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BASIC MORAL
PHILOSOPHY

SECOND EDITION

Basic Moral Philosophy

Second Edition

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Preface

The principal aim of this book is to introduce those with no previous background in ethics to the main issues, concepts, and theories of Western moral philosophy. A secondary aim is to provide a handy supplementary text for more advanced undergraduates and others who want to review these topics.

Introductory ethics courses have changed dramatically in recent decades. There are traditional courses, dealing with the main historical writers; systematic courses, analyzing theoretical problems with little more than passing acknowledgment of their historical antecedents; and courses in applied ethics, dealing with practical problems, often after a brief introduction to theory.

No one textbook is equally well suited to all three of these approaches. What is most important in ethics, and how the whole subject is best approached, is in fact one of the more divisive issues in twentieth-century ethics. Most notably, perhaps, there are differences over whether a rational, systematic approach is even a useful way to try to understand morality.

It may not be. Some Eastern philosophies hold that enlightenment requires an altogether different approach, involving mediation, self-purification, and self-discipline. Conceptual thinking and rational argumentation are sometimes even considered an impediment. And some of feminist ethics views much of the Western tradition as representing a masculine concept of rationality that does not do justice to what is believed to be woman's different experience of morality.

Be that as it may, if one wants to understand morality, and if at least a part of such an understanding requires understanding the efforts that have been made to explain it rationally, then one must take account of the most serious of those efforts. There are other approaches, and they are equally deserving of consideration. But limitations of space prevent us from doing justice to them here; and, in any event, some of them do not lend themselves to the sort of treatment we are undertaking.

So even if it should turn out that reason plays a limited role in the actual making of moral judgments, as even many writers in the Western tradition have maintained, to show that and to explain why it is so would require the systematic use of reason. And this would require placing alternative approaches in the broader context of competing traditional theories. It is these theories we examine in this book.

Although I believe that confronting the moral issues of how to live, and how best to deal with interpersonal and social moral problems, is ultimately of greatest

importance, I also believe that no better grounding for this confrontation can be provided than by understanding the best of traditional theoretical work on moral philosophy. I therefore believe moral philosophy is best approached with at least one eye on the history of ethics. Moreover, I think an ethics course should also prepare students to do more advanced work in ethics if they should choose, and should enable them to understand recent (though not necessarily contemporary) philosophical literature on ethics. Thus it is important that they understand both the theory and the vocabulary of recent ethical theory (even if some of it is jargon). Finally, I believe it is important to do more than just present positions, concepts, and theories; it is also important to engage students in some philosophizing, to challenge them to think as well as to learn what others have thought.

In this book, students are exposed to some of the most important work in moral philosophy in the Western tradition; not in great depth, obviously, but enough to instil a sense of its importance and relevance to contemporary concerns. They also consider some of the problems twentieth-century philosophers have taken to be most important, which is essential to proceeding with more advanced ethical theory. Finally, by presenting my own assessments on a number of issues, I hope to involve students in *doing* moral philosophy as well as in learning about it. One problem with many ethics courses—is that students find themselves being convinced by each successive theory they study, or at least feeling that each theory is equally ingenious and irrefutable. So they often end up not knowing what to believe, or become convinced that every theory is as good as any other. In what follows, I do some philosophizing as well as explaining and analyzing what other philosophers have said. I do so in the conviction that becoming part of such an enterprise is a more constructive way of engaging philosophical issues than by being presented with a detached, neutral examination of one theory after another. The assessments I make, however, and the position I sketch in the final chapter, should, of course, be received in the same critical spirit as all the other theories we examine. They are certainly no less controversial, and I trust that instructors will take issue with these assessments where they see fit.

Students who do all this will, I believe, be well prepared to do more work in ethics, whether from an historical, theoretical, or practical approach. Those for whom this is their sole exposure to ethics should come away not only with an understanding of the primary issues in moral philosophy but also with some sense of how to deal with those issues philosophically.

