

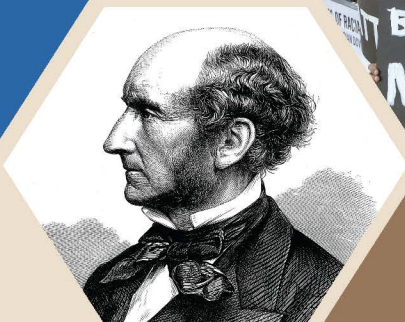
Ninth Edition



Ethics

Theory and Contemporary Issues

Barbara MacKinnon
Andrew Fiala





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Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues,
Ninth Edition

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This ninth edition of *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* contains a substantial revision of the text and extensive update of the empirical material contained in the chapters focused on contemporary issues. Andrew Fiala joined as coauthor on the eighth edition. In the ninth edition, we have included new learning apparatus, especially tables that outline possible moral positions with regard to the issues considered. As in past editions, each chapter begins with a detailed, accessible introduction that prepares the student to read accompanying selections from important and influential philosophers. The book remains a comprehensive introduction to ethics in theory and practice. It also continues to emphasize pedagogy through clear summaries, engaging examples, and various study tools—such as review exercises and discussion cases. Each chapter begins with a list of learning objectives, and the book ends with an extensive glossary of key terms.

ADDITIONS AND CHANGES

Although the basic elements remain the same, this new ninth edition includes the following additions and changes from the eighth edition. Each chapter in Part I has been revised to focus on readability. All introductory and empirical material in each chapter in Part II has been updated to incorporate the latest information about contemporary issues and current affairs. These updates include recent statistics, relevant cases, and contemporary examples.

This edition offers expanded and continued coverage of the following topics: global (non-Western) philosophy and religion, the prisoner's dilemma and the tragedy of the commons, social justice and economic inequality, mass incarceration and decarceration, restorative justice, environmental justice, biotechnology and bioengineering, gene editing, vegetarianism and the ethics of hunting, circuses, race and racism, pacifism, gay marriage, global poverty, LGBT and transgender issues, Black Lives Matter, Syrian refugees, the precautionary principle, and climate change. This edition includes some familiar readings from previous editions and some new additions. In some cases, older readings have been shortened to make room for new readings and short excerpts by a more diverse set of authors, including some emerging voices. New readings include: John Lachs on relativism, Hilde Lindemann on feminism, a new essay on abortion by Bertha Alvarez Manninen, U.S. Supreme Court Obergefell Decision, Naomi Zack on Black Lives Matter, Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression," Pope Francis and Ayn Rand on economic issues, Michelle Alexander on the New Jim Crow, Tom Regan on animal rights, the Transhumanist declaration, Andrew Fitz-Gibbon on peace, and Garret Hardin on global poverty.

Key Elements

Each chapter of *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* contains an extended summary of key

concepts and issues written in clear, accessible prose. These detailed summaries go beyond the short introductions found in most ethics anthologies to provide students with a thorough grounding in the theory and practical application of philosophical ethics.

As previously noted, these discussions have been thoroughly updated to include detailed information on current events, statistics, and political and cultural developments.

The theory chapters in Part I present detailed summaries of the theories and major concepts, positions, and arguments. The contemporary issues chapters in Part II include summaries of:

- › current social conditions and recent events, with special emphasis on their relevance to students' lives
- › conceptual issues, such as how to define key words and phrases (for example, *cloning*, *terrorism*, and *distributive justice*)
- › arguments and suggested ways to organize an ethical analysis of each topic
- › tables outlining possible moral positions, linked to normative theories and key authors.

Throughout this text, we seek to engage readers by posing challenging ethical questions and then offering a range of possible answers or explanations. The aim is to present more than one side of each issue so that students can decide for themselves what position they will take. This also allows instructors more latitude to emphasize specific arguments and concepts and to direct the students' focus as they see fit.

Where possible throughout the text, the relation of ethical theory to the practical issues is indicated. For example, one pervasive distinction used throughout the text is between consequentialist and non-consequentialist considerations and arguments. The idea is that if students are able to first situate or categorize a philosophical reason or argument, then they will be better able to evaluate it critically in their thinking and writing. Connections to related concepts and issues in other chapters are also highlighted throughout the text to help students note similarities and contrasts among various ethical positions.

Pedagogical Aids This text is designed as an accessible, “user-friendly” introduction to ethics. To aid both instructor and student, we have provided the following pedagogical aids:

- › a list of learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter (new to this edition)
- › a real-life event, hypothetical dialogue, or updated empirical data at the beginning of each chapter
- › diagrams, subheadings, and boldface key terms and definitions that provide guideposts for readers and organize the summary exposition
- › study questions for each reading selection
- › review exercises at the end of each chapter that can be used for exams and quizzes
- › a glossary of definitions of key terms (new to this edition)
- › discussion cases that follow each chapter in Part II and provide opportunities for class or group discussion
- › topics and resources for written assignments in the discussion cases
- › tables outlining moral positions (new to this edition).

A Digital Solution for Students and Instructors:

MindTap for Philosophy for Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues is a personalized, online digital learning platform providing students with an immersive learning experience that builds critical thinking skills. Through a carefully designed chapter-based learning path, MindTap allows students to easily identify the chapter's learning objectives; draw connections and improve writing skills by completing essay assignments; read short, manageable sections from the e-book; and test their content knowledge with critical thinking Aplia™ questions.

