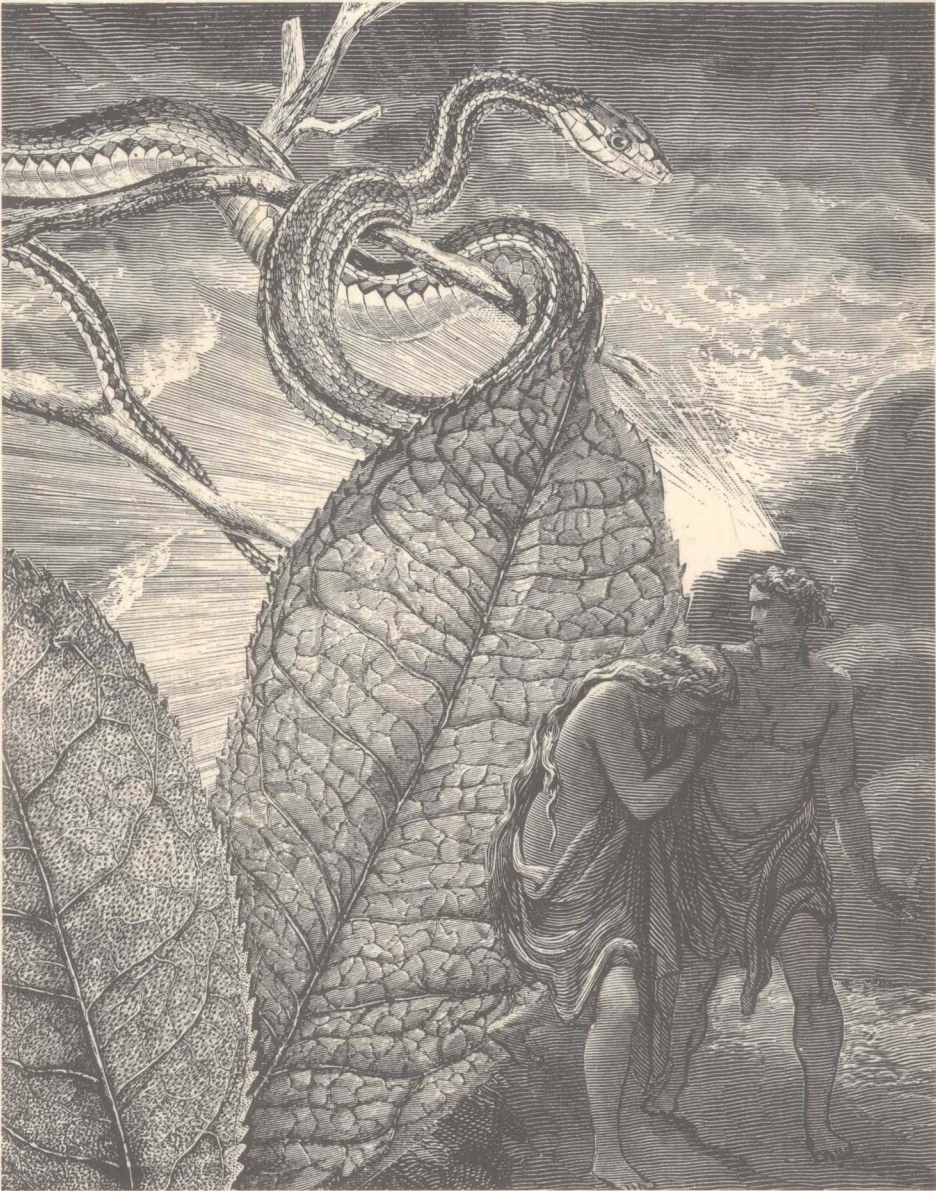


# ETHICS

A BRIEF  
INTRODUCTION

ROBERT C. SOLOMON



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## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

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## **ETHICS**

### **A Brief Introduction**

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# PREFACE

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In this book I have tried to provide a short introduction to ethics. Briefly defined, ethics is the study of the rules of right and wrong behavior, the appreciation and justification of the goals we strive for, and the ideals we admire, and the laws we think it right and necessary to obey. It is a general set of answers to the question, “What should I do?” Accordingly, the subject matter of ethics is as broad-ranging as human behavior itself, covering such daily matters as sexual conduct, family loyalties, and the rules against cheating on exams as well as the life-and-death issues of the morality of abortion and suicide, one’s obligation to risk one’s life in the armed services in times of war, and the right of a society to take the lives of its criminals.

