

Issues in Moral Philosophy



Thomas Donaldson

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To Jane Donaldson Baldwin

PREFACE

Ethics exhibits two divergent approaches: the first focuses on issues of contemporary interest, and the second on more abstract issues of theoretical and historical significance. Having examined the stacks of ethics textbooks available for use in college classrooms, I found that only a few attempt an examination of both, and many fail to integrate the two kinds of subject matter successfully. This polarization is regrettable because ethics traditionally has reflected a mix of classical and contemporary issues. Some topics must be examined now, for it is *now* that answers are needed. Other topics, while less urgent, deserve examination because they display a relevance that seems as permanent as the human condition.

This anthology attempts to harmonize these two critical aspects of ethics. The book's aim is to serve as a basic text for an introductory course in ethics that will shortchange neither the instructor's desire for conceptual sophistication nor the students' demand for relevance. The first section takes up fundamental issues of broad significance: the authority of conventional morality, moral psychology, basic approaches to ethical theory, justice, and morality and the law. The remaining sections explore topics of special contemporary relevance: censorship and sexual ethics, abortion, euthanasia, punishment and the death penalty, prejudice and equality, economic responsibilities, and nuclear deterrence.

Topics are arranged to allow for a step-by-step progression in concepts for the student, and the theoretical issues introduced in Part One are re-encountered in the discussions of applied issues in later sections. For example, the relationship between law and morality discussed in Part One is followed immediately by the discussion of morality and censorship in Part Two, and the same question of law and morality re-emerges in the sections on capital punishment and economic responsibilities. Furthermore, I have attempted to arrange the articles within parts in a logical sequence that first highlights key aspects of the issue being disputed and then displays an increasing sophistication to which the issue's analysis is subject. Finally, like issues are arranged with like; for example, all three topics centering on life-death decisions—abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty—are collected together.

The book also utilizes a device that has gained increasing acceptance in philosophical circles: the case method. Once used exclusively in schools of business or law, the case study has shown itself to have successful application to a wide range of ethical issues. Seven of the book's eight parts begin with a case study, and the instructor may engage students in the discussion of a concrete problem typical of those encountered in the real world. For most instructors the primary role of the case study is to reveal ethical issues as they occur in context and to whet the students' appetites for the theoretical discussions that follow.

Critics of abortion will note that Part Four includes more articles defending the permissibility of abortions (and in one instance, infanticide) than criticizing it. This is not a disguised attempt to promote abortion (indeed, my own views happen to lie in the opposite direction; rather it is an acknowledgment that, wherever truth happens to lie, the variety of kinds of pro-abortion justifications commonly offered is greater than the variety of pro-life justifications. In order to provide the student with an accurate conceptual map from which to judge the issues, it was necessary in this instance for the principle of equal time to give way to that of fair coverage. However, no inference about the relative strength of any point of view should be drawn.

The book has benefited enormously from the patient evaluation of others. I am especially indebted to the reviewers who accepted McGraw-Hill's invitation to critique the first draft: Robert T. Radford, Oklahoma State University; Robert J. Mulvaney, University of South Carolina; Richard Voight, Northampton Area Community College; and Thomas Auxter, University of Florida. Their painstaking attention to the philosophical and organizational aspects of the book was responsible for the dramatic improvement made between the first and final drafts. I want also to acknowledge a number of people who contributed directly or indirectly to the task of creating the book: Richard DeGeorge, Gerald Dworkin, Russell Hardin, Jeffrey MacMahon, Eric Park, Henry Shue, Manuel Velasquez, and Patricia Werhane. My research assistants, Dennis Keenan and Marcia Lehe, deserve substantial credit not only for handling many technical aspects of manuscript preparation, but also for making suggestions about material to include. Terri Gitler and Frances Stickney Newman, both of Publication Services, did a first-rate job of copy editing and page proof production. Thanks finally should go to Emily Barrosse, my editor at McGraw-Hill, whose careful questions and comments sparked my editorial imagination.

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ETHICAL THEORY

INTRODUCTION

In the classic tragedy by Sophocles, *Antigone*, a woman agonizes over the fate of her brother who was killed while opposing the king of Thebes. Her grief is more acute because of the new decree promulgated by the king demanding that her brother's body be left to rot beyond the city's walls, deprived of the burial required by ancient custom. Violation of the decree carries the penalty of death. Thus, not to bury her brother means flouting family duty and defying the will of the gods; but burying him means defying the law of the state and bringing death upon herself. In the end, she disobeys the decree.

