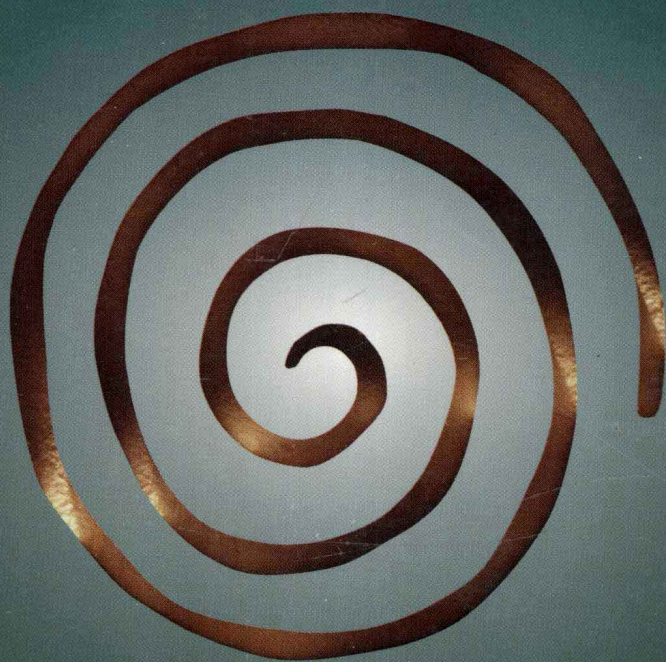


Ethical Insights

A Brief Introduction



Douglas Birsch



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*To my ethics students,
past, present, and future,
and to my first ethics professor, Dr. James F. Sheridan*

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Ethical Insights is a concise introduction to ethics and ethical theories. Its purpose is to provide students with the conceptual framework to facilitate thoughtful and profitable discussions of ethical problems. It is designed as a supplemental book for applied ethics classes, such as classes in contemporary moral issues, bioethics, business ethics, computer ethics, engineering ethics, or environmental ethics.

Organization

Ethical Insights contains a general introduction to ethics (Chapter 1), six short chapters on ethical theories, and a final chapter exploring a pluralistic approach to ethics. The book is organized around ethical insights, traditional ethical assumptions, and four ethical themes. (Appendix 1 provides a summary of these three elements.) The chapters on ethical theories have a common pattern:

- identification of the ethical insight related to the theory;
- the theory's ethical standard, which establishes moral guidelines to help solve ethical problems;
- analysis of the theory in terms of the traditional ethical assumptions and the four basic ethical themes discussed in Chapter 1;
- comparison with another theory, usually the one in the preceding chapter;
- some of the problems that emerge with the theory;
- appraisal of the theory in terms of the criteria for a successful ethical theory presented in Chapter 1; and
- questions to help the reader review key concepts.

I have chosen not to include some of the subtleties of the ethical theories so that the instructor can spend the bulk of the course discussing ethical problems rather than explaining the intricacies of Kant's ideas or hedonistic utilitarianism. Because this book is designed for use

in a variety of applied ethics courses, I have also deliberately omitted case studies. Including such material for each type of course would have excessively lengthened the text.

The Ethical Theories

I have chosen to label the approaches to ethics in this book "ethical theories." In Chapter 1 I provide two functional definitions: (1) ethical theories provide clear and reasonable concepts to use in responding to ethical problems, and (2) ethical theories identify the legitimate moral guidelines that can help us solve ethical problems and live together successfully. The approaches to ethics discussed in the subsequent chapters can be viewed as "theories" because they attempt to accomplish these functions.

The six moral theories presented in this book are versions of ethical relativism, act utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, the moral rights theory, virtue ethics, and the ethic of care. These theories center, respectively, on social moral principles, harm and benefit for morally significant beings, consistency and moral equality, moral rights, the virtues, and care.

I have chosen these six theories because they are the ones that I have used most profitably in my classes, perhaps because the insights related to each of them make sense to students. This is crucial for me. I want to provide a conceptual ethical framework for the course using theories that are related to familiar insights. Several of the theories (act utilitarianism, the moral rights theory, and virtue ethics) also contain familiar moral vocabularies, such as harm and benefit, rights, and virtues.

