Anthropological Realism

Anthropological Realism:

Ethics for a Global World

By

Stephen J. A. Ward
and Clifford G. Christians

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

PREFACE

STEPHEN J. A. WARD

Some time ago, Professor Christians and I found ourselves converging on a common perspective about the state of media ethics as both a discipline and as a guide for practice.

As a discipline, media ethics tended to lack a strong theoretical basis and interest, and therefore studies, articles, and books could be conceptually weak or unoriginal. Authors borrowed a principle or idea from ethical theory, such as Mill's general happiness principle or Kant's categorical imperative, and applied it to an issue. The principle was not challenged or reformulated. The writing did not indicate an awareness of the criticisms of the principle in philosophy, ethics, and elsewhere. At other times, simplistic presentations of complex ethical views were quickly presented and placed into rivalry: teleology versus deontology, Kant's duty ethics versus Mill's utilitarianism, or virtue theory versus consequentialism. That these dualisms might be questionable was not discussed. For example, it was not noted that Kant did not discount entirely the pursuit of happiness, and his deontology contained large dollops of stoic virtue theory; or, that John Rawls, often quoted as the modern deontologist par excellence, said a deontological ethic that did not consider the consequences of its adoption was irrational. Although principles of justice are primary, a full and proper ethic must find a "congruence" between justice and the good, between duty and good consequences.[1]

At its worst, this ethics lite approach made the history of moral theory a Madame Tussaud museum of stock figures. Of

course, there were (and are) excellent works that showed theoretical depth and insight but they were too few in number.

A second source of concern was the parochialism of morality in society, both in our thinking and in our practices. Moral parochialism—the view that we ought to make our local and national values primary in life and in theory—seemed increasingly out of place in a global world. Moral globalism—the view that global values and principles of humanity should be primary—needed to become the theoretical basis for a global ethics. It should ground ethical thought in many domains such as in media and communications.

We were also disenchanted with the state of moral theory per se. Progress in moral theory was being prevented by unproductive dualisms which, like the trench warfare of the First World War, saw little gain or retreat but a continual conflict over the same patch of ground. Moral theory textbooks chopped up the terrain into realism versus anti-realism, cognitivism versus non-cognitivism, absolutism versus relativism, discovery versus invention, and consequentialism versus non-consequentialism. Yet it seemed to us that better, more inclusive positions lie somewhere between the poles of these opposing theories where, for example, emotion and cognition are both part of moral experience, not dualistic rivals; or the fact that morality is a human invention does not make it less real than things discovered in nature. We were encouraged by the appearance of new hybrid forms of ethical and philosophical thinking.

Over the course of the last decade or so, Professor Christians and I, along with others, set out to address these concerns. With regard to the first concern, we wrote more about the theory behind media ethics and encouraged others to do so, while including theory in teaching. With regard to the second concern, both of us and a cohort of forward-looking academic colleagues and media practitioners around the world began holding conferences

and workshops at the turn of the present century to discuss how to construct a global media ethics. At first, the idea of a global media ethics struck some as either impossible or a conceptual contradiction, given the parochial nature of media work. But then serious issues surrounding global media arose. Misinformation and toxic, intolerant discourse began to taint social media and global public channels of information. The trends continue to threaten democracies and egalitarian societies. Consequently, the notion of global media ethics became accepted and has evolved into a recognized discipline. [2]

What about dualistic media theory? The result is this book. We create a theory called anthropological realism that attempts to escape the tired ruts of thinking that have coalesced into dualisms. We bring together ideas that once were seen as opposites. The book begins with the problem of moral dualism. It surveys the history of moral theory because how we understand this history is crucial to reform. Then, the book presents hybridic, holistic, and integrative ways of thinking about moral value. Anthropological realism is a philosophy of the human in full, where history, language, interpretation, and the construction of meaning define moral globalism. Therefore, the book is not unrelated to our other concerns. We believe that anthropological realism is a theory that can undergird humane global ethics amid the turmoil of a plural and interconnected world.