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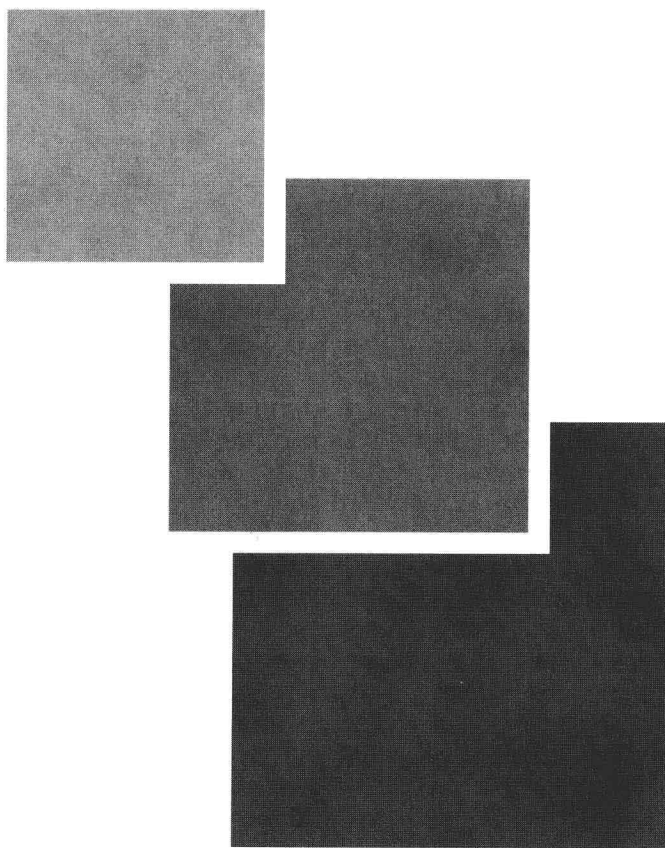
CHAPTER ONE

The Nature of Ethics

The good greets us initially in every experience and in every object. Remove from anything its share of excellence and you have made it utterly insignificant, irrelevant to human discourse, and unworthy of even theoretic consideration.

—George Santayana

1.1 WHY STUDY MORAL PHILOSOPHY?

Simply put, **ethics** is the study of morality. But there are many different approaches to studying morality, reflecting different assumptions about its nature and about how best to understand it.

Moral philosophy is one such approach, and it is unique in the scope and depth of the questions it raises, and the way it sets about answering them. Indeed, it is almost certain that one cannot understand morality fully without raising the kinds of questions moral philosophy asks.

The ancients distinguished **knowledge** from wisdom, where knowledge was understood to be something that can be taught. If you pay attention, after hearing a lecture on physics, chemistry, or history you come away with knowledge—facts and information—you didn't have before. It can be given, taught. Knowledge is important and is essential to **wisdom,** but does not by itself ensure wisdom, whose elements are understanding, insight, good judgment, and the capacity to live well and guide conduct well. Many educated people, in fact, are inept at making practical decisions, and they aren't noticeably better at living moral lives than other people. They have *knowledge,* but they lack *wisdom.* And it is with wisdom that moral philosophy is most concerned. For **philosophy,** etymologically, is the love of wisdom

(*philo-*, "love"; *sophos*, "wisdom"—from the Greek). And *moral philosophy* is the love and pursuit of wisdom in moral matters.

Strictly speaking, then, moral philosophy cannot be taught, because the love of wisdom cannot be imparted in the way in which facts about the world can be imparted. But the love of moral wisdom can be encouraged in everyone and can be nurtured in those who actively seek to understand morality and its place in human life. Although moral philosophy cannot promise to resolve your moral problems for you, it can help guide you in efforts to resolve those problems, and in deliberations about what constitutes the wise conduct of life. And virtually nothing is of greater importance.

The study of moral philosophy is also exciting and challenging in its own right. Whatever the nature of reality, and however the universe came into being, morality is now a part of it. Love, hate, values, thoughts, feelings, emotions, obligations, virtues, and principles—the elements of morality—are in their own way as real as atoms and electrons, and to understand our world fully we must be prepared to study them as seriously as we do the chemical and physical properties of things. They are, of course, often dismissed as "subjective," "relative," or merely "matters of opinion." Even if that should be true (which is far from obvious), they nonetheless exist in some way, or can be explained in terms of things that exist. In any event, such claims simply reflect implicit theories about the nature of morality, and they are by no means the only such theories, nor necessarily the most plausible ones. And these and other theories can be assessed adequately only through moral philosophy.

