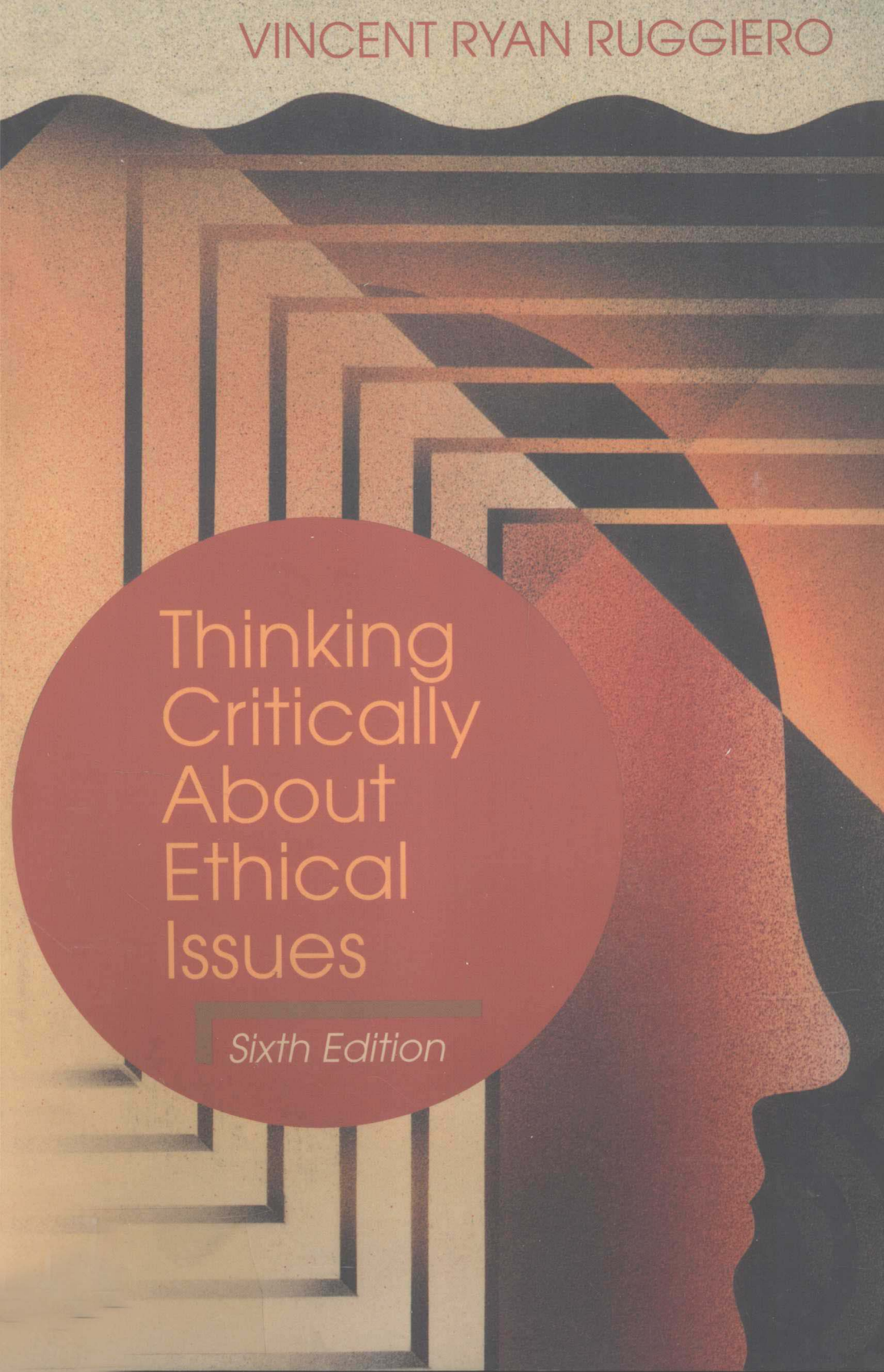
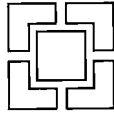


VINCENT RYAN RUGGIERO

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of overlapping geometric shapes in shades of brown, tan, and black. A large, solid red circle is positioned on the left side, containing the title text. To the right of the circle, a dark silhouette of a human head in profile is visible, facing right. The overall design is modern and minimalist.

