

1

Thinking about Ethics

Goals of this chapter:

- to reflect on the complex relationship between ethical reflection and moral behaviour;
- to explore the difference between ethics and morals;
- to explain the structure of the book;
- to introduce the concept of a morally serious person.

Thinking about ethics can be dangerous, so it is with some nervousness that I invite you to join me on a journey around the ethical world. The problem is this: rational reflection can expose certain tensions in a person that were hitherto hidden. As the old slogan goes: ethics are caught, not taught. Parents are the primary vehicle for ethical education and the process for this is not argument but example. In a healthy family, children are provided with good role models. Kindness and love permeate the home. Constructive mutual affirming habits are formed – one learns that as one is kind to others so others are kind to you. Discipline does not need to resort to violence and uncontrolled violence is never seen. In this environment, the basis of morality is laid. Certain assumptions – do unto others as you would have them do unto you – become part of the furniture of your mind.

Given all this, the trouble with ethical reflection as an adult is that you can inadvertently unpack all the good work that your parents did when bringing you up. You start asking awkward questions: what is wrong with selfishness? How do I know what is right and good? Given that sex is pleasurable, why not seek as many pleasurable sexual experiences as possible? As the questions are raised, so the unthinking assumptions are challenged. Suddenly, alternative answers which have not occurred to you before emerge. These alternatives become temptations. In short, this book needs a health warning: thinking about ethics can damage your ethical health.

So why write it? And from your point of view, why read it? The term ‘globalist’ has become a term of abuse as ‘populist’ movements start getting attention. The Supreme Court in the United States is likely to revisit the abortion consensus. Interest is growing in cyber ethics, especially around privacy. With this renewed interest in ethics, we do need a new map of the ethical territory. This map must include all the major landmarks from the past, and add comment, reflection, and analysis in the light of this changing world. In writing this book my goal has been simple – it is to provide an up-to-date, accurate, interesting map of this changing ethical world.

Any map that opens up new ethical questions will have to face the possibility that some readers will become preoccupied with some of the old fundamental questions and perhaps arrive at answers that damage their current healthy ethical assumptions. This is an unavoidable risk.

However, to mitigate this a little, this map does have a suggested route – a message. It will introduce you to the concept of a *morally serious person* (MSP). This is a person who takes ethical discourse seriously and strives to live in a positive and constructive way. As you work through each chapter, you will see serious ethical exchanges about the nature of ethical discourse and the appropriate way to think about certain questions. At the end, I shall argue that, regardless of the position you actually take on many questions, the responsible obligation on us all is to take part in the conversation and be motivated by the quest for a position that is life enhancing and committed to the care of others.

In the more descriptive chapters, I have attempted to be as fair as I can be to the main arguments and positions in the various debates. I have tried to be ‘objective’. Naturally, in this postmodern age, we now know that strict objectivity is impossible. Value judgements are involved at every stage. I have made a selection of views that I consider important: at this point, I am clearly making a judgement. Perhaps more seriously, there are certain points in the narrative where I develop an argument. In Chapter 4, I strongly suggest that consequentialist and deontological positions (terms that will be explained in that chapter) can be transcended with appropriate emphasis on the ‘responsible self’. In Chapter 9, I argue that Roman Catholics are the only major group who can consistently oppose homosexuality. And in Chapter 10, I attempt to show that business ethics is in the interests of good business. However, beyond this, my goal has been to describe the options – not to decide between them.

Naturally I do hold opinions on such tricky issues as the significance of religion, abortion, and environmentalism. So, in the very last chapter I do present my ethical world-view. In so doing, I trust it will help to demonstrate how one goes about making ethical judgements. The danger of just being presented with arguments on both sides is that it compounds the impression that there is no way of deciding between options. This last chapter should help overcome that impression.

Before we start the journey, there are certain preliminaries that need to be established. This we shall do now.

1.1 Ethics and Morals

For many, these two words are synonyms. However, a distinction between ‘morals’ and ‘ethics’ can be helpful. Ethics is the realm of ‘rational reflection upon human behaviour.’ As Peter Baelz (1977, p. 2) puts it: ‘Ethics, then, is a reflective, or theoretical, business. It aims in the first instance at understanding rather than decision. It takes stock of the moral scene. It steps back from the immediately practical and attempts to discover some underlying pattern or order in the immense variety of moral decisions and practices both of individuals and societies.’ Morals are the actual practical problem that we face in a particular situation or circumstance. Although most chapters start with a moral problem, this book is a primer about ethics – therefore it stands back and deals with the big picture.

