



# *Applying Ethics*

A TEXT WITH READINGS  FIFTH EDITION

Jeffrey Olen & Vincent Barry

CAMPUS CONNECTIONS  
**USED BOOK**

# *Applying Ethics*

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A TEXT WITH READINGS □ FIFTH EDITION

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WADSWORTH PUBLISHING COMPANY  
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*Belmont • Albany • Bonn • Boston • Cincinnati • Detroit  
London • Madrid • Melbourne • Mexico City • New York • Paris  
San Francisco • Singapore • Tokyo • Toronto • Washington*

Philosophy Editor Tammy Goldfeld  
Editorial Assistant Kelly Zavislak  
Production: Rogue Valley Publications  
Print Buyer: Diana Spence  
Permissions Editor Robert Kauser

Designer Andrew Ogus  
Copyeditor Ruth Cottrell

Cover Illustration Pablo Picasso, *Family of Saltimbanques*, 1905, oil on canvas, 83 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  $\times$  90 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", National Gallery of Art, Washington, D C, Chester Dale Collection  
Compositor TCSystems, Inc

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A Division of International Thomson Publishing Inc



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Printed in the United States of America

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—02 01 00 99 98 97 96

For more information, contact Wadsworth Publishing Company

Wadsworth Publishing Company  
10 Davis Drive  
Belmont, California 94002  
USA

International Thomson Editores  
Campos Eliseos 385, Piso 7  
Col Polanco  
11560 México D F México

International Thomson Publishing Europe  
Berkshire House 168-173  
High Holborn  
London, WC1V 7AA  
England

International Thomson Publishing GmbH  
Königswinterer Strasse 418  
53227 Bonn  
Germany

Thomas Nelson Australia  
102 Dodds Street  
South Melbourne 3205  
Victoria, Australia

International Thomson Publishing Asia  
221 Henderson Road  
#05-10 Henderson Building  
Singapore 0315

Nelson Canada  
1120 Birchmount Road  
Scarborough, Ontario  
Canada M1K 5G4

International Thomson Publishing Japan  
Hirakawacho Kyowa Building, 3F  
2-2-1 Hirakawacho  
Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102  
Japan

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Olen, Jeffrey  
Applying ethics a text with readings / Jeffrey Olen, Vincent  
Barry —5th ed  
p cm  
Includes bibliographical references and index  
ISBN 0-534-26316-X (acid-free paper)  
1 Social ethics. 2 United States—Moral conditions I Barry,  
Vincent E II Title  
HM216.044 1996  
303 3'72—dc20

95-11852  
CIP

# PREFACE

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Few writers of textbooks have been as lucky as I have been with *Applying Ethics*. For one thing, I was given an excellent head start by Vincent Barry. For another, I had Wadsworth's Philosophy Editor Ken King, who guided the book through its first four editions. For this fifth edition, I am lucky to have Tammy Goldfeld, an unusually savvy and understanding editor, as Ken's successor. I also received many helpful suggestions over the years from students and from reviewers and other instructors who use the book in their classes.

As with every new edition, suggestions for this one often conflicted. There was, however, near unanimity on one point. Most reviewers requested a section on informal fallacies in Chapter 2, and I have complied. Because many reviewers found Hugo Adam Bedau's contribution to the chapter on capital punishment too difficult for their students, I replaced it with another, less difficult selection by Bedau, "Capital Punishment and Social Defense." Two other selections, Tibor R. Machan's "Do Animals Have Rights?" and Rosalind Hursthouse's "Virtue Theory and Abortion," are also new, as are the two Case Presentations added to each chapter of Part II.

The major addition is a new chapter, "Welfare and Social Justice." The public discussion of welfare has skyrocketed during the years between the fourth and fifth editions. Given the issue's moral and social importance, its inclusion seemed mandatory.

I am grateful to every teacher who likes *Applying Ethics* enough to teach from it. For their help on this edition, I am especially grateful to Milton L. Boyle, Jr., Bridgewater State University; David Brahinsky, Bucks County Community College; Warren Kessler, California State University, Fresno; Wendy Lee-Lampshire, Bloomsburg University; Delos B. McKoun, Auburn University; Joseph Mendola, University of Nebraska; Elie Noujain, Trenton State University; Angus Taylor, University of Victoria; and Robert P. Tucker, Florida Southern College.

