

BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of Cecilie Eriksen,  
*Moral Change: Dynamics, Structure, and  
Normativity*

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Cecilie Eriksen, *Moral Change: Dynamics, Structure, and Normativity*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xiv+180 pp.

Cecilie Eriksen presents the reader with a philosophical investigation into the dynamics, structure, and normativity of moral change. The first half of the text (Part I) presents the reader with eight examples of moral change, unified by a connection to changes of law. The second half (Part II) conceptualises aspects of these examples under six sub-categories: moral conflict, moral uncertainty, moral certainty, moral distortion, moral revolution, and moral progress. The text then finishes with a reflection on the nature of ethics in light of the numerous aspects of moral change that have been explored.

Eriksen notes that her methodological approach is broadly Wittgensteinian in the sense that to understand a concept, in this case moral change, we are not to *think* about the phenomenon in abstraction,

but to *look* at how it plays out in the context of our everyday lives. The form the text takes is a testament to Eriksen's commitment to Wittgenstein's famous methodological remark (PI, §66). In Part I, Eriksen *looks* at a series of eight historical moral changes, and only then, in Part II, does she *reflect* on what she has seen. What we are contemplating, notes Eriksen, drawing on Wittgenstein, is "how we learned the word for the phenomenon, to remind ourselves how this word is used in everyday talk, and investigate and describe the language-games we have for it" (4). This approach is not an investigation "into 'mere words', but into human forms of life" (4–5).

In short, Eriksen's investigation leads her to claim that the drivers of moral change are "*irreducibly pluralistic*" (69, original emphasis), meaning

“that there is not one recurring dynamic (or group of dynamics), which is necessary for any moral change to happen” (69). This leads her to suggest, drawing on another famous Wittgensteinian notion, that the concept of an “explanation” in relation to moral change is a “family-resemblance concept”: “a word with a family of uses, which does not have one common trait” (70). We are thus mistaken if we think that there *must* be some universal driver behind everything we refer to as a “moral change”.

On the whole, Eriksen’s approach is promising, and many of the philosophical tools she makes use of help to illuminate what Part I of her text shows to be an incredibly complex phenomenon. An example can be seen in her use of a collection of metaphors that assist in her conceptualisation of various aspects of moral change. Eriksen sites Nora Härmäläinen’s (2017) work on metaphors and moral change, adding her own metaphors of “‘the meteor’, ‘the dawn’, ‘the hen and the egg’, ‘a re-birth’, ‘a weave of threads’, ‘a shift of tide’, ‘feedback loops’ and ‘a leap of faith’” to the discussion (80). A metaphor of moral change is not taken by Eriksen – or Härmäläinen – to be a “theory” of moral change, but can offer “us *a way of seeing* a situation, and as such it can also suggest ways of *handling* it” (80, original emphases).

For example, the metaphor of “the dawn”, described as a form of moral change brought about not by singular acts or forces, but by a “fluid and cohesive” (74) evolution of thought, is used to explain holistic

changes that are difficult to attribute to one particular factor, such as those associated with “the change of labour laws for children and the passing of the Convention for the Rights of the Child” (73). In both cases, the additional metaphor of the “hen and the egg” is used to highlight a difficulty here. Though such changes can be attributed to changes in the conceptualisation of “child”, and “childhood”, as well as economic, scientific, and political changes, it is “tricky – and perhaps even impossible – to state what initially led to what” to bring about such change (73).

Though an impressive project overall, one concern a reader might have is that with such a large number of complex examples to consider in Part I, and such a variety of sub-categories to navigate in Part II, the text as a whole is only able to provide a sketch of what seems at times a much larger project. For example, the description of the moral changes associated with the horrific conditions of children working as chimney sweeps in the UK in Chapter 6. The chapter opens with an anonymous description of the gruesome “accidental” deaths that were the fate of many children, and was circulated during campaigns to limit the practice of children in this role (Waldron 1983: 391). However, the force of the words used in this tract are left without comment. In the same chapter, Eriksen also mentions but does not quote from Jonas Hanway’s book *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers*, first published in 1785, which “initiated a whole genre of poems and literature

drawing attention to conditions of the poor and working-class children” (41). The first four lines of William Blake’s poem ‘The Chimney Sweeper’, first published in 1789, are quoted, but are not analysed, and instead the text moves on to mention a series of “reports made by the UK government on the working conditions of children” (42). This fast moving, unreflective approach to some of the descriptions of moral change may leave the reader with a sense that they are being told, rather than shown, how, for example, “a society changes its conception of who has the right to live ‘a good life’” (45). This would not be such an issue were Eriksen not explicit in her methodological remarks about the importance of analysing language in context in order to illuminate aspects of “human forms of life” (4–5). A consequence is that a reader might feel that the author is letting a preconceived picture of ethics, one that I am very sympathetic to, creep into her philosophical positions and conclusions before an analysis that supports

them is fully undertaken. One way to overcome this issue might have been to focus on less examples in Part I, so that more time could be spent on each case.

This conceivably pedantic criticism aside, Eriksen’s text is an enjoyable and informative read, and a welcome addition to Wittgensteinian approaches to ethics. It is recommended for anyone interested in better understanding the complicated phenomenon of moral change.

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### **References**

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