

ETHICS & LIFE

*An Interdisciplinary Approach
to Moral Problems*

*Elaine E. Englehardt
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An Interdisciplinary Approach to Moral Problems

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Wm. C. Brown Publishers

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PREFACE

This book is designed for an introductory course in ethics that links both theoretical and practical concerns. The readings in the book are interdisciplinary and challenge students to read critically a variety of works in philosophy, religion, literature, and history. Interdisciplinary examination is an exceptional way for students to become acquainted with the study of ethics. Through the four disciplines, students will benefit from a holistic perspective on ethical questions and dilemmas. Moreover, this book should engage students in serious reflection on moral issues that relate to their own lives.

The book begins with a short essay on the nature of ethics. The first part of the book introduces the student to ethical theory through the works of selected philosophers and religious writings. This section focuses on five ethical traditions: duty, rights, utility, virtue, and caring relations. The writings from the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and Immanuel Kant provide varying accounts of an ethic of duty. Thomas Hobbes's ethical approach is naturalistically based, but it also establishes the rudiments of an ethic of rights. The principle of utility is presented through an essay from John Stuart Mill. The reading from Aristotle introduces the student to the notion of ethics as virtue. And, an ethic based on caring relationships, an emerging theoretical perspective, is articulated by Carol Gilligan, a professor of education at Harvard University.

Each of these ethical approaches is a legitimate part of our cultural heritage, but each can and often does conflict with others in certain respects. As students work through the book, they should determine the perspectives of the writers, for such understanding will shape the analysis of and recommended responses to ethical dilemmas. Students also should confront the question of why they are inclined to one ethical system over another. Why does one author or philosopher appeal to them over others? Are their choices explained merely by what their parents, their peers, or their religious communities believe? Or, are their choices the result of independent judgments that respect the moral views of others—including their parents, peers, and clergy—but are ultimately formed autonomously and with a full sense of personal accountability? In short, how firm and well-grounded are the students' ethical points of view? Are the students really capable of publicly justifying their ethical positions, both those they might hold in an academic sense and those they live by? These are questions that should help push students not only to think carefully about ethical matters, but also to live lives reflecting well-considered moral behavior.

The next three chapters of the book focus on moral dilemmas, again using interdisciplinary material. We have selected the topics of abortion, war and nuclear war, and corporate social responsibility as three of the most important ethical problems of our time. Each chapter opens with an introductory essay by the editors that indicates the central ethical issues connected with each area and presents an overview of all the readings in the section. The readings begin with an explanation of and an orientation to the issue by various authorities. We next present the dilemma from a philosophical perspective, paying attention to the variety of viewpoints offered by different philosophers. Religious writings also add a helpful dimension to the ethical study of these dilemmas. Religions concern themselves with questions of applied ethics, but, in addition, their leaders and sacred writings have a special authority for their adherents. We have selected perspectives from three important world religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The discipline of literature brings an additional and distinctive contribution to moral reflection through its special focus on the human factor. Through short stories, poems, essays, and plays, literature helps the reader envision a dilemma through strong description, captivating plot lines, and, above all, emotion and feeling. The final discipline, history, brings out yet another viewpoint on ethical concerns. It is important that students understand moral dilemmas from the perspective of those who have actually experienced them in all their complexity and depth, often as an occasion of genuine suffering. Actual stories relating to abortion, war, and corporate irresponsibility confront us in a special way with the ambiguity and the harsh reality of what we sometimes do. Human experience, both direct and indirect, can be a master "teacher" of the moral point of view.

An important function of this book is to enable students to confront themselves with respect to ethical matters and examine critically all of the issues of moral dilemmas. Moreover, students should recognize possible inconsistencies in their own ethical views as well as the implications of their actual moral beliefs and actions. In the classroom, this can be done through strong discussion and the writing of papers on ethical subjects. At the end

of each reading, we have six questions designed to promote discussion and to encourage the intellectual stimulation needed for interesting essays and papers.