Thinking Critically About Ethical Issues

Sixth Edition



THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT ETHICAL ISSUES

SIXTH EDITION

VINCENT RYAN RUGGIERO

Professor Emeritus

State University of New York, Delhi



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To the memory of
Vincent V. Ruggiero, my father,
Filomena Ruggiero, my grandmother,
Francis and Michael Ruggiero, my uncles, and
Edith and Bernhard Theisselmann, my "extra parents,"
whose quiet lessons and example first introduced
me to the subject of this book.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT ETHICAL ISSUES, SIXTH EDITION

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☐ PREFACE ☐

No introductory textbook can do complete justice to the subject of ethics. The best it can do is to help students develop a basic competency in ethical analysis and acquire a measure of confidence in their judgment; it should also stimulate enough interest in the subject that they will want to continue learning about it, formally or informally, when the final chapter is completed and the course is over. Even that relatively modest aim is difficult to achieve. The author must strike the right balance between the theoretical and the practical, between breadth and depth of treatment, and between rigor and relevance, so that students are challenged but not daunted.

This book is based on several specific ideas about how that crucial balance is best achieved:

The emphasis should be on DOING ethics rather than on studying the history of ethics. This does not mean that students should not become familiar with historical developments and the contributions of great ethicists. It means that more attention should be given to applying ethical principles to specific cases, that is, to conducting ethical analysis. This approach, which Alfred North Whitehead termed an emphasis on principles rather than details (and which he proposed as the standard for all education), is the same approach that many educators are recommending to promote the development of critical thinking skills in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities.

Careful attention should be given to overcoming students' intellectual impediments to ethical analysis. Today's students have been exposed to numerous misconceptions about ethical analysis—indeed, about thinking in general. For example, it is fashionable today to regard all value judgments as undemocratic. This fashion has led many students to the belief that whatever one *feels* is right, is by that very fact right. Even when they manage to avoid that notion, many students adopt other erroneous notions—for instance, that the majority view is necessarily the best view or that morality is a religious matter only, without any secular dimension. Unless students get beyond such crippling notions, their efforts at ethical analysis are unlikely to be effective and meaningful.

The fundamental concerns in ethical analysis should be presented first, and more complex concerns reserved, wherever possible, until later. This may seem too obvious to state. Yet it is a consideration that many textbooks in ethics ignore. Such textbooks present a concept in detail, with all the conflicting interpretations of it that have been advanced by various ethical schools. This conflicting information can paralyze students' efforts. Instead of applying the concept in their work, as the authors intend, students often think, "If the experts disagree, how can I be expected to make sense of this?" The time for identifying complexities is after students have been introduced to the basic concepts and have become comfortable applying them in their analyses.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

The influence of the foregoing ideas accounts for certain features that distinguish this book from other texts. The most significant of these features are the following:

ORGANIZATION

The history of ethics and the contributions of great ethicists are presented at the end of the book (in Chapter 12) rather than at the beginning or throughout. This arrangement reflects the author's experience that most introductory students learn ethical analysis better when they are not burdened with names and dates and details of ethical systems. Showing students how Plato, Kant, and Mill approached an ethical issue and then asking them to analyze an issue themselves is very much like showing them a professional athlete performing and then saying, "Now, let's see how you perform." Both situations are intimidating; students are put in a competitive situation in which they cannot compete. In ethics, as in sports, it is better to postpone introducing students to "the professionals" until they have gained a little experience and confidence.

This format does not diminish the importance of ethical history. On the contrary, students are better able to appreciate and remember historical contributions after they have grappled with problems themselves and pondered the question of how to judge them. (In cases where course syllabi require that historical material be presented first, instructors can begin with Chapter 12 and then proceed with Chapters 1, 2, and so on.)

