

## ***The Rise (and Fall?) of Normative Ethics. A Critical notice of Sergio Cremaschi's L'etica del Novecento***

[Giovanni De Grandis](#)  
[Department for Continuing Education](#)  
[University of Oxford](#)

### ABSTRACT

Sergio Cremaschi's *L'etica del Novecento* offers a clear and careful account of the development of ethical theory in English-language and German Philosophy. The focus on meta-ethics and normative concerns allows the author to offer a very concise, reliable and comprehensive overview of philosophical ethics. In this respect the book effectively fills the gap left by the lack of a good, updated history of ethics. Although those qualities establish Cremaschi's work as a valuable reference book, a few doubts are raised about the highly theoretical approach adopted. On the one hand this choice proves not to be very hospitable to some traditions (like most of French philosophy, Marxism, Virtue ethics etc.) and overlooks the connections between ethics and the socio-historical world, with the effect of giving a picture of moral philosophy as a very abstract and academic discipline. On the other hand it is not clear whether the emergence of applied ethics is to be greeted as the culmination of the resurgence of normative ethics, or whether it is conspiring with other trends to undermine the whole enterprise of constructing normative theories. If, as I suspect, the latter is the case, the moral of Cremaschi's narrative may be different from the one he suggests.

1. Sergio Cremaschi's *L'etica del Novecento: Dopo Nietzsche* (Carocci, Roma, 2005, pp. 282, € 23) is the first volume to appear of a trilogy aimed at covering the history of ethics. The other two volumes will cover moral philosophy from Pythagoras to scholasticism and from Grotius to Nietzsche respectively. The whole project is to be welcomed as it addresses a regrettable gap in philosophical publishing: not only is there no history of ethics in Italian, but also the international scene does not offer much on this topic. Furthermore the gap to be filled by the trilogy is one that needs filling, since the undeniable revival of ethics witnessed in the last forty years has failed to bring with it an adequate attention to the history of ethics, and it is hard to deny that much contemporary discussion suffers from a lack of familiarity with many strands of the western ethical tradition. If Cremaschi's books will help to encourage a better knowledge of our ethical inheritance they will no doubt render a very valuable service to our philosophical culture. However, here I am concerned only with the volume dedicated to the 20th Century, a period that poses a

special kind of challenge, since the difficulty is not to bridge the distance with ways of thinking and feeling that are extremely remote from us, sometimes even outlandish, but rather to take a detached view that allows the author to discriminate between what is of lasting interest from what is more ephemeral.

Let us begin to illustrate the task that Cremaschi has set for himself. He states his purposes at the beginning of his preface as being:

1) to give a historical introduction to ethics;

2) to follow the development of the discussion through the analysis of a selected number of authors;

To these he adds a third which I am not sure I have grasped:

3) to offer a picture of ethics not simply as a branch of philosophy but as an ongoing dialectic «between “moral” doctrines and their “ethical” enlightening» (p. 11).

I thought that this was to be interpreted as an attempt to see ethical theories in the light of actual moral beliefs and practices, that is, not as an attempt to work out abstract systems of principles, but rather as an attempt to make explicit and sort out the *morals* of existing societies and communities. Such a project would deserve to be highly praised and welcomed and would have contributed to root ethics in the social, cultural and historical background from which it emerges. Moreover this would have served to meet the minimal historicist requirements that seem to be implied in producing a history of ethics. But this interpretation is soon shaken by the subsequent statement that the book is a history of ethical theories, not of the relations between ethics on the one hand and society, history, politics and literature on the other. And this qualification is fully confirmed by the content of the book: its subject is indeed an analysis of ethical (and meta-ethical) theories and not their contextualization. I must confess I could not find another interpretation of the meaning of Cremaschi's third aim, nor could I persuade myself that that was not a purpose well worth pursuing. Thus I found myself unable to understand Cremaschi's third aim and regretting that his history is so focussed on the philosophico-theoretical side of morality.

