

FOURTH
EDITION

DOING ETHICS

MORAL REASONING AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

LEWIS VAUGHN



D O I N G E T H I C S



Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues

Fourth Edition

—
Lewis Vaughn



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C O N T E N T S



PREFACE xvii

PART 1: FUNDAMENTALS

CHAPTER 1	Ethics and the Examined Life	3
	The Ethical Landscape	5
	The Elements of Ethics	6
	<i>The Preeminence of Reason</i>	6
	☞ QUICK REVIEW	7
	<i>The Universal Perspective</i>	7
	<i>The Principle of Impartiality</i>	8
	<i>The Dominance of Moral Norms</i>	8
	Religion and Morality	8
	<i>Believers Need Moral Reasoning</i>	9
	<i>When Conflicts Arise, Ethics Steps In</i>	9
	☞ CRITICAL THOUGHT: ETHICS, RELIGION, AND TOUGH MORAL ISSUES	10
	<i>Moral Philosophy Enables Productive Discourse</i>	10
	Summary	12
	Exercises: <i>Review Questions / Discussion Questions</i>	12
	READINGS	
	from <i>What Is the Socratic Method?</i> by Christopher Phillips	13
	from <i>The Euthyphro</i> by Plato	16
CHAPTER 2	Subjectivism, Relativism, and Emotivism	20
	Subjective Relativism	21
	☞ QUICK REVIEW	21
	☞ JUDGE NOT?	22

Cultural Relativism 23

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: “FEMALE CIRCUMCISION” AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM 24

Emotivism 28

Summary 30

Exercises: *Review Questions / Discussion Questions* 31

READINGS

from *Anthropology and the Abnormal* by Ruth Benedict 32

Trying Out One’s New Sword by Mary Midgley 35

PART 2: MORAL REASONING

CHAPTER 3 Evaluating Moral Arguments

41

Claims and Arguments 41

Arguments Good and Bad 43

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: THE MORALITY OF CRITICAL THINKING 44

Implied Premises 47

 QUICK REVIEW 47

Deconstructing Arguments 48

Moral Statements and Arguments 51

Testing Moral Premises 53

Assessing Nonmoral Premises 55

 QUICK REVIEW 55

Avoiding Bad Arguments 56

Begging the Question 56

Equivocation 56


Appeal to Authority 57

Slippery Slope 57






 APPEAL TO EMOTION 57



Faulty Analogy 58

Appeal to Ignorance 58



<i>Straw Man</i>	59
<i>Appeal to the Person</i>	59
<i>Hasty Generalization</i>	59
 QUICK REVIEW	60
Writing and Speaking about Moral Issues	60
Summary	62
Exercises: <i>Review Questions / Discussion Questions / Argument Exercises</i>	62

PART 3: THEORIES OF MORALITY

CHAPTER 4	The Power of Moral Theories	67
	Theories of Right and Wrong	67
	 MORAL THEORIES VERSUS MORAL CODES	68
	Major Theories	69
	<i>Consequentialist Theories</i>	69
	<i>Nonconsequentialist Theories</i>	70
	 QUICK REVIEW	71
	Evaluating Theories	72
	<i>Criterion 1: Consistency with Considered Judgments</i>	73
	 CONSIDERED MORAL JUDGMENTS	73
	<i>Criterion 2: Consistency with Our Moral Experiences</i>	74
	 CRITICAL THOUGHT: A 100 PERCENT ALL-NATURAL THEORY	74
	<i>Criterion 3: Usefulness in Moral Problem Solving</i>	75
	 QUICK REVIEW	75
	Summary	76
	Exercises: <i>Review Questions / Discussion Questions</i>	76
CHAPTER 5	CONSEQUENTIALIST THEORIES: MAXIMIZE THE GOOD	78
	Ethical Egoism	78
	<i>Applying the Theory</i>	79
	<i>Evaluating the Theory</i>	80

-  CAN ETHICAL EGOISM BE ADVOCATED? 82
-  QUICK REVIEW 84

Utilitarianism 84

- Applying the Theory* 88
-  PETER SINGER, UTILITARIAN 88
-  QUICK REVIEW 89
- Evaluating the Theory* 89

Learning from Utilitarianism 93

-  CRITICAL THOUGHT: CROSS-SPECIES TRANSPLANTS:
WHAT WOULD A UTILITARIAN DO? 94

Summary 94

Exercises: *Review Questions / Discussion Questions* 95



READING

from *Utilitarianism* by John Stuart Mill 96

CHAPTER 6 Nonconsequentialist Theories: Do Your Duty



102

Kant's Ethics 102

-  CRITICAL THOUGHT: SIZING UP THE
GOLDEN RULE 104
- Applying the Theory* 106
- Evaluating the Theory* 106
-  THE KANTIAN VIEW OF PUNISHMENT 107

