ETHICS *in* PRACTICE

AN ANTHOLOGY

SIXTH EDITION

EDITED BY HUGH LAFOLLETTE

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Ethics in Practice

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Hugh LaFollette

University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

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Contents

Preface for Instructors

This anthology seeks to provide engagingly written, carefully argued philosophical essays on a wide range of important, contemporary moral issues. When I had trouble finding essays suiting those purposes, I commissioned new ones. I also invited a number of philosophers to revise previous work. Altogether, well over half of the essays herein were written or revised specifically for *Ethics in Practice*. This edition also includes five introductory essays for your students.

The result is a tasty blend of the old and the new, the familiar and the unfamiliar. I have organized the book into four thematic sections and fourteen topics to give you maximum flexibility when designing your course. When feasible, I begin or end sections with essays connecting the current topic to ones in preceding or following sections.

Although I include essays I think introductory students can comprehend, no one should think these are easy reads. Many students have trouble grasping philosophical essays; I know I did. Many essays were written originally for other philosophers. Moreover, even when philosophers write expressly for introductory audiences, their vocabularies, ideas, and styles are foreign to most introductory students. So I include a brief introduction on "Reading Philosophy."

I want this volume to be appropriate for an array of moral issues courses. The most straightforward way to use the text is to assign essays on six or seven of your favorite topics. If you want a more focused course, you could emphasize issues in one or two thematic sections. You could also focus on practical and theoretical issues spanning individual topics and major divisions of the book. For instance, if you want to focus on gender, you could select most essays from two sections – ABORTION and DISCRIMINATION – and many of the essays in the section on BIOMEDICAL TECHNOLOGIES. Finally, you can also give your course a decided theoretical flavor by using the section on ETHICAL THEORY, and then selecting essays that address, in diverse contexts, significant theoretical issues such as equality, the act/omission (or doing/allowing) distinction, the determination of moral status, the limits of morality, and so on. You might suggest that your students read "Theorizing about Ethics" – a brief introductory essay offering a snapshot of several distinct theories which seeks to help them see theory's importance, and limits.

Section introductions seek to identify relevant factual and theoretical issues and explain their role in moral deliberations. Although these section introductions indicate the main thrust of each essay, that is not their primary function. Their purpose is (1) to focus students' attention on relevant factual and theoretical questions, and (2) to relate these to discussions by other essayists in that section, as well as essays addressing different moral topics. Often students (and philosophers) see practical ethics as a hodgepodge of wholly or largely unrelated issues. These section and general introductions challenge that view. They show why practical issues are not discrete, but intricately connected. Thinking carefully about any issue (e.g., liberty of action) invariably illuminates (and is illuminated by) others (e.g., the proper role of conscience). Identifying these connections helps this volume show that practical ethics is a broad and coherent inquiry.

This strategy has consequences you might mention to your students. I organized the order of the papers within each section to maximize the students' understanding of

that practical issue – nothing more. However, I wrote the introductions to maximize the understanding of theoretical issues. Often, the order of the discussion of essays in the introduction parallels the order of essays in that section; occasionally it does not. Moreover, if I spend more time "summarizing" some of the essays, I am not proposing that the essays on which I focus are more cogent, useful, or superior to others. Rather, I found it easier to use them as entrées into the theoretical debates.

Finally, since I do not know which sections you will use, you should be aware that the introductions will likely refer to essays some students will not read. When that happens, the introductions will not fully realize one of their aims. Nonetheless, they may still be valuable. For even if a student does not read the essays to which an introduction refers, they can better appreciate interconnections between issues. It could also prompt students to read essays that you did not assign.

One last note about the criteria for selecting essays. Many practical ethics anthologies include essays on opposing sides of every issue. For most topics that is a laudable aim that an editor can normally achieve, but not always. I include essays that discuss the issue as we currently frame and understand it. Sometimes that understanding precludes some positions that would have once been part of the debate. For instance, early practical ethics anthologies included essays that argued that an individual should always choose to prolong their life, by any medical means whatever. On this view, euthanasia of any sort and for any reason was immoral. Although that was once a common and viable position, virtually no one now advocates or even discusses it. Even the author of the essay with serious misgivings about a "right to die" would not endorse that dated view. The current euthanasia debate largely concerns when people might choose not to sustain their lives, how they might carry out their wishes, and with whose assistance. Those are the questions addressed by the essays on euthanasia.

Likewise, I do not have any essays that argue that women and People of Color ought to be treated as second-class citizens. No one seriously discusses these proposals in academic circles. Instead, I include essays that highlight current issues concerning the treatment of minorities and women (sexual harassment, date rape, implicit bias, etc.).

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General Introduction

All of us make choices. Some of these seem to concern only ourselves – what to wear, when to sleep, what to read, where to live, how to decorate our homes, and what to eat. Under most circumstances, these choices are purely personal. Purely personal concerns are beyond the scope of morality as ordinarily understood and will not be expressly discussed in this book. Other choices demonstrably affect others – whether to prolong the life of our comatose grandmother, when and with whom to have sex, how to relate to people of different races, and whether to support capital punishment or laws against genetic engineering. These choices affect others and are commonly seen as choices we should morally assess.

Upon closer examination, however, it is not always obvious if a choice affects only us. Is choosing to view pornography purely personal or does it support the degradation of women? Is eating meat purely personal or does it encourage and sustain inhumane treatment of animals or depletion of resources needed to sustain the planet? Is choosing where to live purely personal or might it support racist practices confining African Americans or Hispanics to inadequate housing? If so, then choices that seem purely personal turn out to affect others in morally significant ways.

