

# *Ethics for Life*



An Interdisciplinary and  
Multicultural Introduction



Judith A. Boss



# Ethics for Life

*An Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Introduction*

JUDITH A. BOSS

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Brown University*



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## To My Students

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## Preface

Aristotle wrote that “the ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it.” *Ethics for Life* is a multicultural and interdisciplinary introductory ethics text that provides students with an ethics curriculum which has been shown to significantly improve students’ ability to make real-life moral decisions.<sup>1</sup>

One of the frustrations in teaching ethics is getting students to integrate moral theory into their lives. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life, at one time the number one value among entering college freshmen, has declined rapidly in the past twenty years as a motive for attending college. Increased selfish behavior among young people and a decline in altruistic behavior during the college years has become a source of concern and even alarm.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the level of moral reasoning of as many as 20% of college students is equivalent to that of a junior high student or adult criminal. Racism and hate crimes have become a major problem on many campuses. Criminal activities such as murder, drug dealing, and sexual assaults, to name only a few, have all increased sharply on college campuses over the past few years.<sup>3</sup>

How can we as ethics teachers provide our students with the skills necessary to make better moral decisions in their lives? Traditional ethics courses, which restrict the study of ethics to the purely theoretical realm and avoid any attempts to make students “better” people, have been found to have little or no impact on students’ ability to engage in moral reasoning outside of the classroom.<sup>4</sup> While students are able to memorize theories and lines of reasoning long enough to pass the final exam, there is little true understanding and carryover into their moral reasoning outside the classroom. When confronted with real-life moral issues, most students simply revert back to their earlier forms of reasoning based on cultural norms or self-interest.

In the 1970s and early 1980s some professors who were dissatisfied with the traditional theory-laden ethics course replaced it with the values clarification or value-neutral approach. This approach involves “nonjudgmental” and “nondirective” discussions of popular moral issues where students were encouraged to express their own opinions without fear of criticism or judgment. Unfortunately, the values clarification approach has been found to have no positive effect on students’ moral development and, in fact, may even inhibit moral growth by sending the message that morality is all relative and hence anything goes as long as it feels good.

These findings have prompted researchers and instructors to look for new ways of approaching ethics education. *Ethics for Life* provides a curriculum that combines traditional ethics theory with a pedagogy based on the latest research on how to enhance moral development in college students. This approach has been found to be effective in improving students' moral judgment, moral behavior, and their self-esteem.<sup>5</sup>

**Objective** The primary objective of *Ethics for Life* is to provide a text that is solidly based in the latest research on moral development in college students while at the same time providing students with a broad overview of the major world moral philosophies.

**Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Approach** One of the main obstacles students face in taking an ethics course is its perceived lack of relevance to their own lives. Most ethics students are not philosophy majors. Ethics courses also tend to attract a widely diverse group of students, many of whom do not personally relate to the traditional European approach to moral philosophy. *Ethics for Life* includes coverage of, to name only a few, Buddhist ethics, Native American philosophy, ecofeminism, Confucianism, the utilitarian philosophy of Mo Tzu, feminist care ethics, liberation ethics, and the ethics of African philosopher Ibn Khaldun. The inclusion of moral philosophies from all over the world from both women and men not only gives the text a greater appeal to nontraditional students but also helps students to move beyond the implicit cultural relativism in most ethics texts that privileges traditional Western male approaches to ethics.

Moral theory does not occur in isolation, nor is morality practiced within a social vacuum. While the primary focus of this text is philosophical ethics, *Ethics for Life* adopts a more holistic approach. The text is presented in a historical and interdisciplinary context and includes extensive material from anthropology and sociology, political science, religion, psychology, and literature.

Because many students taking an ethics course are weak in critical thinking skills, there is a chapter on moral reasoning that includes sections on constructing moral arguments, resolving moral dilemmas, avoiding logical fallacies, and the relation between moral analysis and practice.

**A Developmental Pedagogy** There is a saying that if students cannot learn the way we teach them, we have to teach them the way they learn. In creating ethics curriculums that promote moral development, one of the approaches that has held out the most promise is the use of a cognitive-developmental approach to ethics education combined with experiential education, generally in the form of community service and the discussion of real-life moral dilemmas.

*Ethics for Life* is organized using a developmental or progressive approach. This approach to the teaching of ethics has been shown to have

a higher success rate than the more traditional or values-clarification approaches to ethics, in terms of helping students move beyond ethical relativism and become principled moral reasoners.

Most ethics texts focus only briefly on ethical relativism. However, more than 90 percent of college students are ethical relativists. Rather than talk over students' heads, *Ethics for Life* starts at their level by including a whole section on ethical relativism. The chapters in this book are arranged in the same order that these stages appear in a person's actual moral development. Only later are the students introduced to in-depth discussions of more advanced theories such as deontology, rights ethics, and virtue ethics.

