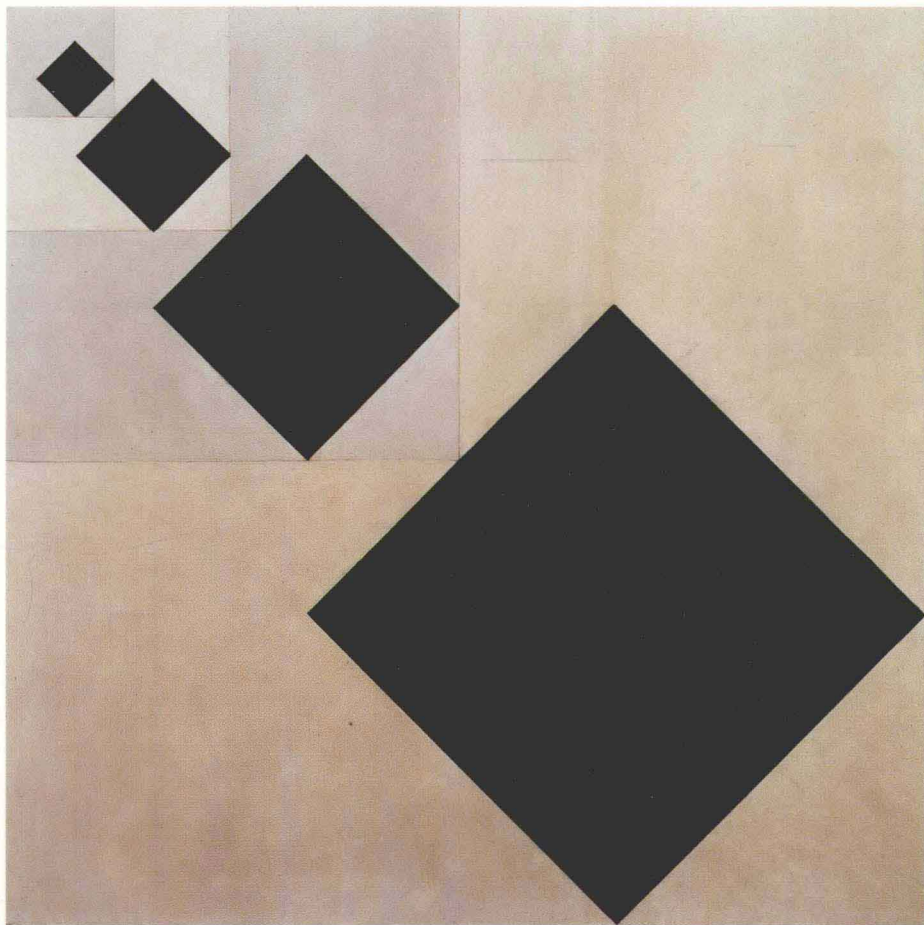


Steven Luper



A Guide to *Ethics*



A GUIDE TO ETHICS

Steven Luper

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A GUIDE TO ETHICS



Preface

A Guide to Ethics is designed to introduce the beginner to ethics, or moral philosophy. The field is too vast for any book to cover everything, but my goal is to outline moral philosophy and discuss its main areas of controversy.

Perhaps the most fundamental question in ethics is, How ought we to live? This question, in turn, gives rise to two others: What are our obligations? and What is the best life like? Like other introductions to ethics, *A Guide* discusses the first of these questions extensively; it surveys the leading accounts of moral obligation and probes their strengths and weaknesses. Unlike most, however, *A Guide* devotes substantial space (two chapters—5 and 6) to the second question and considers not just Western ideas but also a few fascinating Eastern views. We all struggle to make our lives worthwhile, and asking how it can be done is at least as important as asking about our moral obligations. We need answers to both questions if we are to know how we ought to live.

The chapters are designed to stand on their own. They can be read in any order. However, there is a natural development of ideas from one chapter to the next, starting with Chapter 1, which is a general introduction. Readers who are already acquainted with the field will recognize the following organization:

Chapter 1, Introduction: What Is Ethics?

- Metaethics (What is the status of moral claims?):

Chapter 2, Subjectivism: Is Morality an Illusion?