CHAPTER LENGTH

Short chapters allow students to spend less time reading and underlining and more time analyzing ethical issues. More conscientious students gain

an additional benefit from the brevity of the chapters. These students are able to read each chapter more than once and thereby master the material better than they would with a long chapter.

APPENDIX ON WRITING

Today's students often arrive at college without the English proficiency that instructors expect them to have. The guide to writing included in this text can save instructors time and effort. Instead of trying to teach rhetorical skills during class or in conferences with students, instructors need only direct students to the Appendix. Students, too, benefit by being able to break the common cycle of submitting poor papers, getting poor grades, becoming frustrated, losing interest, and blaming the instructor. By knowing what is expected in their analyses of issues and, more important, how to provide it, they can devote more attention to the mastery and application of ethical principles.

The correction symbols noted in the Appendix can be used to make the evaluation of papers faster and more effective. If a paper is lacking in both coherence and development, the instructor need write nothing more than COH and DEV. Students will be able to turn to the appropriate sections of the Appendix, see what errors they have committed, and note how to avoid those errors in the future.

CHANGES IN THE SIXTH EDITION

In preparing the sixth edition, I have been guided by the suggestions of instructors who have used previous editions. The changes in this edition are as follows:

- Chapter 1: A new section, "Making Discussion Meaningful," has been added. Also, the section on using the Internet to research ethical issues has been illustrated with graphics and expanded to include specific strategies.
- Chapter 7: A new error affecting ethical judgment has been added—"Mine is better" thinking.
- Chapters 8 and 9: The criteria of "obligations" and "ideals" have been extensively revised to clarify the difference and to facilitate analysis of issues.
- Chapter 10: The discussion of ends versus means and the principle of the greater good have been revised and expanded.
- "Contemporary Ethical Controversies": A number of new ethical issues have been added.

- Appendix: A new appendix, "Avoiding Plagiarism," has been added. This new section is designed both to eliminate any confusion about plagiarism and to reduce the temptation to engage in it. Rather than merely *telling* students what not to do, it *demonstrates* how to handle quoted and paraphrased material properly.

STANDARD FORMAT VS. ALTERNATIVES

The standard format is based on the author's experience that investing sufficient time to overcome misconceptions and build a sound philosophical perspective pays dividends in student learning. This format entails following the chapter order at a fairly leisurely pace, with more time devoted to examining the inquiries and forming/sharing judgments than to reading. Accordingly, in a fifteen-week semester course, approximately one week would be spent on each chapter, perhaps slightly more than that on Chapters 6–10. In this format enough time would remain for students to do an extended analysis of one or maybe two issues from "Contemporary Ethical Controversies."

For any one of several good reasons, of course, an instructor may wish to adjust this format. The following adaptations can be made with relative ease:

ALTERNATIVE 1

Situation: Students have already had some training in critical thinking and, in the instructor's view, will be able to master the material in Section I relatively quickly.

Approach: Devote one class period and one homework assignment to each chapter in Section I—that is, to each of Chapters 1–5. Allocate the remaining thirteen weeks to Chapters 6–12 and "Contemporary Ethical Controversies."

ALTERNATIVE 2

Situation: Students have already had *considerable* training in critical thinking or have otherwise achieved an unusual level of intellectual sophistication.

Approach: Make Chapters 1–5 *a single reading assignment*, with either no inquiries or only a few selected ones. Devote the remainder of the course to Chapters 6–12 and "Contemporary Ethical Controversies," focusing on individual and/or group analysis and discussion of the inquiries, perhaps involving the preparation of a term paper and/or formal debates toward the end of the course.

ALTERNATIVE 3

Situation: In the instructor's judgment, giving students a historical perspective at the outset of the course will enhance the learning experience.

Approach: Have students read Chapter 12, "A Perspective on History," and address its inquiry at the very beginning of the course. Then proceed with the other chapters, following the standard format or one of the other alternatives.