- The first question relates to some aspect of the content of the specific reading.
- The second question asks the student to examine the soundness of the essay and the intent of the author.
- The third question focuses on personal interpretation and asks for a response to the moral issue at hand or to related issues.
- The fourth question asks for a response to the reading using ethics as the focus.
- The fifth question involves the specific discipline reflected in the reading and how this discipline relates to the ethical dilemma.
- The final question examines how the study of ethics might be influenced by a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

Finally, we hope this book will help students understand the humanities as well as the specific topic of ethics. We have not meant to teach students a specific skill, but rather to help them be individuals of a special kind—who think critically and constructively, who know how to evaluate problems, who discuss issues civilly, who communicate well orally and in writing, and who care about and strive to do what is morally right. These abilities and developed characteristics compose, we believe, much of the goal of teaching and learning in the humanities.

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We dedicate this book to Judy and Kirk.

Elaine E. Englehardt, Utah Valley Community College
Donald D. Schmeltekopf, Baylor University

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PART 1



*THE NATURE OF
ETHICS*

“M orality is made for man, not man for morality.”¹ This statement aptly suggests what morality is about: a system of guidance designed to assist us in the living of our lives. This practical assistance, however, has a distinctive quality to it. In contrast to nonmoral guides, morality ultimately rests on self-sacrifice and the curbing of our inclination to want and to do anything that pleases us. The primary goal of morality is to establish appropriate constraints on human behavior—constraints made necessary by self-aggrandizement and conflicting interests. We would not need morality if the human situation were otherwise, if people lived together peaceably and without harming one another. The fact that we do not so live is the major condition requiring morality.

Ethics is the study of morality and moral behavior. That is, ethics is the philosophical discipline dealing with our moral choices, actions, and judgments, and their rational justifications. The main reason we engage in ethical reflection is for practical guidance on what we ought to or ought not to do. But while the analysis of some of our moral behavior yields clear-cut answers (e.g., it was wrong of X to kill Y in cold blood), the analysis of much of our moral behavior produces answers that are not always definite (e.g., it was wrong of X to abort Y). The latter kinds of situations are moral dilemmas, where desirable or undesirable alternatives conflict and where both sides seem equally justifiable. In moral dilemmas, it is not clear what the right course of action is. The study of morality—ethics—assists conscientious people in establishing the right thing to do in both definite and indefinite situations.

To a great extent, this book is arranged with moral dilemmas in mind. The proper moral choices, actions, and judgments concerning abortion, corporate responsibility, and war and nuclear conflict are not always well-defined. There is considerable moral disagreement about these matters, but the study of morality can help us make better and wiser decisions in these areas and, at the very minimum, help us know why we disagree.

We said that ethics is the disciplined study of the rational justification of moral principles and moral behavior. This means, first, that ethics is a discipline like history or psychology. As a discipline, ethics involves schools of thought (e.g., consequentialism and non-consequentialism—more on these later.) As a discipline, ethical inquiry produces theories, distinctive concepts and principles, and its own methodology. And, of course, it has its own peculiar language: “(moral) right and wrong,” “good and evil,” “ought and obligation,” “duty,” “(human) rights,” “freedom and responsibility,” and the like. When one engages in the study of ethics, one needs to be familiar with the history, norms, and semantics of the field, just as with other disciplines.

Second, ethics has to do with what is *moral*—with the moral domain of human behavior. The study of ethics involves reflection on *moral* behavior in contrast to prudential, legal, or even religious behavior, although they may be related. What are the fundamental, distinguishing characteristics or properties of moral behavior? Two of these characteristics are harm and mutual aid. Morality, and its study through ethics, is important to us because of our basic and universal aversion to harm, either physical or

¹William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 98.

psychological. No one wants to be harmed (killed, maimed, inflicted with pain, deprived of freedom and opportunity, etc.), and no one submits to harm unless there is an overriding reason. What specifically is harm? It is the experience of pain, suffering, or deprivation—*against our will*—that results from the willful or negligent act of another person. From the moral point of view, harm is wrongful injury as a result of human action and should be seen as an aspect of evil.

