Ethical thinking today seems to be seriously “stuck.” Abortion, capital punishment, animal rights—on issue after issue we hear only the extremes. Some people feel that their values are so obviously right that they doubt the other side even has any values. Certainly there is little interest in understanding the other side—as if there have to be two and only two views on such questions in the first place.

Yet we are not so stuck in other areas of life. Every public library has rack after rack of books about how to make intelligent choices when it comes to jobs or health or family finance or home decorating. We know how to compromise when necessary and find our ways around practical roadblocks. Product designers are trained in creative problem-solving. Elementary schools even teach peer conflict resolution.

The premise of this book is that we do not need to be so stuck in ethics either. Especially not in ethics, where the effects on our own lives and on the lives of others may be profound and permanent.

The aim of this book is therefore to offer you the skills—the tools—to make more creative and constructive thinking possible in ethics as well. You should leave this book better able to understand what is at stake with moral issues, quicker to seek out the factual or conceptual or imaginative resources you need to make progress on them, and better able to contribute constructively, in both word and deed, to the ongoing debate about them.

In a word, this book is meant as a contribution to your ethical intelligence—recognizing, as psychologists are now telling us, that “intelligence” takes many forms besides the mere recall of facts. A well-rounded and effective person needs them all.

It takes some work—skills usually do. But the rewards are great as well. Besides, it will turn out that we have many of the necessary skills already, though we can improve all of them too. Most of them apply in other areas of life as well. The key thing is to put them to work in ethics.
The Ethics of Ethics

Another remarkable thing about our ethical debates today is that they are seldom carried on in an ethical way.

We know that we really ought to listen to other people. We know that we ought not to act out of impatience or anger or indifference or prejudice. We know that we ought to take special care when making decisions that deeply affect not only our own lives but the lives of many others too. This is what ethics itself requires.

Yet nowhere do we fail to do this so flagrantly as in debates about ethical issues. It’s a melancholy but familiar story. We don’t listen; we let prejudice take the place of thinking—so it goes. This is one reason ethical debates are often “stuck” in the first place.

So there are two good reasons to improve our ethical toolbox. One is that we may be able to get certain issues “unstuck.” The other is that using these tools is an ethical act itself. Learning to listen, thinking creatively about problems, seeking common ground when we can—putting these and the other tools to use is both practical and right.

The Toolbox

The first part of the book—Parts I through V, Chapters 1 through 15—make up the Toolbox proper.

In Part I we are Getting Started. Ethics can be, in the first place, a learning experience—the theme of Chapter 1. We need to start by seriously acknowledging that we alone are not likely to have the whole and only truth. We need to be willing to take some time and care to think about moral issues that come up, rather than sticking to our first reaction come what may. And we need to think critically about our own views too, even though we might rather just “agree to disagree” any time difficult issues come up.

Chapter 2 explores the relation between ethics and religion. Religion plays a major role in shaping and sustaining moral values, but we also need to clarify its limits. We need to think for ourselves—indeed we can’t avoid it. This turns out to be a biblical lesson too. The patriarch Abraham actually took it upon himself to argue with God—and God not only listened but approved!

Part II turns to Values. Chapter 3 offers some guidelines for unpacking moral issues. Chapter 4 gets one step more formal by classifying moral values into three different basic families, which also allows us to identify a variety of different ways that moral values come into conflict.

Traditional ethical theories systematize and extend each of the three families of moral values. In Chapter 5 we examine the three major theoretical traditions in turn, considered more or less by themselves. Each gives us a way of articulating certain kinds of values more deeply; each has its own history and appeal.

But moral values conflict—what then? Chapter 6 offers an overview of theoretical approaches. Some theories propose a common measure by which all moral values can be weighed against each other. Other theories propose to prioritize moral values according to various standards. Each theoretical approach also has its limits, and they tend to be fierce critics of each other too.

We can also approach conflict more practically. When moral values conflict we are often tempted to think that only one side can be right. Usually, though, both (all) sides are right about something. Instead of trying to decide who’s right and who’s wrong, then, it is often wiser to ask what each side is right about.

From there we can ask what kind of common ground or (at least) common understanding we might be able to reach. Chapter 7 offers some tools along these lines—tools for “integrating values.”


Chapter 9 concerns language: how to keep our terms neutral enough that we can see the issue without being swayed by half-conscious overtones; how to specify definitions when terms are unclear; and how to (try to) define a term whose meaning is contested.