However, one cannot fail to recognize that the failure to link ethical theories to their socio-historical background enables Cremaschi to cover a very large ground in a very short space: this broadness of scope and conciseness could have never been achieved while also offering contextualisation. In this respect it is worth noting that a maxim that Cremaschi has unfailingly followed throughout the book - with a Kantian zeal we may say! - is the avoidance of any digression, aside, anecdote and generally of anything that distracts the attention from the key features of the theories presented. The amount of information that he gives us in less the 300 pages is as amazing, as his ability to synthesize without trivializing and simplifying complex and difficult ideas is remarkable. These achievements cannot but be the outcome of a self-imposed iron discipline that

commands great respect and admiration. Of course, this gives the whole book a distinctly academical style and a certain dryness. But here one has to qualify such affirmations, to make clear that although Cremaschi makes no allowance to ornaments and rhetorical tricks to seduce the casual reader, he makes a consistent and successful effort to write in pure Italian and to avoid any unnecessary technicality and jargon. Combining concision with this clarity and simplicity is an achievement that deserves high praise - and if one considers the very poor editorial assistance that publishers nowadays offer, this achievement is even more praiseworthy.

2. Let us now turn to the methodological directions that have guided Cremaschi's work. He clearly states that the focus is on philosophical ethics, although this has not been wholly isolated from the developments of social sciences (or better *Geistwissenschaften*) and religious thinking, since some of these have had an important influence on philosophical debates, while contributions from disciplines such as biology, politics, anthropology have not had such an impact and have therefore been ignored. Also ignored is the thought of Foucault, on account of the little impact (and not of any lack of value or interest) of his work on moral philosophers. In practice this comes down to a treatment of Freud and Weber and to a whole chapter devoted to theologians and religious thinkers. Even though the chapter devoted to them is interesting, informative and valuable, yet the claim for their inclusion in the book - their influence of 20<sup>th</sup> century's ethics - seems not to be wholly justified from what we read in the rest of the book, where those thinkers are almost never mentioned (only Barth is awarded a reference in another chapter of the book); in fact when it comes to that Freud does not score much better. This criticism is not directed towards their inclusion in the book, but rather towards the stated criterion for their inclusion and in favour of a broader one. Theologians and religious thinkers deserve to be included, but not because of their influence on philosophical ethical theories, but because of their great influence on culture and customs, i.e. on *morals*. For the same reason I would have discussed some anthropological theses that have given theoretical support to ethical relativism (for instance Ruth Benedict). This broader criterion would have allowed Cremaschi to deliver us a chapter on Foucault, which would have helped moral philosophers to take account of his contributions «as they deserve» (p. 12).

Another methodological suggestion to justify inclusions and exclusions given by Cremaschi is that the thinkers had to be either English- or German-speaking, with only three French exceptions to this criterion (Levinas, Sartre, Beauvoir - what a pity that Simone Weil was not included). Further reasons for this geographico-linguistic curtailing are not offered. My conjecture is that

Cremaschi sees western philosophy as constituted mainly by three main cultural traditions related to three broad cultural and linguistic areas: Anglo-Saxon, French and Germanic. These are the traditions that have established themselves as having a super-national relevance and have therefore gained a superior status and importance. The further reason for partially excluding the French area is that notwithstanding relevant and lasting differences German and English-speaking philosophy have managed to establish a fruitful dialogue and to converge over a similar understanding of ethics, while French philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has either showed little interest for ethics or pursued ethical inquiries along lines that have failed to attract much attention in the international community of moral philosophers. In short, I think that Cremaschi believes that Anglo-Saxon and German ethics have played the major role in defining the topic and the methods of ethics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps they also present more continuity with the preceding tradition. If I am right, there is an obvious element of truth in these ideas, since it is undeniable that today there exists a well established and recognizable international community of philosophers doing ethics along the lines of the Anglo-German tradition.

