SOLVING

MORAL

PROBLEMS

*A Strategy
for Practical
Inquiry*

**Ronald
McLaren**

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To my Mother and Father,

Louise Eleanor Sinz McLaren

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Preface

Courses in practical, applied, and professional ethics raise issues that are pressing and of broad importance. In this book I seek to help the student address those issues in a constructive way.

One challenge for students in such courses is to avoid being confused by the welter of alternative views encountered, especially when those views are given sophisticated philosophical treatment.

An equally serious problem stems from the fact that values and moral principles come prominently into play with the consideration of such issues. Many students are uncertain about the possibility of reflecting critically and with some objectivity about moral questions; they may feel unable to avoid such troublesome refuges as dogmatism, relativism, or skepticism. This problem may worsen when classical moral theories are presented as possible sources of guidance for the resolution of concrete practical problems. For how is one to choose among these abstract philosophical theories?

The critical method offered here provides an overall strategy for organizing inquiry on complex problems. Although many features of this method are applicable to all sorts of problems, it is here tailored specifically for practical problems that involve moral issues and values. With fairly obvious modifications, it can be applied to other types of problems; hence it can even provide guidance for confronting large questions about competing moral theories.

The critical method structures the procedures of inquiry in a natural yet orderly way. Understanding one's present position provides the clue as to how to proceed next. Thus the questions, thoughts, and information which pose a problem provide the materials for moving systematically towards a resolution, one step at a time. At each step I explain what should be done in order to progress further, and why.

As it is understood here, the aim of inquiry is to reach a reflective or critical judgment; more broadly, it is to appreciate where a judgment or

decision can be supported with good reasons and where it cannot. Hence the designation 'critical method.'

Another reason for that designation is that the method does not attempt to supply the reader with values or moral principles chosen by the author. It does explain how values and principles may be employed in thinking critically about personal decisions and policy questions. In addition, it provides a strategy for reflection on the further question of what values and principles to endorse. Thus it offers a live alternative to naive forms of dogmatism and relativism.

With practice the method becomes easy to use, and indeed soon seems quite natural, since both individual steps and overall strategy have been chosen for their intuitive plausibility.

The book does not treat at any length the specific matters dealt with in standard texts on critical thinking. It does, however, supply an overall strategy for critical reflection, and thus provides the larger context in which deductive reasoning and validity, for example, find their proper places. Those places are explained in the course of Chapters Five and Six.

Because it is intended as a strategy for coping with tough issues, I have sought the most natural and plausible understanding of practical inquiry and its procedures. I have limited my aims by focusing on methodological points that have pedagogical value and by avoiding philosophical theorizing. However, philosophers will no doubt quickly recognize a number of historical antecedents. They will also appreciate that it is impossible to avoid controversial issues entirely in dealing with methodological questions, especially in ethics. Occasionally I indicate that a position I take is controversial, but on the whole it seemed pedagogically undesirable continually to draw attention to the fact that methods themselves are subject to philosophical scrutiny. One thing we need is enough agreement about methods to make inquiry possible, even if in the end some of that agreement is provisional.

At the same time, this nondogmatic feature of the present method is worth pointing out: the method can be employed to pursue the question of its own adoption, without prejudging the outcome. This is yet another reason for calling it a critical method.

Where my readers see room for improvement, I hope they will bring it to my attention.

Acknowledgments

. . . what is the use of studying philosophy . . .
if it does not improve your thinking about
the important questions of everyday life . . .

L. Wittgenstein

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Introduction: A Critical Method for Practical Problems

Problems and Method

Problems come in many shapes and sizes, and they are not all best approached in the same way. Not only is there no universal method that is best for all problems, no one can even guarantee that every problem will actually yield a solution. After all, some problems may be insoluble. None of this is reason for pessimism, however. The right degree of optimism towards problems can be struck by approaching them methodically.

In this book, I present a critical method, a strategy designed for tackling hard and controversial issues of many sorts, both intellectual and practical. Although it can be applied to problems of various types, I shall concentrate here on showing how it applies to practical moral problems. The reader who masters it can easily apply it to other kinds of problems as well, modifying it as occasion demands.

By a practical problem, I mean a problem concerning what someone is to do or what policy they are to follow; for example, "What should our policy on nuclear arms be?" "Should I join the Peace Corps or go to law school?" "Should cocaine be legalized?" In the main, practical problems are questions one settles by making a decision.