Chapter 10’s challenge is to “judge like cases alike.” Our moral reasons in one case usually bear on many other cases. But if they really are good and sufficient reasons in the one case, they should be equally good and sufficient in any other relevantly similar case. Are they? What if we’re not willing to go quite that far? We may need to do some adjusting all around. That is part of what ongoing ethical thinking is all about.

Part IV offers some Tools for Creativity in Ethics. Moral debates often get stuck because we can’t think of any good options. But are there really no good options? More often than we think, I suggest, the limits really lie in our own imaginations. So we need the tools to imagine other options (Chapter 11). More radically, we can also ask how the whole problem might be shifted (Chapter 12) so that we can prevent it from coming up at all in the future, or at least from coming up so often and in so difficult a form. You may discover that ethical creativity can take us a lot farther than we usually think.

In Part V we are Putting Ethics into Action. Chapter 13 outlines a way to use the toolbox as a whole when approaching ethical issues. Much depends on our goals in coming to ethics in the first place—for our goals determine the appropriate tools in turn. Exploring an issue calls for one set of tools, making a constructive contribution to an ethical debate calls for another, and actually deciding a question calls for still others. There is specific advice here on writing a paper in ethics as well.

Chapter 14 specifically discusses ethics and/as dialogue. This may be puzzling. We all know how to talk already, don’t we? Just open your mouth! But we are not so good at having a constructive discussion—identifying shared values, brainstorming better possibilities together. Once again, these more
collaborative and constructive skills are not so unfamiliar, at least in theory, but we still need a lot of practice putting them to work.

Chapter 15 concerns ethics as service. Many schools are just beginning to recognize service as itself a form of learning—as when we speak of “service-learning” not as a combination of two different things but as one kind of activity. Ethics does ask us to be of service to others and to our communities and the world, yes, but what we may discover is that service is not just a way of changing the world but also a way in which the world changes us.

Applications

Part VI—Chapters 16 through 19—discusses some Contemporary Debates: sexuality; abortion; business and professional ethics; and poverty and welfare.

As you'd expect, each chapter explores the issue at hand, laying out a bit of its background and history and some of the relevant values. These chapters serve in part as introductions to the debates as they stand. But these chapters have another aim as well. Standard texts at this point explore a range of contending points of views between which students are invited to choose. In this book, however, although some contending views are usually introduced, I proceed in quite a different way. The aim is not so much to enter the controversy but to make some progress on it. The aim is to illustrate the toolbox in action—to show you how to use it in real-life practice, in useful and perhaps unexpected ways, and thereby to show you how just how powerful it can actually be.

It turns out that even the most painful and “stuck” moral debates—even the abortion debate, for the most notable example—are open to the constructive use of our tools. In fact, no moral debate is really so stuck that a little creativity or integrative thinking can't open it up again. There are ways that you—yes, you—can make a real contribution.

Finally, Part VII considers what some philosophers call The Expanding Circle: the possible extension or expansion of ethics to include other animals (Chapter 20) and nature itself (Chapter 21).

We may be living in a time of genuine moral revolution. The traditional restriction of ethical attention to human relations with other humans is under fire. Activists and philosophers are arguing that we have obligations not just to each other, but to the other-than-human beings who share our lives and with whom we co-inhabit this world. We may even have obligations to that world itself, quite apart from what good it does us. But how shall we understand these obligations? Where do they come from? Do they represent a new kind of value, for example? And how far do they go?

Serious questions—quite probably the key moral questions of the first part of the twenty-first century. It's fitting that they close this book.

The chapters in parts VI and VII are somewhat longer than those in the preceding parts of the book. There is more to cover, and even these chapters offer just the barest outlines. All of these chapters also offer readings, short essays or stories by others. Don't overlook the exercises and notes too, which often contain additional substantive points or suggestions as well.

Bon Voyage

This is a thick book, and much of it may well be challenging. Many of the tools it offers will be familiar, but they are not often put to use in ethics. Even the familiar ones may need improvement. The mere possibility of hope, meanwhile, when a question is hotly debated and maybe painful, is sometimes hard to sustain. Analyzing arguments may seem too daunting, or too cold-blooded. And listening—actually listening—when others seem only to rant and rave takes a major leap of faith.

So it may take a while to discover the value of some of these tools. On the other hand, most of them are familiar, at least in some areas. Some of them also have immediate and obvious attractions. Take that as at least a place to start. Just don’t forget that all of these tools really go together. At least sometimes, take the leap. Use the whole toolbox. Once you discover how many possibilities there are even in the most stuck debate, I hope you'll use it all the time!
I

GETTING
STARTED
CHAPTE R 1

Ethics as a Learning Experience

THE NEED FOR OPEN MINDS

It takes an open mind to learn and to grow. The world is seldom as simple as it seems at first—there's always more to find out.

