

## Introduction

Should you tell a friend something you've heard about a mutual acquaintance? Would it be rude to address someone by his first name rather than using his title? What does it say about me if I laugh when someone tells a sick joke? Is it snobbish to assume that *New York Times* readers are likely to be better informed than people who prefer the *National Enquirer*? Can I think your beliefs ridiculous while still respecting you as a person?

Questions like these may seem small, but they are the very stuff of everyday ethical life. Books on applied ethics, especially college textbooks, typically discuss the Big Issues—abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, affirmative action, nuclear deterrence, immigration, world poverty, and so on. Such topics are undeniably important. They are the focus of national debates, and the stakes are high; consequently, they have attracted more attention from professional philosophers. But it is the smaller ques-

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tions, the microethical issues, that take up the bulk of whatever time most of us spend in moral reflection and decision making. After all, few people are in a position to sign or commute death sentences, but nearly all of us have to deal regularly with questions such as those mentioned above.

This book contains five studies on topics in everyday ethics: specifically, rudeness, gossip, snobbery, humor, and respect. Each essay is self-contained, but the collection is unified by recurring interlocking themes and a common philosophical approach. Clearly, the number of topics covered could be greater. I chose to write on these particular issues because I find them inherently interesting, and because I hope that what I have to say will be of interest to others.

Some might consider topics such as gossip, rudeness, or snobbery rather trivial, unworthy subjects for philosophical reflection. Aren't philosophers supposed to be engaged in nobler enterprises, like defining the essence of Being or formulating fundamental principles of justice? But this criticism rests on a narrow conception of philosophy as well as a rather unimaginative view of ethics. There are plenty of reasons why the topics discussed here deserve the attention of philosophers.

First, and most obviously, they concern matters that often figure very importantly in our day-to-day lives. Feeling that a colleague has been rude to you, for instance—or even worse, that you have been rude to her—can have a major impact on your mood, on your relationship, and on the way you view your workplace. The dark mood may well persist for some time, coloring all your experiences, incapable of being lifted even by the news that at UCLA they have finally discovered the essence of Being!

Second, our everyday thinking and conduct regarding commonplace matters are the most important indicators, both to

ourselves and to others, of our true moral values and character. Certainly, they count for more than purely hypothetical scenarios in which we imagine how we would handle terrible dilemmas involving lifeboats, terrorists, deathbed promises, or runaway trains. Thought experiments involving extraordinary situations are a standard device used by ethicists to clarify some issues, and they can undoubtedly be useful. But their distance from everyday life is a drawback. They place abstract moral principles in sharp relief but lose the grainy complexity of real-life decision making. One of the points that regularly emerges from the following inquiries is just how complex everyday moral life can be, how many factors, how many variables we have to take into account at times. Given this complexity, our ability much of the time to negotiate more or less satisfactorily the moral problems we encounter is really quite remarkable.

Third, reflecting on quotidian ethical issues often yields insights into the character of our society, the trends we are part of, the assumptions we take for granted, the ideals we cherish, and the contradictory commitments we may harbor. Applying philosophy to everyday life offers an unusual but valuable window on cultural phenomena. It is one of the ways that philosophy can perform its Hegelian function of grasping its own time in thought, one of the ways in which, as a culture, we can try to become more self-aware.

One thing linking all five essays is that to a greater or lesser extent each of them challenges common sense. In my view, some of what passes for common sense on everyday ethical issues is confused, simplistic, or unthinkingly narrow and conventional. We all tend to wish that things were simpler and more clear-cut than they really are, so we often favor universal principles, unconditional

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rules, and blanket judgments. We repeat these thoughtlessly, no matter how absurd. “If you can’t say something nice about someone, don’t say anything at all.” (So don’t report that arsonist to the police.) “Don’t do anything you’d be ashamed to tell your mother.” (Even though the shame you feel may be a neurotic effect of your mother’s Puritanism.) “Do to others what you would have them do to you.” (So if you would enjoy being groped by others, it’s fine for you to grope them.)

