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BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: Erin Beeghly (2025) *What's Wrong with Stereotyping?*

Katherine Puddifoot

Philosophy, Durham University, UK
katherine.h.puddifoot@durham.ac.uk

1. Introduction

In *What's Wrong with Stereotyping?* Beeghly offers an account of the wrongs associated with stereotyping, arguing that they are many and diverse. Drawing on first person narratives, historical accounts and philosophical analysis, she resists traditional philosophical boundaries and amplifies the voices of marginalized individuals. This approach reflects a commitment to standpoint theory. The result—radical pluralism—is compelling.

Beeghly begins, in chapter one, by defending broad definitions of stereotypes and stereotyping: to stereotype a group is to "characterize the group as a collective entity," and to stereotype an individual is to "judge that person by group membership." Narrow accounts—defining stereotypes as inherently pernicious—are rejected for failing to capture the full range of cases.

Next, in chapter two, Beeghly argues stereotyping can constitute, not merely cause, wrongful discrimination. Stereotyping draws distinctions based on social identity, relies on epistemic shortcuts rather than more detailed inquiry, applies group-specific norms and evaluative standards, and is embodied in behaviour. These things can be wrongful under each of the main ethical theories: virtue theory, consequentialism, and Kantianism. In chapter three, Beeghly defends her use of lived experience to identify and explain stereotyping's wrongs. Drawing on Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, and Sophia Moreau, she argues for a "maximally inclusive conversation" about the wrongs of stereotyping.

Chapters four to seven each focus on different ways wrongful stereotyping might be characterised: in terms of a failure to treat people as individuals (chapter four), as involving prejudice (chapter five), as harmful or disrespectful (chapter six) and as undermining equality and freedom (chapter seven). The case studies and first-person testimony that Beeghly uses to support her view are taken to show that while each of these features can be involved with wrongful stereotyping none of them captures all the wrongs of stereotyping. Consequently, Beeghly's defends a radically pluralistic view of stereotyping. It is argued that no single ethical objection applies universally, and instead moral wrongs cluster together like properties of a "messy natural kind", tending to but not always co-occurring.

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For Beeghly, the process of discerning whether acts of stereotyping are wrongful will involve collaboration and debate, and input from a diversity of voices, including people with lived experience of being stereotyped, social scientists, and ethicists. The product will be multiple, cross-cutting taxonomies, e.g. representing different types of stereotypes or types of injustice caused by stereotyping. For Beeghly, this integrative and inclusive methodology provides the basis for both reliably identifying and explaining wrongful stereotyping.

There is much to be admired in Beeghly's book. Its systematic exploration of the moral wrongs of stereotyping digs deeper into this topic than any previous work in contemporary western philosophy. Beeghly's inclusive methodology and approach to taxonomizing the wrongs of stereotyping illustrate how important philosophical goals can be achieved when mapping out unjust aspects of the social world is treated as a collaborative exercise. However, for the remainder of this review, I raise some questions that would need to be addressed before Beeghly's hopeful, inclusive and integrative vision for future research could be enacted. Simultaneously, I raise worries about how successful the collaborative enterprise of radical pluralism is likely to be.

2. Whose lived experience and how?

By foregrounding lived experience, *What's Wrong with Stereotyping?* gives rhetorical force to the claim that certain features—e.g. harm or inequality—can make stereotyping morally wrongful. Considering people's lives, and specific experiences that they have undergone, brings these abstract ideas to life, making a powerful case for thinking that certain things that happen due to stereotyping are wrongful. However, it is not clear, beyond this rhetorical force, what lived experience can contribute to developing a *shared* understanding of the wrongs of acts of stereotyping—that is, an understanding shared by people who would initially disagree.

Beeghly might seem to have demonstrated that lived experience reveals new wrongs of stereotyping. However, the features identified in her book via lived experience—mistaken prejudiced judgements, harm, disrespect, inequality, limits on freedom—have previously been identified in the theoretical work, including recent work on stereotyping by Blum (2004), Begby (2021), Fricker (2007), and Puddifoot (2021), and in the literature on discrimination that Beeghly discusses in depth.