If quarrelling over this choice may be beside the point, there is an observation which is instead worth making. In focusing on the traditions that have established for themselves a recognised international standing, Cremaschi seems to opt for a kind of objective, impersonal strategy of selection. The schools and authors are not singled out according to some explicit understanding of the subject and task of ethics, but rather in light of their ability to establish an influence and a standing for themselves. It almost looks like an ‘impact’ criterion for inclusion: whatever succeeds in gaining influence and visibility in the international academic world deserves attention. Such a strategy presents three main shortcomings. First, it presents a risk of self-referentiality, since the set of cultural circles (universities, journals and publishers) that are selected for measuring the relevance and impact of different authors and schools will determine the outcome, and it will do so not only on the basis of intellectual merits, but also national, linguistic, economic, power, gender, racial factors will play a role. This perhaps is too bold a suspicion, but the more modest worry is that first there has been a choice of what counts as a respectable philosophical community today and then a genealogy of it has been constructed.

The second problem of this “impartial spectator’s” strategy is that it presents a curious contrast with the choice of focussing only on ethical theories. I see a puzzling asymmetry between the critical, rationalistic conception of ethics adopted (focussing on philosophical, speculative ethics and excluding positive morality, *morals*, *Sittlichkeit*) and the positive, sociological, a-critical conception of importance chosen. Alternatively, one might wonder whether behind the choice there is the author’s own (easily guessed at) preference for a given

tradition of ethical thinking and that the story told is ultimately a vindication of the rationalistic ethics which is the heir of the Enlightenment. Indeed, reading the back cover and some of the remarks at page 12, it is hard to resist the impression that Cremaschi has written the success story of the post-war defeat of the destructors of reason by the grandchildren of the Enlightenment. I am not claiming that this story is false or uninteresting or unacceptably ideological, but only that Cremaschi would have done better to be more frank about the value-assumptions that lies at the basis of his subject-matter and methodological choices. Such choices are, after all, defensible and can be respected and acknowledged even by those who do not share them. Moreover, I think that a complete frankness about his cultural aim (vindicating the richness, fecundity and force of rational discourses on normative ethics) would have made even more apparent Cremaschi's intellectual honesty and fair-mindedness: qualities that can be appreciated throughout the whole book. The third weakness of the 'impact' criterion of inclusion is that it gives very little help in giving a definite structure and plan to the book. I think that this difficulty becomes apparent if we turn to a short analysis of the content of the book and of the subdivision of chapters.

3. Let us quickly summarize the historiographical hypothesis put forward by Cremaschi. It is briskly outlined in the back cover. In the first half of the century scepticism about normative ethics prevails both in the English-speaking and in the German world. The trend is overthrown in 1958: from that year normative ethics regain the centre of the scene, but at the same time a silent takeover is taking place: applied ethics undermines the idea that the business of ethics is to deal with its rational foundations and little by little affirms the more modest and pragmatic aim of finding reasonable agreements and convergences on urgent and pressing issues. However, the plan of the book does not reflect this hypothesis, and adopts instead that impartial observer attitude of someone who is merely recording the events. The neutral chronicle approach works fairly well for the first six chapters - although 5 and 6 already show a certain lack of obvious thematic unity - that cover roughly the first sixty years of the century. Chapter 7 on theologians and religious thinkers, clear and interesting as it is, remains in my view an external body not obviously integrated in the book. Chapters 8 to 10 illustrate the avowed revival of normative ethics, chapter 11 deals with applied ethics and chapter 12 illustrates the new twists and turns of meta-ethics in the last forty years.

