CONDUC CCHARACTER



READINGS IN MORAL THEORY

fourth edition MARK TIMMONS

CONDUCT AND CHARACTER

Readings in Moral Theory

FOURTH EDITION

Mark Timmons University of Memphis





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Philosophy Editor: Steve Wainwright Assistant Editor: Lee McCracken Editorial Assistant: Anna Lustig

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Preface

This fourth edition of *Conduct and Character* includes a balance of classical and contemporary writings on moral theory designed to introduce students to the study of ethics. The book is organized according to type of moral theory and is preceded by an introduction, which provides the needed conceptual framework for studying ethics.

This collection is suitable for ethics courses that focus on theory, and it can serve as a supplementary text for "applied" ethics courses. It can also provide readings for the ethics component of an introductory philosophy course.

This edition features new selections by Rosalind Hursthouse, Michael Slote, and Thomas Hurka that reflect recent developments in virtue ethics. Also new to this edition are papers by Virginia Held on the ethics of care, Brad Hooker on moral particularism, and a piece I wrote on the divine command theory. I have written a new introduction to moral theory that covers the same ground as its predecessor but in a more streamlined manner. Finally, there are a few minor changes worth mentioning. I have shortened the selection by Aquinas on natural law theory and slightly reordered a few of the chapters.

Since the chapters are self-contained, they can be taught in any order. The order I have chosen reflects that, in my experience with teaching ethics, students often begin with questions like: "Why not just do whatever you think will benefit yourself?" "Isn't morality just a matter of what some authority like God or society says?" So the readings begin with chapters on egoism, the divine command theory, and ethical relativism. The next three chapters on natural law theory, utilitarianism, and Kant's ethics represent moral theories that are standard in teaching ethics. The last three chapters on virtue ethics, the ethics of care, and pluralism and particularism represent, in different ways, challenges to the standard views.

I would like to thank Anna Lustig and my editor, Steve Wainwright, at Wadsworth for their encouragement and help with this project. Steve Rogers deserves special thanks for his technical guidance. I especially wish to thank Linda Sadler for her help in preparing this new edition of Conduct and Character.

x PREFACE

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Introduction to Moral Theory

THE NATURE AND EVALUATION OF MORAL THEORIES

The two main concepts of ethics are those of the right and the good;... The structure of an ethical theory is, then, largely determined by how it defines and connects these two basic notions.

--JOHN RAWLS

In 1997 a research team headed by Ian Wilmut at the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh, Scotland, successfully cloned a lamb who became known as "Dolly"—the first mammal ever cloned. The process of cloning involves what is called somatic cell nuclear transfer in which the nucleus from the cell of an adult is implanted in an egg cell from which the nucleus has been removed. Because successful cloning of a lamb means that it is very likely that humans can be cloned, the news of Dolly sparked a moral (and legal) controversy over cloning humans—over reproductive cloning. Is reproductive cloning morally wrong as its critics claim, or is it (at least sometimes) morally right as its advocates insist?

Another kind of cloning, therapeutic cloning, is also ethically controversial and at the heart of debates over the morality of stem cell research. A stem cell, extracted from a human embryo, can presumably grow into any of the body's cell types. Many scientists hope to be able to use stem cells to treat many diseases including diabetes and Parkinson's disease. The idea would be to create human embryos that are specifically fashioned to match patients' tissue. However, the process of extracting stem cells from human embryos inevitably destroys those embryos. Since many people find the destruction of human embryos morally problematic, stem cell research is controversial. Again, is therapeutic cloning morally wrong or is it (at least sometimes) morally right?

The ethics of human cloning is but one of a large number of morally controversial actions and practices. Readers are no doubt familiar with some of the moral controversy that surrounds abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, homosexuality, discrimination, treatment of animals, and the environment. And, as in the case of cloning, each of these issues raises general moral questions—basic questions about the rightness and wrongness of various actions and practices.

In addition to questions about the morality of actions, we also judge the goodness and badness of persons. What makes someone a morally good or morally bad person? Ethics is the branch of philosophy that addresses basic philosophical questions about the right and the good, and philosophers who attempt to answer such questions in a systematic way offer theories—moral theories—about the right and the good. Because philosophers offer competing answers to such questions, there are competing moral theories that are the focus of debate in ethics.