A Caveat

A concluding note on how we wrote the book. No two scholars agree on everything. Given the diversity of thought in ethics, Professor Christians and I have been fortunate in sharing key moral positions. This allowed us to write each chapter separately, utilizing our expertise in different areas of ethics. Then we shared our work and discussed needed improvements and clarifications. We also placed our name on the chapters we wrote, for two reasons. One, if readers agree or disagree with a

point in a chapter, they know to whom the claim should be attributed. Second, the naming of chapter authors helped us get around one difficulty in writing the book. The problem appeared after I had written Chapter Seven, where the idea of transcendence and naturalism is discussed. To be frank, my naturalism is robust. I dislike transcendent forms of thought whether in religion, spiritualism, Platonism, or elsewhere. Professor Christians agrees with the overall thrust of naturalism but believes there is, and there should be, room for nuanced forms of theology that do not take the deistic form of postulating a remote, transcendent deity. Such a spirituality might be compatible with my naturalism. I suspect there is common ground between our views, but we did not feel that this book was the place for sorting it out. Therefore, the reader should be aware that Chapter Seven's strong skepticism about transcendent thinking is an expression of my imperfectionism.[3] Otherwise, we are in full agreement on the book's text.

Notes

1. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* 513.
2. For a comprehensive survey of global media ethics, see Ward, *Handbook of Global Media Ethics.*
3. Ward, "Imperfectionism: The Meanings of Life," Chapter 12, *The Project of Moral Globalism.*

CHAPTER ONE

RECONCEIVING META-ETHICS

STEPHEN J. A. WARD

Moral philosophy cannot avoid taking sides and would-be neutral philosophers merely take sides surreptitiously.
—Iris Murdoch[1]

If one were able to climb a ladder and look down on the state of philosophizing about ethics, or meta-ethics, it would be hard not to conclude that the competition between basic positions is at a stalemate. Meta-ethics is bogged down in philosophical trench warfare between various positions on the meaning, knowledge, and evidence for moral claims and theories. New positions add subtleties or novel arguments for the basic rivalries without changing the overall landscape. The landscape has been, for some time, divided into conceptual dualisms such as reason and emotion, absolutism and relativism, objectivity and subjectivity, and truth and mediated belief. Only in recent years have there been important and pioneering attempts to overcome these dualisms and to see ethics in a more holistic manner, more attuned to how people actually discuss morality and do ethics in everyday situations.

This book focuses on what can be regarded as the fundamental rivalry in meta-ethics, so fundamental that it contains other rivalries. It is the rivalry between realism and anti-realism. We propose a hybrid position, anthropological realism, that combines the insights of both camps. The exposition of our position begins in Chapter Three, after a historical re-

view of the rivalry and main positions. In developing anthropological realism, we think holistically to avoid dualisms. We bring together ideas often thought to be separate in ethics, such as constructing and discovering moral value, reason and emotion, fact and value, and the local and the global.

The previous sentence may sound odd or even contradictory. How can construction and discovery go together? Or, how can reason and emotion work together? Are not fact and value completely different things, often in opposition? If it sounds odd it is because we have inherited through Western culture centuries of dualistic thinking in philosophy, religion, ethics, and science. We have trouble bringing together certain concepts. The future of ethics, and meta-ethics, is to think more radically, to escape the old ruts and habits of thought. We should explore the rich intellectual ground between the polarities.

In the next two chapters, we prepare the ground for anthropological realism. In this chapter, we explain our view of ethics, describe the senses of realism and anti-realism, and sketch the history of the rivalry from Greek antiquity to the end of the nineteenth century. In the next chapter, we focus on twentieth century positions, especially those that attempt a hybrid realism in ontology, epistemology, and morality.

Value of Philosophy and Meta Thinking

Before we begin, it behooves us to indicate why relatively abstract disputes in meta-ethics and philosophy are important for the practical ethical issues which confront our global world. The simple answer is because beliefs influence our conduct, and our ethical beliefs are particularly influential. Yet, we can say more than this in favor of meta-ethics.