Especially popular are blanket condemnations: Never talk about someone behind his back. Never laugh at another person’s misfortune. Never speak ill of the dead. Never tell lies. Following such principles rigidly would certainly make moral life simpler in some ways, but that is a weak argument in their favor since circumstances often call for sensitive and discriminating responses rather than slavish obedience to universal rules. Practical moral wisdom means recognizing complexities, not spray painting over them with crude precepts. Most people recognize this in practice, even if they still pay lip service to the rules in an abstract way.

That being said, I concede that in these studies I, too, will sometimes take a conventional, widely accepted moral principle for granted. In the essay on gossip, for instance, I assume without argument that telling malicious lies about other people is wrong. But this approach is defensible, I believe, for two main reasons. First, the moral tenets being assumed are, in my view, fairly easy to defend as conducive to individual and social well-being; and second, in inquiries of the sort attempted here, some kind of stable framework is necessary. I would not claim that every normative assumption made is beyond challenge. But my purpose is not to rethink our morality from the ground up. It is, rather, to look at places where some of our moral conclusions do not sit well with each other or with other values we uphold, and to sug-

gest ways in which loosening our moral corsets might enable us to breathe more freely.

Language itself sometimes stands in the way of a more nuanced approach, and this is one place where philosophical analysis can be helpful. Words are like labels: they are useful, a helpful shorthand; but often we slap them on things carelessly and then assume no further analysis is needed. We call someone a “snob” or we describe a joke as “sick,” and the act of labeling encourages us to think we have advanced our understanding. It also settles whether the thing in question is naughty or nice. In their ordinary usage words like “gossiping” or “snobbery” are inherently pejorative: when we apply them to an action or an attitude, we unavoidably convey disapproval. This can make it harder to achieve both a more precise, analytical understanding of the concepts in question and a more open-minded appraisal of the sort of behavior they describe. In some cases the critical character of the word can blind us to the positive qualities of the behavior.

Philosophical analysis at times involves trying to remove the label in order to examine the thing in question closely without letting the label dictate one’s findings in advance. Afterwards, we may favor a more discriminating labeling system, one that, say, distinguishes between different kinds of disrespect, or between acceptable and unacceptable forms of rudeness. Philosophical analysis also attends to the labels themselves, and in some of the essays I try to construct more precise definitions of the key concepts. This enterprise can be valuable, I believe, even when a fully satisfactory definition turns out to be elusive. Philosophical definitions are very different from those found in a dictionary. The dictionary tells us how a word is generally used; but a philosophical definition tries to draw the boundaries of a concept, showing what falls under it and what does not. Of course, the boundaries of moral concepts are not

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sharp the way those of mathematical concepts are. And, as Aristotle says, we should not look for a degree of precision beyond what is appropriate to our subject matter. All the same, striving for as much precision as we can manage is a fruitful methodology. The sort of intense scrutiny it requires can yield a whole world of unexpected insights into our language, values, history, culture, and ideals.

The analyses I offer are primarily philosophical. Their chief goal is to clarify the nature and meaning of key concepts, to articulate arguments, evaluate ethical standpoints, and support specific conclusions. They are not intended to be value-free or value-neutral. They are normative in the sense that they can be used to appraise what people think, say, and do. But they are intended to take us beyond the rather crude assumptions underlying everyday moral discourse and make room for the possibility that what are commonly deemed moral failings may sometimes be acceptable or even praiseworthy.

Much of the existing scholarship on the topics covered here has been undertaken by historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and other social scientists or culture critics. This research is tremendously interesting, and my own thinking is certainly informed by it. However, a philosophical perspective that demands close attention to the meaning of terms and the logic of arguments while articulating and defending explicit value judgments can, I hope, offer a valuable supplement to these more empirical approaches.

Normative ethics offers moral judgments on people and their behavior; it is willing to assert that things are good, bad, right, wrong, acceptable, unjustified, and so on. Some readers may be automatically dubious about this kind of enterprise, and to explain why I do not share their misgivings, some account of my general philosophical outlook may be helpful here.

Philosophy, including normative ethics, is not science, not even social science; but its claims can still be judged according to criteria of reasonableness. They will usually fall short of certainty, but to be dissatisfied with the less-than-certain is unreasonable, a hangover from the idea that philosophy should deal only with a priori knowledge, with propositions that are necessarily and universally true. Conclusions that are probable, plausible, useful, or insightful are worth seeking and are often the best we can hope for.

