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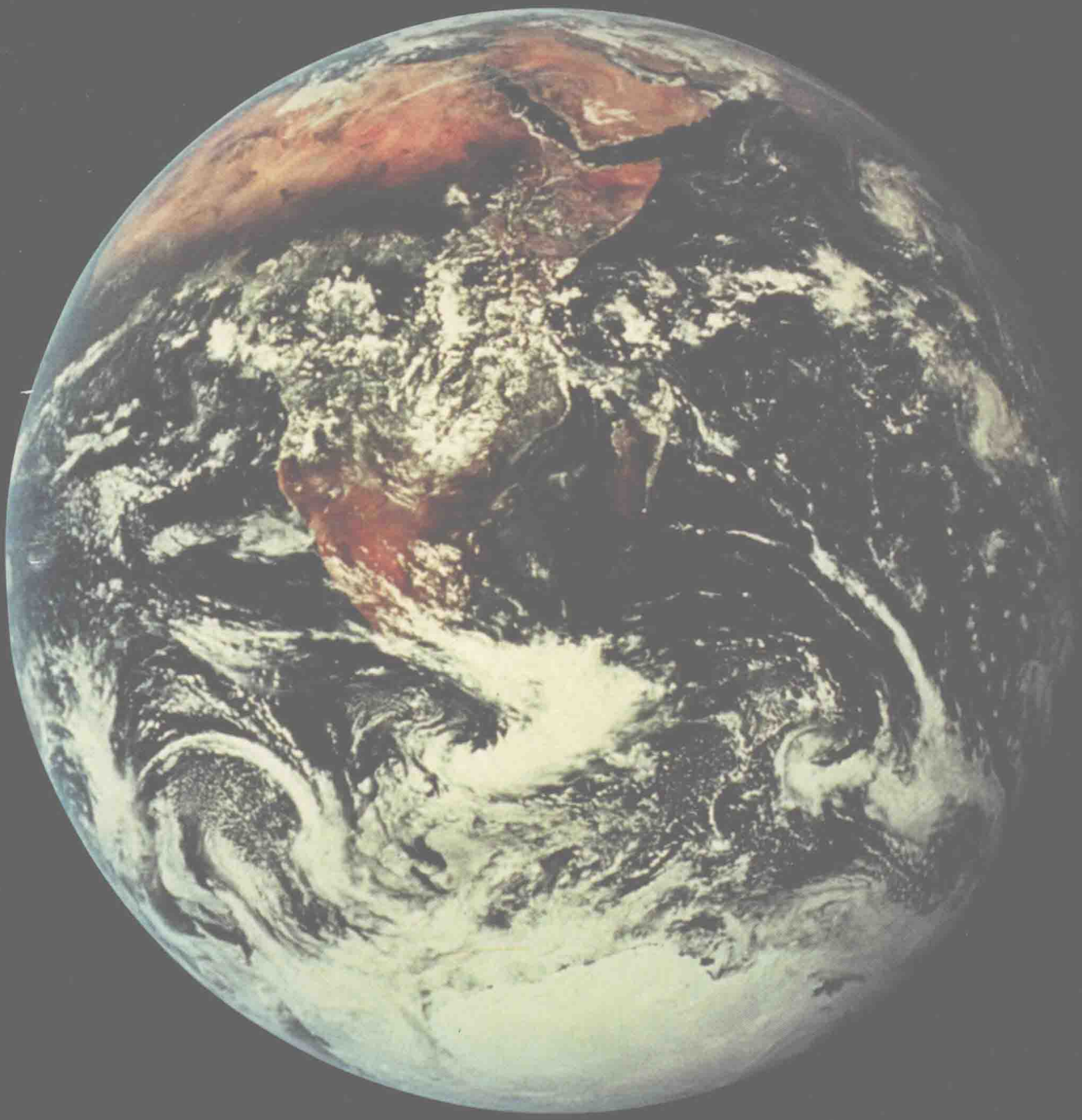

# Environmental Ethics

## NGS IN THEORY AND APPLICATION

SECOND EDITION

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# Environmental Ethics

## *Readings in Theory and Application*

Second Edition

Louis P. Pojman

*United States Military Academy*

**Wadsworth Publishing Company**

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*Dedicated to Ruth and Brian*

# Preface

When I became interested in environmental ethics in the late 1970s, few articles and books existed in that area. I remember searching through journals for relevant articles, usually without much success. Not many environmental ethics courses (I knew of none) were being offered in the late 1970s when I requested permission from my university to offer such a course. My colleagues questioned whether there was a need for such a "soft," nontraditional course and whether enough material existed to put a syllabus together. Eventually, it was approved on an experimental basis. In my first courses, I relied heavily on Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, Ian Barbour's *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, and John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility to Nature*. The rest of my course was made up from texts in ecology, such as Charles and Penelope Revelle's *The Environment* and G. Tyler Miller's *Living in the Environment*.