Retold for over two thousand years, this simple story draws its power from its ability to dramatize a difficult moral dilemma. Each of us must at some point confront one of the key issues of *Antigone*—whether to obey the law of the land, or our own conscience. Moreover, different, but equally difficult, moral questions can intrude in our lives with a direct demand for answers. Is it acceptable to secure an abortion? Should my conscience bother me if I kill an enemy soldier? Should I work for a nuclear freeze? Is business bluffing ethical? Am I bound to send some of my food or money to starving people in the far corners of the world?

A major aim of this anthology is to aid moral reflection by illustrating the connection between ethical theory and practice. In this section the emphasis is on ethical theory, or, in other words, on the basic issues dominating the conceptual background against which ethical decisions must be made. These issues include the authority of custom, the major modes of ethical reasoning, the nature of justice, and the relationship between law and morality. However

cold and abstract they may sound, such issues have a critical relationship to practical problems.

We shall be using the words “ethics” and “morality” interchangeably, although differences between the two exist in ordinary language. The word “ethics” evolved from the Greek words, “ethos,” denoting personal character and “ta ethika,” used to refer to philosophical inquiries into the nature of good and evil. The word “morality,” in contrast, has its origins in the same Latin stem as the word “mores,” meaning social customs or habits. In turn, common parlance distinguishes between “ethics” and “morality” as it distinguishes matters of individual character from those of custom. Yet despite this, modern philosophers use the words almost interchangeably, and mean by them the inquiry into, or substance of, whatever is good and right for human beings.

One can think about ethics, or one can think *about thinking* about ethics, and sometimes it helps to note the difference. In this vein, modern philosophers separate *normative* ethics from *non-normative* ethics. *Normative* ethics is what most persons think of when hearing the word “ethics”; it attempts to isolate and justify ethical principles, precepts, and positions. In other words, it purports to tell us something about how we ought to behave. *Non-normative* ethics, on the other hand, consists either of (1) *metaethics*, which is the analysis of the meaning and use of moral concepts and of the nature of moral reasoning; or of (2) *descriptive ethics*, which is the description and recording of ethical practices. Although most of the articles in this book are normative rather than non-normative, issues of metaethics and descriptive ethics are interwoven throughout.

Many philosophers take pains to distinguish normative ethics from science. Put in its simplest form, the distinction they wish to draw is between “is” and “ought,” or between that which ought to be done or ought to exist, and that which is done, or is the case. Science tells us that cancer kills, not that it should kill. Ethics, on the other hand, tells us that people ought not to murder, not that they do not murder. The distinction is apt in many ways, for it highlights the differences in methodology needed for ethical versus scientific investigations. The painstaking survey that illuminates public preferences for soft drinks or political candidates (and is helpful to pollsters and manufacturers of soft drinks) may say nothing about which candidates or soft drinks people *ought* to pick.

Nevertheless, the simple distinction between fact and value breaks down in important ways. To begin with, sophisticated theories exist which attempt to bridge the gap between “is” and “ought.” Aristotle and Spinoza, for example, both identify the good with an underlying reality in nature. Second, the gap suggests something false about moral belief; namely, that facts are irrelevant. Often, agreement about the facts will generate agreement about ethics. The woman who disagrees with U.S. policy in Central American, or the man who objects to welfare payments made to the poor, usually maintains factual beliefs about these issues—say, that the Soviets are not orchestrating national revolutions, or that welfare recipients would prefer not to work—that are crucial to

her or his moral views. Clear up factual disputes and, in many cases, the ethical disputes will likewise vanish.

The issue of the fact-value distinction has confused and divided generations of philosophers. Spinning off from the nucleus of this issue are a few specific, unresolved questions:

- 1 Are ethical judgments *true or false*?
- 2 Is genuine ethical knowledge, whether factual or nonfactual, possible?
- 3 Can values be derived from facts? (Can one derive an *ought* from an *is*?)