Learning from Kant's Theory 109

Natural Law Theory 109

- Applying the Theory* 111
-  QUICK REVIEW 111
-  CRITICAL THOUGHT: DOUBLE EFFECT AND THE
"TROLLEY PROBLEM" 112
- Evaluating the Theory* 113

Learning from Natural Law 114

Summary 114

Exercises: *Review Questions / Discussion Questions* 115

READINGS

from *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* by Immanuel Kant 116

from *Summa Theologica* by St. Thomas Aquinas 125

CHAPTER 7 Virtue Ethics: Be a Good Person 136

The Ethics of Virtue 136

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: LEARNING VIRTUES IN THE CLASSROOM 137

Virtue in Action 138

Evaluating Virtue Ethics 138

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: WARRIOR VIRTUES AND MORAL DISAGREEMENTS 140

The Ethics of Care 141

 QUICK REVIEW 141

Learning from Virtue Ethics 141

 FEMINIST ETHICS 142

Summary 143

Exercises: *Review Questions / Discussion Questions* 144

READINGS

from *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle 145

The Need for More Than Justice by Annette C. Baier 153

PART 4: ETHICAL ISSUES**CHAPTER 8 Abortion 163**

Issue File: Background 163

 ABORTION IN THE UNITED STATES: FACTS AND FIGURES 164

 MAJORITY OPINION IN *ROE V. WADE* 166

Moral Theories 166

 ABORTION AND THE SCRIPTURES 168

 QUICK REVIEW 169

Moral Arguments 169

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: LATE-TERM ABORTIONS 170

Summary 174

READINGS

- A Defense of Abortion* by Judith Jarvis Thomson 175
On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion by Mary Anne Warren 185
Why Abortion Is Immoral by Don Marquis 194
Virtue Theory and Abortion by Rosalind Hursthouse 205

Cases for Analysis 211

CHAPTER 9 Altering Genes and Cloning Humans 213

Issue File: Background 213

 GENE THERAPY: SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS 216

Moral Theories 218

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: LONGER LIFE THROUGH GENE THERAPY? 219

Moral Arguments 219

 QUICK REVIEW 221

Summary 221

READINGS

- Genetic Enhancement* by Walter Glannon 222
Is Gene Therapy a Form of Eugenics? by John Harris 226
The Wisdom of Repugnance by Leon R. Kass 232
Cloning Human Beings: An Assessment of the Ethical Issues Pro and Con by Dan W. Brock 249

Cases for Analysis 260

CHAPTER 10 Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide 263

 THE DEATH OF KAREN ANN QUINLAN 264

Issue File: Background 264

 LANDMARK COURT RULINGS 266

 QUICK REVIEW 267

Moral Theories 267

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: DR. KEVORKIAN AND PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE 269

Moral Arguments 269

 PUBLIC OPINION AND EUTHANASIA 271

Summary 273

READINGS

Active and Passive Euthanasia by James Rachels 274

The Wrongfulness of Euthanasia by J. Gay-Williams 278

From *Voluntary Active Euthanasia* by Dan W. Brock 281

Euthanasia by Philippa Foot 289

Killing and Allowing to Die by Daniel Callahan 304

Cases for Analysis 306

CHAPTER 11 Capital Punishment

310

Issue File: Background 310

Moral Theories 312

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: MEDICATED FOR THE DEATH PENALTY 313

 QUICK REVIEW 315

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: BOTCHED EXECUTIONS 316

Moral Arguments 318

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: DIFFERENT CASES, SAME PUNISHMENT 319

Summary 320

READINGS

The Ultimate Punishment: A Defense by Ernest van den Haag 321

from *Justice, Civilization, and the Death Penalty: Answering van den Haag* by Jeffrey H. Reiman 326


Against the Death Penalty: The Minimal Invasion Argument by Hugo Adam Bedau 332

In Defense of the Death Penalty by Louis P. Pojman 337

Cases for Analysis 347

CHAPTER 12 Drug Use, Harm, and Personal Liberty 350

Issue File: Background 351

 DIVERSE VIEWS IN THE UNITED STATES ON USING MARIJUANA 352

Moral Theories 353

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: DOES LEGALIZING MEDICAL MARIJUANA ENCOURAGE USE AMONG TEENAGERS? 354

Moral Arguments 354

 QUICK REVIEW 356

Summary 357

READINGS*The Ethics of Addiction* by Thomas Szasz 357*The Fallacy of the “Hijacked Brain”* by Peg O’Connor 366*Against the Legalization of Drugs* by James Q. Wilson 368