Today, some 20 years later, environmental ethics is a burgeoning field. Courses in this subject are taught in most universities in the United States, and books and articles appear almost weekly. The journal *Environmental Ethics* was started by Eugene Hargrove in 1979 and has widespread circulation. Virtually every meeting of the American Philosophical Association has a whole series of papers and programs devoted to the subject. Keeping up with the literature is difficult.

When I put together the first edition of this work some four years ago, no comprehensive anthology existed. Although that has changed and other fine anthologies have appeared, I think this one combines theory and practical concerns in a particularly balanced and comprehensive manner. Theory and practice cannot be separated. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant: Theory without practice is sterile; practice without theory is blind.

*Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application* is intended as a comprehensive, balanced introduction to the field of environmental ethics for undergraduate students. It covers both environmental theory and practical application. Here is a list of the subjects covered.

Part One: Theory
1. Western Philosophy of Nature: The Roots of Our Ecological Crisis
2. Animal Rights
3. Does Nature Have Intrinsic Value? Biocentric and Ecocentric Ethics and Deep Ecology
4. Ecofeminism
5. The Gaia Hypothesis and Biospheric Ethics
6. Preservation of Species, Nature, and Natural Objects
7. Non-Western Perspectives on Environmental Ethics
8. Obligations to Future Generations

Part Two: Application
9. Population: General Considerations
10. Population and World Hunger
11. Pollution: General Considerations
12. Pesticides
13. Atmospheric Conditions: The Greenhouse Effect and the Ozone Layer
14. Are We Conquering Hazardous Waste?
15. Should We Revive Nuclear Power?
16. Economics and the Environment
17. From Dysfunctional to Sustainable Society

Epilogue: The Rio Declaration (1992)

The instructor need not follow my format. Different instructors will want to emphasize different aspects. I've varied course outlines from semester to semester, sometimes emphasizing the theoretical, sometimes the applied part of environmental ethics. There is enough material in this work for three or four semesters.

This anthology includes subjects not usually offered in environmental books, such as the Gaia hypothesis, non-Western perspectives, and immigration. World hunger is not usually put into an environmental ethics book, but I consider it part of the population and resource problems. What is our responsibility to distant people? Should we share our surplus resources with them even when it appears that they have gone beyond the carrying capacity of their environment? The world hunger problem also illustrates my belief that environmental ethics is a global issue, not merely a state or national problem. A growing interdependence is emerging in the world. For example, air pollution from a distant nation can affect us, by causing global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, or the spread of radiation.

This second edition has an introduction to ethics ("What Is Ethics?") and thirteen more articles than the first edition. I have added a section to Chapter 3 entitled "Does Nature Have Intrinsic Value?" and have included a lively debate by Holmes Rolston, III, and Ernest Partridge, including two responses written for this edi-



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tion. I have included Kenneth Goodpaster's article "On Being Morally Considerable" in the section "Biocentric Ethics" and Murray Bookchin's essay "Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology" and a new essay by James Sterba, "Environmental Justice," in the section "Deep Ecology." In Chapter 6, "Preservation of Species, Nature, and Natural Objects," I have added Martin Krieger's "What's Wrong with Plastic Trees?" together with Eric Katz's response to it, "The Call of the Wild." In Chapter 8, "Obligations to Future Generations," Derek Parfit's seminal "Energy Policy and the Further Future" is now included.

In Part Two, "Application," I have commissioned Lindsey Grant to write an essay on the ethics of immigration. This will balance Jacqueline Kasun's opposing article. In Chapter 10, "Population and World Hunger," I have added an essay from the *Washington Spectator* on the ecological damage done by cattle. In Chapter 12, "Pesticides," I have included Michael Fumento's revealing essay that argues against what he sees as extremism in the environmental movement. In Chapter 16, "Economics and the Environment," Kristin Shrader-Frechette has been commissioned to write an important essay on risk assessment. In the final chapter, "From Dysfunctional to Sustainable Society," I have added "Environmental Risks, Rights, and the Failure of Liberal Democracy" by Laura Westra and "Environmental Ethics and Democracy" by Eugene Hargrove.

Using a dialogic format (pro and con), I have endeavored to present different and conflicting views on each major issue in this book. Each of the seventeen chapters has a general introduction to the subject debated therein, and each article has an introductory abstract. Study questions follow each reading, and suggested further readings follow each chapter. Of the eighty-four readings, eleven have been commissioned for this work (five for the first edition and six more for this second edition). I have chosen the best argued, clearest, and most accessible articles on each issue that I could find.

Several people helped me in this endeavor. For the first edition: Eugene Hargrove, Baird Callicott, John Jagger, Garret Hardin, Art Bartlett, Lynn Margulis, Andrea Donlon, Leslie Francis, and Robert Ginsberg offered helpful advice along the way. For the second edition: Kendall D'Andrade, Eric Katz, Bill Throop, Laura Westra, and Art and Nancy Bartlett provided excellent advice for improving this work.