Chapter 3, Cultural Relativism: Does Each Culture Invent Its Own Morality?

Chapter 4, The Divine Command View: Is Morality God's Invention?

- Normative ethics (How ought we to live?)

The good (What does the best life include?)

Chapter 5, Hedonism: Is the Pleasant Life the Best Life?

Chapter 6, Perfectionism: Do We Live Best When We Excel?

The right (What are our obligations?):

Teleological views (explaining proper behavior in terms of the good):

Chapter 7, Ethical Egoism: Is Duty a Matter of Self-Enhancement?

Chapter 8, Utilitarianism: Does Duty Consist in Maximizing the Collective Good?

Deontological views (explaining proper behavior in terms of duty):

Chapter 9, Kantianism: Is Duty Respect for Humanity?

Chapter 10, Contractarianism: Is Duty the Outcome of an Ideal Agreement?

While writing *A Guide*, I have learned a great deal from others. The reviewers of this book made many helpful suggestions. I am especially grateful to Dorothy L. Orzech, of Hartnell College, whose detailed comments led to many substantial improvements; I also thank Ronald Glass, University of Wisconsin–La Crosse; John Rowan, Purdue University Calumet; and David Schmidt, University of Arizona. I would also like to thank Ken King at Mayfield Publishing for suggesting this project and for his patient advice and searching criticism during its various stages. Joan Pendleton did a great job copyediting the manuscript; Jennifer Westrick helped out in many ways. I thank them both.

Those who read *A Guide to Ethics* will no doubt have many ideas about ways in which it can be improved. I urge them to share their suggestions; I can be reached at sluper@trinity.edu or at the Philosophy Department at Trinity University in San Antonio.

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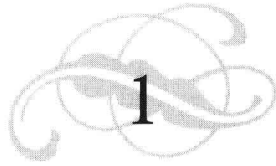
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Introduction

What Is Ethics?

We can begin to familiarize ourselves with ethics by considering the predicament of a remarkable young man who called himself “witty ticcy Ray.” Oliver Sacks, a clinical neurologist, treated Ray for Tourette’s syndrome, a condition that causes muscle spasms and involuntary outbursts of various sorts. Sacks describes his first encounter with Ray:

He was 24 years old, and almost incapacitated by multiple tics of extreme violence coming in volleys every few seconds. He had been subject to these since the age of four and severely stigmatised by the attention they aroused, though his high intelligence, his wit, his strength of character and sense of reality, enabled him to pass successfully through school and college, and to be valued and loved by a few friends and his wife. Since leaving college, however, he had been fired from a dozen jobs—always because of tics, never for incompetence—was continually in crises of one sort and another, . . . and had found his marriage threatened by involuntary [vulgar] cries . . . which would burst from him at times of sexual excitement. He was (like many Touretters) remarkably musical, and could scarcely have survived—emotionally or economically—had he not been a weekend jazz drummer of real virtuosity. . . . The only time he was free from tics was in post-coital quiescence or in sleep; or when he swam or sang or worked; evenly and rhythmically, and found “a kinetic melody,” a play, which was tension-free, tic-free and free.¹

Although Ray seemed cheerful to people around him, he was “a man in despair” and had reached the age of twenty-four without even knowing that the name of his condition was “Tourette’s syndrome.” He persevered as best he could, for there was nothing else to be done, until he read a *Washington Post* article on tics that described Oliver Sacks’s success “awakening” patients with a condition that is very much the opposite of Tourette’s: sleepy-sickness

(*encephalitis lethargica*). Some of Sacks's patients were not only revived but also overstimulated; they erupted in excited, impulsive behavior that Sacks described as "Tourettism." The *Post* article discussed Tourette's, and when Ray read it he recognized his condition. He contacted Sacks, who confirmed Ray's self-diagnosis, and Sacks offered to treat Ray with the drug Haldol.

Ray accepted the offer, and eventually, Haldol entirely freed Ray from the effects of Tourette's. Surprisingly, however, Ray found that the disappearance of his disease was a mixed blessing. For two decades, he had shaped his identity under the influence of Tourette's; and, once relieved of its effects, he realized how inextricably those were bound up with who he was. Sadly, he told Sacks, "I consist of tics—there is nothing else."² Without Tourette's, he was no longer a virtuoso at music and, as Sacks says, "less sharp, less quick in repartee, no longer bubbling with witty tics or ticcy wit."