In short, once we reflect carefully, we discover many actions might profoundly affect others, and therefore ought to be evaluated morally. That, of course, does not tell us what we should do since:

1 we may not know how to behave, *or* mistakenly think we do know;
2 even if we know w*hat* people should do, we may not understand *why*, in some measure;
3 we often do not discern the consequences of our actions and the implications of our views, sometimes intentionally;
4 we tend to be morally myopic – we make dubious excuses for our moral misbehavior, while criticizing similar behavior from those we dislike or with whom we disagree; and lastly,
5 we often lack the motivation or skills to do what we ought.

Even the best ethics course cannot close all epistemic and moral gaps. It should not try. Rather, it should prompt critical reflection on our behavior through honest and reflective inquiry about the world, ourselves, and others. Given most people's abstract desire *that* people act morally, these efforts can empower us to act morally more often; it may help close – or at least narrow – the aforementioned gaps.

Ethics in Practice: An Anthology, Sixth Edition. Edited by Hugh LaFollette.

The aim of this volume is to provide readings exploring practical ethical issues. I suspect most immoral behavior does not result primarily from conscious choices of evil people, but from ignorance and inattention (LaFollette, H. 2017). Diminishing ignorance and heightening attention improve moral vision, understanding, and action. My means of achieving this end is to offer essays that carefully and critically discuss a range of practical moral issues. These offer information you may lack, perspectives you may have overlooked. Far too many schools neither expect nor permit students to think critically. Many will not have expected you to develop and defend your views, but, rather, to memorize the content of your texts and the assertions of your teachers – only to regurgitate them on a test. This is not a serious education.

Astute professors do not standardly expect or want you to memorize what they or someone else says. Still less will they want you to parrot them or the texts. You should read what others said, not to recite it, but to encourage clear thinking. Reading others' arguments can help you reach your own conclusions. I include a brief introduction on READING PHILOSOPHY some of you may find helpful.

I also have a brief introductory essay on ethical theorizing. Philosophers do not discuss practical issues in a vacuum. They place their discussions in a larger context to clarify and define practical issues. They discuss not only details unique to the issue, but features relevant to all practical ethical inquiry. THEORIZING ABOUT ETHICS describes the main ethical theories you will encounter in these pages. As you read individual essays, you see authors deploying these theories when defending their views.

I also include an introductory essay on WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER. Some of what I say there overlaps with other introductions. However, since I know not all teachers will assign – and not all students will read – each introduction, this is unavoidable. My aim is to briefly describe a variety of papers you might be asked to write, to talk about what you should do to make your papers as strong as possible.

Finally, to augment your familiarity with various theories, in introductions to each section I summarize central themes of the essays. I spotlight general theoretical questions and explain how they are relevant to other issues discussed in this volume. It is important to appreciate myriad ways practical moral issues are interwoven by common theoretical threads. Practical ethics is not a random collection of disconnected issues, but a systematic exploration of how we can act responsibly in various moral contexts.

Put differently, this is not a recipe book answering all moral questions. It chronicles how several thinkers have thought about practical moral issues. If you absorb the information the authors' supply, attend to their arguments, and consider their diverse perspectives, you should find you are better at thinking carefully and critically about practical and theoretical moral issues. Since arguments play such a key role in these essays, I end with an introductory essay on BASICS OF ARGUMENTATION.

Source

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Theorizing about Ethics

When deciding what to do, we are often uncertain and confused about – or have conflicts between – our inclinations, desires, interests, and beliefs. These difficulties can be present even when we want to promote only our self-interests. We may not know what is in our best interests – we may have simply adopted some mistaken ideas of our parents, our friends, or our culture. For instance, had our parents been Nazis, we might have believed that maintaining racial purity is an extremely important personal aim. We may also confuse our wants with our interests – we want to manipulate others for our own ends and therefore mistakenly infer that caring for others always or usually undermines our interests (LaFollette, H. 1996: Chapters 3 and 13). Even when we know some of our interests, we may be unable to determine their relative importance – we may assume that wealth is more important than developing character and having close relationships. Other times we may know our interests and desires, but be unsure of how to resolve conflicts between them – I may need to write a paper, yet want to watch a movie with my squeeze. Finally, even if I know the best choice, I may not act on it – I may know that it is in my best long-term interest to lose weight, yet inhale that scrumptious pie.

These complications show why I can best pursue my self-interests only if I self-critically and rationally deliberate about them. I must sometimes step back and think more abstractly about (a) what it means for something to be an interest (rather than a mere desire), (b) how to detect which behavior or goals are most likely to advance those interests, and (c) how to understand the interconnections between my interests (e.g., the ways that health enhances my chances of achieving other interests). Finally, I must (d) find a procedure for coping with conflicts between interests, and (e) learn how to act on the outcome of my rational deliberations. Theorizing about practice improves and helps us act more prudently.

Of course, many actions do not concern simply ourselves; they also affect others. Some of my actions benefit others while some harm them. The benefit or harm may be direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional. I might directly harm Joe by pushing him. I might push him because I am angry with him or because I want his place in the queue. I could indirectly harm Joe by landing a promotion he needs to finance nursing care for his dying mother. Or I might offend Joe by privately engaging in what he considers kinky sex. In the latter case, my bedroom antics affect him, although only indirectly and only because he holds the particular moral beliefs he does. Arguably, it is inappropriate to say that I harmed Joe in these last two cases, although I did choose to act knowing my actions might make him unhappy or nauseated.

