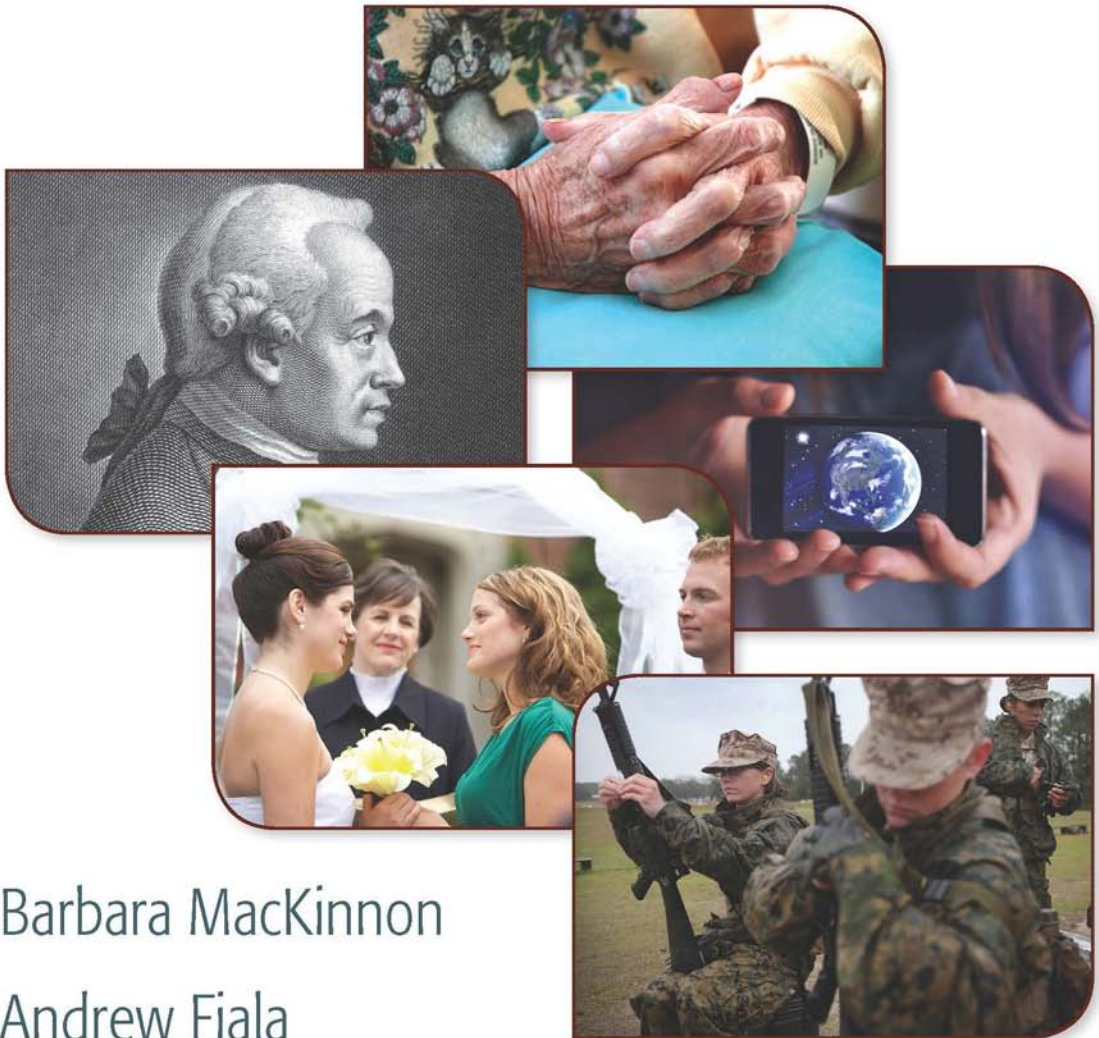


ETHICS

THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Eighth Edition | **CONCISE**



Barbara MacKinnon

Andrew Fiala

ETHICS

THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Concise, Eighth Edition

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For Edward, Jennifer, and Kathleen



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Concise, Eighth Edition**

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Preface

This concise version of the eighth edition of *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* represents an extensive revision of the text and reflects the input of a new co-author. This new edition provides increased coverage of ethical theory in Part I and a thorough introduction to contemporary ethical issues in Part II. As in past editions, each chapter begins with a detailed, accessible introduction. In this, it not only remains a comprehensive introduction to ethics but also continues to emphasize pedagogy through clear summaries, engaging examples, and various study tools—such as review exercises, discussion cases, and the appendix on how to write an ethics paper. Each chapter now begins with a list of learning objectives, and the book now ends with an extensive glossary of key terms.