To understand ethics in any of its forms, as well as to understand moral philosophy in particular, presupposes at least a rudimentary understanding of the nature of morality. The problem is that we can only go so far in presenting such an understanding without beginning to presuppose answers to controversial issues contested by different ethical theories. Nonetheless, I believe we can tell a plausible story about the origins of morality—one that will highlight its main features as well as help us to understand the different approaches to studying morality.

Let's begin with some relatively unproblematic observations, and then work our way into the more complex and controversial issues.

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1.2 THE ORIGINS OF MORALITY

Humans have always needed food, warmth, shelter, and sex, and things that satisfy these basic needs have always had value for us. In this we are like other animals.

But at some point in our history we begin to *think* of these things as valued. With that, conceptualization began and the idea of goodness was born. This shift separated us from other animals. They need and want many things but (so far as we

know) don't have a concept of **value** (or goodness) by which to understand and think about such things or about the role such things play in their lives. This capacity for conceptualization and thought makes moral philosophy possible.

As societies came into being, increased cooperation and a division of labor facilitated the satisfaction of needs. Wants then began to outstrip needs, and interests extended beyond things that merely make survival possible to things that also enhance life. Entertainment and leisure became valued, along with artistic and musical expression, and in time literature, science, and philosophy. Learning became actively pursued for its own sake as well as for the sake of survival. Aspirations grew, and with the development of intelligence and the capacity to reflect on life and the world, the idea of goodness extended still further.

Anything in which an interest was taken eventually came to be invested with value, and the idea of goodness became pervasive.

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1.3 THE ACTIVITY OF EVALUATING

The details of how this came about we do not know. We do know that in Western thought the philosophical significance of the story received its first full explication from Plato in the fourth century B.C. He pointed out that just as the sun is necessary to light, nutrition, and growth throughout the physical world, so the idea of goodness is essential to our understanding of people, conduct, institutions, and society.

This was one of the profoundest insights in Western philosophy. Its importance cannot be underestimated. Let's consider what it means.

At this moment, you are reading this book for a specific purpose; perhaps to pass a course, to gather background for a term paper, or simply to learn about ethics. A full explanation of your behavior would require at least tacit reference to the *value* you attach to learning or passing a course or getting a college degree. Even a college or university itself presupposes the end of education. Education is a value for organizing and operating such an institution. In fact, you cannot fully explain what a college or university is apart from that value. Nor could you adequately explain what a library is apart from the purpose of making knowledge accessible and the assumption that to do so is deemed by some to be good; or what law is apart from the goal of regulating behavior and the idea that to do so serves a valued social purpose; or what a monetary system is apart from its role in making certain kinds of value transactions possible. The same with virtually all institutions.

Even simple everyday choices typically reflect **value judgments.** That you chose to get up at 6 A.M. rather than at 9 A.M. today, or to wear your green sweater rather than the blue one, reflect judgments that (for whatever reason) it was *better* to do so. Of course, you didn't need to say to yourself, "It would be better to do this." Judging may be more or less self-conscious and need not be verbalized. But we all

do it, regularly. It isn't possible, in fact, to go through a single day of rational self-directed conduct without making value judgments.

So the activity of *evaluating* lies at the center of human affairs. Even if we do not think of the physical universe as containing ends or purposes (a **teleological** conception of the world held by Plato and most classical Greek philosophers), human activities can only be understood in terms of purposes. Such activities include science. The scientific study of the universe and the life in it is undertaken only because it is valued—whether merely to increase understanding or, as in modern times (for better or worse), to let us harness the world's resources to human needs. We can, in short, neither live as rational beings nor fully understand our personal and social lives apart from the idea of value.

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1.4 GUIDING AND DIRECTING CONDUCT

In our development, another important activity also emerged—that of guiding and directing conduct. Again, we do not know precisely when or how, but it most likely arose somewhat as follows.

Humans have probably always clustered in groups of some sort, no doubt families at first, then tribes, clans, and eventually whole societies. This clustering facilitated our survival as well as our communication and the satisfaction of our needs. But a part of such communication, almost certainly from the start, was the direction and guidance of conduct—from a mother's warning to her child not to play too close to the fire, to a father's instructions to his sons on the hunt. As social relations evolved, the kinds of direction, and the circumstances of its use, undoubtedly expanded as concepts of power, dominance, leadership, and eventually government formed.