- › **Chapter e-Book:** Each chapter within MindTap contains the narrative of the chapter, offering an easy to navigate online reading experience.
- › **Chapter Quiz:** Each chapter within MindTap ends with a summative Chapter Test covering the chapter's learning objectives and ensuring

students are reading and understanding the material presented.

- **Chapter Aplia Assignment:** Each chapter includes an Aplia assignment that provides automatically graded critical thinking assignments with detailed, immediate feedback and explanations on every question. Students can also choose to see another set of related questions if they did not earn all available points in their first attempt and want more practice.
- **Ethics Simulations:** Each chapter offers an interactive simulated ethical dilemma, allowing students to make decisions and see the implications of their choices.
- **Chapter Essay Question:** Every chapter ends with essay prompts that ask students to explore and reflect on concepts from the chapter and build writing and critical thinking faculties.
- **KnowNOW! Philosophy Blog:** The KnowNOW! Philosophy Blog connects course concepts with real-world events. Updated twice a week, the blog provides a succinct philosophical analysis of major news stories, along with multimedia and discussion-starter questions.

MindTap also includes a variety of other tools that support philosophy teaching and learning:

- The Philosophy Toolbox collects tutorials on using MindTap and researching and writing academic papers, including citation information and tools, that instructors can use to support students in the writing process.
- Questia allows professors and students to search a database of thousands of peer-reviewed journals, newspapers, magazines, and full-length books—all assets can be added to any relevant chapter in MindTap, and students can
- Kaltura allows instructors to create and insert inline video and audio into the MindTap platform.
- ReadSpeaker reads the text out loud to students in a voice they can customize.
- Note-taking and highlighting are organized in a central location that can be synced with Ever-Note on any mobile device a student may have access to.

- Digital flash cards are premade for each chapter, and students can make their own by adding images, descriptions, and more.

MindTap gives students ample opportunities for improving comprehension and for self-evaluation to prepare for exams, while also providing faculty and students alike a clear way to measure and assess student progress. Faculty can use MindTap as a turn-key solution or customize by adding YouTube videos, RSS feeds, or their own documents directly within the e-book or within each chapter's Learning Path. MindTap goes well beyond an e-book and a homework solution. It is truly a Personal Learning Experience that allows instructors to synchronize the reading with engaging assignments. To learn more, ask your Cengage Learning sales representative to demo it for you—or go to www.Cengage.com/MindTap.

Instructor's Resources:

The Instructor's Companion Site features an Instructor's Manual, PowerPoint Lecture Slides, and a robust Test Bank (Cengage Learning Testing powered by Cognero).

The Instructor's Manual provides useful suggestions for lectures and classroom activities, based directly on the content in this book. Answers to many review exercises or study questions are provided, as well as questions for further thought.

The PowerPoint Lecture Slides offer a chapter-by-chapter breakdown **Cengage Learning Testing, powered by Cognero**, new to this edition, allows instructors to author, edit, and manage Test Bank content. Instructors can create multiple test versions and instantly deliver them through their learning management system right to the classroom.

Interested instructors can find and access all this content by adding the ninth edition of this book to their bookshelf on Cengage.com.

IN SUMMARY

We have sought to make this ninth edition of *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* the most comprehensive ethics text available. It combines theory and issues, text and readings, as well as up-to-date empirical information about contemporary moral

problems. It is designed to be flexible, user-friendly, current, pedagogically helpful, and balanced.

- › The flexible structure of the text allows instructors to emphasize only those theories and applied ethical topics which best suit their courses.
- › The text is user-friendly, while at the same time philosophically reliable. It employs pedagogical aids throughout and at the end of each chapter, and provides extensive examples from current events and trends. The exposition challenges students with stimulating questions and is interspersed with useful diagrams, charts, and headings.
- › The text not only provides up-to-date coverage of developments in the news and in scientific journals but also on ethical issues as they are discussed in contemporary philosophy.
- › It offers a balanced collection of readings, including both the ethical theories and contemporary sources on the issues.
- › *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues*, ninth edition, is accompanied by a broad range of online and textual tools that amplify its teachability and give instructors specific pedagogical tools for different learning styles.