I am grateful also to Mary Douglas, project editor for the previous edition as well as this one; also, of course, to Tammy, Vincent, and Ken. Finally, I thank Corinne Olen. With a demanding career of her own, Corinne somehow manages to provide all sorts of help when I need it.

Jeffrey Olen

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# PART I

## *Moral Reasoning*

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# 1

## MORAL REASONS

---

When we act, we act for reasons. We eat breakfast because we are hungry, or because it gives us the energy we need to get through the morning. We read a book because we want to be entertained, or because we want to learn something. We buy a car because it's reliable, or fun to drive, or affordable.

At any one time, we might—and usually do—have many reasons to do all sorts of things. Most of what we do we do for more than one reason. We buy a car because it's reliable *and* fun to drive *and* affordable, and we read a book because it's entertaining *and* informative.

But not all of our relevant reasons support the same course of action when we choose to do something. Often, we find ourselves faced with conflicting reasons, reasons both to do and not to do something. In addition to our reasons *for* eating breakfast, we might have reasons *for not* eating it. We might be in a hurry, or we might be trying to lose weight.

When our reasons lead us in different directions like that, we must decide which direction to take. Although we can make our decision in a purely arbitrary way—by flipping a coin, perhaps—the rational way to proceed is to weigh the conflicting reasons, to ask ourselves which of the conflicting reasons are the best reasons. If we are lucky, we will answer the question correctly. That is, we will choose the best thing to do, the right course of action. We will do what we ought to do under the circumstances. If we are unlucky, we will choose the wrong course of action. We will do what we ought not do.

Of course, whether we choose correctly is not merely a matter of luck. If it were, rational deliberation would be no more trustworthy than the flip of a coin. Whether we choose correctly is also a matter of how well informed we are, how carefully we reason, how accurately we gauge the pros and cons of the alternatives, how exhaustive our deliberations are. Thus, we can minimize the element of luck when buying a car by test-driving various models, by reading reports in

*Car and Driver* and *Consumer Reports*, and by giving careful attention to our own needs and preferences. Do we really need a car with this much power? Does appearance matter that much to us? Can we afford all of these options?

We can also minimize the element of luck by making sure that we reason in a reliable way. In the next chapter, we will take a careful look at what makes reasoning reliable. For the rest of this chapter, though, we will concentrate on a particular kind of reasoning—moral reasoning.

## Moral Reasoning

To reason morally is not to reason in a certain way. Rather, it is to consider certain kinds of reasons—moral reasons. It is to try to arrive at the best moral reasons for acting, to choose the morally right course of action, to do what we morally ought to do.

There are, after all, many different ways in which an action can be right or wrong. An artist who puts the right finishing touches on a painting does what is aesthetically right. An investor who buys and sells stock at the right times does what is financially right. Someone who gives up smoking cigarettes does what is right for her health. And someone who returns a found wallet does what is morally right. In the first case, we have an action supported by the best aesthetic reasons. In the second, one supported by the best financial reasons. In the third, one supported by the best health-related reasons. In the fourth, one supported by the best moral reasons.

Sometimes, an action will be right in one way but wrong in another. That is, the best reasons of one kind will support it, while the best reasons of another kind will support something else. Reasons of self-interest, for example, might lead us to conclude that we ought to keep a found wallet. Moral reasons, on the other hand, lead us to conclude that we ought to return it. In cases like that, we must decide which kind of reason is best. We must decide what we ought to do, all things considered.

When we make these all-things-considered judgments, we generally do so based on what matters to us most. Some people are willing to risk their health because they enjoy smoking, others are not. Some people are willing to forego a higher paying job for a more pleasant one, others are not. Some people are willing to set aside their self-interest to do what is morally right, others are not.

Although we generally give people a lot of leeway in determining what most matters to them, we do expect them to give moral reasons high priority. And when the moral stakes are very high, we expect people to give moral reasons top priority. We expect them to realize that the morally right course of action is the best course of action, what they ought to do, all things considered.

These are not unreasonable expectations. If we are to live together in society, we must cooperate with one another. And if we are to cooperate with one another, we must trust one another. And we cannot trust people who treat honesty, good faith, and loyalty lightly.

## Individual Morality and Social Morality

Honesty, good faith, and loyalty are important considerations of *individual* morality. When each of us, as individuals, must decide what to do, we must, if we are to decide morally, consider whether we are being honest or dishonest, faithful to our commitments to others or unfaithful to them, loyal to those who deserve our loyalty or disloyal to them. The roles that such considerations play in our lives are crucial to our understanding of ourselves as moral people. And the roles that they play in the lives of others are crucial to our moral judgments of both them and their actions.