In choosing how to behave, I should acknowledge my actions affect others, even if only indirectly. In these circumstances, I must choose whether to pursue my self-interest or whether to promote (or at least not set back) others' interests. Other times I must choose to act in ways that harm some while benefitting others. If I am fortunate, I might occasionally find ways to promote everyone's interests without harming anyone's.

Understanding these distinctions does not settle the question of how I should act. It only circumscribes the arena within which morality operates. Morality, traditionally understood, involves primarily, and perhaps exclusively, behavior affecting others. I say "perhaps"

because some philosophers (e.g., Kant) thought anyone who harms themselves, for instance, by squandering their talents or abusing their body, has done something morally wrong. For present purposes, though, we can set this issue aside. For what everyone acknowledges is that actions that indisputably affect others should be evaluated morally, although we might disagree about how that judgment should shape our action. We might further disagree whether and to what extent actions that affect others only indirectly should be evaluated morally. We might further disagree about whether and how to morally distinguish direct from indirect harm. Nonetheless, if someone's action directly and substantially affects others (either benefits or harms them), then even if we do not yet know whether the action is right or wrong, we can agree that we should evaluate it morally.

This discussion might suggest that moral decisions are always confusing. Not so. We can make many moral decisions so easily that we never think about them. No one seriously asks whether it is morally permissible to drug a classmate so they can have sex with them, whether they should steal money from their co-workers to finance a Parisian vacation, or whether they should knowingly infect someone with AIDS. This is not the stuff of which moral disagreement is made. We know quite well these are wrong. Rather than discuss questions to which there are obvious answers, we focus on, think about, and debate ones about which there is genuine disagreement.

However, we sometimes think a decision is clear, when it is not. This is arguably a more serious mistake. We may fail to see genuine conflicts, confusions, or uncertainties. The issue may be so complicated that we overlook, fail to understand, or do not appreciate how (and how profoundly) our actions affect others. Or we may be so preoccupied with our self-interest, we do not see or give appropriate weight to others' interests. Finally, unquestioning acceptance of the moral status quo blinds us to just how wrong some behaviors and institutions are.

The Need for Theory

We may think that an action is grossly immoral, but not know why. Or we may think we know, only to later see that we are parroting "reasons" offered by friends, teachers, parents, or preachers. There is nothing wrong with considering how others think and how they decided similar moral questions. We would be foolish not to absorb and benefit from their experience. However, anyone aware of history will see that collective moral wisdom is sometimes fatally mistaken (see Mill's "Freedom of Thought and Discussion" in this volume). Our ancestors held slaves, denied women the right to vote, practiced genocide, and burned witches at the stake. Many of these were generally decent people, firmly convinced their actions were moral. They acted wrongly because they were insufficiently self-critical. They did not evaluate their own beliefs; they blindly adopted the outlook of ancestors, political leaders, teachers, friends, and community. This is a "sin" of which each of us is guilty. The resounding lesson of history is that we must scrutinize our beliefs and choices. We must work to be informed, consistent, unbiased, and imaginative, not mindlessly aping others' epistemic and moral vices (see Madva and Cassim in this volume). Otherwise, we perpetrate evils we could avoid, evils for which future generations will rightly condemn us (LaFollette, H. 2017).

To critically evaluate our moral views, we should theorize about ethics – we should think about moral issues coherently and consistently. Theorizing is not an enterprise divorced from practice, but is careful, systematic, and thoughtful reflection on practice. Theorizing does not make us infallible. It does, however, empower us to shed ill-conceived, uninformed, and irrelevant considerations. To see why, consider an issue dear to students – grades. Grading of students' work can go awry in three ways:

1 I might use inconsistent standards, that is, I might use different standards for different students. Thus, Joan gets an A because she has a pleasant smile; Ralph, because he works hard; Rachel, because her paper was exceptional. Knowing that I used inconsistent standards does not show that the grades were inappropriate. Perhaps they all deserved the A's they received. However, it is not enough that I accidentally gave them the grades they deserved. They should receive A's because they deserved them.
2 I might be guided by improper standards to which I adhere unwaveringly. I may consistently give

students I like – or students who agree with me – higher grades. If so, then I grade their work inappropriately, albeit consistently.

3 I might apply reasonable standards inappropriately, perhaps because I am ignorant, close-minded, exhausted, preoccupied, or inattentive.

I can make parallel mistakes in ethical deliberations:

1 I might use inconsistent ethical principles.
2 I might hold inappropriate moral standards.
3 I might employ appropriate moral standards inappropriately.

Let us look at each deliberative error in more detail:

1) **Consistency:** We should treat two creatures the same unless they are relevantly different – different in ways that justify treating them differently. Just as students expect teachers to grade consistently, we expect others (and hopefully ourselves) to be morally consistent. The demand for consistency pervades moral thinking. A common strategy for defending our moral views is to claim that we are consistent; a common strategy for criticizing others' views is to charge that they are not.

The argumentative role of consistency is evident in discussions of every practical moral issue. Disputants spend considerable effort arguing that their own positions are consistent while charging that their opponents' positions are not. For instance, in the abortion debate, each side labors to show why abortion is relevantly similar to standard cases of murder. Most of those who think abortion is immoral (and likely all of those who think it should be illegal) think abortion is relevantly similar to murder, while those who think abortion should be legal claim it is not. What we do not find are people who think abortion is indisputably murder and indisputably moral.

Consistency likewise plays central roles in debates over Free Speech and Paternalism and Risk. Those opposed to censorship often argue that books, pictures, movies, plays, or sculptures that some people want to censor are relevantly similar to art that most people do not want censored. They further claim that pornography is a form of speech, and if we prohibit it *because the majority finds it offensive*, then we must censor any speech that offends the majority. Conversely, those who claim we can legitimately censor pornography go to some pains to explain why pornography is relevantly different from other forms of speech we want to protect. Both sides want to show that their position is consistent and that their opponent's position is not.

