

THIRD
EDITION

Ethics

DISCOVERING RIGHT AND WRONG



LOUIS P. POJMAN



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Discovering Right and Wrong

Third Edition

LOUIS P. POJMAN
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY



Wadsworth Publishing Company
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Belmont, CA • Albany, NY • Boston • Cincinnati • Johannesburg • London • Madrid • Melbourne
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Philosophy Editor: Peter Adams
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Copy Editor: Douglas Becker
Cover Designer: Laurie Anderson
Compositor: Linda Weidemann/Wolf Creek Press
Printer: Banta Book Group

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Printed in The United States of America
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

For more information, contact Wadsworth Publishing Company, 10 Davis Drive,
Belmont, CA 94002, or electronically at <http://www.wadsworth.com>

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

International Thomson Editores
Seneca, 53
Colonia Polanco
11560 México D.F. México

Nelson ITP, Australia
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International Thomson Publishing Asia
60 Albert Street #15-01
Albert Complex
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1120 Birchmount Road
Scarborough, Ontario
Canada M1K 5G4

International Thomson Publishing Southern Africa
Building 18, Constantia Square
138 Sixteenth Road, P.O. Box 2459
Halfway House, 1685 South Africa

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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pojman, Louis P.

Ethics: discovering right and wrong / Louis P. Pojman. — 3rd ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-534-55181-5

1. Ethics. I. Title

BJ1012.P65 1998

170—dc21

98-23849



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Preface

In all the world and in all of life there is nothing more important to determine than what is right. Whatever the matter which lies before us calling for consideration, whatever the question asked us or the problem to be solved, there is some settlement of it which will meet the situation and is to be sought. . . . Wherever there is a decision to be made or any deliberation is in point, there is a right determination of the matter in hand which is to be found and adhered to, and other possible commitments which would be wrong and are to be avoided.

C. I. LEWIS, *THE GROUND AND NATURE OF RIGHT*,
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1955, p. 27

WHY STUDY ETHICS?

What is it to live a morally good life? Why is morality important? Are moral principles valid only as they depend on cultural approval or are there universal moral truths? How should I live my life? Are there intrinsic values? Which is the best moral theory? Can we derive moral values from facts? Why should I be moral? Is there a right answer to every problem in life? What is the relationship of religion to morality?

These sorts of questions have concerned me for several years, and I believe that they should concern all thoughtful individuals. Many people in our society, including university students, are confused about morality. On the one hand, many claim (as judged from questionnaires and in-class conversations) that they are moral relativists (which they suppose promotes tolerance). But (as judged from their answers to different questions) these same people believe in absolute religious authority in faith and morals or answer “no” to questions such as “Is it ever morally permissible to have an abortion—except to save a woman’s life?” and “Is capital punishment ever morally justified?” They often uncritically hold either deontological, utilitarian, or egoist positions without being aware of the problems inherent in those positions. In sum, such people are very far from having an articulate moral theory of their own to match their understanding of literature, science, math, or even basketball. Yet morality is more important than any of these subjects, for it goes to the heart of what it means to live in the right way.

I am convinced that the subject of ethics is of paramount importance to us at the end of the 20th century. With the onset of pluralism and the loss of confidence in traditional authorities, a rational approach to ethics is vital if we are to survive and flourish. I disagree with many ethicists, including G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica* (1903) and C. D. Broad in *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (1930), who dismiss ethics as merely theoretical and as having no practical relevance.

On the contrary, ethical theory has enormous practical benefits. It can free us from prejudice and dogmatism. It sets forth comprehensive systems from which to orient our individual judgments. It carves up the moral landscape so that we can sort out the issues in order to think more clearly and confidently about moral problems. It helps us clarify in our minds just how our principles and values relate to one another, and, most of all, it gives us some guidance in how to live.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Having taught ethical theory for several years, I felt the need for a textbook that challenged the student to develop his or her own moral theory, that emphasized the importance of the enterprise and could serve as a guide for intelligent young people. The available textbooks were either too light, sweeping over important distinctions, or too heavy, getting bogged down in needless formalization, or too narrow, omitting a serious

discussion of the virtues or the relationship between ethics and religion or the nature of values.