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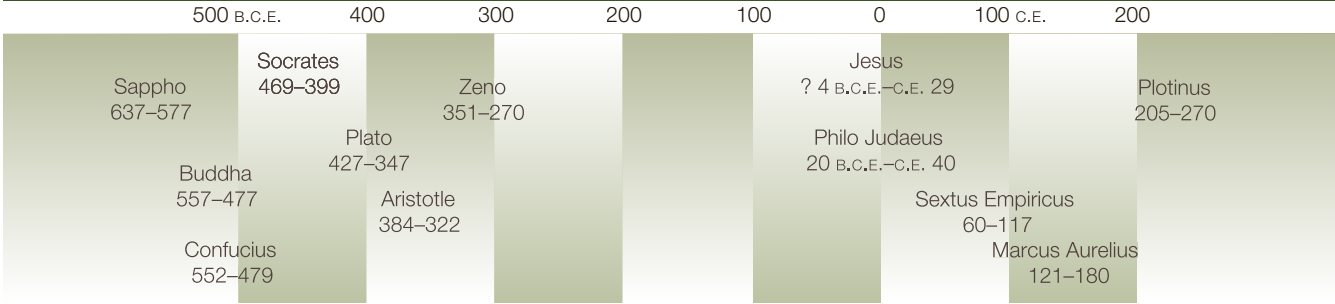
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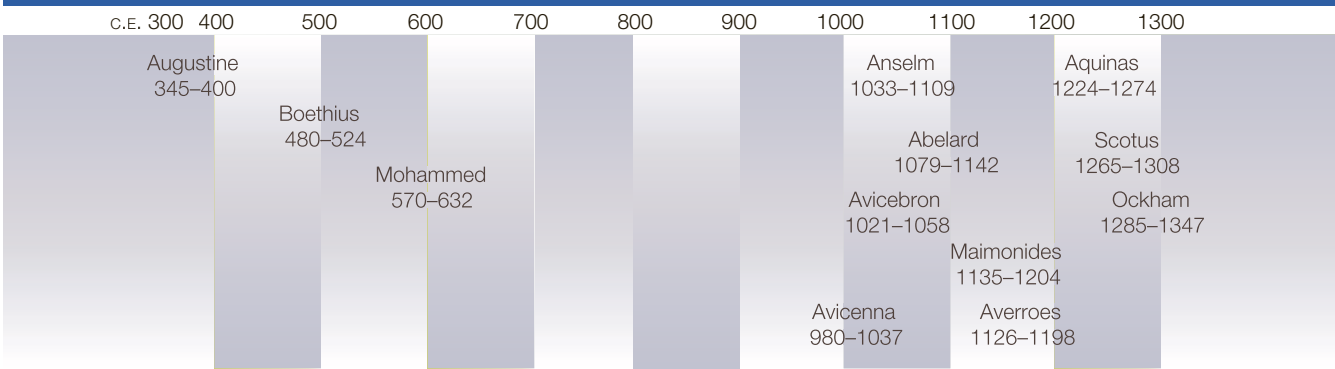
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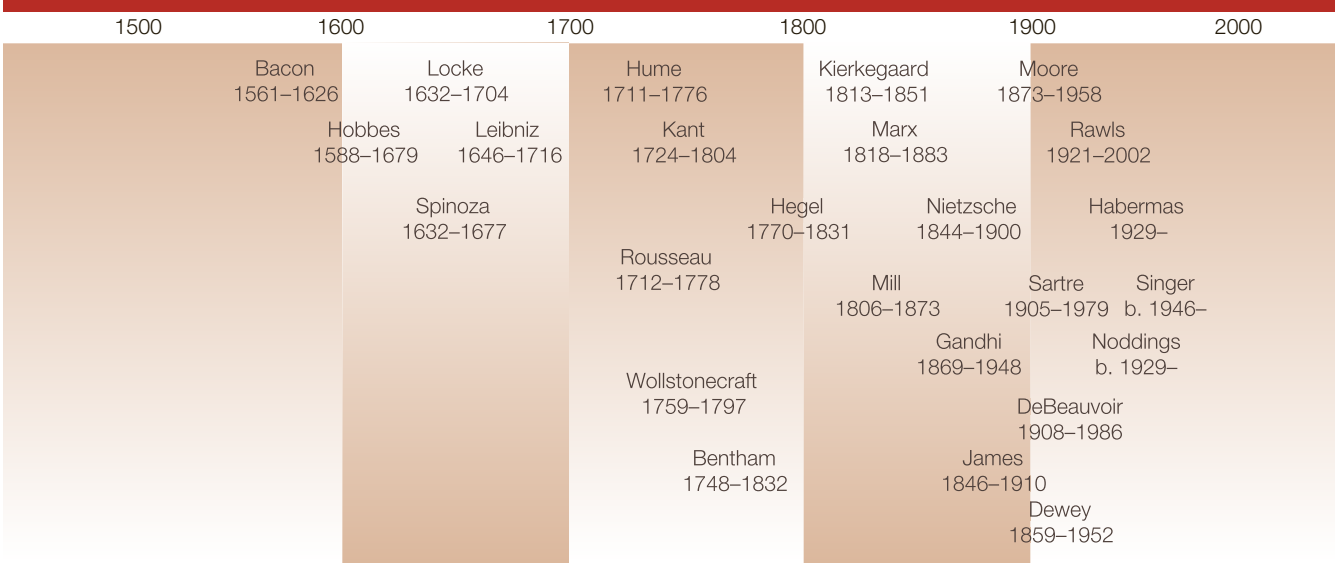
Ancient



Medieval



Modern



Ethics and Ethical Reasoning

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the philosophical study of ethics.
- Discuss the difference between normative and descriptive claims.
- Define key terms: intuitionism, emotivism, objectivism, and subjectivism.
- Explain the difference between metaethics and normative ethics.
- Decide whether naturalistic explanations of ethics commit the naturalistic fallacy.
- Differentiate between instrumental and intrinsic values.
- Distinguish consequentialist from nonconsequentialist approaches to ethics.
- Use the distinctions among motives, acts, and consequences to analyze ethical phenomena.