Students in various environmental ethics classes provided a testing ground for many of these readings. Of special note are David Brown, David Ley, Scott McAuley, Catherine Parrish, Michael Tobin, Marshall Smith, and Fred Wallace. Ruth Cottrell did a splendid job taking this work through production. Most of all, my wife Trudy argued with me about many of the ideas in this work and forced me to change my views on a number of issues. She read through the whole manuscript, making cogent comments and constructive criticisms. This edition is dedicated to my daughter Ruth Freedom and her husband Brian Kemple, two young people whose dedication to global peace and justice exemplify the spirit of this work. Most of the royalties of this work have been donated to environmental organizations.

Louis P. Pojman
United States Military Academy
June 17, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

# On Ethics and Environmental Concerns

Human beings have lived on Earth for about 100,000 years, a very short time in relation to the age of the universe (15 billion years) or even to the life of our planet (4.6 billion years). Civilization developed only 10,000 years ago, and the wheel was invented 4,000 years ago. If we compact the history of Earth into a movie lasting 1 year, running 146 years per second, life would not appear until March, multicellular organisms not until November, dinosaurs not until December 13 (lasting until the 26th), mammals not until December 15, *Homo sapiens* (our species) not until eleven minutes to midnight, and civilization one minute ago. Yet in a very short time, say less than 200 years, a mere .000002% of Earth's life, humans have become capable of seriously altering the entire biosphere. In some respects, we have already altered it more profoundly than it has changed in the past *billion* years. Paraphrasing Winston Churchill's remark about the British air force during World War II, we may say, "Never have so few done so much in so short a time." In the last 100 years or so, we have invented electricity, the light bulb, the telephone, cinema, radio, television, the automobile, the airplane, the spaceship, the refrigerator, the air conditioner, the skyscraper, antibiotics, heart transplant machines, the birth control pill, the microwave oven, the atom bomb, nuclear energy, and the digital computer. Through the wonders of science and technology, we have enabled millions of people over the face of Earth to live with more freedom, power, and knowledge than our ancestors could dream of. Only in science fiction were the wonders of modern life even hinted at.

Yet with this new freedom, power, and knowledge has come a dark side. The automobile kills hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world each year (more Americans have died in automobile accidents than on all the battlefields in all the wars our nation has fought). It produces chemical pollution that degrades the atmosphere, causing cancer, and is bringing on dangerous global warming, the greenhouse effect. Refrigerators and air conditioners enable us to preserve food and live comfortably in hot seasons and climates, but they also use chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which rise into the stratosphere and deplete the thin ozone layer that protects us from harmful ultraviolet radiation. The result is an increase in skin cancer, especially melanoma, and harmful effects on plankton, which forms the base of much of the food chain of marine animals. Nuclear power could provide safe, inexpensive energy to the world, but instead it has been used to exterminate cities and threaten a global holocaust. Disasters like the nuclear plant steam explosion at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union have spread harmful radiation over thousands of square miles and cause public distrust of the nuclear power industry. Nuclear waste piles up with no solution in sight. But our modern way of life does require energy, lots of it. So we burn fossil fuels, especially coal, which, unbeknownst to the public at large, is probably more dangerous than nuclear energy, causing more cancer, polluting the air with sulfur dioxide, and producing acid rain, which is destroying our rivers and lakes and killing trees. Medical science found cures for tuberculosis and syphilis and has aided in greatly lowering infant mortality, but in the process we have allowed an exponential growth of the population to produce crowded cities and put a strain on our resources. The more people, the more energy needed; the more energy produced, the more pollution; the more pollution, the more our lives are threatened by disease.

And so the story goes. For each blessing of modern technology, a corresponding risk comes into being, as the tail of the same coin. With each new invention comes frightful responsibility. It is hard to get it right. It's hard to live moderately, wisely, and frugally; it's hard to conserve our resources so that posterity will get a fair share.

Environmental ethics concerns itself with these global concerns: humanity's relationship to the environment, its understanding of and responsibility to nature, and its obligations to leave some of nature's resources to posterity. Pollution, population control, resource use, food production and distribution, energy production and consumption, the preservation of the wilderness and of species diversity—all fall under its purview. It asks comprehensive, global questions, develops metaphysical theories, and applies its principles to the daily lives of men and women everywhere on Earth.

In this work we consider readings in both environmental theory and practice. Treating "Theory" first (Part 1), we'll focus on the debate over the causes of our environmental crisis. To what extent has our Judeo-Christian religious tradition contributed to the present crisis? Has our religious heritage created a dangerous sense of alienation by emphasizing the domination of nature by humanity? Or is Western technology the primary culprit? We begin our first chapter with the first three chapters from the Book of Genesis, the source of Judeo-Christian attitudes toward creation. Then we enter the controversy as to whether our religious tradition or technology is the cause of our environmental malaise.

