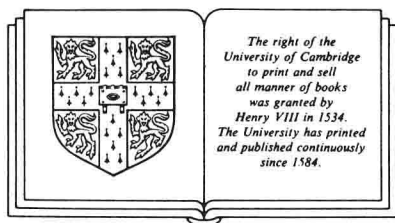


Practical Ethics

PETER SINGER

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PREFACE

Practical ethics covers a wide area. We can find ethical ramifications in most of our choices, if we look hard enough. This book does not attempt to cover the whole area. The problems it deals with have been selected on two grounds: relevance, and the extent to which philosophical reasoning can contribute to discussion of them.

I regard an ethical issue as relevant if it is one that any thinking person must face. Some of the issues discussed in this book confront us daily: what are our personal responsibilities towards the poor? Are we justified in treating animals as nothing more than machines producing flesh for us to eat? And why should we bother about acting in accordance with moral principles anyway? Other problems, like abortion and euthanasia, fortunately are not everyday decisions for most of us; but they are issues which can arise at some time in our lives. They are also issues of current concern about which any active participant in our society's decision-making process needs to reflect.

The extent to which an issue can usefully be discussed philosophically depends on the kind of issue it is. Some issues are controversial largely because there are facts in dispute. For example, whether experiments in genetic engineering using recombinant DNA ought to go ahead seems to hang largely on whether they pose a serious risk to public health through the escape of new bacteria to which we have no resistance. Philosophers lack the expertise to tackle this question. In other

cases, however, the facts are clear and accepted by both sides; it is conflicting ethical views that give rise to disagreement over what to do. Then the kind of reasoning and analysis that philosophers practise really can make a difference. The issues discussed in this book are ones in which ethical, rather than factual, disagreement plays a major role. The potential contribution of philosophers to discussions of these issues is therefore considerable.

In writing this book I have not hesitated to make use of my own previously published articles and books. Thus Chapter 3 is based on my book, *Animal Liberation* (New York Review/Random House, 1975) although it also takes account of objections made since the book appeared. Sections of Chapter 8 restate arguments from 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1 (1972) and from 'Reconsidering the Famine Relief Argument' in Peter Brown and Henry Shue (eds.) *Food Policy: The Responsibility of the United States in the Life and Death Choices* (New York, The Free Press, 1977). Portions of Chapter 9 draw on *Democracy and Disobedience* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973).

H. J. McCloskey, Derek Parfit and Robert Young provided useful comments on a draft version of the book. Robert Young's ideas also entered into my thinking at an earlier stage, when we jointly taught a course on these topics at La Trobe University. The chapter on euthanasia, in particular, owes much to his ideas, though he may not agree with everything in it. Going back further still, my interest in ethics was stimulated by H. J. McCloskey, whom I was fortunate to have as a teacher during my undergraduate years; while the mark left by R. M. Hare, who taught me at Oxford, is apparent in the ethical foundations underlying the positions taken in this book. Jeremy Mynott, of Cambridge University Press, encouraged me to write the book and helped to shape and improve it as it went along. It remains only to thank Jean Archer for typing up the final version with her usual efficiency and good humour.

Oxford, February 1979

Peter Singer

Note to the reader

To give an uncluttered text, notes, references and suggested further reading are provided by chapter on pp. 221–33.

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About ethics

This book is about practical ethics, that is about the application of ethics or morality – I shall use the words interchangeably – to practical issues like the treatment of racial minorities, equality for women, the use of animals for food and research, abortion, euthanasia and the obligation of the wealthy to help the poor. No doubt the reader will want to get on to these issues without delay; but there are some preliminaries which must be dealt with at the start. In order to have a useful discussion *within* ethics, it is necessary to say a little *about* ethics so that we have a clear understanding of what we are doing when we discuss ethical questions. This first chapter therefore sets the stage for the remainder of the book. In order to prevent it growing into an entire volume itself, it is brief and at times dogmatic. I cannot take the space properly to consider all the different conceptions of ethics that might be opposed to the one I shall defend; but this chapter will at least serve to reveal the assumptions on which the remainder of the book is based.

What ethics is not

Some people think that morality is now out of date. They regard morality as a system of nasty puritanical prohibitions, mainly designed to stop people having fun. Traditional moralists who claim to be the defenders of morality, when they are only defending one particular moral code, rather than morality as

such, have been allowed to pre-empt the field to such an extent that when a newspaper headline reads **BISHOP ATTACKS DECLINING MORAL STANDARDS** we expect to read yet again about promiscuity, homosexuality, pornography and so on, and not about corporations bribing government officials, or the puny amounts we give as overseas aid to poorer nations.