Although consistency is generally recognized as a requirement of morality, in specific cases it is difficult to detect if someone is being (in)consistent. Someone may appear to act inconsistently, but only because we do not appreciate the complexity of their moral reasoning or fail to understand the morally relevant features framing their action. Nonetheless, what everyone acknowledges is that if someone is being inconsistent, then that is a compelling reason to doubt their position.

2) **Correct principles:** It is not enough to be consistent. We must also employ the appropriate guidelines, principles, or standards, or make the appropriate judgments. Theorizing about ethics is one good way to discern the best (most defensible) standards or guidelines, to identify the morally relevant features of our actions, and to enhance our ability to make good judgments. Later, I discuss how to select and defend these principles – how we determine what is morally relevant.

3) **Correct "application":** Even when we know what is morally relevant, and even when we reason consistently, we may still make moral mistakes. Consider the ways I might misapply rules prohibiting (a) lying, or (b) harming another's feelings. Suppose my wife comes home wearing a gaudy sweater. She wants to know if I like it. Presumably I should neither lie nor intentionally hurt her feelings. What, in these circumstances, should I do? There are a number of ways I might act inappropriately. (1) *I may not see viable alternatives*: I may assume, for example, that I must baldly lie or significantly hurt her feelings. (2) *I may be insufficiently attentive to her needs, interests, and abilities*: I may overestimate or underestimate how much she will be hurt by my honesty (or lack of it). (3) *I may be unduly influenced by self-interest or personal bias*: I may lie not to protect her feelings, but because I don't want her to be angry with me. (4) *I may know precisely what I should do but be insufficiently motivated to do it*: I may lie because I just don't want the hassle. (5) Or, *I may be motivated to act as I should, but lack the talent or skill to do it*: I may want to be honest, but lack the verbal and personal skills to be honest in a way that will not hurt her feelings.

These are all failings with practical moral significance. We would be better off if we learn how to make ourselves more attentive, informed, and motivated. However, although these are vital practical concerns, they are not the focus of most essays here. What these authors provide is relevant information, careful logical analysis, and an account of what they take to be morally relevant features of practical ethical questions.

Is It Just a Matter of Opinion?

Many of you may find talk of moral standards troubling. You may think – certainly many people talk as if they think – that moral judgments are just "matters of opinion." All of us have overheard people conclude a debate about a contentious moral issue by saying, "Well, it is all just a matter of opinion!" I suspect the function of this claim is to signal the speaker's desire to terminate discussion. Unfortunately, it implies more. It suggests that since moral judgments are *just* opinions, then all moral judgments are equally good or equally bad. It implies that we cannot criticize or rationally scrutinize ours or anyone else's moral judgments or actions. After all, we don't rationally criticize *mere* opinions ("I don't like Jazz or French kissing," or "I prefer green to red").

However, even if no (contentious) moral judgment is *indisputably* correct, we should not infer that all moral judgments are equally reliable. Although we may have no way of determining which actions are best, we have ways of showing some are morally bankrupt. We know moral judgments based on misinformation, shortsightedness, bias, or lack of understanding are flawed. Conversely, judgments are more plausible if they are based on full information, careful calculation, astute perception, and if they have successfully survived others' criticisms in the marketplace of ideas.

Consider the following analogy: no grammatical or stylistic rules determine the way I should phrase the next sentence. However, from that we should not infer that I may string together just any words. Some arrangements are not sentences; some grammatically complete sentences are gibberish. Other sentences are grammatically well-formed, relevant, and minimally clear, but are imprecise. Others are relevant, comprehensible, and generally precise, yet are bereft of style. Still others might be grammatically well-formed and even stylish, yet be inappropriate because they are not connected to the preceding or following sentences. Still others may be wholly and sufficiently adequate so that there is no strong reason to prefer one. A few may be brilliant. No grammar book will enable us to make all those distinctions or to identify a uniquely best sentence. Nonetheless, we have no problem distinguishing the trashy or the unacceptably vague from the linguistically sublime. In short, we need not think that one sentence is uniquely good to acknowledge that some are better and some are worse. Likewise for ethics. We may not always know how to act; we may find substantial disagreement about highly contentious issues. However, that does not show that all moral views are created equal (LaFollette 1991).

Moreover, circumstances may demand we act even if there is no uniquely superior action – at least none we can identify. Our uncertainty does not lead us to think that – or act as if – all views are equal. We do not toss a coin to decide whether to remove our parents from life support, whether to save a small child drowning in a pond, or whether someone charged with a felony is guilty. We should make an informed decision based on the best evidence, and then act accordingly. We should not bemoan our inability to be certain we found a uniquely best action. We should, of course, acknowledge our uncertainty, admit our fallibility, and be prepared to consider new ideas, especially when they are supported by strong arguments. However, we should not embrace pernicious relativism. That would be misguided, morally mistaken.

The Role of Theory

Even when people agree that an issue should be morally evaluated, they may disagree on its evaluation. Using language of the previous section, they may disagree about the best principles or judgments, about how these are to be interpreted, or about how they should be deployed. Anti-abortionists argue that abortion should be illegal because the fetus has the same right to life as a normal adult, while pro-abortionists argue that it should be legal since the woman has the right to decide what happens in and to her body. Supporters of capital punishment argue that executions deter crime, while opponents argue that it is cruel and inhumane. Those who

want to censor pornography claim it degrades women or offends some people's moral sensitivities, while supporters argue that it is a form of free speech that should be protected by law.