MindTap[®] For more chapter resources and activities, go to MindTap.

WHY STUDY ETHICS?

It is clear that we often disagree about questions of value. Should same-sex marriage be legal? Should women have abortions? Should drugs such as marijuana be legalized? Should we torture terrorists in order to get information from them? Should we eat animals or use them in medical experiments? These sorts of questions are sure to expose divergent ideas about what is right or wrong.

Discussions of these sorts of questions often devolve into unreasonable name-calling, foot-stomping, and other questionable argument styles. The philosophical study of ethics aims to produce good arguments that provide reasonable support for our opinions about practical topics. If someone says that abortion should (or should not) be permitted, he or she needs to explain why this is so. It is not enough to say that abortion should not be permitted because it is wrong or that women should be allowed to choose abortion because it is wrong to limit women's choices. To say that these things are wrong is merely to reiterate that they should not be permitted. Such an answer *begs the question*. Circular, question-begging arguments are fallacious. We need further argument and information to know *why* abortion is wrong or *why* limiting free choice is wrong. We need a theory of what is right and wrong, good or evil, justified, permissible, and unjustifiable, and we need to understand how our theory applies in concrete cases. The first half of this text will discuss various



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theories and concepts that can be used to help us avoid begging the question in debates about ethical issues. The second half looks in detail at a number of these issues.

It is appropriate to wonder, at the outset, why we need to do this. Why isn't it sufficient to simply state your opinion and assert that "x is wrong (or evil, just, permissible, etc.)"? One answer to this question is that such assertions do nothing to solve the deep conflicts of value that we find in our world. We know that people disagree about abortion, same-sex marriage, animal rights, and other issues. If we are to make progress toward understanding each other, if we are to make progress toward establishing some consensus about these topics, then we have to understand *why* we think certain things are right and others are wrong. We need to make arguments and give reasons in order to work out our own conclusions about these issues and in order to explain our conclusions to others.

It is also insufficient to appeal to custom or authority in deriving our conclusions about moral issues. While it may be appropriate for children to simply obey their parents' decisions, adults should strive for more than conformity and obedience to authority. Sometimes our parents and grandparents are wrong—or they disagree among themselves. Sometimes the law is wrong—or laws conflict. And sometimes religious authorities are wrong—or authorities do not agree. To appeal to authority on moral issues, we would first have to decide which authority is to be trusted and believed. Which religion provides the best set of moral rules? Which set of laws in which country is to be followed? Even within the United States, there is currently a conflict of laws with regard to some of these issues: some states have legalized medical marijuana or physician assisted suicide, others have not. The world's religions also disagree about a number of issues: for example, the status of women, the permissibility of abortion, and the question of whether war is justifiable. And members of the same religion or denomination may disagree among themselves about these issues. To begin resolving these conflicts, we need critical philosophical inquiry into

basic ethical questions. In Chapter 2, we discuss the world's diverse religious traditions and ask whether there is a set of common ethical ideas that is shared by these traditions. In this chapter, we clarify what ethics is and how ethical reasoning should proceed.

WHAT IS ETHICS?

On the first day of an ethics class, we often ask students to write one-paragraph answers to the question, "What is ethics?"

How would you answer? Over the years, there have been significant differences of opinion among our students on this issue. Some have argued that ethics is a highly personal thing, a matter of private opinion. Others claim that our values come from family upbringing. Other students think that ethics is a set of social principles, the codes of one's society or particular groups within it, such as medical or legal organizations. Some write that many people get their ethical beliefs from their religion.

One general conclusion can be drawn from these students' comments: We tend to think of ethics as the set of values or principles held by individuals or groups. I have my ethics and you have yours; groups—professional organizations and societies, for example—have shared sets of values. We can study the various sets of values that people have. This could be done historically and sociologically. Or we could take a psychological interest in determining how people form their values. But philosophical ethics is a critical enterprise that asks whether any particular set of values or beliefs is better than any other. We compare and evaluate sets of values and beliefs, giving reasons for our evaluations. We ask questions such as, "Are there good reasons for preferring one set of ethics over another?" In this text, we examine ethics from a critical or evaluative standpoint. This examination will help you come to a better understanding of your own values and the values of others.

Ethics is a branch of *philosophy*. It is also called *moral philosophy*. In general, philosophy is a discipline or study in which we ask—and attempt to answer—basic questions about key areas or subject matters of human life and about pervasive and

significant aspects of experience. Some philosophers, such as Plato and Kant, have tried to do this systematically by interrelating their philosophical views in many areas. According to Alfred North Whitehead, “Philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”¹ Some contemporary philosophers have given up on the goal of building a system of general ideas, arguing instead that we must work at problems piecemeal, focusing on one particular issue at a time. For instance, some philosophers might analyze the meaning of the phrase *to know*, while others might work on the morality of lying. Some philosophers are optimistic about our ability to address these problems, while others are more skeptical because they think that the way we analyze the issues and the conclusions we draw will always be influenced by our background, culture, and habitual ways of thinking. Most agree, however, that these problems are worth wondering about and caring about.