To say that no one desires to be harmed seems to be a fact of life, a truism about our common humanity. Another such truth, however, is that most, if not all, humans inflict harm from time to time on others without the others' consent. We need not agree with Thomas Hobbes's pessimistic version of the state of war among us to agree, nevertheless, that life would be intolerable without a formidable constraint on our inclination to inflict harm on others. These coexistent realities—the universal human aversion to harm and the universal human tendency to inflict harm—are the conditions that make morality necessary. This explains why the central issue of ethical reflection is the problem of harm and its appropriate constraint.

Avoiding harm, of course, is not the only distinguishing characteristic of moral behavior. Moral behavior also involves assisting others in their lives by contributing to their well-being or benefit. The concept of the "good Samaritan" captures this characteristic in classic fashion. Surely morality would be incomplete without this positive side of obligation to others. The phrase "do good and avoid evil" readily summarizes both distinctive characteristics of *moral* behavior and establishes the basic subject matter of ethics.

Morality in the sense indicated has both an individual and a social dimension. What we have said thus far assumes the preeminence of the individual as moral agent, in keeping with most moral traditions of the Western world. But morality is also a social system, sometimes understood or referred to as the "moral institution of life."

The "moral institution of life" refers to the pervasive societal framework that perpetuates morality within any given social order. Morality is not invented anew by each generation, nor is it limited to actions of individuals. Rather, as William K. Frankena observes, "like one's language, state, or church, it exists before the individual, who is inducted into it and becomes more or less of a participant in it, and it goes on existing after him."² Morality is a social enterprise that involves a system of rules, ideals, and sanctions, and thereby serves the essential social functions of harmony and cooperation. However, morality as a social institution *needs*, from time to time, the critical judgment of the autonomous moral agent. This criticism has the potential of contributing, over time, to a measure of moral progress within the social order.

Since morality has a social dimension, it certainly applies to institutions, institutional arrangements and policies, and the behavioral norms of various cultures and groups. Thus, the study of ethics encompasses *moral norms* applicable to business corporations, political bodies, medical organizations, colleges and universities, churches, sects, and so on, as well as individuals *qua* individuals. While moral theories and concepts are designed to deal primarily with individuals, moral categories can be sensibly applied to these various institutions and groups, although in a secondary sense. Manufacturing firms have an obligation to produce safe products because individuals working within firms can and are obligated to produce safe products in the first place.

²*Ibid.*, 5.

Third, the focus of our definition of ethics is on *behavior* rather than motives, intentions, or character. Experiences of harm and mutual aid occur primarily because of concrete actions that are committed or are not committed. Moral motivation and intention are certainly of interest to us, as is evident in the judgments we make about the reasons behind certain actions. We also have strong interest in the character of people because one's disposition to act in a certain way has predictive value in moral behavior. But, in the end, what people actually do or don't do is what counts most of all, morally speaking. The pain of actually being maimed, without our consent, is far worse than whatever intentions someone might have entertained with respect to us. Moreover, many intentions are never acted on, whereas each moral action may count as either harm or help.

A final component of our definition of ethics concerns the concept of *rational justification*. As a philosophical enterprise, work in the field of ethics is based ultimately on reason and its power to justify beliefs. Philosophers generally hold that while reason is not the only guide to truth, it provides the best direction. And, one of the areas to which reason can give guidance is morality. One aspect, then, of the nature of ethics is our *analysis* of and *reflection* on moral choices and judgments.³ Of particular interest in this regard is the rational justification of our moral beliefs. To justify a belief—a position, a viewpoint, or a conclusion—is to give sufficient grounds for it; it is to show that an idea is warranted. There are various kinds of backings—in experience, in religion, and in reason—for a warranted moral belief, but in philosophy, the decisive kind of evidence is found in reason. In the study of ethics, both theoretical and practical, one constantly seeks the theory or principle(s) that is most convincing and that action which, all things considered, would be the best thing to do.