So the first thing ethics is not, is a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex. Sex raises no special moral issues at all. Decisions about sex may involve considerations of honesty, concern for others, prudence and so on, but there is nothing special about sex in this respect, for the same could be said of decisions about driving a car. (In fact the moral issues raised by driving a car, both from an environmental and from a safety point of view, are much more serious than those raised by having sex.) Accordingly this book contains no discussion of sexual morality. There are more important ethical issues to be considered.

The second thing that ethics is not, is an ideal system which is all very noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse of this is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice.

People sometimes believe that ethics is inapplicable to the real world because they believe that ethics is a system of short and simple rules like 'Do not lie', 'Do not steal', and 'Do not kill'. It is not surprising that those who hold this model of ethics should also believe that ethics is not suited to life's complexities. In unusual situations, simple rules conflict; and even when they do not, following a rule can lead to disaster. It may normally be wrong to lie, but if you were living in Nazi Germany and the Gestapo came to your door looking for Jews, it would surely be right to deny the existence of the Jewish family hiding in your attic.

Like the failure of a restrictive sexual morality, the failure of an ethic of simple rules must not be taken as a failure of ethics as a whole. It is only a failure of one view of ethics, and not even an

irremediable failure of that view. Those who think that ethics is a system of rules – the deontologists – can rescue their position by finding more complicated and more specific rules which do not conflict with each other, or by ranking the rules in some hierarchical structure to resolve conflicts between them. Moreover there is a long-standing approach to ethics which is quite untouched by the complexities which make simple rules difficult to apply. This is the teleological or consequentialist view. Consequentialists start not with moral rules but with goals. They assess actions by the extent to which they further these goals. The best-known, though not the only, consequentialist theory is utilitarianism. The classical utilitarian regards an action as right if it produces as much or more of an increase in the happiness of all affected by it than any alternative action, and wrong if it does not.

The consequences of an action vary according to the circumstances in which it is performed. Hence a utilitarian can never properly be accused of a lack of realism, or of a rigid adherence to ideals in defiance of practical experience. The utilitarian will judge lying bad in some circumstances and good in others, depending on its consequences.

The third thing ethics is not, is something intelligible only in the context of religion. I shall treat ethics as entirely independent of religion.

Some theists say that ethics cannot do without religion because the very meaning of 'good' is nothing other than 'what God approves'. Plato refuted a similar claim more than two thousand years ago by arguing that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods' approval that makes them good. The alternative view makes divine approval entirely arbitrary: if the gods had happened to approve of torture and disapprove of helping our neighbours, torture would have been good and helping our neighbours bad. Some modern theists have attempted to extricate themselves from this type of dilemma by maintaining that God is good and so could not possibly approve of torture; but these theists are caught in a trap

of their own making, for what can they possibly mean by the assertion that God is good? That God is approved of by God?

Traditionally the more important link between religion and ethics was that religion was thought to provide a reason for doing what is right, the reason being that those who are virtuous will be rewarded by an eternity of bliss while the rest roast in hell. Not all religious thinkers have accepted this: Immanuel Kant, a most pious Christian, scorned anything that smacked of a self-interested motive for obeying the moral law. We must obey it, he said, for its own sake. Nor do we have to be Kantians to dispense with the motivation offered by traditional religion. There is a long line of thought which finds the source of ethics in the attitudes of benevolence and sympathy for others that most people have. This is, however, a complex topic and since it is the subject of the final chapter of this book I shall not pursue it here. It is enough to say that our everyday observation of our fellows clearly shows that ethical behaviour does not require belief in heaven and hell.

The fourth, and last claim about ethics that I shall deny in this opening chapter is that ethics is relative or subjective. At least, I shall deny these claims in some of the senses in which they are often made. This point requires a more extended discussion than the other three.

Let us take first the often-asserted idea that ethics is relative to the society one happens to live in. This is true in one sense and false in another. It is true that, as we have already seen in discussing consequentialism, actions that are right in one situation because of their good consequences may be wrong in another situation because of their bad consequences. Thus casual sexual intercourse may be wrong when it leads to the existence of children who cannot be adequately cared for, and not wrong when, because of the existence of effective contraception, it does not lead to reproduction at all. But this is only a superficial form of relativism. While it suggests that a specific principle like 'Casual sex is wrong' may be relative to time and place, it says nothing against such a principle being objectively

valid in certain specified circumstances, or against the universal applicability of a more general principle like 'Do what increases happiness and reduces suffering.'

The more fundamental form of relativism became popular in the nineteenth century when data on the moral beliefs and practices of far-flung societies began pouring in. To the strict reign of Victorian prudery the knowledge that there were places where sexual relations between unmarried people were regarded as perfectly wholesome brought the seeds of a revolution in sexual attitudes. It is not surprising that to some the new knowledge suggested, not merely that the moral code of nineteenth-century Europe was not objectively valid, but that no moral judgment can do more than reflect the customs of the society in which it is made.