To bring back his "ticcing self," he had only to end his therapy. But life as his "Haldol self" was easier: He was stable at work, patient, and calm. Should he continue to take Haldol and live tic-free—or not?

Ray's decision raised three questions. First, what was good for Ray as an individual? That is, what would enhance his life? Would continued drug therapy be in Ray's best interest? Second, what was good for others? His choice had a bearing on the lives of others; he had to consider the ways his therapy and his ticcing affected his wife and friends. These first two questions are answered by applying one of the two main moral concepts: the concept of the *good*, which refers to what is *desirable*. The third question is a bit different: What must be done? Is there a way (or perhaps several ways) for Ray to meet all of his obligations? Here there are two possibilities: (1) The duties that apply to Ray dictate a single course of action, or (2) these duties eliminate some possibilities (or none), but leave Ray more than one permissible option. Here we apply the concept of the *right*, which is the other main moral concept. Typically, the term *right* can be equated with *obligatory*, but often it is used in a more inclusive sense. Sometimes when we say an action is right (or, better, all right) we mean it is *permissible*—that is, not wrong—rather than obligatory.³

The first question (What was good for Ray?) involves considering Ray's well-being. Well-being is a complicated matter; it is measured in terms of the extent to which our lives incorporate elements taken to be valuable in their own right. Virtually everyone agrees that a positive state of mind (what is sometimes called *happiness*) is one of these valuable things, but arguably there are others, such as success with our projects and personal relationships, a good character, and so on.

So what was good for Ray? No answer could be more instructive than his own. Ray decided that he did not want to be *solely* "witty ticcy Ray" or his "Haldol self." It was important for Ray to fit in smoothly with society, so he

had good reasons to take Haldol, but it was also important for him to experience many of the effects of Tourette's. His very identity was at stake, for ticcing had become an integral part of who he was. So he had good reasons to discontinue his therapy. Fortunately, he did not have to choose either option. He split the difference (and himself!) and decided to take Haldol only on working days so that he could "let fly" on weekends. Given his background and situation, this double life really does seem to be the best life available to him. Were going on and off Haldol to become troublesome, he might eventually have to reinvent himself, letting go of "witty ticcy Ray" and cultivating his Haldol persona, but he was able to postpone that choice indefinitely.

How shall we answer the second question: What was best for Ray's family and friends? There were pluses and minuses in terms of their well-being, and it is difficult to say that the pluses outweighed the minuses to any appreciable degree. Life with the "Haldol Ray" was no doubt more predictable and less complicated: He drew less attention and was able to hold down a better job. On the other hand, his wife and friends had come to love "witty ticcy Ray" and would surely have missed this earlier Ray just as he himself did. Predictability and financial stability are not everything. Also, Tourette's is not life-threatening, so Ray's wife and friends were in no danger of losing him no matter how he chose. And Ray's own happiness was important to them: Given their love for him, it is reasonable to assume that they would not have wanted Ray to continue the treatment if it made him unhappy.

But was Ray's choice permissible—was it consistent with all of his obligations? It was indeed, especially when we recall that none of Ray's options would have significantly impaired the well-being of his wife and friends. The main impact was on Ray alone. Ray was morally permitted to abandon his drug therapy or to continue it if he chose; but, given his interests, splitting the difference was best.

Ray's case illustrates that in some situations we have several permissible options, so that in making our choice the concept of the good moves to center stage. In other cases the concept of the right is in the spotlight. Let's discuss a couple of these, starting with a simple illustration.

SIMPLE MORAL REASONING: THE CASE OF THE FRAUDULENT DOC

People tend to disguise what they are doing when they know full well that they are violating their obligations. A case in point involves a physician named William Summerlin. In the 1970s, he made a name for himself by attempting to discover ways to make tissue grafts more successful, and so facilitate organ transplantation. In 1974 Summerlin was immersing pieces of skin from

mice in nutrient solutions, trying to wash them clean of identifying features that trigger immune responses and, as a result, rejection. He claimed that skin from one mouse could be cleansed and successfully grafted onto another mouse. One day Robert Good, Director of the Sloan-Kettering Institute, where Summerlin worked, wanted to see some successful grafts of skin from black mice onto white mice. Summerlin used a black felt-tip pen to darken the grafts on his white mice, making it appear that the grafts came from black mice.