This book is intended for undergraduates in ethics courses. I have tried to write in an interesting, conversational manner, raising the key theoretical questions and analyzing them fairly closely without using unnecessary jargon. I have opened some chapters or included in the chapter discussion or in the sections entitled “For Further Reflection” at the end of each chapter examples of moral problems in order that students might have material to which to apply the theoretical discussion. It will be even better if students think up examples from their own lives.

This book is comprehensive, covering the major issues in contemporary moral theory and including a discussion of classical as well as contemporary renditions of the problems. It has an outline similar to that of my anthology, *Ethics: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Third Edition (Wadsworth, 1998) and may be used as a companion to and commentary on that work. But the user of this text is free to change the order of presentation. For example, many teachers, including myself at times, like to deal with the relation of religion to morality, including the divine command theory, early on in the course. Nothing will be lost by going directly from Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) to Chapter 10 (“Religion and Ethics”). Chapter 5 (“Values”) is related to Chapter 9 (“Why Should I Be Moral?”), so they may be read in sequence.

I strive to be fair to opposing sides of every question, but whenever I do offer my own solutions to problems (in a single-author text this is virtually inevitable), I do so in the spirit of fallibility and openness to correction, leaving the reader to form his or her own judgment on the matter. Philosophers will note that the title of this book reflects a fundamental disagreement with J. L. Mackie, who entitled his influential work on ethics *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, whose work is discussed in Chapters 3 and 12. The late John Mackie, from whom I learned a great deal, was my esteemed teacher at Oxford University, but I think that his starting point is misleading. Ethics, although it contains an element of human creativity and inventiveness, is even more clearly a discovery, something which is not of our own making but constitutes the blueprint for individual happiness and social harmony. Hence the subtitle of this book: *Discovering Right and Wrong*.

The reader will note that I raise more questions than I answer. I do this in part because what is important in philosophy is for the individual to work out his or her own solutions to problems and in part because I am unsure of many of the solutions myself. Study questions and a short, usable bibliography (“For Further Reading”) accompany each chapter. A glossary appears at the end of the book.

In this third edition I have revised most of the chapters, added more study questions, and added a chapter on moral realism (Chapter 12), including a discussion of Mackie's error theory and Gilbert Harman's moral nihilism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Michael Beaty, Jonathan Harrison, Bill Lawhead, Robert Loudon, Laura Purdy, Roger Rigerink, Bruce Russell, Walter Schaller, Robert Audi, and Bob Westmoreland were very helpful in offering trenchant criticisms on several chapters of this book. The students in my ethical theory classes at the University of Mississippi made a challenging sounding board for many of my arguments. Deserving of special mention are John Ates, Chris Bradford, Laura Burrell, Scott Morris, and Clayton Overton. Ronald F. Duska, Rosemont College; Peter List, Oregon State University; Peter Vallentyne, Virginia Commonwealth University; and Stephen Griffith, Lycoming College, reviewed the manuscript for the first edition of this work. Arthur Kuflik, University of Vermont; Fred Schueler, University of New Mexico; R. Duane Thompson, Indiana Wesleyan University; and David A. White, Marquette University, reviewed the manuscript for the second edition. Peter Boltuc, St. Olaf College; R. L. Borton, Orange Coast Community College; Ronald Cox, San Antonio College; Jamie Dreier, Brown University; Ed Langerack, St. Olaf College; Robert Mellert, Brookdale Community College; Mark Michael, Austin Peay State University; Ken Schenck, Indiana Wesleyan University; Ed Sherline, University of Wyoming; and Gordon Whiting, Brigham Young University, reviewed this work for the third edition. Each of the reviewers greatly enhanced the finished text.

I am grateful to Peter Adams for his strong support of this third edition. Kate Barrett did an excellent job of putting this work into its final form. I'm grateful to Douglas Becker for his helpful copyediting of the manuscript and to Ruth Stevens for proofreading this work. Most of all, I am indebted to my wife, Trudy, for living a morally inspiring life. Without her love and devotion, my life would be less joyous and this book would not have been written. To her this book is dedicated.

—LOUIS P. POJMAN



A Word to the Student: Why Study Moral Philosophy?

