

*Ethics Done Right*, by Elijah Millgram (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Reviewed by Richard Joyce, *Philosophical Books* 48 (2006)

[penultimate draft]

This collection of eleven papers by Elijah Millgram (nine of which have been previously published) is ostensibly united by the thesis that the best way to go about assessing moral theories is to identify the view of practical reasoning that each such theory rests upon, and evaluate the adequacy of these respective theories of practical reasoning. The correct moral theory, Millgram assures us, will be the one that is paired with the best theory of practical reasoning. He outlines this methodology in a substantial (32 pp.) introduction.

Why should we adopt Millgram's method? A host of concerns immediately leap to mind. If two or more different moral theories rest on the same theory of practical reasoning, then how would discovering the latter to be the correct theory of practical reasoning help us decide among the moral theories? What if a given moral theory is consistent with two or more different theories of practical reasoning? What if we cannot evaluate theories of practical reasoning independently of having adopted a moral perspective? Millgram doesn't address these natural questions head on, but rather proposes that the essays of the volume collectively constitute a "feasibility demonstration" (p. 3) of the method. In other words, the only way that we will be persuaded that the pairings between moral theories and practical reasoning theories are tight enough to support this grand project is to get our hands dirty in detailed discussion of particular moral theories, particular theories of practical reasoning, and the relations between them. It is through seeing the method at work that we will become convinced, Millgram hopes, of several interlocking theses: (1) that each of the major moral theories of the past has had a distinctive take on practical reasoning; (2) that pivotal structural elements of these theories are due to the underlying theory of practical reasoning; (3) that problems in a moral theory can often be traced to problems in the underlying theory of practical reasoning; (4) that theories of practical reasoning are "engines" (p. 4) of moral theories; and (5) that the method provides the advantage that the moral theory that is ultimately chosen as a result of its implementation will automatically come with a powerful argument in its favor.

In the first two chapters Millgram purports to show that practical instrumentalism and utilitarianism 'pair off.' Chapter 3 argues that Kant's Categorical Imperative is self-refuting, which is interpreted as demonstrating how a fundamental flaw with the theory "bottoms out in the theory of practical reasoning" (p. 17). Chapter 4 discusses how virtue ethics is founded on a distinctively Aristotelian theory of practical reasoning, while the following chapter aims to highlight the extent to which Iris Murdoch's moral particularism is shaped by her take on practical reasoning. The next three chapters discuss Hume's nihilism about practical reasoning, and the kind of moral theory that such nihilism will beget. (The last of the trio is a previously unpublished unusual discussion of Hume's *History of England*, analyzed as a product of his metathetical commitments.) Chapters 9 and 10 concern incommensurability. The final chapter (first published in 1997) more than any other directly addresses the method that is supposed to undergird the collection; perhaps it is the progenitor article of this whole line of reasoning in Millgram's thought.

Even though there are many occasions on which the relevance of the discussion to Millgram's general method is obscure (to say the least), the aspiration to provide the collection with a guiding, forward-looking ethos, to avoid being just another volume of "collected papers," is to be commended. He doesn't quite pull it off—one never escapes the

knowledge that this uniting methodology has been projected post hoc onto a series of independently written articles—but, nevertheless, the result is tolerably cohesive, and arguably makes for a richer and more diverse reading experience than had all the papers been constructed as chapters of a monograph.

Whatever misgivings one may have about the ultimate rectitude of the favored method (and at the end of the book there certainly remains plenty of room for skepticism that theories of morality and theories of practical reasoning will pair off in the one-to-one manner necessary to make the method viable), there is no doubt that in pursuing it Millgram provides many valuable insights for the working moral philosopher. His arguments are not without problems—sometimes significant ones—but his discussion is invariably interesting, perceptive, nuanced, scholarly, and not infrequently witty. One of the intellectual virtues of his work is the impossibility of easily pigeon-holing his position; the reader senses that Millgram would find it simply boring for his name to become associated with any well-known “ism” of moral philosophy. Millgram is a genuinely original thinker, unafraid of Big New Ideas. His confidence is occasionally his own undoing, leading to selective reading and an impatience with opposing viewpoints. And the book’s main title (while not quite in the league of Nietzsche’s “Why I Write Such Good Books”) has a characteristic air of hubris about it. This may not be *ethics done right*, but it is certainly ethics done interesting.