This anthology contains writings that explore some of the major theories in ethics—moral theories that are both historically influential and of current philosophical interest. But what is a moral theory? And how can competing moral theories be evaluated? This introduction addresses these and related questions so that the beginning student will have a framework for understanding the writings that follow.

In order to have a basic understanding of moral theory, there are five main tasks to accomplish. First, we need to clarify the basic *concepts* featured in a moral theory—the concepts of the right and the good (as well as those of the wrong and the bad). Second, we need to explain the guiding aims of a moral theory—what such a theory sets out to accomplish. Third, we need to explain the importance of moral principles in a moral theory. Fourth, the structure of a moral theory is determined by how it connects the concepts of the right and the good, and so we need to indicate some of the ways different theories connect these concepts and thus differ in structure. Finally, we need to explain some of the standards that are used in evaluating a moral theory. In what follows, let us take up these tasks in order.

Basic Moral Concepts

As the opening quote from John Rawls indicates, the basic concepts in ethics are the concepts of the right and the good. They are often referred to respectively as deontic and value concepts.

DEONTIC CONCEPTS

When we evaluate the morality of an action, we are primarily interested in whether the action is right or wrong. More precisely, we are interested in whether an action is *obligatory*, wrong, or optional. These are

often called deontic concepts or categories (from the Greek word 'deon' that means duty) because they concern what we ought to do (and hence have a duty to perform) or ought not to do (and hence have a duty not to perform). Here is a brief description of each of these categories.

Obligatory actions. An obligatory action is one that a person morally ought to perform. Typically, we refer to such actions as *duties*. Other terms used for this category include *required* and *right*. (Use of the term 'right' requires special comment. See below.)

Wrong actions. An action is wrong when it is one that a person ought not to perform. Other terms used for this category include *forbidden*, *impermissible*, and *contrary to duty*.

Optional actions. An action is optional when it is neither obligatory nor wrong—one is morally permitted to perform the action but is not required to. Sometimes actions in this category are referred to as *merely permissible* ("merely" because, although both optional actions and obligatory actions are permissible, actions of the former type are not required).

Obviously, these brief characterizations are not intended as illuminating definitions of these basic deontic concepts. To be told that an *obligatory* action is one that a person *ought* to perform is hardly illuminating. However, I hope these descriptions convey an intuitive sense of how these basic categories are understood in ethics.

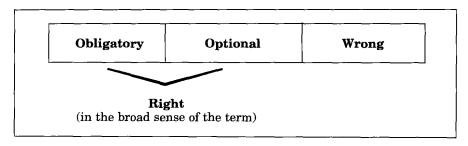
What about the concept of the right? Talk of right action in ethics has both a narrow and a broad meaning. When it is used narrowly, to say that an action is right is to say that it is obligatory. We are using it this way when we say of someone that she did the right thing (she did what she morally ought to have done). But sometimes the term is used broadly to mean simply that an act is not wrong. Sometimes, for instance, when we say that what someone did was right, we mean that what he did was morally in the clear—that it was all right for him to do, that it was not wrong. Talk of right action in the broad sense covers both obligatory and optional actions. So when someone claims that an action is morally right, it is important to make clear whether she is using the term 'right' narrowly or broadly. Figure 1 summarizes where 'right' is used in the broad sense to mean 'not wrong'.

VALUE CONCEPTS

In addition to morally evaluating actions, we also evaluate people and other things as being good or bad. The concepts of the good and the bad are the basic value concepts. To say that something is good is to say that it has positive value, while to say that something is bad is to say that it has negative value.

4 BASIC MORAL CONCEPTS

FIGURE 1 Deontic Concepts.



To understand more clearly the philosophical investigation into the nature of value, we must begin by distinguishing between things with intrinsic value and things with extrinsic value.

To say that something has intrinsic positive value—that it is *intrinsically good*—is to say that there is something about *it* that makes it good in itself. In other words, its goodness is based on something that is inherent to the thing in question. (Intrinsic negative value or badness is understood in an analogous way.) By contrast, to say that something is merely *extrinsically good* is to say that it possesses its goodness because of how it is related to something that is intrinsically good. Here is an example.