What is wrong with the illustrated plan? Two flaws emerge while reading the book. One is that it tells a story without a narrative or a plot. I am not suggesting that Cremaschi should have produced a Hegelian history of ethics with a clear direction and a rational dialectic that necessarily leads from every

stage to the following, but the structure of the book is on the whole loose and, paradoxically, sometimes one would have preferred it even more so. The problem is that there is no clear and consistent line along which the narrative is unfolded. Cremaschi makes use of several criteria to order and group his chapters: there is a certain chronological line, but loose; there are geographical criteria, but they are often broken; sometimes a chapter is built around normative affinities, sometimes around a recognizable ethical tradition, sometimes on the convergence on an issue from different starting points. In at least one case the grouping is random, not to say misleading. I am thinking of chapter nine («Normative ethics: neo-aristotelianisms and virtue ethics») which conflates Arendt, Gadamer, MacIntyre, Hampshire, Williams, and feminist ethics. The chapter is incoherent because it groups together thinkers who are offering first and foremost a diagnosis of an epoch and attempt to indicate the way out of the traps of modernity (Arendt, Gadamer and MacIntyre), with thinkers who are sceptical about the claims of normative ethical theories (Hampshire and Williams) and thinkers who are trying to break away from the traditional paradigms of Western ethics and to work in new directions, that in some respect raise challenges that are akin to those that emerged from environmental ethics and multiculturalism. None of the thinkers here grouped can be considered a representative of a tradition of ethical thought that seeks to work out the rational foundations of morality and to derive normative prescriptions from them. And I want here to stress that nothing of what Cremaschi says of them suggests that they do. So I am not accusing him of giving a distorted portrait of their positions and points of view (he does not: as usual his presentation is accurate), but merely of classifying them under a misleading label. The effect of this mislabelling is not altogether innocuous, because it contributes to giving an image of contemporary philosophical ethics as dominated by the concern of constructing normative theories.

4. Some critical remarks are also raised by Chapter 11, which is devoted to the rebirth of applied ethics and is at the same time one of the best and most infuriating. It is incredibly rich in clear and reliable information, as is the rest of the book, and it also has a greater liveliness that makes it particularly gripping and pacy, so that the reader's attention never drops. I think that a reason for this more seductive character of this chapter is that it has a definite narrative, as well as a brief but helpful historical contextualization, that helps the reader to set the rich data into a clear framework. The chapter begins by giving a short social, political and historical background to the emergence of applied ethics and then, succinctly but effectively, illustrates some of the main trends that emerged in this field and the theoretical challenges that they have posed to philosophical ethics. Here Cremaschi is at his very best and this part of the

chapter is a pleasure to read. In a few pages the reader learns a lot and is led by the author's admirable ability to summarize concisely and by his secure judgment in singling out what is really important and fundamental. It is a pleasure to be led by Cremaschi's learning, scholarly accuracy and fair-mindedness.

After bioethics Cremaschi turns to public ethics and gives us an account of the ideas of Rawls, Nozick, Dworkin and Sen. Once again Cremaschi's knowledge and reliability offers no occasion for criticism. What then is there to infuriate in so excellent a chapter? Before answering let me go back to the initial paragraph of the chapter, which has a particular interest since it provides some further indications about the general hypotheses that underlie the structure of the book. According to Cremaschi, around 1880 Sidgwick and Nietzsche undermined philosophers' trust in the possibility of normative ethics, but such impossibility did not have terribly disquieting effects, since it was accompanied by a widespread faith in the existence of a wide and substantial agreement among civilized humans on fundamental values and norms. So if normative ethics was impossible, that was not a serious problem since it wasn't really needed either. This accounts for the prominence of meta-ethics in the English-speaking world and for the reluctance of European philosophers to propose concrete normative guidelines, even by those authors that vindicated the possibility of normative theories. In short, directives on how to behave were left to the individual's choice in the light of his grasp of a more or less acknowledged common sense morality. This cultural climate finally broke down at the end of the Fifties, when in both cultural areas a revival of normative ethics took place and applied ethics began to emerge in the Anglo-Saxon world. Cremaschi does not give any suggestions about the reasons that prompted the return of normative ethics, while he ventures some hypotheses about the motives that caused the emergence of applied ethics. He mentions the following: the Vietnam War, the American civil rights movement, the growing awareness of the problem of underdevelopment in the Third World, innovations in medicine and health care, ecological concerns.

