MORAL THEORY

An Introduction

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Preface

This book is essentially a survey of various moral theories including the divine command theory, moral relativism, natural law theory, utilitarianism, Kant's moral theory, moral pluralism, virtue ethics, and moral particularism. The nine chapters that discuss these theories are preceded by an introduction whose purpose is to expose readers to some basic concepts and ideas common to all or most of the theories featured in the rest of the book. The conclusion ties together certain general themes that emerge from the study of the various theories.

My main goal in writing this book is to provide an intermediate-level introduction to moral theory. I have tried to go beyond many introductory ethics texts by delving into some of the complexity involved in debates within and about moral theories. But I have also tried to refrain from too much complexity, as is evident from the many places throughout the text where I cut off discussion of some issue by leaving it for readers to ponder on their own. This text, then, is written for those individuals who are ready for something more challenging than an elementary treatment of the questions and issues that come up in moral theory but who are not yet ready to tackle advanced research in ethics.

For the most part, the contents of the chapters are based on my lectures delivered over a number of years in upper-level undergraduate courses in ethics. My presentation of the ideas and arguments in the chapters to follow has been "classroom tested," so to speak. Over the years, and mainly as a result of student input, I have made many adjustments and changes to my course lectures, resulting in many improvements. I wish to thank those many students I have taught at Illinois State University, the University of Memphis, and the Katholischen Universität Eichstätt for their comments and questions that helped me improve my course on moral theory.

I received a Professional Development Assignment from the University of Memphis that released me from teaching responsibilities during fall semester 2000 and enabled me to make substantial progress on this book.

While writing this book, I received useful written comments on various chapters from Paul Bloomfield, Josh Glasgow, Mitch Haney, Nelson Potter, and David Shoemaker. I benefited greatly from e-mail discussions with Brad Hooker about various topics in moral theory as well as his comments on the chapters I sent him. In writing chapter 10, I benefited from weekly meetings of the fall semester 2000 moral particularism reading group, which included Jenny Case, David Henderson, Terry Horgan, Matjaž Potrč, John Tienson, and Debbie Zeller. I also had many useful conversations with my colleagues Terry Horgan, Tim Roche, and John Tienson about various topics covered in the pages to follow. My deepest thanks to all these philosophers for their help.

I am especially grateful to Robert Audi, the series editor for the Rowman & Littlefield series in which this book appears, for his encouragement and support and for his comments on certain parts of the book.

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To my students over the years

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An Introduction to Moral Theory

What makes an act right or wrong? What is it about individuals that makes them morally good or bad? How can we come to correct conclusions about the morality of what we ought to do and what sorts of persons we ought to be? Moral theory attempts to provide systematic answers to these very general moral questions about what to do and how to be. Because moral theorists have given different answers to these questions, we find a variety of competing moral theories. This book contains a survey of some of the most important moral theories—theories that are of both historical and contemporary interest.

But what is a moral theory? What does such a theory attempt to accomplish? What are the central concepts that such theories make use of? Furthermore, how can a moral theory be evaluated?

This chapter is an introduction to moral theory; it will address these and related questions and thus prepare readers for the chapters that follow. The kinds of general moral questions that are of concern in moral theory, and the apparent need for such theory, are easily raised by reflecting on disputed moral questions including, for example, questions about the morality of suicide.

1. A Sample Moral Controversy: Suicide

In 1997, the state of Oregon's Death with Dignity Act took effect, allowing physicians to assist patients in ending their own lives. From 1997 to 2000, forty-three people made use of the act in committing suicide. This unprecedented statute permitting physician-assisted suicide provoked highly charged debates about the legality and morality of this practice. The most significant legal response to Oregon's act came in 1999 when the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Pain Relief Promotion Act, intended

to promote pain control in patients but also prohibiting the use of controlled substances for purposes of causing death or assisting another person in causing death. This act effectively overturned the Oregon statute. There are many other interesting legal issues that these two acts raise, but our concern is with the moral controversy that the Oregon act stirred.[1]

The moral debate over physician-assisted suicide concerns the larger issue of the morality of suicide, and moral arguments both for and against the Death with Dignity Act often depend on moral claims about suicide. Those who think that there is nothing necessarily wrong with suicide often argue that deciding to end one's own life is consistent with the dignity that is inherent in every individual. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, choosing to end one's life when continued existence threatens one's dignity is morally permissible. Those opposed to suicide on moral grounds sometimes argue that God has dominion over our bodies and so the choice between life and death belongs to him.[2] Another commonly voiced argument against suicide is that this kind of act is wrong because allowing it would inevitably lead to bad consequences such as the killing of terminally ill patients against their will.