Meta thinking in general, especially in philosophy, is valuable because it can identify errors, limitations in thinking, and questionable premises. It can suggest options not yet ex-

plored. Our ethical beliefs and actions are based implicitly or explicitly on philosophical presumptions about what constitutes knowledge, and how we know it. It is based on assumptions about truth, the relativity of values, and whether moral belief can be rationally justified. To have defensible beliefs about ethics and to make informed ethical decisions, that is, to approach ethics rationally, presumes an understanding of what we are doing and why. This requires meta-ethics, or philosophy of ethics.

One does not have to be a philosopher to act on philosophical presumptions or ideas. Philosophical ideas are embedded in our ethical decisions in life. Ideas penetrate into our daily lives and judgments. The assumptions influence us, even if our assumptions are implicit. In making ethical judgments, or in disagreeing with someone on what actions to take, you are doing philosophy, if only in the minimalist sense of working implicitly from philosophical assumptions. These assumptions, once brought to the surface, can be evaluated. We may come to see some of them as misleading or based on flimsy evidence, bias, or social indoctrination. Critical reflection on ethics is important for democratic society where individuals and groups seek to test beliefs and create better ethical practices, rather than passively accept a "customary morality" of existing mores.[2]

Philosophical reflection is all but inevitable in democratic society because, sooner or later, people will ask us to justify our moral beliefs and practices. At this point, we must ascend what can be called the ladder of justification. For every reason we give, we may be asked to give a more general reason for *that* reason, and then a more general reason for *that* reason. We climb step-by-step until we reach abstract philosophical principles. Sometimes, we end in a philosophical fog. We realize our conceptions are unclear, and therefore we lose some confidence in judgments that contain these concepts. We may

not know what we think we know. Socrates was a master of inducing philosophical fog to persuade people to reflect on their beliefs.

Consider an example from a domain outside meta-ethics, something as practical as journalism. Our judgments about journalism practice face the same inescapability of philosophy and the ladder of justification. Imagine that I judge that a news report on government corruption, which embarrasses its leaders, is good because the report accurately informs the public, and keeps officials accountable. Both informing the public and official accountability are standards. But why, you may ask, are they so important? Well, I reply, because accuracy falls under the more general standard of truth-telling in public communications. And because citizens need truthful reports to make decisions and to judge their government. But you persist. Why are informed citizens important? I reply with a more general reason: Because it aids democracy. But why aim at democracy? And so on. By climbing the ladder of justification, I realize that my judgments are grounded in general social and political values. Change those philosophical assumptions, for example, presume an authoritarian view of media as state mouthpieces, and you will not judge the report to be good. You may consider the report dangerous because it undermines confidence in the state. There is, then, *no such thing* as a stand-alone practical ethics without an embedded philosophy. There is no practical ethics that is encapsulated and separate from the rest of what we know and believe philosophically.

Another reason for philosophy is the critique of social, political, and religious ideologies. Ideologies are systems of ideas that attempt to make sense of the things around us and guide group actions. Ideologies also contain philosophical assumptions on knowledge, reality, value, and human flourishing. We not only say something is true. We think about what

notion of truth we are using. We not only say that some belief is well-evidenced; we also think about what evidence means. Philosophy is meta-reflection on our ideology, and the ideology of others. Philosophy is the most general, and least restrained, meta exercise, taking all of life and experience as its domain. Philosophy is willing to ask questions about almost anything, and to follow out ideas into the hinterland of our minds where our most basic thoughts reside.

Philosophical presumptions act like the bed of a river. They channel the rest of our thoughts in definite directions as a riverbed channels the water flowing through it. Not surprisingly, this flow of ideas affects our decisions and actions. In addition, our ideas can affect our general mood or emotional perspective on life and society. For example, our thinking may arrive at nihilism: the conclusion that there is nothing of great value in the world, or that our existence is arbitrary and without reason. I may conclude coolly and logically that nihilism follows from facts about the world. Yet, another person may find nihilism threatening or emotionally disturbing. The belief may cause depression, or justify unethical actions, or lead to suicide. Humans also can need or crave certain ideas as much as they need certain bodily comforts or emotional support. For some people, certain ideas, for example, that God exists or that the soul survives the death of the body, is a deep psychological need. If beliefs have such impact, how can we bring them to consciousness for further examination?