We can ask philosophical questions about many subjects. In the philosophical study of **aesthetics**, philosophers ask basic or foundational questions about art and objects of beauty: what kinds of things do or should count as art (rocks arranged in a certain way, for example)? Is what makes something an object of aesthetic interest its emotional expressiveness, its peculiar formal nature, or its ability to reveal truths that cannot be described in other ways? In the philosophy of science, philosophers ask whether scientific knowledge gives us a picture of reality as it is, whether progress exists in science, and whether the scientific method discloses truth. Philosophers of law seek to understand the nature of law itself, the source of its authority, the nature of legal interpretation, and the basis of legal responsibility. In the philosophy of knowledge, called **epistemology**, we try to answer questions about what we can know of ourselves and our world, and what it means to know something rather than just to believe it. In each area, philosophers ask basic questions about the particular subject matter. This is also true of moral philosophy.

Ethics, or moral philosophy, asks basic questions about the good life, about what is better and worse, about whether there is any objective right and wrong, and how we know it if there is.

One objective of ethics is to help us decide what is good or bad, better or worse. This is generally called **normative ethics**. Normative ethics defends a thesis about what is good, right, or just. Normative ethics can be distinguished from **metaethics**. Metaethical inquiry asks questions about the nature of ethics, including the meaning of ethical terms and judgments. Questions about the relation between philosophical ethics and religion—as we discuss in Chapter 2—are metaethical. Theoretical questions about ethical relativism—as discussed in Chapter 3—are also metaethical. The other chapters in Part I are more properly designated as ethical theory. These chapters present concrete normative theories; they make claims about what is good or evil, just or unjust.

From the mid 1930s until recently, metaethics predominated in English-speaking universities. In doing metaethics, we often analyze the meaning of ethical language. Instead of asking whether the death penalty is morally justified, we would ask what we meant in calling something “morally justified” or “good” or “right.” We analyze ethical language, ethical terms, and ethical statements to determine what they mean. In doing this, we function at a level removed from that implied by our definition. It is for this reason that we call this other type of ethics *metaethics*—*meta* meaning “beyond.” Some of the discussions in this chapter are metaethical discussions—for example, the analysis of various senses of “good.” As you will see, much can be learned from such discussions.

ETHICAL AND OTHER TYPES OF EVALUATION

“That’s great!” “Now, this is what I call a delicious meal!” “That play was wonderful!” All of these statements express approval of something. They do not tell us much about the meal or the play, but they do imply that the speaker thought they were good. These are evaluative statements. Ethical statements

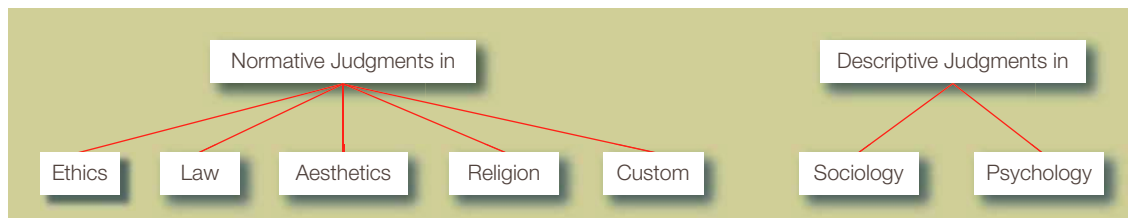
or judgments are also *evaluative*. They tell us what the speaker believes is good or bad. They do not simply *describe* the object of the judgment—for example, as an action that occurred at a certain time or that affected people in a certain way. They go further and express a positive or negative regard for it. Of course, factual matters are relevant to moral evaluation. For example, factual judgments about whether capital punishment has a deterrent effect might be relevant to our moral judgments about it. So also would we want to know the facts about whether violence can ever bring about peace; this would help us judge the morality of war. Because ethical judgments often rely on such *empirical* information, ethics is often indebted to other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and history. Thus, we can distinguish between empirical or **descriptive claims**, which state factual beliefs, and evaluative judgments, which state whether such facts are good or bad, just or unjust, right or wrong. Evaluative judgments are also called **normative judgments**. Moral judgments are evaluative because they “place a value,” negative or positive, on some action or practice, such as capital punishment.

- Descriptive (empirical) judgment: Capital punishment acts (or does not act) as a deterrent.
- Normative (moral) judgment: Capital punishment is justifiable (or unjustifiable).

We also evaluate people, saying that a person is good or evil, just or unjust. Because these evaluations also rely on beliefs in general about what is good or right, they are also normative. For example, the judgment that a person is a hero or a villain is based upon a normative theory about good or evil sorts of people.

“That is a good knife” is an evaluative or normative statement. However, it does not mean that the knife is morally good. In making ethical judgments, we use terms such as *good*, *bad*, *right*, *wrong*, *obligatory*, and *permissible*. We talk about what we ought or ought not to do. These are evaluative terms. *But not all evaluations are moral in nature*. We speak of a good knife without attributing moral goodness to it. In so describing the knife, we are probably referring to its practical usefulness for cutting. Other evaluations refer to other systems of values. When people tell us that a law is legitimate or unconstitutional, that is a legal judgment. When we read that two articles of clothing ought not to be worn together, that is an aesthetic judgment. When religious leaders tell members of their communities what they ought to do, that is a religious matter. When a community teaches people to bow before elders or use eating utensils in a certain way, that is a matter of custom. These various normative or evaluative judgments appeal to practical, legal, aesthetic, religious, or customary norms for their justification.