The moral controversy over suicide generally, and physician-assisted suicide in particular, is but one of a number of moral controversies including abortion, treatment of animals, capital punishment, sexuality, privacy, gun control, drugs, and discrimination. Debate about these issues focuses on reasons for holding one or another moral viewpoint about them. As just noted, appeal to the idea of human dignity has sometimes been offered as a reason in support of the claim that suicide is not necessarily morally wrong, while we find that appeals to the will of God and to the alleged bad consequences of allowing suicide are sometimes used to argue that suicide is morally wrong. Giving reasons like this for some claim that one wants to establish is what philosophers call giving an argument for the claim. So moral debates like the one over the morality of suicide feature arguments on both sides of the issue.

To understand and evaluate such arguments, three main tasks must be undertaken. First, there is the *conceptual* task of clarifying important concepts such as that of human dignity. What are we talking about when we make claims about human dignity? In what does one's dignity consist? Unless we have an answer to this question, we will not really understand moral arguments that make use of this concept.

A second main task in understanding moral arguments requires that we *evaluate various claims* being made in the sorts of arguments mentioned above. Is it true that suicide is against God's will? Is it true that allowing suicide would lead to bad social consequences? Is it true that suicide is consistent with human dignity? These claims are controversial and require examination.

A third main task concerning moral arguments involves *evaluating basic moral assumptions* that are often unstated in the giving of such arguments. For instance, when someone argues that suicide is wrong because it is contrary to God's will, the unstated assumption is that if an action is contrary to God's will, then it is wrong. Is this assumption correct? Again, the claim that suicide is wrong because it would have bad consequences assumes that if an action would have bad consequences, then it is wrong. Is this assumption correct?

Such moral assumptions often express ideas about what makes an action right or wrong, and hence about the nature of such actions. And questions about the nature of right and wrong, as well as about the nature of good and bad, are central in the study of moral theory. And in this way, reflection on ordinary moral debate and discussion, featuring moral arguments, leads us to the kinds of questions that a moral theory attempts to answer.

In order to explain more fully the project of moral theory, we need to consider (1) the main aims of moral theory, (2) the role of moral principles within a moral theory, (3) the main categories of moral evaluation, (4) the structure of such theories, and finally (5) questions about the evaluation of moral theories. These topics will occupy us in the next five sections of this chapter.

2. The Aims of Moral Theory

It will help in trying to understand what a moral theory is all about if we consider the main aims of moral theory—what such a theory is out to accomplish. There are two fundamental aims of moral theory: one practical, the other theoretical.

The practical aim of moral theory has to do with the desire to have some method to follow when, for example, we reason about what is right or wrong. Scientists employ scientific methodology in arriving at scientific conclusions about various phenomena under investigation, and such methodology provides a means of resolving scientific disputes. Similarly, we might hope to discover a proper moral methodology—a *decision procedure*, as it is often referred to by moral philosophers—that could be employed in moral thinking and debate and which would help to resolve moral conflicts.

We can summarize the practical aim this way:

Practical aim. The main practical aim of a moral theory is to discover a decision procedure that can be used to guide correct moral reasoning about matters of moral concern.

The theoretical aim of moral theory has to do with coming to understand the underlying nature of right and wrong, good and bad. When someone claims that an action is morally wrong, it makes sense to ask them why they think the action in question is wrong. We thus assume that when an action is morally right or wrong, there is something about the action that makes it right or wrong. (A similar point can be made in relation to claims about the goodness and badness of persons. But for simplicity's sake, let us just focus for the moment on questions about the rightness and wrongness of actions.)

To explain further, consider an analogy. What makes a liquid *water* (as opposed to ammonia or some other liquid) is its chemical composition. Underlying all bodies of water—big and small—is the fact that the liquid in question is composed of an appropriate number of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen. The fact that some liquid is H_2O is what makes it water. Something analogous might well be true about morality. We assume that when an action is right or wrong, there is something about the action that makes it right or wrong. Moreover, it is natural to wonder whether there might be some fixed set of underlying features of actions that make them right or wrong. Perhaps there is one such underlying feature, but perhaps there is more than one. Then again, we may find that although the rightness or wrongness of actions depends on certain underlying features of actions, such features vary so much from case to case that there is no fixed set of underlying features to be discovered.