Many people would agree that money is a good thing to possess. But in virtue of what is it good? Clearly, it is not something about the bits of paper and metal that compose money that make it good. Rather, the goodness of money is explained by the fact that it is useful as a means for obtaining things and services that are intrinsically good or contribute to what has intrinsic value. Thus, assuming that money has positive value of some sort, it is merely extrinsically good.

Because the idea of extrinsic value is explained in terms of intrinsic value, the latter notion is the more basic of the two. Hence, in giving a theory of value, philosophers focus on intrinsic value. In doing so, they are concerned with the question of what makes something intrinsically good or intrinsically bad *in itself*. Things that are neither intrinsically good nor bad are intrinsically value-neutral.²

MORAL AND NONMORAL VALUE

Philosophers often distinguish between *moral value* and *nonmoral value*. Both types of value are important in ethics and require an explanation. Only responsible agents who can be praised or blamed, that is, *persons*, are capable of possessing (positive or negative) moral value or worth. In describing someone as morally good (or bad), we are saying something about that person's character. A morally good person is a person who has a virtuous character—who has certain positive character traits—while a morally bad person is one who has a vicious character—who has certain

negative character traits. Some of the virtuous character traits include honesty, beneficence, courage, and justice, while the traits of dishonesty, indifference to others, cowardice, and injustice are among the vices. So a theory of moral value addresses the question of what makes someone a morally good or bad person.

Other items that have value—things, experiences, and states of affairs—possess nonmoral value. The term 'nonmoral' only means that items possessing this sort of value are not responsible agents who can be praised or blamed. For example, some philosophers hold that experiences of pleasure are intrinsically good and that experiences of pain are intrinsically bad. Of course, pleasure and pain are experiences of persons, but such experiences—as experiences—are not agents who can be praised or blamed for anything. If an experience of pleasure is intrinsically good. then we say that it possesses positive nonmoral value.

Why is nonmoral value of any interest in ethics? The answer is that some philosophers have defended moral theories that make the rightness and wrongness of actions depend on how they promote what has intrinsic nonmoral value. One example would be a theory that accepts the following two claims: (1) the deontic status of an action (its rightness or wrongness) depends entirely upon how much intrinsic goodness or badness it would produce if performed and (2) pleasure alone is intrinsically good and pain alone is intrinsically bad.3

The Aims of a Moral Theory

Now that we have clarified the main concepts involved in moral evaluation, let us proceed to consider the guiding aims of a moral theory. Like any theory, a moral theory is supposed to satisfy certain aims that motivate and guide its development. There are two primary aims of moral theory prompted by what we have already identified as some of the main questions in ethics: a theoretical aim and a practical aim. Let us consider these in order.

First, there are questions about the underlying nature of right and wrong, good and bad-of duty and value. What makes an action right or wrong? What makes something good or bad?

The idea is that an action's being right or wrong depends on certain features of the action. One aim of a moral theory is to reveal those features of actions that explain why they are right or wrong. Revealing such features would provide us with a theoretical understanding of the nature of right and wrong (similarly for good and bad) and serve as criteria of the right and the good. Thus, we can express the theoretical aim of a moral theory this way:

Theoretical Aim. The theoretical aim of a moral theory is to reveal those underlying features of actions, persons, and other items of moral evaluation that make them right or wrong, good or bad. The

underlying features that explain what makes an action right or wrong serve as moral criteria of rightness. The underlying features of persons and other items of evaluation that explain what makes them good or bad serve as criteria of value.

In addition to theoretical questions about the underlying nature of duty and value, philosophers are also interested in practical questions about what sort of method we might follow in figuring out what is dutiful or valuable in specific contexts of decision making. What method or procedure should we follow in trying to reach correct moral verdicts about the rightness and wrongness of actions and the goodness and badness of persons and other items of evaluation?

Just as scientists employ scientific methodology in coming to conclusions about matters of scientific dispute, moral philosophers hope to discover a proper methodology—a *decision procedure*—that can be used to arrive at correct or justified conclusions about matters of moral inquiry. Thus, the practical aim of moral theory can be expressed this way:

Practical aim. The practical aim of moral theory is to discover a decision procedure that can be used to guide correct moral reasoning and decision making about matters of moral concern.

