

Fourth Edition

Moral Choices

An Introduction to Ethics



SCOTT B. RAE

In this highly readable and well-referenced book, Scott Rae patiently works through some of the most relevant and perplexing moral questions of the twenty-first century. Given the nature of these issues, this is not an easy task. His careful analysis is illustrated with many enlightening analogies. Beyond that, many readers will appreciate his answers to foundational questions such as why the topic matters in the first place, how to think morally and the variety of ways people do so, and what distinguishes a Christian approach to ethical analysis from a nonchristian one. Those who desire to navigate the perplexing maze of moral questions and various viewpoints on them will find this book invaluable.

Paul Chamberlain, professor of ethics and leadership, director of
Institute of Christian Apologetics, Trinity Western University

Moral Choices is a treasure. After giving a tour on how to think about ethics, Rae walks us through the array of moral choices one faces in the modern world. Loaded with example scenarios and all kinds of data, this book travels through the labyrinth of moral decisions one faces, especially in the area of medical ethics. Anyone reading this book will not get lost in how to wrestle with such choices and will possess a solid guide on how to think about them.

Darrell Bock, senior research professor of New Testament, executive director of
cultural engagement at the Hendricks Center, Dallas Theological Seminary

Moral Choices is my go-to book on helping students think through challenging ethical issues. I recently took a group of advanced high school students through it, and they loved it. It is clear, compelling, and biblical. I'm thrilled about this update and am honored to offer it my highest recommendation.

Sean McDowell, PhD, speaker, author, associate professor, Biola University

In my twenty years of teaching Christian Ethics, *Moral Choices* has been very helpful for my students because it is biblically grounded, clear, and engaging, and it helps readers both to think through the process of Christian moral reasoning and to apply such reasoning to the issues of our day. This updated and expanded fourth edition is timely, with new chapters on "Creation Care and Environmental Ethics," "Violence and Gun Control," "Race, Gender, and Diversity," and "Immigration, Refugees, and Border Control." Readers may disagree with some of Dr. Rae's conclusions, but all will benefit from his work on critical moral issues.

Ken Magnuson, professor of Christian ethics, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

I regard Scott Rae's latest book, the fourth edition of *Moral Choices*, as the most impressive work on Christian ethics that I have read in the last few decades. Written by an outstanding teacher and scholar, this is the one book that I would recommend to students, church leaders, and political decision-makers who want a sophisticated but easy-to-read guide through the maze of modern ethical decision-making. Situating ethics within an overall framework of worldview, this work masterfully explains and evaluates the various ethical systems, provides a suggested model for moral decision-making, and offers up-to-date and real life working examples of some sensible and satisfying solutions available to modern ethicists.

Peter Hastie, principal, Presbyterian Theological College, Melbourne, Australia

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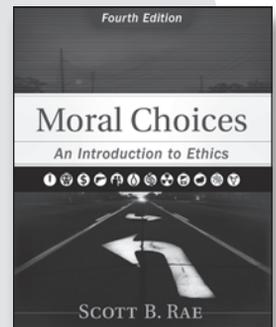
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Moral Choices

An Introduction to Ethics

SCOTT B. RAE

4th Edition

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Moral Choices

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Many thanks to Zondervan for their desire to publish a fourth edition of this book. I trust that it will continue to be a useful tool, now more beneficial with the updates and new chapters made for this edition.

To my wife, Sally, and my sons, Taylor, Cameron, and Austin—thanks for your patience with me when I was getting this finished. You all are such an encouragement, and I am grateful for all that you mean to me.



Introduction

Why Morality Matters

Imagine that you were able to live your life in such a way that you could do whatever you wanted to do, whenever you wanted to do it, and you would never get caught or face any consequences for your actions? That is, you could cheat on exams in school, plagiarize papers, sleep with whoever you wanted to, or embezzle money from your employer, and never worry about getting caught. In Plato's classic work *The Republic*, the myth of Gyges sets out precisely this situation. In a parallel to Frodo putting on the ring in the film trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*,¹ Gyges was given the opportunity to live as an invisible entity, able to do anything he wanted without anyone discovering what he had done. That is, he could do whatever he wanted and would assuredly get away with it. Given the chance to live life like this, the question Plato raises is "Would a person want to be moral? And if so, why?"² After a good deal of dialogue, Plato concluded that being moral was inherently valuable, apart from any additional benefits it produced or harm that it enabled a person to avoid.

How would you respond to the question "Why be moral?" Since the moral life and moral decision-making are the focal points of this book, you can see that I am assuming being moral matters, and significantly. If you decide that being moral is not very important, then you probably will not spend much time reading this or any other book on ethics. But if being moral is important to you, the content of this book will be helpful in shaping how you view morality.