ADDITIONS AND CHANGES

Although the basic elements remain the same, this edition includes the following additions and changes from the seventh edition. Part I has been revised to include a new chapter on religion and global ethics, as well as increased coverage of naturalistic approaches to ethics and natural law. All introductions in Part II have been updated to incorporate contemporary issues and current affairs. These updates include recent statistics, relevant cases, and contemporary examples.

In this edition there is expanded 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 restorative justice, environmental

justice, biotechnology and bioengineering, vegetarianism and the ethics of hunting, race and racism, pacifism, gay marriage, and 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 noted above, 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); and
- arguments and suggested ways to organize an ethical analysis of each topic.

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 that between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist 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 (this is new to this edition);
- a real-life event, hypothetical dialogue, or updated empirical data at the beginning of each chapter;
- diagrams, subheadings, boldface key terms and definitions that provide guideposts for readers and organize the summary exposition;
- review exercises at the end of each chapter that can be used for exams and quizzes;
- a glossary of definitions of key terms (this is 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; and
- an appendix on how to write an ethics paper, which gives students helpful advice and brief examples of ethics papers.

Online Student and Instructor Resources This text is accompanied by an innovative online resource center that offers animated simulations that give you the opportunity to engage with dilemmas and thought experiments commonly presented in your introduction to ethics class. The resource center also includes Aplia, an interactive learning solution that provides automatically graded assignments with detailed, immediate explanations on every question. You will get immediate feedback on your work (not only what you got right or wrong, but why), and you can choose to see another set of related questions if you want more practice. A searchable eBook (MindTap Reader) is also available inside the resource center, for easy reference, and includes links to a host of assets.

The Instructor's Manual is available online on the password-protected Instructor's Companion Site. It provides useful suggestions for lectures and classroom activities, based directly on the content in this book. Answers to any review exercises or study questions are provided, as well as questions for further thought. Interested instructors can find it by looking up this edition of the book on cengage.com.

IN SUMMARY

We have sought to make this edition of *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* the most comprehensive ethics text available. It combines theory and issues. 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 provides up-to-date coverage not only of developments in the news and in scientific journals but also on ethical issues as they are discussed in contemporary philosophy.

