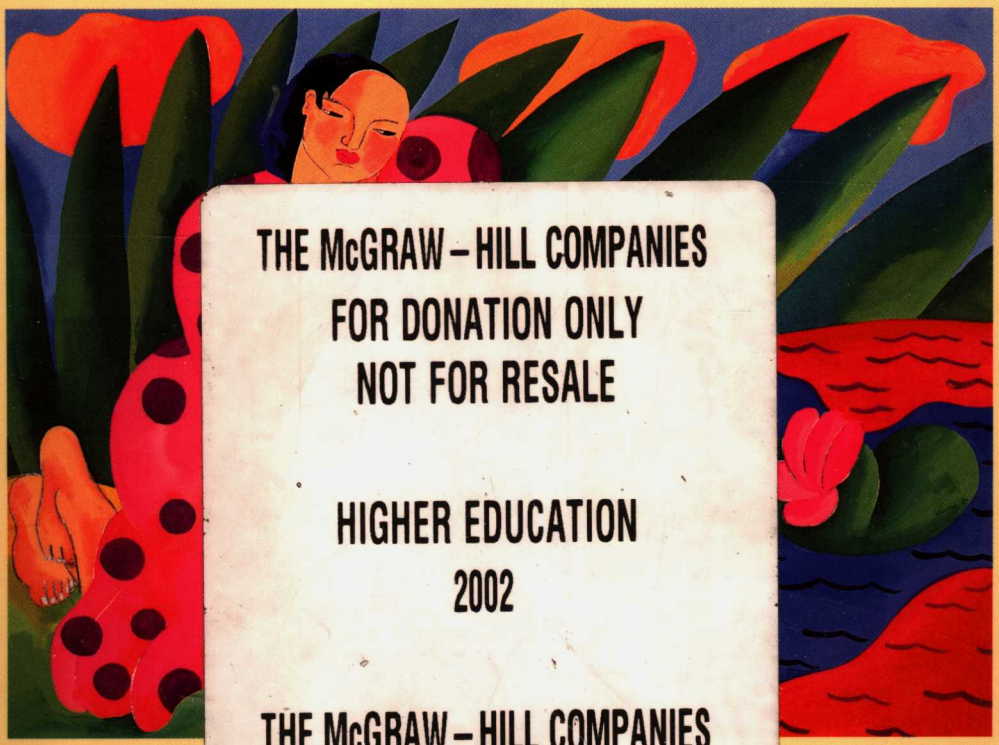
The MORAL of the STORY

THIRD EDITION

An Introduction to Ethics



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The Moral of the Story

AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

Third Edition

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THE MORAL OF THE STORY

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Preface

The Moral of the Story is an introduction to ethical theory written primarily for such college courses as Introduction to Ethics, Moral Problems, and Introduction to Philosophy: Values. Although many textbooks in value theory or ethics present problems of social importance for students to discuss, such as abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment, in my experience it is better for students to be introduced to basic ethical theory before they are plunged into discussions involving moral judgments. As a result, this book provides an overview of influential classical and modern approaches to ethical theory. However, without practical application of the theories, there can be no complete understanding of the problems raised, so each chapter includes examples that illustrate and explore the issues. As in the first two editions, I have chosen to use examples primarily from the world of fiction.

There is a growing interest in narrative theory among American, as well as European, philosophers; ethicists and other thinkers are beginning to include stories in their courses, as well as in their professional papers, not only as examples of problem solving but also as illustrations of an epistemological phenomenon. Humans are, in Alasdair MacIntyre's words, storytelling animals, and humans seem to choose the narrative form as their favorite way to structure meaning as they attempt to make sense of their reality. Recognizing this trend and taking advantage of most students' natural interest in films and stories in general, I have selected a number of fictional narrative illustrations of moral problems to conclude each chapter rather than relying solely on real-life case stories. These stories, referred to as Narratives, are in the form of summaries or short excerpts.