Morality and the Good Life/Society

Morality matters because most people, when they are genuinely honest with themselves, associate doing well in life with being a good person. Having moral character is still essential to most people's conceptions of what makes a person



flourish in his or her life. For example, it is difficult to imagine a person being considered a success in life if he has gained his wealth dishonestly. It is equally difficult to call a person a success who is at the top of his profession but cheats on his wife, abuses his children, and drinks too much. On the other hand, we rightly hold up a person like Mother Teresa as a model of living a good life, even though she lacked most material goods that society values. One of the principal reasons for being moral is that it is central to most concepts of human fulfillment. For the Christian, being moral is critical to a life that seeks to honor God. We could say that being moral is inherently good because it is foundational to a person's flourishing in life, since doing well in life and being a good person still go together for most people.

The same holds true for society as a whole. Most people would not want to live in a society in which morality was unimportant, in which conceptions of right and wrong carried little weight. In fact, it is unlikely that any sort of civilized society could continue unless it had concern for key moral values, such as fairness, justice, truthfulness, and compassion. Ethics are important because they give direction to people and societies who have some sense that they cannot flourish without being moral. This is sometimes referred to as *social contract theory*, which maintains that as a society, people generally agree to abide by certain moral rules and standards for the sake of social order and peace.³ Thomas Hobbes, for example, insists that something like this social contract is necessary if societies are to avoid his "state of nature," which he describes as a war of all against all. This type of society Hobbes wanted to avoid is exemplified in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* in which a social order without morality degenerates into a world that very few people would want to live.

Many thoughtful observers of today's culture are growing increasingly concerned about a breakdown in morality, particularly among students and young adults. They cite phenomena such as drug use, alcoholism, teenage pregnancies, violence, juvenile delinquency, crime, and sexually transmitted diseases as evidence of the moral fabric of society coming unraveled. Some even suggest that the 2016 US Presidential election is further evidence of character and morality being marginalized. University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter pointedly maintains, "Character is dead. Attempts to revive it will yield little. Its time has passed."⁴ He argues that, culturally, we want a renewal of morality, but we want it without the commitments that accompany a rekindling of the importance of character and ethics. He puts it this way:



We want a renewal of character in our day, but we don't really know what we ask for. To have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of a creedal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates and compels. This price is too high for us to pay (as a culture). We want character, but without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality, but without the emotional burden of guilt and shame; we want virtue, but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist on it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms we want it.⁵

What Hunter means by a “creedal order” is a framework for morality that has substantial authority and is binding on individuals and communities. It is not necessarily a religious framework, but Hunter is not optimistic about a renewal of character apart from some kind of religious reinforcement of moral commitments.

Morality and One's Worldview

Morality matters because moral questions are at the core of life's most vital issues. Morality is primarily concerned with questions of right and wrong, the ability to distinguish between the two, and the justification of the distinction. Closely related are such questions as: What is a good person? What things are morally praiseworthy? What constitutes a good life? And what would a good society look like? These are fundamental to your view of the world. You cannot formulate an adequate worldview without providing answers to these moral questions.⁶ Your view of morality is connected to other critical questions that your worldview must answer. Everyone has a worldview, that is, a set of intellectual lenses through which a person sees the world. Of course, not everyone's worldview is well thought out or entirely consistent; nonetheless, everyone has one. In fact, when someone makes a decision for Christian faith, he or she not only begins a relationship with God but also adopts a new set of lenses through which to see the world. The same is basically true of adopting other faiths or no faith—that commitment comes with a worldview, a set of ideas to which you are also committed. You cannot have an adequate worldview without a view of morality.

A person's worldview consists of the way a person answers questions about *metaphysics*, which ask what is real, or what is the nature of reality? Metaphysics



means “beyond the physical,” and it deals with questions of what exists—is it just the physical world (known as naturalism), or are there real things that exist outside the physical world? Your worldview also involves a viewpoint about *epistemology* (which comes from two Greek words meaning “the study of knowledge”), which asks how we know what we know. It also involves a view about *anthropology* (which also comes from two Greek words which mean “the study of man [humanity]”), which asks what a person is (and, by extension, what happens to a person after death). Anthropology addresses the issues of human personhood: Is a person simply a collection of body parts and physical properties, or does a person consist of something else, something immaterial, like a soul? Your answers to the questions about morality mentioned above connect to other aspects of your worldview, hopefully consistently!

For example, your view of *metaphysics* makes a substantial difference in how you view morality. If God exists, then your view of morality, to be consistent, should take that into account. You might also conclude that God has ordered his world so that morality is built into its framework. If your worldview has no place for God, you might conclude that morality is strictly a human creation. Or you might conclude that morality arose as a result of an evolutionary adaptive advantage, that human beings saw the advantage for survival in having communities that are governed by moral obligations.

Likewise, your *anthropology* is closely connected to your view of metaphysics. If you are a naturalist, human beings are nothing more than a collection of parts and properties with no essence that continues through time and change. How you view the morality of many bioethical issues depends on your view of human persons—what are persons, and when does human personhood begin and end?⁷ A person’s position on abortion, physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia, reproductive technologies, and enhancement biotechnology all depend on your view of human persons, which is often assumed and not made explicit.