My choices of ethical relativism, act utilitarianism, and Kantian ethics are probably not particularly controversial, but possibly the other selections may require some explanation. I have included a chapter on moral rights because I believe that we can produce a plausible "ethical theory" centered around moral rights, and I personally prefer discussing moral rights as a representative deontological theory rather than the more common choice, Kant's ethical theory. Because contemporary moral problems are often discussed in the language of rights, most students are familiar with the key concepts, and, in my experience, they find rights easier to understand and more interesting than the various formulations of the Categorical Imperative. Although I prefer the moral rights theory, many other professors prefer Kantian ethics as a representative deontological theory, so I have included a chapter on Kantian ethics. This gives the instructor the option of using one or both chapters.

I chose virtue ethics, or more precisely Aristotle's ethics, because it allows the instructor to develop the idea of ethics in terms of a goal, purpose, or function—in Aristotle's case, a universal human purpose. Aristotle's theory can form the foundation for a discussion of organizational ethics in terms of the goals, purposes, or functions of corporations and organizations, an approach I find especially useful in business ethics. Inclusion of virtue ethics allows both exploration of the concept of virtue in general and discussion of specific virtues. Moreover, like the moral rights theory, virtue ethics has a familiar moral vocabulary, such as courage, generosity, and friendliness.

The last and probably most controversial choice is Nel Noddings's version of the ethic of care. I included this theory because it provides a contemporary rejection of many of the traditional ethical ideas, such as universalizability and moral equality. If the instructor is sympathetic to the claim that men and women have different ways of talking about ethics, this theory can also be used to represent a feminine approach to solving moral problems.

Suggestions for Using This Book

Ethical Insights can be used at the beginning of the course to introduce students to ethics and ethical theories and to prepare them for subsequent discussions of ethical problems. A second way to use the book is to integrate the appropriate chapters into the discussion of moral problems or issues. For instance, students could read the chapter on moral rights before discussing the abortion issue.

This book is intended to make the task of teaching ethical theories in applied ethics classes easier. Ethical theories are difficult for many students to understand; unlike ethical problems, they can seem abstract and remote from the students' experience. I think this book responds to this concern.

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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Ethics and Ethical Theories

All of us face ethical problems from time to time. These problems turn up in relation to most human activities. Sustaining friendships, raising children, selling things, or providing others with information can present us with serious dilemmas that have serious consequences. Some ethical problems that could confront any college student are described in the following paragraphs. The descriptions of the problems are brief, so as you read about them, think about what additional information would be helpful for resolving them.

You are friends with two people involved in a serious relationship. You find out that one of them is cheating on the other. Should you tell the deceived person? Why, or why not? Suppose the deceived person asks you about the matter. Should you lie or tell the truth?

You need a textbook for a very important class but lack the money to buy it. Should you steal the textbook from the bookstore if you believe there is only a slight chance you would get caught? If you are too scared to steal it from the bookstore, should you steal it from a wealthy friend if you believe that he or she would never find out? Why did you give the answers that you did?

You are in your first year of college, and you (or your girlfriend) become pregnant. Would you get an abortion? Would you try to convince your girlfriend to get an abortion? Why, or why not?

You need to get a good grade on the final to pass a class, but you are not confident that you will be successful. Should you cheat on the test if there is almost no chance of getting caught? Why, or why not?

For many years you have been in a serious relationship with another person. Then he or she ends it. You become very depressed and think about killing yourself. Would you try to kill yourself? Why or why not?

You have been paralyzed from the neck down in a car accident. Your life is filled with pain and humiliation. Would you ask a family member or close friend to kill you? Why, or why not?

You are in a relationship with another person. You love this person, and he or she loves you. Now another person (better looking, richer, smarter, more fun) tells you that he or she loves you. Should you break up with the first person and get involved with this new individual? Why, or why not?

Which of these problems seems most serious to you? Was it hard to arrive at answers to these questions? Do you think everyone would agree with your responses? Would you be able to convince people who disagreed with you that you were right and that they were wrong? Do you think it is a good idea to learn more about problems like these and how to solve them?

If you had trouble answering these questions, this book will help you. Each of the next six chapters discusses and evaluates a particular ethical theory. Ethical theories identify legitimate ethical guidelines. These guidelines are tools we can use to help solve ethical problems. Each theory claims that its guidelines are the best tools to use in solving all ethical problems. However, just as we use different tools for different jobs—such as a wrench and not a hammer to loosen a bolt—different sets of ethical guidelines are the optimum tools for particular areas of ethics (See Chapter 8 for more on this topic).