Organization

Like the second edition, the third edition of *The Moral of the Story* is divided into three major sections. Part 1 introduces the topic of ethics and places the phenomenon of storytelling within the context of cross-cultural moral education and discussion. Part 2 examines the conduct theories of ethical relativism, psychological and ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and Kantian deontology and explores the concepts of personhood, rights, and justice. Part 3 focuses on the subject of virtue theory and contains chapters on Socrates and Plato, Aristotle, contemporary virtue theories in American and Continental philosophy, and gender theory. In addition, the virtues of compassion and gratitude are examined in detail.

Major Changes to the Third Edition

Each chapter now ends with a set of study questions that immediately precede the primary readings. These questions are based on the text itself. If the instructor should wish to conduct class discussions and/or tests independently of any use of

the primary readings and the narratives (which include their own sets of study questions), this feature should make it easier for the instructor and her or his students to incorporate the discussions of the chapter into essays, group discussions, or class discussions.

Key discussions have been updated in several chapters, such as the introduction in Chapter 1. The discussion about the relationship between stories and violence in Chapter 2 includes a discussion of the possible harm caused by violent films. Chapter 3 now contains a discussion of the problematic concept "culture." Chapter 5 includes an expanded discussion of utilitarian principles applied to some official policies, as well as a selection from Mill's *Autobiography.* Chapter 7 contains several expansions of the discussions about rights, including a longer section dealing with the death penalty. Chapter 10 has been updated with a discussion of the political aspects of the debate over conduct *vs.* character. Chapter 11 has a new section, "Feminism in America: An Overview," and an expanded section, "Facets of Feminism Today," that includes classical, difference, radical, and equity feminism. Chapter 12 (formerly Chapter 13) has been expanded with an updated section on Philip Hallie and a background section about the Chinese philosophical tradition incorporated from the previous Chapter 12. Chapter 13 (formerly Chapter 14) has been restructured to include a section on writing one's own life story as a moral project and draws a parallel to political events at the end of the millennium.

Many new boxes have been added throughout the book, highlighting such issues as modern cynicism and psychological egoism and the harm principle applied to drug legislation. Other new boxes put Kant's attitude toward non-European populations into perspective, discuss the contemporary reluctance to include certain members of our society in the "persons" category, consider Megan's Law as an example of rights traded for benefits, discuss euthanasia as a right, and expand the discussion of Nietzsche's moral philosophy.

The new primary readings include excerpts from Hobbes's *Leviathan,* Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,* Stephen Nathanson's *An Eye for an Eye,* John Douglas's *Journey Into Darkness,* Plato's *Euthyphro,* Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* Philip Hallie's *Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm,* Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge,* and Tristine Rainer's *Your Life as Story.*

The new narratives are mostly films, with three exceptions: excerpts from Euripides' *Medea* and Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* and a reinstatement and expansion of Sheri Tepper's *Sideshow,* by request from readers of the first edition who missed the story in the second edition. The films include *Wag the Dog, Extreme Measures, Saving Private Ryan, High Noon* — reinstated from the first edition by request and placed in a group with two other thematically related films, *Outland* and *Cop Land* — *Gattaca, Dead Man Walking, Losing Isaiah, As Good As It Gets, Smoke Signals,* and *Tombstone.* I hope the added movie stills will provide additional inspiration for the readers of this edition.

Using the Narratives

The narratives have been chosen from a wide variety of sources ranging from epic prose, poems, and novels to films. I wish to emphasize that from a literary and

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artistic point of view that summaries and excerpts do not do the originals justice; a story worth experiencing, be it a novel, short story, or film, can't be reduced to a mere plot outline or fragment and still retain all of its essence. As Martha Nussbaum says, the form is an inherent part of the story content. Usually, there is more to the story than the bare bones of a moral problem, and in writing these summaries I have had to disregard much of the richness of story and character development. Nevertheless, I have chosen the summary or excerpt format in order to discuss a number of different stories and genres as they relate to specific issues in ethics. Because I believe it is important to show that there is a cross-cultural, historic tradition of exploring moral problems through telling a story, I have opted for a broad selection of narratives. There are, of course, other ways in which stories and ethical theory can be brought together; one might, for instance, select one or two short stories or films in their original format for class discussion. I hope that instructors will indeed select a few stories—novels, short stories, or videos—for their classes to experience firsthand. However, the narratives are written so that firsthand experience should not be necessary to a discussion of the problem presented by the story. The summaries and excerpts give readers just enough information to enable them to discuss the moral problem presented. I hope that some readers will become inspired to seek out the originals on their own.

