

The Moral Life

An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature



Louis P. Pojman

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in Ethics and Literature

LOUIS P. POJMAN

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
2000

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Calcutta
Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi Paris São Paulo Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

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Berlin Ibadan

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.,
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York, 10016
<http://www.oup-usa.org>

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pojman, Louis P.

The moral life : an introductory reader in ethics and literature /

Louis P. Pojman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-19-512844-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Ethics. I. Title.

BJ1025.P67 1999

170—dc21

98-46486

CIP

Printing (last digit): 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*Dedicated to
my colleagues in the English department
United States Military Academy
West Point*



*Where Philosophy and English
cross-fertilize each other
in a magnificent manner*

PREFACE

This is a book integrating literature with philosophy, while also covering both classical and contemporary ethical theory and applied topics. Literature often highlights moral ideas, focusing on particular people in their dilemmas, awakening our imagination to new possibilities, and enabling us to understand the moral life in fresh and creative ways. Good literature compels us to rethink and revise our everyday assumptions. It sets before us powerful particularities, which serve both as reinforcers and counterexamples to our sweeping principles. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* challenged the assumptions of ante-bellum America and created great sympathy for the abolitionist cause. Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984* brought clearly home to millions the dangers of totalitarianism. Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment* made us aware of the haunting voice of conscience that could overturn our best rationalization. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is like a picture worth a thousand arguments on why we need morality. William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* faces us with the tragedy of moral choice when all options are unacceptable. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* highlights the paradox of freedom and welfare better than any political philosophy book I've ever read. Victor Hugo's bishop of Digne encountering Jean Valjean is a more eloquent statement on the virtuous person than anything ever published in professional journals on virtue ethics. Tolstoy's short stories on greed and love leave their indelible marks on our souls. And so it goes. Good literature is the contemporary equivalent of the parables of the New Testament. It makes the abstract concrete, brings it home to the heart, and forces us to think with innovative imagination.

Yet, acknowledging the element of truth in Kant's rejection of

the empirical and the need for examples in ethics, particularity often is one-sided and passion-ridden. If it leaves us merely with gut reactions to a particular tragedy, it tends toward bias and irrationality. One needs cool-headed philosophical analysis to play a sturdy role in sorting out the ambiguities and ambivalences in literature, to abstract from particulars and universalize principles, to generate wide-ranging intellectual theories. To paraphrase Kant, the passionate imagination of literature is blind without the cool head of philosophy, but the cool head of philosophy is sterile and as frigid as an iceberg without the passions of life, conveyed in literature.

I have endeavored to join forces, to unite literature and philosophy in the service of ethical understanding. Most sections of this work open with literary pieces.

This work is divided into four parts:

I. *The Nature of Morality*. The central problems: What is morality? What is it for? What is its scope and force? I use Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Melville's *Billy Budd*, and Styron's *Sophie's Choice* to highlight central themes, followed by philosophical essays that delve more systematically into the nature of morality, the nature of good and evil, and, relating to the scope and force of morality, moral relativism and objectivism. One might wonder why the latter issue comes in so soon, but there may be no issue more in dispute among young people today than this topic. Hence its prominence.

II. *Moral Theories*. The three classic ethical theories: utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics. Following the chapter on virtue ethics, I have included essays on particular virtues and vices, such as Tolstoy's "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" and "Where Love Is, There Is God," Kant's "Jealousy, Malice, and Ingratitude," Helen Keller's "Three Days to See," and Vice Admiral Stockdale's "The World of Epictetus."

III. *Moral Issues*. Why be moral? What is the meaning of life? What is important about freedom, autonomy, and self-respect? I have included Plato's classic discussion of "The Ring of Gyges," James Rachels' exposition of ethical egoism, followed by my critique of ethical egoism, and writings by Epicurus, Epictetus, Camus, Frankl, Buddha, Nozick, Sartre, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Hill.

IV. *Applied Ethics*. Contemporary issues such as sex, love, and marriage; abortion; substance abuse; animal rights; and the environment. I have chosen issues that relate primarily to personal, rather than social, morality.

There are fifteen chapters and eighty-six articles in all. Short introductions open each part and chapter. Each reading is introduced with an abstract and most essays conclude with questions for further reflection.