Rather than lecturing from a higher stage of development (the traditional moral-indoctrination approach) or ignoring differences (the values-clarification approach), this approach first entails building a bridge to the students and then guiding them across that bridge toward a higher stage of moral development and "respectfully engaging" them by challenging them to question their own assumptions. This process is also known as a "cognitive apprenticeship" whereby the teacher or mentor (the "expert") teaches the student (the "novice") a new skill by collaborating with them on a task—in this case, dialogue around moral dilemmas and the application of moral theory to hypothetical and real-life issues.<sup>6</sup> Respectful engagement also requires that the teacher take an active role in the dialogue, including challenging students rather than creating an atmosphere of passive indifference and superficial tolerance.

In order to avoid reinforcing students' belief that morality is all a matter of personal opinion and the mistaken impression that most moral decisions involve moral dilemmas, the case studies used in the first part of the book present situations where what is morally right and wrong seems clear-cut. This helps students sort out the relevant moral principles so that they later have a solid foundation for solving more difficult moral dilemmas.

The text makes extensive use of exercises throughout each chapter. The purpose of the exercises is to encourage students to relate the theories in the text to real-life events and issues as well as to their own moral development. In addition to case studies that relate to students' own experience, case studies and personal reflection exercises are chosen with an eye to expanding their concept of moral community. This is accomplished through the use of readings, case studies, and reflective exercises that focus on multicultural issues and problems of racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism.

Also important for moral development is the integration of students' experiences by means of readings in developmental psychology and discussions of the personal meaning and relevance of these experiences to their own personality development. Chapter 6 provides an in-depth discussion of the latest research on moral development. Students are also encouraged throughout the text to relate the material in the text to their own experience and their own moral growth.

*Ethics for Life* is also set up so it can be used with or without a community service component. John Dewey often reminded us that we learn by doing. Studies show that participation in community service as part of an ethics class has a positive effect on a person's self-esteem and level of empathy as well as their ability to engage in moral reasoning. Community service gives students an opportunity to integrate what they are learning in class into real-life situations. To assist in this goal, exercises are provided in each chapter to help students relate classroom theory to their community service. These exercises are marked with asterisks.

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1. Judith A. Boss, "Adopting an Aristotelian Approach to Teaching College Ethics," *Philosophy and Community Service Learning* (Washington, DC: Association for the Advancement of Higher Education, 1997); and Judith A. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students," *Journal of Moral Education*, 1994, vol. 23, 183–198.
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4. James Rest, "Why Does College Promote Development in Moral Judgment?" *Journal of Moral Education*, 1988, vol. 17(3), 183–194.
5. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students."
6. See William Damon, *Greater Expectations* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), Chapter 7, for a discussion of this method of moral education.





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## SECTION I



# The Study of Ethics

Many college ethics students want to skip ethical theory and immediately begin with discussions of compelling moral issues. However, productive discussion of issues requires first establishing a solid foundation in the nuances of ethical theory and moral reasoning.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live as well as the justification of these values and guidelines. The first chapter, “Ethics: An Overview,” begins with an introduction to ethics and a brief discussion of different types of ethical theories. It also addresses some of the fundamental philosophical questions that underlie ethics, including questions about human nature, free will versus determinism, moral knowledge, and the nature of philosophical inquiry.

The second chapter, “Moral Reasoning,” provides the reader with the skills necessary to analyze and evaluate different moral theories and lines of reasoning. Developing critical thinking skills enables students to make better moral judgments and makes them less likely to be taken in by faulty reasoning.

Ethics education is making a comeback. As such, speculations about what morality is are bombarding us from all sides. This is exciting: We are challenged to be on our toes and to sharpen our analytical skills in order to discern which theories are workable and which ones we need to discard. By figuring out what doesn’t work, we can learn a lot. We may not have come up with the perfect theory by the end of this course, but we will have a much better sense of how to make satisfactory moral decisions.



## CHAPTER 1



### Ethics

#### An Overview

*The ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it.*

—ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 2

It's the beginning of a new semester. Tomorrow morning is your first ethics class. You only signed up for the class because it was required. "What a waste of time," you grumble as you climb into bed. "What's the point in studying ethics? It doesn't have anything to do with real life. I wish there was no such thing as ethics or morality."

The next morning you wake up and wearily grope your way to the bathroom. As you open the door, you find to your dismay that your roommate has left the bathroom in a total mess. Dirty clothes—your roommate's clothes—are soaking in cold slimy water in the sink and bathtub, and the toilet is caked with grime. Annoyed, you return to your room and shake your roommate's shoulder: "Come on, get up. You promised to clean the bathroom yesterday."

"So what?" your roommate replies. "I don't have to keep my promises if I don't feel like it." And with that, your roommate rolls over and, looking quite peaceful, goes back to sleep.

You are now feeling very annoyed, but you manage to get ready for class, although not in time to have breakfast. You arrive at class right on time; however, the teacher hasn't turned up. You take a seat next to another student who lives in your dormitory. But instead of returning your greeting, he grabs your book bag and heads toward the door. "Stop!" you protest. "That's mine. You can't take that."

He looks at you like you're nuts. "Why not?"

"Because it doesn't belong to you," you reply indignantly. "It's stealing!"

At which he laughs, "You're not making any sense."

"You have no right . . .," you add.