Because space is limited, I have not been able to include more than a sampling of stories, and I readily admit that my choices are subjective ones; I personally find them interesting as illustrations and effective in a classroom context where students come from many different cultural backgrounds. Because I am a native of Denmark, I have chosen to include a few references to the Scandinavian literary tradition. I am fully aware that others might choose other stories or even choose completely different ethical problems to illustrate, and I am grateful to the many users of the first and second editions, instructors as well as students, who have let me know about their favorite stories and how they thought this selection of stories might be expanded and improved. The new narratives reflect some of these suggestions.

Acknowledgments

The previous edition introduced a number of major changes in the structure and content of the text. I remain grateful to the following colleagues and friends for their invaluable detailed assistance with the second edition: Carol Enns, College of the Sequoias; John Hasenjaeger, Clacamas Community College; John Osborne, Butte College; Tony Pettina, San Diego Mesa College; Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, Georgia State University; Søren Peter Hansen, Metropolitanskolen, Copenhagen, Denmark; Peter Kemp, Center for Ethics and Law, Copenhagen; Peter Atterton, San Diego State University; Thomas Wren, Loyola University; and Brian Shea, Loyola University.

The present edition has fewer major changes but many smaller additions, boxes, and expanded discussions. For their assistance in helping me prepare these changes for the third edition, I would like to extend my gratitude to a great many people. First of all, I want to thank my editor at Mayfield, Ken King, for his vision and his drive—and I really appreciate the fact that he enjoys a good movie, too! My

production editor, Carla Kirschenbaum, deserves much appreciation for great e-mail communications, for having the patience of a saint, and for keeping a clear perspective throughout the editing process. I thank my manuscript editor, Elaine Kehoe, for her skillful editing. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to Chris Poulos, Susan Shook, Marty Granahan, Susan Breitbard, and Brian Pecko. Warm thoughts go to my former editor, and friend, Jim Bull, without whom this book wouldn't have existed.

Next I want to thank my students at San Diego Mesa College, in particular my classes in Introduction to Philosophy: Values, Problems in Social and Political Philosophy, and Philosophy of Women in World Cultures. Their enthusiasm, sound skepticism, and fresh insights—and their enthusiasm in suggesting new films for the third edition—have been an invaluable source and encouragement for me.

In addition, I would like to express my gratitude specifically to the following colleagues and friends for their help and suggestions: Helmut Wautischer, Sonoma State University; Charles Zappia, San Diego Mesa College; Michael Kuttnauer, San Diego Mesa College; Jonathan McLeod, San Diego Mesa College; Arlene Wolinski, San Diego Mesa College; Mary Lou Locke, San Diego Mesa College; Richard Hammes, San Diego Mesa College; John D. Miller, University of Central Oklahoma; Emily Dial-Driver, Rogers University; Eugene Troxell, San Diego State University; Lawrence Hinman, University of San Diego; Eva Frederiksen, Helsinge, Denmark; Betty B. Owens, Dallas; Philip Martin, Long Beach; Nancy and Herbert Covner, Phoenix (for all the clippings); David Galloway, San Diego; Ed Wilbur, San Diego; Steen Wackerhausen, Århus University, Denmark; Karsten Friis Johansen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark; and Betsy Decyk, California State University, Long Beach. Many thanks to those who reviewed the manuscript for the third edition: Art Jackson, Providence College; Richard J. Mayock, West Los Angeles College; Pam R. Sailors, Southwest Missouri State University; and Joe S. Wixom, Utah Valley State College. A special thanks goes to American Indian activist and author Russell Means for enlightening me about the name preferred by indigenous Americans: *American Indians,* not "Native Americans."