Your view of *epistemology* is also very important for understanding how you come to know your moral obligations. If you are an epistemological skeptic, you might hold that even if morality does exist, human beings cannot know its demands. But if you are more of an epistemological realist, you might conclude that morality can be known and what we can know does correspond to what actually exists. How, specifically, it can be known helps to distinguish a divine command view of morality from a natural law view.

Epistemology from a Christian worldview presumes that there is such a thing as genuine moral knowledge. But the existence of genuine moral knowledge is being increasingly called into question in philosophy today as a result of the cultural



dominance of *naturalism*. This demonstrates how a person's view of epistemology is connected to his or her view of metaphysics. Among other things, the naturalist metaphysic maintains that all reality is reducible to that which can be perceived with one's senses. The implication for epistemology is that there is nothing that is real or that counts for knowledge that is not verifiable by the senses. As a result, moral knowledge has been reduced to the realm of *belief* and is considered parallel to religious beliefs, which the culture widely holds are not verifiable. The theist maintains that moral knowledge is genuine knowledge just like scientific knowledge—that “murder is wrong” can be known as true and cannot be reduced to subjective opinion or belief without the risk of all morality being subjective. The theist argues that no one consistently lives as if morality is entirely subjective and that moral truths do exist and can be known.⁸

Morality and Diversity/Pluralism

Morality matters because, in our increasingly diverse global culture, it is critical for solving what may be the most important issue for our survival—namely, getting along with each other peacefully despite a plethora of irreconcilable differences. Os Guinness, in *The Global Public Square*, identifies the problem as such: “How do we live with our deepest differences, especially when those differences are religious and ideological, and when those differences concern matters of our common public life. In short, how do we create a global public square and make the world safer for diversity?”⁹ The most obvious of these conflicts, one that has grown increasingly violent and intolerant in recent years, is between radical Islam and Western culture. But others, though less violent, are showing evidence of increasing intolerance of those who disagree. Take, for example, the response to businesses that choose not to provide services to same-sex wedding ceremonies. The well-publicized bakers and florists, and even Memories Pizza, who, out of sincere religious convictions, opted not to serve a same-sex wedding, found their livelihood destroyed as a consequence.¹⁰ Or take Brendan Eich, founder and former CEO of Mozilla. Eich was forced out of his position because he contributed a small amount of money to Proposition 8 in California.¹¹ In addition, some state university systems and private colleges no longer allow some religious organizations and clubs to have a presence on campus because of their views. Increasingly, religious institutions, including schools, nonprofits, and businesses run by religious believers are finding themselves subject to highly coercive measures that would force them to abandon deeply held religious views or face severe sanctions that would force many out of business.



Morality matters because important virtues and moral principles are at stake in these public issues and because ethics is our best hope for establishing a framework for living together peacefully despite our ideological differences. Guinness insists that what we need goes beyond the traditional idea of religious freedom to what he calls “soul freedom,” which others have referred to as “freedom of conscience.” This extension of religious freedom is necessary because soul freedom applies to all human beings, whether or not they have religious faith. Guinness insists,

Indispensable to solving these challenges is the extension of *soul freedom* for all. Soul freedom is the inviolable freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief that alone does full justice to the dictates of our humanity. . . . It best expresses human dignity and agency; it promotes freedom and justice for all; it fosters healthy giving, caring, peaceful and stable societies; and it acts as a bulwark against the countless current abuses of power and the equally countless brutal oppressions of human dignity. . . . Soul freedom is about nothing less than our freedom and responsibility to be fully human and to live together in thriving and beneficial communities.¹²

Mutual respect, tolerance, and peaceful resolution of conflicts—these are moral values, so the issue that Guinness raises is fundamentally a moral one. In order to deal with the increasing secularization of the culture, the privatization of faith that often results from the tensions raised by a secular culture, and the changing notion of tolerance (from treating people well with whom you disagree, to actually agreeing with their ideas), we require a new sense of moral pluralism.¹³

Morality and the Professions

Morality matters because practitioners in a wide variety of professions deal with moral questions, whether or not they realize it. For example, morality is fundamental to politics, since politics and law concern the way people ought to order their lives together in society. In addition, medicine and the sciences, such as genetics and molecular biology, have numerous moral overtones because they deal with the morally charged areas of life and death. Further, business practices provide a variety of ethical minefields that can challenge the integrity of the men and women striving to succeed in an ever more competitive global economy.

Morality matters because you face moral choices every day, both in the workplace and in your private life. Every so often you will face emotionally wrenching



moral dilemmas that have no easy answers. Many decisions you make on a day-to-day basis also involve questions of right and wrong, some of which may have easy answers that are difficult to carry out. Ethics provides the basis for those decisions. Most people have an idea of what sorts of things are right and wrong. Explaining why you think something is right or wrong is altogether another question. The basis on which you make moral choices is often as important as the choices themselves. Yet few people have adequately considered how they justify their conceptions of right and wrong.