As Jean-François Lyotard said, to ask, "Why philosophize?" is to ask a philosophical question. It is the fate of humans to philosophize because of the creatures we are—with consciousness, desire, language, and a critical ability to question what is and to wonder what might be. Philosophy's mission is to recall humans back to their inherent capacity to philosophize, and to ask questions that "irritate everybody."[3] Far from being detached or unnatural, thinking philosophically

about oneself and life is as natural as any human activity. In a social context, this critical thinking is crucial for intelligent responses to ever new problems and conditions. As Alasdair MacIntyre wrote, a central task of the moral philosopher is "to articulate the convictions of the society in which he or she lives so that these convictions become available for rational scrutiny."[4] John Dewey thought that philosophy could overcome its historical "craving" for theoretical, infallible truths and become a socially engaged, but fallible, form of inquiry into our most serious problems. Ethics ceases to be a philosopher's quest for the one supreme moral principle. It becomes the common quest of groups for the intelligent and sensitive solution of human problems. As realist philosopher John Searle has written:

> I actually think that philosophical theories make a tremendous difference to every aspect of our lives. In my observation, the rejection of realism…is an essential component of the attacks on epistemic objectivity, rationality, truth, and intelligence in contemporary intellectual life.[5]

These points reflect one way of looking at meta-ethics and other meta activities. It is a top-down perspective. We think about how philosophical generalities seep down to the more concrete level of praxis. There is also a bottom-up perspective of how praxis affects ideas, more popular among the social sciences. In this view, what is primary are the economic and cultural structures of a society. They cause groups to construct ideologies that explain or attempt to validate social practices, social classes, and political systems. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, this bottom-up perspective has given ideology a negative connotation due to the social criticism of Marxists, communists, Nietzscheans, Freudians, postmoderns, and many others. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Paul Ricoeur called this interpretative approach to texts and ideas the "her-

meneutics of suspicion." Ideas and ideals are revealed as tools of hegemony or social control. They rationalize illegitimate power, unjust social hierarchies, and other forces below the surface of society.[6] Marx, for instance, portrayed art and philosophy as the "superstructure" of a ship that sits on the material base of the vessel. In society, the material base is the means of economic production that shapes social classes and values. Although Marx was careful not to crudely reduce ideas to material activities, subsequent Marxists often turned this metaphor into a reductionist philosophy of culture. However, they made one exception: the true ideology of Marxism. This book adopts a hybrid approach to this issue. It rejects reductionist explanations of ideas, values, and ideologies to physical or social elements. Instead, it posits a holistic web of interactions among all levels of society. The lines of influence run from the bottom up, and from the top down, and in many other directions. Analysis of the level of ideology or meta thinking requires a multi-disciplinary investigation by cultural anthropologists, social psychologists, sociologists, evolutionary psychologists, neuro-scientists, historians, philosophers, and many others. The aim is not to reduce ideas to a primal need or a subconscious force but, rather, to show how ideology and praxis work together in complex ways.

In ethics, and elsewhere, what this concern with ideology amounts to is an attempt to grasp the worldview of ourselves or some group so as to bring it forward for discussion, improvement, or critique. William James summed this up in "Pragmatism," his 1906 and 1907 lectures at Columbia University, where he begins with the fact that "everyone has a philosophy." He then tells his audience that "the most interesting and important thing about you is the way in which it determines the perspective in your several worlds."[7] James would go on to say revealing things about how people's worldviews and personalities prompt them to endorse certain

varieties of religious experience, such as asceticism, or to em-
brace a hard-nosed empiricism that, like Mr. Gradgrind in
Dickens' *Hard Times,* wants, and only wants, "facts, facts,
facts."

