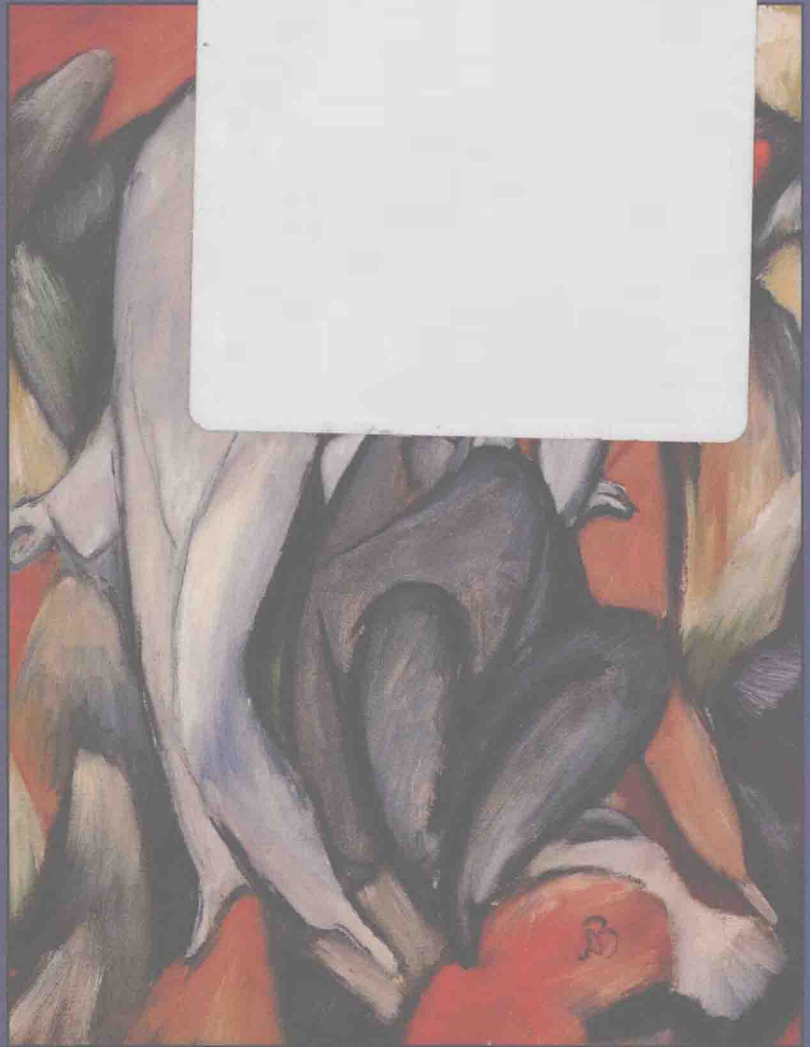


# ETHICS *for* LI

A TEXT  
—  
WITH  
—  
READINGS

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SECOND EDITION



JUDITH A. BOSS



# Ethics for Life

*A Text with Readings*

JUDITH A. BOSS

*Brown University School of Medicine*



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# Preface

Aristotle wrote that “the ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it.” *Ethics for Life* is a multicultural and interdisciplinary introductory ethics textbook that provides students with an ethics curriculum that has been shown to significantly improve students’ ability to make real-life moral decisions.<sup>1</sup>

One of the frustrations in teaching ethics is getting students to integrate moral theory into their lives. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life, at one time the highest-priority value among entering college freshmen, has declined rapidly in the past twenty-five years as a motive for attending college. Increased selfish behavior among young people and a decline in altruistic behavior during the college years has become a source of concern and even alarm.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the level of moral reasoning of as many as 20 percent of college students is equivalent to that of a junior high student or adult criminal. Racism and hate crimes have become a major problem on many campuses. Criminal activities such as murder, drug dealing, and sexual assaults, to name only a few, have all increased sharply on college campuses over the past decade.<sup>3</sup>