Ethics, Theoretical Ethics, and Applied Ethics

Moral philosophers try to understand and solve ethical problems. If the problems are serious and a great deal rests on their solution, then the task of moral philosophers is an important one. To accomplish this task, philosophers use a variety of conceptual and theoretical ethical resources. This investigation into the conceptual and theoretical ethical resources for solving ethical problems and into the solutions to them is called *ethics*.¹ Ethics is subdivided into *theoretical ethics*, which studies the conceptual and theoretical resources for solving problems, and *applied ethics*, which examines specific problems and offers solutions to them. Ethics discussions traditionally have centered around books and essays written by famous philosophers and other thinkers, but ethics is open to everyone. If you thought about the brief sketches that raised some common ethical problems, you have already started to participate in it.

In the past, theoretical ethics has concentrated on ethical theories. Ethical theories try to answer a variety of questions. How ought we to live? Is it possible to find a rational answer to the question about how we ought to live? What is the difference between good and evil? What makes an action or a belief morally good? Is anything always good or evil? When is a person morally responsible for something? What is virtue in general? What is a particular virtue, and how do these particular virtues relate to virtue in general? What ought we to do or to believe? Why should we act morally?

The answers to these theoretical ethical questions help us do applied ethics and solve ethical problems. Ethical problems come in two forms: (1) specific cases where we must determine the good or right thing to do, say, or believe, and (2) general problems where we attempt to discover the appropriate response to a class or set of actions, statements, or beliefs. Finding successful solutions to ethical problems is a serious challenge and is of great importance.

Alternative Sources of Solutions

One way to get help in solving ethical problems is to learn about ethical theories, but there are other sources of help as well. *Religion* provides guidelines about how to live and can help us solve these problems. If I am a Christian, my religion informs me about how I ought to live—for example, to follow the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule. Although religion does inform us about how we ought to live, religious answers are separate from ethical ones. Ethics is open to everyone, no matter what their particular religious beliefs may be, and serious problems arise when we do not separate ethics from religion.

If we claim that God creates good and evil, we would not be able to separate ethics and religion. One way to understand this view is to assert that what is good is what God commands us to do, and what is bad is what God orders us not to do. Now let's look at a few of the problems related to this view. One problem is our inability to resolve the dispute over what text contains the divine commandments. Do we look at the Koran? the Bhagavad Gita? the Bible? the Torah? or some other religious text?

The second problem involves not being able to agree on how to interpret the text that we choose. For example, scholars disagree about the correct interpretation of many passages in the Bible. Does God command us never to divorce our spouses, or is divorce permitted? Does "thou shalt not kill" permit some kinds of killing, and if so, what kinds?

A third problem is that if the only thing that makes something good is that God has commanded it, then good is arbitrary. Suppose that

instead of relying on the angel of death God had commanded Moses to kill all the firstborn Egyptian children. Following God's command, Moses murders all these innocent children. If I claimed that these murders were horrible, a religious person would probably tell me that God had a reason for giving this command. The religious person might add that these deaths led to a greater good—the freedom of the Jewish people. If slaying the Egyptian children was good, it was not good simply because God commanded it but because of some other factor, like freeing the Jewish people. If good was only connected to God's commands, then killing the Egyptian children would be good even if it was totally arbitrary (that is, done for no reason at all). Therefore, if good is not to be arbitrary, there must be some view of good and evil that is independent of God.

A fourth problem with the "divine command" view is that it makes very odd the usual claim that God is perfectly good. If good simply means "commanded by God," then "God is perfectly good" means "God is perfectly commanded by God," which is an odd claim to make.

The view that ethics is nonreligious does not deny the existence of God. Actually, it helps make sense out of the claim that God is perfectly good. Keeping ethics and religion separate allows us to avoid these difficult problems and keep the ethical investigation open to everyone, whatever his or her particular religious beliefs.

