

Making Everything Easier!™

Ethics FOR **DUMMIES®**

Learn to:

- Demystify the ethical writings of Aristotle, Confucius, and other famous philosophers
- Examine controversial aspects of ethical thought
- Tackle and understand today's important questions and dilemmas

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Ethics For Dummies®

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About the Authors

Chris Panza was born and raised in New York. After trying unsuccessfully for many years to figure out how to live the right way, he enrolled at the State University of New York at Purchase, where he figured philosophy and literature degrees would help. It provided hints, but no answers. After college, he spent a few more years working in business and hammering away at the question of value. More hints, but no answers. Finally, he attended the University of Connecticut and earned a master's degree and doctoral degree (in philosophy) hoping to finally learn how to live a good and ethical life. More degrees and more hints, but no definite answers. What to do? Well, with all these degrees you may not know exactly how to live ethically, but you can at least make a

living teaching. So he did that, and he has been an associate professor of philosophy at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri, since 2002.

Chris received the university's Excellence in Teaching Award in 2004, probably for getting a lot of students to join him on the endless quest to understanding what it means to live a good life. In addition to his teaching interests in ethics, Chris also teaches classes in existentialism (and is the co-author of *Existentialism For Dummies*), Confucianism, free will, metaphysics, and modern philosophy. Chris is married to his wife Christie, a social psychologist, and has two beautiful little girls: a 4-year-old named Parker and an almost 2-year-old named Paige. Chris is hoping to one day infect his own children with the same desire to investigate life that has long invigorated him and as a result made his life a continuously interesting and mysterious experience.

Adam Potthast was born and raised in Missouri. After directors stopped casting him in plays, he had no choice but to fall into the seedy underbelly of intellectualism that thrived at Truman State in Kirksville, Missouri. Trying to do the hardest thing he knew he could do well (and not being able to do physics and music very well), he found philosophy. He went on to get his masters and PhD in philosophy at the University of Connecticut where he discovered that far from all being a matter of opinion, ethics was stimulating and a lot of fun.

He's currently an assistant professor at Missouri University of Science and Technology (Missouri S&T) in Rolla, Missouri, where — when he's not pestering his engineering colleagues about the value of ethical thinking — he teaches courses in virtually every kind of ethics, political philosophy, and the meaning of life. His research

interests are practical and professional ethics, the connections between ethics and personal identity, and the apparently very high tolerance people have for listening to him carry on about the connection between freedom and morality in Kantian ethics. When he's not working, he enjoys travel, hiking, riding bikes, subjecting friends to culinary experiments, and Canadian independent music. Go places!

Dedication

From Chris: I would like to dedicate this book first and foremost to my wife, Christie, and to my two daughters, Parker and Paige, who are the lights of my life. I also would like to dedicate the book to my mom, Janice, who has been a source of strength and inspiration for me my whole life, and to my dad, Tony, for his quirky sense of humor and great cooking. Lastly, to my sister, Amy, and her husband, Jay, not to mention my young nephew, Aiden.

From Adam: This book is dedicated first to my parents, Ferd and Joan. I'm forever grateful to them for having the good sense to leave behind vows of chastity, take up with one another, and later teach me the power of words, courage, and kindness. Second, to my brother, David, whose creativity and perseverance is always an inspiration. Finally, to my undergraduate advisor, Patricia Burton, and my graduate advisor, Joel Kupperman, who had the patience to put up with me learning to be a philosopher. I couldn't have asked for better or more virtuous philosophical exemplars.

Authors'

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From Adam: I'd like to thank my co-author, Chris, first of all, for being a good friend through the years, bringing me on board this project, and tolerating my idiosyncratic writing style and relationship with deadlines. I'd also like to thank my department chair, Dick Miller, for the philosophical companionship, jokes, and institutional support he's joyfully given through the years and during the drafting of this book. To my friends, current and former students, and colleagues around the world: You've been an unforgettable source of support through the whole project, and I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks to the DJs at KMNR, KDHX, WMBR, CBC Radio 3, and Erika for keeping me in good music throughout the process. Thanks to the Giddy Goat, Keen Bean, and Meshuggah Café for renting me a place to write for the unreasonably low price of a cup of coffee (and in the case of Jo's back porch, not even that). And finally, we couldn't have written such a good book without the helpful

suggestions and support of our editors Chad, Jessica, and Michael.

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Introduction

As the authors of this book, we feel strongly about the importance of ethics. Ethics marks off one of the most fascinating — and difficult — aspects of human life. Whether you're a university student who's taking an ethics course and needs some of the theories clarified or you're someone who wants to live a life that's more aligned with what's right, *Ethics For Dummies* is just for you. Philosophy courses on ethics can be pretty stuffy material, but this book tries to cut to the chase and gives you what you need to know while making you smile at the same time.

To take ethics — or the investigation of what *ought* to be — seriously is to engage head on with the question of value. Of course, it also involves jumping into the thick controversy that involves debating what you ought to do and why. Taking ethics on involves applying different answers about what you ought to do to the world you live in. That means thinking about how to interact with other people, animals, perhaps your colleagues at work, and the environment. By the time you're done reading this book, ethics will no longer be mystifying. It will seem like familiar territory.