The study of ethics is the attempt to clarify our thinking about the most general goals, ideals, rules, and principles which govern our conduct in all such matters. For example, all three of the life-and-death issues mentioned above involve one of our most fundamental ethical principles, which is sometimes summarized as the individual’s “right to life.” We enter into our study of ethics with the unshakable conviction that people should not be killed or forced to risk their lives, or at least, not without a very good reason. But what is a “good reason”? If a person has murdered someone, is that a justification for taking his or her life? If one answers, “yes, for the overall good of society,” then would it also be permissible to kill a person who is extremely vulgar or rude? Why not? Is abortion—taking the life of an unborn fetus—a case of murder? Is the fact that the mother doesn’t want or can’t support a child a sufficient reason for having an abortion? Does a society have the right to risk, and possibly sacrifice, a young person’s life, perhaps in a war that the person does not understand or accept? Does the same person have the right to risk or take his or her own life for foolish reasons—jumping motorcycles without a crash helmet or jumping off lover’s leap because of a temporary depression? What kinds of considerations would lead us to say “no”? To ask any or all of these questions is to force a clarification of the principle summarized in the seemingly simple

phrase, “right to life.” Such discussions do not in any way imply the rejection of such principles. Rather, they demand their clarification and justification. What do they really mean? What kinds of cases are covered by a principle and which are not? Why do we think that the principle is so important and what goals or principles, if any, might be even more important, for which this one might be compromised or sacrificed?

The more mundane issues of our daily lives are similarly governed by goals, ideals, rules, and principles. In the most general way, we might say that everything we do, from brushing our teeth in the morning to setting the alarm clock at night, is aimed at the goal of “living well.” One goal for all of us is, in a word, “happiness.” But what is happiness, and what sorts of goals and activities make it possible? Is the good life a single goal—like success or being respected or enjoying oneself or being good to one’s family? Or is it a great many things, in which case, how do they all tie together and which take priority? We often talk about “enjoying life” as the best thing, but why, then, do we so admire the person who has “accomplished” something and “done something meaningful” in life, even at the cost of considerable pain and sacrifice? What sorts of achievements are “meaningful”? Is personal satisfaction, the achievement of one’s individual goals in life, sufficient? What about friendship, or just being “a good person”? It is often said that *love* is the most meaningful thing in life, but what about love makes it meaningful? Is it the loving or the being loved? Is it the feeling itself, or what we actually do for one another? Is it because love is indeed a “gift of God,” or is it simply the fact that, in love, we don’t have to go through life alone?

The issues of ethics are the issues of life in human society. We do not just behave according to instinct or impulse. We are taught goals and acquire ideals. We conform to patterns of acceptable social behavior and share in our praise for certain actions (generosity and bravery, for example) and our condemnation of others (utter selfishness and cowardice, for instance). We obey the laws but sometimes disagree with them for reasons that we also agree or disagree about. And however personal and individual we consider our values to be, we agree in our acceptance of certain general principles, not only “the right to life” but the desirability of happiness, the importance of money, sex, success, and love in our lives and the importance of doing the right thing—though we may not always agree on what that is.

In this book, I have not tried to “do” moral philosophy, that is, to present my own opinions and arguments about the kinds of cases just mentioned or about the general principles and theories of ethics. It is not possible to say anything at all about ethics and not betray one’s own views and perspective, but I have tried to do so. This book is a text rather than an essay, an introduction to the central questions, concepts, and arguments that continue to appear and reappear throughout the long history of ethics. I have tried to encourage some acquaintance with the history of ethics, although little time will be spent

