

everyday THICS

Inspired Solutions
to Real-Life
Dilemmas



Joshua Halberstam



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PENGUIN BOOKS



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**For my mother and
to the memory of my father**

Preface

Chemists don't need to justify their subject, and neither do computer programmers, market researchers, or horse racing handicappers. Those of us who teach and write about morality aren't so lucky. In any conversation about what we do, we must explain what counts as a legitimate moral argument, what doesn't, and who decides. The problem isn't that so-called moral experts differ with one another—so do economists, historians, and physicists. The problem lies in the subject: Moral philosophy can be slippery, difficult to circumscribe. That's why ethics is both very hard and very easy; it's so difficult to prove your contentions but so simple to assert, with some plausibility, almost anything.

So what do we professional moral philosophers offer to the nonpractitioner? Experience. We've taken the time to think about these issues longer and more carefully than most, and that mental exercise is extremely helpful in analyzing moral problems. We may not always get you on the right road, but we can often direct you away from the dead ends

into which we ourselves have stumbled. So if you're ready for some serious moral reflection, this book provides a head start.

Most of the issues discussed here are subjects of continuing debate within the philosophical community. As someone who contributes to that professional discourse, I know how complicated these discussions can get. But *Everyday Ethics* is not written for professional philosophers. It's written for everyone else (although I'd like to think that even academics will find something of value here). You'll find no technical analysis, no esoteric bibliography, no intricate formal arguments. Nor will you find scholarly footnotes, not because the ideas suggested here don't have their origins in the works of other philosophers, but because almost all do. In many instances, I can't honestly say how much is original and how much is derivative. However, while *Everyday Ethics* is not a treatise on moral philosophy, it's no less serious in its aims. And while it takes effort to get your ethics right, ethics can also be fun, as I hope this book demonstrates.

Authors share a special perk with Academy Award winners—they get to make public thank-yous. Since the opportunity is offered, I accept.

My thanks, first, to my friends and colleagues who served as such wise critics of the ideas I continually bounced off them. My agent, Agnes Birnbaum, helped shepherd this project from its incipency. The book benefited from having, at different stages, two wonderful editors at Viking: Roger Devine and Dawn Drzal. My thanks to them both for helping me sail the book between the rock of academic philosophy and the hard place of an innocuous how-to primer. My wife,

Yoco, as always, assisted in so many ways, on so many levels. Ariana and Amitai—sorry for the false promises. Here I am writing a book on ethics and for months I tell my patient children that the book will be finished next week. Well, it was bound to be true one of those times.

We learn values first, foremost, and—often—finally at home. This book is dedicated to my parents and their extraordinary moral decency and compassion. As I began this book, my father passed away. My fondest hope is that he would have been pleased with this endeavor.

Introduction

Talk about ethics is everywhere. From all sides, we're told that we're morally confused and need to reestablish our values. Fine, but how do we do that? It's not as if you can simply declare that you're in control of your values and be done with it. Understanding your own ethics is hard work. *Everyday Ethics* aims to help in this endeavor.

Because this book is unusual in its approach, it may help to be clear at the outset about what it does and does not set out to accomplish. First, this is not a book about social morality. It is a book about *personal* morality—the morality of everyday ethics. Social issues are those problems you see every day on the news and read about in magazines. Affirmative action, abortion, capital punishment, foreign policy, tax redistribution, and the right to view pornography are examples of public policy concerns. You hear these topics discussed in high school debates, during political campaigns, and at the dinner table. They're important to you as a citizen, but they have little to do with your personal life. You, alone, can't

change the law, nor does the resolution of these issues reflect on you personally.

But what about the quality of your friendships? What do you owe to your lover whom you no longer love? Why are your conversations so dishonest? Are you responsible for your anger? For your guilt? How important—be honest—is money in your life? Do you have to tolerate intolerance? These concerns of personal morality are some of the topics of this book.

The key to your everyday ethics, and the underlying theme of this book, is your moral character. Morality is not primarily about duties, about following rules that say, Do this, Don't do that. It is primarily about moral sensitivity. The pivotal moral imperative is not *do* the right thing, but *be* the right thing. If you have a decent character, if you care about intelligence, honesty, and compassion, you'll do the right thing as a matter of course.