A NOTE ON STUDENT FRUSTRATION

The approach used in the early chapters of this book will be frustrating to some students. They will ask, "If it's not feelings and not majority opinion that decide the morality of an action, then what is it? Why doesn't the author tell us?" This reaction is a reflection of students' prior classroom conditioning. They expect textbooks to provide neat answers that can be swallowed and then regurgitated on a test. When asked to think, to reason out for themselves the best answers to moral problems, they naturally become anxious for a time because the activity is unfamiliar.

Whenever your students ask, "What *does* decide the morality of an action?" you will know that their minds have become engaged in the subject, that they are seeing the need for a standard (other than feelings, for example) and are struggling to define it. By the time the book suggests the criteria of judgment (Chapter 7), students will be ready to learn and apply those criteria. Many, in fact, will already have anticipated the criteria in their own analyses of problems. Without realizing it, they will have been *doing* ethics.

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Vincent Ryan Ruggiero

[CONTENTS]

PREFACE iii

I / THE CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR ETHICS 3

Why do we need ethics? We have laws to protect people's rights.
If the laws are enforced, what need have we of further rules?

CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE OF THE MAJORITY VIEW 20

Is the basis for deciding moral values the majority view? In
other words, if the majority of the citizens of our country
should decide that a particular action is right, would that
very decision make the action right?

CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF FEELINGS 27

If the majority view does not determine the rightness of an
action, should each person decide on the basis of her or his
own feelings, desires, preferences?

CHAPTER 4**THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE 36**

If feelings are no better a guide than the majority view, is the basis of morality each person's own conscience? How trustworthy is conscience?

CHAPTER 5**COMPARING CULTURES 49**

If an action that is praised in one culture may be condemned in another, would it be correct to say that all moral values are relative to the culture they are found in? Isn't it a mark of ignorance to pass judgments on other cultures or to claim that one culture is better than another?

II / A STRATEGY**CHAPTER 6****A FOUNDATION FOR JUDGMENT 67**

If both individuals and cultures can be mistaken in their moral reasoning, we need a basis for evaluating their judgment. If the majority view, feelings, and conscience do not provide that basis, what does?

CHAPTER 7**THE BASIC CRITERIA 78**

What is really good for us? What criteria and approaches are most effective in examining moral issues? What pitfalls other than relativism and absolutism should we be aware of and strive to avoid?

CHAPTER 8**CONSIDERING OBLIGATIONS 96**

What do we do in situations where there is more than a single obligation? How can we reconcile conflicting obligations?

CHAPTER 9**CONSIDERING MORAL IDEALS 106**

How can we reconcile conflicts between moral ideals or between a moral ideal and an obligation?

CHAPTER 10**CONSIDERING CONSEQUENCES 118**

How do we deal with cases in which the consequences are not neatly separable into good and bad, but are mixed?

CHAPTER 11**DETERMINING MORAL RESPONSIBILITY 130**

How do we determine whether a person is responsible for her or his immoral actions? Are there degrees of responsibility?

III / THE TRADITION**CHAPTER 12****A PERSPECTIVE ON HISTORY 141**

When did the study of ethics begin? Who were the great thinkers in the history of ethics? What contributions did they make?

IV / CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL CONTROVERSIES

Education	153
Media and the Arts	157
Sex	161
Government	164
Law	168
Business	172
Medicine	177
Science	181
War	185

AFTERWORD: A SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDY	189
-------------------------------------------	-----

APPENDIX A: WRITING ABOUT MORAL ISSUES	191
----------------------------------------	-----

APPENDIX B: AVOIDING PLAGIARISM	199
---------------------------------	-----

NOTES	203
-------	-----

INDEX	209
-------	-----

THE SAME MORAL ISSUES that men and women have grappled with throughout history have grown ever more complex in a society whose structures and forms are changing. And the impressive advances of science and technology have created a host of new issues.