Ethics, or moral philosophy, is one branch of philosophy. What is philosophy? It is an enterprise that begins with wonder at the marvels and mysteries of the world, that pursues a rational investigation of those marvels and mysteries, seeking wisdom and truth, and that results in a life lived in passionate moral and intellectual integrity. Believing that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” philosophy leaves no facet of life untouched by its inquiry. It aims for a clear, critical, comprehensive conception of reality.

The hallmark of philosophy is rational argument. Philosophers clarify concepts and analyze and test propositions and beliefs, but their major task is to analyze and construct arguments. Philosophical reasoning is closely allied with scientific reasoning, in that both build hypotheses and look for evidence to test those hypotheses with the hope of coming closer to the truth. However, scientific experiments take place in laboratories and have testing procedures to record objective or empirically verifiable results. The laboratory of the philosopher is the domain of ideas—the mind, where imaginative thought-experiments take place; the study, where ideas are written down and examined; and wherever conversation or debate about the perennial questions takes place, where thesis and counterexample and counterthesis are considered.

Let us apply this to ethics. Ethics is that branch of philosophy that deals with how we ought to live, with the idea of the Good, and with such concepts as “right” and “wrong.” As such, it is a *practical* discipline. There are two parts

to the study of ethics: the theoretical and the applied. The theoretical aspect, “ethical theory,” deals with comprehensive theories about the good life and moral obligation. It analyzes and constructs grand systems of thought in order to explain and orient agents to the moral life. Included in this domain is a close analysis of concepts such as “right,” “wrong,” “permissible,” and the like. The applied aspect, “applied ethics,” deals with moral problems, including questions about the morality of abortion, premarital sex, capital punishment, euthanasia, and civil disobedience. Ethical theory and applied ethics are closely related: theory without application is sterile and useless, but action without a theoretical perspective is blind. There will be an enormous difference in the quality of discussions about abortion, punishment, sexual morality, and euthanasia when those discussions are informed by ethical theory as compared to when they are not. More light and less heat will be the likely outcome.

With the onset of pluralism and the loss of confidence in traditional authorities, a rational approach to ethics is vital for us to survive and thrive. Ethical theory may rid us of facile dogmatism and emotionalism—where shouting matches replace arguments—and liberate us from what Bernard Williams refers to as “vulgar relativism.” Ethical theory clarifies relevant concepts, constructs and evaluates arguments, and guides us in living our lives. It is important that the educated person be able to discuss ethical situations with precision and subtlety.

Ethics is not only of instrumental value; it is valuable in its own right. It is satisfying to have knowledge of important matters for its own sake, and it is important to understand the nature and scope of moral theory for its own sake. We are rational beings who cannot help but want to understand the nature of the good life and all that it implies. You may become disturbed by the variety of theories discussed in this book, which seem mutually exclusive and so produce confusion when you desire guidance. But an appreciation of the complexity of ethics is valuable in offsetting our tendency toward dogmatism and provincialism. It is also a challenge to use your reason to endorse or produce the best system or combination of systems possible.

I have written this book as a quest for truth and understanding, hoping to create excitement about the value of ethics. It is a subject that I love, for it is about how we are to live, about the best kind of life. I hope that you will come to share my enthusiasm for the subject and to develop your own ideas in the process.

I would be delighted to hear your thoughts or questions on the ideas in this book, including any suggestions for ways to improve the work. Feel free to write to me at the following address:

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Introduction: What Is Ethics?

We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.

SOCRATES, IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

Some years ago, the nation was stunned by a report from Kew Gardens, Queens, in New York City. A young woman, Kitty Genovese, was brutally stabbed in her neighborhood late at night during three separate attacks while thirty-eight respectable, law-abiding citizens watched and listened. Her neighbors looked on from their bedroom windows for some thirty-five minutes as the assailant beat her, stabbed her, left her, and returned to repeat the attack two more times until she died. No one lifted a phone to call the police; no one shouted at the criminal, let alone went to Genovese's aid. Finally, a seventy-year-old woman called the police. It took them two minutes to arrive, but by that time Genovese was dead. Only one other woman came out to testify before the ambulance came, which was an hour later. Then residents from the whole neighborhood poured out of their apartments. When asked why they hadn't done anything, they gave answers ranging from "I don't know" and "I was tired" to "Frankly, we were afraid."¹

Who are our neighbors? What should these respectable citizens have done? What would you have done? If, with little inconvenience to yourself,

you could save someone's life or save someone from harm, would you be partly responsible for any harm done to that person if you chose not to act? Are such acts of omission morally blameworthy? How much risk should we undergo to help someone in danger? What kinds of generalizations can we make from this episode about contemporary culture in America? What does the crime rate in our cities tell us about the moral climate of our society? Is the Genovese murder an anomaly, or is it quite indicative of a deeply disturbing trend?