Next, in Chapter 2 we examine rival theories on the locus of intrinsic value, especially in regard to the wider animal kingdom What makes something valuable or morally considerable? Is it being human or rationally self-conscious, as Kant and most Western "anthropocentric" philosophers have held, or is it *sentience*, the ability to have experiences and, specifically, to suffer? What are our duties to animals, who are sentient, but (for the most part) not rationally self-conscious?

In Chapter 3 we go beyond rationality and sentience and inquire whether nature itself has intrinsic value. Do we need a broader environmental ethic that incorporates nature as a good in itself? Several theories are treated here: biocentric ethics, ecocentric ethics, and deep ecology.

In Chapter 4 we examine ecofeminism, the theory that joins feminism with radical eccentric ethics, claiming that the model of patriarchal dominance is the main source of the oppression of both nature and women.

In Chapter 5 we consider the Gaia (pronounced GUY-uh) hypothesis, the theory that Earth is a single, interactive, self-regulating, organism.

In Chapter 6 we examine the value of endangered species, the wilderness, and natural objects and consider both the moral, aesthetic, and institutional recognition of these objects (e.g., granting trees and ecosystems legal rights).

In Chapter 7 we go beyond Western horizons and view environmental ethics through non-Western eyes and theories. Environmental concerns are global concerns, so we must learn to see issues from various cultural and national perspectives. Our readings present viewpoints from Nigeria, Kenya, Ceylon, India, and the Arab world.

In Chapter 8 we take up the difficult philosophical issue of responsibility to future generations. Do we, and if so, on what basis do we have responsibilities to those not yet born? Most moral theory holds that obligations only hold toward concrete individuals, so how can we have duties to nonexistent entities?

In Part 2, "Applications," we turn to practical concerns. First (Chapter 9) to population growth: How serious is the rapidly growing global population? Doomsdayers claim it is the number one problem. The more people we produce, the more resources we will use up, and hence the more pollution that will be produced. Doomsdayers predict that decreasing resources and increasing pollution will make life unbearable for future generations. On the other hand, the optimistic Cornucopians argue that population is nowhere near a serious problem. They say that we have the resources to accommodate reasonable needs if only we all live morally. If we distribute our resources justly, there will be enough for all and plenty more.

The debate over population comes to a head in Chapter 10 where we discuss whether we should feed the world's poor. Doomsdayers like Garrett Hardin argue that feeding the poor in an overcrowded world is like feeding a cancer. If we are to survive, we must use tough love, however hard it may be. Others disagree and argue that we can both help the starving and solve our demographic problems.

After a short debate on the relationship between population and pollution in Chapter 11, we turn to the problem of pollution itself, to its causes, effects, and types. The next three chapters deal with issues related to pollution. Should we use pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers? On the one hand, by doing so, we have been able to increase food production enormously. On the other hand, such practices have created life-threatening pollution. We also consider the debate over acid rain and the greenhouse effect.

In Chapter 15 we consider the troubling matter of disposing of hazardous waste, which is piling up at an alarming rate and threatening our soil and water and the people who use them.

In Chapter 16 we examine the debate over nuclear energy. No one seriously questions that coal-burning power plants emit dangerous pollutants (sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxide, and particulates), but what is the alternative? Although the disaster of Chernobyl has dampened the debate over nuclear power, many scientists contend that it can be made safe and play a vital role in future energy policies. Other scientists and ecologists argue that nuclear power is a dangerous Faustian bargain, which we should reject.

In Chapter 17 we examine the relationship between economics and the environment. Can the entire panoply of our value assessments be reduced to economic cost–benefit analysis? Is the classical free-market view of economics an adequate guide for protecting the environment? Or, do we need a new more socialist or nature-centered approach?

In the last chapter, we look at some practical ways we can work to maintain a sustainable, ecologically responsible society. For instance, what should we do about the powerful tool of advertising, which helps fuel the consumer society, a society that is environmentally harmful? Should we de-emphasize automobile transport and instead support mass transport and bicycle



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use? How can we get beyond a throwaway, nationalistic society to a recycling, sustainable, global society?

We cannot cover every environmental theory or issue in this anthology, but you will have many vital intellectual and practical issues to keep you thinking and acting for a long time. I hope the challenging readings will provoke you to be more informed, to think more deeply, and to act morally in the quest for a better environment.

It's your world—to save or lose.

# What Is Ethics?

*We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.*

SOCRATES IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

What is it to be a moral person? What is the nature of morality, and why do we need it? What is the good, and how will I know it? Are moral principles absolute or simply relative to social groups or individual decision? Is it in my interest to be moral? Is it sometimes in my best interest to act immorally? What is the relationship between morality and religion? What is the relationship between morality and law? What is the relationship between morality and etiquette?

These are some of the questions that we will be looking at in this introductory essay. We want to understand the foundation and structure of morality. We want to know how we should live. The terms *moral* and *ethics* come from Latin and Greek, respectively (*mores* and *ethos*), deriving their meaning from the idea of custom. Although philosophers sometimes distinguish between these terms, I use these terms interchangeably, permitting the context to show various meanings.