Cases for Analysis 377

CHAPTER 13 Sexual Morality 380

Issue File: Background 380

 VITAL STATS: SEXUAL BEHAVIOR 381

Moral Theories 382

Moral Arguments 383

 VITAL STATS: SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS 384 QUICK REVIEW 385

Summary 386


READINGS*Plain Sex* by Alan H. Goldman 386*Sexual Morality* by Roger Scruton 395*Sexual Perversion* by Thomas Nagel 402*Feminists against the First Amendment* by Wendy Kaminer 409*“The Price We Pay?”: Pornography and Harm* by Susan J. Brison 416

Cases for Analysis 426

CHAPTER 14 Same-Sex Marriage 429

Issue File: Background 429

Moral Theories 430

 OPINION POLLS: SAME-SEX MARRIAGE 431 VITAL STATS: GAYS, LESBIANS, AND SAME-SEX
COUPLES 432

Moral Arguments 432

 QUICK REVIEW 433

Summary 433

READINGS*On Gay Rights* by Richard D. Mohr 434*What Marriage Is For: Children Need Mothers and Fathers* by
Maggie Gallagher 442*Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage* by
Andrew Sullivan 446


Cases for Analysis 449

CHAPTER 15 Environmental Ethics 451

Issue File: Background 451

 SOME MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES 454

Moral Theories 456

 QUICK REVIEW 456 CRITICAL THOUGHT: SHOULD PANDAS PAY
THE PRICE? 457

Moral Arguments 458

Summary 460

READINGS*People or Penguins* by William F. Baxter 461*The Ethics of Respect for Nature* by Paul W. Taylor 465*Are All Species Equal?* by David Schmidtz 480*The Land Ethic* by Aldo Leopold 488

Cases for Analysis 492

CHAPTER 16 Animal Rights

495

Issue File: Background 496

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: SHOULD WE ABOLISH DOG RACING? 498

Moral Theories 499

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: SHOULD WE EXPERIMENT ON ORPHANED BABIES? 501

 QUICK REVIEW 502

Moral Arguments 502

Summary 504

READINGS

All Animals Are Equal by Peter Singer 505

The Case for Animal Rights by Tom Regan 515

Difficulties with the Strong Animal Rights Position by Mary Anne Warren 522

Speciesism and the Idea of Equality by Bonnie Steinbock 528

Cases for Analysis 535

CHAPTER 17 Political Violence: War, Terrorism, and Torture

539

Issue File: Background 539

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: PREEMPTIVE WAR ON IRAQ 542

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: TERRORISTS OR FREEDOM FIGHTERS? 549

Moral Theories 550

Moral Arguments 552

 QUICK REVIEW 556

Summary 557

READINGS

Reconciling Pacifists and Just War Theorists by James P. Sterba 558

Against "Realism" by Michael Walzer 566

Can Terrorism Be Morally Justified? by Stephen Nathanson 577

The Case for Torturing the Ticking Bomb Terrorist by Alan M. Dershowitz 585


Cases for Analysis 594

CHAPTER 18 Equality and Affirmative Action 597

Issue File: Background 597

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: ARE LEGACIES RACIST? 599

Moral Theories 600

 CRITICAL THOUGHT: ARE WHITES-ONLY SCHOLARSHIPS UNJUST? 601 QUICK REVIEW 602

Moral Arguments 603

Summary 605

READINGS*Reverse Discrimination as Unjustified* by Lisa H. Newton 606*The Case against Affirmative Action* by Louis P. Pojman 609*Affirmative Action and Quotas* by Richard A. Wasserstrom 622*In Defense of Affirmative Action* by Tom L. Beauchamp 625

Cases for Analysis 634

CHAPTER 19 Global Economic Justice 637

Issue File: Background 637

Moral Theories 639

 VITAL STATS: THE PLANET'S POOR AND HUNGRY 639

Moral Arguments 641

 QUICK REVIEW 643

Summary 643

READINGS*On Justice* by John Rawls 644*The Entitlement Theory of Justice* by Robert Nozick 651*Famine, Affluence, and Morality* by Peter Singer 660*Lifeboat Ethics* by Garrett Hardin 665

Cases for Analysis 672

GLOSSARY 674

FURTHER READING 678

ANSWERS TO ARGUMENT EXERCISES 684

INDEX 685

P R E F A C E



This fourth edition of *Doing Ethics* brings another set of substantial improvements to a text that had already been greatly expanded and improved. The aims that have shaped this text from the beginning have not changed: to help students (1) see why ethics matters to society and to themselves; (2) understand core concepts (theories, principles, values, virtues, and the like); (3) be familiar with the background (scientific, legal, and otherwise) of contemporary moral problems; and (4) know how to apply critical reasoning to those problems—to assess moral judgments and principles, construct and evaluate moral arguments, and apply and critique moral theories. This book, then, tries hard to provide the strongest possible support to teachers of applied ethics who want students, above all, to think for themselves and competently do what is often required of morally mature persons—that is, to do *ethics*.

