The second half of Sterba's book contains three chapters on topics in contemporary ethics. The chapter on discussions of natural-law theory, utilitarianism, and Kantianism, Timmons pushes his view that the best moral theory will be pluralistic and also "indeterminate". This motivates the next chapter, "Kant's Moral Theory." In his pluralism is the objection that utilitarianism fails to respect persons and their separateness; this motivates the next chapter, "Kant's Moral Theory." In his discussions of natural-law theory, utilitarianism, and Kantianism, Timmons pushes his view that the best moral theory will be pluralistic and also "indeterminate" in what the principles of the theory imply about the deontic status of a wide range of actions" (147). This idea blossoms in the next chapter, "Moral Pluralism," an examination of Ross's theory of prima facie duties. It enjoys further incarnations in the chapters on virtue ethics and particularism.

Although Timmons is exceptionally evenhanded, he is also opinionated in places, which makes the book even more pedagogically useful, since students and teachers are bound to reject some of his opinions. One recurring theme, as suggested above, is a campaign on behalf of "limited moral pluralism," more or less the following view: there are a plurality of basic moral duties and/or intrinsic goods; there is no codifiable super principle stating when some duty (or value) is more stringent (or greater) than a competing one, and so our final theory is limited (i.e., it will not deliver a verdict in every possible case about what, all things considered, morally ought to be done); therefore, we often need moral judgment, or practical wisdom, to discover what to do.

My main complaint is that Timmons nowhere acknowledges that if our final theory is a form of limited moral pluralism, then, really, our project has failed. It has failed to whatever extent the theory is limited. Perhaps limited moral pluralism is the best we mere mortal moralists can do, but this is a conclusion to lament, not to welcome. (I say this as a pluralist and Ross sympathizer.) Our original goal was actually to answer moral philosophy's first question, What should I do? The way a moral theory answers this question is by stating the nonmoral conditions an act must satisfy to be such that it should be done. Limited moral pluralism doesn't do this. It drops some worthwhile hints but then leaves us on our own to intuit the final answer. (It also, incidentally, leaves bigots and zealots on their own to intuit their preferred answers.) This objection to limited moral pluralism is not the weaker, merely epistemic one, often leveled against utilitarianism, that, given the theory, it is sometimes hard to know when the relevant nonmoral conditions are satisfied. Limited moral pluralism's shortcoming is that it supplies no such conditions. Despite this criticism, my recommendation of Timmons's superb book remains unqualified.

C. C. H.