In giving reasons for their judgments, people cite some features of the action they think explain or support their evaluation. This function of reasons is not confined to ethical disagreements. I may justify my opinion that "'Elvis' is a good movie" by claiming that it has well-defined characters, an interesting plot, and appropriate dramatic tension. That is, I identify features of the movie I think justify my evaluation. The features I cite, however, are not unique to this movie. In giving these reasons I imply that "having well-defined characters," "having an interesting plot," and "having the appropriate dramatic tension" are important characteristics of good movies, period. That is not to say these are the only or the most important characteristics. Nor is it yet to decide how weighty these characteristics are. It is, however, to say that we have a reason to think that a movie with these characteristics is a good movie.

You can challenge my evaluation in three ways. You can challenge my criteria, the weight I give those criteria, or my claim that the movie satisfies them. For instance, you could argue that having well-defined characters is not a relevant criterion, that I have given that criterion excessive weight, or that "Elvis" does not have well-defined characters. In defense, I could explain why I think the criterion is relevant and why I have given it appropriate weight, and why the movie's characters are well developed. At this point, we are discussing issues at two different levels. We are debating the criteria of good movies and the application of these to this movie.

Likewise, when discussing a practical ethical issue, we often employ and investigate distinct theoretical perspectives. We do not want to know only whether capital punishment deters crime, we also want to know whether deterrence is morally important, and, if so, just how important. When theorizing reaches a certain level or complexity, we begin to speak of someone's "having a theory." Ethical theories are formal, systematic second-level discussions aimed at identifying relevant moral criteria, as well their weight and significance. In so doing, they can inform thinking about how to decide whether an action satisfies those criteria.

In the next section, I briefly outline the more familiar ethical theories. Before I do, I warn you – we may be tempted to assume that people holding the same theory will have similar ethical judgments, and that people who make similar ethical judgments embrace the same theory. Not so. After all, this is not true of any other evaluative judgment. Two people with similar criteria for good movies may differently evaluate "Elvis," while two people who loved "Elvis" may have somewhat different criteria of good movies.

Likewise for ethics. Two people with different ethical theories may think abortion is morally permitted (or grossly immoral), while two supporters of abortion may embrace different theories. Knowing someone's theoretical commitments does not tell us precisely what actions they think right and wrong. It tells us only *how* they think about moral issues; it identifies their criteria of relevance and the weight.

Main Types of Theory

Two broad classes of ethical theory – consequentialist and deontological – have shaped most people's understanding of ethics. Consequentialists hold that we should choose the available action with the best overall consequences, while deontologists hold that we should act in ways circumscribed by moral rules or rights, and that these are defined somewhat independently of consequences. Since this book includes a section on ETHICAL THEORY, my exposition is brief. Nonetheless, it should be sufficient to help you understand the broad outlines of each.

Consequentialism

Consequentialists claim that we are morally obligated to act in ways that produce the best consequences. It is not difficult to see why this is an appealing theory. It employs the same style of reasoning we use in purely prudential decisions. If you are trying to select a major, you consider available options, predict which one will likely lead to the best overall outcome, and then choose that major. If you are trying to decide whether to keep your present job or take a new one, you will consider likely consequences of each (working conditions, location, salary, chance of advancement, how the change might alter personal and

family relations, etc.). You choose the one with the best overall consequences.

Despite similarities, prudence and morality differ. Whereas prudence requires we wisely advance only our own personal interests, consequentialism requires us to consider the interests of all affected. When facing a moral decision, we should consider available alternative actions, trace likely consequences of each for all affected, and select the one with the best overall consequences.

Of course, a consequentialist need not consider every action's consequence, nor must they consider them all equally. Two consequences of my typing this introduction are that I strengthen hand muscles and increase eye–hand coordination. However, barring unusual circumstances, these are not morally relevant – they are neither a means to nor constative of my or anyone else's welfare, happiness, or well-being. That is why they play no role in *moral* deliberation. However, it is not always clear whether or why some consequence is morally relevant. Many moral disagreements are disputes over whether or how much a consequence is morally relevant. That is why any adequate consequentialist theory must specify (a) which consequences are relevant (i.e., which to consider when morally deliberating), and (b) how much weight we should give them.

Utilitarians, for instance, claim we should choose the option that maximizes "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." They also advocate complete equality – "each to count as one and no more than one." Of course, we might disagree about exactly what it means to maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number; still more we might be unsure about how this is to be achieved. Act utilitarians claim that we determine the rightness of an action if we can decide which action, in those circumstances, would be most likely to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Rule utilitarians reject the idea that moral decisions are case-by-case. They think we should decide not whether a particular action is likely to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but whether a type of action would, if done by everyone (or most people), promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

This theory is discussed in more detail by Shaw (ETHICAL THEORY).

Deontology

Deontological theories are most easily understood in contrast to consequentialist ones. Whereas consequentialists claim we should always strive to promote the best consequences, deontologists claim that our moral obligations – whatever they are – are *in some respects* independent of consequences. Thus, if I have obligations not to kill or steal or lie, those obligations are not justified *simply* on the ground that doing these behaviors will always produce the best consequences.

That is why many people find deontological theories so attractive. For example, most of us would be offended if someone lied to us, even if the lie produced the greatest happiness for the greatest number. I would certainly be offended if someone killed me, even if my death might produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number (you use my kidneys to save two people's lives, my heart to save someone else's life, etc.) The deontologist claims the rightness or wrongness of lying or killing cannot be explained by its consequences. Of course, deontologists disagree about which rules or standards there are, how to determine them, and whether they can ever be legitimately ignored because acting on them would have horrible consequences.