- › *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* 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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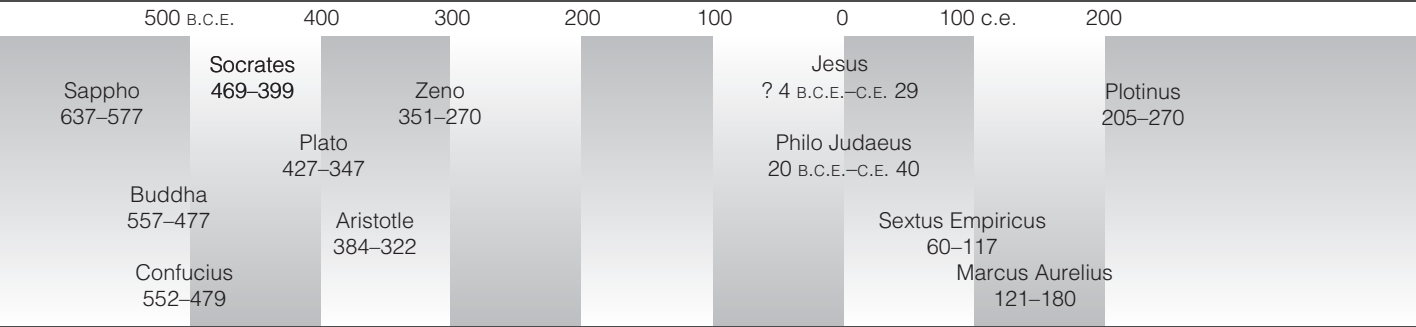
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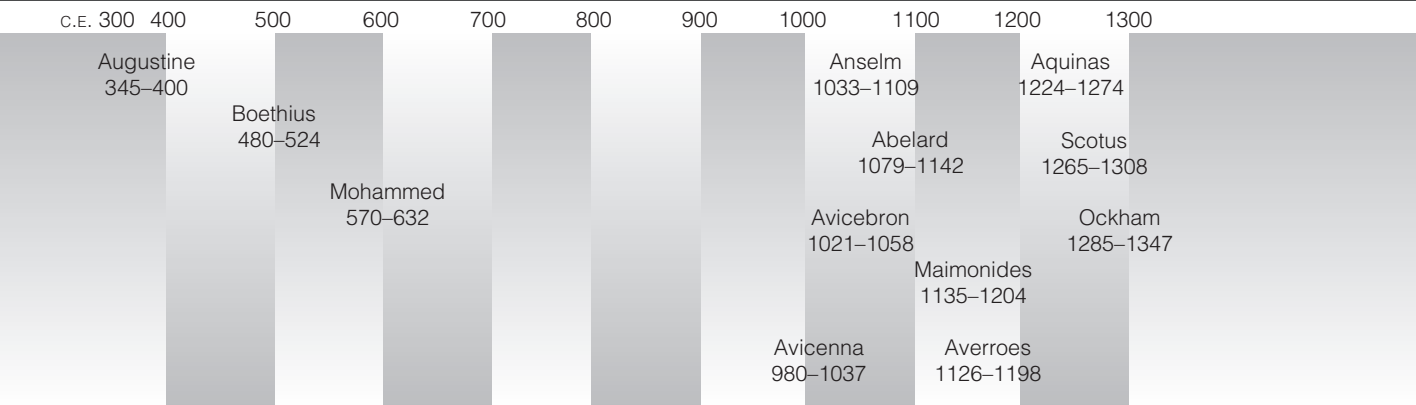
Francisco. Over the years they have also contributed greatly to this text by challenging her to keep up with the times and to make things more clear and more interesting. She also appreciates the support of her husband and fellow philosopher, Edward MacKinnon. She dedicates this book to her two wonderful daughters, Jennifer and Kathleen. Andrew Fiala is thankful for Barbara's hard work throughout the previous editions of this book and for the opportunity to transform his classroom teaching experience into a useful text for teaching ethics.

We also wish to acknowledge the many professional people from Cengage Learning and its vendors who have worked on this edition, including Joann Kozyrev—Senior Sponsoring Editor, Debra Matteson—Product Manager, Ian Lague—Development Editor, Lauren MacLachlan—Production Manager, Cathie DiMassa—Senior Content Project Manager, Kristina Mose-Libon—Art Director, and Joshua Duncan—Assistant Editor.

