NEW DIRECTIONS IN ETHICS

THE CHALLENGE OF APPLIED ETHICS

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PREFACE

In designing the present collection of essays, we planned to provide
an authoritative, comprehensive up-to-date account of recent
trends and developments in ethical theory as they bear upon current
issues in applied ethics. We also expected the book would provide a
valuable text for teachers of applied ethics, a source for scholars
working in field, and a reference for professionals in the many areas
where ethical issues have become a pressing concern.

The collection is indeed authoritative, we believe, because the
essays in it have been written by prominent figures in each of the
major schools of ethical theory and fields of applied ethics. It is
reasonably comprehensive because it covers a greater number of
ethical theories in far greater detail than other texts, and because it
considers how theory itself is changing, or may need to change, in
order to meet the requirements of application. The book is also
up-to-date because the vast majority of essays in it have been
written specially for this volume, while others have been revised for
this publication. In a word, the essays are written by experts who
survey the latest work in their fields.

In the first section of the book, leading figures in each of the
schools of moral philosophy discuss recent developments within
each of their theories, ways in which the theory has been or can be
applied, and whether or how the theory needs to be amended to
solve practical moral problems. In the second section, philosophers
working in each of several areas of applied ethics survey the
literature and kinds of problems which arise in their respective
fields and provide examples of styles of applied ethics. They also

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assess the extent to which philosophical theories have been useful or deficient and point out where they think some of the solutions lie. Finally, in the third and last section, prominent ethical theorists address the question of the future of ethics, given the challenge of practical application. The first essay of the book, written by the editors, discusses the challenge of applied ethics within its historical context.

At the present time there is a widespread concern over moral issues in society, in the professions, and in public life. Because of the demand for informed opinion, many new courses, journals, books, societies and institutes on the subject of applied ethics have come into existence during the last decade or two. However, because most of this material is highly specialized and quite limited in scope, we have tried to provide an overview of the field to which teachers, scholars and concerned lay persons can refer for a reliable survey of the work that has been accomplished, explanations of the various theories being used to address moral problems, issues which have arisen in each of the special fields, and prospects for change. The many prominent scholars who have generously agreed to contribute to this volume have confirmed our belief in the need for such a work. We wish to thank them for their contributions, and we also wish to thank Basil Blackwell (Publishers), the University of Chicago Press, *Metaphilosophy*, *Nous*, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* and *Zygon* for their permission to reprint parts of articles which appear in this volume in revised form. Several individuals contributed significantly to the preparation and typing of the manuscript: especially Cindy Bellinger and Mary Persanyi, but also Katherine Groves who provided additional help as the deadline approached. Last but not least, we want to thank our wives. Patricia Fox and Bonnie DeMarco, who read and critiqued much of the material as it was being prepared. We also want to thank the editors of Routledge & Kegan Paul, and especially Stratford Caldecott, for their helpful suggestions. The editors are equally responsible for the material contained in the book, and any errors of judgment or fact are, of course, ours.

Joseph P. DeMarco
Richard M. Fox

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THE CHALLENGE OF APPLIED ETHICS

Richard M. Fox and Joseph P. DeMarco

For little more than a decade, philosophic ethics has been faced with a relatively new challenge: to provide theoretical frameworks within which practical moral problems can be solved. This challenge has been posed from many quarters, from outside as well as within philosophy. It is heard in the form of calls from diverse professional and policy making organizations for the study and teaching of ethics in medicine, law, business and government. Such concerns reflect the growing awareness of the many moral, social and political issues which beset the modern world: problems of war, persecution, poverty, social injustice and inequality. Crime and corruption on the one hand, and moral controversy and indifference, on the other, have called attention to an apparent lack of moral knowledge and sensitivity. In opposition to traditional beliefs, a new morality seems to have emerged, as evidenced by changing attitudes towards sex and various rights movements. New problems have also been created by scientific and technological changes, including the many issues of bioethics which focus on matters of life and death.

New philosophical concerns have been evoked especially by a growing number of moral controversies. In the past, there seems to have been more agreement about matters of right and wrong conduct and a stronger commitment to doing what was considered right, at least among persons of the same cultural background. Traditional philosophers, therefore, shared many beliefs about the rightness or wrongness of particular acts, about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of moral rules, and about the possibility of demonstrated moral knowledge. Assured by widespread moral

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agreement, philosophers could concentrate on finding principles which would support shared moral convictions and serve to resolve doubtful cases. Today, by contrast, there is relatively little consensus on moral issues, so that the problem of moral philosophy is not so much one of justifying moral beliefs already known or assumed to be true but, rather, one of finding a method for determining which beliefs are true. The problem is to find what counts as evidence in moral reasoning, how such evidence can be weighed, and how persons can reach consensus in cases of disagreement, ignorance or doubt.