These goals are reflected in the book's extensive introductions to concepts, cases, and issues; its large collection of readings and exercises; and its chapter-by-chapter coverage of moral reasoning—perhaps the most thorough introduction to these skills available in an applied-ethics text. This latter theme gets systematic treatment in five chapters, threads prominently throughout all the others, and is reinforced everywhere by “Critical Thought” text boxes prompting students to apply critical thinking to real debates and cases. The point of all this is to help students not just to study ethics but to become fully involved in the ethical enterprise and the moral life.

NEW FEATURES

- A new chapter on the morality of personal use of illicit drugs and the laws and policies that pertain to that use: Chapter 12, Drug Use, Harm, and Personal Liberty. It includes three new readings by major figures in the debates on illegal drugs.
- A new chapter on the moral permissibility of affirmative action: Chapter 18, Equality and Affirmative Action. It includes four readings by prominent commentators on the issue.
- A revamped chapter on sexual morality that includes two new readings on pornography: Chapter 13, Sexual Morality.
- Six new readings to supplement the already extensive collection of essays.

ORGANIZATION

Part 1 (“Fundamentals”) prepares students for the tasks enumerated above. Chapter 1 explains why ethics is important and why thinking critically about ethical issues is essential to the examined life. It introduces the field of moral philosophy, defines and illustrates basic terminology, clarifies the connection between religion and morality, and explains why moral reasoning is crucial to moral maturity and personal freedom. Chapter 2 investigates a favorite doctrine of undergraduates—ethical relativism—and examines its distant cousin, emotivism.

Part 2 (“Moral Reasoning”) consists of Chapter 3, which starts by reassuring students that moral reasoning is neither alien nor difficult but is simply

ordinary critical reasoning applied to ethics. They've seen this kind of reasoning before and done it before. Thus, the chapter focuses on identifying, devising, diagramming, and evaluating moral arguments and encourages practice and competence in finding implied premises, testing moral premises, assessing nonmoral premises, and dealing with common argument fallacies.

Part 3 ("Theories of Morality") is about applying critical reasoning to moral theories. Chapter 4 explains how moral theories work and how they are related to other important elements in moral experience: considered judgments, moral arguments, moral principles and rules, and cases and issues. It reviews major theories and shows how students can evaluate them by applying plausible criteria. The rest of Part 3 (Chapters 5 through 7) covers key theories in depth—utilitarianism, ethical egoism, Kant's theory, natural law theory, and the ethics of virtue. Students see how each theory is applied to moral issues and how those issues' strengths and weaknesses are revealed by applying the criteria of evaluation.

In Part 4 ("Ethical Issues"), each of twelve chapters explores a timely moral issue through discussion and relevant readings: abortion, genetic manipulation and human cloning, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, drug use, capital punishment, sexual morality, same-sex marriage, environmental ethics, animal rights, affirmative action, political violence, and global economic justice. Every chapter supplies legal, scientific, and other background information on the issue; discusses how major theories have been applied to the problem; examines arguments that have been used in the debate; and includes additional cases for analysis with questions. The readings are a mix of well-known essays and surprising new voices, both classic and contemporary.

PEDAGOGICAL FEATURES

In addition to the "Critical Thought" boxes and "Cases for Analysis," there are other pedagogical devices:

- "Quick Review" boxes that reiterate key points or terms mentioned in previous pages
- Text boxes that discuss additional topics or issues related to main chapter material
- End-of-chapter review and discussion questions
- Chapter summaries
- Suggestions for further reading for each issues chapter
- Glossary

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P A R T

1



Fundamentals



Ethics and the Examined Life

Ethics, or **moral philosophy**, is the philosophical study of morality. **Morality** refers to beliefs concerning right and wrong, good and bad—beliefs that can include judgments, values, rules, principles, and theories. They help guide our actions, define our values, and give us reasons for being the persons we are. (*Ethical* and *moral*, the adjective forms, are often used to mean simply “having to do with morality,” and *ethics* and *morality* are sometimes used to refer to the moral norms of a specific group or individual, as in “Greek ethics” or “Russell’s morality.”) Ethics, then, addresses the powerful question that Socrates formulated twenty-four hundred years ago: how ought we to live?