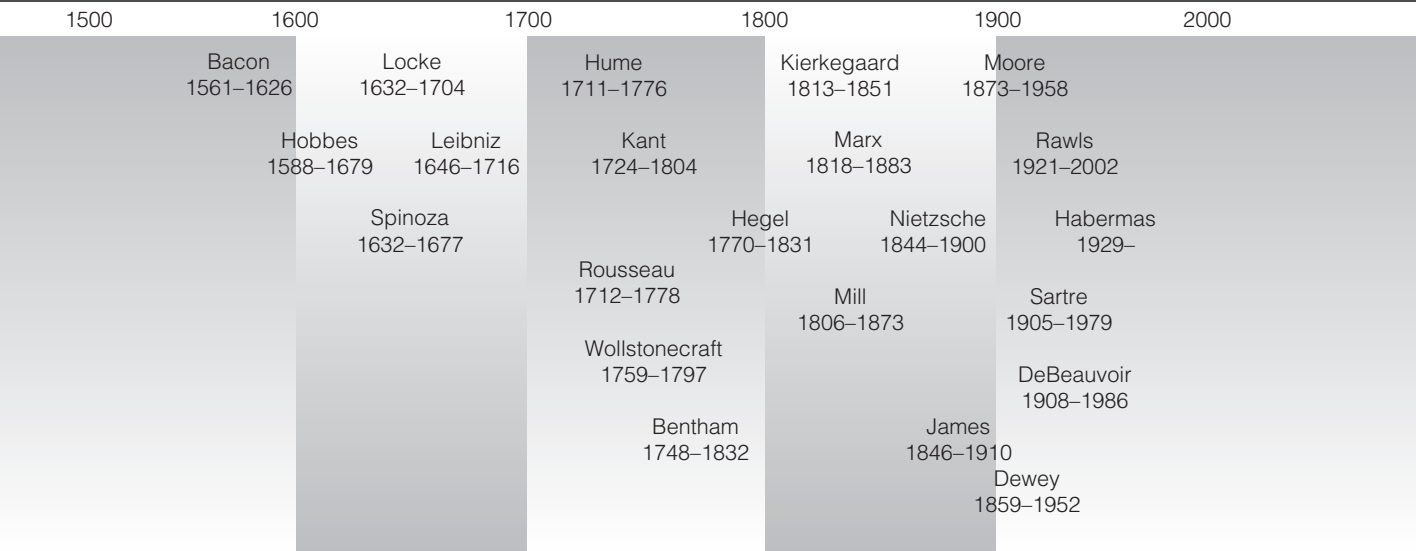
Ancient



Medieval



Modern



Ethics and Ethical Reasoning

1

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the philosophical study of ethics.
- Understand 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 non-consequentialist approaches to ethics.
- Use the distinctions among motives, acts, and consequences to analyze ethical phenomena.

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WHY STUDY ETHICS?

It is clear that we often disagree about questions of value. Should homosexuals be allowed to marry? Should women be permitted to 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 quite rapidly into name-calling, foot-stomping, and fallacious argumentation. One common fallacy or error in reasoning that occurs in ethical argument is *begging the question* or arguing in a circle. If someone says that abortion should (or should not) be permitted, 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. 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 theories and concepts that can be used to help us avoid begging the question in debates about ethical issues. The second half of the book 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 can do nothing to solve the deep conflicts of value that we find in our world. We know that people disagree about abortion, **gay 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 other things 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 with whom we disagree.

It is also not sufficient 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 the laws conflict. And sometimes religious authorities are wrong—or

the 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 and gay marriage, and 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. Many of these disagreements are internal to religions, with members of the same religion or denomination disagreeing among themselves. To begin resolving the problem of laws that conflict and religions that disagree, we need critical philosophical inquiry into basic ethical questions. In the next chapter, 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.



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Member of the international animal rights group PETA demonstrates in a human-sized meat packaging tray.

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, and groups have sets of values with which they tend to identify. We can think of ethics as the study of the various sets of values that people have. This could be done historically and comparatively, for example, or with a psychological interest in determining how people form their values and when they tend to act on them. We can also think of ethics as a critical enterprise. We would then ask whether any particular set of values or beliefs is better than any other. We would compare and evaluate the sets of values and beliefs, giving reasons for our evaluations. We would ask questions such as, “Are there good reasons for preferring one set of ethics over another?” As we will pursue it in this text, ethics is this latter type of study. We will examine various ethical views and types of reasoning from a critical or evaluative standpoint. This examination will also help us come to a better understanding of our 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 Other people believe that philosophers today must work at problems piecemeal, focusing on one particular issue at a time. For instance, some 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 **aesthetics**, or the philosophy of art, for example, philosophers do not merely interpret a certain novel or painting. Rather, philosophers concerned with aesthetics 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)? What makes something an object of aesthetic interest its emotional expressiveness, its peculiar formal nature, or its ability to show us certain truths that cannot be described? In the philosophy of science, philosophers ask not about the structure or composition of some chemical or biological material, but about such matters as whether scientific knowledge gives us a picture of reality as it is, whether progress exists in science, and whether it is meaningful to talk about the scientific method. 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, either in some general way or with regard to particular ethical issues. 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—also belong most properly to metaethics. 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

