Timmons, Mark. *Moral Theory: An Introduction*.

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002. Pp. 291. $69.00 (cloth), $20.95

(paper).

   Mark Timmons's *Moral Theory* is one of the best ethics textbooks in existence: clear,

careful, non-superficial, erudite, systematic, wide-ranging, organized, and fair. Although it is

probably too advanced (and maybe a little too dry) for an introductory ethics course, I

recommend it unhesitatingly for upper division undergraduate courses in ethical theory. I also

recommend it as a reference for teachers and graduate students of philosophy.

   Moral Theory covers eight theories of right conduct: divine command theory, relativism,

natural law theory, utilitarianism, Kantianism, Rossianism, virtue ethics, and particularism.

Ethical egoism and social contract theory – two approaches commonly covered in ethics

textbooks – receive no treatment.

   I love the way the book is organized. First we get divine command theory and relativism

– two "morality-by-authority" approaches so popular among undergraduates – out of the way.

Then the chapter on natural law theory introduces the crucial idea that values can conflict, along

with one resolution, the doctrine of double effect, the examination of which makes for an

excellent exercise. The chapter concludes by contrasting perfectionism and welfarism about

intrinsic value, which leads naturally to the simplest solution to the problem of moral conflict:

utilitarianism. Included in the rich, two-chapter discussion of utilitarianism 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 even-handed, 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 superprinciple 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 non-moral 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 non-moral 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.

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