Marxists adapted this form of relativism to their own theories. The ruling ideas of each period, they said, are the ideas of its ruling class, and so the morality of a society is relative to its dominant economic class, and thus indirectly relative to its economic basis. So they triumphantly refuted the claims of feudal and bourgeois morality to objective, universal validity. But this raises a problem: if all morality is relative, what is so special about communism? Why side with the proletariat rather than the bourgeoisie?

Engels dealt with this problem in the only way possible, by abandoning relativism in favour of the more limited claim that the morality of a society divided into classes will always be relative to the ruling class, although the morality of a society without class antagonisms could be a 'really human' morality. This is no longer relativism at all, but Marxism still, in a confused sort of way, provides the impetus for a lot of woolly relativist ideas.

The problem that led Engels to abandon relativism defeats ordinary ethical relativism as well. Anyone who has thought about an ethical decision knows that being told what our society thinks we ought to do does not settle our decision. We have to reach our own decision. The beliefs and customs we were brought up with may exercise great influence on us, but once we

start to reflect upon them we can decide whether to act in accordance with them, or go against them.

The opposite view – that ethics is always relative to a particular society – has most implausible consequences. If our society disapproves of slavery, while another society approves of it, we have no basis to choose between these conflicting views. Indeed, on a relativist analysis there is really no conflict – when I say slavery is wrong I am really only saying that my society disapproves of slavery, and when the slaveowners from the other society say that slavery is right, they are only saying that their society approves of it. Why argue? Obviously we could both be speaking the truth.

Worse still, the relativist cannot satisfactorily account for the nonconformist. If ‘slavery is wrong’ means ‘my society disapproves of slavery’ then someone who lives in a society which does not disapprove of slavery is, in claiming that slavery is wrong, making a simple factual error. An opinion poll could demonstrate the error of an ethical judgment. Would-be reformers are therefore in a parlous situation: when they set out to change the ethical views of their fellow-citizens they are *necessarily* mistaken; it is only when they succeed in winning most of the society over to their own views that those views become right.

These difficulties are enough to sink ethical relativism; ethical subjectivism at least avoids making nonsense of the valiant efforts of would-be moral reformers, for it makes ethical judgments depend on the approval or disapproval of the person making the judgment, rather than that person’s society. There are other difficulties, though, that at least some forms of ethical subjectivism cannot overcome.

If those who say that ethics is subjective mean by this that when I say that cruelty to animals is wrong I am really only saying that I disapprove of cruelty to animals, they are faced with an aggravated form of one of the difficulties of relativism: the inability to account for ethical disagreement. What was true for the relativist of disagreement between people from different societies is for the subjectivist true of disagreement between any

two people. I say cruelty to animals is wrong: someone else says it is not wrong. If this means that I disapprove of cruelty to animals and someone else does not, both statements may be true and so there is nothing to argue about.

Other theories often described as 'subjectivist' are not open to this objection. Suppose someone maintains that ethical judgments are neither true nor false because they do not describe anything – neither objective moral facts, nor one's own subjective states of mind. This theory might hold that, as C. L. Stevenson suggested, ethical judgments express attitudes, rather than describe them, and we disagree about ethics because we try, by expressing our own attitude, to bring our listeners to a similar attitude. Or it might be, as R. M. Hare has urged, that ethical judgments are prescriptions and therefore more closely related to commands than to statements of fact. On this view we disagree because we care about what people do. Those features of ethical argument that imply the existence of objective moral standards can be explained away by maintaining that this is some kind of error – perhaps the legacy of the belief that ethics is a God-given system of law, or perhaps just another example of our tendency to objectify our personal wants and preferences. J. L. Mackie has defended this view.

Provided they are carefully distinguished from the crude form of subjectivism which sees ethical judgments as descriptions of the speaker's attitudes, these are plausible accounts of ethics. In their denial of a realm of ethical facts which is part of the real world, existing quite independently of us, they are no doubt correct; but does it follow from this that ethical judgments are immune from criticism, that there is no role for reason or argument in ethics and that, from the standpoint of reason, any ethical judgment is as good as any other? I do not think it does, and none of the three philosophers referred to in the previous paragraph denies reason and argument a role in ethics, though they disagree as to the significance of this role.