Our understanding of ethics may be further clarified by distinguishing morality or moral behavior from law, etiquette, customary morality, and religion. The law, of course, reflects various moral rules, ideals, and sanctions of a society. However, obedience to the law is not an adequate moral standard because the law cannot cover all acts or intentions, nor does the law prescribe for *all* acts of mutual aid. Moreover, the law occasionally runs contrary to morality—is unjust—and hence, may justifiably be disobeyed in *exceptional cases*.

Etiquette refers to the forms of behavior that are associated with social and official life. Examples of good etiquette are the use of proper language in public (and bad etiquette, the use of obscene or offensive language in public), appropriate eating habits (and bad etiquette, the slurping of one's food), and appropriate deference to others. Judgments about matters of etiquette are often expressed in moral-like language, as in, "It's wrong that he curses on the tennis court." In these matters, however, such words as "wrong," "bad," "right," and "good" convey judgments about manners or taste, not ethics. What is of primary importance in etiquette is public behavior that is socially acceptable.

³An important part of ethical analysis and reflection that is not dealt with in this book is called "meta-ethics." Meta-ethics relates to those questions of ethics that concern the language and the logic of moral belief. For example, what is the meaning of terms such as "right" and "wrong"? More basic, however, is the problem of the logic of moral beliefs. For example, do moral beliefs reflect some objective truth, or are they the product essentially of personal desires and attitudes? These examples indicate that while meta-ethics is only *about* morality, meta-ethical issues are nevertheless of fundamental importance in moral argumentation. Indeed, they may be seen as logically prior to normative considerations, which have to do with the content of moral principles and their justification. In spite of the importance of meta-ethical issues, they are beyond the immediate scope of this book.

Customary morality and religion also use the moral categories of ethics. Both propose action-guides and appropriate sanctions in the interest of a better life in the community or within the religious group. The problem with both, however, is that they may prescribe actions in the name of custom or deity that violate fundamental morality. For example, customary morality in various societies has condoned and even advocated slavery, systematic discrimination against certain groups (religious, sexual, and racial), and caste systems. Religions, too, sometimes require their followers to engage in practices that seemingly inflict gratuitous harm on others, as in holy wars, human sacrifices, and the deprivation of possessions. Indeed, there is no necessary connection between religion and morality. "God forbids rape because rape is wrong, but it is not God's forbidding rape that makes it wrong."⁴ In all cultures, irrespective of religious traditions, actions such as rape are wrong from a moral point of view. It should be recognized, however, that in the established social systems of morality that exist in all cultures, religion is one of the most important pillars in the "moral institution of life."

In the history of ethics or moral philosophy, the main interest of philosophers has been to construct normative theories of morality and to comment on theories already proposed. While there are many such theories, it is convenient to group them into two broad schools of thought, consequentialism and non-consequentialism. These two schools of thought are frequently referred to as teleological and deontological ethical theories, the first stressing consequences and the second the nature of actions themselves. What all ethical theories ultimately have in common is that each tries to give a persuasive account of what constitutes right and wrong action, and how that conclusion is determined. From this main concern follows another: What we and others should do in concrete situations. We are interested in normative theories to help us know both what to do ourselves and how to make judgments, if appropriate, about what others do.

The basic idea of all consequentialist theories is that right and wrong action, and judgments about these, are determined by the results produced. Are the results good or bad? The standard for this, in turn, is the nonmoral value brought into consideration. This nonmoral value is generally spoken of as the "good" (whatever it may otherwise be called). That which is conducive to the "good" (or end) is called "right" action on our part; the action that inhibits the attainment of this end is considered "wrong."

For consequentialists, the particular nonmoral value brought into being is all-important. This "good" is considered worthwhile in its own right; it is intrinsically or inherently valuable. It is not a means to anything else. What might such a value be? In the history of moral philosophy, the prevailing views have been pleasure (hedonism), self-interest (egoism), maximization of happiness (utilitarianism), and happiness and self-realization (Aristotelianism). These are nonmoral values, each called the "good," that are viewed as inherently valuable. Depending on the nature of the "good," consequentialist ethical theories often produce codes of conduct that are broader in scope than our definition of ethics allows. That is, according to some consequentialist theories, one may be morally obligated to engage in certain behaviors even though these have no clear connection with harm or mutual aid (e.g., exercising or dieting). According to our definitions, these behaviors are justified on prudential grounds, not moral ones.

