

Smith, Nicholas H. Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity. New York: Routledge, 1998. Pp. 197. \$65.00 (cloth); \$22.99 (paper).

BOOK NOTE for *Ethics*

One challenge often made against universalistic ethical theories is based on the idea that moral obligations necessarily depend on contingencies of one's culture, situation, and identity -- that what we ought to do can be determined only by looking at who we happen to be. Smith's well-written book makes an important contribution to this issue by drawing on philosophical hermeneutics to capture both the situated character of moral understanding and the possibility for nonsubjective ethical imperatives. Smith convincingly dispatches Rorty and Lyotard's "weak hermeneutics" of unlimited contingency, in order to focus on reconstructing a debate between Habermas's "deep hermeneutics" and Charles Taylor's "strong hermeneutics." Smith's criticisms of Habermas's search for normative standards in constants of human nature (in the early work) and in communication are well-informed and subtle, if not conclusive. His excellent defense and elaboration of Taylor's strong hermeneutics focuses on the idea that some ethical standards are objective, even though they are accessible only within contingent experiences and practices. In the process of working out the relative merits of these two approaches, Smith includes sophisticated discussions of value pluralism, ecological conscience, discourse ethics, the unavoidability of substantive evaluative standards, and the contingent self's dependence on noncontingent standards of value.

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