on systematic exposition of the texts and ideas of the great moral philosophers. (I have presented some of these classic texts with an exposition of them in *Morality and the Good Life*, also published by the McGraw-Hill Book Company.) I have tried to present as simply as possible the variety of ethical and moral theories that have been, and still are, defended in ethics. While I have tried to discuss them evenhandedly along with their arguments and objections, it would be a mistake to think of the variety of theories as a “grab bag” or smorgasbord from which each student can pick and choose according to personal taste. Indeed, if there is one overview which has motivated philosophers since Plato in their ethical search, it is the idea that there is a *correct* theory of ethics, that the goals, ideals, rules, and principles governing behavior do form a coherent and comprehensible system, which it is the purpose of ethics to understand. There may be conflict of interests; there may be serious disagreement over what is the right thing to do. The whole history of ethics shows us how much philosophers disagree about ethical theories, but, nevertheless, the reason *why* we disagree, both in particular cases and in the most general philosophical inquiries, is the fact that each of us believes that we are *RIGHT*. Ethics, unlike one’s favorite beer, is not just a matter of taste. Accordingly, it is necessary to understand the views we disagree about—and this too is an important part of ethics. But understanding the other side does not mean giving up one’s own convictions, and appreciating the variety of ethical theories does not mean that “it’s all a matter of opinion.”

The aim of the study of ethics and the aim of this book is to help the student think about ethical issues, from the most concrete personal problems (“I promised my ‘sweetie’ that I wouldn’t go out with anyone else while I’m away at college, but then I met. . . .”) to the most general ethical questions (“What’s wrong with blackmail, if it’s an exercise of my freedom of speech?” or “What is happiness, anyhow?”) Ethical theories have been formulated to help us think about right conduct in the concrete situations of life, to organize the enormous number of opinions, feelings, and “intuitions” we have about what is right and what is wrong. At the same time, particular personal problems often arise just because of our awareness of the broader ethical questions. A course of action might be singularly promising, so far as our personal ambitions and pleasures are concerned; yet we know so well that this is not enough. Our awareness of the consequences and the significance of our actions adds an additional dimension to our thinking. A student knows that he or she will have a better chance of getting a job with a small fabrication on the résumé; but even if no one will ever find out, what does it *mean* to have lied? A person wants “out” of a tedious marriage because happiness lies elsewhere. But what does it *mean* to abandon a marriage, and what will happen to everyone else involved? Ethics is the unity of concrete human concerns and the awareness of general goals, ideals, rules and principles, and their significance. If we may adapt a phrase from one of the great moral philosophers, Immanuel Kant, we might say that ethics with-

out reference to one's own concrete actions and feelings is empty, but action without ethics is blind.

One of the central themes of this book is the insistence that ethics is virtually never an isolated, individual enterprise. It is a shared effort with many influences, obligations, and debts of gratitude. The same is true of writing about ethics; and my debts to friends, colleagues, and students are in evidence on every one of the following pages. (Any mistakes are theirs too, of course.) Some of the orientation of this book has been influenced by the new "revisions" in classical ethics promoted by Alasdair MacIntyre, William Gass, Frithjof Bergmann, Edmund Pincoffs, and others. The classical substance of the book I digested with the tutelage of Betty Flowers, Charles Stevenson, William Frankena, Julius Moravcsik, and Stuart Hampshire. I owe a very special ethical debt to Lee Bowie and Meredith Michaels of Mount Holyoke College. I have a unique sense of gratitude to my wife, Kristine, for her support and encouragement. And I owe a very unromantic debt to Apple Computers (II plus) for making life so much easier. The concept of this book was developed by Kaye Pace, and the book itself grew to maturity under the watchful eyes of Anne Murphy and David Dunham of the McGraw-Hill Book Company.

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*Robert C. Solomon*

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# CONTENTS

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PREFACE	xī
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## **PART 1 AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS**

Small Crimes	1
What Is Ethics?	2
Change, Choice, and “Pluralism”	3
Ethics and Ethos	5
Morality	6
Ethics, Ethos, and Morality: The Problem of Relativism	9
Why Be Moral? Selfishness, Motivation, and Justification	12
Two Dimensions of Morals: Rules and Virtues	15
Two Levels of Inquiry: Normative and Metaethics	18
The Examined Life and “The Meaning of Life”	20
Appendix to Part I: Ten Great Moral Philosophers	21

## **PART 2 MORALITY AND THE GOOD LIFE**

What to Live for: The Example of Socrates	25
The Good Life	26
The Limits of Satisfaction	29