Thus, the critical method provides an overall strategy for decision-making. It can be thought of as a broad, systematic plan for organizing a research project on a controversial question. The strategy leads, by natural steps, from statement of the problem to critical judgment of a proposed solution.

In explaining the method, I clarify the individual steps that must be taken and indicate the contribution each one makes a towards reaching a considered view. Each step is important and must be made with care;

no single step will take the inquirer all the way to the final goal; yet the point of each is best appreciated by keeping an eye on how it helps one move closer to that goal.

An important feature of the critical method is that it enables values and ethical principles to be brought to bear on a problem, so it offers a way to address practical questions that have a moral dimension. However, the method itself is neutral as between different moral principles and values. The critical inquirer must decide what his or her principles are to be and which values are more important, following the neutral strategies indicated for reflection on such matters.

Moral Frontiers

It hardly needs to be said that some moral issues are problematic and controversial. But it is worth reminding ourselves that many things in ethics we agree about thoroughly, things that are hardly problematic at all. Thus, we settle many of the moral questions we confront in our daily lives quickly and easily, often requiring little reflection in order to know exactly what to do and what not to do. Rarely do we need to think twice about avoiding gratuitous harm, theft, lying, breaking our agreements, or cheating. We are highly confident these things are wrong, and we go directly about avoiding them. And when, as sometimes happens, we fail on one of these obvious matters, we usually need not think twice to realize we are wrong and regret it.

Although many moral issues excite controversy, we should not be too impressed by that. Not everything in morality is up for grabs. If it were, we could not take for granted as much of morality as we do, nor could we make so many of our decisions as quickly and easily as we do. The broad agreement that makes life with others run as smoothly as it does would not exist. If everything were up for grabs we would disagree all the time about who the good guys are and who are the bad ones. As it is, we disagree about that only a small part of the time.

Still, it is undeniable that we encounter difficult issues and hard cases on which we do not easily agree. Abortion, capital punishment, nuclear arms, euthanasia, the value and proper use of the natural environment, affirmative action, sexual behavior, welfare policies, and eating animal flesh are just a few of the social issues that remain controversial.

Personal moral dilemmas crop up too, which often can't be settled without difficult and sometimes painful individual choices. Although theft is almost always wrong, is the woman who painfully decides to

steal a little from the rich in order to feed her hungry child doing something wicked or wrong?

As individuals and as a society, we confront hard cases. Like science, morality has an unsettled frontier which is just as important as its well-groomed and neatly fenced heartland; both represent major regions of human experience. This does not mean everyone experiences both in the same ways; some avoid the problems found on frontiers, while others, perhaps more adventurous, eagerly seek them out.

But why are there problematic issues and moral frontiers? For one thing, different people may approach a moral problem in different ways. They may have acquired different principles or different values, and now circumstances have brought them together in such a way that, given their differences, they clash. One person believes pornography is harmless and enjoyable while another finds it morally offensive and corrupting. If they do not have shared rules for settling such conflicts, how are they to proceed? In the modern world, where people move about easily and where different cultures encounter one another frequently, such problems are common and occur not only among individuals but at the social and international levels as well.

Sometimes a person's own rules are in conflict. You feel you should tell the truth and that you should correct wrongs; but you should also be loyal to your friends. So what are you to do when a friend has done something very wrong, and you are the only other person who knows and is able to correct it? You may not have a principle that tells you which of your conflicting rules takes precedence in this case.

Factual disagreement is also common on the moral frontier. Some supporters of apartheid in South Africa believe blacks are not rational persons who are capable of participating wisely in the governance of their country. However, many of these advocates believe in democracy just as strongly as their opponents do. If they were to change their view about the rationality of blacks, they might also have to agree that blacks should have an equal voice in politics. As you use the critical method, you may be surprised to discover how many moral disagreements actually rest on disagreement about facts.

Moral frontiers are, in one respect, like scientific or geographic frontiers—they comprise territories that need further exploration. They can also be like political frontiers, inasmuch as they tend to excite controversy. But the most troublesome feature of moral frontiers is how hard they can be to recognize. A moral frontier can be as shifty and as hard to pin down as a good quarterback in action. People even disagree about were the moral frontier is. Consider an example from our history. It is not so long since slavery was regarded by many in our own land as part of the natural order and as morally acceptable; but today

everyone agrees we made real moral progress in rejecting slavery. However, there was a period during which it was not easy for everyone to know which side was right; at that time, not everyone realized slavery was a frontier question which deserved further exploration.

