

Kwame A. Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 288, €16.20, ISBN 9780674034570

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A philosophical research can sometimes be blurry and fuzzy if it remains blind to the demands of real life and to its possible applications. Ethics in particular is not foreign to this inclination having been the field of abstract approaches to everyday life and morally relevant situations. Nevertheless, in the last fifty years (mostly due to the problems discussed in the fields of Bioethics and Neuroethics) we have witnessed a renewed interest in the sphere of Applied Ethics that opened new questions and underlined some methodological queries that needed to be faced. Broadly, if we want to make philosophy reliable, are we allowed to consider it a self-referring subject? Again, can philosophy pretend to be left alone in its world without considering the possible influences that can derive from close subjects? And if this is not the case, which can be the best allies for a philosophical research that aims at being the mirror of reality but at the same time tries to give us a deeper understanding of it? And then, how can they cooperate toward such a deeper understating of reality? In this book Appiah makes some interesting points that try to answer these questions, pursuing the way of cooperation between philosophy and other sciences. His general aim is that of restoring the proper importance to the *inductive* dimension (from reality to theory) as the essential ally of the *deductive* dimension (from theory to reality). This systematic approach doesn't require philosophy to shift completely its way of accomplishing philosophical results, what Appiah is looking for is a wider approach that opens the path to reality in considering what has traditionally been relegated to physical and social sciences. Plainly: "*Philosophy should be open to what it can learn from experiments; it doesn't need to set up its own laboratories*" (p.3). Following this process, therefore, leads to the so called *Experimental Philosophy* as the reestablished *modus operandi* we should endorse if we want to practice philosophy (and most of all ethics) reliably. In fact, this is not a process that aims at being a complete innovation of moral philosophy, but rather it seems to be an attempt to recover a philosophical attitude that is already present in a tradition that goes as back as Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. Here in fact

we can find the idea that human beings strive for *εὐδαιμονία* as the ultimate and fundamental aim of their lives. This concept (far from being mere *subjective happiness*) is deeply rooted into everyday life as being the inclination towards *human flourishing* at its best (living according to *ἀρετή*, i.e. virtue). As a matter of fact, we cannot completely detach ourselves from reality (abstract moral and philosophical theorizing) if we want to grasp what drives our lives to a whole realization of our nature which can be accomplished only within our life (or better *my personal life*) and according to everyday experience (namely *my experience*). Moreover, the Aristotelian conception of *ἀρετή* requires a moral agent that aims at the idea of *good* according to its *good character* and this, being something that is deeply formed and trained empirically, will strengthen once again the link between moral philosophy and empirical experience.

Appiah's aim is that of underlining this Aristotelian position in order to cast new attention on the empirical extent and, so doing, highlighting the usefulness of the experimentations of moral psychology: "*Morality is practical. In the end it is about what to do and what to feel; how to respond to our own and the world's demands. And to apply norms, we must understand the empirical contexts in which we are applying them*" (p.22). Hence this is why a clear and stressed distinction between ethics, moral psychology and other morally-relevant sciences (for example economy) is meaningless, sterile and in the end nothing but a *waterless moat*.

On the philosophical hand this return to the Aristotelian approach is proven by the relevance of Virtue Ethics (witnessed in the last fifty years) as the moral point of view that recalls *virtues* as the way to live a good life capable of human flourishing (*εὐδαιμονία*). This view holds that moral agents are constantly and coherently driven to act by their *virtuous character* across different contexts and settings (*Globalism*). Nevertheless the benefits of *Experimental Philosophy* can be seen straightforwardly in showing that this claim is wrong (chp.2). In fact, if we consider the experiments of moral psychology on helping behavior (also known as *Good Samaritanism*) we find out that our acting could be deeply conditioned by contingencies of the environment we are living at the time (*Situationism*) and so we could act differently according to different situations (Darley-Batson, 1973). These

studies warn us from overestimating moral dispositions and underestimating situations which disclose to be morally relevant and Appiah's intent is that of giving a theoretical and philosophical approach that is aware of this.