Some claim abstract reason shows us how we should act (Kant 2002/1785). Others talk about discovering principles that are justified in *reflective equilibrium* (Rawls, for example, in the selection on ECONOMIC JUSTICE), while some claim we should seek principles an ideal observer might adopt (Arthur in GLOBAL JUSTICE).

These theories are discussed in more detail by McNaughton and Rawling, as well as Rainbolt (ETHICAL THEORY).

Alternatives

There are numerous alternatives to these theories. To call them "alternatives" does not imply that they are inferior, only that they have not played the same role in shaping contemporary ethical thought. Two are especially worth mention since they have become influential in the past four decades; they also play pivotal roles in several essays in this book.

Virtue theory

Virtue theory predates both consequentialism and deontology as a formal theory. It was the dominant theory of the ancient Greeks, reaching its clearest expression in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Then, for many centuries, it was not discussed or advocated as a serious theory. But by the late 1950s, it reappeared in the philosophical literature. This history is traced in essays reprinted in Crisp, R. and Slote, M.A. (1997).

Much appeal of virtue theory arises from the perceived failings of the standard alternatives. Virtue theorists aver that deontology and consequentialism put inadequate emphasis on the agent – on the ways they should be, or the kinds of character they should develop. Relatedly, they fail to give appropriate scope to personal judgment and too much emphasis on following rules, whether deontological or consequentialist.

On some readings of deontology and utilitarianism, it sounds as if advocates of these theorists believed that a moral decision was the mindless application of a moral rule. If the rule says "Be honest," then we should be honest. If the rule says "Always act to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number," then we need to only figure out which action has the most desirable consequences and do it. Ethics thus seems to resemble math. The calculations require patience and care, but not judgment.

Many advocates of the standard theories find these objections by virtue theorists telling, and over the past two decades have modified their respective theories to (partially) accommodate them. The result, says Rosalind Hursthouse, is "that the lines of demarcation between these three approaches have become blurred … Deontology and utilitarianism are no longer perspicuously identified by describing them as emphasizing rules or consequences in contrast to character" (Hursthouse, R. 1999: 4). Both put more emphasis on judgment and character. For instance, Hill, who is a deontologist, describes the proper attitude toward the ENVIRONMENT in a way that emphasizes excellence or character, while May and Strikwerda (DISCRIMINATION), who do not generally embrace virtue theory, emphasize the need for men to feel shame for their complicity in the rape of women. However, although judgment and character may play increasingly important roles in contemporary versions of deontology or consequentialism, neither plays the central role they do in virtue theory.

Feminist theory

Historically, most philosophers were men; most embraced the sexism of their respective cultures. Thus, it is not surprising that women's interests and perspectives played no role in the development of standard ethical theories. Does that mean these theories are useless? Or can they be salvaged? Can we merely prune Aristotle's explicit sexism from his theory and still have an Aristotelian theory that is adequate for a less sexist age? Can we remove Kant's sexism and have a nonsexist deontology?

In the early years of feminism, many thinkers thought so. They claimed that the standard ethical theories' emphasis on justice, equality, and fairness offers all the argumentative ammunition women need to claim their rightful place in the public world. Others were not so sure. Carol Gilligan (1982) argued that women have different moral experiences and different moral reasoning, and that these differences must be incorporated into our understanding of morality. She advocated an "Ethics of Care," which she claimed best exemplified women's experience and thinking. However, other feminists claimed this view too closely resembles old-fashioned views of women. What we need instead, they claim, are theories that have a keen awareness of gender and a concern to develop all people's unique human capacities (Jaggar, A.M. 2000). The details of this theory are more fully developed by Finlayson (ETHICAL THEORY).

Observe the ways that issues concerning woman are discussed (DISCRIMINATION; ABORTION; FREE SPEECH; and BIOMEDICAL TECHNOLOGIES). See whether the reasons used differ from those employed in other essays. If so, how?

Conclusion

As you read the following essays, you will see how these different ways of thinking about ethics shape our deliberations about particular moral issues. Be alert to theoretical differences. They illuminate reasoning in essays. Also attend to section introductions. They highlight theoretical issues that play a central role within that section.

Overlapping Epistemic and Moral Spectra

Five key questions, informing – and reflected in – "Theorizing about Ethics."

1 What things are **morally considerable** (things we should consider morally)?
2 What are significant values? Are they intrinsically or instrumentally valuable?
3 What makes something **responsible** for their actions (or omissions)? [Can something be responsible, in this sense, but not morally considerable?]
4 What are the epistemic **prerequisites** for being considerable and responsibility? **Since all these are spectra,**
5 How can we set (multiple?) **cutoff points** – where differences between things more or less considerable (or responsible) are sufficiently great that we categorize and treat them differently?
[grass/oaks/amoeba/chickens/whales/human children/adults?]

ELABORATIONS

What makes something morally considerable? What makes something have a good? Can something without a good be morally considerable (mountains; rivers) – how?
What are values for things that are morally considerable?
(Only if they value them? Or can they be valuable even if they do not see it?)

What makes someone responsible for actions (good or bad)? For who they are?
Can omissions be actions/causes [we speak as if they could be, for example, parents]
Can collectives be responsible? How? When?

What is the appropriate response to something responsible (positive and negative)?