The subject of this book is, in a word, integrity. In two words, integrity and responsibility. My aim here is to help you to integrate the many strands of your personal value system—to make it whole—and to take responsibility for whether you succeed. It isn't easy to achieve integrity, but that's what distinguishes the decent person, the *mensch*, from the rest.

This focus on personal morality echoes a sea change that's been going on recently in professional moral philosophy. For the previous two hundred years, academic philosophers thought about morality in social terms. Thousands of volumes were written explicating such theories as utilitarianism (which defines morality as producing the greatest happiness for the

greatest number) or Kantian ethics (with its emphasis on duty). Emotions and personal character were of secondary moral interest.

That's no longer the case. Over the past decade or so, academic philosophers have rediscovered the virtues. Professional journals now abound with articles about the ethics of love and hate, the family, friendship, dignity, and pride. It's a rediscovery, because this domain was the primary focus of still earlier moral philosophy—of Plato, Aristotle, the medieval philosophers, Spinoza, Hume, and religious thinkers both Eastern and Western. It's a welcome return.

We desperately need to talk and think more—more candidly and more intelligently—about our personal morality. Now perhaps as never before.

The twentieth century has been an especially brutal period. Hundreds of millions of people have killed hundreds of millions of other people. In the name of their glorified ideologies, they have visited unspeakable horrors upon isolated individuals and entire nations. The effect of all this evil on our personal lives is subtle but profound. Our moral sensitivities can't help being numbed.

Modern life has also eaten away at the social structures we've come to rely on. For better or for worse, family life isn't what it used to be. Our friends are now scattered across thousands of miles. Increasingly, parents no longer live with their children. Our communities are fragile, exhausted, often nonexistent. Technology, too, has thrown us into a moral spin. Without a moment's pause, the electronic media beam their values into our lives; they shout so loudly we can barely hear ourselves think. Advances in medical research have

forced us to reconfigure what we mean by life, death, and what we do or don't have the right to control. It's all terribly confusing.

But underneath it all, the same fundamental human tendencies reign. Some people are greedy, some caring. Some aspire to create, others to destroy. The only way we can work out our moral approach to this dizzying world is by recognizing our own inner moral workings. The great divide, then, is not between the moral and the immoral—that's easy—but between those who still care about morality and those who don't.

We've become very cynical. We call teachers, social workers, community activists, and those who devote their lives to helping others "bleeding hearts." What, then, runs in our own hearts? We tell our young not to steal because crime doesn't pay instead of telling them not to steal because it's wrong. We think an individual's morality is a matter of personal preference the way taste in dessert is a personal preference. We have transformed the exhortation "Live and let live" into "Live and let die," as if the welfare of our friends, family, and neighbors weren't our personal business. More and more of us realize that we need to get back to fundamentals. We need to think again about our values. We need to ask the important questions.

You certainly won't agree with everything you read here. (If you do, I've done something wrong.) At the same time, I've assumed that we share basic moral principles, such as that it's wrong to steal or cause suffering just for the heck of it. This isn't the forum in which to defend these basic principles with the complicated theoretical underpinnings of philosophy. We have too much direct work to do to allow detours

into abstruse theory. (But I will ask you to join me in some philosophical analysis I've strewn along the way. Sometimes it's difficult for me to imagine that not everyone gets the same enormous charge out of doing philosophy as I do. I'm convinced, though, that most of us would see how much fun philosophy can be if only we did it more often.)

Morality has had a bad press. When you talk about ethics, people immediately slouch in their chairs and sigh. Oh, great, they think, here comes another sermon about how terrible we are and how we have to improve. Relax. You won't find any preaching here. I trust your intelligence too much for that. You will find, however, some inspirational writing, and that's intentional. We can all use an occasional pep talk as long as it respects our diversity.

Philosophy has been defined as "thinking hard," and my aim is to provoke you to do some hard thinking about your life, your values and your everyday morality. I certainly hope that some of what you read gives you new insights into your moral life, but even if it just gets you thinking hard about it, I'll have accomplished my goal.

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