What is it to be a moral person? What is the nature of morality? Why do we need morality? What function does it play? What is the good, and how shall I know it? Are moral principles absolute, or are they simply relative to social groups or individual decision? Is morality, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder? Is it always in my interest to be moral? Or is it sometimes in my best interest to act immorally? How do we justify our moral beliefs? What is the basis of morality? Which ethical theory best justifies and explains the moral life? What relationship does morality have with religion, law, and etiquette?

These are some of the questions we shall be looking at in this book. We want to understand the foundation and structure of morality. We want to know how we should live.

The terms "moral" and "ethics" come from Latin and Greek, respectively ("mores" and "ethos"), deriving their meaning from the idea of "custom." Although philosophers sometimes use these terms interchangeably, many philosophers distinguish among *morality*, *moral philosophy*, and *ethics*. I generally use *morality* to refer to certain customs, precepts, and practices of people and cultures. This is sometimes called *positive morality* or *descriptive morality* (since it describes actual beliefs and customs). I use *moral philosophy* to refer to philosophical or theoretical reflection on morality. Specific moral theories issuing from such philosophical reflection I call *ethical theories*, in line with a common practice. I use *ethics* to refer to the whole domain of morality and moral philosophy, since these two areas have many features in common. For example, both areas concern values, virtues, and principles and practices, though in different ways.

Moral philosophy refers to the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories. It undertakes to analyze concepts and terms such as "right," "wrong," "permissible," "ought," "good," and "evil" in their moral contexts. Moral philosophy seeks to establish principles of right behavior that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups. It investigates which values and virtues are paramount to a worthwhile life or society. It builds and scrutinizes arguments in ethical theories and seeks to discover valid principles (e.g., "Never kill innocent human

beings”) and the relationship between valid principles (e.g., “Does saving a life in some situations constitute a valid reason for breaking a promise?”).

MORALITY AS COMPARED WITH OTHER NORMATIVE SUBJECTS

Moral precepts concern norms; roughly speaking, they concern not what is, but what ought to be. How should I live my life? What is the right thing to do in this situation? Should I always tell the truth? Do I have a duty to report a coworker whom I have seen cheating our company? Should I tell my friend that his spouse is having an affair? Is premarital sex morally permissible? Ought a woman ever to have an abortion? Morality has a distinct action-guiding, or *normative*, aspect,² which it shares with other practical institutions, such as religion, law, and etiquette.

Moral behavior, as defined by a given religion, is usually believed essential to that religion’s practice. But neither the practices nor precepts of morality should be identified with religion. The practice of morality need not be motivated by religious considerations. And moral precepts need not be grounded in revelation or divine authority—as religious teachings invariably are. The most salient characteristic of ethics—by which I mean both philosophical morality (or *morality*, as I will simply refer to it) and moral philosophy—is its grounding in reason and human experience.

To use a spatial metaphor, secular ethics is horizontal, lacking a vertical or transcendental dimension. Religious ethics, being grounded in revelation or divine authority, has that vertical dimension, though religious ethics generally uses reason to supplement or complement revelation. These two differing orientations often generate different moral principles and standards of evaluation, but they need not do so. Some versions of religious ethics, which posit God’s revelation of the moral law in nature or conscience, hold that reason can discover what is right or wrong even apart from divine revelation. We will discuss this subject in Chapters 3 (under natural law) and 10.

Morality is also closely related to law, and some people equate the two practices. Many laws are instituted in order to promote well-being, resolve conflicts of interest, and promote social harmony, just as morality does, but ethics may judge that some laws are immoral without denying that they are valid *laws*. For example, laws may permit slavery, spousal abuse, racial discrimination, or sexual discrimination, but these are immoral practices. A Catholic or antiabortion advocate may believe that the laws permitting abortion are immoral.