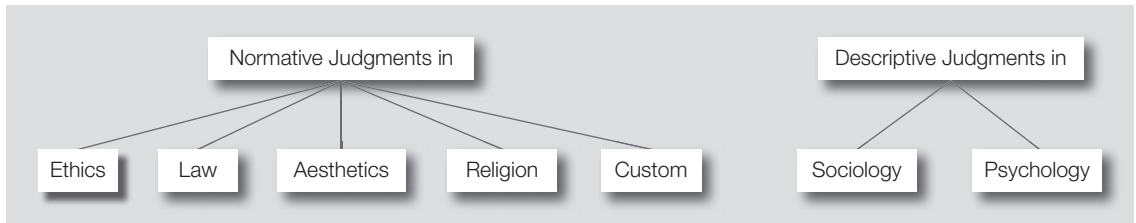
“That’s great!” “Now, this is what I call a delicious meal!” “That play was wonderful!” All these statements express approval of something. They do not tell us much about the meal or the play, but they do imply that the speaker thought they were good. These are evaluative statements. Ethical statements 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. However, factual matters are often relevant to our moral evaluations. For example, factual judgments about whether capital punishment has a deterrent effect might be quite 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 and terrorism. Because ethical judgments often rely on such *empirical* or experientially based 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—in other words, on norms or standards of good and bad or right and wrong—they are also normative. For example, the judgment that people ought to give their informed consent to participate as research subjects may rely on beliefs about the value of human autonomy. In this case, autonomy functions as a norm by which we judge the practice of using people as subjects of research. Thus, ethics of this sort is **normative**, both because it is evaluative and not simply descriptive, and because it grounds its judgments in certain norms or values.

“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 or for impressing others. People tell us that we ought to pay this amount in taxes or stop at that corner before crossing because that is what the law requires. We read that two styles ought not to be worn or placed together because such a combination is distasteful. Here someone is making an aesthetic judgment. Religious leaders tell members of their communities what they ought to do because it is required by their religious beliefs. We may say that in some countries people ought to bow before the elders or use eating utensils in a certain way. This 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 are different 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. Whether the artistic worth of an art object ought to be in any way judged by its moral value or influence is another interesting question.

SOCIOBIOLOGY AND THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY

The distinction between descriptive and normative claims is a central issue for thinking about ethics. Philosophers have long been aware that we tend to confuse these issues in our ordinary thinking about things. 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. Another example is 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. 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*. 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 non-empirical 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 naturalism in ethics is 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 a subsequent chapter). 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 by

natural selection, even the capacities to select particular esthetic judgments and religious beliefs must have arisen by the same mechanistic process,” Wilson explained.³ The basic idea of sociobiology is that human behaviors result from the pressures of natural selection. A useful tool for understanding human behavior is to understand the adaptive advantage of certain behaviors. We can study this 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 The problem is that 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 are not explicitly recommending 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.

We also use other ethical terms when we engage in moral evaluation and judgment. For example, we sometimes say that something “ought” or “ought not” to be done. There is the sense here of urgency. Thus, of these things we may talk in terms of an obligation to do or not do something. It is something about which there is morally no choice. 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 an action as right or wrong or some condition as good or bad, we appeal to certain norms or reasons. Suppose, for example, 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 just 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 also will be expected to push the matter further and explain *why* it is unfair or even what constitutes fairness and unfairness.

To be required to give reasons to justify one’s moral conclusions is essential to the moral enterprise and to doing 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 they know what is good. They also differ on the question of whether our moral judgments refer to something objective to us or are simple reports of subjective opinions and 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 non-empirical 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 above.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 the truth of ethical truths such as 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 all of us.

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—yeah!” One contemporary author, Leon Kass, whom we study in a later chapter, 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. Not only do our own emotional responses vary depending upon our moods but these responses vary among and between individuals. We will discuss **relativism** in more detail later, but the problem is that these 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 our internal or subjective responses to things and that they do not connect us to some 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 are merely the expression of 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 use them and value them as a 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—it is just 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. According to Hume's law, there is no higher value that can be derived from the factual description of how morality is developed by evolutionary forces. 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 conception of human beings 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 or 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 something about ethical arguments and argumentation, not in the sense of understanding why people get into arguments but rather in the sense of 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 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.