The scope and continued relevance of this query suggest something compelling about ethics: you cannot escape it. You cannot run away from all the choices, feelings, and actions that accompany ideas about right and wrong, good and bad—ideas that persist in your culture and in your mind. After all, for much of your life, you have been assimilating, modifying, or rejecting the ethical norms you inherited from your family, community, and society. Unless you are very unusual, from time to time you deliberate about the rightness or wrongness of actions, embrace or reject particular moral principles or codes, judge the goodness of your character or intentions (or someone else’s), perhaps even question (and agonize over) the soundness of your own moral outlook when it conflicts with that of others. In other words, you are involved in ethics—you *do ethics*.

Even if you try to remove yourself from the ethical realm by insisting that all ethical concepts are irrelevant or empty, you assume a particular view, a theory in the broadest sense, about morality and its place in your life. If at some point you are intellectually brave enough to wonder whether your moral beliefs rest on some coherent supporting considerations, you will see that you cannot even begin to sort out such considerations without—again—doing ethics. In any case, in your life you must deal with the rest of the world, which turns on moral conflict and resolution, moral decision and debate.

What is at stake when we do ethics? In an important sense, the answer is *everything we hold dear*. Ethics is concerned with values—specifically, *moral values*. Through the sifting and weighing of moral values we determine what the most important things are in our lives, what is worth living for and what is worth dying for. We decide what is the greatest good, what goals we should pursue in life, what virtues we should cultivate, what duties we should or should not fulfill, what value we should put on human life, and what pain and perils we should be willing to endure for notions such as the common good, justice, and rights.

Does it matter whether the state executes a criminal who has the mental capacity of a ten-year-old? Does it matter who actually writes the term paper you turn in and represent as your own? Does it matter whether we can easily save a drowning child but casually decide not to? Does it matter whether young girls in Africa undergo painful

genital mutilation for reasons of custom or religion? Do these actions and a million others just as controversial matter at all? Most of us—regardless of our opinion on these issues—would say that they matter a great deal. If they matter, then ethics matters, because these are ethical concerns requiring careful reflection using concepts and reasoning peculiar to ethics.

But even though in life ethics is inescapable and important, you are still free to take the easy way out, and many people do. You are free *not* to think too deeply or too systematically about ethical concerns. You can simply embrace the moral beliefs and norms given to you by your family and your society. You can just accept them without question or serious examination. In other words, you can try *not* to do ethics. This approach can be simple and painless—at least for a while—but it has some drawbacks.

First, it undermines your personal freedom. If you accept and never question the moral beliefs handed to you by your culture, then those beliefs are not really yours—and they, not you, control the path you take in life. Only if you critically examine these beliefs *yourself* and decide for *yourself* whether they have merit will they be truly yours. Only then will you be in charge of your own choices and actions.

Second, the no-questions-asked approach increases the chances that your responses to moral dilemmas or contradictions will be incomplete, confused, or mistaken. Sometimes in real life, moral codes or rules do not fit the situations at hand, or moral principles conflict with one another, or entirely new circumstances are not covered by any moral policy at all. Solving these problems requires something that a hand-me-down morality does not include: the intellectual tools to critically evaluate (and reevaluate) existing moral beliefs.

Third, if there is such a thing as intellectual moral growth, you are unlikely to find it on the

safe route. To not do ethics is to stay locked in a kind of intellectual limbo, where exploration in ethics and personal moral progress are barely possible.

The philosopher Paul Taylor suggests that there is yet another risk in taking the easy road. If someone blindly embraces the morality bequeathed to him by his society, he may very well be a fine embodiment of the rules of his culture and accept them with certainty. But he also will lack the ability to defend his beliefs by rational argument against criticism. What happens when he encounters others who also have very strong beliefs that contradict his? “He will feel lost and bewildered,” Taylor says, and his confusion might leave him disillusioned about morality. “Unable to give an objective, reasoned justification for his own convictions, he may turn from dogmatic certainty to total skepticism. And from total skepticism it is but a short step to an ‘amoral’ life. . . . Thus the person who begins by accepting moral beliefs blindly can end up denying all morality.”¹

There are other easy roads—roads that also bypass critical and thoughtful scrutiny of morality. We can describe most of them as various forms of subjectivism, a topic that we closely examine in the next chapter. You may decide, for example, that you can establish all your moral beliefs by simply consulting your feelings. In situations calling for moral judgments, you let your emotions be your guide. If it feels right, it *is* right. Alternatively, you may come to believe that moral realities are relative to each person, a view known as *subjective relativism* (also covered in the next chapter). That is, you think that what a person believes or approves of determines the rightness or wrongness of actions. If you believe that abortion is wrong,

¹Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics: An Introduction* (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1975), 9–10.

then it is wrong. If you believe it is right, then it is right.

But these facile ways through ethical terrain are no better than blindly accepting existing norms. Even if you want to take the subjectivist route, you still need to critically examine it to see if there are good reasons for choosing it—otherwise your choice is arbitrary and therefore not really yours. And unless you thoughtfully consider the merits of moral beliefs (including subjectivist beliefs), your chances of being wrong about them are substantial.