Many people have helped with this project. Robert Miller, Philosophy Editor at Oxford University Press, first proposed the idea of this anthology and gave enormous support to it. My colleagues in the English Department (an umbrella department for philosophy at West Point—we have seventeen philosophers in the English Department, which must be a record—plus a lot of English faculty who are addictive philosophers). This book is dedicated to all the members of my department, who are as collegial, honorable, and unpretentious colleagues as any I have had the pleasure of working with. Captain Jowell Parks and Lieutenant Colonels Janice Hudley, Mike Owens, Al Bishop, and Mike Burke all made excellent suggestions along the way. Colonel Peter Stromberg, our head, has supported my work with wonderful generosity. Mylan Engel contributed an original essay on vegetarianism for this volume. Robert Audi, Margarita Levin, Robert van Wyk, Bonnie Steinbock, and several anonymous reviewers offered good advice, as did my wife, Trudy, who has been my deepest friend and inspiration for over thirty years.

United States Military Academy
West Point, N.Y.
January 1999

L. P. P.

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Introduction

On the Nature of Morality

Morality is about good and evil, and right and wrong action. What exactly are these? It is not always easy to say. Various religions and philosophies differ. What is the good? Religious people identify it with God, the source of all being and value. Plato thought the good was a transcendent, indefinable mystery, the source of all being and value. It is the absolute truth, higher even than God and discoverable by reason and intuition. Plato's follower, the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore, modified Plato's formula, omitting the transcendent dimension. The good, he thought, was a nonnatural, indefinable property like the color yellow. It was not the source of all reality, only of morality and aesthetic reality. On the other hand, Jeremy Bentham (chapter 4), William James, and Richard Taylor (chapter 2) deny there is anything mysterious or transcendent about goodness. They hold that the good is a definable, natural property. It refers to pleasure or the object of desire—*good* is a functional term which refers to the satisfaction of our desires, the pleasure we feel when satisfied. Variations on this basic hedonism appear in the literature; the human good for Mill consists not just in any kind of pleasure but in certain qualities of pleasure—a deep sense of well-being or happiness spread over a lifetime, not necessarily a life of ecstatic rapture, “but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing.”¹

¹John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863, chapter 2). Mill elaborates on his functional hedonism: “Happiness is a life in which exist free action (includ-

For Nietzsche (chapter 2) goodness has nothing to do with pleasure or happiness (“Only the Englishman wants that”) but power, the sense of dominating, of being in control, of being the alpha male in the pack. Goodness derives from the will to power that we all deeply crave. As such it is hierarchical and inequalitarian. But the envious mediocre masses detest this natural good, and so are determined to crush it. Morality, according to Nietzsche, is the herd’s attempt to institutionalize mediocrity and protect the sheep from the more excellent wolves. The priests, both religious and secular moralizers, invent the soft moral virtues (pity, patience, peace, kindness, forgiveness, and tolerance) in order to protect themselves from their betters. Helping the worst off, redeeming the worthless, forgiving the criminal, maintaining the lives of sick bodies and diseased souls—the criminals, the stupid, and the mediocre. The ideas of good and evil must be understood in the clash between the superior overmen, and the priests who represent the masses. Right and wrong action, then, become a kind of politically correct ideology which, ironically, proves the Nietzschean point of the will to power. For the moralists invent good and evil in order to empower themselves and their clientele against their superior enemy.

Where does the truth lie in these matters? One thing everyone engaged in the debate recognizes: morality is both personal and social. It is personal in that it has to do with how we should live our lives, what we should strive to become. It is social in that it recognizes that we are not hermits or gods, independent beings with no need for each other. We are centers of conscious striving, desire, who have wills of our own but have to adjust the pursuit of our goals in the light of other people’s desires and interests. How to reconcile and adjust these twin forces, the personal and the social, is the central domain of ethics. It is the central concern of this anthology. Many works of ethics emphasize the broader areas of social policy or social ethics: just-war theory, economic relations, punishment, political arrangements, and institutional justice. There is a place for that. But what I want us to focus on in this work is the more personal dimension of ethics: its *raison d’être*, its funda-

ing meaningful work), loving relations, and moral character, and in which the individual is not plagued by guilt and anxiety but is blessed with peace and satisfaction.”

mental purposes. We want to build from the ground up, for unless we get our foundations firmly laid, our structure will be in danger of capsizing. We will first study the nature of morality, beginning with a sizable selection from William Golding's moral allegory, *Lord of the Flies*. After a commentary, we will examine the philosophical analogue to Golding's work, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, written three hundred years earlier. After this we raise one of the most crucial questions about morality: is it universally valid or only relative to individual choice or one's culture?