It should not be surprising then that, in this century, the work of philosophers has focused more on problems of theory construction than on problems of application. This focus has been evident in the seemingly inordinate amount of attention given to metaethics by analytic philosophers: by their speculation over the nature, scope, and even the possibility of moral reasoning, on the one hand, and their disproportionate inattention to substantive issues, on the other. In fact, most analytic philosophers have felt that it is not the business of philosophers to address practical issues. Some of them have called into question the efficacy of moral reasoning and even the existence of moral truth. The emotivists, for example, have taken the position that there is no such thing as moral truth, and intuitionists have argued that moral truth cannot be discovered by reasoning. Relativists, in turn, have claimed that morality is a matter of individual or cultural perspective.

Despite this movement toward metaethics, there are contemporary philosophers who have proposed substantive ethical theories, and some have even questioned the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics. Those influenced by Kant have argued that moral rules can be established on the bases of universal applicability and respect for persons. Contemporary utilitarians argue that the rightness or wrongness of actions is determined by the values of consequences, and Thomists, on the basis of intentions. But, so far, no one has yet been able to fully mediate these views. Thus, skepticism over the validity of ethical reasoning and opposition between the various schools of ethical theory has created the impression that philosophy has little to offer in the way of solutions to everyday, practical concerns.

Yet since the late 1960s and the early 1970s, philosophers have been addressing contemporary moral issues, and whole new fields

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of applied ethics have developed. In the past ten years, there has been a vast increase in the number of conferences, societies, journals and texts devoted to the subject of applied ethics. At the same time, on the theoretical level, new models have been developed to provide procedures for making practical decisions and resolving disputes.

In many respects, the movement toward applied ethics has shown that philosophers do have something to offer by way of clarifying issues and positions, and even by showing how, or to what extent, one or another theory can be applied. Nevertheless, many critics feel that there is still a serious gap between theoretical and applied ethics. One reason for the criticism is that much of the work in applied ethics presupposes the position of one or another school of philosophy and hence does not face up to the problem of opposing philosophical views. In other cases it turns out that one or another existing theory is simply not refined enough to yield answers, even according to the principles it lays down. In still other cases, applied philosophy is done without any explicit attention to theory at all.

It is, therefore, important to investigate the relation of theoretical ethics to applied ethics, not only from the point of view of what philosophers have to offer to the solution of practical problems, but also from the point of view of seeing how philosophical ethics itself might be improved by considering problems of application. How, for example, does the question of the applicability of a theory bear upon the question of its truth? In addition to the test of internal coherence, should there also be a test of completeness, based upon a theory's ability to resolve practical disputes? How can principles be elicited from the subject-matters in which moral questions arise in order to resolve differences between theories or to construct a more comprehensive ethical view?

ETHICAL THEORY AND MORAL PRACTICE

Moral theorizing and the application of moral theory in practical moral judgment is not limited to moral philosophers. Practically everyone theorizes about values, and disciplines other than philosophy use moral theories of one kind or another to justify their activities or to resolve problems within their fields. Science, for example, is thought to be justified by its pursuit of knowledge, or a

particular economic structure by its efficiency. Recent psychotherapies are founded upon ethical theories as various as hedonism and self-realization. Implicitly at least, ethical theories are being applied. Philosophy, however, retains the distinction of being the only discipline explicitly engaged in the study of ethical theory as one of its special subject-matters. Unlike practitioners or theoreticians in other disciplines, who assume the truth of one ethical theory or another without critical investigation, philosophers traditionally attempt to justify the theories they propose. Ethics is sometimes supposed to fall within the province of religion as well as philosophy, but practitioners in religion, like practitioners in other non-philosophical fields, are apt to simply assume that the principles expressed in their codes are true – although theologians sometimes attempt to justify religious beliefs on philosophical grounds. Therefore, when one seeks answers, not only to what is right or wrong in particular cases, but also to questions of correct principles, it seems only natural to turn to philosophy for answers.

The problems of moral philosophy arise quite naturally when anyone begins to reflect upon his or her moral practices, questioning the justification of actions or the reasons for judgments. Disagreement is often the source of such reflection; it also arises when people are genuinely perplexed about what they should do. In their attempts to resolve a controversy or remove doubt, they seek reasons for or against particular actions and, in so doing, they often appeal to personal codes or socially accepted rules. However, such rules may also be disputed, when, for example, there is disagreement about the acceptability of the rules, or when the accepted rules appear to conflict. An accepted rule may also seem inapplicable to a particular case, or the case may appear to be an exception, or it may not be clear which judgment the rule requires. When rules are in question, the next step is to move to higher ground, so to speak, to seek principles which will justify the rules, resolve conflicts between them, determine the range of their application, justify exceptions, or clarify their meanings. Moral reasoning does not always proceed in this way, of course, for persons may begin by appealing directly to accepted moral principles, or to contextual values, and some simply refuse to reason in support of their opinions. Traditionally, it has been the philosopher's job to sort out such responses.

Historically, philosophers have sought to examine and defend ethical principles in order to guide action and enlighten moral

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judgments. Their answers to questions about the nature and justification of moral principles, therefore, may serve to distinguish the different types of moral theory. Such answers are, for the most part, simply highly articulated accounts of the kinds of answers anyone might propose as an ultimate justification for his or her own actions or beliefs. The major difference between popular opinions on ethics and the theories of moral philosophers is that philosophers usually try to clarify their positions and demonstrate their truth. Philosophers use logical analysis and argumentation to test whether any principles being proposed really are the first principles of ethics and whether any principles can be established. Philosophers also tend to give explicit attention to the methodology employed in their examination.