Epistemic values/requirements
Understanding
Can't fathom Minimal similar Almost whole [empathetic?]
Inquisitiveness
Consistency
Self-criticism

Said "others" – but which others: "humanity – Kant". Each: Mill
Moral values – Fundamental (or mostly so)
Liberty Justice Equality [treat the same as others of their type]
[Interests? Welfare?]
Goods required: [For nutrition? For enjoyment? For flourishing?]
Responsibility: way to assess actions by and treatment of morally considerable beings – itself a value, or a way of assessing it?

Using these questions, where would we place creatures, objects, values, actions along the continuum?

Not at all Minimal Some Mostly Completely
What things are morally considerable?

Some you might place on the spectra:

dust	mountains	rivers	grass	bees
sparrows	cows	dogs	children	adults

Anti-value? No value Some value Significant Maximal

What are significant values?

On the vertical axis: instrumentally or intrinsically valuable?

Some to place on the spectra:

- justice (economic; social; criminal; racial?)
- freedom (of press; speech; carry AR-15; hit spouse)
- equality (with whom? when?)
- welfare (ability to feed oneself; attend college; become ____)

None Some Normal Heightened Maximal

What makes something responsible for their actions (or omissions)

Where to place on the spectrum. Does it change depending on circumstances?

ants	children	average adults	parents	leaders/groups

[Can something be responsible but not morally considerable?]

Irrelevant/relevant, but not too much normally required essential

What are epistemic prerequisites for being considerable and responsibility?

How important are both? Why? Do they overlap and reinforce each other?

What is the relationship between being considerable and responsibility?

Some to place on the continuum:

- Background knowledge/understanding
- Inquisitiveness
- Consistency
- Self-criticism

Sources

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Reading Philosophy

Reading philosophy differs from reading science fiction, the daily newspaper, or a Twitter feed. The subjects differ; the purposes differ; the vocabularies and styles differ. A Twitter feed may claim to inform us of an occurrence or its author's thoughts; it may also urge us to act. It typically achieves these ends with loaded language, laced with a generous dose of internet abbreviations and emojis. Newspapers inform us of political, social, cultural, economic, and climatic events. Once we are informed, we presumably can make better decisions about our leaders, finances, and lives. Reporters typically achieve these aims with pithy prose.

Science fiction attempts to transport us imaginatively to distant worlds of larger-than-life heroes and villains. It aims to entertain us, to divert us from the doldrums of daily life. It may also empower us – having seen glories and evils of worlds not yet experienced, we may be better equipped to face this world. Science fiction writers achieve their aims by spinning a convincing narrative encased in expressive language.

Philosophers have neither the direct aims of the journalist nor the airy aims of the science-fiction writer. Primarily, they want to help readers explore competing ideas and reasons for them. They achieve these aims with a writing style that differs from those with which you are most familiar.

Philosophical Language

While the reporter and the novelist write for the public, philosophers usually write for one other. Thus, while most newspapers and some science fiction are written for an eighth-grade audience, philosophical essays are written for people with university training. That is why you need a more robust vocabulary to understand a philosophical essay than you do to understand the latest novel or a column in the local paper. Keep a dictionary handy to look up "ordinary" words you may not yet know. You will also face an additional problem. Like all academic disciplines, philosophy employs specialized terms. Some are familiar words with specialized meanings; others are words unique to the discipline. You need to understand both. Do not despair. Often you can roughly determine a term's meaning from its context. If you still cannot understand its meaning, ask your instructor. Most words can be explained nontechnically. You may also consult online philosophical dictionaries or encyclopedias.

Philosophical writing also tends to be more complex than writings by reporters and novelists. Sometimes it is more complex than it needs be. The author may not know how to write clearly or they may think convoluted prose makes their ideas sound profound. Sometimes, the writing is complex because the ideas are complex. We cannot always render profound thoughts into intellectual pabulum.

If you find writing confusing, break long sentences into components, for example, by treating a semicolon as a period. Reread each essay to sense the author's rhythm, much as you may listen to a musician several times to appreciate their style. Persevere. The best way to enhance your critical reading skills is by reading and rereading assignments.

The Centrality of Argument

Philosophical writing is also complex inasmuch as it identifies and evaluates arguments. An "argument" is not just a disagreement, even a heated one. It is a connected

series of statements whereby the author seeks to defend a claim (the conclusion) with evidence (the premises). The premises may specify empirical data, forward imaginative examples, pose suggestions, or critique alternatives. To better understand what arguments are and how to evaluate them, see the introductory essay "Basics of Argumentation." Before evaluating an argument, identify the conclusion, premises, and the explanation of how the latter support the former.

Resist the urge to assume the argument is meritorious (flawed) because you like (dislike) the conclusion. The human tendency to embrace (dismiss) views we like (dislike) explains philosophers' preoccupation with arguments. Each of us is bombarded with claims. Some are true; many are false. Some offer sage wisdom; others, dreadful advice. How do we distinguish the true from the plausible or the demonstrable false, the wise from the inane, especially when the topic is controversial? Do we just pick the one our parents, preachers, teachers, friends, or society advocate, or lambaste ones they loathe? The tendency to do so exhibits what has been dubbed the "confirmatory bias" (Miller, R.W. 1987; Nickerson, R.S. 1998).

We should resist this deep-seated bias. Even a cursory glance at history reveals most horrendous evils were committed by people who embraced their views steadfastly and uncritically. Most Nazis, slave holders, and commanders of Russian Gulags did not think they were immoral; they assumed they were acting appropriately, even nobly. They accepted their bosses' or society's views without rational scrutiny. That we should not do (LaFollette, H. 2017). People's lives, welfare, and happiness depend on our ability to think rationally and act morally.