How do other types of normative judgments differ from moral judgments? Some philosophers believe that it is a characteristic of moral “oughts” in particular that they override other “oughts,” such as aesthetic ones. In other words, if we must choose between what is aesthetically pleasing and what is morally right, then we ought to do what is morally right. In this way, morality may also take precedence over the law and custom. The doctrine of civil disobedience relies on this belief, because it holds that we may disobey certain laws for moral reasons. Although moral evaluations differ from other normative evaluations, this is not to say that there is no



relation between them. In fact, moral reasons often form the basis for certain laws. But law—at least in the United States—results from a variety of political compromises. We don't tend to look to the law for moral guidance. And we are reluctant to think that we can “legislate morality,” as the saying goes. Of course, there is still an open debate about whether the law should enforce moral ideas in the context of issues such as gay marriage or abortion.

There may be moral reasons supporting legal arrangements—considerations of basic justice, for example. Furthermore, the fit or harmony between forms and colors that ground some aesthetic judgments may be similar to the rightness or moral fit between certain actions and certain situations or beings. Moreover, in some ethical systems, actions are judged morally by their practical usefulness for producing valued ends. For now, however, note that ethics is not the only area in which we make normative judgments.

SOCIOBIOLOGY AND THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY

The distinction between descriptive and normative claims is a central issue for thinking about ethics. We often confuse these issues in our ordinary thinking, in part because we think that what we ordinarily do is what we ought to do. Many people are inclined to say that if something is natural to us, then we ought to do it. For example, one might argue that since eating meat is natural for us, we ought to eat meat. But vegetarians will disagree. Indeed, there is no necessary relation between what is ethical and what is natural or customary. It is thus not true that what is natural is always good. But people often make the mistake of confusing facts of nature and value judgments. Most of the time, we are not attentive to the shift from facts to values, the shift from *is* to *ought*. Consider an example used by the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, who noticed that incest appears to be quite natural—animals do it all the time. But human beings condemn incest. If it is natural, why do we condemn it? Hume pointed out the problem of deriving an *ought* from an *is*; philosophers after Hume named the rule

against simplistically deriving an *ought* from an *is* **Hume's law**. From this perspective, it is not logical, for example, to base our ideas about how we ought to behave from a factual account of how we actually do behave. This logical mistake was called the **naturalistic fallacy** by G. E. Moore, an influential philosopher of the early twentieth century. Moore maintained that moral terms such as *good* are names for nonempirical properties that cannot be reduced to some other natural thing. Moore claimed that to attempt to define *good* in terms of some mundane or natural thing such as pleasure is to commit a version of this fallacy. The problem is that we can ask whether pleasures are actually good. Just because we desire pleasure does not mean that it is good to desire pleasure. As Moore suggested, there is always an open question about whether what is natural is also good.

Now, not everyone agrees that appeals to nature in ethics are fallacious. There are a variety of naturalistic approaches to thinking about ethics. One traditional approach to ethics is called **natural law ethics** (which we discuss in detail in Chapter 7). Natural law ethics focuses on human nature and derives ethical precepts from an account of what is natural for humans. Natural law ethicists may argue, for example, that human body parts have natural functions and that by understanding these natural functions, we can figure out certain moral ideas about sexuality or reproduction. Opponents might argue that this commits the naturalistic fallacy, since there is no obvious moral content to be seen in the structure and function of our body parts.

A more recent version of naturalism in ethics focuses on evolutionary biology and cognitive science. From this perspective, to understand morality, we need to understand the basic functions of our species, including the evolutionary reasons behind moral behavior. We also need to understand how our brains function in order to explain how pleasure works, why some people are psychopathic, and why we struggle to balance egoistic and altruistic motivations. One version of this naturalism is known as **sociobiology**—an idea that was introduced by the biologist E. O. Wilson.² “If the brain evolved



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Does animal behavior provide a guide for human ethical behavior?

by natural selection, even the capacities to select particular esthetic judgments and religious beliefs must have arisen by the same mechanistic process," Wilson explained.⁵ The basic idea of sociobiology is that human behaviors result from the pressures of natural selection. Understanding human morality involves understanding the adaptive advantage of certain behaviors, which can be studied by comparing human behaviors with the behavior of other social animals—from insects to chimpanzees.

Sociobiology attempts to understand altruism, for example, in terms of evolutionary processes. From this perspective, altruistic concern develops through natural selection because altruistic animals will help each other survive. Biologist Richard Dawkins explains a related idea in terms of "the selfish gene."

Dawkins's idea is that our genes use our altruistic and other behaviors to spread themselves. Thus, when we cooperate within groups that share a genetic endowment, we help to preserve the group and help to disseminate our shared genetic characteristics, often in competition with rival genetic groups.⁴

In discussing sociobiology and interpreting biological evidence, we must be careful, however, not to anthropomorphize.⁵ When we look at the natural world, we often interpret it in anthropomorphic terms, seeing in animals and even in genes themselves the motivations and interests that human beings have. In other words, we must be careful that our value judgments do not cloud or confuse our description of the facts.