Reasonableness, in ethics as in science, is primarily a matter of coherence. How well does a particular claim fit in with all of our other beliefs, practices, and commitments? From this point of view, the difference between descriptive claims and normative claims—the so-called fact-value gap—while useful and important in some contexts, should not be viewed as absolute. We call scientific claims “true” when they cohere with our other beliefs about nature—in other words, when they are reasonable in light of all our other beliefs. We judge moral claims in essentially the same way. Contemporary flat-earthists and contemporary advocates of slavery are refuted by similar means: their views are shown to be glaringly at odds with a framework of other beliefs that have become (or that we think should become) widely accepted.

Morality, in my view, is not some special nonnatural domain. It is a human invention, although as a number of recent studies in evolutionary ethics have suggested, it probably has its roots in our evolutionary heritage. For the most part, moral systems were not consciously designed with particular ends in mind; they emerged naturally, and those that helped their societies to thrive tended to be selected in. Within recorded history, moral revolutionaries like Moses, the Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, and Muhammad sought more or less consciously to construct new ethical systems. They

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did so with certain goals in mind, and in most cases viewed the moral rules they proposed as reflecting a divine will. This divine sanction justified viewing the rules as objectively correct; it also provided people with a motive to abide by them.

The Enlightenment secularized our view of morality but sought to uphold the objective status and binding force of moral principles by seeing them as dictates of Reason rather than divine commandments. Since the eighteenth century the secularization of our culture has proceeded apace, and this has made possible a more relativistic view of reason and a more flexible conception of morality. Of course, there are plenty of religious believers who still think that the moral precepts they favor express God's will. The more traditional among them even hold that we have a duty to make our society mirror some divinely ordained ideal. But a thoroughly secular approach sees things differently. Morality is a tool. It is a set of values, beliefs, principles, practices, and ideals that we use to help promote certain personal and social goals. Naturally, people can and do sometimes disagree over what these goals should be. Fascists will sacrifice individual rights to achieve a certain kind of political state; liberals see the state as serving to guarantee basic individual rights. Some people posit ideals of nonviolence and brotherly love; others value rugged individualism and the frontier spirit. But wherever there is common ground, there is room for reasoned discussion, and we can entertain some hope that, in the long term, people's fundamental values will tend to converge.

We cannot demonstrate the correctness of our basic values or ultimate ideals to those who do not share our assumptions. All we can do is articulate them as clearly as possible, offer attractive pictures of what we consider an admirable society and an enviable lifestyle, and compare these to others that are avail-

able. But the situation is not really different in the domain of scientific knowledge. Darwinians cannot *prove* the theory of evolution to dyed-in-the-wool creationists who insist that only what conforms to a literal interpretation of the Bible can be true. All they can do is point to what they see as the desirable consequences of adopting an evolutionist perspective: for instance, satisfying explanations of diverse phenomena, better predictions about future observations, and beneficial spin-offs in agriculture, medicine, and environmental science. We can, if we wish, call those who reject science “irrational” and those who reject modern liberal values “immoral.” But these labels are not arguments; they merely mark the place where debate on the basis of shared assumptions gives out.

The normative standpoint underlying these essays is unexceptional and broadly utilitarian. I believe our ultimate goal should be a world in which unnecessary suffering is minimized and where most people live interesting, fulfilling lives, enjoying the security of basic rights, opportunities for pursuing their chosen goals, plenty of leisure, diverse pleasures, and the well-being that comes from participating in a vibrant culture and belonging to a supportive community. For anyone who shares something like this ideal, moral issues generally boil down to the question of whether pursuing a course of action, adopting a public policy, being a certain kind of person, cultivating certain attitudes, and so on, will help or hinder its realization.