How can we as ethics teachers provide our students with the skills necessary to make better moral decisions in their lives? Traditional ethics courses, which restrict the study of ethics to the purely theoretical realm and avoid any attempt to make students better people, have been found to have little or no impact on students’ ability to engage in moral reasoning outside of the classroom.<sup>4</sup> While students are able to memorize theories and lines of reasoning long enough to pass the final exam, there is little true understanding and carryover into their moral reasoning outside the classroom. When confronted with real-life moral issues, most students simply revert back to their earlier forms of reasoning based on cultural norms or self-interest.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, some professors who were dissatisfied with the traditional theory-laden ethics course replaced it with the values-clarification or value-neutral approach. This approach involves “nonjudgmental” and “non-directive” discussions of popular moral issues where students are encouraged to express their own opinions without fear of criticism or judgment. Unfortunately, the values-clarification approach has been found to have no positive effect on students’ moral development and, in fact, may even inhibit moral growth by sending the message that morality is all relative and hence anything goes as long as it feels good.

These findings have prompted researchers and instructors to look for new ways of approaching ethics education. *Ethics for Life* provides a curriculum that

combines traditional ethics theory with a pedagogy based on the latest research on how to enhance moral development in college students. This approach has been found to be effective in improving students' moral judgment, moral behavior, and their self-esteem.<sup>5</sup>

## Objective

The primary objective of *Ethics for Life* is to provide a text that is solidly based in the latest research on moral development in college students while at the same time providing students with a broad overview of the major world moral philosophies.

## Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Approach

One of the main obstacles students face in taking an ethics course is its perceived lack of relevance to their lives. Most ethics students are not philosophy majors. Ethics courses also tend to attract a widely diverse group of students, many of whom do not personally relate to the traditional European approach to moral philosophy. *Ethics for Life* includes coverage of, to name only a few, Buddhist ethics, Native American philosophy, ecofeminism, Confucianism, the utilitarian philosophy of Mo Tzu, feminist care ethics, liberation ethics, and the ethics of African philosopher Ibn Khaldun. The second edition includes selections from many of these philosophers. The inclusion of moral philosophies from all over the world from both women and men not only makes the book more appealing to nontraditional students but also helps students move beyond the implicit cultural relativism in most ethics textbooks that privileges traditional Western male approaches to ethics.

Moral theory does not occur in isolation, nor is morality practiced within a social vacuum. While the primary focus of this text is philosophical ethics, *Ethics for Life* adopts a more holistic approach. The book is presented in a historical and interdisciplinary context and includes extensive material from anthropology and sociology, political science, religion, psychology, and literature.

Because many students taking an ethics course are weak in critical thinking skills, there is a chapter on moral reasoning that includes sections on constructing moral arguments, resolving moral dilemmas, avoiding logical fallacies, and the relation between moral analysis and practice (Chapter 2).

## A Developmental Pedagogy

There is a saying that if students cannot learn the way we teach them, we have to teach them the way they learn. In creating ethics curriculums that promote moral development, one of the approaches that has held out the most promise is

the use of a cognitive-developmental approach to ethics education combined with experiential education, generally in the form of community service and the discussion of real-life moral dilemmas.

*Ethics for Life* is organized using a developmental or progressive approach. This approach to the teaching of ethics has been shown to have a higher success rate than the more traditional or values-clarification approaches to ethics, in terms of helping students move beyond ethical relativism and become principled moral reasoners.

Most ethics textbooks focus only briefly on ethical relativism. However, more than 90 percent of college students are ethical relativists. Rather than talk over students' heads, *Ethics for Life* starts at their level by including a whole section on ethical relativism. The chapters in this book are arranged in the same order that these stages appear in a person's actual moral development. Only later are the students introduced to in-depth discussions of more advanced theories such as deontology, rights ethics, and virtue ethics.

Rather than lecturing from a higher stage of development (the traditional moral-indoctrination approach) or ignoring differences (the values-clarification approach), this approach first entails building a bridge to the students and then guiding them across that bridge toward a higher stage of moral development and respectfully engaging them by challenging them to question their own assumptions. This process is also known as a cognitive apprenticeship whereby the teacher or mentor (the "expert") teaches the student (the "novice") a new skill by collaborating with him or her on a task—in this case, dialogue around moral dilemmas and the application of moral theory to hypothetical and real-life issues.<sup>6</sup> Respectful engagement also requires that the teacher take an active role in the dialogue, including challenging students rather than creating an atmosphere of passive indifference and superficial tolerance.