In Part II we progress to the three classic moral theories: *utilitarianism*, which aims at maximizing good consequences, usually defined in terms of pleasure or happiness; *deontological ethics*, which focuses on the individual act (its inherent rightness or wrongness) and the individual (his or her inherent dignity or value); and *virtue ethics*, which focuses on character, the kind of qualities we should inculcate, the kind of people we should become. But all of these theories recognize the role of virtue and vice—morally significant character traits. So in the fourth chapter of Part II we examine several classic virtues and vices.

In Part III we consider theoretical issues that are implicit in our study of the nature of morality and moral theories, enlarging on what was said earlier. If the first two parts constituted the foundations and formal structure of moral theory, Part III deals with the materials in our building. First we examine the idea of the self in relation to others. Sometimes we can flout moral rules when it is in our perceived interest to do so. Should we do so? Why should we be moral whenever we can enhance personal gain by disregarding morality's requirements? This problem is related to the second—what really is important about life, what, if anything, gives it meaning? Or is it merely "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? Here we look at various worldviews about the nature and destiny of humanity: Epicureanism, Stoicism, Theism, Buddhism, Existentialism, and others. In chapter 10 we examine the importance of freedom and autonomy.

Finally, in Part IV we examine seven practical moral issues. Continuing our metaphor of the house, these constitute the inner dynamics, the plumbing, electricity, and furniture. In chapter 11 we examine the meaning of human sexuality in relation to love and marriage. What does morality permit and forbid? Why is adultery wrong? Is monogamous marriage really a moral good? Should we need

licenses to have children? Chapter 12 analyzes the difficult problem of abortion. In chapter 13 we consider the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol. Chapter 14 deals with our duties to animals and takes up the issue of vegetarianism. Chapter 15 considers our duty to the environment.

I have generally included readings which take opposing stands on the issues at hand, though sometimes I have simply included a reading to stimulate thinking, say on LaFollette's claim that the government should require people to obtain a license to have children or Engel's claim that moral people already hold beliefs that commit them to being vegetarians. The main purpose of this work is to help you think through the difficult and exciting personal dimensions of what morality is about. Hence the use of literature to supplement philosophical analysis.

Literature particularizes general problems, brings them home to us, enlivening the imagination so that we see and feel nuances that are vital to resolving difficult moral issues, possibilities that we might not have considered in our abstract thinking about moral dilemmas. But it is no substitute for philosophical analysis, so while many chapters begin with a literary work, the philosophical essays are where most of the necessary argument takes place.

Part I

The Nature of Morality

Good and Evil

In this part of our work we consider three fundamental questions relating to morality: What is the purpose of morality? What are good and evil? Is morality essentially relative or are there objective moral truths? We begin each chapter with a literary selection and then go on to provide a philosophical analysis. Let us look briefly at the first of these questions.

What is the purpose of morality? What is morality for? It seems to have many purposes. These include enabling us to reach our goals in socially acceptable ways, enabling us to resolve conflicts of interests fairly, developing certain kinds of positive character, promoting human happiness, enabling society to survive. You can probably think of others. But just as a picture is worth a thousand words, a good story may do more to illuminate the purpose of morality than a thousand disquisitions on the subject. So we begin our book with a sizable selection from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a modern allegory on the nature and purpose of morality. A group of British private school boys are marooned on an island; detached from the constraints of civilization, they turn into savages. Whether or not human nature is as depraved as Golding makes it out to be, the significance of the book lies in the fact that it illuminates the need for and purpose of ethical codes. After Golding's novel, I give an analysis on its meaning for our understanding of morality. This is followed by a selection from Thomas Hobbes's classic work *Leviathan* (1651),