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The thief rolls his eyes: “Didn’t you hear the latest news? Ethics, morality—they no longer exist. Isn’t that great news! Now we can do whatever we like! And no one can pass judgment on anything we do, including you!”

You wait another twenty minutes for the teacher to show up; then you decide to head over to the cafeteria to get some breakfast. However, the dining staff didn’t bother to report to work either. The back door has been smashed open, and trays of donuts and fruit have been taken out onto the quad where a group of administrators and faculty members, including your ethics teacher, are squabbling over the booty. You step up onto a chair that has been tossed out on the curb, to get a better look, when someone comes rushing up from behind and knocks you down.

As you fall, you hear a sickening snap and feel a stabbing pain in your knee. You cry out in agony. Then you recognize the person who knocked you over. It’s the dean of your college. You plead for her to call for help. But she only pushes you out of her way and hurries on toward the skirmish on the quad. Off in the distance you hear another cry for help as two men drag a terrified woman into the bushes. No one tries to stop them. A few people stop and peer at you out of curiosity before moving on. Most just stare blankly at you as they walk past. No one offers to help. And why should they? Sympathy and compassion no longer exist. The duty not to cause harm to others or to help those in need no longer exists. No one has any rights that we have to respect anymore. No more stupid obligations, such as sharing with others or keeping our commitments, to prevent us from doing what we enjoy.



As you begin to lose consciousness, you start having second thoughts about the importance of ethics and morality in your life. At that moment, your alarm clock goes off. You get out of bed and wearily grope your way to the bathroom. As you open the door, you realize that your roommate has left the bathroom in a total mess. Annoyed, you return to your room and shake your roommate's shoulder: "Come on, get up. You promised to clean the bathroom yesterday."

"Oh, no," your roommate groans. "I'm sorry, I forgot all about it." After a short pause, your roommate rolls out of bed, complaining under her breath, "I can't think of anything else I'd less rather do." You breathe a sigh of relief and go to the kitchenette to make yourself some breakfast while your roommate begrudgingly cleans the bathroom.

## What Is Ethics?

Ethics is a lot like air: It is pretty much invisible. In fact, for many centuries, people did not realize that such a substance as air even existed. So too we often fail to recognize the existence of ethics or morality until someone fails to heed it.



**ethics** 1. A system of moral principles: *the ethics of a culture*. 2. the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc.: *medical ethics; Christian ethics*. 3. moral principles, as of an individual: *His ethics forbade betrayal of a confidence*. 4. that branch of philosophy dealing with values related to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of the motives and ends of such actions.

—Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language

(New York: Random House, 1989)

The term **ethics** has several meanings. It is often used to refer to a set of standards of right and wrong established by a particular group and imposed on members of that group as a means of regulating and setting limits on their behavior. This use of the word "ethics" reflects its etymology. The etymology of the word "ethics" goes all the way back to the Greek word *ethos*, meaning "cultural custom or habit." The word "moral" is derived from the Latin word *moralis*, which also means "custom." Although some philosophers distinguish between the terms "ethical" and "moral," others, including the author of this text, use the two terms interchangeably.

The identification of ethics and morality with cultural norms or customs reflects the fact that most adults tend to identify morality with cultural customs. Philosophical ethics, also known as *moral philosophy*, goes beyond this limited concept of right and wrong. Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, includes the study of the values and guidelines by which we live and the *justification* for these values and guidelines. Rather than simply accepting the customs or guidelines used by one particular group or culture, philosophical ethics analyzes and evaluates these guidelines in light of accepted universal principles and concerns.

More importantly, ethics is a way of life. In this sense, ethics involves active engagement in the pursuit of the good life—a life consistent with a coherent set of moral values. According to Aristotle, one of the leading Western moral philosophers, the pursuit of the good life is our most important activity as humans. Indeed, studies have found that even criminals believe morality is important—at least for others. Although criminals may not always act on their moral beliefs, they still expect others to do so. Almost all criminals, when asked, state that they do not want their children to engage in immoral behavior and would get angry if one of their children committed a crime.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle believed that “the moral activities are human *par excellence*.”<sup>2</sup> Because morality is the most fundamental expression of our human nature, it is through being moral that we are the happiest. According to Aristotle, through the repeated performance of good actions, we become moral (and more happy) people. He referred to the repeated practice of moral actions as **habituation**. The idea that practicing good actions is more important for ethics education than merely studying theory is also found in other philosophies, such as Buddhism.



[A] man becomes just by the performance of the just . . . actions; nor is there the smallest likelihood of a man's becoming good by any other course of conduct. It is not, however, a popular line to take, most men preferring theory to practice under the impression that arguing about morals proves them to be philosophers, and that in this way they will turn out to be fine characters.

—ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 4

At the age of seventeen, Aristotle became a student at Plato's Academy in Athens, where he remained until Plato's death twenty years later. The Academy was founded by Plato in 388 B.C.E. and lasted over nine hundred years; it is reputed to be Europe's first university.<sup>3</sup> Plato's famous Academy was not like universities today, with organized classes, degrees, and specialized faculty.