Finally, morality matters because debates on several issues, including abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage, gun control, and capital punishment seem endless and irreconcilable, and they promise to continue far into the future. What many of these issues share is a fundamental disagreement over *the ultimate source of moral authority*. Some individuals hold that moral authority is ultimately a human construction, while others insist that moral authority comes from some transcendent source that is beyond human beings, such as a revelation from God or nature. As you read the newspaper and various news magazines and listen to television news, you will be increasingly aware of the importance of these issues. You will also notice that, apart from legal intervention, most of these issues are no closer to being resolved today than they were ten years ago.

Not only does intractable debate characterize these issues, but society has a general sense of bewilderment over many other issues. Many of these involve matters of science and technology that have run far ahead of ethical reflection. For example, genetic testing, gene editing, enhancement biotechnology, gender selection, various reproductive technologies, and the use of human embryonic stem cells in the treatment of certain diseases all involve moral dilemmas that are far from resolved. Most observers in these areas acknowledge that technology has outpaced society's ability to determine the moral parameters for its use. Yet there remains a general sense that we need ethics to deal with our increasingly technological society.

More people have an interest in ethics today than at any other time in the recent past. Some of that interest is due to the complex issues spawned by technology, while others have an alarming sense of a general moral decline in society. In addition, the numerous scandals that have rocked the business community and other professions have left some to ask if "business ethics" and "professional ethics" are indeed oxymora. Some people are aware of the need to stress ethics and character in various educational arenas, including public schools. Many are also realizing that the value-neutral approach to education is not actually value neutral at all,



and some even suggest that such value neutrality is impossible. Although there is a greater emphasis on character in view of well-publicized business ethics failures, ethics helps determine which character traits are admirable and worth cultivating.

Overview of the Book

As you read this book, you will be exposed both to ethical theory and to the application of that theory to the most pressing moral issues of the day. After this introductory chapter, we will consider how to think about morality. I will distinguish between subjective and objective views of morality and make the case for seeing morality as something objective, something we can know. That is, I will defend the view known as *moral realism* and contrast it with an antirealist view of ethics. Throughout the ages, many philosophers, even some whose inquiries predate the Bible, have wrestled with the questions of ethics and arrived at somewhat different answers. Recognizing, then, that the Bible is not the only source of ethical wisdom, chapter 2 provides a look at some other modes of moral reasoning, such as relativism, utilitarianism, and ethical egoism. We will also examine the major figures who systematized them, including Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant. These must be brief, but I have included resources, especially original sources, should you wish to study any of these individuals or systems further. For each alternative approach to ethics, I will describe the system and its major advocate, present the strong points of the system, compare it with Scripture, and critique the system, both from within the system itself and from the perspective of Christian ethics. In order to be able to converse with an increasingly secular world about ethics and morality, you need exposure to the ways in which other people have done ethics. Some of these approaches have things to offer to a Christian ethic and aspects of them can fit comfortably in that framework.

Believing that morality ultimately issues from the character of God, I find the most critical and foundational element of ethics to be the direction that God provides, both in his Word (i.e., special revelation) and outside his Word (i.e., general revelation). Chapter 3 will outline the distinctive elements of Christian ethics. Christian ethics is an enormous topic. This entire book could be about Christian ethics. Some works are entirely devoted to this subject. Here you will simply get a synthesis of the main parameters of biblical ethics.

Chapter 4 contains a model for making moral decisions and illustrates its use on some particularly knotty moral dilemmas. This model can be used in virtually any setting and does not require a particular worldview commitment for its profitable



use, though it does presume a blend of deontological principles and virtues. I offer this model not as a type of computer program for generating correct moral decisions, but as a guideline to ensure that all the bases are covered when you make moral decisions. This chapter begins to build the bridge from theory to application that will be more clearly defined in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 5 through 16 deal with some of the current issues that are hotly debated in the culture at large. Discussion in these chapters will recognize the way these issues affect people individually (personal ethics) as well as how they affect public policy, if they do (social ethics). Since medical ethics involves some of the most frequently debated and complex issues, chapters 5 through 8 discuss such issues as abortion, reproductive/genetic technologies, and assisted suicide. Staying within the arena of ethics pertaining to life and death, chapter 9 addresses the issue of capital punishment. Chapter 10 takes up one of the longest running moral debates, the morality of war, which has some new questions raised, particularly in the ongoing war on terrorism. Chapter 11 addresses the subject of sexual ethics, which includes sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, and birth control. Chapter 12 will take up creation care and environmental ethics and deal with more recent issues such as climate change. Chapter 13 will address the intersection of ethics and economics, with an introduction to business ethics and a brief look at the moral assessment of the economic system of global capitalism. Chapter 14 will take up the controversial matter of violence and gun control, made more urgent with the recent mass shootings that have drawn such public attention. Chapter 15 will address issues of race, gender, and diversity, particularly the ethical issues raised by the cultural emphasis on diversity. Finally, chapter 16 will deal with the pressing issues related to immigration both in the United States and in Europe, though the discussion of immigration is quite different in those two contexts.