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, for example, thought he was being sinful in helping his black friend Jim escape to the North; but in spite of that, he felt he had to do it. Huck was on the moral frontier although he did not know it. Many people of Huck's time presumed they did have a clear view of this issue and thought they could see that slavery was perfectly in order; they, too, failed to realize that slavery was a frontier question. Others thought they saw just as clearly that slavery was wrong. It is important to appreciate that this kind of problem—disagreement about whether an issue is problematic or not—is common on the frontier.

Incidentally, it is clear that slavery is not an issue that was settled only by force, as is sometimes said. No one really thinks our society would now be a just and decent one if force had settled it the other way and we still had slavery. If force had settled it the other way, we could not claim to have made moral progress; instead, we would have experienced moral regression. We brought our society across that moral frontier, although in a very painful manner, and now we can all see that slavery is an injustice. As a society, not only did our practice improve morally, but our view about the matter has changed for the better, too. No one need be confused any more about the injustice of slavery. This is deep and genuine moral progress. The moral frontier has moved far beyond the issue of slavery.

Do moral frontiers still exist? As the example of slavery shows, there can be disagreement about this. Issues thrive today, some of them mentioned above, about which some people on both sides think they see clearly that their opponents are wrong, while other people feel as troubled as Huck Finn was. Although many moral frontiers have been crossed, we cannot safely assume there are no more to face, nor should we assume that our moral vision is now perfect. Like Huck Finn, we could be on a frontier without realizing it. We must strive to remain alert to issues that may not yet be satisfactorily settled. Moral progress may still be possible if we take controversy as a sign that an issue deserves further exploration.

The critical method is designed to provide guidance for thinking about such issues. Where different principles lead to conflict or indecision, where factual disagreement leaves a moral issue unsettled, where it may seem to some that moral progress is possible although others see no need to change, it will be helpful to have a systematic strategy for

thinking the matter through, a method for working towards a well-substantiated judgment or decision.

Critical Method Versus Decision Procedure

While a critical method is an important tool for approaching problems and decision-making, it should not be confused with a decision procedure. Philosophers disagree about which moral principles are correct or valid, and indeed, whether valid ones exist at all. If they agreed and could establish that certain principles are correct, perhaps we could have a decision procedure for ethics as we have in certain parts of mathematics and logic. When faced with a moral question, we could appeal to the accepted principles; together with the facts of the case, these principles would imply the correct solution. In that case, we might even be able to program computers to solve our moral problems for us.

But there is disagreement about moral principles, so we do not have an accepted decision procedure in ethics. We can, however, have a critical method. It is not a substitute for moral inquiry but a guide for conducting it systematically. It provides a structure for organizing research on difficult questions that involve values and moral principles.

An important difference between a critical method and a decision procedure is that a critical method does not assert or assume that one or another moral principle is correct but leaves that question open. Whoever uses the method as a strategy for thinking about a moral problem can bring to bear at the appropriate stage of inquiry whatever principles or values seem to be best. In that sense, the critical method itself is neutral as between different principles and different values.

Being neutral in this respect, the critical method has additional advantages. One of these is that it can be utilized to consider the problem of which principles and values to endorse. This is a good reason for calling it a critical method instead of a decision procedure; using it, we can take a reflective stance towards moral principles and values themselves instead of merely accepting or rejecting them uncritically.

In this book, however, the method will mainly be applied to particular moral problems rather than to the question of what our general moral principles should be. In this context, its purpose is to enable the moral inquirer to come to a critical judgment in place of an unreflective one. It provides a strategy for reaching a judgment or decision in which one is entitled to have confidence and for discovering in what respects,

if any, an issue remains unsettled and problematic. That it aims at making a critical judgment rather than a dogmatic one in regard to moral conclusions is another feature that distinguishes a critical method. It may be thought of as a broad overall strategy for critical thinking and for maximizing one's objectivity when facing controversial questions.

Another advantage of the critical method, in contrast to a decision procedure, is that it is not dogmatic. Not only can it be used to reach critical judgments about particular issues and about general principles; it can be used to criticize itself. Since it calls for a critical approach to other judgments and views, consistency requires that it accept a critical stance towards itself, too. This is a strength in a critical method. A satisfactory approach to the criticism of other judgments and principles, I believe, should be applicable to itself as well.