

Introduction

How do you set about determining what is right and wrong? The most obvious strategy is to establish a set of robust moral principles and apply them. This requires first selecting a general theory that attempts to do things like determine the true nature of ethics, define the meaning of ethical terms, formulate fundamental moral principles, and place those principles in a hierarchy. Doing that requires explaining why your general theory is better than all the rest, and repelling the various challenges that critics are certain to advance. Only then can you set about applying your theory to real-life moral problems, demonstrating how it resolves disputes and answers questions about what to do in various actual circumstances.

One problem with this kind of approach, however, is that more than two millennia of moral philosophy have led to little consensus about the fundamental nature of ethics, the hierarchy of moral principles, or the way to apply them in the real world. Worse, some respectable thinkers have rejected the idea that reaching consensus about such things is even possible.

Meanwhile, of course, the world goes on, tangled in the most profound sorts of moral struggle. If anything, the demand for meaningful and effective moral thinking has become greater than ever. Moral thinking and reasoning, then, despite the limitations of moral philosophy, can neither be put on hold until agreement is reached nor abandoned altogether. Even amoralists need to get clear on what they're rejecting.

The fact that theoretical consensus about moral issues hasn't been reached doesn't mean it can't be reached. Derek Parfit argued that moral philosophy is a relatively young discipline and so the absence of consensus should not be taken to be terminal. But perhaps there's another method, another way to think about ethical matters, a way that can bring real

intellectual force to bear upon the moral controversies that populate the world but doesn't require a univocal, general moral theory.

Rather than trying to determine a single, complete ethical theory that answers all the relevant moral questions that may arise, and that defeats all its competitors, perhaps one might instead (or also) try to gain a kind of mastery or at least facility with some of the many different theories, concepts, principles, and critiques concerned with ethics that moral philosophers have produced over the ages.

The Ethics Toolkit aspires to help those engaged in moral inquiry and reflection to do just that. By placing a selection of insights from different moral theorists and theories side by side, we hope to show readers something about ethics that may go missing in the contests among ethical theories. The vision of ethics underwriting *The Ethics Toolkit* is pluralistic, and unabashedly so, in the sense that it holds that the insights of, say, utilitarianism are of interest and of value not only to utilitarians but also to anyone who wishes to engage in moral reflection.

Indeed, anyone who wants to deliberate and converse with others about the major moral concerns that occupy people today must be able to draw upon not just a single well-crafted theory but also more broadly upon the rich and diverse work of the past 2,500 years of moral philosophy. Competent thinkers simply must have in their possession a well-stocked "toolkit" containing a host of intellectual instruments for careful, precise, and sophisticated moral thinking. As the political philosopher Jo Wolff says,

Generally, if someone has thought hard and long about an area and they're intelligent to start with and they're thinking in depth and they present an articulated body of thought, it's very unlikely that it's all going to be wrong. The most common mistake people make is to have got part of the truth and to think they've got all of it.

These tools, however, cannot simply be picked up and applied blindly to suit whatever need arises. Various tools are more appropriate to certain needs than others. The tools we collect here cannot and should not only be used in a single way. Some may effectively use a screwdriver to take on the same job others would tackle with a hammer. More advanced thinkers may be able to use some of the tools in ways that beginners cannot. Moral thinkers of all abilities will use some tools more than others, using some only rarely.

There are many voices composing the moral discourses of our age, and these different voices address many different problems in different ways. Many tools are necessary to hear them and to respond properly to them, not a single voice or a single tool. The expansion of the range of those voices is one of the most significant features of this second edition. This includes a greater inclusion of non-Western philosophers.

Although we have aimed to be as impartial, accurate, and descriptive as possible, the *Toolkit* inevitably reflects some of our own conclusions. No such text could ever be a fully neutral report. Rather, it aspires to be a thoughtful and informed account of what we take to be crucial ethical ideas and techniques, distilled after decades of teaching, writing, and presenting philosophy to a diverse and often non-academic audience.

By producing a compendium like this we also hope to provide readers with a deeper and subtler sense of how different ideas and methods may be enlisted so that people might not only think but also act with regard to moral matters in more effective and satisfying ways. That is why we have included concrete examples that illustrate many of the more abstract ideas of the text, to show readers how the material of the text applies to actual ethical controversies.

Many of the problems that human beings have to deal with are in part conceptual and philosophical. Coming to terms with these problems will require better thinking. Medicines and machines will be needed to help make the world a better place. But, contrary to the charges that are often brought against philosophy, so will the capacity for clear thinking and sound moral deliberation. In this way, we believe that there is a connection between what the ancient Greeks called “knowing that” (theoretical knowledge) and “knowing how” (practical knowledge).

There are different ways to use this text. *The Ethics Toolkit* can be read cover-to-cover as a course in ethical reasoning. We begin in Part I with the question of the grounds on which ethics stands. We then consider in Part II the most important frameworks that have been constructed to enable us to reason about ethics. Part III describes a number of central concepts in ethical discourse. In Part IV, we look at the ways in which ethical theories and judgements may be critiqued. Finally, we look at the limits of moral reasoning in Part V.

But this sort of linear approach isn't the only way to use *The Ethics Toolkit*. It can also be used as a reference text upon which people can draw, using either the table of contents or the extensive index, to help understand a specific issue. Or alternatively, readers can simply wander about through

the book, following their own noses in a nearly countless variety of ways. The cross-referencing we've appended to each entry directs readers to other entries that will complement or elaborate upon the material at hand, helping readers to make connections and articulate contrasts, sometimes in surprising ways.

Most importantly, the text should not be treated as an authority. Philosophy is an activity, one which requires deep questioning. We have striven to be as accurate in possible when describing the views of the innumerable thinkers covered in this book, but it is for readers themselves to determine the merits of the ideas. They may also question whether we have given them too generous or too critical a hearing, or have misunderstood their significance or import. Our aim is to lay out a philosophical buffet, not to spoon-feed.

This buffet not only contains many more additional items than the first edition. Every entry has been revised, many extensively. Each is followed by four or five suggestions for further reading. Usually, these recommendations will tell you more about the subject of the entry, but sometimes we have also included details of works referred to in the entries that concern the specific examples used. Readings particularly suitable for beginners are marked with asterisks.

The index includes the topic areas these examples cover. A list of societies, institutions, websites, and other resources related to the study and practice of ethics has been appended to the end of the text.

No matter how it's used, we hope *The Ethics Toolkit* will be a book that readers will return to again and again, whether they are students, teachers, scholars, professionals, or just people concerned with how to think better about morality.