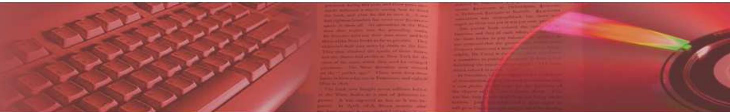
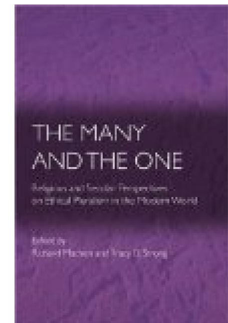


Richard Madsen, Tracy B. Strong, eds. *The Many and the One: Religious and Secular Perspectives on Ethical Pluralism in the Modern World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. vi + 372 pp. $28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-09993-4; $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09992-7.



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Burdens of Existential Pluralism

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This is a timely book. It deals with the crucial question of whether the different ethical systems can be reconciled through rational dialogue rather than political struggle. In a world where different ethical systems have become so polarized that the debate over the alleged "clash of civilizations" is becoming ever more heated, the necessity to mediate among the very different cultures and ways of life of different peoples inevitably takes on a heightened significance. This is not only due to the implications of the ongoing process of globalization but also to the fact that since the September 11 attacks the issues posed by ethical pluralism have gone beyond the academic interest they have always enjoyed and become matters of "most urgent public interest," as Madsen and Strong point out in their introduction. In order to pave the way for reconciliation we first have to understand the position of the "other," which might then carry us beyond mere toleration to reconciliation. This book's major contribution is that it gives us resources for both of these Herculean tasks.

The book contains nine essays about how the problem of ethical pluralism can be understood by different philosophical and religious traditions. Each essay is paired with a shorter "response essay" and juxtaposes modern secular philosophical traditions with older religious traditions, with the aim of bringing these juxtaposed traditions into "genuine dialogue with another." The authors of the main essays are asked to respond to five broad questions (concerning attitude towards ethical pluralism, social regulation, citizenship, human sexuality, life and death decisions) within the framework of a particular tradition. Besides these eighteen essays there is an introduction by the editors and a concluding essay by J. D. Moon which helps to put different traditions into perspective by bringing out the resemblances as well as differences between them.

The editors' declared focus is on "ethical pluralism" manifested at the level of tension between rather than within cultures which brings confrontation with the "other" culture where personal identity is at stake. "Ethical pluralism" is defined as the recognition that there are, in the world, different ethical traditions that differ not only in matters of practical judgment or moral issues (e.g., citizenship, euthanasia, relationships between the sexes, etc.), but also in modes of reasoning used to reach these judgments. Human beings find themselves, whether they will it or not, in a world of incommensurable values and they have to make choices between them. This "existential pluralism," burdens them with acute dilemmas, pulling them in incompatible directions, especially in a world where the conflict between different values has become more intense and the various spheres of life more differentiated.

Religious traditions and classical philosophical traditions such as natural law theory–rightly defined by

the editors as being "perfectionist"–assume it is good to live a coherent, ethical life and they also have a vision of such a life. These prescriptive traditions insist that the state and society should help people to achieve this life. Within most perfectionist ethical traditions there is a tendency towards fundamentalist arguments for limiting value spheres and thus "saving the society from the burdens of existential pluralism." One way to achieve this is to limit the development of diverse value spheres the way the Taliban attempted to do. Of course, not all the perfectionist theories go this far, but it is no surprise that the issues addressed in this book concern, for the most part, the proper role of society and the state in dealing with disagreements over ethical judgments.

In his lucid concluding essay "Pluralisms Compared," J. D. Moon defines the "perfectionist" traditions of Confucianism, Judaism, natural law, Christianity, and Islam as "comprehensive perspectives." Unlike the "partial perspectives" (classical and egalitarian liberalism, critical theory, and feminist theory), these are comprehensive in the sense that they seek to provide answers to a wide range of questions about the nature of human life and the human good, our place in the cosmos, the ideal forms of character, and the principles that should govern a wide variety of relationships among people. However, he is quick to note that all of the comprehensive perspectives represented in the book have also the resources to acknowledge "perspectival pluralism" (the idea that there can be a basis for reasonable disagreement among adherents to different ethical perspectives), at least to some degree: "All perspectives are internally complex, marked by more or less well defined traditions of interpretation and/or different sects, and the arguments among these traditions and sects in large part define the perspective itself. No one can avoid the experience of having to confront opposing arguments and ideas and, as a result, developing the capacity to view one's own ideas with a certain distance. Further, all perspectives place value on behavior that is sincere, that is motivated by the individual's ethical convictions rather than being coerced. Valuing persuasion, one must learn to engage the other, and so to develop the capacity to see the world through the other's eyes" (p. 346).

Hence the existence of an adaptability to existential pluralism within these traditions (but only insofar as it contributes to a transcendent substantive good, one may add with the editors). The possibility of developing the capacity to view one's own ideas with a certain distance is invaluable for acquiring a critical perspective on one's judgments and practices which may open the way for genuine dialogue between very different traditions. However, although there is the possibility of acknowledging perspectival pluralism and significant resources within a tradition that leads to the acceptance of reasonable disagreement, there are also more conservative interpretations in each tradition that serve to end such dialogue even before its onset. And one of the strong points of this book is that the reader can get a sense of both (more liberal and conservative) positions within each tradition by comparing the main chapters and the response essays.