This issue of the role that reason can play in ethics is the crucial point raised by the claim that ethics is subjective. The non-existence of a mysterious realm of objective ethical facts

need not concern us, as long as it does not imply the non-existence of ethical reasoning. It may even help, since if we could arrive at ethical judgments only by intuiting these strange ethical facts, ethical argument would be more difficult still. So what has to be shown to put practical ethics on a sound basis is that ethical reasoning is possible. Here the temptation is to say simply that the proof of the pudding lies in the eating, and the proof that reasoning is possible in ethics is to be found in the remaining chapters of this book, in which we do reason about ethics; but this is not entirely satisfactory. From a theoretical point of view it is unsatisfactory because we might find ourselves reasoning about ethics without really understanding how this can happen; and from a practical point of view it is unsatisfactory because our reasoning is more likely to go astray if we lack a grasp of its foundations. I shall therefore attempt to say something about how we can reason in ethics.

What ethics is: one view

What follows is a sketch of a view of ethics which allows reason an important role in ethical decisions. It is not the only possible view of ethics, but it is a plausible view. Once again, however, I shall have to pass over qualifications and objections worth a chapter to themselves. To those who think these undiscussed objections defeat the position I am advancing I can only say, again, that this whole chapter may be treated as no more than a statement of the assumptions on which this book is based. In that way it will at least assist in giving a clear view of what I take ethics to be.

What is it to make a moral judgment, or to argue about an ethical issue, or to live according to ethical standards? How do moral judgments differ from other practical judgments? Why do we regard a woman's decision to have an abortion as raising an ethical issue, but not her decision to change her job? What is the difference between a person who lives by ethical standards and one who doesn't?

All these questions are related, so we only need to consider one of them; but to do this we need to say something about the

nature of ethics. Suppose that we have studied the lives of a number of different people, and we know a lot about what they do, what they believe, and so on. Can we then decide which of them are living by ethical standards and which are not?

We might think that the way to proceed here is to find out who believes it wrong to lie, cheat, steal and so on, and does not do any of these things, and who has no such beliefs, and shows no such restraint in their actions. Then those in the first group would be living according to ethical standards and those in the second group would not be. But this procedure mistakenly assimilates two distinctions: the first is the distinction between living according to (what we judge to be) the right ethical standards and living according to (what we judge to be) mistaken ethical standards; the second is the distinction between living according to some ethical standards, and living according to no ethical standards at all. Those who lie and cheat, but do not believe what they are doing to be wrong, may be living according to ethical standards. They may believe, for any of a number of possible reasons, that it is right to lie, cheat, steal and so on. They are not living according to conventional ethical standards, but they may be living according to some other ethical standards.

This first attempt to distinguish the ethical from the non-ethical was mistaken, but we can learn from our mistakes. We found that we must concede that those who hold unconventional ethical beliefs are still living according to ethical standards, *if they believe, for any reason, that it is right to do as they are doing*. The italicized condition gives us a clue to the answer we are seeking. The notion of living according to ethical standards is tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it. Thus people may do all kinds of things we regard as wrong, yet still be living according to ethical standards, if they are prepared to defend and justify what they do. We may find the justification inadequate, and may hold that the actions are wrong, but the attempt at justification, whether successful or not, is sufficient to bring the person's conduct within the domain of the ethical as opposed to

the non-ethical. When, on the other hand, people cannot put forward any justification for what they do, we may reject their claim to be living according to ethical standards, even if what they do is in accordance with conventional moral principles.

We can go further. If we are to accept that a person is living according to ethical standards, the justification must be of a certain kind. For instance, a justification in terms of self-interest alone will not do. When Macbeth, contemplating the murder of Duncan, admits that only 'vaulting ambition' drives him to do it, he is admitting that the act cannot be justified ethically. 'So that I can be king in his place' is not a weak attempt at an ethical justification for assassination; it is not the sort of reason that counts as an ethical justification at all. Self-interested acts must be shown to be compatible with more broadly based ethical principles if they are to be ethically defensible, for the notion of ethics carries with it the idea of something bigger than the individual. If I am to defend my conduct on ethical grounds, I cannot point only to the benefits it brings me. I must address myself to a larger audience.

From ancient times, philosophers and moralists have expressed the idea that ethical conduct is acceptable from a point of view that is somehow *universal*. The 'Golden Rule' attributed to Moses tells us to go beyond our own personal interests and 'do unto others as we would have them do unto us'. The same idea of putting oneself in the position of another is involved in the Christian commandment that we love our neighbour as ourself. The Stoics held that ethics derives from a universal natural law. Kant developed this idea into his famous formula: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.' Kant's theory has itself been modified and developed by R. M. Hare, who sees 'universalizability' as a logical feature of moral judgments. The eighteenth-century British philosophers Hutcheson, Hume and Adam Smith appealed to an imaginary 'impartial spectator' as the test of a moral judgment, and this theory has its modern version in the Ideal Observer Theory. Utilitarians, from Jeremy Bentham to J. J. C. Smart, take it as