Let me try to tease out what are the conclusions that Cremaschi seems to suggest that can be drawn from this picture. The age of meta-ethics was useful to sharpen the conceptual tools of moral philosophers, but was at the same time a retreat into an ivory tower on the part of philosophers, and perhaps even a partial dereliction of duty. Hence what took place from the end of the Fifties was healthy and liberating. It is less clear what are the respective roles and the reciprocal relations between normative and applied ethics in effecting the change of agenda in moral philosophy. The impression is that up to a certain point the two strands have worked towards the same goal - restoring ethics' practical relevance for urgent issues - although from different corners: normative ethics proceeding top-down, while applied ethics working bottom-up.

However, it looks like little by little applied ethics has undermined the ambitions and the importance of normative general theories, showing that more pragmatic approaches not only can do without theories, but actually work better in their absence. At least this is the impression that I gain from reading Cremaschi's account of the bioethical trends, though he does not explicitly advocate any such conclusion. But if my impression is not misguided, then applied ethics turns out to be closer to some of the outcomes of the primacy of meta-ethics: namely we don't need comprehensive ethical theories to solve moral puzzles. In this respect it seems also to converge with the so-called anti-theorists - a trend unfortunately overlooked by Cremaschi - according to which normative ethical theories are a misguided and useless enterprise. Yet, this impression needs to be mitigated by noticing an important difference between the scepticism towards theory recommended respectively by positivism and irrationalism in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century on the one hand, and applied ethics (and anti-theorists) in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the former undermined the role of reason in practical decision and yielded to decisionism - or voluntarism - ; the latter does not recommend the obliteration of reason, but rather a less ambitious use thereof, aiming at consent, compromise and agreement rather than at true and compelling clear-cut solutions. Normativity within the limits of plural reasons, one might suggest, paraphrasing Kant! And from this remark arises my complaint for not having treated the emergence of ethical pluralism in a theoretical form. In the English-speaking area a good number of important philosophers have tried to urge the necessity of acknowledging the reality and inescapability of moral pluralism: Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, Stocker, Kekes, Larmore, Bauman. Interestingly enough this brings us back to Weber's polytheism of values—which in turn is indebted to Nietzsche's perspectivism—although in a different cultural climate, and thus with different, less radical and pessimistic, results.

5. Let me now come back to the reasons of my irritation. First, chapter 11 suggests that applied ethics has a relevance - both theoretical and practical - well worth a broader and more inclusive treatment. Cremaschi mentions several branches of inquiry that have gained academic acceptance: ethics of international relations and war, business ethics, environmental ethics, animal ethics (he could have added media ethics), but he only deals with medical ethics (and public ethics, but I'll come to this soon). This is a very regrettable loss, especially considering the importance and relevance of the moral issues related to war and weapons of mass destruction, and with environmental worries. The questions of collective and group responsibility raised by the Holocaust, by the use of the atom bomb, by the massacre of civilians (e.g. the infamous My Lai massacre) have prompted philosophical reflection of paramount importance and