I am grateful also to Peter Atterton, SDSU, for sharing his insight on the issue of race and the Enlightenment with me personally and in a more formal setting with my colleagues and students at Mesa College. I thank Janine Idziac and the Department of Philosophy, Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa, for inviting me to be the keynote speaker at The Matchette Lecture on the subject of literature, film, and ethics and for giving me a number of valuable suggestions for the third edition. A deeply felt appreciation goes to my friend and colleague Peter Kemp, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, for inviting me to give the keynote address at the conference in Filosofisk Forum, Hillerød, Denmark, on Identity and Authenticity. This gave me a rare opportunity to discuss connections between ethics and fiction with a Danish audience. The conference was held in memory of Dr. Kemp's wife (and my good friend) Margrete Lomholt, who was taken away from her family and friends so prematurely.

Additionally, I have a special appreciation to convey. The first and second editions of this book included a short section about Philip Hallie and his studies of

the Le Chambon phenomenon, based partly on his writings and partly on my own recollections of his paper read in San Diego as well as our subsequent conversation. I had always hoped to be able to continue that conversation on some future occasion; however, Professor Hallie passed away in 1994. Then, in May 1997, to my surprise, I received a very warm letter from Philip Hallie's widow, Doris Hallie, telling me of her appreciation that her husband's work was mentioned in my textbook and pointing out an error in my text (which has now been corrected!). In addition, she sent me a copy of the newly published work by Hallie, *Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm,* which is based on a manuscript he left behind.

As they were for the two previous editions, my parents, Gladys and Finn Rosenstand of Denmark, have been there for me, albeit with an ocean and a continent between us most of the time. They have been as active as ever, chasing down obscure bits of information for me and acting as my own private overseas clipping service. Thank you for all the support, *Mor* and *Far,* and for all the stories. And thank you, Rowdie, for your loving reminders of a world away from the computer. Most of all, I want to thank my husband, Craig R. Covner, for his love and support; Craig, you are my rock of refuge and sanity—and you make me laugh, too.

Contents

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Part 1

The Story as a Tool of Ethics

Chapter One

Who Cares About Ethics?

Thoughts at the Turn of the Millennium

An ancient Chinese curse says, "May you live in interesting times." For many of us, the 1990s have been extraordinarily "interesting," especially considering that these have been years of relative prosperity and peace in this country. The president of the United States is impeached for lying under oath about an extramarital affair. A former priest in Dallas confesses to having abused altar boys sexually. A young divorced mother straps her two young sons in the family car and rolls the car into a lake, drowning the children. A serial killer preys on women in Spokane and dumps their bodies in the outskirts of town. A young man rapes and kills a little girl in the restroom in a Las Vegas casino, while his friend waits outside without interfering. Three white males torture and drag a black male to his death behind a car in Jasper, Texas. And in many communities, children have taken firearms to their schools and killed fellow students and teachers—possibly one of the most heartbreaking and bewildering scenarios for people to face and try to come to terms with.

In addition, terrorism has struck home with the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center in New York City. We feel more vulnerable to the possibility of terrorist attacks by chemical or biological weapons, even though a 1998 suspicion of a terrorist plan to spread anthrax turned out to be a false alarm.

In short, we feel more vulnerable. We lock our doors at night, we "Club®" our cars while popping into a store, we sign prenuptial agreements, we take out a number of case-specific insurances. We don't trust each other much anymore. A new concept has been added to our everyday vocabulary: "road rage." However, statistics tell us that violent crime, including murder and school violence, is down in all major cities. Is it just a perception that life is getting cheaper, that some of us have become less sensitized to the plight of others?

It does indeed appear as if some people's consciences speak with weaker voices today than in the past, if they speak at all, and some crimes of today seem more cruel and demeaning to their victims than were crimes of the past. Civilization is a veneer that in an increasing number of cases seems to be wearing thin. But if that is really the case and not merely a perception, then there is an increasing need to discuss these matters. We can't expect to arrive at some unified conclusion about what we should do, but we can keep the subject alive: How do we improve on the quality of social life when so many of us seem to be more interested in doing for ourselves? What social and personal values do we want to bring with us as a society of

individuals moving into the third millennium? What kind of children do we want to raise to be future citizens of the twenty-first century? How do we make sure that common courtesy and moral standards are part of the world view of the future? Do we even agree on what counts as common courtesy and moral standards?