The theoretical and practical aims of moral theory are often thought to be related in that if we have theoretical knowledge about morality and thus know what makes an action right or wrong, then we might expect that a proper moral decision procedure would make use of such knowledge. In order to understand this point more clearly, let us consider the role of moral principles in a moral theory.

The Role of Moral Principles in a Moral Theory

A moral principle is a very general moral statement that purports to set forth conditions under which an action is right or wrong, or something is good or bad. Here is an example of a moral principle:

An action is wrong if and only if it would involve treating others as mere means to one's own ends.

Putting aside the question of whether this moral principle is correct, the main thing to notice is that it states a connection between an action's being morally wrong and its involving treatment of others as mere means to one's own ends. Moral principles have traditionally played a central role in attempts by moral philosophers to accomplish the theoretical and practical aims of moral theory.

Suppose we discover that what makes any action wrong is the fact that it would involve treating someone as a mere means to one's own ends. We could then conveniently express this theoretical knowledge by using the above moral principle. A moral principle, understood this way, would thus serve to satisfy the theoretical aim of a moral theory by providing a moral criterion.

Furthermore, with this moral principle in hand, we would presumably also have the basis of a proper decision procedure in ethics. The idea is that we apply the principle to a case under consideration in order to arrive at a correct or justified moral verdict about some specific action. A sample application of the moral principle in question is provided in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 Sample Application of a Moral Principle.

Argument Component	Argument Scheme	Example Argument
Premise	1. Moral principle	1'. An action is forbidden if and only if it would involve treating some person merely as a means to one's own ends.
Premise	2. Relevant factual information	2´. James's act of lying to Brenda involved treating Brenda merely as a means to James's own ends.
Conclusion	3. Conclusion about the morality of an action	3´. James's act of lying to Brenda was forbidden.

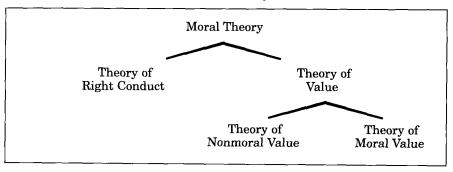
A moral theory, then, is typically understood as composed of moral principles cast in a dual role. First, moral principles are intended to satisfy the theoretical aim of moral theory by stating those basic underlying features that make an action right or wrong, or make something good or bad. Second, such principles are also supposed to provide the basis of a decision procedure for coming to correct moral verdicts in specific situations.4

The Structure of a Moral Theory

In the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Rawls claims that the main concepts in ethics are the concepts of the right and the good. From what we have learned, we now know that ethics is concerned with the moral evaluation of conduct (rightness and wrongness) and with character (goodness and badness of persons). In addition, we have learned that ethics is also concerned with the nonmoral value (goodness and badness) of things, experiences, and states of affairs.

Let us say that an account of the nature of right and wrong action represents a *theory of right conduct*. Let us call an account of the nature of value a *theory of value* and, because we distinguish between moral and nonmoral value, a theory of value has two branches: a *theory of moral value* and a *theory of nonmoral value*. Figure 3 shows the main branches of moral theory.

FIGURE 3 Main Branches of Moral Theory.



One question addressed by a moral theory is how these branches are related. Again, Rawls claims that the *structure* of a moral theory is determined by how a theory connects the concepts of the right and the good. For example, according to what we may call value-based theories, the concept of the good is more basic than the concept of the right. By contrast, according to *deontic-based* theories—often called *deontological* moral theories—the concept of the good is not more basic than the concept of the right.⁵

Among value-based theories, some take the concepts of nonmoral value to be most basic. Such theories define or characterize right action in terms of how actions and character traits are related to what has intrinsic nonmoral value. The natural law theory, featured in chapter 4, and utilitarianism, featured in chapter 5, are representatives of this kind of theory. By contrast, other value-based moral theories—versions of virtue ethics, represented in chapter 7—take the category of moral value to be more basic than the category of right action. Such theories define or characterize right action in terms of some relation between actions and the notion of a virtuous person.

A deontological theory characterizes the rightness and wrongness of actions independently of considerations of value. Kant's ethics (chapter 6) and the version of moral pluralism defended by W. D. Ross (chapter 9) are representatives of this type of theory.

