

## Book Reviews

***Generalization in Ethics.* By Marcus George Singer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961. Pp. xvii + 361, with index. \$6.00.**

At first sight, this book might appear to be restricted to a narrow and perhaps somewhat technical problem of methodology in moral philosophy. Actually, the book turns out to be much broader in scope and much more interesting in content. The central problem with which the book deals concerns the argumentation underlying the question "What would happen if everyone did that?" and the reply "If everyone did that, the consequences would be terrible; therefore you ought not to do that." Singer calls this the generalization argument, and in so far as his book treats principally the topic of generalization in ethics and the problems connected with it, the book is an essay in the logic of ethics interpreted a little broadly to mean a reasoning about moral action rather than a logic of ethics as a science. The sub-title of the book is "An Essay in the Logic of Ethics, with the Rudiments of a System of Moral Philosophy." The second half of this sub-title refers to the ultimate aim of the author to lay the groundwork for a rational and normative system of ethics. He expressly opposes the intuitionist and emotive theories of morals, and takes exception to the "good reasons" theory of Stephen Toulmin in so far as he argues that certain fundamental principles transcend even given social codes.

The fundamental principles, Singer maintains, are not deducible from further premises but simply given in experience, are certain, and form the basis for particular moral judgments. They include the principle of consequence, the principle of suffering, the principle of justification, the categorical imperative (interpreted anew by Singer) and, most of all, the principle of generalization. The principle of generalization states that what is right (or wrong) for any one person must be right (or wrong) for any similar person in similar circumstances. Upon this principle rests the generalization argument, already referred to, that if everyone were to do that, the consequences would be disastrous (or undesirable); therefore no one ought to do that. Singer ably defends the generalization argument from obvious logical fallacies which might be raised against it, principally by determining and explaining the conditions under which the argument is a

good and valid one. Actually, the generalization *principle* mediates and qualifies the generalization *argument* by stressing the phrase *for any similar person in similar circumstances*, which Singer elaborates in Chap. II; he then develops the generalization argument itself in Chap. IV. Chapter V distinguishes between fundamental moral principles and moral rules. The principles are the basis for the moral rules. The moral rules are simply propositions to the effect that a certain kind of action is generally right or generally wrong; they are more specific than the principles and admit of exception if there is a good reason for the exception. By this distinction moral relativity is avoided because, while the rules may change, the principles remain the same and are always applicable. The remainder of the book deals with applications of the generalization argument, the categorical imperative (including a fresh interpretation of Kant) and a final chapter on the basis of morality where the "rudiments of a moral philosophy" are faced and discussed.

This book is another instance, and an especially significant one, of the growing tendency among contemporary philosophers to take the position that reason does have an essential function in moral science and that it provides a basis for moral judgments in both the scientific and completely practical orders. It effectively undermines the position of the purely subjectivist and emotional theorists by successfully arguing that there are certain moral principles which are known to be true and on which moral reasoning rests. Moreover, Singer is aware that such principles are few in number and necessarily very general; they are, he also knows, not to be confused with moral rules. When he insists that moral principles hold in all circumstances and are always relevant whereas rules are not, he is reiterating the sound distinction between common and proper principles of ethics, the former remaining certain in just the way Singer says they are and the latter having an element of uncertainty in their application. He is perceptive in his recognition that neither the principle nor the rules provide ready solutions for problems in the completely practical order of prudence.

Nonetheless, in all those respects where Singer demonstrates competence and understanding, an important misapprehension, or perhaps omission, is constantly apparent. First, his principles are not, after all, the most fundamental principles of ethics, even the principle of generalization, significant though this principle is in the respect in which he treats it. His principles, in effect, tend to be logical rather than ethical. The reason for this lies in a misapprehension of the character

of ethics as a science; Singer certainly knows it is not completely practical knowledge in his sense of "morals," but he tends then to view it as theoretical only, rather than seeing it as formally practical knowledge, i. e., practical primarily as ordered to action though theoretical in the truth known about such action. Now the practical character of ethics demands practical principles. True enough, the principles Singer enunciates seem practical, yet they are not sufficiently so because of a still more fundamental point not taken into account by him: the role of final cause in ethics. Seeking the good is *the* principle in ethics, upon which all other principles depend and to which all moral reasoning is ultimately directed. Only in this context can a principle like that of generalization take on its proper ethical significance; without it, the principle is not sufficiently anchored in the practical order. What is right for any one person must be right for any similar person in similar circumstances—if men seek the good.

This consideration brings us to a related fundamental point omitted by Singer, the essential operative role played by appetite, will and emotion, in moral life. Human experience, which Singer so well respects and analyzes, is still not taken sufficiently into account unless, in addition to the role of reason, the inclination of appetite to the good is admitted. This is the "non-rational" side of moral life that inevitably escapes a purely rationalist approach. Singer recognizes exactly where the problem lies in stating that the great difficulty in morals is not really a matter of theory but lies in the resolution of concrete cases. He even cites a sentence from Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* which adverts to the point that not only facts but intention must be laid bare, although Singer introduces this only in the context of litigation in courts. The role of right appetite is central in all our concrete human acts, and without it prudence does not operate as a virtue. In overlooking appetite, three basic questions about moral experience cannot be adequately answered. First: why is any human act ever performed? Reasoning alone is not enough. Secondly: how can men deliberately act contrary to what they know is right? Third: how can even a virtuous man, who still lacks omniscience, be reasonably sure in so many instances that his action here and now is the right one or that one of two good acts to be performed in these circumstances is preferable?

*Generalization in Ethics* is so good a book, eminently sound in so many respects in establishing a rational basis for distinguishing between

right and wrong, that the comments just made are more by way of supplementing it than simply criticizing it. It is an important and highly significant essay in the logic of ethics and does have the rudiments of a system of moral philosophy. Singer wisely concludes:

It is in the nature of the subject matter that on moral matters reasonable men can, on occasion, reasonably disagree. For the problems are often so complex and difficult, and no man is omniscient. Even if the principles set forth in this book are as clear and as certain as I believe them to be, their application will often be unclear and uncertain. Yet this is no reason for despair or for skepticism. In the reasonable disagreements of reasonable men we may find, so far as we are reasonable, both hope and enlightenment. For it is only in the development of reasonableness, to which this process contributes, that there is any hope for a better world.

To this one simply wants to add: it is only in the development of reasonableness *as men tend to the good* that there is any hope for a better world.

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***Philosophy of Nature.* Francis J. Collingwood. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961. Pp. viii + 306, with index. \$4.50.**

Any new book of philosophy of nature taking full cognizance of contemporary science is bound to be greeted with interest and welcome. The present book is a thought-provoking essay in this difficult field, using a novel order and approach. In the preface the author explains his particular objective and presents an outline of the development of his exposition.

Philosophy of nature is stated to be "an intelligible account of sensible being considered in itself as well as in its causes" (p. v), "namely, to explain the basic nature and properties of physical being" (p. 109). Since scientific certitude can come from both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of physical being, philosophy of nature is entrusted by the author with establishing the legitimacy and limits of both approaches. Philosophy of nature is a metascience, transcending the particular formal aspects of the other sciences "in order to see the whole of the cosmos in all of its intelligible facets" (p. vi). Its only