While the naturalistic approach of sociobiology is provocative and insightful, we might still worry that it commits the naturalistic fallacy. Just because altruistic behavior is natural and useful in the evolutionary struggle for survival does not mean that it is good, just, or right. To see this, let us return to Hume's example of incest. Incest might be useful as a method for disseminating our genetic material—so long as the negative problems associated with inbreeding are minimized. We do inbreed animals in this way in order to select for desirable traits. But it is still appropriate to ask whether incest is morally permissible for human beings—the question of *ought* might not be settled by what *is*.

ETHICAL TERMS

You might have wondered what the difference is between calling something "right" and calling it "good." Consider the ethical meaning for these terms. Right and wrong usually apply to actions, as in "You did the right thing," or "That is the wrong thing to do." These terms prescribe things for us to do or not to do. On the other hand, when we say that something is morally good, we may not explicitly recommend doing it. However, we do recommend that it be positively regarded. Thus, we say things such as "Peace is good, and distress is bad." It is also interesting that with "right" and "wrong" there seems to be no in-between; it is either one or

the other. However, with “good” and “bad” there is room for degrees, and some things are thought to be better or worse than others.

Other ethical terms require careful consideration. For example, when we say that something “ought” or “ought not” to be done, there is a sense of urgency and obligation. We can refrain from doing what we ought to do, but the obligation is still there. On the other hand, there are certain actions that we think are permissible but that we are not obligated to do. Thus, one may think that there is no obligation to help someone in trouble, though it is “morally permissible” (i.e., not wrong) to do so and even “praiseworthy” to do so in some cases. Somewhat more specific ethical terms include *just* and *unjust* and *virtuous* and *vicious*.

To a certain extent, which set of terms we use depends on the particular overall ethical viewpoint or theory we adopt. This will become clearer as we discuss and analyze the various ethical theories in this first part of the text.

ETHICS AND REASONS

When we evaluate something as right or wrong, good or bad, we appeal to certain norms or reasons. If I say that affirmative action is unjustified, I should give reasons for this conclusion; it will not be acceptable for me to respond that this is merely the way I feel. If I have some intuitive negative response to preferential treatment forms of affirmative action, then I will be expected to delve deeper to determine whether there are reasons for this attitude. Perhaps I have experienced the bad results of such programs. Or I may believe that giving preference in hiring or school admissions on the basis of race or sex is unfair. In either case, I will be expected to push the matter further and explain *why* it is unfair or even what constitutes fairness and unfairness.

Reason-giving is essential in philosophical ethics. However, this does not mean that making ethical judgments is and must be purely rational. We might be tempted to think that good moral judgments require us to be objective and not let our feelings, or emotions, enter into our decision making. Yet this assumes that feelings always get in the way

of making good judgments. Sometimes this is surely true, as when we are overcome by anger, jealousy, or fear and cannot think clearly. Biases and prejudice may stem from such strong feelings. We think prejudice is wrong because it prevents us from judging rightly. But emotions can often aid good decision making. We may, for example, simply feel the injustice of a certain situation or the wrongness of someone’s suffering. Furthermore, our caring about some issue or person may, in fact, direct us to more carefully examine the ethical issues involved. However, some explanation of why we hold a certain moral position is still required. Simply to say “X is just wrong” without explanation, or to merely express strong feelings or convictions about “X,” is not sufficient.

INTUITIONISM, EMOTIVISM, SUBJECTIVISM, OBJECTIVISM

Philosophers differ on how we know what is good. They also differ on the question of whether moral judgments refer to something objective or whether they are reports of subjective opinions or dispositions.

To say that something is good is often thought to be different from saying that something is yellow or heavy. The latter two qualities are empirical, known by our senses. However, good or goodness is held to be a nonempirical property, said by some to be knowable through intuition. A position known as **intuitionism** claims that our ideas about ethics rest upon some sort of intuitive knowledge of ethical truths. This view is associated with G. E. Moore, whom we discussed earlier.⁶ Another philosopher, W. D. Ross, thinks that we have a variety of “crystal-clear intuitions” about basic values. These intuitions are clear and distinct beliefs about ethics, which Ross explains using an analogy with mathematics: just as we see or intuit the self-evident truth of “ $2 + 2 = 4$,” we also see or intuit ethical truths: for example, that we have a duty to keep our promises. As Ross explains,

Both in mathematics and in ethics we have certain crystal-clear intuitions from which we build up all that we can know about the nature of numbers and the

nature of duty...we do not read off our knowledge of particular branches of duty from a single ideal of the good life, but build up our ideal of the good life from intuitions into the particular branches of duty.⁷

A very important question is whether our intuitions point toward some objective moral facts in the world or whether they are reports of something subjective. A significant problem for intuitionism is that people's moral intuitions seem to differ. Unlike the crystal-clear intuitions of mathematics—which are shared by all of us—the intuitions of ethics are not apparently shared by everyone.

Another view, sometimes called **emotivism**, maintains that when we say something is good, we are showing our approval of it and recommending it to others rather than describing it. This view is associated with the work of twentieth-century philosophers such as A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson. But it has deeper roots in a theory of the moral sentiments, such as we find in eighteenth-century philosophers Adam Smith and David Hume. Hume maintains, for example, that reason is “the slave of the passions,” by which he means that the ends or goals we pursue are determined by our emotions, passions, and sentiments. Adam Smith maintains that human beings are motivated by the experience of pity, compassion, and sympathy for other human beings. For Smith, ethics develops out of natural sympathy toward one another, experienced by social beings like ourselves.