From this utilitarian perspective, I offer analyses that bring out some of the unrecognized merits and benefits of what are often viewed as moral failings. Some benefits may be immediate and concern only the agents involved: gossiping, for instance, can be therapeutic; rudeness can be an effective educational strategy. Other benefits come indirectly and concern society at large. Sick

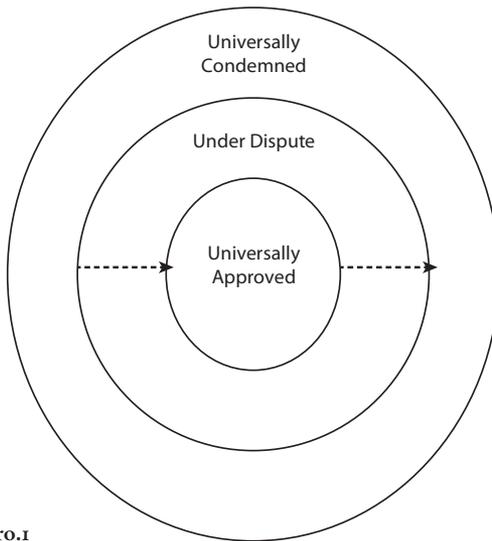
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humor can be viewed as the sharp edge of an important instrument of social criticism; withholding respect from certain beliefs may be a necessary move in the ongoing struggle to build a more rational society. Quite often, as Adam Smith pointed out, what is commonly viewed as a private vice may be a public virtue.

The perspectives I offer can hardly be considered a “reevaluation of all values.” Part of my purpose, though, certainly is to shake up some of our default opinions and conventional wisdom on the issues discussed. And in doing so I hope that we can become not just more self-critical but also, paradoxically, more forgiving, both of ourselves and of others. For we live in interesting times, and this makes everyday moral life more complicated than it is in societies where the rules and the social roles are relatively fixed and not subject to critical questioning.

One can imagine a society’s moral beliefs and values as represented by three concentric rings. Inside the inner circle lies whatever is almost universally accepted or praised; within the outer band lies whatever is generally condemned. In contemporary America, for instance, freedom of worship, universal education, and virtues like generosity or courage would fall within the inner circle; slavery and bullying would be plotted in the outer zone. In ancient Israel, the inner circle would contain, among other things, monotheism, capital punishment for murderers, and virtues like generosity or courage; the outer circle would contain such things as homosexuality, the eating of pork, and bullying.

The middle band is the domain of moral controversy. Here the beliefs are in motion, some moving outwards from acceptability to unacceptability, others moving in the opposite direction. Since the Second World War, for instance, interracial relationships have become increasingly accepted while corporal punishment has come to be increasingly condemned. In stable,



**Figure Intro.1**

tradition-based societies, this middle band is relatively narrow and any movement across it tends to be slow. There is less that is morally controversial, and changes in attitudes can take generations. In dynamic modern societies, by contrast, owing to the influence of forces such as technological innovation and cultural pluralism, the middle band is much wider and the movement across it can be surprisingly fast. Witness the changes in attitude within Western society over the past one hundred years on issues relating to such matters as sex, the workplace, relations between spouses, or relations between children and adults.

The practice of philosophical reflection and criticism is one of the forces that can broaden this middle band. Such reflection is, in turn, prompted by and feeds on issues that have become controversial, questions to which traditional answers no longer seem adequate. The process is not painless. The wider the domain

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and the faster the changes in attitudes, the more uncertainty and anxiety people are likely to feel regarding moral issues. But this anxiety, while uncomfortable, should be welcomed rather than lamented. It inevitably accompanies the critique of traditional authorities and conventional wisdom, and the movement toward a more self-aware, self-critical culture that this critique makes possible.

A common response to our ethically interesting times and the anxieties they induce is to play it safe. One way of doing this is simply to abide by traditional conventions. Another way is to opt for doing nothing over doing something. Another way is to follow some general principle rigidly, almost blindly. Yet playing it safe is not always the most admirable or fruitful course of action. To be sure, a fuller, freer engagement with a world in which categories, terminologies, expectations, and norms are in constant flux inevitably means that one will make mistakes. Lines will be crossed, traditions challenged, conventions violated, sensibilities offended. But those who never risk sinning are not entitled to cast stones. When we make a mistake, we should not assume that this reveals a morally tainted soul. It could just be that we are understandably confused at times because moral navigation in a complex and rapidly changing world is difficult. So we should combine a commitment to rigorous thinking with a willingness to be forgiving when we slip up. And we should remember, thinking holistically, to be grateful that we live at a time when this sort of confusion is possible.