

For ETMP Spring 2018

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How should we do ethics today? What should we aim to publish? These are two very interesting questions, and large ones. I don't pretend that what I say in response is a comprehensive answer, but I hope that what I say offers cause for reflection and that it gels nicely with what Marcus and Thomas say in their editorial.

I am struck by something that has happened in political philosophy during my time as a professional philosopher. When I was a PhD student many political philosophy postgraduates were working on variations of the theme 'Rawls and his critics'. I've got no problem with people working on Rawls or liberalism more generally, of course: much good can come - and *has* come - from such detailed, lengthy attention. But I remember thinking at the time that too much focus on one thinker might be unhealthy and that political philosophy might get stuck in a rut. (Of course, this may simply be a reflection of my own narrow range of philosophical friends and acquaintances at the time. And I am being just a tad provocative to make the point.) Admittedly there were people working on other topics, at the margins, but the work was just that: work at the margins. Or so it seemed to me. Pleasingly in the last decade or more, many of these once marginal topics and questions have come front and centre to philosophical debate: tax and wealth, climate change, borders and immigration, race and gender, and many more. There is a vibrancy that is good and heartening to see. We are seeing a variety of topics and questions being discussed, and we are seeing philosophers attempting to connect more abstract political philosophy with real-world issues and use their acumen and experience to help solve some of the pressing problems of our age. And, just as important, we see the philosophy itself - ideas, reflections, arguments - being sharpened through this focus on pressing problems.

Why mention this? It seems that this offers a valuable lesson for us all. Philosophy is at its best when it conceives of itself as a broad church. Within this church there is room for many things: a focus on practical issues that attract the attention of people outside of academia; a focus on particular thinkers and an attempt to capture all of their broad sweeps of thought and particular ideas; an equal appreciation of the abstract and the concrete; admirable attention paid to technical questions, working with precise and established methodologies; a willingness to try different ways of doing philosophy; and, above all, an openness to different people with

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different attitudes and views of the subject. What goes for political philosophy, at least as I have sketched it just now, goes for ethics and other branches of the subject and, furthermore, for the subject itself. On that last point, I am a great believer in the idea that philosophy remains a vital subject in part because it has the capacity for reinvention: questioning the contours and boundaries of the subject is itself integral to what we do. We can do that whilst respecting previous thinkers and questions, and in doing so rediscovering lost ideas and people perhaps.

All of this sounds marvellous. What does this mean for my opening question? In short, we should do ethics with an open mind, open in the way hinted at and sketched above. This does not mean that we should be lax and drop standards. What it does mean is that people can approach ethical questions in different ways: to focus narrowly *and* to have broader horizons, and go between the two. We should also be prepared to give people the time and space to explain their ideas and to show how their view of the world helps us to understand things better and differently. There is room in all of this for both highly proficient technical work and the discursive and literary. What matters above everything is that people's thoughts help us to understand the world, and the world as they see it, better. As well all know, getting that right can be an enormous undertaking, and despite one's best efforts, one can easily fail.

I suppose that leads to my second question. What should we aim to publish, and what should ETMP publish? In short, as one of the many involved with ETMP I care about quality: quality of ideas and quality of argumentation. Quality can be judged on its own terms but - now a new point - the very best articles and books of philosophy enable readers to see the point and importance of what is being discussed, either through explicit claims or implicitly and immediately. They also push beyond the confines of the debate, either to show how the debate can go in interesting directions or to show what those debates mean for people not already invested in them. We should all aim to publish, in the broadest terms, pieces that have the potential to hold the interest for a wide range of people, some of whom would not have been interested before they started reading.

Philosophy is a broad church, but it still places great demands on its practitioners.