Other than *character* another stronghold of moral philosophy is the belief that we are working primarily with our moral *intuition* as they appear to be the necessary starting point of our moral theories. However if we let them undergo the analysis of *Experimental Philosophy* we will achieve surprising results (chp.3). In fact, according to a study made by psychologists Kahneman and Tversky our moral *intuition* can produce conflicting outcomes in relation to the way the options available for our choice are framed. These are the so called *framing effects*; broadly, we can face decisional scenarios with the same exact options simply exposed in two different ways and, for example, pick choice A in the first scenario and the contradictory choice B in the second one (Kahneman-Tversky 1981). Experiments like these reveal that our *intuitions* are sometimes guided by irrelevant factors; hence they cannot be alone reliable guides for our moral reasoning (p.85). A similar experimental outcome can be observed when we face the well known Trolley Problems derived from the scenario introduced by Philippa Foot (original scenario) and expanded by Judith Jarvis Thompson (footbridge scenario). Here again, we are confronting different variations of the same moral dilemma that intuitively produce diverging outcomes. What is interesting to note is that if we look once again at the experimental field, we can easily conclude that the reason why we treat the two scenarios differently is due to a largely different emotional involvement in respect to one another. The author underlies, in fact, that this is what the studies made by Joshua Greene and his collaborators (through the Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) on a sample of people) conclude: the footbridge scenario differs from the original situation as being "*up close and personal*"; to willingly push a stranger off the bridge is not like using a switch. Our moral intuition (do not kill a stranger) and our reflective moral claims (it is better if only one guy dies instead of five people) are apparently clashing in the footbridge scenario, but rather *Experimental Philosophy* tells us that the two claims are not on the same plane and this gives an additional element for both our decisional process and our theoretical understanding of it. Certainly "*understanding where*

our intuitions come from can surely help us to think about which ones we should trust" (p.110). Then speaking of the structure of the world of morality, we can conclude that we can have good moral *reasons* to act, but also good psychologically-explained *intuition* to act, the experimental approach can throw some light on this distinction since "*our moral world is both caused and created, and its breezes carry the voices of both explanations and reasons*" (p.118). Philosophical and psychological assertions are not rivals; they simply do not compete in the same explanatory space. The very simple idea that underlies these passages is that they both are concerned with the description of the same unique world we are living in and obviously they are allowed to do that from different perspectives which, we should hope for, could eventually converge into mutual benefiting. Good examples of this are already observable in most of neuro-ethical works (among others see Nichols, 2004), as the author notices, what is interesting though is understand why this is relevant for him. In fact, the role of experiments (and that of applied sciences generally) in moral inquiry is not that of being the new answer to philosophical questions, but rather to warn us of using philosophical tools misleadingly. As we have seen before, experiments do have a practical outcome as they may be helpful devices that alert us when our *intuitions* or *character* would have driven us wrongly.

Given these methodological premises, what is then the End of Ethics? The answer given by Appiah follows the Aristotelian pursuit of *εὐδαιμονία*, specifically considered as striving for *human flourishing* rather than mere *subjective happiness*. This means that we cannot simply set the standards of what is good for *us* (since some of them might turn out to be immoral), but instead that we have to aim at a life based on humanly intelligible values. Living well a human life is a challenge to be faced and hence an achievement that can be reached through a multi-subject approach (p.170). This is a path that we cannot go through thanks to the supposed *autonomy of ethics* nor to the charming *lure of scientism*, but rather to both. Experiments in themselves still need an evaluation to be done or they will simply raise some good questions looking for answers. Therefore the End of Ethics would be that of making sense of this pursuit of *εὐδαιμονία* which, being rooted in our real life, requires us to keep in mind that such a task would not be accomplished by exclusive philosophical means. Rather, other

morally relevant sciences could provide the proper help, hence an adequate dialogue with them is indispensable: philosophy “[...] cannot proceed without the aid of all the nine Muses” (p.204), otherwise we will forget Aristotle’s teaching of moral philosophy as a *philosophy of human nature* (“ἡ περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια φιλοσοφία”; *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, 1181b 15).

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