Despite the efficacy of ideas and the need to reflect upon
them, there remains in Western culture a persistent and wide-
spread belief that meta exercises, especially philosophy, are
not practically or socially important. It is important to recog-
nize the roots of this attitude in history.

It is understandable why this negative opinion of philoso-
phy exists. Our current social trends and our cultural history
encourage it. Today, we live in societies where there is much
less stress on the humanities, and where many people believe
that views about life and value are too subjective to admit ra-
tional inquiry. Late-modern scientific culture put its faith in
techno-rationality and instrumental value. Techno-rationality
increasingly organizes higher education according to pro-
grams with quantifiable practical impact in the short-term,
such as the current employment needs of the market. Also,
today people feel lost within large bureaucracies and corpo-
rate conglomerates in alienating societies of strangers. In a
materialistic, consumer-driven, entertainment-focused society,
the value of philosophical reflection and critique is doubted.

At the same time, engagement with philosophical ideas
and the large issues of life is divided between two groups that
have little connection with each other. Popular culture is redo-
lent with superficial trends on how to be happy, occult ideas
of reaching a higher order, and whatever catches the short at-
tention span of consumers in a media-created world. The
more rigorous engagement with philosophy has shrunk to be-
come the province of professional thinkers in university phi-
losophy departments. We can hardly blame the public for be-
ing skeptical about the value of philosophy when a substantial
number of academics, including philosophers, are happy to

pursue their inquiries autonomously, far from the marketplace of ideas where public opinion and politics are formed. To make matters worse, philosophy is often taught in a manner that fails to explain why long-dead thinkers were so interested in certain problems, or in what ways their social context relates to our times. The relatively recent professionalism and academic seclusion of the art of philosophy, as humanistic inquiry, adds to the separation of philosophy from the life-world.

Historically, the separation of philosophy from daily popular culture is only one expression of a larger Western trend since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Western modernity, especially in the second half of the 1800s, set out to place science, morality, philosophy, and the arts in autonomous and separate domains run by specialists or experts. For example, the separation of artistic activity began in the late eighteenth century. What resulted was an abstract philosophy of Art (art as an essence with a capital A), an allegedly superior set of fine arts beloved by elites and a rising class of avant-garde artists who worked autonomously, and often in opposition, to mainstream culture. The separation of philosophy is one consequence of the creation of Western cultural hierarchies, or a distinction between highbrow and lowbrow activities.[8] Hierarchies of knowing or superior activities left a vacuum in everyday life. Public discourse on culture, politics, and life was shaped less and less by informed, reasonable, and inventive interlocutors. Ideas about life, morality, and the world were increasingly found in the writings of propagandists, irrationalists, pseudo-scientists, occultists, media celebrities, and extremists. Today, these forces are empowered by the global media creating a crisis for democracies.

Although strong skepticism about philosophy or meta-ethics is historically understandable, this does not mean that it is valid, or necessary. It is a specific, historically situated atti-

tude. It is possible to think of thinking in philosophy and other domains as neither useless nor irredeemably abstract. Such expertise should be more engaged in public discourse as part of a larger project to protect reasonable, egalitarian societies and detox their public channels of communication.

The ethical task of our era is to construct a global ethics for a media-shaped and media-saturated world. Global ethics needs a credible philosophy of universal principles. But realism's treatment of universals tends to be abstract and rationalistic. Universals are treated as the abstract deliverances of reason (or some other authority) apart from context and history. Not only is this a dubious approach to universals, it also has dubious consequences. Transcendent absolutes—or what are claimed to be absolutes—are imposed top-down on diverse human experiences. In the wrong hands, such impositions become a form of class or cultural imperialism. On the other hand, anti-realist positions, when pressed, tend to become a relativism that is skeptical of any talk of global principles. There are no better or worse moral viewpoints. The latter view seems to entail a social passivity that sees no option but to 'go with the flow' in society. There is no basis for legitimate critique.

