchase (or not to purchase) the good; some strategic behavior is present and the result arrived at by society is unacceptable to Broome. What should happen? Although the democracy described in the example chose not to purchase the good, Broome believes “When we assess what is good for people, we must do so relative to some probabilities of our own. Therefore, what is good for people cannot always coincide with their preferences. This is one reason why preference-satisfaction theory is false.”

All of this takes place in the book without references to the literature that some economists would consider crucial. For instance, there is no reference to game theory or its many applications to situations like many of those described in the various chapters. As Tom Sowell often points out, there is a great deal of discussion about the pros and cons of various issues, but this overlooks the crucial fact that the most basic decision is *who* makes the decision (and under what constraints and subject to what feedback mechanisms). The deciding authority is not a topic covered in any text example or article. In addition, the concept of externalities and their role in making decisions like those described is not mentioned. The literature in economics that has examined how collective choices are made is only selectively referenced here: There are seven references to 1998 Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (as there should be in a volume with this subject), but there are no references to James Buchanan (also a Nobel Laureate) who has carried on spirited debates with Sen on just these topics. This book is well worth reading for those interested in the intersection between economics and ethics, but beware that it may not be an evenhanded discussion of the topic.

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## **Ethics As Social Science: The Moral Philosophy of Social Cooperation**

**Leland B. Yeager**

Chesterton, United Kingdom; Northampton, Massachusetts:  
Edward Elgar, 2001 (334 pages)

The first merit of this remarkable defense of empiricism in ethics and economics is its frank *status quaestionis* and chosen perspective. The cards are on the table from the very start, without any beating about the bush. The author’s commitment to radical empiricism, reminiscent of William James, is thorough and almost passionate. His acknowledged and revered masters are Hume, Adam Smith, Stuart Mill ... all the way to P. T. Bauer and John Gray, as well as to Hayek and von Mises. Of course, Jeremy Bentham figures most prominently as the founder of utilitarianism, to the defense of whose doctrine the author devotes copious sections of the book.

Wishing to demonstrate that ethics is indispensable to economics, and vice versa, he strives to show that ethics, as a *social science*, must satisfy all the canons of “science,” and thus stick to observation and analysis, avoiding all the pitfalls of an antiempiricist ethics made up of noble, vague, and high-sounding words inspired by religion or metaphysics.

In the first chapter of the book, he asserts that he does not want “to ridicule moral convictions. On the contrary, they are indispensable to a healthy society, but precisely for this reason, it is important to seek a sound basis for them.” And then he goes on to say: “Economists are better equipped [*sic*] for handling moral questions, by and large, than are clergymen and clergywomen. They are less likely, I conjecture, to be content with noble-sounding words and more likely to ask what asserted principles would mean in practice, and what institutions would be required to implement them.”

Thus, following the line of P. T. Bauer in the latter’s animosity to Catholic social teaching (“nothing but socialism pure and simple”), Yeager explicitly criticizes the various pronouncements of the U.S. Bishops Conference, ignoring the trenchant and extensive refutations of socialism and welfare-state theories in papal encyclicals, such as *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Populorum Progressio*, *Mater et Magistra*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and *Centesimus Annus*.

Also in this first chapter, the author makes a neat classification of ethical theories, citing three antiempiricist schools of thought, namely Judeo-Christianity, Kant’s morality based on reason alone, and—taking a long jump—the updated version of natural law recently formulated by Hardley Arkes. He puts all of these on trial for failing to be a “scientific,” purely empirical ethics to be worked out in the context of actual “social cooperation.” Thus, he rehashes David Hume, for whom anything that is not empirically observable, namely through sense experience, is dismissed as vague, abstruse, mysterious, or abstract, a product of metaphysical (that dreadful word) illusion, fantasy, or even vanity. This repugnance for “abstractions” is Francis Bacon’s legacy. By contrast, Locke’s moderation and broadmindedness is not all closed to metaphysical or transcendent notions such as free will, fundamental equality, natural rights, and a Supreme Being as Creator of those rights, crystallized in the American Declaration of Independence, inspired by Locke, not by Hume.

Yeager endeavors to ground ethics in a utilitarian context centered on economics; that is, the grappling with the business of living in social cooperation in this material world, steering away from any transcendent or supernatural reference. He deserves credit for his thorough research into contemporary authors. Regrettably, however, he shows himself unacquainted with the way that Kant refuted Hume’s extreme empiricism by appealing to Newton, who applied Aquinas’s scientific method of observation, experiment, and *quantification* (those “dreadful” mathematical *abstractions*) to the study of the material world, thus bringing about a decisive turning point in the history of science.

When Hume’s doctrines filtered into France, they were enthusiastically hailed by Condillac and other materialists who called themselves “sensists,” like Destutt de

Tracy. Already in the nineteenth century, as a backlash to this crass materialism (as Marx called it), Maine de Biran turned against Condillac through his analysis of introspection, free will, and subjective causality, inaugurating a spiritualist (or now called *personalist*) tradition from Ravaisson, through Lachélier, Boutroux, Bergson, and then intertwining with Kierkegaard, Husserl, Scheler, Buber, Marcel, Jaspers, Mounier, Maritain, Heidegger, Lévinas, Ricoeur, Gadamer, and so forth.

In any analysis of ethics and economics, one cannot ignore, for instance, the decisive critique of Hume's empiricism, or "psychologism" in Husserl's classic, *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900–1901), which launched the phenomenological movement. The penetrating critique of the neopositivism of the Vienna Circle, by the two "dissidents," Wittgenstein and Popper, should not be overlooked either.

Of course, as Kierkegaard—and Aquinas, Scotus, Leibniz, and Pascal before him—highlighted so brightly, we have to be fully submerged in existential reality: away from "essentialism," but focusing exclusively on the changeable and becoming blind to the permanent is an arbitrary reduction of human experience. A proper dose of empiricism is always healthy, as Kant acknowledged when, as he said, on reading Hume he was "awakened from his dogmatic slumber." But as Shakespeare put it in *Hamlet* (Act 1), "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." And again (in Act 3): "To be or not to be" (metaphysics!), "that is the question."

There are such things as permanent, objective, and "abstract" values, acknowledged even by Einstein. They are metaempirical but nonetheless *real*; in fact, more real than mere sensible impressions, and present in the immortal works of the human spirit through the ages, both in the arts and in the physical sciences. These are not just high-sounding words but facts of history, thoroughly discussed by Max Scheler and other axiologists.

The trouble with a "social science" that aspires to be "real science" is that it falls between the two shoals of, on the one hand, eliciting the scorn of mathematical physics for not being able to assimilate the imponderable factors of human life and human society, and, on the other, showing its vulnerability to a critique by a personalist, metaphysical perspective that refuses to accept a reductionist confinement of human experience to what is *quantifiable*, overlooking what is *qualifiable*, or reducing the latter to a matter of subjective tastes or preferences.

On the other hand, the American Declaration of Independence proclaims "self-evident" truths, not simply subjective opinions or majority preferences. And these truths are expressed in human rights, inalienable, certain, and given by the Creator: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—liberty under the rule of reason and law.

Economists need an exposure to the *whole* history of philosophy, not just to the empiricist tradition, so as to avoid a one-sided view of the connection of ethics and economics. By focusing on the human person, both existentially and essentially, one can discern the metaphysical ground of social ethics.

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