Because the topics discussed in Part II of this book concern the morality of various kinds of actions, considerations of individual morality will play an important role in those discussions. But so will moral considerations of another kind—*social* morality. In discussing issues like abortion, we will be concerned not only with whether it is moral for an individual woman to have an abortion in various kinds of circumstances, but also with how society as a whole should deal with abortion.

The two concerns are related, of course, but, as we shall see, answering the first does not necessarily settle the second. Rape and armed robbery are obviously immoral, and even rational rapists and armed robbers, we can safely suppose, understand why we require laws forbidding such behavior and why we are perfectly justified in locking up people who disobey them. But no rational person believes that every immoral act should be punishable by imprisonment or even made illegal. Who would want to prosecute everyone who cheats in a “friendly” game of tennis?

Also, we might have good reason to want society to regulate various kinds of behavior that do not violate any considerations of individual morality. Many people feel, for instance, that a mature, psychologically sound adult does nothing immoral by enjoying pornography in the privacy of his home, but these same people might also feel that pornography presents serious social dangers and should be curbed or outlawed.

Obviously, what we need are some general principles of social morality to guide us when we ask ourselves how society ought to deal with morally important social issues. And, just as obviously, we need some general principles of individual morality to guide us when we ask ourselves how individuals ought to act in particular situations.

But before we take a look at various principles of individual and social morality, we should take a look at another issue, the issue of ethical relativism.

## Ethical Relativism

Ethical relativism is the view that moral truths are not absolutely true but true relative to a particular society or individual. According to an ethical relativist, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of society or the moral commitments of the individual, and no absolute standard exists by which

differing rules or commitments can be judged. So what's morally right in one society may be morally wrong in another, and what's morally right for Mary might be morally wrong for John.

As this description suggests, there are two forms of relativism—*cultural* relativism and *individual* relativism. According to the cultural relativist, the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on society's norms. According to the individual relativist, the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the individual's own commitments.

The appeal of ethical relativism rests on two points. First, different societies often do have different moral norms, and individuals often do have different moral commitments. Second, there seems to be no decisive way to settle moral disputes as there are decisive ways to settle many other kinds of disputes. If two individuals or societies differ radically about right and wrong, there seem to be no tests or experiments we can run to confirm the views of one or the other.

Both kinds of relativism exist in varying degrees. Someone can be a relativist about some matters—sexual morality, for instance—but a nonrelativist about others—slavery, for instance. Someone can also be a cultural relativist about some matters and an individual relativist about others, or both a cultural and individual relativist about all moral matters. Relativism can also come in more or less sophisticated versions. In the least sophisticated versions, arguing about abortion, affirmative action, or any other issue we address in Part II is like arguing about whether chocolate tastes better than vanilla. In other words, morality is merely a matter of taste or custom; and one taste or custom is as good as another, whether the taste is for slavery or brightly colored clothes, for theft or science fiction. In the more sophisticated versions of relativism, morality is much more complicated; and arguments about the issues in Part II concern much more than individual taste or social custom, leading to the conclusion that some tastes or customs are decidedly worse than others.

Relativism is, of course, a controversial view. Opponents argue that variation in moral commitments does not prove that moral truth is relative any more than variation in scientific belief proves that scientific truth is relative. They also argue that the difficulty of deciding moral disputes can be dispelled by a deeper understanding of morality. Although we cannot go through all the arguments for and against the many forms of relativism here, we should note a few points that pertain to the rest of the book.

First of all, even if it turns out that some form of relativism is true, that does not mean we cannot criticize the norms of our society or the moral commitments of others. Morality is not, as the least sophisticated forms of relativism would have it, merely an arbitrary matter of taste, like the preference for vanilla over chocolate, nor is it merely a matter of custom, like Fourth of July fireworks. As will be stressed throughout this book, we have the norms and commitments we do for *reasons*, and because they govern the most important areas of our lives, it is important that we examine these reasons carefully. Perhaps some of our moral commitments rest on false beliefs. Perhaps some rest on outmoded assumptions about what makes for a harmonious or desirable society. Perhaps some are inconsistent with other, more deeply held moral commitments, like fairness.