Introducing Key Terms and Distinctions in Ethics

One of the difficult aspects of studying a subject like ethics is that you are introduced to many terms with which you may be unfamiliar. For example, new members of the hospital ethics committee with whom I consulted were often unacquainted with terminology customarily used by ethicists. So, to keep you from the initial shock of jumping headfirst into a new subject, this section will introduce you to some of the key terms that you will often see as you read this book.

Most people use the terms *morality* and *ethics* interchangeably. Technically, morality refers to the actual *content* of right and wrong, and ethics refers to the



process of determining, or discovering, right and wrong. In other words, morality deals with moral *knowledge* and ethics with moral *reasoning and justification*. Thus, ethics is both an art and a science. It does involve precision like the sciences, but like art, it is an inexact and sometimes intuitive discipline. Morality is the end result of ethical deliberation, the substance of right and wrong.

Major Categories

Three broad categories have traditionally fallen under the heading of ethics. They include (1) *descriptive ethics*, (2) *normative ethics*, and (3) *metaethics*. Normative ethics will be the primary concern in this book. We will be applying our normative ethic to various current issues, so, to be entirely accurate, we will be doing *normative applied ethics* in chapters 5–16.

First, *descriptive ethics* is a sociological or anthropological discipline that attempts to describe the morals of a particular society, often by studying other cultures. Anthropologists often use it in their fieldwork to describe the moral distinctives of other cultures.

Second, *normative ethics* refers to the discipline that produces moral norms or rules. Most systems of ethics are designed to tell you what is normative for individual and/or group behavior, or what is right and wrong, both generally and in specific circumstances. Normative ethics *prescribes* moral behavior, whereas descriptive ethics *describes* moral behavior. When we examine important moral issues in later chapters, we will be trying to establish a set of norms to apply to that particular issue. When most people debate about ethics, they are debating normative ethics, that is, what the moral norms should be and how those norms apply to the issues at hand.

Of course, ethics is not the only normative discipline that is interesting and relevant to ethics.¹⁴ For example, the law produces legal norms but not necessarily moral ones, although law and morality overlap significantly. In addition, there are norms of good taste and social acceptability, which we call etiquette. Further, religion produces behavioral norms, often defined by a religious authority such as a pastor or other church official, that govern one's relationship to God. In chapter 3 we will see that Christian ethics includes a substantial overlap between duties with respect to a person's relationship to God and duties with respect to the community.

Third, *metaethics* is an area of ethics that investigates the meaning of moral language, or the epistemology of ethics, and also considers the justification of ethical theories and judgments. For example, it focuses on the meaning of the major terms used in ethics, such as *right*, *good*, and *just*. The primary focus of technical



philosophers, metaethics has been receiving more attention from a popular audience today since more people are insisting that the language of right and wrong is nothing more than an expression of personal preferences. Accordingly, some argue that the judgment that pedophilia is wrong is not a statement about right and wrong but simply a personal distaste for pedophilia. Morality is thus reduced to matters of taste and preference and has little to do with right and wrong. We will look at this later in chapter 2 when we discuss emotivism.

When discussing whether someone or something is moral, it helps to be very specific. Normally, making a moral assessment involves at least four specific considerations.¹⁵ First, you should consider the *action* itself. This is usually the focus of a moral assessment, but it is hardly the only aspect of moral evaluation. Second, you should evaluate the *motive* of the person (called the “moral actor”) performing the action. In some cases the motive is the only difference between two otherwise identical actions. For example, motive is often the only difference between giving a gift and bribery. Of course, sometimes you might not be able to determine the motive, in which case it cannot be assessed. In many cases, the assessment of motives should be held tentatively and cautiously given our lack of knowledge of someone’s thinking. Third, you should evaluate the *consequences* of your actions and decisions. Doing so does not necessarily commit you to a utilitarian framework for ethics, and regardless of your ethical framework, it is unwise to entirely ignore the consequences of your actions. We will discuss this further in chapter 2 when we get to utilitarianism. Fourth, although a bit more difficult to do than the previous three considerations, you should attempt to evaluate the *character* of the moral actor. Character is the tendency of a person to act in predictable ways over time. Virtue theorists have led the way in insisting that any ethic that does not concern itself with character and virtue is incomplete and reduces ethics to a mere preoccupation with actions, specifically moral dilemmas that people rarely face.

We evaluate character more often than we think. For example, when we decide who we can trust, we are assessing that person’s character, determining whether he or she is trustworthy. We certainly evaluate character when we make decisions about who we will marry, since character is critical to a good marriage. And we are usually asked to evaluate character when we write letters of reference for people. So the assessment of character is not something that should be foreign to us, though we realize that, like our judgment of motives, we may not have all the information we need to make an accurate assessment. In those cases our appraisal must remain somewhat tentative.