Brief Summary

Before turning to the question of how we are to evaluate a moral theory, let us sum up the main points from the previous sections.

Main concepts of moral theory. The two main concepts featured in moral theory are the concepts of the right (and wrong) and the good (and bad). The concepts of right and wrong are called 'deontic' concepts and are used primarily to evaluate the morality of actions. The concepts of good and bad are the main concepts of value and are used in the moral evaluation of persons (their character) as well as in the evaluation of things, experiences, and states of affairs.

Two aims of moral theory. There are two main aims characteristic of moral theory. The theoretical aim is to explain the underlying nature of the right and the good by specifying criteria of the right and the good. The practical aim is to discover a decision procedure that can guide us in making correct decisions about matters of morality.

The role of moral principles. A moral theory is typically composed of moral principles that are intended to serve as a criterion of the right and the good (thus satisfying the theoretical aim) and as the basis for a decision procedure (thus satisfying the practical aim).

The structure of moral theory. Considerations of structure concern how a theory connects the right and the good. Value-based theories make the good (value) more basic than the right and define or characterize the right in terms of the good. Deontological theories, by contrast, characterize the right independently of considerations of value.

How to Evaluate a Moral Theory

In this section, I will describe some of the standards that are used to evaluate competing moral theories. But before doing so, let me recommend that readers who are studying moral theory for the first time return to this section when reading those articles that raise objections to the various theories featured in each chapter.

As we have seen, a moral theory has both a theoretical and practical aim. So it makes sense to evaluate such a theory by considering how well it satisfies these aims. How do we do this? There are various standards or criteria that philosophers have developed for determining how well a moral theory does in relation to the theoretical and practical aims. Here, then, is a list of some criteria for evaluating a moral theory.

CONSISTENCY

One expects a moral theory to be consistent in its moral verdicts about what is right or wrong, good or bad. One obvious way in which a moral theory might fail to be consistent is when its principles, together with relevant factual information, yield a conclusion that some specific concrete action is both right and wrong. We can express the consistency criterion as follows:

A moral theory should be consistent in the sense that its principles, together with relevant factual information, yield consistent moral verdicts about the morality of actions, persons, and other items of moral evaluation.

We should be careful here. If a theory leads to the conclusion that some concrete action, performed by a specific individual on a specific occasion, both is and is not obligatory (for example), then it is guilty of inconsistency. Similarly, if a theory leads to the conclusion that some general type of action both is and is not wrong (for example), then, again, it is inconsistent. But it is not inconsistent for a theory to yield the result that in general lying is wrong and at the same time yield the result that in some specific case a concrete act of telling a lie is not wrong. There need be no inconsistency here, because from the outset the claim that lying is wrong has been limited by the implicit modifier in general, implying that the normal rule may, in special circumstances, have exceptions.

It should be fairly obvious why this criterion is important for satisfying both aims of a moral theory. If a theory yields inconsistent moral verdicts about the morality of an action, then it simply fails to be useful as a decision procedure. Furthermore, if a moral theory yields inconsistent verdicts about items of moral evaluation, then presumably it fails to give a correct moral criterion that explains the underlying nature of morality. So, consistency is a hallmark of a correct moral theory.

DETERMINACY

To say that a moral theory is determinate is to say that, at least in a wide range of cases, its principles yield definite moral verdicts about whatever is being evaluated. When the principles of a moral theory (together with any relevant factual information) fail to yield a definite verdict about the morality of an action, then with respect to that action, the theory is indeterminate. Suppose, for instance, that a moral theory features a principle according to which an action is right if and only if it is respectful of persons. Unless the theory goes on to specify in a fairly specific way what counts as being respectful of persons, this principle (and hence the theory in question) will fail to yield determinate moral verdicts about a wide range of actions. For example, is the death penalty respectful of persons? What about euthanasia? What about telling a lie in order to spare someone's feelings? So according to the determinacy criterion:

A moral theory should feature principles that, together with relevant factual information, yield determinate moral verdicts about the morality of actions, persons, and other items of moral evaluation in a wide range of cases.

A moral theory that is too indeterminate will fail to provide a useful decision procedure and thus fail to satisfy the practical aim of moral