What Is Morality?	<b>31</b>
Morality and the Law	<b>33</b>
Nine Problems about Morality	<b>35</b>
The Problem of Justification	<b>44</b>
The Place of Reason in Ethics	<b>46</b>
Reason and the Passions	<b>48</b>
Compassion, Love, and Friendship	<b>50</b>
A Matter of Motives	<b>53</b>
Egoism and Altruism	<b>55</b>
A Note on Selfishness	<b>57</b>
Why Be Reasonable?	<b>57</b>

### **PART 3    ELEMENTS OF THE ETHICAL LIFE**

Happiness, Knowledge, and Intrinsic Goods: The Meaning of Integrity	<b>63</b>
Pleasure (and Pain)	<b>67</b>
Self	<b>70</b>
Freedom and Responsibility	<b>75</b>
The "Free Will" Problem	<b>78</b>
Virtue and the Virtues	<b>81</b>
Virtues and Vices: Defining Practices	<b>86</b>
Duty, Saints, Heroes, and Rogues	<b>89</b>
Justice and Equality	<b>93</b>
Rights	<b>97</b>

### **PART 4    THE JUSTIFICATION OF MORALITY**

The Unreasonable Question: Why Be Moral?	<b>101</b>
Acting for Reasons: Two Kinds of Theories	<b>103</b>
Facts and Values	<b>105</b>

The Good and God's Will	<b>109</b>
Teleology and Human Nature	<b>113</b>
Enlightened Egoism	<b>115</b>
Utilitarianism	<b>117</b>
Kant and Deontology	<b>125</b>
Existentialism, Emotivism, and Moore	<b>130</b>
The Justification of Morality and the Problem of Relativism	<b>134</b>
Ethics, Ethos, and Pluralism: American Morality Today	<b>138</b>
 INDEX	 <b>143</b>

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

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### **SMALL CRIMES**

Last Thursday, you went out for lunch with an acquaintance from class, a nice-enough fellow but not a candidate for lifelong friendship. As you were wolfing down your last bite of cheeseburger, you suddenly gulped and flushed: you realized that you had forgotten your wallet. You were flat broke. Embarrassed, you entreated your classmate to lend you five dollars, which you would, of course, pay back on Tuesday. Today is Wednesday; you forgot.

Now you are doubly embarrassed, for having had to borrow the money in the first place, for having then forgotten to pay it back when promised. You are tempted, momentarily, to ignore the entire awkward situation, just to assume—what may well be true—that your classmate has forgotten about the loan. (After all, it is only five dollars.) But maybe he hasn't forgotten, or, at least, he'll remember it when he sees you. For an irrational instant, you consider dropping the course, but then you realize that would be ridiculous—the five dollars just isn't that important. It is highly unlikely—it would be very embarrassing for him—that he would actually ask you for the money. Any way, you aren't close friends and don't generally talk to each other. So what's the difference?

But now, small hints of large doubts start interrupting your day. You've made up your mind. You are convinced that no harm will come to you. The fellow knows none of your friends and it is hardly likely that he will announce to the class or put a personal ad in the paper that you are a “deadbeat.” And

yet, it's ruining your day, and it may well ruin other days. "If only I could get rid of this guilty feeling," you say to yourself. But it is not just a feeling; it is a new and wholly unwelcome sense of who you are. A voice inside of you (sometimes it sounds like your own voice; occasionally it seems to be your mother's) keeps whispering, "deadbeat," "deadbeat" (and worse). Already distracted from your work, you start speculating, "What if we all were to forget about our debts?" Your first response is that you would probably be washing dishes at the Burger Shoppe, since no one would ever lend anyone money and your classmate would never have lent money to you. Your second response to yourself is that "everyone doesn't forget," but this argument doesn't make you feel any better. It reminds you that in a world where most people pay their debts, you are one of the scoundrels who does not. In a final moment of belligerence, you smash your fist on the table and say, in part to yourself and in part to the slightly surprised people sharing your library table, "The only person I have to worry about is me!"

There is an embarrassed silence. Then you walk over to the bank of phones and dial: "Hello, Harris? You remember that five dollars you loaned me?"

## WHAT IS ETHICS?

*Ethics* is that part of philosophy which is concerned with living well, being a good person, doing the right thing, and wanting the right things in life.

The word "ethics" refers both to a discipline—the study of our values and their justification—and to the subject matter of that discipline—the actual values and rules of conduct by which we live. The two meanings merge in the fact that we behave (and misbehave) according to a complex and continually changing set of rules, customs, and expectations; consequently, we are forced to reflect on our conduct and attitudes, to justify and sometimes to revise them.