This book formulates a hybrid moral realism that combines insights from both sides of the dualistic line. Anthropological realism combines realism and constructionism—positions usually thought to be rivals. It embraces pluralism but rejects extreme relativism. It challenges the strict division of discovery *or* invention; and of fact *or* value. We reject the view that a moral claim either refers to a moral fact independent of mind (and human nature) or it is nothing but a subjective feeling or bias. We affirm a set of universals but we locate them here on earth, in human nature, in communication, and we eschew cultural imperialism. We combine the local and the universal. In sum, we reframe the issues, skate around (or be-

tween) dualisms, and respond to cultural pluralism. One way that philosophy makes progress is to not accept the problem space created by previous philosophies. In this book, we do not accept a dualistic problem space as a starting point for inquiry.

The book combines Christians' seminal work on universals and Ward's work on inventing ethics as a centuries-old human "ethical project" based on evolving human experience and society.[9] Morality is grounded in a conception of the human, as a world-directed agent and cultural being, within history. The result is a *realism of human moral experience*, of facts expressive of human existence in the round. It is not a realism about a realm of human-independent moral facts. Anthropological realism is a moral globalism for a global human world.

Section One: The Project of Ethics

Practice and Theory

Ethics as a social practice can be described factually or evaluated normatively. Around the world, societies and cultures act in accordance with mores, norms, and laws. Societies have a normative sphere that regulates conduct and makes human interaction and cooperation possible. The sphere contains legal norms, aesthetic norms, religious norms, and norms of custom, ethnic tradition and etiquette. Evolutionists have argued that early human bands in prehistory developed unwritten norms for group-wide behavior, as a necessary part of surviving in a hostile environment.[10] The earliest written codes of norms have been found in the first human civilizations in such places as Mesopotamia, Egypt and China about the third millennium BC. These codes blur our modern distinctions between legal, ethical, religious and customary. There has always been considerable overlap between precepts that are legal, ethical or based on etiquette. However, over

centuries, ethics arose as a distinct area of the normative sphere with its own institutions, its own ways of teaching, and its own way of enforcing moral precepts. The history of morality, then, can be seen as a project of societies or groups, the project of sustaining a coherent and endorsed set of rules for social cooperation over time and amid fluctuations in external conditions. In this sense, we can speak of the "moralities" in the world. "Morality" refers to the entire set of moralities, the way that a collective noun such as "language" refers to the many languages of mankind. We can also study such moralities objectively and factually, noting their rules, how the rules evolved, how the rules structure behavior and social relations, how societies spin out ideologies or myths to explain and justify the morality. We can also study how, within societies, groups exist with their own sub-moralities which may disagree with or challenge a common or society-wide morality imposed, for example, by a majority group. Many people study morality and culture in this manner, from cultural anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists to ethicists, students of cultural studies, historians, sociologists and students of comparative religion. Typically, their stance is that of the disengaged observer trying to understand the nature of morality the way a scientific approach attempts to study the nature of some natural phenomenon. It is a second-order study of ordinary people engaged in first-order morality—the making of ethical judgments and acting according to norms. There need not be any evaluation of the morality.

However, we can also approach ethics from an evaluative stance. We do meta-ethics for normative purposes—to critique and improve our norms, to detect 'blind spots' in our moral consciousness. We are engaged in both doing and reforming ethics. We are not satisfied with a detached description of the facts about moralities. We ask a normative question: Of all these moralities, which one should we embrace

and promote? Critical, normative ethics is practical in overall intent, but theoretical in understanding.