I believe that some reference to the *Schuldfrage* debate in Germany and to such authors as Jaspers, Anders, Russell and Jonas would have been to the point. Second, the chapter shows how helpful it is to have even a short historical contextualisation, and the readers would have had an easier task in ordering the wealth of information delivered by the book if the reflections found at pp. 217-8 had been given earlier, and possibly articulated a bit further. Finally I strongly disagree with assimilating public ethics to applied ethics. Apart from my personal dislike for the proliferation of such labels as public ethics, that only tend to encourage the consolidation of self-centred and self-referential disciplines, I think that it is very questionable even to draw close boundaries between ethics, political philosophy and legal philosophy. Such disciplines are too closely intertwined in the western tradition to allow any strict separation, especially in works as broad in scope as the present one. Surely Cremaschi neither wants to claim that Plato's *Republic*, or Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* are works of applied ethics, nor that Plato's *Laws*, Hobbes's *Elements of Law Natural and Political*, Hegel's *Outlines of a philosophy of right* are merely works of legal philosophy. But then why does he confine Rawls's work to the section of applied ethics? This to me makes no sense at all. First, the importance of Rawls is such that in Cremaschi's own volume there is only one other 20<sup>th</sup> century's author who manages to be mentioned more often (G.E. Moore). Every serious anthology of normative ethics features some contribution from Rawls (but very few readers in applied ethics do). There is no question that Rawls's writings played a major contribution in the normative revival that emerged at the end of the Fifties. Papers like *Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics* (1951), *Two Concepts of Rules* (1955), *Justice as Fairness* (1958), *The Sense of Justice* (1963), are by no means pieces of applied ethics and have been enormously influential. The proper place of Rawls would have been in chapter 10 (Normative ethics: Kantian and rights-based theories). Not having done so produces some quite bizarre results; Gauthier, Arendt and Habermas turn out to have more importance than Rawls as ethical theorists, and one might wonder why Harsanyi and Harrod (and Arrow) are treated as ethical theorists while Sen and Nussbaum as applied ethicists. Obviously there is something wrong with this. Similarly, there is something wrong in the complete forgetfulness of the philosophy of law. Certainly a few words about legal positivism and Kelsen would have thrown some further light on the heyday of non-cognitivism, and a treatment of Hart would have illuminated further the reaction against this climate; besides it would have provided a more suitable setting for Dworkin and perhaps for other neglected figures like Perelman, Alexy, Raz. Incidentally it is worth mentioning that a lively debate on the philosophy of punishment was one of the first manifestations of the renewed practical concerns of philosophers in the Fifties.

There are other good reasons for not considering public ethics as a branch of applied ethics and as separate from normative ethics. I have already mentioned that there are good historical reasons for keeping public and private morality together (which does not mean that they cannot be distinguished, indeed in many cases they need be separated) and further reasons can be added. I shall quickly mention just a few. Utilitarianism, which has an important place in the book, was born as a public ethic and only after World War Two was proposed as a personal morality as well (with poor results). In its more credible forms it is still presented as a public morality. Very few of the ethical theories presented (Moore, the existentialists, the theologians, the virtue ethicists) have much to say in matters of private morality and not much attention is given to this side of ethics throughout the book (which clearly accepts the idea of the priority of the right over the good, an idea that thanks to Cremaschi now I know we owe to Prichard). Incidentally, the difficulty in finding a place and giving a proper treatment of virtue ethics stems from this general approach, and ends up in accepting the - misleading, but unfortunately well established - commonplace that virtue ethics is a third kind of normative ethics, next to consequentialism and deontology, while contemporary virtue ethics is mainly an attempt to change the agenda and the methods of philosophical ethics, and in this respect it bears more resemblance with feminism, particularism, anti-theory and applied ethics than with consequentialism and deontology. Finally, it would have been helpful to say a few words about the socio-historical reasons that have contributed to make public ethics such a major concern for moral philosophers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The tension between the spread of individualist and libertarian aspirations and rhetoric on the one hand and the sense of impotence, alienation and meaninglessness fostered by mass society, bureaucratization and the triumph of mighty organizations (nation states and capitalist corporations) have certainly played a major role in urging the need to work out ways to give back some power and control to the individual through the construction of public spaces hospitable to ethical concerns. A chapter devoted to the authors who have engaged with the task of producing diagnoses of the predicaments of modernity would have helped in bringing such issues to the surface. It is worth noting that the book itself features a valuable list of authors that would have made up a good chapter: Weber, Freud, Adorno and Horkheimer, Heidegger, Gadamer, Arendt, Habermas and MacIntyre. Unfortunately scattered in various different chapters they fail to make much impression and they are easily forgotten as minor figures in the (ghost-) narrative of the book.