Laws also inform us about how we ought to live. Some laws are related to ethical problems, but legal considerations are not the same as ethical ones.² Laws are rules of conduct established by governments or legislative bodies and usually are connected to specific penalties or punishments. Ethical principles can be created by anyone, and they have no specific penalties attached to them. "Obey the laws" is an ethical claim about how one ought to live, but the laws themselves are legislative rules, not ethical principles. The distinction between laws and morality is reinforced by the possibility that there can be unethical laws.³ At one time slavery was legal in the United States, but most of us would claim that slavery has always been unethical and that the laws permitting it were immoral ones. The subject of ethics will also be clearer if we maintain this distinction between laws and ethical principles.

What might be called *attitudes* or *relationships* can also provide insight into how we ought to live and can help us solve ethical problems. Love, caring, and friendship shape our daily lives. Traditionally, these attitudes or relationships have not found a central role in ethics because they were thought to be contrary to the search for universalizable ethical guidelines. In my view, however, love, caring, and friendship are ethically significant and, therefore, ethics is more than the search for these universalizable ethical guidelines. In Chapter 7, I will

discuss an ethical view centered on caring, and in Chapter 8 I will briefly discuss the importance of special treatment for friends and loved ones.

Ethical Theories

I have chosen to call the approaches to ethics contained in this book "ethical theories." *Ethical theories* provide clear and reasonable concepts to use in responding to ethical problems. More specifically, they provide three things: (1) standards for determining good and evil or right and wrong, (2) justifications for using these particular standards, and (3) differentiations between what is and what is not morally significant. Most of the proponents of ethical theories are distressed by the profusion of ethical beliefs and competing solutions to ethical problems. They believe that their particular approach to ethics is the best one, in the sense that it will furnish the legitimate ethical standard to determine good and evil.

Although many ethical theorists emphasize the previous aspect of ethical theories, there is another one. I agree with Mary Midgley who says:

Human beings are not limpets or even crocodiles, they are highly social creatures. Except for a few natural hermits, they have to interact fairly constantly if they are to have any sort of a satisfying life. And these interactions are only possible where there is some measure of agreement on basic patterns.⁴

Human beings are indeed social creatures. We live together in societies, and if we are to do so successfully, we must live within certain basic guidelines. Laws provide some of these guidelines and help us to live together successfully, but at least two kinds of situations arise where the laws are insufficient and where we also need ethical guidelines. One situation is illustrated by the slavery example, wherein a law treats one segment of society unfairly or harmfully. An ethical standard allows us to evaluate the questionable law. Another situation arises when society would run more smoothly if people acted in a certain way, but the law is inadequate to produce the desired actions. In general, we believe we can get along better if we do not steal each other's property. Imagine that you find a wallet containing a hundred dollars in a deserted area at night. No one is nearby. You could take the hundred dollars, discard the wallet, and have no reason to fear being caught and punished. However, if you were guided by the moral principle that it is wrong to steal other

people's property, you would return the wallet. We get along better if people return wallets and if property is protected. Thus, ethical guidelines help us live together more successfully. The second aspect of ethical theories is that they identify ethical guidelines that can help us live together more successfully.

Ethical theories identify moral guidelines. These guidelines create a view of ethical activity that contrasts with the unlimited pursuit of self-interest. If people believe that it is permissible to do anything that is in their self-interest, they may injure other individuals or society in general to benefit themselves. This will interfere with living together successfully. Ethical theories help to prevent injury to individuals and to society by identifying a view of "good" that opposes the unlimited pursuit of self-interest. This does not mean that ethical people can never act in their own self-interest, only that there are limitations on the pursuit of self-interest.

In my opinion, the most important function of ethical theories is to identify moral guidelines that can help us solve ethical problems and live together successfully. The two aspects of this function are closely related. Ethical problems usually involve other people. Should I tell the deceived friend the truth? Should I steal the textbook? Should I end the relationship? The solutions to these ethical problems will affect how successfully we can live with others.

Evaluating Ethical Theories

The most important function of ethical theories is to identify legitimate moral guidelines to help us solve ethical problems and to help us live together more successfully. In this book, I will evaluate the ethical theories presented in relation to their success at accomplishing this function. Here are the criteria I will use for this evaluation:

1. The ethical theory must be able to identify some ethical guidelines.
2. The theory must be able to show that some ethical guidelines are better than others. (A theory that concludes that any ethical guideline is as good as any other would legitimize any actions, even the most antisocial ones.)
3. The theory must identify ethical guidelines that would prohibit the unlimited pursuit of self-interest.
4. The theory must help us to solve ethical problems.