About This Book

We — your humble authors — are both university professors. Each of us regularly teaches courses on ethics at our colleges. As a result, we're well acquainted with how difficult and frustrating a subject ethics can be for students or other people who know little about the

subject and are approaching it for the first time. We were there once too.

Our first-hand knowledge of the difficulties of teaching ethics puts us in a good position to write this book for you. We've laid out the book in a particular way that helps you get a better grasp on the many topics in ethics that you're likely to study. Basically, we want to translate these sometimes confusing topics into plain English. No matter whether you're taking a college ethics course and need some clarification or you're just taking an interest in this field, we hope our explanations help you grasp the main concepts.

Most importantly, we've arranged this book so you don't need to read it straight through like a novel. Feel free to jump around. You can open up the book wherever you want and start reading. It's written so you can understand any part of it without needing to read the others. At the same time, the book also is arranged in a way that makes it worthwhile to read straight through from start to end. Ethics has many side topics and points that you don't need to fuss with right now, so we give you just the need-to-know information on a topic.

We've also written this book with humor foremost in our minds. Philosophy and ethics can sometimes be dry, so we've done our best to make sure that our book doesn't come across that way. We want *Ethics For Dummies* to be informative and helpful, but we also want it to be enjoyable to read.

Conventions Used in This Book

In our book, we've used a few conventions to help make the text more accessible and easier to read. Consider the following:

We **boldface** the action parts of numbered steps and the keywords of bulleted lists.

We *italicize* new terms and provide definitions of them so you're always in the loop.

We also include some conventions that are strictly ethics related. We tend to gloss over some things in this book in order to get the basic points across and not make things too complicated. So instead of constantly using caveats and pointing your attention to fine print or footnotes at the end of the book, keep in mind the following conventions we use:

The uses of terms like *morality* and *ethics* are typically seen as separate in ethics. We use them interchangeably. To see why, head to Chapter 1.

We wrote this book as if you believe it's important to want to be a better and more ethical person. This is a bit of a slide toward virtue ethics, but studying ethics won't do you much good unless you actually try to implement what you've learned.

We believe that people of all faiths and spiritual belief systems — even those without faith or spiritual beliefs — can join together in a critical discussion of ethical issues and their foundations.

So we didn't write this book for one group or another. Everyone can benefit from reading it.

Occasionally it may seem like we're being preachy or ruling things out too quickly. We usually do this because we're trying to challenge you, not because we're holier-than-thou philosophers. And sometimes it's because we can only stick so many pages between the covers. Trust us, what's in these pages are just the tips of argumentative icebergs.

What You're Not to Read

Because we poured our hearts and souls into this book, we'd love for you to read everything word for word. However, we also know that as a student of ethics, you're likely short on time and want to get what you need and get out. For that reason, we want to tell you upfront that you don't need to read the shaded sidebars that pop up throughout the chapters in this book. They're super-interesting tidbits that we're sure you'll enjoy, and they'll make you more fun at parties, but they aren't necessary to be an ethics whiz kid. It's not unethical to skip them!

Foolish Assumptions

As authors, it's difficult not to make some basic assumptions about the subject you're writing about — and, more importantly, about the readers you're communicating to. So before we started writing, we made the following assumptions, thinking that at least one or more of them were likely true of you:

You may be a student in an undergraduate ethics course and need some clarification of the sometimes confusing topics you're studying. If so, look through the table of contents. You'll notice that it's arranged in a way that makes course referencing easy: You'll see theories, applications, and starting questions. Typically, university syllabi are organized in a similar manner.

You don't know too much about the subject, but you have an informal interest in ethics. We've tried our best to argue as strongly as we can for all the theories within this book — without taking any sides. It's important that you make up your own mind about what's right, so we've tried to stay balanced. (However, that doesn't mean we don't have our favorite theories. In fact, we don't agree about which ethical theory is the best one!)

You're annoyed by some of the crazy stuff going on in the world today and want a way to think about it. If you need a more sophisticated language through which you can express that frustration, we provide it for you.

How This Book Is Organized

If you'd like to get a feel for how we organized this book, the following sections explain the overall aims of each particular part. This overview may help you to get a feel for where you'd like to get started.

Part I: Ethics 101: Just the Basics, Please

Ethics is a big field, so there's a whole lot to talk about! However, because the landscape is so vast, you first need to get your footing by looking at some basic issues and questions that should be addressed before you dive into the more complex stuff. We provide that footing in Part I, looking at the basic question, "What is ethics?" We examine some basic vocabulary and distinctions and ask why being ethical is such a big deal. Finally, we move into a discussion of relativism, which examines whether ethics is true, justified, or just a matter of opinion.

Part II: Uncovering the Roots of Ethics

It's difficult to avoid the fact that when people think of ethics, they want to know whether it fits into a larger context. With this question in mind, in this part we devote chapters to thinking about how ethics and human nature may be related and to the possible connections and misconceptions between ethics and God and ethics and science. We finish the part with a chapter that hashes out the three famous challenges to the idea of ethics.

Part III: Surveying Key Ethical Theories

This part is the meat of the book. We dedicate chapters to each of the central theories in ethics. We start off with