Lived experience might instead be viewed as capable of adjudicating disputes about whether specific acts of stereotyping are wrongful. It might be thought that we can say with certainty that X is wrongful if it, for example, involves disrespect *and* marginalized voices with lived experience of stereotyping say that disrespect is morally wrongful. However, I have doubts whether this type of approach will make progress in many important disputes. Say there is dispute about whether an act of stereotyping by a political figure of an opposing politician is morally wrongful. Some defenders of the stereotyping may say that the stereotyping is not disrespectful. Others may acknowledge the disrespect but insist it is outweighed by the moral benefits of the stereotyping. Crucially, Beeghly allows that there can be moral benefits of stereotyping that may outweigh the wrongs. Appeal to the idea that some people experience disrespect as something that is morally wrong about stereotyping is unlikely to settle the dispute.

Beeghly's broad definition of stereotyping intensifies this problem. On this definition, everyone has lived experience of being stereotyped. Many people also—rightly or wrongly—claim to be marginalized. Therefore, in many cases it will be difficult to convince relevant parties to prioritise some individuals' lived experiences as a reliable

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guide. More specifically, it will be difficult to do this without seeming to beg the question about what makes stereotyping wrongful. One might argue that members of a particular marginalized group have experienced the most morally pernicious stereotyping, so their voices should matter most. However, arguing this prior to developing an account of wrongful stereotyping seems to beg the question about what makes stereotyping pernicious.

3. How can we ensure people reliably identify wrongful stereotyping as such?

Radical pluralism seems, then, to struggle to meet one of the two criteria Beeghly sets for a successful theory of stereotyping: reliably identifying cases. Pluralism initially appears promising in relation to this. It proposes many wrong-making features. This may seem to increase the likelihood that any wrongful case will be judged to be wrongful because it is likely to exhibit at least one of these features. However, radical pluralism leaves significant room for disputes about whether any specific act of stereotyping is wrongful. Given that these disputes could easily end with neither side being persuaded by the other (see section 2), following the pluralistic framework will fail to lead some people to reliably identify acts of wrongful stereotyping. One might think that this is an unfair criticism of radical pluralism because any view would be imperfect at identifying cases. However, the problem seems especially serious for radical pluralism because it does not provide tools for adjudicating disputes—tools which might otherwise guide people to the truth about wrongful acts of stereotyping. Other accounts may avoid this serious problem.

4. Can radical pluralism explain what is wrongful about wrongful stereotyping?

Beeghly stipulates that a successful account of the moral wrongs of stereotyping must also *explain* why some stereotyping is wrongful. Beeghly argues radical pluralism offers "synergistic, integrated" (Beeghly, 2025, p. 201) explanations of the wrongfulness of some stereotyping: a case may be wrongful because it has one or more of many features. Yet explanations are often sought to gain understanding. One can easily imagine that someone told X is wrongful because it is disrespectful and some marginalised people think disrespectful stereotyping is wrongful might seek further understanding, asking, why should we think disrespectful stereotyping is wrongful on that basis? It is not obvious what the radical pluralist can say in response to this question given that, as detailed above, questions remain about how to articulate the role of lived experience in understanding wrongful stereotyping. It might therefore be questioned whether pluralism provides a satisfactory explanation of what is morally wrong with stereotyping.

5. Conclusion

Beeghly's book is compelling. It integrates important insights from marginalised voices and captures many features of stereotyping that appear to be wrongful, while providing a hopeful agenda for future research. However, if the sceptic that I have been considering in my critique—doubtful of the value of lived experience or questioning whose lived experience is relevant while failing to accept that cases of stereotyping are wrongful when they are claimed to be—is someone that works on the moral wrongs of stereotyping should aim to convince, *What's Wrong with Stereotyping?* leaves important questions remaining.

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Katherine Puddifoot is Associate Professor at Durham University with expertise in philosophy of psychology, social epistemology, and social philosophy. She has published extensively on the epistemology of stereotyping and implicit bias, memory bias, and epistemic injustice. Her book *How Stereotypes Deceive Us* was published by Oxford University Press.

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