Emotivism offers an explanation of moral knowledge that is subjective, with moral judgments resting upon subjective experience. One version of emotivism makes ethical judgments akin to expressions of approval or disapproval. In this view, to say “murder is wrong” is to express something like “murder—yuck!” Similarly, to say “courageous self-sacrifice is good” is to express something like “self-sacrifice—yay!” One contemporary author, Leon Kass, whom we study in Chapter 18, argues that there is wisdom in our experiences of disgust and repugnance—that our emotional reactions to things reveal deep moral insight. Kass focuses especially on the “yuck factor” that many feel about advanced biotechnologies such as cloning.

One worry, however, is that our emotions and feelings of sympathy or disgust are variable and relative. Our own emotional responses vary depending upon our moods and these responses vary among and between individuals. Emotional responses are relative to culture and even to the subjective dispositions of individuals. Indeed, our own feelings change over time and are not reliable or sufficient gauges of what is going on in the external world. The worry here is that our emotions merely express internal or subjective responses to things and that they do not connect us to an objective and stable source of value.

Other moral theories aim for more objective sources for morality. From this standpoint, there must be objective reasons that ground our subjective and emotional responses to things. Instead of saying that the things we desire are good, an **objectivist** about ethics will argue that we ought to desire things that are good—with an emphasis on the goodness of the thing-in-itself apart from our subjective responses. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato was an objectivist in this sense. Objectivists hold that values have an objective reality—that they are objects available for knowledge—as opposed to **subjectivists**, who claim that value judgments merely express subjective opinion. Plato argues that there is some concept or idea called “the Good” and that we can compare our subjective moral opinions about morality with this objective standard. Those who want to ground morality in God are objectivists, as are those who defend some form of natural law ethics, which focuses on essential or objective features of bodies and their functions. Interestingly, the approach of sociobiology tends not to be objectivist in this sense. Although the sociobiologist bases her study of morality on objective facts in the world, the sociobiologist does not think that moral judgments represent moral facts. Instead, as Michael Ruse puts it,

Objective ethics, in the sense of something written on tablets of stone (or engraven on God's heart) external to us, has to go. The only reasonable thing that we, as sociobiologists, can say is that morality is something

biology makes us believe in, so that we will further our evolutionary ends.⁸

One of the issues introduced in Ruse's rejection of objectivity in ethics is the distinction between **intrinsic** and **instrumental** goods. Instrumental goods are things that are useful as instruments or tools—we value them as means toward some other end. Intrinsic goods are things that have value in themselves or for their own sake. For example, we might say that life is an intrinsic good and fundamentally valuable. But food is an instrumental good because it is a means or tool that is used to support life. From Ruse's perspective, morality itself is merely an instrumental good that is used by evolution for other purposes. Morality is, from this perspective, simply a tool that helps the human species to survive. The selfish gene hypothesis of Richard Dawkins understands individual human beings instrumentally, as carriers of genetic information: "We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to serve the selfish molecules known as genes."⁹ This runs counter to our usual moral view, which holds that human beings have intrinsic or inherent value. The idea that some things have intrinsic value is an idea that is common to a variety of approaches that claim that ethics is objective. The intrinsic value of a thing is supposed to be an objective fact about that thing, which has no relation to our subjective response to that thing. Claims about intrinsic value show up in arguments about human rights and about the environment. Do human beings, ecosystems, or species have intrinsic value, or is the value of these things contained within our subjective responses and in their instrumental uses? This question shows us that the metaethical theories are connected to important practical issues.

ETHICAL REASONING AND ARGUMENTS

It is important to know how to reason well in thinking or speaking about ethical matters. This is helpful not only in trying to determine what to think about controversial ethical matters but also in arguing for something you believe is right and in critically evaluating positions held by others.

The Structure of Ethical Reasoning and Argument

To be able to reason well in ethics you need to understand what constitutes a good argument. We can do this by looking at an argument's basic structure. This is the structure not only of ethical arguments about what is good or right but also of arguments about what is the case or what is true.

Suppose you are standing on the shore and a person in the water calls out for help. Should you try to rescue that person? You may or may not be able to swim. You may or may not be sure you could rescue the person. In this case, however, there is no time for reasoning, as you would have to act promptly. On the other hand, if this were an imaginary case, you would have to think through the reasons for and against trying to rescue the person. You might conclude that if you could actually rescue the person, then you ought to try to do it. Your reasoning might go as follows:

Every human life is valuable.
 Whatever has a good chance of saving such a life should be attempted.
 My swimming out to rescue this person has a good chance of saving his life.
 Therefore, I ought to do so.

Or you might conclude that you could not save this person, and your reasoning might go like this:

Every human life is valuable.
 Whatever has a good chance of saving such a life should be attempted.
 In this case, there is no chance of saving this life because I cannot swim.
 Thus, I am not obligated to try to save him (although, if others are around who can help, I might be obligated to try to get them to help).

Some structure like this is implicit in any ethical argument, although some are longer and more complex chains than the simple form given here. One can recognize the reasons in an argument by their introduction through key words such as *since*,