An assistant noticed that the black coloring washed away with alcohol and turned Summerlin in. Good suspended Summerlin's research and set up a peer review committee to investigate the matter. The committee discovered that Summerlin not only had faked these results but also had been getting away with crude forgeries for years. People little suspected that a physician working at the prestigious Sloan-Kettering Institute would cheat. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Summerlin was his attitude about his deception. When the story broke, he told the press that his

error was not in knowingly promulgating false data, but rather in succumbing to extreme pressure placed on [him] by the Institute's director to publicize information . . . and to an unbearable clinical and experimental load which numbed [his] better judgment.⁴

Summerlin portrayed himself as a victim rather than a wrongdoer, a man destroyed by Good, an overly demanding boss. But was Good the bad guy? Certainly he should have done a better job of monitoring research he was charged to supervise. He might also have been more flexible in his demands on his employees (but note that jobs like Summerlin's are supposed to be highly competitive). Nonetheless, it was Summerlin's behavior that deserved criticism. In his desperation to excuse his conduct, Summerlin ignored the fact that he could have resigned from the position that was too demanding for him. He also ignored the effects his fraud had on the people around him. He betrayed the trust of his employer: As a result of the scandal, Good was forced out of his position. Journals had published Summerlin's fraudulent research papers, and scholars had relied on them. And money provided for life-saving research was completely wasted. Summerlin's behavior was wrong, and at some level he knew it—that is why he did it on the sly.

In straightforward cases like Summerlin's, moral reasoning is a matter of applying moral principles that are easily acknowledged and that express our obligations in the form of general rules. For example, it is an acknowledged moral principle that disseminating fraudulent data is wrong, since such data are harmful to others, often seriously so. Using this principle, Summerlin could have reasoned as follows:

1. Disseminating forged data is wrong.
2. Summerlin disseminated forged data.
3. So what he did was wrong.

Claims 1–3 constitute an *argument*, which is composed of one or more assertions, called *premises*, offered in support of another assertion, called a *conclusion*. In the argument against forging data, assertions 1 and 2 are premises, and 3 is the conclusion.

Simple moral reasoning such as this has four main elements:

1. *Logical considerations*. We must be able to tell when an argument is strong, at least to the extent that we can work out what a moral principle implies about our situation. For example, the argument concerning forged data is very strong indeed, for two reasons. First, it is deductively valid. A *valid* argument is one whose conclusion cannot possibly be false if its premises are true. Second, it is *sound*, which means that it is valid and its premises are in fact true. When an argument is sound, its conclusion must be true.

2. *Factual considerations*. We must accurately grasp the facts about our situation. For example, Summerlin had to recognize that at a certain point he pulled out a marker and colored the skin of a mouse.

3. *Evaluative (or normative) considerations*. We must evaluate our situation accurately. In elementary reasoning, we must be acquainted with moral principles whose relevance is easily recognized, and be able to tell which of them applies in our situation. *Evaluative*, or *normative*, considerations involve claims about good or bad, right or wrong. These contrast with factual, purely *descriptive* claims (such as “the sun is hot,” and “few people desire to eat worms”), which are neutral from the standpoint of value.

4. *Conceptual considerations*. We must be clear about the concepts involved in our reasoning. For example, Summerlin would have to realize what forging data means and that publishing is a way of disseminating data.

Furthermore, success in even the most elementary moral reasoning requires that we be willing to apply relevant moral principles accurately and to size up our situation correctly. Anything that diminishes this readiness is an impediment to good moral reasoning. For example, anger, grief, and (as in the case of Summerlin) ambition can motivate us to turn a blind eye to what we are really doing. The example of William Summerlin shows how easily we can act badly even when the most elementary form of moral reasoning would counsel against it. In our eagerness to gain and maintain positions of prestige,