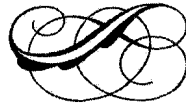FIFTH EDITION

Today's Moral Issues

Classic and Contemporary Perspectives

Daniel Bonevac

TODAY'S MORAL ISSUES

Classic and Contemporary Perspectives

Fifth Edition

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Mc Graw Hill **Higher Education**

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For Robert C. Koons

PREFACE

This book is a text for courses on contemporary moral issues. Such courses assume that philosophy has something important to contribute to contemporary moral problems. They try to bring philosophical theories to bear on practical questions. From one point of view, this seems difficult. Philosophy is in many ways the most abstract of all disciplines. The questions it addresses are very general: What is real? How do we know? What should we do? But philosophy is also the most practical of all disciplines. It aims at wisdom. Living wisely, displaying good judgment, understanding yourself and your surroundings—these offer immense benefits to all, no matter who they are, how they earn a living, or what kind of society they inhabit. Living wisely is a key to living well. For just that reason, Aristotle thought that philosophy was the highest human activity and that the contemplative life was the highest and happiest form of life possible for a human being.

Nevertheless, it is not always easy to bring theory and practice together in the classroom. Philosophical texts can be hard to read. Philosophers often write primarily for each other. And arguments about contemporary issues are rarely reflective; the underlying principles can be hard to discern.

Contemporary moral problems textbooks often amplify these difficulties. They contain mostly papers by professional philosophers written for a professional audience. They tend to either omit underlying theoretical approaches altogether or segregate them in a separate section of the book. The first strategy leaves students with no moral compass. Students have trouble abstracting ethical principles and methods from treatments of particular issues; even the best students flounder when faced with issues that have not been treated explicitly in class. The result is that students emerge with only the vaguest idea of what ethical thinking is. The second strategy divides courses into two parts that are hard to unify. The theory usually

strikes students as dry and irrelevant, while the practical part remains confusing or, at best, an exercise in applying theory.

This book tries to resolve the dilemma by tying theoretical and practical considerations together. *Today's Moral Issues* combines theoretical and practical readings on four general themes: first principles, liberty, rights and responsibilities, and justice. The theoretical readings relate closely to the contemporary readings that follow. I have found that using philosophical texts helps students connect theory and practice, for writers such as Locke and Mill tend to be more concrete and practical in outlook than most secondary discussions of their thought. Their motivations are not difficult for most students to understand. And I have edited the theoretical texts closely to bring students into direct contact with their chief motivations and arguments.

The classic and contemporary theoretical approaches constitute a foundation for thinking about contemporary issues. Combining these texts with discussions of contemporary problems lets students see the dialectic between theory and practice in ethics. Faced with practical dilemmas and disagreements, it is easy to see why ethical thinkers have sought to construct theories. And contemporary issues provide opportunities not only to apply theories but also to test and evaluate them. Good students, I have found, attain not only a rich understanding of the theories, the issues, and how they relate, but also a real sense of what ethical thinking is all about.

Today's Moral Issues is unique in treating contemporary moral issues in the context of both political philosophy and ethics. Issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and the environment have political as well as personal dimensions. Others, such as freedom of speech, capital punishment, and economic, racial, sexual, and global equality, are almost entirely political. To

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treat them adequately, one must consider the proper ends of government and the bounds of state action.

New Features

This edition retains the virtues of earlier editions. It combines theoretical and practical treatments of ethical and political issues from a wide variety of perspectives and sources, including court cases, journalists, public figures, public policy researchers, and scientists as well as philosophers.

This edition also has some new virtues. It differs from earlier editions in some important ways:

1. Among the most contentious issues of current politics are gay marriage and the war on terror. I have expanded the book to include them. New sections treat issues of sexual orientation and the ethics of war.

2. Recent court decisions on flag burning and undergraduate and graduate university admissions have been added to sections on offensive speech and behavior and affirmative action.

3. More than 21 percent of the readings are new to this edition.

4. The "Racial Equality" section has been extensively revised. I have expanded chapters on the environment, offensive speech, abortion, and capital punishment.

5. In my own classes, I have found that many students have trouble reading philosophical texts. As always, I have edited classic texts to make them easier to read and understand. I have also added headings to theoretical reading to help students learn to read philosophy by providing them with what amounts to an outline of what they are reading.