Most complex forms of cooperation, as noted, made increasingly possible the satisfaction of wants and the attainment of broader ends such as education, artistic achievement, and social and political organization. For this reason, the community became increasingly important. Its preservation became essential to attaining other values. And settled ways of doing things took hold, some rooted in superstition, others in generalizations from experience about what is useful. Although not all consciously adopted at first, those ways that endured served *overall* (they need not all have done so *individually*) to further the ends or purposes valued by the community and its members.

Accordingly, conduct contrary to established and approved ways of doing things came to be discouraged and often punished. Prohibitions grew up, and certain kinds of conduct were considered *wrong*. Others were permitted or even expressly required and were deemed *right* or *obligatory*. Directives for regulating conduct congealed over time into rules and principles, as settled habits became transformed into customs and practices. Our words "ethics" and "morals," in fact, derive from

the Greek and Roman words *ethos* and *mores* respectively, signifying the customs, conventions, rules, standards, and distinctive characteristics of communal groups.

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1.5 VALUE JUDGMENTS AND PRESCRIPTIVE JUDGMENTS

Directives expressing requirements and prohibitions in the social sphere at first largely signified what was approved or disapproved by the collectivity. Yet the notions of right and wrong (and associated concepts such as "should" and "should not," "must" and "must not," "just" and "unjust," "duty" and "obligation") provided individuals with the conceptual tools with which to criticize even the customs and conventions of the community itself. The very notions to which the practices of groups gave rise made possible the critical assessment of those practices themselves.

We will never know how it came about, but recognition (or perhaps invention) of the distinction between what *is* and what *ought to be* was an epochal development in human affairs. It created a vastly expanded capacity for reasoning and opened possibilities for the guidance of both personal and social life. Without it, civilization and the institutions of law and government could not have arisen. And morality surely could not have come into being.

Thus it is conceptually possible to question whether infanticide in ancient Sparta, or the burning of widows in India, or the enslavement of Africans by Europeans and Americans was right. We can in our own day question whether discrimination against women and nonwhites is right, even though all these either were or still are established practices. Moral thinking became possible with the emergence of the concepts of good and bad, and right and wrong.

Here, however, we have already crossed over into controversial ground. Some people deny that one can effectively criticize the customs and practices of other cultures, or perhaps even of one's own. Morality, they say, is in some important sense relative to the social and cultural circumstances in which it arises, and right and wrong can only be understood in that context. Still others insist that, although morality is not relative, it derives its meaning only from religion, and that to omit the religious dimension in any account of its genesis distorts its nature.

Both objections raise serious issues. The first raises the issue of moral relativism, the second that of the possible dependence of morality on religion. But they merit detailed treatment on their own, and so they will be discussed later (relativism in Chapter 11 and the divine command theory—one version of the religious view—in Chapter 6).

For the present, let me say that in addition to the activity of evaluating we must recognize (1) the importance to human affairs of guiding and directing conduct,

which grow out of socialization processes, and, (2) in more complex forms, the importance of the perceived need to regulate the conduct of group members. This guiding and directing and regulating can take the form of either commands and orders or of **prescriptive judgments** about what is right or wrong, or ought or ought not to be done. Both value judgments and prescriptive judgments originate in the practical activities of evaluating and directing.

This importance can be granted, whatever one's views on relativism and the relationship of morality to religion. Therefore, this importance to society of guidance provides a good point of departure for detailing some of the implications of these distinctions. Let us begin by making the distinctions a little clearer.

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1.6 NORMATIVE JUDGMENTS AND DESCRIPTIVE STATEMENTS

Value judgments and prescriptive judgments may both be called **normative judgments** to distinguish them from purely descriptive, factual statements about the world. They typically express or presuppose norms or standards rather than simply reporting scientifically verifiable facts. For example, I may say,

1. This is a red car.

I am making a descriptive statement here. I am reporting a fact about the car without any implied evaluation. Then I say,

2. This is a good car.

Here I am making a value judgment, one that presupposes some standard of quality or goodness that I believe the car meets. Now perhaps I say,

3. You haven't returned the ten dollars I lent you.

Here I am making a descriptive statement. But maybe I say,

4. You ought to have returned the ten dollars I lent you.

Now I am making a prescriptive judgment.

Although all moral judgments are normative, not all normative judgments are moral. Whether they are moral depends on the criteria presupposed in making them. This means that although we associate such terms as "right" and "wrong" with morality, they are often used for purposes other than to make moral judgments.