Another distinction is commonplace in the literature. This is the distinction between *descriptive ethics* and *normative ethics*. Descriptive ethics simply – as the word implies – describes the major ethical traditions both historically and today. The task is understanding. Normative ethics, on the other hand, will try to adjudicate between positions. It will attempt to suggest what is right, rather than describing the ways that others believe are right. This book weaves these two types of ethics together: it will describe the main ethical traditions, yet also offer the arguments of those who take a position. The last chapter is where your author and guide offers an adjudication about the strength and weakness of the arguments that have been considered in this book.

1.2 Thought Exercises and Case Studies

Each chapter (with the exception of the last two) will start with a thought exercise or a case study. A thought exercise is an abstract exercise that seeks to think through a principle. It constructs an imaginary scenario, which often serves as part of an argument. The famous article by Judith Jarvis Thomson called ‘A Defense of Abortion’ started with a thought exercise that she hoped would invite the reader to concede a principle that she wants to use in her pro-abortion argument. You will find this thought exercise reproduced at the start of Chapter 11. A case study is an actual moral problem that identifies a pivotal issue for decision-making. Case studies are realistic and often actual dilemmas.

The reason why each chapter begins with a thought exercise or case study is that ethical discourse needs to be grounded. In other words, thought exercises and case studies link our ethical reflection with moral problems. The ethical arguments in this book have implications for the way that we behave, the things we do and say, and the priorities for our future. The thought exercise or case study should make these connections.

Do, please, use the thought exercise or case study as dinner-time conversation. As you find your guests exhausting the normal topics of children, schools, mortgages, and pensions, it is good to introduce a few moral problems into the conversation. It may liven the whole thing up!

1.3 Let the Journey Begin

With these preliminaries out of the way, you are now ready to embark on the journey. The book is divided into three sections. Chapters 2 to 8 deal with meta-ethics (or philosophical ethics). We start with the basic question ‘Why not do wrong?’ and move through the whole debate about the fundamental nature of moral discourse and its relationship with religions. You will be introduced to Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill; natural law and virtue ethics will be described; and by the end of this section, your vocabulary will include such terms as ‘deontological’ and ‘consequentialist’. Although the focus is on the Western philosophical traditions, Chapter 6 does look at the key areas of ethical agreement and disagreement across the major world religions, and Chapter 8 provides a sympathetic description and critique of the secular humanist tradition.

The second section is much more applied. Chapter 9 looks at the realm of human sexuality; Chapter 10 examines business ethics; Chapter 11 embarks on the complex area of medical ethics; Chapter 12 explores the moral problems involved in war; Chapter 13 takes up the problems of government and power; Chapter 14 looks at environmental ethics; and Chapter 15 engages with the ever-changing world of the Internet. It is perfectly possible to move straight to the second section or to read particular chapters. Each chapter is a separate entity that can be read on its own.

As already mentioned, it is in the third section that I become a conversation partner. In Chapter 16, I make explicit the implicit argument of the book that we all need to take ethical discourse seriously. You can be almost anything and an MSP (gay, Catholic, or rich); it is an approach or disposition to life that is characterized by the sense that moral discourse matters. In the last chapter, I discard my apparent neutrality and explain precisely how I see the issues that we have explored together. If you don’t want to be subjected to my ethical prejudices, then feel free to skip this section.

Finally, I do hope this book is enjoyable. Although my goal is to cultivate an MSP, the seriousness is not meant in terms of being sober or miserable. Indeed, the opposite is true: our seriousness should run parallel with the capacity to appreciate the ironies of life that cannot help but produce a smile. The moral life can and should be fun; and reading about it should also be fun.

Reflection Questions

- 1 What, if anything, is the difference between ethics and morals?
- 2 What is the difference between 'descriptive ethics' and 'normative ethics'?

Discussion Questions

- 1 Do you agree that learning about ethics can damage your ethical health?
- 2 Do you think there are some types of positions or views that are incompatible with the concept of a morally serious person?
- 3 The author promises to provide a neutral summary of the main issues in most chapters, saving his position for the end of the book. Do you think a neutral summary is possible? Do you think the author might be deluding himself?

Reference

Baelz, Peter. 1977. *Ethics and Belief*. London: Sheldon Press.