6. The Web page (*http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/ philosophy/faculty/bonevac/tmi.html*) that accompanies the book has been expanded considerably. It includes many features to help both students and instructors, including

    a. sample course syllabi

    b. extensive class notes for all sections of the book, with links to relevant parts of philosophical texts (where they are public domain and available online)

c. a study guide summarizing key points

d. a comprehensive glossary of terms

e. practice exams

f. suggested readings

g. relevant court cases

h. Web links to other sources of information on contemporary issues

i. a guide to writing philosophical essays

j. tips on multimedia presentations

k. PowerPoint slides for each section of the text

Acknowledgments

This book and the ideas behind it have evolved considerably during the twenty-seven years I have been teaching contemporary moral issues courses at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Texas at Austin. I am grateful to the many instructors, teaching assistants, and students who have used earlier versions and helped me refine them. I am particularly grateful to the more than 10,000 students who have taken my contemporary moral problems course at the University of Texas at Austin. They have taught me much about what a course on moral issues ought to be.

I especially want to thank Nicholas Asher and Stephen Phillips, who have team-taught courses on contemporary moral problems with me. Their ideas have found expression here in more ways than I can distinguish. I am also grateful for the helpful criticism and advice I have received throughout the years from Randy Mayes, California State University, Sacramento; Bill Myers, Birmingham Southern College; David Bradshaw, University of Kentucky; and Jonathan Davis, University of Texas at Austin.

I would like to thank the reviewers whose comments have helped me clarify my own thinking and decide what issues and readings to include: for the first edition, L. E. Andrade, Illinois State University; Linda Bomstad, California State University, Sacramento; Karen Hanson, Indiana University; and Anita Silvers, San Francisco State University; for the second edition, Stephanie Beardman, Rutgers University; Ray Cebik, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Deirdre Golash, American University; Patrick Lee, Franciscan University of Steubenville; Aaron Meskin, Rutgers University; Sharon Sytsma, Northern Illinois University;

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INTRODUCTION

MORAL ARGUMENTS AND MORAL RELATIVISM

This is a book about moral issues. What are moral issues? To answer this question, we need to consider the definition of philosophy. If the word itself is any guide, philosophy is the love of wisdom. A simple definition of wisdom, in turn, is good judgment. Philosophy, then, is the love or pursuit of good judgment. Moral philosophy, or ethics, is the pursuit of good judgment about character and action—about what kind of person to be and about what to do. Ethics addresses questions about virtue and vice, good and bad, right and wrong.

Such questions, clearly, have varied answers; they are often the subject of controversy and debate. The moral issues considered in this book—abortion, euthanasia, pornography, capital punishment, affirmative action, and many others—are among the most controversial our society faces. Most of this book consists of moral arguments, in which a moral issue is considered and a particular position is supported or a particular conclusion is reached through reasoning.

How can we think through moral issues carefully and systematically? How do we develop arguments for ethical conclusions? These are questions that I attempt to answer in this introduction. I also consider an important objection to the idea of moral argument, namely, the view that different groups have different values and it is therefore impossible to argue logically about right and wrong. This position, known as *relativism*, is common today and poses a serious challenge to ethical thinking.

Relativism

Allan Bloom began his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind* with the statement, "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."* This is especially so in philosophy courses and in ethics courses in particular. Ethics consists of principled reflection on questions such as How should I live? and What should I do? It takes as its central tasks criticizing, justifying, and deciding on various answers to these questions. No one, of course, likes to be criticized; no one likes to think that his or her particular answer to the question, How should I live? is unjustified or just plain wrong. So it can be tempting to defang these questions by saying that truth in ethics is relative.

But relative to what? To an individual person? To a society, a culture, or the currently popular formulation, "interpretive community"? To humanity as a whole? The last, relativity to humanity, does not challenge the traditional project of ethics at all; Aristotle characterizes ethics as the search for the good life for man. Even the second, relativity to a society or a culture, has little effect on the discussions of contemporary issues in this book. The readings debate social problems in the context of affluent, technologically advanced societies such as those of the United States, Canada, and Europe.

*Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.

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Problems such as welfare, abortion, and poverty might look very different from the perspective of a poor developing nation. Relativity to a society or a culture does, however, have an impact on the theoretical discussions in the classic readings in this collection, which generally purport to say something about what is good for all human beings, not just residents of the United States, Canada, or Europe. And relativity to an individual makes ethical thinking absurd; what is good for me may differ so completely from what is good for you that ethical reflection and argument make no sense.