Such are our reasons for taking meta thinking and meta-ethics seriously in theory and practice. We now turn to a more detailed account of practical (or applied) ethics and philo-sophical (or meta-) ethics.[11]

Applied Ethics[12]

Applied ethics is thinking that hovers close to the everyday world of actual ethical decisions and dilemmas. It is situated, prompted by actual moral problems or experiences in a certain place or time. Applied ethics asks what should I (or we) do in situation *y?* What is the morally best thing to do? For exam-ple, if I stumble upon a wallet on my walk to work, I think to myself, morally, I ought to return the wallet to the owner. It is the right thing to do. Notoriously, morality contains situations and issues where the morally right course of action is not as clear as in this example. What is the right conduct is anything but clear for complex issues such as abortion, the death penal-ty, whether promises can be broken, what justice requires in society, and the duty that co-nationals owe to distressed for-eign countries. I may ask: Did I do the wrong thing when I refused to give money to famine relief? Or: Is euthanasia mor-ally justifiable if the dying person is in extreme pain?

Applied ethics presumes that the interlocutors have an in-terest in being moral. When people seek resources for think-ing about the situation, it typically begins with principles within pre-existing moral codes. For example, we may argue for the right to express offensive views in public based on the principle of freedom of expression. Or, we may criticize a discriminatory practice because it violates the principle of equality before the law. In addition, people may argue on the basis of ideas found in applied moral theories such as utilitari-

anism, cosmopolitanism,[13] contractarianism,[14] communitarian-
ism,[15] and the various forms of religious ethics from Christian
morality to Buddhism.

Applied theories typically deal with one of the three great
themes of ethics: What is good and what the good life consists
in; what is right (or what justice requires); and what the moral
virtues are. We encounter theories that think the pursuit of the
good is primary, such as utilitarianism (what produces the
most utility) or consequentialism (what, overall, has the best
consequences). We encounter theories that think the pursuit of
what is right and dutiful is primary, such as Immanuel Kant's
ethics of moral duty.[16] Also, we encounter theories that take
the virtuous life as primary, resulting in many kinds of virtue
ethics.[17]

Applied theories attempt to create consistent moral systems
consisting of principles, precepts, and protocols. They seek to
answer moral questions in ways that appear persuasive, do not
violate basic moral intuitions and ring 'true' given our experi-
ence of the world. For example, any applied theory which en-
tailed that the murder of citizens or the torture of children for
degraded pleasure is permissible would rightly cause us to
question the theory. Applied theories such as utilitarianism,
communitarian ethics, or Christian ethics take up positions on
a range of large issues such as animal rights, our obligations
to future generations, a just immigration policy, and the re-
sponsibilities of citizens to others during a pandemic. This
application of theory to concrete problems is crucial for ap-
plied ethics. We need to see how moral positions work in
practice. Values such as friendship or happiness can be so ab-
stract that we need to see how people apply these values. Af-
ter all, both the Quakers and the mafia agree on the value of
friendship.[18]

Take utilitarianism as an example of an applied theory.[19]
Classical forms of the theory, as in John Stuart Mill, say that

society should seek, in any situation, the greatest amount of happiness (or utility) for all. Utility can be the amount of pleasure an action produces, or it can be something less tangible such as the enjoyment of self-respect or esteem felt when a discriminatory policy is no longer applied to an oppressed minority. Utilitarians take a wide array of positions on the moral issues of the day. They may support freedom of speech because it enhances overall utility, or support justice because it creates a more stable, peaceful society. In calculating the expected utilities, utilitarianism tends to be impartial. It does not matter whether the persons involved are of a certain gender, race, or nationality. Each person's utility or pleasure counts equally. Some versions of the theory, such as egoistic utilitarianism, are prepared to count as a person's utility whatever they happen to prefer, even if the preference is based on impulse, or may cause them harm in the long run. The strategy of counting expected utilities has proven to be, over the decades, a controversial matter. A typical complaint is that utilitarianism entails that the rights of a minority can be sacrificed to the rights of the majority. If repression of gay or trans individuals would please the majority of citizens, don't utilitarians have to agree? Utilitarians, of course, have rejoinders to these criticisms. Much of utilitarianism's history has consisted in alterations in the theory's formulation to escape counter-intuitive results.