Why do we need to study ethics as a discipline? Isn't it enough that we *have* ethics, that we do (most of us, most of the time) act according to our values and rules? But part of our ethics is understanding ethics, that is, acting for *reasons* and being able to defend our actions if called upon to do so. It is not enough, after the age of eight or so, simply to do what you are told; it is just as important to know the reason why, and to be able to say no when you think an act is wrong. The study of ethics teaches us to appreciate the overall system of reasons within which having ethics makes sense. Understanding what we are doing and why is just as essential to ethics as the doing itself.

We learn ethics, typically, a piece at a time. Our education begins in childhood with a number of instructions and prohibitions, such as "don't hit your little sister" and "you should share your toys with your friends." The recognition of authority is essential, of course, beginning with "You do what your father says" and culminating in "Because it's the law, that's why." But it is also learning reasons, such as "because if everyone did that, there wouldn't be

any left” or “because it will make her unhappy.” Ultimately, we learn the specialized language of *morality* and its more abstract reasons for doing or refraining from certain actions, such as “because it is your *duty*” and “because it is *immoral*.” By this time we have begun to learn that ethics is not just a varied collection of “do’s and don’ts” but a *system* of values and principles which tie together in a reasonable and coherent way in order to make our society and our lives as “civilized” and as happy as possible. The study of ethics is the final step in this process of education—the understanding of that system as such and the way that all our particular values and principles fit into it.

### CHANGE, CHOICE, AND “PLURALISM”

Our understanding of ethics is complicated enormously by the fact that, as a living system, our ethics is continually *changing*. Consider, for example, the tremendous changes that our society has experienced over just the past few decades in the realm of sexual morality; today, we accept behavior which would have been wanton immorality fifty years ago (for example, topless beachwear for *men*!). Similar changes have taken place in our concept of personal roles and career options. Only twenty years ago, many people considered it “unethical” for a wife to work except in cases of dire family need, but it was perfectly acceptable—in fact, even commendable—for a husband to spend so much time working at his career that he virtually never saw his children or did anything but work. Today, we would not find such behavior praiseworthy but, rather, akin to a disease—some call it “workaholism.” Attitudes toward authority have also changed dramatically. Forty years ago, the attitude of most young men, when drafted into the army (or invited to enlist), was unquestioning acceptance. Today, those who refuse to cooperate and who resist authority are often praised as moral heroes. What this means and whether it is a change for the better or for the worse is one of the most important questions of ethics.

If we continued to accept whatever values we were taught as children, if there were no dramatic ethical changes or disagreements about what is right, the study of ethics might still be desirable, but it would not have any decisive impact on our lives. The fact is, however, that we live in a society filled with change and disagreements, in which each generation is taught to reexamine the values and actions of the older generation, in which doing what you are told or simply conforming to tradition is not necessarily a mark of moral goodness but may be considered cowardice or lack of character. Our ethics, in other words, essentially involves *choice*. In fact, having and permitting individual freedom of choice is itself one of the most noteworthy values of our ethics. But to choose between alternative courses of action or opposed values requires intelligent deliberation and some sense of the reasons why we should choose one rather than another. Each of us must select a career and a way of life. We might “follow in our parents’ footsteps” or we might go off on a completely

different path. But we must choose. Each of us must decide whether or not to get married, and when and to whom. We must decide whether or not to have children, how many, and how they will be raised, thus affecting the lives of others in the most direct and dramatic sense possible. Every day, each of us decides whether or not to engage in a dozen small crimes and an occasional felony, whether to drive Highway 10 to El Paso at a safe (but illegal) 80 miles per hour, or to take an extra box of paperclips from the office, since “no one will ever miss them.”

The importance of choice in ethics is often confused with the idea that we “choose our values.” This is misleading. Most of ethics involves decisions between already-established possibilities and already-available reasons, and those we do not choose. A student deciding between joining the Navy or going to law school does indeed have an important choice to make, but the alternatives and their values are provided by the society as a whole. (There must already be a navy to join or a society with a role for lawyers.) One does not choose the alternatives; one chooses among the alternatives.