Ethics does not give us a royal road to moral truth. Instead, it shows us how to ask critical questions about morality and systematically seek answers supported by good reasons. This is a tall order because, as we have seen, many of the questions in ethics are among the toughest we can ever ask—and among the most important in life.

THE ETHICAL LANDSCAPE

The domain of ethics is large, divided into several areas of investigation and cordoned off from related subjects. So let us map the territory carefully. As the term *moral philosophy* suggests, ethics is a branch of philosophy. A very rough characterization of philosophy is the systematic use of critical reasoning to answer the most fundamental questions in life. Moral philosophy, obviously, tries to answer the fundamental questions of morality. The other major philosophical divisions address other basic questions; these are *logic* (the study of correct reasoning), *metaphysics* (the study of the fundamental nature of reality), and *epistemology* (the study of knowledge). As a division of philosophy, ethics does its work primarily through critical reasoning. Critical reasoning is the careful, systematic evaluation of statements, or claims—a process used in all fields of study, not just in ethics. Mainly this process includes both the evaluation of logical arguments and the careful analysis of concepts.

Science also studies morality, but not in the way that moral philosophy does. Its approach is known as **descriptive ethics**—the *scientific* study of moral beliefs and practices. Its aim is to describe and explain how people actually behave and think when dealing with moral issues and concepts. This kind of empirical research is usually conducted by sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists. In contrast, the focus of moral philosophy is not what people actually believe and do, but what they *should* believe and do. The point of moral philosophy is to determine what actions are right (or wrong) and what things are good (or bad).

Philosophers distinguish three major divisions in ethics, each one representing a different way to approach the subject. The first is **normative ethics**—the study of the principles, rules, or theories that guide our actions and judgments. (The word *normative* refers to norms, or standards, of judgment—in this case, norms for judging rightness and goodness.) The ultimate purpose of doing normative ethics is to try to establish the soundness of moral norms, especially the norms embodied in a comprehensive moral system, or theory. We do normative ethics when we use critical reasoning to demonstrate that a moral principle is justified, or that a professional code of conduct is contradictory, or that one proposed moral theory is better than another, or that a person's motive is good. Should the rightness of actions be judged by their consequences? Is happiness the greatest good in life? Is utilitarianism a good moral theory? Such questions are the preoccupation of normative ethics.

Another major division is **metaethics**—the study of the meaning and logical structure of moral beliefs. It asks not whether an action is right or whether a person's character is good. It takes a step back from these concerns and asks more fundamental questions about them: What does it mean for an action to be *right*? Is *good* the same

thing as *desirable*? How can a moral principle be justified? Is there such a thing as moral truth? To do normative ethics, we must assume certain things about the meaning of moral terms and the logical relations among them. But the job of metaethics is to question all these assumptions, to see if they really make sense.

Finally, there is **applied ethics**—the application of moral norms to specific moral issues or cases, particularly those in a profession such as medicine or law. Applied ethics in these fields goes under names such as medical ethics, journalistic ethics, and business ethics. In applied ethics we study the results derived from applying a moral principle or theory to specific circumstances. The purpose of the exercise is to learn something important about either the moral characteristics of the situation or the adequacy of the moral norms. Did the doctor do right in performing that abortion? Is it morally permissible for scientists to perform experiments on people without their consent? Was it right for the journalist to distort her reporting to aid a particular side in the war? Questions like these drive the search for answers in applied ethics.

In every division of ethics, we must be careful to distinguish between *values* and *obligations*. Sometimes we may be interested in concepts or judgments of *value*—that is, about what is morally *good*, *bad*, *blameworthy*, or *praiseworthy*. We properly use these kinds of terms to refer mostly to persons, character traits, motives, and intentions. We may say “She is a good person” or “He is to blame for that tragedy.” Other times, we may be interested in concepts or judgments of *obligation*—that is, about what is obligatory or a duty or what we should or ought to do. We use these terms to refer to *actions*. We may say “She has a duty to tell the truth” or “What he did was wrong.”

When we talk about value in the sense just described, we mean *moral* value. If she is a good person, she is good in the moral sense. But we can also talk about *nonmoral* value. We can say that

things such as televisions, rockets, experiences, and artwork (things other than persons, intentions, etc.) are good, but we mean “good” only in a nonmoral way. It makes no sense to assert that in themselves televisions or rockets are morally good or bad. Perhaps a rocket could be used to perform an action that is morally wrong. In that case, the action would be immoral, while the rocket itself would still have nonmoral value only.