The theoretical aim of moral theory, then, is to explore the underlying nature of right and wrong action in order to be able to explain what it is about an action that makes it right or wrong. If we suppose that there is some fixed set of underlying features that make an action right or wrong, they will function as standards, or *moral criteria,* of right and wrong action. Similar remarks apply to matters of good and bad: part of the theoretical aim of a moral theory is to discover what it is about persons that makes them good or bad.

We can express the main theoretical aim this way:

Theoretical aim. The main theoretical aim of moral theory is to discover those underlying features of actions, persons, and other items of moral evaluation that make them right or wrong, good or bad.

The practical and theoretical aims of moral theory are commonly thought to be related to one another in that satisfying one is either required for, or at least the best way of, satisfying the other. To explain this point and to deepen our understanding of the main aims of moral theory, let us consider the role of moral principles in moral theory.

3. Moral Principles and Their Role in Moral Theory

In the field of ethics, *moral principles* are to be understood as very general moral statements that purport to set forth conditions under which an action is right or wrong or something is good or bad.[3]

Here is a sample moral principle:

> An action is right if and only if the action does not interfere with the well-being of those individuals who are likely to be affected by the action.

For present purposes, we need not worry about what counts as interfering with the well-being of individuals, or whether the principle is true. The thing to notice about this principle is that it asserts a connection between an action's being right and its not interfering with the well-being of certain individuals. We were just noting that a moral theory has both a practical and a theoretical aim. Moral principles have traditionally played a central role in attempts by moral philosophers to accomplish both of these aims. Let us see how.

In attempting to satisfy the practical aim of providing a decision procedure for correct moral reasoning, moral philosophers have often been guided by the idea that such reasoning must be based on moral principles. Here is a simple example.

Suppose Brittany claims that it would be wrong for her to lie about her job experience on a job application, even when she is reasonably certain that a lie about this matter would not be found out. Suppose further that she is asked to give her reasons for thinking this, and, being a reflective person, she responds by pointing out that her lying in these circumstances might well negatively affect the chances of other applicants' getting the job and thereby interfere with the well-being of others. And so we imagine her attempting to justify the claim that her lying would be wrong by appealing to the sample moral principle stated above. Brittany's line of reasoning could be set out as follows.

> *Moral principle:* An action is right if and only if the action does not interfere with the well-being of those individuals who are likely to be affected by the action.
>
> *Factual claim:* The act of lying on a job application would interfere with the well-being of those individuals who will be affected by the action.
>
> *Conclusion:* The act of lying on a job application is not right (and hence is wrong).

The point I am making with this example is simply that the practical aim of providing a decision procedure for arriving at justified moral verdicts about actions (and other items of moral concern) has often been supposed to be a matter of reasoning from moral principles to conclusions about actions (and other items of moral concern). Understood as a decision procedure, then, a moral principle guides proper moral reasoning by indicating those features of actions whose recognition can guide one to well-reasoned verdicts about the morality of actions.

Of course, not any old moral principles will serve to satisfy this practical aim. In order to provide a decision procedure to guide *correct* moral reasoning, the moral principles used must themselves be correct. And this brings us to the theoretical aim of moral theory and the role of principles in achieving this aim.

In attempting to satisfy the theoretical aim of explaining what makes an action right or wrong or what makes something good or bad, moral philosophers have typically sought to formulate moral principles that express this information. In fulfilling this theoretical aim, then, a moral principle concerned with right and wrong action can be understood as indicating those most basic features of actions that make them right or wrong. According to our example principle, it is facts about how an action would affect the well-being of a certain group of individuals that are supposed to explain what makes an action right or wrong.

Moreover, moral principles that serve to explain what makes actions right or wrong will thus *unify* morality by revealing those basic features that determine in general an action's rightness or wrongness. (Similar remarks apply to principles of goodness and badness.) Finding the underlying unity behind the diversity of moral phenomena has thus been an aim of traditional moral theory—an aim that can supposedly be achieved by discovering moral principles that satisfy the main theoretical aim of moral theory.[4]

So moral principles are often cast by moral theorists in a dual role. In light of the theoretical aim of moral theory, these principles purport to express those underlying features in virtue of which an action, person, or other item of moral evaluation has the moral quality it has. In this way, moral principles aim to *unify* morality—revealing to us the underlying nature of right and wrong, good and bad. In light of the practical aim of moral theory, such principles are also supposed to provide a decision procedure for engaging in correct moral reasoning.