In order to avoid reinforcing students' belief that morality is all a matter of personal opinion and the mistaken impression that most moral decisions involve moral dilemmas, the case studies used in the first part of the book present situations where what is morally right and wrong seems clear-cut. This helps students sort out the relevant moral principles so that they later have a solid foundation for resolving more difficult moral dilemmas.

The book makes extensive use of exercises throughout each chapter. The purpose of the exercises is to encourage students to relate the theories in the text to real-life events and issues as well as to their own moral development. In addition to case studies that relate to students' own experience, case studies and personal reflection exercises are chosen with an eye to expanding their concept of moral community. This is accomplished through the use of readings, case studies, and reflective exercises that focus on multicultural issues and problems of racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism.

Also important for moral development is the integration of students' experiences by means of readings in developmental psychology and discussions of the personal meaning and relevance of these experiences to their own personality development. Chapter 6 provides an in-depth discussion of the latest research on

moral development. Students are also encouraged throughout the textbook to relate the material to their own experience and their own moral growth.

## Instructor's Manual

*Ethics for Life*, Second Edition, comes with an Instructor's Manual that provides summaries of the chapters and readings, as well as helpful teaching tips. It also includes a bank of test questions for each chapter.

*Ethics for Life* is also set up so it can be used with or without a community service component. John Dewey often reminded us that we learn by doing. Studies show that participation in community service as part of an ethics class has a positive effect on people's self-esteem and level of empathy as well as their ability to engage in moral reasoning. Community service gives students an opportunity to integrate what they are learning in class into real-life situations. To assist in this goal, exercises are provided in each chapter to help students relate classroom theory to their community service. These exercises are marked with asterisks.

## Acknowledgments

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1. Judith A. Boss, "Adopting an Aristotelian Approach to Teaching College Ethics," *Philosophy and Community Service Learning* (Washington, DC: Association for the Advancement of Higher Education, 1997); and Judith A. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students," *Journal of Moral Education*, 23 (1994): 183–198.
2. Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).
3. Kit Lively, "Campuses Are Hit by Steep Increases for Third Straight Year," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 April, 1996, pp. A37–A49.
4. James Rest, "Why Does College Promote Development in Moral Judgment?" *Journal of Moral Education* 17, no. 3 (1988): 183–184.
5. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students."
6. See William Damon, *Greater Expectations* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), Chapter 7, for a discussion of this method of moral education.





# Contents

Preface vii

## Section I The Study of Ethics 1

---

### CHAPTER 1 Ethics: An Overview 3

What Is Ethics? 5

Normative and Theoretical Ethics 8

Metaphysics and the Study of Human Nature 12

Epistemology and Moral Knowledge 19

Philosophy and the Search for Wisdom 23

*Summary* 30

*Readings:*

“Emotivism” by Alfred J. Ayer 32

“Allegory of the Cave” by Plato 33

### CHAPTER 2 Moral Reasoning 35

The Three Levels of Thinking 35

Moral Analysis, Praxis, and Paradigm Shifts 39

Overcoming Resistance 43

The Role of *Is* and *Ought* Statements in Ethics 50

Recognizing and Constructing Moral Arguments 52

Avoiding Logical Fallacies 57

Resolving Moral Dilemmas 67

A Final Word 71

*Summary* 72

*Readings:*

“The Relevance of the Noble Eightfold Path to  
Contemporary Society” by P. Don Premasiri 75

*Can’t We Make Moral Judgements?* by Mary Midgley 76

## Section II Ethical Relativism 77

---

- CHAPTER 3** Ethical Subjectivism: Morality Is Just A Matter of Personal Feeling 79
- What Is Ethical Subjectivism? 79
  - What Ethical Subjectivism Is Not 81
  - Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Roots of Ethical Subjectivism in Romantic Sentimentalism 86
  - Mary Wollstonecraft: Critic of Rousseau's Ethical Subjectivism 90
  - The Kitty Genovese Syndrome 92
  - Critique of Ethical Subjectivism 95
  - Summary 98
  - Readings:
    - Émile* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau 100
    - "Student Relativism" by Stephen A. Satris 102
- CHAPTER 4** Cultural Relativism: Is Morality Dependent on Culture? 105
- What Is Cultural Relativism? 105
  - Distinguishing Between Cultural and Sociological Relativism 110
  - Social Darwinian Ethics: The Concept of Moral Progress 113
  - Ruth Benedict: Cultural Relativism as a Protest Against Social Darwinism 115
  - Cultural Relativism and the Moral Community 119
  - Are Some Cultures More Moral than Others? 127
  - The Holocaust and Disillusionment with Cultural Relativism 133
  - Critique of Cultural Relativism 137
  - Summary 143
  - Readings:
    - "Anthropology and the Abnormal" by Ruth Benedict 145
    - The Muqaddimah* by Ibn Khaldun 146