To be more precise, let us say that an *ethical relativist* believes that fundamental ethical truth—the basic truth about how one should live and what one should do—is relative to a group smaller than humanity as a whole. Something may be fundamentally right for one group but fundamentally wrong for another. A *cultural relativist* holds that fundamental ethical truth is relative to a culture; an *individual relativist* holds that it is relative to each individual person.

These definitions depend on the idea of *fundamental* ethical truth. Certain answers to ethical questions presuppose other answers to more basic questions. An ethical truth is fundamental if it does not depend on facts and *derivative* if it does. Disagreement over fundamental ethical truths is thus purely ethical; it does not stem from a factual disagreement. To say that something may be fundamentally right for one group but fundamentally wrong for another is thus to say that there may be different answers to the questions of how to live and what to do for these groups, even though the factual circumstances and the groups' beliefs about the factual circumstances are exactly the same.

If we make no distinction between fundamental and derivative truths, individual relativism is obvious. Suppose that John has murdered someone and Mary has done no harm to anyone. Then John deserves to be punished and Mary does not. John should turn himself over to the police; Mary should not. John's obligations differ from Mary's because of the facts. Relativism is interesting only when it pertains to the most fundamental ethical truths, which are independent of facts. What these are, of course, is controversial. Different moral theories espouse different candidates. But it is at the level of fundamental truths—Maximize good, Treat others as ends, not merely as means, Treat others as you would want to be treated—that the issue must be decided.

Relativism is often motivated by toleration or openness. Since tolerance is a virtue, relativists see their own position as morally required. Bloom observes,

> That it is a moral issue for students is revealed by the character of their response when challenged—a combination of belief and indignation: "Are you an absolutist?," the only alternative they know, uttered in the same tone as "Are you a monarchist?" or "Do you really believe in witches?" This latter leads into the indignation, for someone who believes in witches might well be a witch-hunter or a Salem judge. The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance.*

But tolerance and relativism are not the same thing. I may believe that I am right and you are wrong, while still tolerating your behavior and respecting your right to be wrong. The traditional belief in freedom of thought and freedom of speech requires just such an attitude.

Conversely, I may be a relativist, holding only that my opinion is right *for me,* yet show little tolerance for any deviation from my opinion. The intolerance of relativists is not only possible but common enough to have a label: *political correctness.* Friedrich Nietzsche predicted that the twentieth century would be a century of great wars, precisely because it would be a century of relativism. Without truth, Nietzsche understood, there is only power.

Bloom frets that his students cannot defend their opinions. But it is possible to think through issues in ethics, including ethical relativism, carefully and systematically, as mentioned earlier. This introduction provides you with some tools—the basic elements of reasoning—that will help you do this. It tells you how to recognize and evaluate arguments. The examples used are arguments for and against ethical relativism. At the end, you should not only know how to analyze an argument critically but also have greater insight into relativism.

Arguments

Arguments are bits of reasoning in language. Frequently, we think of arguments as conflicts. In that sense, this book presents a series of arguments about

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*Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind,* 25.

issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and affirmative action. But philosophers and logicians primarily use "argument" in the sense that one argues for a conclusion. An argument starts with some assertions and tries to justify a thesis.

Components of Arguments

The initial assertions of an argument are its *premises;* the thesis that the argument tries to justify is its *conclusion.* Arguments consist of *statements,* sentences that can be true or false. Almost every sentence in this book falls into this category. Statements are declarative, in the indicative mood; they say something about the way the world is, correctly or incorrectly.

Here, for example, is a simple argument that some have advanced in favor of cultural relativism:

(1) Societies differ in their fundamental ethical
      beliefs.
      ∴ Ethical truth is relative to culture.

(This format lists the premises in the order in which they are given and then gives the conclusion. The symbol ∴ means "therefore.")

How can we recognize arguments? The premises of an argument are meant to support the conclusion. We can recognize arguments, then, by recognizing when some statements are offered in support of others. We can do this most easily, in turn, if we can distinguish premises from conclusions. But how can we pick out the conclusion of an argument? In English, various words and phrases can signal the premises or the conclusion of an argument.

- *Conclusion Indicators:* therefore, thus, hence, consequently, it follows that, in conclusion, as a result, then, must, accordingly, this implies that, this entails that, we may infer that
- *Premise Indicators:* because, as, for, since, given that, for the reason that

Beware: These words and phrases have other uses as well.

Extended or *complex* arguments contain other arguments. *Simple* arguments do not. Because extended arguments are good only if the simple arguments within them are good, it is best to break extended arguments down into their simple components and analyze them separately.