Ethics, or moral philosophy, refers to the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories. It undertakes to analyze such concepts as "right," "wrong," "permissible," "ought," "good," and "evil" in their moral contexts. Ethics seeks to establish principles of right behavior that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups. It investigates which values and virtues are paramount to the worthwhile life or society. It builds and scrutinizes arguments in ethical theories, and it seeks to discover valid principles (e.g., "Never kill innocent human beings") and the relationship between those principles (e.g., "Does saving a life in some situations constitute a valid reason for breaking a promise?").

## ETHICS AS COMPARED WITH OTHER NORMATIVE SUBJECTS

Moral precepts are concerned with norms; roughly speaking they are concerned not with what is but with what *ought* to be. How should I live my life? What is the right thing to do in this situation? Should one always tell the truth? Do I have a duty to report a fellow student whom I have seen cheating in class? Should I tell my friend that his spouse is having an affair? Is premarital sex morally permissible? Ought a woman ever to have an abortion? Ethics has a distinct action guiding or *normative* aspect,[1] an aspect it shares with other practical institutions such as religion, law, and etiquette.

Moral behavior, as defined by a given religion, is often held to be essential to the practice of that religion. But neither the practices nor precepts of morality should be identified with religion. The practice of morality need not be motivated by religious considerations. And moral precepts need not be grounded in revelation or divine authority—as religious teachings invariably are. The most salient characteristic of ethics is that it is grounded in reason and human experience.

To use a spatial metaphor, secular ethics are horizontal, omitting a vertical or transcendental dimension. Religious ethics has a vertical dimension, being grounded in revelation or divine authority, though generally using reason to supplement or complement revelation. These two differing orientations will often generate different moral principles and standards of evaluation, but they need not. Some versions of religious ethics, which posit God's revelation of the moral law in nature or conscience, hold that reason can discover what is right or wrong even apart from divine revelation.

Morality is also closely related to law, and some people equate the two practices. Many laws are instituted in order to promote well-being, resolve conflicts of interest and/or social harmony, just as morality does, but ethics may judge that some laws are immoral without denying that they are valid laws. For example, laws may permit slavery or irrelevant discrimination against people on the basis of race or sex. A Catholic or antiabortionist may believe that the laws permitting abortion are immoral.

In the television series *Ethics in America* (PBS, 1989), James Neal, a trial lawyer, was asked what he would do if he discovered that his client had committed a murder some years back for which another man had been convicted and would soon be executed.

Mr. Neal said that he had a legal obligation to keep this information confidential and that if he divulged it, he would be disbarred. It is arguable that he has a moral obligation that overrides his legal obligation and that demands he take action to protect the innocent man from being executed.

Furthermore, some aspects of morality are not covered by law. For example, though it is generally agreed that lying is usually immoral, there is no general law against it (except under special conditions, such as in cases of perjury or falsifying income tax returns). Sometimes college newspapers publish advertisements for "research assistance," where it is known in advance that the companies will aid and abet plagiarism. The publishing of such research paper ads is legal, but it is doubtful whether it is morally correct. In 1963, thirty-nine people in Queens, New York, watched from their apartments for some forty-five minutes as a man beat up a woman, Kitty Genovese, and did nothing to intervene, not even call the police. These people broke no law, but they were very likely morally culpable for not calling the police or shouting at the assailant.

One other major difference exists between law and morality. In 1351 King Edward of England promulgated a law against treason that made it a crime merely to think homicidal thoughts about the king. But, alas, the law could not be enforced, for not even a tribunal can search the heart and fathom the intentions of the mind. It is true that *intention*, such as malice aforethought, plays a role in the legal process in determining the legal character of the act, once the act has been committed. But preemptive punishment for people presumed to have bad intentions is illegal. If malicious intentions (called in law *mens rea*) were criminally illegal, would we not all deserve imprisonment? Even if it were possible to detect intentions, when should the punishment be administered? As soon as the subject has the intention? But how do we know that he will not change his mind? Furthermore, is there not a continuum between imagining some harm to *X*, wishing a harm to *X*, desiring a harm to *X*, and intending a harm to *X*?

Though it is impractical to have laws against bad intentions, these intentions are still bad, still morally wrong. Suppose I buy a gun with the intention of killing Uncle Charlie in order to inherit his wealth, but I never get a chance to fire it (e.g., Uncle Charlie moves to Australia). I have not committed a crime, but I have committed a moral wrong.

Finally, law differs from morality in that physical and financial sanctions[2] (e.g., imprisonment and fines) enforce the law but only the sanction of conscience and reputation enforces morality.

Morality also differs from etiquette, which concerns form and style rather than the essence of social existence. Etiquette determines what is polite behavior rather than what is *right* behavior in a deeper sense. It represents society's decision about how we are to dress, greet one another, eat, celebrate festivals, dispose of the dead, express gratitude and appreciation, and, in general, carry out social transactions. Whether we greet each other with a handshake, a bow, a hug, or a kiss on the cheek will differ in different social systems, uncover our heads in holy places (as males do in Christian churches) or cover them (as females do in Catholic churches and males do in synagogues), none of these rituals has any moral superiority.