Many things in life have value for us, but they are not necessarily valuable in the same way. Some things are valuable because they are a means to something else. We might say that gasoline is good because it is a means to make a gas-powered vehicle work, or that a pen is good because it can be used to write a letter. Such things are said to be **instrumentally**, or **extrinsically, valuable**—they are valuable as a means to something else. Some things, however, are valuable in themselves or for their own sakes. They are valuable simply because they are what they are, without being a means to something else. Things that have been regarded as valuable in themselves include happiness, pleasure, virtue, and beauty. These are said to be **intrinsically valuable**—they are valuable in themselves.

THE ELEMENTS OF ETHICS

We all do ethics, and we all have a general sense of what is involved. But we can still ask, What are the elements of ethics that make it the peculiar enterprise that it is? We can include at least the following factors:

The Preeminence of Reason

Doing ethics typically involves grappling with our feelings, taking into account the facts of the situation (including our own observations and relevant knowledge), and trying to understand the ideas that bear on the case. But above all, it involves, even requires, critical reasoning—the consideration of reasons for whatever statements



QUICK REVIEW

ethics (or moral philosophy)—The philosophical study of morality.

morality—Beliefs concerning right and wrong, good and bad; they can include judgments, rules, principles, and theories.

descriptive ethics—The scientific study of moral beliefs and practices.

normative ethics—The study of the principles, rules, or theories that guide our actions and judgments.

metaethics—The study of the meaning and logical structure of moral beliefs.

applied ethics—The application of moral norms to specific moral issues or cases, particularly those in a profession such as medicine or law.

instrumentally (or extrinsically) valuable—Valuable as a means to something else.

intrinsically valuable—Valuable in itself, for its own sake.

(moral or otherwise) are in question. Whatever our view on moral issues and whatever moral outlook we subscribe to, our commonsense moral experience suggests that if a moral judgment is to be worthy of acceptance, it must be supported by good reasons, and our deliberations on the issue must include a consideration of those reasons.

The backbone of critical reasoning generally and moral reasoning in particular is logical argument. This kind of argument—not the angry-exchange type—consists of a statement to be supported (the assertion to be proved, the conclusion) and the statements that do the supporting (the reasons for believing the statement, the premises). With such arguments, we try to show that a

moral judgment is or is not justified, that a moral principle is or is not sound, that an action is or is not morally permissible, or that a moral theory is or is not plausible.

Our use of critical reasoning and argument helps us keep our feelings about moral issues in perspective. Feelings are an important part of our moral experience. They make empathy possible, which gives us a deeper understanding of the human impact of moral norms. They also can serve as internal alarm bells, warning us of the possibility of injustice, suffering, and wrongdoing. But they are unreliable guides to moral truth. They may simply reflect our own emotional needs, prejudices, upbringing, culture, and self-interests. Careful reasoning, however, can inform our feelings and help us decide moral questions on their merits.

The Universal Perspective

Logic requires that moral norms and judgments follow the *principle of universalizability*—the idea that a moral statement (a principle, rule, or judgment) that applies in one situation must apply in all other situations that are relevantly similar. If you say, for example, that lying is wrong in a particular situation, then you implicitly agree that lying is wrong for anyone in relevantly similar situations. If you say that killing in self-defense is morally permissible, then you say in effect that killing in self-defense is permissible for everyone in relevantly similar situations. It cannot be the case that an action performed by A is *wrong* while the same action performed by B in relevantly similar circumstances is *right*. It cannot be the case that the moral judgments formed in these two situations must differ just because two different people are involved.

This point about universalizability also applies to reasons used to support moral judgments. If reasons apply in a specific case, then those reasons also apply in all relevantly similar cases. It cannot be true that reasons that apply in a specific case do

not apply to other cases that are similar in all relevant respects.

The Principle of Impartiality

From the moral point of view, all persons are considered equal and should be treated accordingly. This sense of impartiality is implied in all moral statements. It means that the welfare and interests of each individual should be given the same weight as the welfare and interests of all others. Unless there is a morally relevant difference between people, we should treat them the same: we must treat equals equally. We would think it outrageous for a moral rule to say something like “Everyone must refrain from stealing food in grocery stores—except for Mr. X, who may steal all he wants.” Imagine that there is no morally relevant reason for making this exception to food stealing; Mr. X is exempted merely because, say, he is a celebrity known for outrageous behavior. We not only would object to this rule, we might even begin to wonder if it was a genuine moral rule at all since it lacks impartiality. Similarly, we would reject a moral rule that says something like “Everyone is entitled to basic human rights—except Native Americans.” Such a rule would be a prime example of unfair discrimination based on race. We can see this blatant partiality best if we ask what morally relevant difference there is between Native Americans and everyone else. Differences in income, social status, skin color, ancestry, and the like are not morally relevant. Apparently there are no morally relevant differences. Because there are none, we must conclude that the rule sanctions unfair discrimination.