Let us return for a moment to the issue of the morality of suicide. A correct set of moral principles functioning as moral criteria would enable us to understand what makes an action of suicide right or wrong, thus giving us insight into the moral nature of such action. A correct set of moral principles functioning as a decision procedure would provide us the means for reasoning our way to correct moral verdicts about the morality of suicide.

As we shall see in later chapters, some philosophers deny the claim that a moral principle that satisfies the theoretical aim must also satisfy the practical aim. Moreover, some moral philosophers deny altogether the idea that there can be moral principles of the sort featured in most moral theories and thus deny that morality can be unified in the manner just explained. (The reader should therefore keep in mind that my introductory remarks are meant to capture traditional assumptions about moral theory and the roles of principles in any such theory, but that such assumptions have been challenged.)

Earlier, we noted that moral theory concerns questions about the morality of actions (what to do) as well as the morality of persons (how to be). And I have been saying that traditional moral theories are primarily in the business of formulating and defending principles about the morality of actions and of persons. Having explained the two main aims of moral theory and the role of principles in satisfying those aims, let us take a closer look at some of the basic categories of moral evaluation.

4. Some Basic Moral Categories

The concepts of right and wrong and good and bad are central in moral thinking; thus in theorizing about morality it will be useful to consider some of these concepts and the categories that they pick out. Since a concept picks out a category of things, let us consider the categories that are picked out by basic moral concepts. There are two main divisions of moral categories to consider: the deontic categories and the value categories.

The Categories of Deontic Evaluation

The term "deontic" is from the Greek word *deon*, which means duty. The categories of deontic evaluation are used primarily to evaluate the morality of actions—their rightness and wrongness. There are three basic deontic categories (which I will also call categories of right action): the *obligatory*, the *wrong*, and the *optional*. Let us briefly consider each one in turn.

> *Obligatory actions.* An obligatory action is one that one morally ought to do. Typically, we refer to actions that are obligatory as *duties.* Other terms used for this category include "required" and "right." (Use of the term "right" requires special comment. See below.)
>
> *Wrong actions.* A wrong action is one that morally ought not to be done. Other terms often used for this category include "forbidden," "impermissible," and "contrary to duty."

Optional actions. An action is morally optional when it is neither obliga-
tory nor wrong—one is morally permitted to perform the action, but
need not. Sometimes actions in this category are referred to as "merely
permissible" ("merely," because unlike obligatory actions, which are per-
mitted, they are not also required).

These characterizations are not meant to be illuminating definitions
that would help someone come to understand them. To be told that an
obligatory action is one that *ought* to be done is hardly illuminating. How-
ever, the brief remarks made about each category are, I think, still useful
for conveying an intuitive sense of the main categories of deontic evalua-
tion.

What about the category of the right? Talk of right action has both a
narrow and a broad meaning. When it is used narrowly, it refers to the cat-
egory of the obligatory, as when we say she did *the* right act (meaning she
did what she morally ought to have done). When the term is used broadly,
right action is the opposite of wrong action: an action is right, in the broad
sense of the term, when it is not wrong. For instance, to say of someone
that what she did was right often conveys the idea that her act was moral-
ly in the clear—that it was all right for her to do, that what she did was not
wrong. Since actions that are not wrong include the categories of both the
obligatory and the optional, talk of right action (in the broad sense) covers
both of these categories.

Figure 1.1 summarizes what I have been saying, where "right" is used in
its broad sense to mean simply "not wrong." In the chapters that follow,
when I want to refer to the species of moral evaluation that we are now
considering, I will speak indifferently about the *deontic status* of an action
and of the *rightness* or *wrongness* of an action. These expressions are to be
understood as shorthand for referring to an action's being either obligato-
ry, optional, or wrong.

The Categories of Value

To speak of the value of something is to speak of its being either good
or bad, or neither good nor bad (some things have no value, positive or
negative). I have already mentioned that one concern of moral theory is
with answering the question of what makes an individual a good or bad
person. Goodness or badness of persons is not the only kind of value that
is of concern to moral theory, as I will explain shortly. But let us begin to
clarify the categories of the good and the bad by distinguishing between
things with intrinsic value and things with extrinsic value.