People in Russia wear their wedding rings on the third finger of their right hand, whereas we wear them on our left hands. People in England hold their fork in their left hand when they eat, people in other countries hold it in either their right or left hand, while people in India typically eat without a fork at all, using the forefingers of their right hand for conveying food from their plate to their mouth.

Polite manners grace our social existence, but they are not what social existence is about. They help social transactions to flow smoothly but are not the substance of those transactions.

At the same time, it can be immoral to disregard or flout etiquette. The decision whether to shake hands when greeting a person for the first time or putting one's hands together and forward as one bows, as people in India do, is a matter of cultural decision. Once the custom is adopted, however, the practice takes on the importance of a moral rule, subsumed under the wider principle of Show Respect to People. Similarly, there is no moral necessity of wearing clothes, but we have adopted the custom partly to keep us warm in colder climates and partly out of modesty. But there is nothing wrong with nudists who decide to live together naked in nudist colonies. But, it may well be the case that people running nude outside nudist colonies—say, in classrooms, stores, and along the road—would constitute such offensive behavior as to count as morally insensitive. Recently, there was a scandal on the beaches of South India where American tourists swam in bikinis, shocking the more modest Indians. There was nothing immoral in itself about wearing bikinis, but given the cultural context, the Americans, in willfully violating etiquette, were guilty of moral impropriety.

Although Americans pride themselves on tolerance, pluralism, and awareness of other cultures, custom and etiquette can be—even among people from similar backgrounds—a bone of contention. A friend of mine, John, tells of an experience early in his marriage. He and his wife, Gwen, were hosting their first Thanksgiving meal. He had been used to small celebrations with his immediate family, whereas his wife had been used to grand celebrations. He writes, "I had been asked to carve, something I had never done before, but I was willing. I put on an apron, entered the kitchen, and attacked the bird with as much artistry as I could muster. And what reward did I get? [My wife] burst

into tears. In *her* family the turkey is brought to the *table,* laid before the [father], grace is said, and *then* he carves! 'So I fail patriarchy,' I hollered later. 'What do you expect?'"[3]

Law, etiquette, and religion are all important institutions, but each has limitations. The limitation of the law is that you can't have a law against every social malady nor can you enforce every desirable rule. The limitation of etiquette is that it doesn't get to the heart of what is of vital importance for personal and social existence. Whether or not one eats with one's fingers pales in significance compared with the importance of being honest or trustworthy or just. Etiquette is a cultural invention, but morality claims to be a discovery.

The limitation of the religious injunction is that it rests on authority, and we are not always sure of or in agreement about the credentials of the authority, nor on how the authority would rule in ambiguous or new cases. Since religion is not founded on reason but on revelation, you cannot use reason to convince someone who does not share your religious views that your view is the right one. I hasten to add that, when moral differences are caused by fundamental moral principles, it is unlikely that philosophical reasoning will settle the matter. Often, however, our moral differences turn out to be rooted in worldviews, not moral principles. For example, the antiabortionist and pro-choicer often agree that it is wrong to kill innocent persons but differ on the facts. The antiabortionist may hold a religious view stating that the fetus has an eternal soul and thus possesses a right to life, whereas the pro-choicer may deny that anyone has a soul and hold that only self-conscious, rational beings have rights to life.

Table 1 characterizes the relationship between ethics, religion, etiquette, and law.

In summary, morality distinguishes itself from law and etiquette by going deeper into the essence of rational existence. It distinguishes itself from religion in that it seeks reasons, rather than authority, to justify its principles. The central purpose of moral philosophy is to secure valid principles of conduct and values that can be instrumental in guiding human actions and producing good character. As such, it is the most important activity known to humans, for it has to do with how we are to live.

**TABLE 1** *The Relationship Between Ethics, Religion, Etiquette, and Law*

| SUBJECT | NORMATIVE DISJUNCTS | SANCTIONS |
|---|---|---|
| Ethics | Right, wrong, or permissible—as defined by conscience or reason | Conscience: praise and blame<br>Reputation |
| Religion | Right, wrong (sin), or permissible—as defined by religious authority | Conscience: eternal Reward and punishment caused by a supernatural agent or force |
| Law | Legal and illegal—as defined by a judicial body | Punishments determined by the legislative body |
| Etiquette | Proper and improper—as defined by culture | Social disapprobation and approbation |

## DOMAINS OF ETHICAL ASSESSMENT

It might seem at this point that ethics concerns itself entirely with rules of conduct based solely on an evaluation of acts. However, the situation is more complicated than this. There are four domains of ethical assessment:

| DOMAIN | EVALUATIVE Terms |
|---|---|
| 1. Action, the act | Right, wrong, obligatory, permissible |
| 2. Consequences | Good, bad, indifferent |
| 3. Character | Virtuous, vicious, neutral |
| 4. Motive | Good will, evil will, neutral |

Let's examine each of these domains.