We should seek conclusions supported by the best evidence. We should examine *reasons* for alternative beliefs. Doing so will not ensure that we make the best decisions, but it will increase the odds that we do. It lessens the probability that we are cruel or callous.

Most people are unaccustomed to scrutinizing arguments. Most of us were expected to believe what our parents, priests, preachers, teachers, and pals told us. We were thus disinclined to consider opposing arguments seriously or to criticize our own views. Moreover, although all of us have offered some arguments for our views, we have rarely done so with the care and depth that are the staple of good philosophy. Philosophers strive to offer clear, unambiguous conclusions supported by reasons that even those reluctant to believe their conclusions are likely to find plausible. That is not to say that philosophers never make bad arguments or say stupid things. Of course we do. However, it is to say that an explicit aim of philosophy is a *clear, careful assessment of the reasons for and against our and others' views*. That is why a key to understanding philosophy is being able to spot arguments, and then analyze and evaluate them. That is something you will learn in significant measure by practice.

Looking at Others' Views

Since part of the task of defending one's view is to show that it is rationally superior to alternatives, standardly a philosopher (a) provides arguments for their views, (b) responds to criticisms of these views, and (c) considers alternatives. Sometimes other views and criticisms are advocated by a specific philosopher whose work the author cites. Often, though, ideas an author discusses are not those of any particular philosopher, but rather represent the views of some hypothetical advocate of the position (e.g., conservatism or theism or pro-life). This is often double trouble for you as a student. You may be unfamiliar with the view being discussed. Therefore, since you cannot ascertain if the view has been accurately represented; you cannot judge if the criticisms (and responses to them) are telling. You may even have difficulty distinguishing the author's view from the views of those they discuss.

If you read the essay quickly, and without concentrating, you may be confused. However, with care, usually you can distinguish one view from the other. Most authors give argumentative road signs indicating when they are defending a view and when they are stating or discussing someone else's view. Of course, the student may miss these signs if they do not know what to look for. But simply knowing that this is a common strategy should make distinguishing them easier. You can also look for specific cues. For instance, philosophers discussing another's views may use the third person to indicate that someone else is speaking (or arguing). At other times, the author may say something like "some may disagree…," and then go on to discuss that person's view. In still other cases, signs are more subtle.

In the end, there is no simple way to distinguish the author's view from others they discuss. However, if you read carefully and use this strategy, you will increase the likelihood that you will not be confused.

The Rational Consequences of What We Say

The philosopher's discussion of examples or cases – especially fictional ones – sometimes confuses students. The use of such cases builds upon a central pillar of philosophical argument, namely, that we should consider the implications or rational consequences of our beliefs and actions. The following example explains what I mean. Suppose a teacher gives you an "A" because they like you, and gives Robert – your worst enemy – an "F" because they dislike him. You might be ecstatic that you received an "A"; you may also be thrilled to know that your worst enemy failed. However, would you say that what the teacher did was morally acceptable? No. There are implications of saying that, implications you loathe to accept.

If you said that the teacher's *reason* for giving those grades was legitimate, you would be saying that teachers should be able to give students they like good grades and students they dislike bad grades. Thus, you would be rationally committed to holding that if one of your teachers disliked you, then they could legitimately fail you. That, of course, is a consequence you are unwilling to accept. Therefore, you (and we) have reason to suspect that your original acceptance of the teacher's grading scheme was inappropriate. This is a common argumentative strategy. Trace the implications – the rational consequences – of a person's reasons for action, and then see if you (or others) would be willing to accept those consequences. If the answer is "no," then the original reasons are dubious.

A Final Word

These suggestions will not make reading philosophical essays easy. My hope, though, is that they will make it easier. In the end, the key to success is practice. If you have never read philosophical arguments before, you are unlikely to be able to glance at the essay and understand it – you will likely miss the central idea, its relation to alternatives, and you will almost certainly fail to comprehend the author's argument. To fully understand the essay, you must read the assignment carefully and more than once. Most essays are too difficult in style and content to grasp in a single reading. Not even most professional philosophers can do that.

Here is a good strategy – read the essay once, identify confusing or unusual terms, and to get a general sense of the argument. Isolate the author's point and their reasons for the view, What arguments do they discuss? Identify the points about which you are still unclear. After you have a general sense of the essay, reread it again more carefully. Strive for a thorough understanding of the argument. Come to class prepared to ask the teacher to clarify any remaining questions about the author's views. If you are accustomed to reading an assignment once – and then only quickly – this expectation will seem overly demanding. Yet, it is important that you learn to read carefully and critically.

Herein lies the key to success – persistence and practice. There may be times you find the reading so difficult that you will be tempted to stop, to wait for the instructor to explain it. Yield not to temptation. Press on. It is more rewarding to understand the reading for yourself. Think, for a moment, about what happens when someone "explains" a joke you could (with time and effort) have understood on your own. It spoils the joke.

Learning to read more complex essays is a skill, and, like any skill, it is not acquired all at once or without effort. Nothing in life that is valuable is acquired effortlessly. Getting in physical shape requires vigorous exercise and perspiration. Establishing and maintaining a vibrant relationship requires effort, understanding, and sacrifice. Learning to play a musical instrument does not come quickly, and is, at times, exceedingly frustrating.

Learning to read sophisticated essays is no different. If you persist, however, you will find that with time it becomes easier to read and understand philosophical essays. The payoff is substantial and enduring. You will better understand the day's reading assignment, which will most assuredly improve your grade. But more importantly, you will also expand your vocabulary and improve your reading comprehension. You will increase