⁴William H. Shaw and Vincent Barry, *Moral Issues in Business*, 4th ed., (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), 11.

Non-consequentialist or deontological theories, on the other hand, maintain that rightness, wrongness, and obligation are based upon certain features of the act itself, not necessarily the results produced by the act. Non-consequentialist ethics, then, is primarily concerned with action that is right in-and-of-itself, irrespective of other considerations. The rightness or wrongness of the act is the crucial point. Thus, for example, promise keeping, truth telling, and respecting the rights of others are the kinds of behaviors advocated by non-consequentialists, not because these acts are guaranteed to bring about good results (indeed, the opposite may occur), but because these acts possess a certain moral character. Once this common character is understood, these acts command our respect and confront us as moral duties. The most influential non-consequentialist in the history of moral thought is Immanuel Kant.

While philosophical ethics and religiously based ethics need to be distinguished, it is, nevertheless, the case that the tradition of ethical reflection has been significantly influenced by religious teachings. Indeed, we cannot do justice to an adequate understanding of the history of ethics without a familiarity with action-guides that are religiously based. For those of us in the Western world, this means primarily a knowledge of the Mosaic Law, especially the Ten Commandments, and the moral teachings of Jesus. The crucial differentiating feature of religious moral systems is that they are ultimately based on divine authority rather than exclusively on human experience and reason. Often, however, these two approaches prescribe and proscribe similar codes of conduct. The final test for the adequacy of all moral systems and ethical theories—religious and natural—is whether or not they help us to prevent or to mitigate human harm and to maximize human benefit. Authentic morality, in practice and theory, must always be for us, not against us.

Donald D. Schmeltekopf
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chapter 1

FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICS

Y

ou are leaving a parking lot. As you back out, you accidentally hit the car next to you, leaving a dent in its door. You get out of your car, assess the damages at about five hundred dollars, and leave a note on the car's windshield. What does

your note say?

One version of the note may leave a phone number, driver's license number, and an offer to pay the damages. Another may rationalize by saying, "I only have enough money to pay for your car or to go to school. I think it is more important for me to go to school." Or, you may write, "I'm leaving this note to satisfy the people around me. I sure hope you have insurance to pay for this dent, because I'm not paying for it. It was just an accident anyway."

It was just an accident? How would you feel had *your* car been damaged? Would you want a student to pay tuition instead of repairs? Would you want someone to leave a note to appease witnesses? Or, would you want the individual to offer to pay for the damage to your car? The choice is obvious when the tables are turned. How could someone harm you financially and not offer to compensate you?

This example, which happens daily in parking lots across the country, demonstrates some of the basic issues involved in morality. Every day we are faced with moral dilemmas, some momentous, some rather insignificant.



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How do we make decisions? How do we know what is right and wrong, good and evil? These are fundamental questions of ethics, and they may be among the hardest of life's puzzles to solve.

Philosophers and others throughout history have given much thought to the important subject of ethics. Simply stated, ethics is the study of moral behavior, its underlying moral principles, and their rational justifications. Ethics involves critical reflection on and self-confrontation with the moral choices that arise daily. The choices can be as ordinary as borrowing your roommate's bicycle without permission, or as far-reaching as a decision involving the life of a family member who is suffering a terminal disease and wants to die now. Perhaps an opportunity to make money that appears a bit too easy comes your way. Maybe you will face a decision on the aborting of a fetus.

What should your decision be in each of these circumstances? Whatever your decisions are in these and countless other situations involving questions of right and wrong, they should reflect an understanding of sound moral principles and the importance of rational justification for choices and actions. The attempt to justify actions from the standpoint of moral considerations is one that has engaged the best thinkers and writers throughout human history. In this book we use interdisciplinary studies through writers in philosophy, religion, literature, and history to show the necessity both for ethical reflection and for the critical examination of moral choices. This opening chapter of the book, which deals with ethical foundations, presents religious and philosophical readings only.