Ethical Systems

Moral theories, in their most basic classification, can be either cognitive systems, or noncognitive systems. Noncognitive systems, by definition, do not render judgments about the truth-value of ethical statements because for advocates of noncognitivism moral statements have no truth-value. They are simply expressions of personal approval or disapproval of the action in question. They have no value other than that expression and no relevance to anyone other than the person making the expression. According to noncognitivism, saying “adultery is wrong” is not making a statement that can be either true or false; it is saying, “I disapprove of adultery.” We will look at this further in chapter 2 when we take up the subject of emotivism. Most normative ethical systems are cognitive systems. These different styles of moral reasoning may be classified as either *action-oriented* or *virtue-based* systems. Under these two major divisions are three subcategories by which ethical systems may be further classified: *deontological* systems, *teleological* systems, and *relativist* systems. Most of the technical terms have to do with the action-oriented systems.

First, *deontological* systems are systems that are based on principles in which actions (or character, or even intentions) are inherently right or wrong. There are three primary deontological systems: (1) *divine command theory*, (2) *natural law*, and (3) *ethical rationalism*. Christians tend to be more deontologically oriented because of the emphasis in Christian ethics on the commands of God as moral absolutes and guiding principles. But Christian ethics have a substantial place for virtue ethics too, since a major part of the Christian moral life involves emulating the character traits of Christ and exemplifying the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:13–24).

Second, *teleological* systems are systems in which the morality of an action is based on the result produced by an action. Since the consequences rather than principles determine right actions for teleological systems, no action is inherently right or wrong in a teleological system. Whether an action is right or wrong depends on the consequences of that action. The primary form of teleological ethics is called *utilitarianism*, which holds that the action that produces the greatest good for the greatest number is the moral choice. More specifically, utilitarianism defines the good generally as the greatest pleasure, or preference satisfaction, and seeks that for the greatest number. Another form of teleological ethics is called *ethical egoism*, which maintains that the right thing to do is whatever is in a person’s self-interest. Thus, for the ethical egoist the only consequence that matters is whether it advances his or her own self-interest.

Third, *relativist* systems refer to ethical systems in which right and wrong are not absolute and unchanging but relative to one’s culture (cultural relativism)



or one's own personal preferences (moral subjectivism). Both forms of relativism are widely embraced today. With the current emphasis on multiculturalism and appreciation for the cultural diversity that exists in much of the world, and the importance of a culture's values in its self-definition, it should not surprise us that there is a movement toward accepting every cultures' values as equally valid, which is the definition of cultural relativism. Moral subjectivism is advocated every time someone says, "Whatever is right for you is morally right, but what's right for me is also morally right!" Such moral subjectivism is frequently seen in one's view of sexual morality, in which a person is particularly sensitive to having a view forced on him or her, thus reducing sexual ethics to personal preference. This view of morality is often associated with a postmodern view of the world, in which objective truth and objective morality are called into question.¹⁶

Morality and the Law

As you might expect, there is substantial overlap between what is legal and what is moral. Most, if not all laws, have some moral overtones to them. Even laws regarding driving on the correct side of the road imply a respect for life and property. We rightly assume that the person who drives on the wrong side of the road and ignores other similar traffic laws has respect for neither life nor property. Most people hold that for laws to be valid they must have some connection to widely shared moral principles; that is, a law that violates society's widely held values cannot be a valid one. Thus, in most cases there is a significant connection between law and morality.¹⁷ This is not always the case, and thus there are occasions in which civil disobedience is morally justified.

As a general rule, we will assume that the law is the *moral minimum*. Obeying the law is the beginning of our moral obligations, not the end. Be careful about the person who insists, "If it's legal, then it must be moral." That view is that the law is the moral maximum, not the minimum. There are many things that are immoral that are not illegal. Take adultery for example. Most people would agree that cheating on one's spouse is immoral, but no one (at least in the West) goes to jail for it. In addition, lying is immoral in most cases; but only in certain contexts, such as a court of law, would someone be prosecuted for lying. In most cases violating the law is immoral, except in rare cases where the law requires a person to do something that is unethical. For example, if the law required physicians to perform abortions for everyone who requested one, many physicians would consider that an immoral law, and they would be free to engage in civil disobedience—that is, they would follow



their norms of morality, violate the law, and take whatever consequences the law meted out. But cases of civil disobedience are somewhat rare today, but when they occur, the person may follow the biblical dictum that “we must obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29).¹⁸

So the law is the moral minimum. It is the moral floor, not the ceiling! The majority of our most interesting moral dilemmas occur when confronted with the question of how far beyond what the law requires our morality demands us to go. In other words, how far beyond mere compliance with the law do my moral convictions tell me I have to go? Most of the pressing demands of morality are in those spaces where the law is not definitive, where the law is silent, or where the law allows for something unethical.