**Types of Action.** The most common distinction may be the classification of actions as right and wrong, but the term *right* is ambiguous. Sometimes it means "obligatory" (as in "*the* right act"), but sometimes it means permissible (as in "*a* right act"). Usually, philosophers define *right* as permissible, including under that category what is obligatory.

1. A "right act" is an act that it is permissible for you to do. It may be either (a) optional or (b) obligatory.
   a. An *optional act is* neither obligatory nor wrong to do. It is not your duty to do it, nor is it your duty not to do it. Neither doing it nor not doing it would be wrong.
   b. An *obligatory act* is one that morality requires you to do; it is not permissible for you to refrain from doing it. That is, it would be wrong not to do it.
2. A "wrong act" is an act that you have an obligation, or a duty, to refrain from doing. It is an act you ought not to do. It is not permissible to do it.

Let's briefly illustrate these concepts. The act of lying is generally seen as a wrong type of act (prohibited), whereas telling the truth is generally seen as obligatory. But some acts do not seem to be either obligatory or wrong. Whether you decide to take a course in art history or English literature or whether you write your friend a letter with a pencil or a pen seems morally neutral. Either is permissible. Whether you listen to pop music or classical music is not usually considered morally significant. Listening to both is allowed, and neither is obligatory. A decision to marry or remain sin-

gle is of great moral significance (it is, after all, an important decision about how to live one's life). The decision reached, however, is usually considered to be morally neutral or optional. Under most circumstances, to marry (or not to marry) is thought to be neither obligatory nor wrong but permissible. Within the range of permissible acts is the notion of *supererogatory,* or highly altruistic, *acts*. These acts are not required or obligatory but are acts that exceed what morality requires, going "beyond the call of duty." You may have an obligation to give a donation to help people in dire need, but you are probably not obliged to sell your car, let alone become destitute, in order to help them.

Theories that place the emphasis on the nature of the act are called *deontological* (from the Greek word for "duty"). These theories hold that something is inherently right or good about such acts as truth telling and promise keeping and something is inherently wrong or bad about such acts as lying and promise breaking. Illustrations of deontological ethics include the ten commandments, found in the Bible (Exodus 20); natural law ethics, such as is found in the Roman Catholic Church, and Immanuel Kant's theory of the categorical imperative.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that two kinds of commands or imperatives existed: hypothetical and categorical. *Hypothetical imperatives* are conditional, having the form "If you want *X*, do act *A*!" For example, if you want to pass this course, do your homework and study this book! *Categorical imperatives*, on the other hand, are not conditional but universal and rationally necessary. Kant's primary version of the categorical imperative (he actually offered three versions that he thought were equivalent) states: "Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law." Examples were "Never break your promise" and "Never commit suicide." Contemporary Kantians often interpret the categorical imperative as yielding objective though not absolute principles. That is, in general it is wrong to break promises or commit suicide, but sometimes other moral principles may override them. Here is where consequences enter the picture.

Kant gave a second formulation of the categorical imperative, referred to as the *principle of ends*: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end and never as merely a means." Each person as a rational agent has dignity and profound worth, which entails that he or she must never be exploited or manipulated or merely used as a means to our idea of what is for the general good—or to any other end. The individual is sacred, and our acts must reflect as much.

**Consequences.** We said that lying is generally seen as wrong and telling the truth is generally seen as right. But consider this situation. You are hiding in your home an innocent woman named Laura, who is fleeing gangsters. Gangland Gus knocks on your door and when you open it, he asks if Laura is in your house. What should you do? Should you tell the truth or lie? Those who say that morality has something to do with consequences of actions would prescribe lying as the morally right thing to do. Those who deny that we should look at the consequences when considering what to do when there is a clear and absolute rule of action will say that we should either keep silent or tell the truth. When no other rule is at stake, of course, the rule-oriented ethicist will allow the foreseeable consequences to determine a course of action. Theories that focus primarily on consequences in determining moral rightness and wrongness are called *teleological ethical theories* (from the Greek *telos*, meaning "goal directed"). The most famous of these theories is utilitarianism, set forth by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), which enjoins us to do the act that is most likely to have the best consequences: Do the act that will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

**Character.** While some ethical theories emphasize principles of action in themselves and some emphasize principles involving consequences of action, other theories, such as Aristotle's ethics, emphasize character or virtue. According to Aristotle, developing virtuous character is most important, for if and only if we have good people can we ensure habitual right action. Although it may be helpful to have action-guiding rules, what is vital is the empowerment of character to do good. Many people know that cheating or gossiping or overindulging in eating or imbibing too much alcohol is wrong, but they are incapable of doing what is right. The virtuous person may not be consciously following the moral law when he or she does what is right and good. Though the virtues are not central to other types of moral theories, most moral theories include the virtues as important. Most reasonable people, whatever their notions about ethics, would judge that the people who watched Kitty Genovese get assaulted lacked good character. Different moral systems emphasize different virtues and emphasize them to different degrees.