Validity and Soundness

To evaluate arguments, we need to ask, What distinguishes good from bad arguments? What makes a good argument good?

A good argument links its premises to its conclusion in the right way. In a (deductively) *valid* argument, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. If the premises are all true, then the conclusion has to be true. Or, equivalently, if the conclusion of a valid argument is false, at least one premise must also be false. Consider, for example, the argument:

(2) All promises ought to be kept.
      Your promise to Joe is a promise.
      ∴ You ought to keep your promise to Joe.

In any circumstance in which the premises of this argument are true, the conclusion must be true as well. It is impossible to conceive of a state of affairs in which, while all promises ought to be kept, and your promise to Joe is a promise, you nevertheless should not keep your promise to Joe. If it is false that you should keep your promise to Joe, then either there are promises that shouldn't be kept, or your "promise" wasn't a real promise.

Valid arguments are only one species of good argument. Others are *inductively strong* (or *reliable).* The truth of the premises of such an argument does not guarantee the truth of its conclusion, but it does make the truth of the conclusion probable. Consider, for example, this argument:

(3) Every generous person I've ever known has also
      been kind.
      ∴ All generous people are kind.

It is possible for the premise to be true while the conclusion is false. There may be generous but nasty people I've never met. So the argument is invalid. Nevertheless, the premise lends some support to the conclusion. The argument is inductively strong; how strong depends on how many generous people I've known, among other things.

In general, good arguments not only are valid or inductively strong but also have true premises. A *sound* argument is a valid argument with true premises. In any valid argument, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. So, a sound argument also has a true conclusion. A *cogent* argument is an

inductively strong argument with true premises. In a cogent argument, the truth of the conclusion is likely but not guaranteed.

Evaluating Arguments: Three Arguments for Cultural Relativism

Logic develops precise ways of determining whether arguments are valid (although the most powerful ways of evaluating arguments are intuitive). An argument is valid if the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. To show that an argument is invalid, therefore, one needs to show that the premises could all be true while the conclusion is false.

There are two ways of showing that an argument is invalid. The first, the *direct* method, is simply to describe such a situation; that is, we can show an argument to be invalid by depicting a possible circumstance in which the premises were all true but the conclusion was false. Consider the argument with which we began:

(1) Societies differ in their fundamental ethical beliefs.
     ∴ Ethical truth is relative to culture.

To show that this is invalid, we might imagine a circumstance in which societies differ in fundamental ethical beliefs because one or both are wrong, not because ethical truth is relative.

The second way to show that an argument is invalid, devised by Aristotle, is based on the idea of *form* and is known as the method of *counterexamples*. To show that an argument is invalid using this method, we must produce another argument of the same form with true premises and a false conclusion. This introduction is too short to present a detailed discussion of form. But Aristotle's insight was that validity is *formal* in the sense that arguments can be classified into certain general patterns, or forms, of which individual arguments are instances. An argument form is valid if and only if every instance of it is valid. More to the point, an argument form is invalid if and only if some instance of it is invalid. To show that an argument form is invalid, then, find an instance with true premises and a false conclusion. To show that an *individual argument* is invalid, find an argument with true premises and a false conclusion

that shares the *specific form* of the original argument: the most explicit form we can devise, displaying the most structure.

Let's now consider and evaluate three arguments for cultural relativism: the argument from cultural variation, the argument from undecidability, and the argument from subjectivism.

The Argument from Cultural Variation

The argument from cultural variation is an extended argument consisting of several simple arguments in sequence:

(4) Ancient Greek society accepted infanticide.
     Contemporary American society does not.
     ∴ Societies differ in their fundamental ethical beliefs.
     Societies differ in their fundamental ethical beliefs.
     ∴ Ethical truth is relative to culture.

To apply the method of counterexamples to (1) (which is a key step in the argument from cultural variation), we need to find an argument with the same specific form but with true premises and a false conclusion:

(5) Societies differ in their fundamental astronomical beliefs.
     ∴ Astronomical truth is relative to culture.

Ancient Greeks believed that the sun revolves around the earth. We believe that the earth revolves around the sun. But nobody thinks that the truth of the matter is culturally relative; the earth and sun did not switch places at some point in the last 2,000 years. Thus, the argument from cultural variation can be shown to be invalid.

The Argument from Undecidability

Another argument for cultural relativism is the argument from undecidability, which insists that there is no neutral ground on which one might judge competing ethical claims.

(6) Ancient Greeks could not neutrally judge which society is right.
     [Ancient Greeks will use their own society's standards.