Nevertheless, there is a sense, defended recently by the French “existentialist” Jean-Paul Sartre, in which each of us “chooses” our values every time we make an ethical decision. By deciding not to take advantage of a loophole in the tax laws, for example, one personally affirms the priority of compliance over individual gain. By acting in one way rather than another, we support one value rather than another, one sense of who we are rather than another. Thus, Sartre also says that we “choose ourselves,” that ethics is largely a matter of individual choice and commitment rather than of obedience to already-established authorities.

It is often said that we live in an ethically *pluralist* society. This means that there is no single code of ethics but several different sets of values and rules in a variety of communities or “subcultures.” Professional and business people in our society emphasize individual success and mobility; some cultural communities stress the importance of group identity and stable ethnic tradition. Some college and urban communities are notably more “liberal” in their tolerance for eccentricity and deviance than more conservative suburban neighborhoods. Thus, we find our Supreme Court—the ultimate arbiter of laws if not morals—insisting on “community standards” as the test for what is permissible, in the case of pornography, for instance. Many people in our society insist that the ultimate value is individual freedom; others argue that the general welfare is more important, even if it interferes with individual freedom. Some people consider it absolutely wrong to take a human life even if the life in question is that of an unborn zygote or fetus; others do not believe that such a life counts as “human” and should be sacrificed if necessary to the well-being of the mother. None of these differences in ethics is easily reconciled; in fact, they may be unreconcilable. But that makes it all the more important that we understand the nature of these differences, and at least know how to try to reconcile our

differences instead of intransigently shouting our views at one another or simply storming out of the room. Trying to be “reasonable” in this sense is much of what ethical discussion and debate are about, and pluralism provides much of the motive. If one isn’t clear about the nature and justification of one’s own values, he or she won’t be in a position to understand the nature and justification of other people’s values. And if one doesn’t understand other people’s values, neither will one understand how they conflict or might be brought into harmony.

## ETHICS AND ETHOS

The word “ethics” comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning “character” or “custom”, and the derivative phrase *ta ethika*, which the philosophers Plato and Aristotle used to describe their own studies of Greek values and ideals. Accordingly, ethics is first of all a concern for individual character, including what we blandly call “being a good person,” but it is also a concern for the overall character of an entire society, which is still appropriately called its “ethos.” Ethics is participation in, and an understanding of, an ethos, the effort to understand the social rules which govern and limit our behavior, especially those fundamental rules, such as the prohibitions on killing and stealing and the commandments that one should “honor thy parents” and respect the rights of others, which we call *morality*.

The close connection between ethics and social customs (“mores,” which shares its etymological root with the word “morality”) inevitably raises the question of whether morality is *nothing but* the customs of our particular society, our ethics nothing but the rules of our particular ethos. On the one hand, it is clear that ethics and morality are very closely tied to the laws and the customs of a particular society. Kissing in public and making a profit in a business transaction are considered immoral in some societies, not in others. But, on the other hand, we are firmly convinced that not *all* laws or customs endorsed by an entire society are equally acceptable. The rules of etiquette may be merely a matter of local custom or taste, but the prohibition against cannibalism, for example, seems to have much more universal power and justification than the simple reminder, “That just isn’t done around here.”

One way of defining *moral* principles—as distinguished from rules for polite behavior or standards of good taste, for example—is to insist that these are not the province of only a particular society or subculture within society but, rather, rules which we apply to all people everywhere and expect them to obey. We might be happy to accept, and even be charmed by, the fact that people in another culture eat food with wooden sticks instead of forks or enjoy music based on quarter tones without a discernible melody. But when we consider a society in which female babies are ritually subjected to painful disfigurement (such as the clitorectomies that are still practiced routinely in many African

nations), poets are sent to prison (as in Soviet Russia) or politicians who speak out against the government are murdered (as in the Philippines), these acts cannot be considered cultural curiosities or mere differences in custom. Morality may provide the basic rules of an ethos, but those rules are not limited to that ethos. Morality needs a culture in which to be cultivated, but that does not mean that morality consists of just the rules of that particular culture.