Those who answer questions (1) and (2) with a “no” are *non-cognitivists* because of their belief that moral judgments do not *refer* to anything, but instead are merely expressions either of attitudes or of emotions. Those, on the other hand, who answer (1) and (2) with a “yes” are “*cognitivists*” and fall into two separate subcategories depending on how they answer question (3). If they believe that an “is” can be used to derive an “ought,” or in other words that ethical knowledge can be derived from empirical truths (facts about the world), then they are “*naturalists*.” But if, on the other hand, they deny that facts underlie values, preferring to view moral knowledge as the product of moral intuition, they are classified as *intuitionists*. As should be obvious, there is no simple answer to the question of the relationship between facts and values, and one’s perspective on the issue will be strongly influenced by one’s answer to subsidiary questions such as factual derivability, moral knowledge, and the status of ethical judgments.

It is tempting to by-pass the moral theory of the present section and turn immediately to the problems of practice that come later. Yet patience with theory is a prerequisite for practical success. Only an acquaintance with moral basics can untangle and clarify background assumptions that frequently determine moral attitudes. One word of encouragement: despite the fact that philosophy is notorious for disagreement, most philosophers do agree that people can come to think better and more clearly about ethics, just as they can come to think more clearly about law or biology. Indeed students are usually amazed to discover how much agreement exists among moral philosophers, and how much headway has been made in resolving stubborn moral problems.

CONVENTIONAL MORALITY

When studying ethics, one is forced to begin in the middle. We all bring to our study a host of beliefs, experiences, and attitudes, and many of these are remnants of the morality of our friends, teachers, and family. Thus, it makes sense to inquire early in one’s study about the status of conventional morality, of, in other words, the moral views that are accepted by ordinary members of society, and of the authority, if any, such views possess.

Those lucky few who depart from ordinary ways of thinking and attain true moral knowledge, says Plato, are like people who once were chained to rocks in a dark cave and who mistook shadows on the wall for reality. Once free, they

are bedazzled by the light of the sun but will never again settle for the illusions and half-truths of their former existence. In the selection that begins this section, we read the classic allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, a story that underscores Plato's own conviction of the value of philosophical knowledge. In the section that precedes the allegory, Plato clarifies his own vision of what insight into the "Good" (an expression he uses to represent the highest object of philosophical knowledge) ultimately means.

In sharp contrast to Plato, the anthropologist William Graham Sumner argues in "A Defense of Cultural Relativism" that mores are, and ought to be, relative to culture. In certain South Sea societies a young woman's attractiveness as a prospective marriage partner is enhanced by proving her fertility by having a child out of wedlock. In ours just the reverse is true. How, asks Sumner, are we to say that one culture is objectively "right" and the other "wrong?" If Sumner is correct, the implications for ethics are staggering. If he is, then ethics should doubtlessly be reduced to a branch of anthropology or to what earlier we called "descriptive ethics," and the ethicist should hope at best to explain and describe existing moral customs. Yet in a fascinating reply to the relativist, the contemporary philosopher Carl Wellman makes use of the distinction already noted between "is" and "ought." The mere existence of differences in moral attitudes among cultures, he points out, does not entail moral relativity. Indeed, it entails relativity no more than differences in factual attitudes among cultures would entail factual relativity. A disagreement between two cultures about the shape of the earth—one culture believing it to be round and the other flat—would not entail that the shape of the earth is a matter of taste. Wellman next considers more sophisticated versions of relativism, including those that derive relativity from cultural differences in moral reasoning. Although stopping short of claiming to have proven a universal, objective ethical truth, he concludes that the cultural relativism has offered no persuasive reason for accepting its assertions.

MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Anyone seriously wishing to understand ethics must eventually confront not only the issue of how people *ought* to think and behave, but of how they *do* think and behave, and the latter issue falls under the heading of moral psychology. Two diametrically opposed views about the nature of moral psychology are presented in the readings from Hobbes and Kohlberg. In one, the seventeenth-century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, defends his view that people are inherently, and unalterably, self-interested. Sometimes called "psychological egoism," this view sees all actions, however well disguised by apparent benevolence, as motivated by selfish interests. Even the hero who jumps on a grenade, apparently sacrificing his life for the lives of his friends, is doing so in order to satisfy some internal and ultimately self-interested urge. Peace and harmony among such self-interested creatures, Hobbes concludes, can only be secured by arranging human affairs in a manner where obedience