Porter’s book seeks to examine various approaches concerning the good life. It begins by discussing some methods by which one can assess the plausibility of an ethical theory, and how some key ethical concepts such as ‘right’ and ‘good’ should be understood. It next considers two problems that confront most ethical theories, namely, determinism and relativism, and argues against them. It then analyzes such ethical theories as hedonism, self-realization, naturalism, evolutionism, duty, religious ethics and existentialism, after which it invites the reader to form his own theory of the good life.

This book is an introductory book on ethics, intended for a general audience. Each chapter is laid out in a similar manner: Various ways of interpreting some particular views of a particular topic are first presented and analyzed. A summary of the key points of the chapter and some review questions are then offered. There is a glossary for key ethical concepts at the end of the book.

This book deserves to be commended in number of ways. First, Porter’s style is lucid and his arguments are clear and to the point, which makes this book quite accessible to a general audience. Secondly, Porter’s discussion of some of the less dominant theories concerning the good life will interest readers who seek pluralistic ways of examining this issue. For example, in addition to considering dominant ethical theories such as deontology (what Porter calls ‘Duty’) and utilitarianism (what Porter calls ‘Hedonism’), Porter also examines such theories as self-realization, naturalism, evolutionism, and existentialism. Porter’s discussion of naturalism and existentialism are particularly interesting. In the former, Porter uses the poetry of such writers as Thoreau, Wordsworth and Keats to investigate how one should live. In the latter, Porter examines the writings of such authors as Kierkegaard, Sartre and Nietzsche, which will appeal to readers who are interested in Post-Kantian philosophy. Finally, the fact that Porter takes some positions with respect to each of the ethical theories and offers reasonable arguments for his positions will help and encourage readers who have less background in ethical theories to develop similarly reasonable views on the matter.

On the other hand, I have two reservations regarding this book. The first, more substantial, one is that the arguments Porter presents for or against a particular theory are fairly commonplace views. As such, many responses have been developed against them. Unfortunately, Porter does not mention these responses. This defect could have been remedied by using footnotes or having a further reading list to indicate how the discussions could continue. Porter provides neither, however. The result is that his analysis sometimes seems superficial. To use one example, consider Porter’s discussion of Hedonism. After identifying various types of hedonism such as psychological hedonism, individualistic hedonism and universalistic hedonism, Porter considers the problem of rule utilitarianism and says the following: ‘the basic objection still remains, namely, that actions should be judged right or wrong in themselves, independent of the
pleasurable consequences for the majority, and our endorsement of moral rules does not depend on the happiness they promote necessarily but on their intrinsic rightness. Even if most people were to derive happiness from child molesting, we would not call it morally justified as a rule of conduct. Utilitarian ethics, therefore, does not provide us with a proper standard of behavior even in its rule-utilitarian form, and could well approve of immoral actions’ (p. 135). Porter is making a general claim and a specific claim here against utilitarianism. The general claim is that moral rules ‘does not depend on the happiness they promote necessarily but on their intrinsic rightness’. This claim is suspect because it begs the question against utilitarianism. Utilitarians believe that moral rules do depend on the happiness they promote. Hence, what is required is an argument to show that they are wrong to hold this view rather than a reassertion of the claim against them. The specific claim is that utilitarians may condone child molesting. This argument is also suspect, because utilitarians need not accept this as an implication of their theory. For example, they may say that a society that would promote the greatest good is one which there is a rule forbidding child molesting. If so, the child molesting argument becomes no longer a real argument against utilitarianism. Rather than making the bold assertion that ‘Utilitarians ethics, therefore, do not provide us with a proper standard of behavior,’ Porter could have instead indicated how a reasonable utilitarian could respond to his points. This would have made his analysis more convincing.

My second, less substantial, reservation is that Porter does not discuss a dominant theory concerning the good life, namely, virtue ethics. Many writers today believe that virtue ethics provides a better account than deontology or utilitarianism of how one should live. Given this, and given Porter’s interest in issues concerning the good life, one would have expected some discussions of this theory. Porter, it should be said, does discuss Aristotle’s ethics. However, in this discussion he does not really address the issues concerning modern virtue ethics.

Overall, Porter’s book provides a good and accessible introduction to the various approaches concerning ethics and the good life. Readers are advised not to assume that the arguments in this book for or against various theories are conclusive. Otherwise, readers should find the breadth of discussions informative and interesting.