An ethos is that core of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings that gives coherence and vitality to a people (in ancient Greek, an *ethnos*, a word significantly similar to “ethos”). It may be spelled out explicitly in terms of laws, but much of an ethos resides in the hearts and minds of the people, in what they expect of one another and what they expect of themselves, in what they like and dislike, in what they value and disdain, hope and fear. It is an essential part of our ethos, for example, that individual success and “standing out in the crowd” are very important to us, though there is no law or moral principle that commands that this should be so. In some societies, by way of contrast, individual ambitions and eccentricities are unacceptable. “The nail that sticks out is the one that gets hammered down,” reads a traditional Japanese proverb. We should not assume that all *ethē* (the plural of “ethos”) are the same, even in their most basic values and visions.

## MORALITY

Ethics includes the whole range of acceptable social and personal practices, from the rules of “common courtesy” to the institutions that determine the kinds of work we do, the kinds of friends we have, and the ways we relate to both family and strangers. Morality, on the other hand, is something more specific, a subset of ethical rules which are of particular importance. If someone refuses to play fair or to honor a verbal contract, we might say that he or she is untrustworthy or “unethical,” but we would not say “immoral.” If a person abuses children or poisons his in-laws, however, we may well call such behavior “immoral,” thus indicating the seriousness of these violations. Morality consists of the most basic and inviolable rules of a society.

In modern European and American philosophy, “ethics” is often treated as a synonym for “moral philosophy,” and philosophers who study ethics are called “moral philosophers.” This in itself tells us a great deal about our own ethos and the fact that we tend to be *pluralists* regarding most of the details of life and what counts as an acceptable social or personal practice; as moral philosophers, we are primarily concerned, instead, with those apparently universal rules that apply to everyone without exception and without regard for anyone’s particular culture or personality. Accordingly, morality becomes the central concern of ethics, and the discussion of moral principles (such as “thou shalt not kill”) comes to define ethics as such. Morality is not the whole of ethics; but one of the central issues in ethics—if not *the* issue—is the special status and nature of moral rules.



What is so distinctive about moral rules and principles? Ethicists have made many suggestions and pointed to a number of distinctive attributes of morality that set it off from other aspects of ethics and ethos. By way of anticipation of our later discussions, here are four of them:

1 Moral rules have great *importance*.

Moral rules, however else they may be characterized, are of indisputable importance. They are like trump cards in certain games, overpowering all other considerations. In our opening example, the *obligation* to repay a loan outweighs purely personal concerns, such as embarrassment and the need for money. Indeed, it is the mark of morality that the amount of money involved is not what is important; “it’s the principle of the thing.” The obligation would still override self-interest, whether the amount involved were ten cents or a thousand dollars. It is sometimes suggested that moral rules are those without which a society could not survive, or, at least, could not function in what it considers a “civilized” way. For example, how could there be promises or contracts at all—the bases of much of our lives—if the respect for promises and contracts were not more important than a person’s personal advantage in breaking them? Furthermore, to call a person or an act “immoral” is to condemn that person or act in the strongest possible terms, just as to say that an issue is a “moral issue” is to say that it is of the utmost urgency.

2 Morality consists of *universal rules*.

Morality is rule-governed in that it tells us what sorts of things to do and not to do, by way of general classes and types of acts, such as “one ought to repay debts.” Morality thus consists of obedience to rules rather than just correct action. (A dog can be trained to behave, for instance, but it is doubtful that a dog can be moral.) Furthermore, moral rules are distinguished by the fact that they are *universal*: they apply to everyone everywhere, and without qualification or exception.

3 Moral rules are *rational* and *objective*.

There are *reasons* for acting morally, for example, “because it is my obligation.” Morality has been defined by some philosophers as the rules and actions of “a completely rational person.” Morality is rational, in part, because it is *disinterested*. A moral rule is disinterested in that it applies regardless of the interests or power or stature of the people to whom it applies. (Think of the classic image of Justice as wearing a blindfold, thus being “blind” to individual interests and the identities of the people who stand before her.) One has an obligation to repay a loan whether or not one needs the money, whether or not repaying the loan will advance one’s interests in other ways (for example, making it easier to obtain another loan in the future). Of course, one can sometimes use a moral principle to one’s own advantage, but the moral principle itself is formulated to no one’s advantage and with no particular person’s interests in mind. To insist that morality is independent of “subjective” feelings and interests is to say that morality is *objective*. “Adultery is wrong!” does not mean “I don’t like adultery” or “Our society disapproves of adultery”; a moral