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John-Stewart Gordon

# Ethics as a Method

VERLAG KARL ALBER







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*In memory of*  
*Günther Patzig (1926–2018)*



## Preface of the English translation, 2024

I am delighted to see that my seminal work, *Ethik als Methode*, originally published in 2019, is now available in English. This translation aims to fulfill the desires of colleagues, students, and other interested individuals eager to explore my unique ethical framework, which I have termed *Ethics as a Method*. Following the release of the German edition, I delivered lectures and keynotes at various universities to introduce my ethical perspective. The response I received made it clear there was a significant demand for this work to be accessible to a broader audience, allowing my peers to delve deeper into my approach to ethical reasoning and moral decision-making. This feedback was a valuable lesson, reinforcing the need for a translation.

Since its initial publication in German, my conviction in the relevance and necessity of my approach has only deepened. While I have always believed in its critical contribution to contemporary ethics and moral philosophy, it has become increasingly apparent that it is particularly well-suited to addressing the complex issues arising from recent technological advancements, such as ChatGPT and other Large Language Models (LLMs). My method proves especially pertinent in discussions on the ethics of Artificial Intelligence, a field where traditional ethical theories often encounter significant challenges.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Verlag Karl Alber, and specifically to the general editor, Martin Hähnel, for their interest in bringing an English version of my book to a global audience. This project's fruition would not have been possible without the generous support of the Hermann and Marianne Straniak Foundation, which graciously covered the costs of translation and publication. My sincere thanks to them for enabling this endeavor to reach completion.



## Preface of the German edition, 2019

This work is the result of several years of searching for an answer to the question of the nature of moral reasoning. Although I have not spent the last few years working exclusively on this topic, I have been able to tackle the essential questions and problems for my research in stages here and there, which have now been brought together in this groundwork. This study takes a critical look at the general (and widely accepted) thesis that almost all moral problems can be solved with just one or a few moral principles and rules. This assumption is not only philosophically inappropriate, but simply wrong. The moral universe is too complex for all problems to be solved with just one master principle, for example. Rather, we need a flexible ethical method that solves our moral problems by recourse to practical wisdom. This book is an attempt to identify the foundations of such a method and to explain them in more detail. Basically, my aim is to initiate a new discourse on the nature of moral reasoning, since we are not already at the end, but still at the beginning of a moral journey.

With regard to chapter 5 of this thesis, I would particularly like to thank the *Hermann and Marianne Straniak Foundation*, whose funding enabled me to undertake three extended research visits to the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford (2017), the Centre for Ethics at the University of Toronto (2018) and the Institute An Foras Feasa at the University of Maynooth (2018) in 2017 and 2018. I was able to use some of the results to write chapter 5. Overall, my discussions with colleagues at the three universities mentioned have strengthened my belief that I am on the right track. My special thanks go to Roger Crisp, Jeff MacMahan, John Broome, Julian Savulescu, Markus Dubber, Vincent Shen, Atsushi Moriya, Thomas Hurka and Susan Schreibman. I would also like to thank the many colleagues and students who have spoken at my presentations on this topic (if I have forgotten anyone, please forgive me). I would also like to sincerely thank Petr Frantik, who has read significant parts of this

groundwork in various versions and discussed them with me in detail over the last few years. Finally, I would like to thank Lukas Trabert (Verlag Karl Alber), who has not only edited my work, but has always been very patient.



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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The basic problem

The traditional idea that the moral problems of human life can be successfully resolved with *one* monistic moral principle in the spirit of Kant (the Categorical Imperative) or the utilitarians (the principle of utility) seems not only inappropriate but also presumptuous against the background of the moral complexity of human life. Any narrowing down of an ethical theory to *one central aspect of morality*, which is then to be applied to *all* moral problems, contains the seeds of failure from the outset.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, however, that previous ethics are completely wrong and that nothing can be learnt from them; on the contrary, traditional ethics such as virtue ethics, Kant's ethics of duty or (classical) utilitarianism all point to *an* essential and correct aspect of morality that is appropriate and highly relevant in the context of a particular application. The crucial and tragic mistake, however, is that the authors *absolutise* the central aspect of their ethics and believe

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1 A brief explanation of how the terms morality and ethics are used seems appropriate: morality is usually understood to mean that the interests of others must be taken into account. Here, the talk of moral obligation is key. Ethics can be understood as thinking about questions of the good life, i.e. individual ideas of one's own good life become relevant here, with the pursuit of projects that are individually regarded as valuable taking centre stage. Whether ethics should be seen as purely objectivist, purely subjectivist or as a mixture of both forms is unimportant for the categorisation of morality and ethics. In principle, however, it must be stated that questions of morality should always be a sub-area of questions of ethics, so that moral statements are always understood as a sub-class of ethical statements (cf. Bernard Williams 1985).