These are questions not only for professional educators and parents but also for every one of us who interacts with other people, because even though it may sometimes feel good to shortchange, ignore, or bully someone, we realize that it feels awful to be shortchanged, ignored, or bullied. It is only a short step to the realization that if we don't want to be treated that way, then we shouldn't treat others that way, either; but that short step may well be the step that defines civilization. It is commonly known as the Golden Rule, and we encounter it in several versions in this book.

Ethics, Morals, and Values

One might ask, What exactly do we mean by saying that "things are getting worse," morally speaking? Do we mean that, overall, everyone has less moral sense now than, say, thirty years ago? Or do we mean that some people (but not everyone) are becoming much worse than even the most morally corrupt individuals of the previous generation? Do we mean that *morality itself* has changed—that it no longer encompasses a set of more or less well-defined Christian values but rather an ill-defined set of secular values? Or do we mean that its emphasis has shifted from altruism to egoism? Some people might say that we are on a downhill slide when we abandon certain older values (such as "Humans are more important than other creatures" and "The land has been given to humans to develop") for newer values (such as "All creatures deserve respect" and "The land must be protected from abuse"). Others may view this change in attitude as an example of moral progress.

In addition, the depressing vision of "things getting worse" should be seen in the proper perspective. Consider that (1) we are witnessing a universal phenomenon; every generation seems to believe that the present, somehow, cannot compare with the past in terms of moral values; (2) we are much more exposed to human suffering all over the world than any generation of the past has ever been, because the news reaches us instantly through television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet, and the news that bombards us is most often the bad news of human woes—wars, crimes, and other bloodshed or natural disasters; and (3) such massive exposure will often lead to a certain cynical attitude toward our fellow human beings, a tendency to believe the worst-case scenarios. (Whether this attitude is fair is discussed in Chapter 4.)

It's important to keep this misanthropic view of modern morality in perspective. Today, our general awareness of what kind of conduct breaks the moral rules has actually become increasingly enlightened. In times past, an abused woman patient might not report her psychoanalyst for any wrongdoing, for a number of reasons; today, we are aware of how doctors ought to behave with their patients, and we speak up if they don't live up to our expectations. We believe that teachers should generally avoid having affairs with their students and employers with their employees and so on. We expect people in official positions not to abuse their power and people in

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Are times getting worse? Are people getting less sensitive to one another and more rude? Or are people generally becoming more aware of rudeness and callousness? Can you relate to either character in this cartoon?

leadership positions not to intimidate their employees through sexual harassment. In previous eras corruption and abuse of political power were, as we read in our history books, rampant. At least, so the argument goes, we are now more watchful. And although some books and films seem to say that life is cheap and brutality is fun, the majority of movies and novels today have a distinct moral point, which is not lost on the audience. (We will take up the moral impact of movies and books later in this chapter.)

There is also the phenomenon of introductory ethics classes in schools. Courses such as Introduction to Values, Ethics, and Contemporary Moral Problems are offered by all colleges, with more classes being added all the time. Although some students do take these courses because they are genuinely interested in the issues raised, most students take them because they are required to do so. Why, though, are such classes required? Is it because university professors believe that students have such appalling morals that they need to take a class before they can be let loose on society as lawyers, engineers, doctors, schoolteachers, and so on? That can hardly be the case, because these classes usually don't teach morals—they teach *ethics.* It also is not because students are seen to lack moral sense, but because they are assumed to *have* a moral sense that should be trained to work properly: not just to follow the rules or decide to break them, but to question them and come up with a reasonable answer as to why they are good enough or not good enough.

So what is the difference between *ethics* and *morality?* "Ethics" comes from Greek (*ethos,* character), and "morality" from Latin (*mores,* character, custom, or habit). Today, in English as well as in many other Western languages, both words refer to some form of proper conduct. Although we, in our everyday lives, don't distinguish clearly between morals and ethics, there is a subtle difference: Some people think the word *morality* has negative connotations, and in fact it does carry two different sets of associations for most of us. The positive ones are guidance, goodness, humanitarian

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