Modern secular philosophies are resigned to the impossibility of integrating the diverse value spheres into a commonly accepted ethically coherent order; in this sense they are procedural not perfectionist, trying to allow individuals freely to pursue their own versions of the good (unless interfering with the liberty of others). Here the "burdens" of existential pluralism, the existential struggles when confronting incommensurable values, are relegated to the "private realm" where they cannot undermine (at least in theory) the universally accepted public procedures that ensure an overall social order. This is especially true of liberalism. However, the boundaries between the public and the private realms are not so strict and not always in the same place. Thus a sharp separation between the public realm (the realm of universal procedures) and the private (the realm of particular versions of the substantive good) is needed which, in turn, leads to the serious criticisms from certain versions of feminist and postmodernist theories.

Here one should note that such secular procedural, moral philosophical traditions, although seemingly more equipped to deal with the difficulties posed by value pluralism, have their own forms of fundamentalism that restrict the existential pluralism of a morally complex society. But moral relativism–the doctrine that in matters of morality there are no universals, no standards by which to judge moral action, independent of historical and individual contingencies–cannot be a way out either. Because, then, the question of power determining what counts as morally and ethically true arises. The most dominant Western approach to this problem presented by ethical pluralism has been to identify a core of values on which all reasonable people might agree and then to try to extend that core rationally to different practices and cultures. However, it is difficult to use the fundamental assumptions of the Western Enlightenment, about the possibility and necessity for individuals to achieve moral autonomy through the use of reason, as a basis for dialogue with non-Western traditions, especially religiously

based ones, that do not accept such fundamental assumptions. Likewise, reconciling them with postmodernist perspectives that emphasize the extent to which our notions of freedom and rationality are constructed by language and culture is also very difficult.

Western liberalism has been crticized for its tendency to sidestep the encounter with difference by relegating incommensurable values to the private realm and confining the considerations of justice and enforcement of moral standards within the public realm. Issues such as race and sexual orientation are generally seen as private matters. In this framework, liberalism is understood as the philosophy of societies in which liberty or autonomy takes pride of place. However, as W. A. Galston points out, liberalism can also be intrepreted as to be about the protection of diversity, not the promotion of autonomy. In this sense liberal societies can and must make room for individuals and groups whose lives are guided by tradition, authority, and faith.

But obviously there are "liberal fundamentalists" in the West who maintain that this is not possible and that the non-westerners have to accept the main tenets of western liberalism if they are to be fully modern, stable, and peaceful. Such liberal fundamentalists would only tolerate those forms of Islam, Judaism, or Christianity that would relegate themselves to a private sphere. However, one has to remember that if value pluralism is correct, liberalism cannot sustain its universalist claims and emerges at best as one valid form of political association among many others. As Madsen and Strong point out, modern, secular traditions of liberalism, critical theory, and feminism are not without challenges in trying to formulate their traditions. They stress the need for individual autonomy more than the religious traditions, but in the early twenty-first century they have to contend with a world dominated by large multinational organizations, and the apparent pluralism promised in such a world is superficial–a Benetton type of pluralism! Modern secular ethical theories, which stress the autonomy of the empowered individual, have to struggle with basic definitions of fundamental concepts like "individual autonomy" and "empowerment," and they have to be critically sensitive to the possibility of ethnocentrism within their traditions.

Maintaining peace in a world of ongoing process of globalization depends on establishing institutions that both protect and limit the ethical pluralism that comes with modernization. But different types of societies have different ways of doing this, diferences being based not simply on moral principles but on configurations of political arrangements bolstered by economic interests. Here, of course, the questions posed by the editors become crucial: are we then really destined for a "clash of civilizations" that cannot be resolved until the whole world adopts the liberal institutions of the West? Or are there multiple models for a humane, flexible modernity? Can the modern, globally interdependent world accomodate "civilizational pluralism" as well as "ethical pluralism"? These are all vital questions and any book that addresses such questions is bound to be interesting and meaningful. Moreover, this book is another example that globalization, apart from bringing dangers of deadly conflict, may also bring opportunities for constructive interconnection and dialogue.

Indeed, as the editors note, with regards to style, a concern for building bridges between different ethical traditions is manifest in the chapters of the book which in itself is a hopeful element, and also supports the claim that "giving a serious account of major ethical traditions never takes pace in a historical vacuum," but is always "a response to the moral predicaments arising in certain political and social contexts." I agree with the editors' claim that this is due to the eruption of religious and ethnic warfare since the end of the Cold War, leading to raised stakes in discussions of ethical pluralism. *The Many and the One* gives us lots of food for thought and information about how to start and sustain a dialogue between different ethical traditions of a diverse yet interdependent world. However, the difficult problem and the task still remain: to provide hopeful examples of how the challenges posed by existential, ethical, and civilizational pluralism can be resolved in a constructive, peaceful way!

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