However, many things that are unethical ought also to be illegal. For example, fraud is immoral, and most forms of fraud are also illegal, and justifiably so. I’m sure you can think of many other immoral activities that should be illegal, such as murder, child abuse, and sexual assault. Be careful of the person who insists, “You can’t legislate morality!” Whether that statement is true depends on what is meant by “morality.” If moral beliefs, motives, or intentions are meant, then those certainly cannot be legislated. In fact, the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion and speech, was written to keep the state out of the business of imposing beliefs on its citizens. A person’s genuine moral intent is changed by persuasion, not coercion, since intent has to do with one’s free choices. But if by *morality* one means “moral behavior,” then that can be, and is, legislated virtually every day around the world. Some cultures, such as Islamic cultures, use the force of law more routinely to enforce private moral behavior among consenting adults. But virtually every law is the imposition of someone’s morality, given the overlap between most laws and the moral principles that undergird them.

Some of the issues we will take up in the later chapters raise this question of whether a moral position should also be legislated in terms of public policy. For example, issues such as abortion, assisted suicide, human cloning, genetic privacy, and same-sex marriage raise important questions of what public policy should be on these matters. A variety of interest groups, including religious ones, attempt to influence what the law should be on these and other issues.

When religious groups or individuals get involved in public policy, it invariably raises questions about “the separation of church and state.” As originally intended, the First Amendment, which established religious freedom, only prohibited the federal government from establishing federally supported and federally sanctioned churches, as had been done in Europe with disastrous results, including religious



wars and harsh persecution. The First Amendment guaranteed religious freedom by prohibiting the establishment of a national church. The government was supposed to be neutral toward all religious groups. This clearly emphasized freedom of religion.

From the separation of church and state, it did not follow that the state was to be neutral or hostile toward religion in general. Many of the founding fathers who wrote parts of the Bill of Rights were very clear that a democracy needed the moral restraints and the grounding for rights that religion provided.¹⁹ The founding fathers never imagined a society in which the state would be neutral or hostile toward the value of religion for civil society. As A. James Reichley of the Brookings Institution said:

The founders' belief in the wisdom of placing civil society within a framework of religious values formed part of their reason for enacting the free exercise clause. The First Amendment is no more neutral of the general value of religion than it is on the general value of the free exchange of ideas or an independent press. The virtually unanimous view among the founders [is] that functional separation between church and state should be maintained without threatening the support and guidance received by republican government from religion.²⁰

Until recently, religious groups have freely attempted to influence public policy without anyone objecting that they are violating the separation of church and state.

Conclusion

You will undoubtedly be introduced to other new terms and ideas as you read this book. But don't let the terminology intimidate you. Every thoughtful person should be concerned about and interested in ethics, since it addresses the ultimate questions about the good life, the good person, and the good society. As Socrates said in Plato's *Republic*, "We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live."

Chapter Review

1. How would you answer the question "Why be moral?"
2. What is the myth of Gyges, and how does it relate to the question "Why be moral?"



3. How is ethics important in fields such as business, medicine, and politics?
4. How would you distinguish between ethics and morality?
5. What are descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and metaethics?
6. When a moral assessment is made, what must be assessed besides the action?
7. What is the difference between deontological and teleological systems of ethics?
8. How would you describe the relationship between morality and the law?
9. What would you say to someone who maintains that you can't legislate morality?

For Further Reading

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How to Think about Morality

As people in our contemporary culture wrestle with ethical decisions, they employ a wide variety of methods of moral reasoning. One obvious place to observe this is in the debates over social issues. One of the primary reasons why many of these debates remain unresolved is that often the participants apply different methods of moral reasoning.

Imagine that you are listening to a community panel discussion on the morality of physician-assisted suicide. The participants are (1) an eighty-year-old with terminal cancer and approximately six months to live; (2) the head of the local chapter of the Hemlock Society, an organization that advocates assisted suicide; (3) a physician who specializes as an oncologist, that is, a cancer specialist; (4) a Catholic priest who is an outspoken opponent of euthanasia; (5) an atheistic philosophy professor from the local college; (6) an attorney; and (7) a Protestant minister. Each one will use a different type of moral reasoning in presenting his or her respective position, and each will offer a brief opening statement to define and defend his or her position.

Participant 1: The Eighty-Year-Old with Terminal Cancer (Ethical Egoist)

All this moral discussion of assisted suicide really bothers me. You see, for me it all boils down to the fact that I am the patient, and what I want should be the thing that counts. It's my interests that really matter here, not whether euthanasia violates the Hippocratic Oath or the sixth commandment ("Thou shalt not murder") or the consequences of allowing euthanasia for the general society. I am the patient and the one most directly affected, and that's why it should be my decision. Whatever is in my best interest in terms of physician-assisted suicide should be okay.



Participant 2: The Head of the Local Chapter of Dignity in Dying (Deontologist)

I am in substantial agreement with our first participant, though for a different reason. I too support active euthanasia, or physician-assisted suicide, but from a slightly different perspective. One of the fundamental principles, or rights, that Western societies have affirmed for centuries is the right of individual autonomy and self-determination, that is, the right of people to make private choices concerning their lives without interference from the state. Surely matters of life and death for people are so private that they ought to have the freedom to do as they choose without undue interference from the authorities, as long as no one else is harmed. This is a fundamental right that is based on the principle of respect for persons and individual bodily integrity. I appeal to this fundamental moral principle in order to affirm my support for physician-assisted suicide.