This is no news, I'm sure. Yet when it comes to moral values we sometimes hear a different story. Here, all too often, we're supposed to know what we think already, and we're supposed to stick to it come what may. To talk about moral complexity or compromise, or to be curious about other moral views, makes you sound (to some people) spineless, "wishy-washy," practically immoral already.

It's not. Ethics concerns some of the hardest and most complex of our choices. Here, surely, most of the time at least, we need to listen, to keep at least a somewhat open mind. Otherwise doggedness is likely to blind us, to make us insensitive and unresponsive. Even a few new facts might change everything. We do not want to end up like the person Mark Twain once described as "so full of what's right that he can't see what's good." Open the door a crack or two.

Besides, even the firmest conviction in no way guarantees rightness. Every bad cause has firm convictions behind it too. Slavery, exclusion, the savage exploitation of other people and animals and the land—every one of the evils that calls forth such memorable courage in its opponents was and often still is defended, firmly and courageously too, by others. Ethics must ask more than that. Some sense of openness, some willingness to learn and change, is necessary too.

The Role of Feelings

Feeling right does not guarantee rightness either. Feeling is part of the story, yes. Care, concern, passion—these are what make ethics so engaging and so compelling. Feelings may also alert us to moral problems that we might otherwise paper over with excuses. Often it's feelings that really start moral revolutions—the arguments come later.

Still, we must also examine and temper our feelings too, even the strongest feelings. Take prejudice. To be prejudiced is to have a strong negative feeling
about someone who is of a different ethnicity or gender or age or social class (or . . .) from yourself. If ethics were just a matter of feelings, there would be nothing to say against such prejudices. It would be perfectly ethical to discriminate against people you don't like.

Ethics asks us to challenge those feelings instead. "Prejudice" literally means "pre-judgment": it is one way of not really paying attention. But we need to pay attention. We need to ask why we feel as we do, whether our beliefs and feelings are true or fair, how we would feel in the other person's shoes, and so on. Only by working these feelings through, carefully, can we begin to recognize their limits, and then if necessary change them.

It's not that we can't ever trust our instincts—it's that we can't only trust our instincts. There must be some give and take between ethics and feelings. We need a more open-ended attitude, more critical and analytical at times too, tolerant of ambiguity, not so quick to judge or to jump.

It is in this spirit that ethics approaches controversial issues of the day. We care for other animals, for instance. But we also use many of them for food, shoes, chemical tests, even as objects of sport. Should all of this stop? No? Well, should any of it stop? Probably. So what kinds of use of other animals should stop and what kinds should not? Why? How do you decide?

Questions like these cannot be adequately answered by consulting your preexisting feelings. There are too many different possibilities, too many different "uses," too many different opinions and prejudices (on all sides) that need to be carefully sorted out. Again, it takes some time and care. Ethics is the space for precisely that.

**Ethical Learning**

I ask my students what they've learned about moral values in the last few years. A few say that very little has changed for them. More say that not so much has changed yet, but they're looking forward to it. Most say that they have changed, ethically, sometimes in ways they could never have predicted. Students who were strongly pro-life find themselves in an abortion clinic with

**Dogmatism**

Dogmatists are people who are unshakably committed to one answer to an ethical question, or perhaps to all ethical questions. They may appear to listen (or not), but they will not change their minds. Name "their" issue (or perhaps any issue), and they know the answer already.

Dogmatists don't necessarily agree—which is a bit ironic. One dogmatist is sure that capital punishment is ordained by God and deters thousands of would-be murderers from pulling the trigger. The next dogmatist may be equally sure that capital punishment is detested by God and useless or worse as a deterrent. And so it goes. Dogmatists on one side do not seem to give pause to dogmatists on the other. If anything they become even more entrenched in their own views.

If dogmatists agree about anything, it's that careful and open-ended thinking about ethical issues is not necessary. After all, if you already know the answer, there is no need to think about it. If you need to argue for your position, you admit that it needs defending, which is to say that people can legitimately have doubts. But that can't be true: you already know that your position is the only right one. Therefore, any reasoned argument for your
Avoiding Dogmatism

Here are some strategies for avoiding dogmatism.

Whenever you find yourself insisting too strongly on some view of your own, try to stop yourself and really listen to the “other side.” You do not always have to be stating your own views front and center.