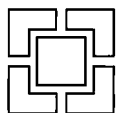
Yet precisely at this time, when we most need a firm intellectual foundation to guide our judgment, we are confused by countless challenges to old and familiar faiths and standards.

The outlines of our very humanity are blurred by conflicting theories.

This, then, is the moral imperative of our time—to break the bonds of indecision, move beyond fad and foolishness, and address the dilemmas of modern living sensitively and sensibly, with regard for their complexity.

I

THE CONTEXT



[CHAPTER ONE]

THE NEED FOR ETHICS

Why do we need ethics? We have laws to protect people's rights. If the laws are enforced, what need have we of further rules?

Ethics is the study of the choices people make regarding right and wrong. Each of us makes dozens of moral choices daily. Will we go to work or call in sick? Follow the research protocol or violate it? Put quotes around borrowed phrasing or pretend the words are our own? Answer a colleague's question truthfully or lie? Obey the speed laws or drive as fast as our vehicles will go? Pay our bills or spend our money on entertainment? Keep our marriage vows or break them? Meet our children's emotional needs or ignore them? Pet the cat or kick it?

In most times and places, people have acknowledged the existence of an objective moral standard binding on all people regardless of their personal desires and preferences. (Of course, there was not always complete agreement on what that standard was.) Over the past several decades, however, that need has been called into question. It is fashionable today to believe that decisions about right and wrong are purely personal and subjective. This belief is known as moral relativism. According to it, whatever anyone claims to be morally acceptable *is* morally acceptable, at least for that person. Supposedly, there is only one exception to this rule: Judging other people's conduct is considered intolerant. (To this author's knowledge, no moral relativist has ever explained why, if *any* view of honesty, faithfulness, fairness, and justice is considered valid, only *one* view of tolerance is permitted.)

In the 1960s moral relativists challenged the traditional view that fornication and adultery are immoral. "Only the individual can decide what sexual behavior is right for him or her," they said, "and the individual's decision should be respected." Given the mood of the time (and the

strength of the sex drive), it was not surprising that many people were disposed to accept this view. Critics raised serious objections, of course. They argued that even the wisest among us are capable of error and self-deception, especially where the emotions are involved. They predicted that the idea that everyone creates his or her own sexual morality would spill over into other areas of morality and provide an excuse for everything from petty pilfering, plagiarism, and perjury to child molesting, rape, spouse abuse, and murder.

More important for our purposes, the critics of relativism warned that “anything goes” thinking would undermine the subject of ethics. “If morality is merely a matter of preference, and no one view is better than any other,” they reasoned, “then there is no way to distinguish good from evil or civilized behavior from uncivilized, and any attempt at meaningful discussion of moral issues is futile.” Centuries earlier, Dr. Samuel Johnson saw the more personal implications in relativism and remarked, “If he does really think that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, why, sir, when he leaves our houses let us count our spoons.”

At the time, relativists dismissed the predictions of the critics as irresponsible. Now, however, four decades later, we can see that those predictions were at least in part accurate. Evidence that civility has declined and human life has become cheapened can be found any day in the news. (To what extent relativism is responsible for this development is, of course, debatable.) Equally significant, many people are so possessed by the “who can say?” mentality that they find it difficult to pass moral judgment even on the most heinous deeds.

One professor of philosophy estimates that between 10 and 20 percent of his students can't bring themselves to say that the killing of millions of people in the Holocaust was wrong. He calls this phenomenon “absolutophobia,” the fear of saying unequivocally that certain behavior is unethical. Another professor reports that her students are reluctant to judge even so obvious a moral issue as *human sacrifice*! Speaking of one student who refused to say such sacrifice was wrong, the professor writes, “I was stunned. This was the [same] woman who wrote so passionately of saving the whales, of concern for the rain forests, of her rescue and tender care of a stray dog.”¹

As almost any ethics instructor will confirm, when it comes to more subtle issues—such as unauthorized copying of computer programs or plagiarism—the number of people who cannot bring themselves to make a moral judgment increases significantly. Such individuals may regard ethics as intrusive.