Ethical theories are influenced by philosophical traditions, but moral philosophers also arrive at their positions by analyzing the values of the societies in which they live, or by analyzing ordinary moral reasonings and judgments. Philosophies therefore tend to reflect basic cultural views; yet culture is often influenced by the views of philosophers. One expects to find Christian philosophies among Christians, or communist philosophies among communists, for such philosophies both express and influence the beliefs of their adherents. The differences in the moral beliefs of different cultures have, in fact, led many people to believe in the general relativism of values. A belief in cultural or individual relativism, however, is not peculiar to our time. It is a form of moral skepticism which finds expression in all periods of philosophic history. In ancient times, Plato, for example, tried to refute the sophists, the moral skeptics of his day; St Augustine, at the end of the Roman Empire, argued against 'the academics'; and in the early modern period Descartes thought he could teach 'the infidels' how to walk with confidence in the conduct of life.

The argument which many philosophers have used to defeat the skeptic is relatively simple. They have argued that there must be universal principles discoverable by reason, because otherwise moral judgments and moral disputes would not make sense. There would be no point in having a moral opinion, or in disputing the opinion of another, unless one had reason to suppose that opinions could be either correct or mistaken. If there were no principles for determining which opinion is correct, there would be no point in having an opinion, for a moral opinion would then be an opinion

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about nothing. One way to confront such an argument would be to allow that moral judgments are really not judgments about anything, or that moral disagreements are not really logical disagreements, as, in this century, logical positivists and emotivists have claimed. They have held that so-called moral judgments are simply expressions of feeling and hence not really judgments at all.

Many philosophers have also maintained that concerning principles there is no disputing. They mean that that ultimate moral principles cannot be proved by deductive reasoning, for if they could be so proved, there would have to be still higher principles. But if there were higher moral principles, the principles being proved would not be ultimate, and the same argument applies to any supposedly higher principles. However, this argument ignores the possibility of establishing principles in other ways. For example, moral principles might be established by intuition, or by non-moral principles, or by showing that the principles in question really are ultimate. Within teleological reasoning, or reasoning according to ends and means, one might try to show, as many philosophers have, that a given value (or set of values) functions as an ultimate end, and one may even try to show *why* it is ultimate by citing certain facts about the world, or certain characteristics of human nature. Plato, for example, argues that there is no higher principle than goodness itself, because it bestows value on all other things. Hedonists have argued that, when all is said and done, the only reason anyone could give for thinking anything valuable is that it gives pleasure. But one need not suppose that there is only one ultimate principle, for there may be several, as Aristotle, for example, maintained. Indeed, the American pragmatist John Dewey held that there are different values in different contexts and, according to his ends-means continuum, that values which function as ends in some contexts function as means in others. In a system which has more than one principle, it is usually thought that some method needs to be devised for resolving possible conflicts in principle, but Thomas Aquinas appeared to believe that ultimate ends need not conflict, for he thought that a person could always be positively oriented toward several ultimate goods without ever acting in opposition to any of them.

TRADITIONAL ETHICAL VIEWS

If the arguments against skepticism are sound and there are answers to moral questions, what are the answers? Or if, philosophically, we cannot hope to propose an answer to every particular question, how in general can we go about finding answers? Many philosophers have felt that, if, as a matter of principle, we could find out what *makes* right acts right or wrong acts wrong, we would then know how to make a determination. But there is a question about whether acts are right or wrong independently of how we or anyone may happen to reason about them, or whether they are right or wrong because they correspond to right reasoning. In this century, extreme objectivists, such as the act-deontologist and intuitionist H.H. Prichard, have argued that acts are right or wrong in and of themselves, regardless of how anyone might reason about them. Some utilitarians, such as G.E. Moore, also seem to have held this position. On such accounts, intuition or reasoning is thought to be a way of *finding out* which acts are right, but intuition or reasoning does not *make* them right.

Such extreme objectivism is unusual in the history of moral philosophy, for although most moral philosophers have assumed that there are correct answers to moral questions, they have not supposed that moral truths are wholly independent of minds or ideas. Most have recognized, indeed, that moral judgments are prescriptive in nature and not simply descriptive, and hence that they must issue from some authority, even if the authority of reason itself. However, in many ancient and medieval accounts, the authority of reason was not limited to human reason, for the entire universe was thought to have a rational structure to which human reason is subordinate. In traditional theological ethics, for example, the value of things was thought to be determined by God's reason, or by God's creative act, for God was supposed to have conferred his goodness upon the world. Such moral theories were ontological in the sense that being and value were understood to be correlative terms. That is, things were thought to have value according to their level of being in a hierarchy of nature, and things could be evil, or lack value, only by failing to actualize their potentiality, or by failing to achieve the perfection of the species to which they belong. Such reasoning has been the basis of self-realization theories offered by a

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