Imagine that you're an anthropologist or psychologist studying other people’s views. Just consider what they’re saying without immediately thinking of your responses to it. What sort of world do these people live in? How does it hang together? How can their views seem so simple and obvious to them (just as yours do to you)? Later on you can kick in your own views and compare them. First just give yourself a little space to listen.

Another useful strategy is to seek out arguments for the other side(s). One way that dogmatic views ensure themselves long lives is by systematically avoiding the other side’s arguments. Only the other side’s conclusions are registered. This person is for (or against) capital punishment, let's say, and that's all a dogmatist needs to know. He doesn't ask why; he's not interested. . . .

To look at the reasons for other and opposed positions both helps you understand the positions better, and may begin to introduce some more complex thinking. Very often I hear people say, in amazement, something like

There really are reasons for ________!

(fill in the blank with whatever position they previously despised)
Amazing but true: people don’t just hold views that differ from our own out of sheer perversity or ignorance. I guess it’s to our credit that when we discover this we tend to be surprised and intrigued. The world seems a little bigger than it did before. Again this is an “obvious” thing that we don’t really “know” quite well enough.

It pays to adjust your language as well. Instead of categorical statements of opinion, especially bumper-sticker-style slogans (“Meat is murder”; “It’s Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve”; etc., etc.), try to speak in a way that is less categorical and final. Very few reasonable moral positions can be shoe-horned into a bumper-sticker, clever as the slogan might be—and besides, this way of putting things polarizes views and makes the other side seem stupid and misled. Don’t call names either (“You animal-rights fanatics . . .”; “You Bible-thumpers . . .”). Avoid the easy labels (“liberal,” “right-wing,” . . .).

Language leads the mind. Speaking in an open-ended way will help you begin to think in an open-ended way as well. Certainly it will create quite different conversations. Typically one dogmatic statement just provokes an equal and opposite dogmatic statement. Speak differently and not only your mind but your discussions may open up differently, and more constructively too!

Halberstam again:

Don’t elevate your every whim into a conviction. Having an opinion is one thing, delivering the Ten Commandments is something else. Intellectual honesty demands that unless you’re a bona fide expert in the field, a hint of tentativeness should accompany all your views and decisions. Indeed, a hint of uncertainty is appropriate even if you are an authority. Here’s a simple device to ensure that you have the proper humility when offering your opinion: When you speak, imagine that an expert is sitting right across from you. Now offer that opinion.

**Offhand Self-justification**

I offer a view in an ethical discussion. Someone challenges me. My natural first reaction is to defend whatever it was I just said, even if the challenge is exactly on target.

This is **offhand self-justification**: a kind of automatic excuse-making or defensiveness, or what we sometimes call “rationalizing.” I may not even get to the point of asking if the challenge actually is on target or not. Indeed, that’s the idea. I’d rather not. Self-defense is all that counts. I try to paper over my uncertainties (or insecurities, or half-knowledge, or wishful thinking) by grabbing for some excuse, and any excuse will do. “It’s OK to cheat the phone company, because . . . because, well, everyone else does it too . . . because the phone company cheats you . . . because . . .”

**Resisting Offhand Self-justification**

There are no surefire ways to avoid rationalizing. It takes a kind of self-confidence, honesty, and maturity that develop slowly, and even then we seldom escape the temptation entirely. Sometimes it’s hard to recognize an offhand self-justification when it is right in front of our eyes. Yet there are some useful strategies for overcoming the urge.

Remind yourself how self-defeating it is. Making excuses only allows us to go on with some questionable behavior until we get into worse trouble. It may even be worse than merely hanging on to one unintelligent opinion. When we rationalize, we saddle ourselves with more and more unintelligent opinions—new ones invented, off the top of the head, to patch up the holes in the old ones. But the new ones are likely to be full of holes too. It’s not a winning game.

**Ethics as a Learning Experience**

Asked for your reasons, you should give them. There is nothing wrong with trying to defend yourself. The problem lies with the offhand or automatic spirit (or, more accurately, spiritlessness) of the defense. Once again, it’s an excuse for not really thinking.

S: Of course the death penalty deters murders. It’s a proven fact that murder rates are lower in states with the death penalty.

A: I’m not so sure about that. My understanding is that most states with the death penalty have higher murder rates.

S: Well, you can prove anything with numbers.

S initially appeals to “numbers,” comparative murder rates, to support her position. Challenged, though, she does not reconsider her position or explore other possibilities. She just dismisses any studies that disagree with what she believes—and in the process manages to dismiss the very numbers she herself just cited. But she doesn’t even notice. You can tell that nothing will change for her. In the next discussion she’ll be right back citing the same “proven fact” again.