6. I speak of a ghost-narrative because it is not explicit enough to represent a helpful framework for the reader, while it obviously affects the choice of

inclusions and exclusions. The problem is that Cremaschi is committed to bringing us good news about ethics, its usefulness and robustness. Such hidden optimism vitiates against the narrative because it risks either to eliminate or to curtail with a *cordon sanitaire* the unwelcome guests at the ethical symposium: nihilists, sceptics, relativists, stubborn post-modernists, anti-theorists, deep pessimists etc. The final picture of the metaphorical ethical symposium should not look too bad: we are told, after all, that the present situation is the best possible scenario, with people sitting around the table and exchanging reasons on serious issues with good will. No doubt there is much truth in that picture. But not the whole of the truth, and we should not be satisfied with anything less. The problem is not so much that at the ethical table some people have not been invited and some others are behaving either rudely or annoyingly, that is refusing to play the game favoured by the majority. Although this is true, this is not the worst feature of the picture. The most disquieting feature of the metaphor of the dinner table is that it is something more than a metaphor: it captures the weight and the impact that ethical discourse has on the contemporary world: more or less that of dinner table chats. Outside the philosophical symposium described by Cremaschi, nihilism, scepticism, mistrust, glib relativism, disillusionment, fanaticism, prejudice, selfishness and power struggles are alive and kicking. (Would this situation have appeared more understandable had, say, Jung, Schmitt, Luhmann, Strauss, Morgenthau, Girard, Bataille, Deleuze, Foucault, Croce, Gramsci, Oakeshott, Bloom, Rorty been included in the book?) And now who is to blame? Is the world too stupid and ignorant? Or are the philosophers a bit alienated from the world?

Is it really possible that a community of philosophers that live in societies that went through two devastating world wars were not at all affected by that? Did they really take a further fifteen years after the end of World War II to get rid of the spell of meta-ethics and decisionism? And yet from the account offered by Cremaschi it looks like historical events did not affect them until the noise from the outside world upset the quiet life of their universities in the Sixties. I repeat the question: are the philosophers a bit alienated from the world? (Curiously, from this point of view theologians come out much better). Or is Cremaschi offering us a picture which is too partial? I think that most philosophers in the past century have avoided engagement with the world and the hard issues raised by historical events. Cremaschi did not falsify the picture, but his choice of focussing on the more theoretical side of moral reflection has left little space for attempts of some philosophers to deal directly - i.e. without the mediation of theories - with the big questions of their time. In this way the impression that ethics is a flight from reality has been reinforced. As a consequence it is easy to predict that sceptics and pessimists will see their suspicion that ethics is an idle and useless enterprise confirmed, while the

optimists will be more impressed by the happy ending represented by the picture of the well-intentioned discussion mentioned above.

7. In conclusion how does Cremaschi's book fulfil his task of filling the gap represented by the lack of a good history of 20<sup>th</sup> century ethics? Thanks to its wealth of information and accurate scholarship the book will prove to be an extremely valuable reference for all those interested in philosophical ethics. It offers a very exhaustive, accurate and reliable account of the development of ethical theories in the English-speaking world, but its theoretical framework and plan does not prove as well-suited for accounting for German and French contributions. Had the book been presented as an encyclopaedia of ethical theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the content arranged alphabetically, I would have unconditionally praised it. As a history it is open to some complaints on account of the lack of historical rooting and of a plan that excludes too much to be an impartial chronicle and that is not bold and explicit enough to offer a helpful narrative. However, we cannot expect a single book to satisfy all possible demands. Cremaschi has done an admirable job and if it will stimulate alternative histories of moral philosophy - and of morality at large - capable of dealing with issues overlooked in his account, that would be a further reason to welcome his brave and pioneering attempt to write a much needed history of ethics.