**Motive.** Finally, virtually all ethical systems, but especially Kant's system, accept the relevance of motive. It is important to the full assessment of any action that the intention of the agent be taken into account. Two acts may be identical, but one be judged morally culpable and the other excusable. Consider John's pushing Joan off a ledge, causing her to break her leg. In situation (A), he is angry and intends to harm her; but in situation (B) he sees a knife flying in her direction and intends to save her life. In (A) what he did was clearly wrong, whereas in (B), he did the right thing. On the other hand, two acts may have opposite results, but the action may be equally good judged on the basis of intention. For example, two soldiers may try to cross enemy lines to

communicate with an allied force, but one gets captured through no fault of his own and the other succeeds. In a full moral description of any act, motive will be taken into consideration as a relevant factor.

## The Purposes of Morality

What is the role of morality in human existence? I believe that morality is necessary to stave off social chaos, what Hobbes called a "state of nature" wherein life becomes "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." It is a set of rules that if followed by nearly everyone, will promote the flourishing of nearly everyone. These rules restrict our freedom but only in order to promote greater freedom and well-being. More specifically, morality seems to have these five purposes:

1. To keep society from falling apart
2. To ameliorate human suffering
3. To promote human flourishing
4. To resolve conflicts of interest in just and orderly ways
5. To assign praise and blame, reward and punishment, and guilt

Let's elaborate these purposes. Imagine what society would be if everyone or nearly everyone did whatever he or she pleased without obeying moral rules. I would make a promise to you to help you with your philosophy homework tomorrow if you fix my car today. You believe me. So you fix my car, but you are deeply angry when I laugh at you on the morrow when I drive away to the beach instead of helping you with your homework. Or you loan me money, but I run off with it. Or I lie to you or harm you when it is in my interest, or even kill you when I feel the urge.

Parents would abandon children and spouses betray each other whenever it was convenient. Under such circumstances, society would break down. No one would have an incentive to help anyone else because reciprocity (a moral principle) was not recognized. Great gratuitous suffering would go largely unameliorated, and people certainly would not be very happy. We would not flourish or reach our highest potential.

I have just returned from Kazakhstan and Russia, which are undergoing a difficult transition from communism to democracy. In this transition (hopefully it will be resolved favorably), with the state's power considerably withdrawn, crime is on the increase and distrust is prevalent. At night when trying to navigate my way up the staircases to apartments throughout one city, I had to do so in complete darkness. I inquired about why there were no light bulbs in the stairwells, only to be told that the residents stole them, believing that if they did not take them, their neighbors would. Absent a dominant authority, the social contract has been eroded, and everyone must struggle alone in the darkness.

We need moral rules to guide our actions in ways that light up our paths and prevent and reduce *unnecessary* suffering (some suffering is a necessary means to a good end—e.g., the pain that is incurred in practicing a sport), that enhance human (and animal, for that matter) well-being, that allow us to resolve our conflicts of interests according to recognizably fair rules and to assign responsibility for actions, so that we can praise and blame, reward and punish people according to how their actions reflect moral principles.

Even though these five purposes are related, they are not identical, and different moral theories emphasize different purposes and in different ways. Utilitarianism fastens on human flourishing and the amelioration of suffering, whereas contractual systems rooted in rational self-interest accent the role of resolving conflicts of interest. A complete moral theory would include a place for each of these purposes. Such a system has the goal of internalizing the rules that promote these principles in each moral person's life, producing the virtuous person, someone who is "a jewel that shines in [morality's] own light," to paraphrase Kant. The goal of morality is to create happy and virtuous people, the kind who create flourishing communities. That's why ethics is the most important subject on Earth.

Let's return to the questions asked at the beginning of this essay. You should be able to answer each of them.

1. What is the nature of morality, and why do we need it? It has to do with discovering the rules that will promote the human good, elaborated in the five purposes just discussed. Without morality we cannot promote that good.

2. What is the good, and how will I know it? The good in question is the human good, specified by happiness, reaching one's potential, and so forth. Whatever we decide that meets human needs and helps us develop our deepest potential is the good morality promotes.

3. Are moral principles absolute or simply relative to social groups or individual decision? It would seem that moral principles have universal and objective validity, since similar rules are needed in all cultures to promote human flourishing. So moral rules are not justified by cultural acceptance and are not relative. But neither are they absolute, if absolute means that they can never be broken or overridden. Most moral rules can be overridden by other moral rules in different contexts. For example, it is sometimes justified to lie in order to save an innocent life.

4. Is it in my interest to be moral? In general and in the long run, it is in my interest to be moral for morality is exactly the set of rules that are most likely to help (nearly) all of us if nearly all of us follow them nearly all of the time. The good is good for you—at least most of the time. Furthermore, if we believe in the superior importance of morality, we will bring up children who



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