To say that something has intrinsic value—that it is intrinsically
good—is to say that there is something about *it* that makes it good in it-
self. In other words, its goodness is grounded on something that is inter-

Figure 1.1 Basic Deontic Categories

OBLIGATORY	OPTIONAL	WRONG

RIGHT
(in the broad sense)
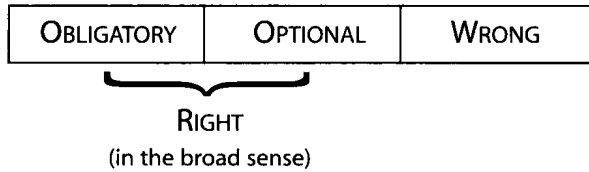
nal to that thing. By contrast, to say that something is extrinsically good is to say that it possesses goodness because of how it is related to something else that is good. Here is an example. Many people would agree that money is a good thing. But what is the source of its goodness? It seems pretty clear that the goodness of money is not somehow internal to the pieces of paper and bits of metal that compose it. Rather, what makes money good has to do with how it is related to other things that have value. Money's goodness has to do with its enabling its possessor to purchase things and services that are themselves good. So, its goodness is borrowed, so to speak, from being related to other things that are good. Its goodness, we say, is *extrinsic*.

Obviously, for something to be extrinsically good, there must be something else to which that thing is related and which is good. But if this other thing is only extrinsically good, its goodness is also borrowed. Since not all goodness can be borrowed in this way, it would seem that there must be some things whose goodness is intrinsic. In short, for something A to be extrinsically good in some way, there must be something B (to which it is related) such that B is intrinsically good and is the ultimate source of the goodness that is possessed by A. So the concept of intrinsic goodness is more basic than the concept of extrinsic goodness, and the same goes for the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic badness.

Theories about the nature of value are, therefore, theories about the nature of intrinsic value. And here again we find that there are three basic categories (see fig. 1.2). In addition to the categories of the intrinsically good (or valuable) and the intrinsically bad (or disvaluable), there is the category of what we may call the *intrinsically value-neutral*. This third category comprises all those things that are neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad (though such things may have either positive or negative extrinsic value).

Figure 1.2 Basic Categories of Value

INTRINSICALLY GOOD	INTRINSICALLY VALUE-NEUTRAL	INTRINSICALLY BAD

Moral Value and Nonmoral Value

When philosophers speak of something having *moral value* or *moral worth* (these expressions are used interchangeably), they are typically referring to persons. This is because talk of moral value or worth is used in connection with objects of evaluation regarding which it makes sense to morally praise or blame them for how they are and what they do. The sorts of things regarding which such praise and blame are appropriate are things that are responsible for who they are and what they do. Hence, persons are the sorts of things that qualify for being either morally good or morally bad because they can be held responsible for who they are and what they do.

But many moral theories, in explaining what makes an action right or wrong, appeal to things, experiences, and states of affairs that are taken to have intrinsic value. For instance, according to the classical utilitarian moral theory (which we examine in chapter 5), the deontic status of an action (its rightness or wrongness) depends on how much intrinsic value the action would produce, where what is intrinsically valuable or good on this theory is happiness. Happiness is something that persons may (or may not) possess, but the state of being happy and the pleasant experiences that happiness involves are not themselves responsible agents. And so when it is said that happiness is intrinsically good (as some philosophers hold), the sort of goodness being ascribed to happiness is appropriately called "nonmoral" goodness. It has this label, not because the goodness of happiness is morally irrelevant—it is morally relevant in determining the deontic status of actions, at least according to some moral theories—but, as I hope I have made clear, because things other than persons that are intrinsically good are not responsible agents, and it is only responsible agents that are candidates for being *morally* good or bad.

For the time being, the essential thing to understand here is simply that we evaluate persons as being morally good or bad, and we also evaluate things other than persons as being good or bad. *Moral* value (positive and negative) is something only agents can possess; other things (including experiences and states of affairs in the world) may have *nonmoral* value (positive and negative).

5. Moral Theory and Its Structure

What I wish to do in this section is fill out a bit my introduction to moral theory by explaining what is meant by referring to the "structure" of a moral theory. In doing so, I will make use of some of the distinctions we have been noting.

In light of the fact that a moral theory aims to answer very general questions about what makes actions right or wrong and what makes persons (as