Participant 3: The Physician Who Specializes as an Oncologist (Utilitarian)

In most cases I too support physician-assisted suicide, but for still different reasons than we have heard so far. You see, I hold that it is not principles that determine right and wrong, but the consequences produced by the actions in question. If a particular course of action or decision produces the best set of consequences, then it seems to me that it should be allowed. To put it another way, the action that produces the greatest balance of benefits over harms is the one that is the most moral. So, in the case of assisted suicide, I think that the first two participants have framed the question incorrectly. What is important to determine is whether assisted suicide would produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. I can see that allowing physician-assisted suicide could produce a lot of good for the people involved. It would relieve the patient of needless suffering, stop the family's anxiety about their loved one's condition, end a needless drain of the family's financial resources, and allow everyone involved to get on with their lives. Now, there may be situations in which assisted suicide may produce more negative than positive consequences. In those cases it should not be allowed. We should be cautious in setting hard-and-fast rules that don't fully consider the consequences.

Participant 4: The Catholic Priest (Deontologist)

I am opposed to all physician-assisted suicide because of a principle that is foundational to our civilization. Even for those without any religious



inclination, the principle “Thou shalt not kill” is still one of the core values on which most civilized people agree. Now I also happen to believe that this principle comes from God, but a person does not have to believe in God to accept the importance of this moral rule. I hold that assisted suicide, especially when it progresses to euthanasia, involves killing an innocent person, and that is something our society should not allow, regardless of the person’s desires. Underlying the moral rule “Thou shalt not kill” is the more important principle of respect for the dignity of a person. Now, again, I believe we should respect people because they are made in God’s image, but you don’t have to believe in God to accept such a basic moral principle. People have an innate tendency toward self-preservation, and that is one of the basic reasons it is immoral to take innocent life. Like my opponent at Dignity in Dying, I too hold a high place for principles, but I differ on how they are applied. For me, the principle of respect for persons does not mean that we should necessarily let them do whatever they want to do. What it does mean is that we should never take innocent life, because life is sacred, and when it shall end is not our prerogative.

Participant 5: The Atheist Philosophy Professor (Emotivist)

I hate to throw a monkey wrench into this whole discussion, but in my view, all of the participants so far are trying to do the impossible. So far each person has attempted to make some kind of determination of what is right or wrong in the case of active euthanasia. I don’t think this is possible. They are really using the language of right and wrong to mask their own personal preferences. What I mean is that anytime a person says that something is right or wrong, all they are saying is that they either like or dislike the action or position under consideration. It is obvious that the elderly gentleman and the representative of the Hemlock Society are really saying that they personally approve of assisted suicide. It is equally obvious that the priest is really saying that he personally disapproves. We should be honest and admit that we’re only talking about our preferences and that we’re simply using moral language to give greater persuasive power to our argument.

Participant 6: The Local Attorney (Relativist)

I wouldn’t go quite as far as my professor friend, but I do think he’s moving in the right direction. I’m not prepared to say that there is no such thing as genuine right and wrong, but I do think that there is no universal, absolute standard of right and wrong. What is moral depends on the situation and on



what the cultural consensus of right and wrong is at that time. In the case of physician-assisted suicide, if the culture has reached a consensus that it should be allowed, then I see no reason why it shouldn't be. Conversely, if the culture is opposed to the practice, I see no good reason why assisted suicide should be forced on them. I know that in the Netherlands, for example, most believe that assisted suicide and euthanasia are both right, and that should be respected. We could say that it is right for them. But in the state of Utah where so many religious Mormons live, or in the Bible Belt that has so many conservative Christians, the culture will undoubtedly be against assisted suicide, and that should also be respected.

Participant 7: The Protestant Minister (Virtue Theorist)

I'd like to put a slightly different slant on the issue of assisted suicide. I believe that there's more to morality than simply making decisions when a person is faced with a moral quandary. There is more to the moral life than simply doing the right thing and making the correct decision. We cannot neglect the place of an individual's character, or virtue, when we consider ethical questions. In my view, the important questions have still not been asked. For example, what does a person's desire for physician-assisted suicide tell us about that individual's character? What does support for assisted suicide, or opposition to it, say about our society? Does it say that we as a society lack compassion for the suffering terminally ill, as proponents of assisted suicide suggest? Or does it say that we have lost some of our reverence for life and our commitment to care for the dying, as opponents of assisted suicide would suggest? No discussion about the morality of physician-assisted suicide should ignore important questions like these.

Each person on this panel has argued his position using a distinctive method of moral reasoning from a specific ethical system (each participant's method is noted in parentheses above). The positions represented are the main positions adopted by people when applying moral reasoning to the moral issues currently debated in society. As you witness the news media's coverage of various debates over ethical issues, watch for the various methods utilized by those engaged in the debates. If you watch carefully, you will likely detect the regular use of most of the systems discussed in this chapter.

The major types of moral reasoning can be grouped roughly into two primary categories. The first set of these categories are what are called *cognitive* and