**Learning Experience 15**

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Watch yourself. Step a little more slowly the next time you find yourself casting about for some excuse to put questions to rest. You may stop a little sooner to ask whether you really are justified in the first place.

Watch for that telltale anger or irritation at being challenged. We often find ourselves becoming irritated or angry when our especially precious excuses are too persistently or effectively challenged by someone else. But of course, we get angry at the person challenging us, rather than considering that we might be at fault for making an offhand excuse in the first place. Anger at someone else keeps us from having to be angry at ourselves. Better take the irritation as a warning sign.
Avoid the automatic counterattack. Again, watch yourself. Listening to someone else, are you trying to understand, or just waiting to give your comeback? Are you trying to “win,” or to learn? Watch your voice tone: are you conveying ridicule, irritation? Take a time-out if you need it. Give yourself some space to think.

**Relativism**

“It’s all relative,” we sometimes say. What’s right for you may not be right for me. Mind your own business. Don’t criticize. Any moral opinion is as good as the next.

This attitude is a form of relativism (though this is a broad and tricky term—see the discussion in the box to follow). It begins with the simple observation that different individuals and societies sometimes have different moral values. Some societies tolerate homeless populations running into the millions, for example, while in other societies the very idea of allowing even one person to be homeless, whatever the cause, is shameful, unthinkable. Some societies condemn sex between unmarried young people; others approve and encourage it.

Relativists go on to conclude that no one single standard is “right.” There’s something to this. At least, it’s mind opening to look at other points of view, and moral matters are complex enough that no one point of view is likely to have a monopoly on the truth. Besides, sometimes we need to assert our right to do as we please, even if others think we are making a big mistake. This is one of relativism’s chief uses in practice: making a space for us to figure things out for ourselves.

But relativists go much farther. From our differences about moral values they conclude that there is no legitimate basis for arguing about them at all. It’s all just opinion, and one opinion is as good as another. And here, though relativism may appear to be the very model of open-mindedness, it actually has just the opposite effect. It begins to close our minds instead.

**U:** I support the death penalty. I believe that it saves lives because it makes murderers think twice before killing someone. As the Bible says, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

**V:** I don’t agree.

**U:** Why?

**V:** I just don’t. That’s my opinion and it’s as good as yours!

Maybe that’s a little blatant, but you get the idea. Here relativism slides right into offhand self-justification. V treats it like a magic key to escape any kind of thinking whatsoever. She cannot be bothered to offer any reasons, let alone engage U’s.
In fact, all opinions on this and most moral subjects require further thinking. Are U's arguments good ones? What values stand on the other side? What are V's reasons against the death penalty? Is the death penalty really a deterrent? Doesn't the Bible also tell us not to kill? Whether values are "relative" or not, there is no way out of some good hard thinking.

Minding Our Own Business

There is another practical problem with relativism—again, even if values really do differ, maybe even fundamentally.

Ethics often concerns matters that affect us all. Take pollution. If the air is polluted, it doesn't merely affect the polluters. If we spend money on pollution clean-up and prevention, on the other hand, we can't spend that money on other things, perhaps better things, maybe again for all of us. For some people it could be a life-or-death matter however we decide. The same goes for issues like professional ethics, abortion and assisted suicide, other animals, and many others.

None of these is just our "own" business. Other people's lives and health and possibilities are at stake too. These matters—basic moral issues—are everyone's business.

The relativist's stock phrase "Mind your own business" is therefore an antisocial response. It not only avoids thinking on the relativist's part: it also refuses to acknowledge that on issues like these, however much we differ, we still need to work out some way of going on together.

D: I oppose legal abortion.

E: Why don't you just mind your own business? Like the slogan says, if you're against abortion, then don't have one!

But there is more to it than this. If some of us practice abortion and some do not, the result is a society in which abortion is practiced. The rest of us have to stand for it, at least insofar as we have to stand aside. Likewise, if some of us pollute and some don't, the result is pollution for everyone. In such matters, we cannot act as though everyone can simply do as they please without anyone else being affected.

Some philosophers argue that this is the very point of ethics: to help us arrive at certain standards that we all are to live by when all of us are affected by each other's behavior. Some philosophers even depart from this point to build a theory of ethics. On this view, ethics is precisely for those cases where "Mind your own business!" doesn't work as an approach to a problem. Instead, we need to work things out together. Keep an open mind: stay in touch and keep talking. That is nothing less than ethics itself in practice.