## Section III Beyond Ethical Relativism 149

---

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <b>CHAPTER 5</b>     | Is Morality Grounded in Religion? 151                                  |
|                      | Religion and Morality 151  |
|                      | The Divine Command Theory 153  |
|                      | Thomas Aquinas: Natural Law Theory 157                                 |
|                      | Religion, Natural Law Theory, and<br>Civil Disobedience 162            |
|                      | Civil Religion and Cultural Relativism 168                             |
|                      | Religion and the Moral Community 171                                   |
|                      | God and the Problem of Evil 175  |
|                      | Does Morality Need Religion? 179                                       |
|                      | Summary 183  |
|                      | Readings:  |
|                      | <i>The Summa Theologica</i> by Thomas Aquinas 185                      |
|                      | “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”<br>by Martin Luther King, Jr. 187      |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 6</b> | <br>Conscience and Moral Development 190                               |
|                      | Ethics and the Study of Human Development 190                          |
|                      | Conscience: Culturally Relative or Universal? 191                      |
|                      | The Affective and Cognitive Sides of the Conscience 201                |
|                      | Lawrence Kohlberg: The Stage Theory<br>of Moral Development 211        |
|                      | Carol Gilligan: The Care Perspective 218                               |
|                      | James Rest: The Four Components of Moral Behavior 223                  |
|                      | Moral Maturity: Moving Beyond Ethical Relativism 229                   |
|                      | Summary 231  |
|                      | Readings:  |
|                      | <i>The Philosophy of Moral Development</i><br>by Lawrence Kohlberg 234 |
|                      | <i>In a Different Voice</i> by Carol Gilligan 235                      |

## Section IV Morality as Universal 239

---

|                  |   |     |
|------------------|---|-----|
| <b>CHAPTER 7</b> | Ethical Egoism: Morality Is Acting in Our Best Self-Interest                            | 241 |
|                  | What Is Ethical Egoism?   | 241 |
|                  | Psychological Egoism  | 245 |
|                  | Ayn Rand: Objectivist Ethics and Rational Egoism  | 250 |
|                  | Ethical Egoism and Laissez-Faire Capitalism   | 254 |
|                  | Ethical Egoism and the Moral Community  | 260 |
|                  | Self-Interest and Happiness   | 263 |
|                  | Critique of Ethical Egoism  | 265 |
|                  | Summary   | 269 |
|                  | Readings:   |     |
|                  | <i>Leviathan</i> by Thomas Hobbes   | 271 |
|                  | <i>The Fountainhead</i> by Ayn Rand   | 274 |
| <b>CHAPTER 8</b> | Utilitarianism: The Greatest Happiness Principle  | 277 |
|                  | Utilitarianism and the Principle of Utility   | 277 |
|                  | Mo Tzu: Utilitarianism as Universal Love  | 281 |
|                  | Jeremy Bentham: Utilitarianism and Social Reform  | 284 |
|                  | John Stuart Mill: Reformulation of Utilitarianism                                       | 290 |
|                  | Utilitarianism and the Moral Community  | 295 |
|                  | Euthanasia and the Principle of Utility:<br>Is Death Always a Harm?                     | 299 |
|                  | Critique of Utilitarianism  | 301 |
|                  | Summary   | 306 |
|                  | Readings:   |     |
|                  | <i>An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation</i> by<br>Jeremy Bentham | 308 |
|                  | <i>Utilitarianism</i> by John Stuart Mill   | 309 |
| <b>CHAPTER 9</b> | Deontology: The Ethics of Duty  | 311 |
|                  | Deontology and Duty   | 311 |
|                  | Confucius: Duty and the Community   | 314 |
|                  | Immanuel Kant: The Categorical Imperative   | 317 |
|                  | The Good Will and Proper Self-Esteem  | 323 |