We must keep in mind, however, that sometimes there are good reasons for treating someone differently. Imagine a hospital that generally gives equal care to patients, treating equals equally. But suppose a patient comes to the hospital in an ambulance because she has had a heart attack and will die without immediate care. The hospital staff responds quickly, giving her faster and more

sophisticated care than other patients receive. The situation is a matter of life and death—a good reason for *not* treating everyone the same and for providing the heart attack patient with special consideration. This instance of discrimination is justified.

The Dominance of Moral Norms

Not all norms are moral norms. There are legal norms (laws, statutes), aesthetic norms (for judging artistic creations), prudential norms (practical considerations of self-interest), and others. Moral norms seem to stand out from all these in an interesting way: they dominate. Whenever moral principles or values conflict in some way with nonmoral principles or values, the moral considerations usually override the others. Moral considerations seem more important, more critical, or more weighty. A principle of prudence such as “Never help a stranger” may be well justified, but it must yield to any moral principle that contradicts it, such as “Help a stranger in an emergency if you can do so without endangering yourself.” An aesthetic norm that somehow involved violating a moral principle would have to take a backseat to the moral considerations. A law that conflicted with a moral principle would be suspect, and the latter would have to prevail over the former. Ultimately the justification for civil disobedience is that specific laws conflict with moral norms and are therefore invalid. If we judge a law to be bad, we usually do so on moral grounds.

RELIGION AND MORALITY

Many people believe that morality and religion are inseparable—that religion is the source or basis of morality and that moral precepts are simply what God says should be done. This view is not at all surprising, since all religions imply or assert a perspective on morality. The three great religions in the Western tradition—Christianity, Judaism, and

Islam—provide to their believers commandments or principles of conduct that are thought to constitute the moral law, the essence of morality. For millions of these adherents, the moral law is the will of God, and the will of God is the moral law. In the West at least, the powerful imprint of religion is evident in secular laws and in the private morality of believers and unbelievers alike. Secular systems of morality—for example, those of the ancient Greek philosophers, Immanuel Kant, the utilitarians, and others—have of course left their mark on Western ethics. But they have not moved the millions who think that morality is a product exclusively of religion.

So what is the relationship between religion and morality? For our purposes, we should break this question into two parts: (1) what is the relationship between religion and *ethics* (the philosophical study of morality), and (2) what is the relationship between religion and *morality* (beliefs about right and wrong)? The first question asks about how religion relates to the kind of investigation we conduct in this book—the use of experience and critical reasoning to study morality. The key point about the relationship is that whatever your views on religion and morality, an open-minded expedition into ethics is more useful and empowering than you may realize, especially now at the beginning of your journey into moral philosophy. You may believe, for example, that God determines what is right and wrong, so there is no need to apply critical reasoning to morality—you just need to know what God says. But this judgment—and similar dismissals of ethics—would be premature. Consider the following:

Believers Need Moral Reasoning

It is difficult—perhaps impossible—for most people to avoid using moral reasoning. Religious people are no exception. One reason is that religious moral codes (such as the Ten Command-

ments) and other major religious rules of conduct are usually vague, laying out general principles that may be difficult to apply to specific cases. (Secular moral codes have the same disadvantage.) For example, we may be commanded to love our neighbor, but what neighbors are included—people of a different religion? people who denounce our religion? the gay or lesbian couple? those who steal from us? the convicted child molester next door? the drug dealers on the corner? the woman who got an abortion? Also, what does loving our neighbor demand of us? How does love require us to behave toward the drug dealers, the gay couple, or the person who denounces our religion? If our terminally ill neighbor asks us in the name of love to help him kill himself, what should we do? Does love require us to kill him—or to refrain from killing him? And, of course, commandments can conflict—as when, for example, the only way to avoid killing an innocent person is to tell a lie, or the only way to save the life of one person is to kill another. All these situations force the believer to interpret religious directives, to try to apply general rules to specific cases, to draw out the implications of particular views—in other words, to do ethics.

When Conflicts Arise, Ethics Steps In

Very often moral contradictions or inconsistencies confront the religious believer, and only moral reasoning can help resolve them. Believers sometimes disagree with their religious leaders on moral issues. Adherents of one religious tradition may disagree with those from another tradition on whether an act is right or wrong. Sincere devotees in a religious tradition may wonder if its moral teachings make sense. In all such cases, intelligent resolution of the conflict of moral claims can be achieved only by applying a neutral standard that helps sort out the competing viewpoints. Moral philosophy supplies the neutral standard in the form of critical thinking, well-made arguments,