Sissela Bok: Is the Duty Not to Lie Absolute? 329

W. D. Ross: Prima Facie Deontology 333

The Duty of Justice 340

Critique of Deontology 345

Summary 348

Readings:

*The Analects of Confucius* translated  
by Arthur Waley 350

*Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*  
by Immanuel Kant 352

## CHAPTER 10 Rights Ethics: The Other Side of Deontology 355

The Emergence of Rights Ethics in Modern Society 355

Natural Rights Ethics 361

The Marxist Critique of Natural Rights Ethics 366

Rights and Duties 372

Buddhism and Rights Ethics 378

Liberty (Negative) Rights and Welfare (Positive) Rights 380

Rights and the Moral Community 386

Critique of Rights Ethics 391

Summary 392

Readings:

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” issued by the  
United Nations 395

*Two Treatises of Civil Government* by John Locke 399

## CHAPTER 11 Virtue Ethics and the Good Life 401

Virtue Ethics and Character 401

Aristotle: Reason and Virtue 407

Confucius and Aristotle: The Doctrine of the Mean 409

Nel Noddings and David Hume:

Sentiment and Virtue 412

Is Virtue Relative to Culture, Social Status,  
and Gender? 420

The Unity of Virtue 426

Virtue and Moral Education 428

Critique of Virtue Ethics 432

Summary 433

Readings:

*Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle 435

*Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral  
Education* by Nel Noddings 438

Glossary 443

Notes 449

Photo and Illustration Credits 461

Index 463

## SECTION I



# The Study of Ethics

Many college ethics students want to skip ethical theory and immediately begin with discussions of compelling moral issues. However, productive discussion of issues requires first establishing a solid foundation in the nuances of ethical theory and moral reasoning.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live as well as the justification of these values and guidelines. The first chapter, “Ethics: An Overview,” begins with an introduction to ethics and a brief discussion of different types of ethical theories. It also addresses some of the fundamental philosophical questions that underlie ethics, including questions about human nature, free will versus determinism, moral knowledge, and the nature of philosophical inquiry.

The second chapter, “Moral Reasoning,” provides the reader with the skills necessary to analyze and evaluate different moral theories and lines of reasoning. Developing critical thinking skills enables students to make better moral judgments and makes them less likely to be taken in by faulty reasoning.

Ethics education is making a comeback. As such, speculations about what morality is are bombarding us from all sides. This is exciting: We are challenged to be on our toes and to sharpen our analytical skills in order to discern which theories are workable and which ones we need to discard. By figuring out what doesn't work, we can learn a lot. We may not have come up with the perfect theory by the end of this course, but we will have a much better sense of how to make satisfactory moral decisions.







# Ethics

## An Overview

*The ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it.*

—ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 2

It's the beginning of a new semester. Tomorrow morning is your first ethics class. You only signed up for the class because it was required. "What a waste of time," you grumble as you climb into bed. "What's the point in studying ethics? It doesn't have anything to do with real life. I wish there was no such thing as ethics or morality."

The next morning you wake up and wearily grope your way to the bathroom. As you open the door, you find to your dismay that your roommate has left the bathroom in a total mess. Dirty clothes—your roommate's clothes—are soaking in cold slimy water in the sink and bathtub, and the toilet is caked with grime. Annoyed, you return to your room and shake your roommate's shoulder: "Come on, get up. You promised to clean the bathroom yesterday."

"So what?" your roommate replies. "I don't have to keep my promises if I don't feel like it." And with that, your roommate rolls over and, looking quite peaceful, goes back to sleep.

You are now feeling very annoyed, but you manage to get ready for class, although not in time to have breakfast. You arrive at class right on time; however, the teacher hasn't turned up. You take a seat next to another student who lives in your dormitory. But instead of returning your greeting, he grabs your book bag and heads toward the door. "Stop!" you protest. "That's mine. You can't take that."

He looks at you like you're nuts. "Why not?"

"Because it doesn't belong to you," you reply indignantly. "It's stealing!"

At which he laughs, "You're not making any sense."

"You have no right . . .," you add.

The thief rolls his eyes: "Didn't you hear the latest news? Ethics, morality—they no longer exist. Isn't that great news! Now we can do whatever we like! And no one can pass judgment on anything we do, including you!"