An important component of applied ethics are professional codes of ethics. They are frameworks of principles meant to guide professional and institutional practice. There are codes for physicians, nurses, accountants, journalists, and so on. 'Framework ethics' asks about the validity, coherence, and adequacy of a given framework. For example, in journalism, we can question whether a professional code of ethics originating decades ago is adequate for journalism today where citizen journalists are numerous. Or we can question a specif-

ic principle such as the doctrine that reporters should be objective, in the sense of reporting only facts in an unbiased manner. In medicine, we can discuss how much information a doctor should provide seriously ill patients about their disease. How should a health organization deal with botched breast cancer tests? What is informed consent in a business contract? If a financial adviser owns stock in a company, should he promote that company to clients?

Meta-Ethics

Meta-ethics is theorizing about the activity of applied ethics. It includes (a) *meaning:* the meaning of ethical concepts and statements such as *x* is right or *y* is morally good. In applied ethics, we ask what actions and kinds of things are actually good or right. Meta-ethics asks: What do we mean by good or right? (b) *the psychological-neural base:* How do human minds and brains apprehend moral values and make moral judgments? (c) *available evidence*: What kinds of evidence, logical or empirical, support ethical statements? (d) *moral reasoning and discourse*: How do we reason and seek to persuade when we discuss moral issues? (e) *embedded meta-ethics*: What type of meta-ethical positions do the leading theories of applied ethics presume? What meta-ethics is embedded in common sense moral thinking, or in utilitarianism, consequentialism, and other theories? (f) *aims and uses of morality:* What are the aims and social purpose(s) of ethics? What is the natural and social history of morality? Do moral systems, today or across time, share common principles? If so, why?

There have been times in the philosophical study of ethics when theorists defined meta-ethics more narrowly than described in the previous paragraph. In the previous century, analytical philosophers such as George E. Moore sought to

reduce the philosophy of ethics to the a priori analysis of moral concepts such as good. Analytic philosophy tended to dualistically separate empirical and conceptual questions. What was empirical and factual belonged to the kingdom of science. The rest of inquiry, where valid, was lumped under conceptual analysis as in logic, the formal sciences, and analytical philosophy. The implication was that ethics should concern itself only with definitions and analysis of concepts, not attempt to defend applied ethical positions or provide guidance on real-world normative questions.[20]

Today, this dualism of empirical and analytical inquiry has largely crumbled, replaced by multi-disciplinary research where philosophers, ethicists, neuro-scientists, linguists, computer scientists, evolutionary psychologists, historians, and sociologists study ethical questions. This means that we need a broader categorization scheme for meta-ethics. Inquirers have provided new and significant knowledge about the biological, psychological, and social aspects of humans when they engage in morality.

Does this mean that a historian or anthropologist who studies the moral codes of cultures is doing meta-ethics? Yes and no. They are doing meta-ethics defined, generally, as the study of the activity of ethics. But they are not (typically or primarily) studying that activity for normative purposes—to develop ethical theories on how we should morally reason, what principles are best for our ethics project and so on. Meta-ethics *proper* is the study of normative moral activity for normative purposes.

We have given logical reasons for doing meta-ethics. But, psychologically, why are we, as individuals, prompted to engage in meta-ethics? One trigger for ethical thought are the problems of everyday experience. We encounter difficult moral questions. In hesitation, we step back and think about our dilemma. At this point, it often happens that the line be-

tween applied and philosophical ethics blurs. For example, as
the utilitarian develops her applied positions on controversial
issues, she can scarcely avoid engaging in meta-ethics. She
will be asked how she defines the concept of happiness,
whether she regards ethical statements as describing a moral
fact, whether her system constitutes objective grounds for de-
cision-making, and so on. There begins, in her mind, a mov-
ing back and forth between her practical intuitions of what
kinds of things are good and her philosophical assumptions
about goodness, happiness, and moral knowledge. As John
Rawls pointed out with regard to theories of justice, ethical
thinking seeks a well-balanced equilibrium between princi-
ples, precepts, rules, and our concrete intuitions about what is
moral in particular cases.[21]

Ethical thinking never gets totally outside of some meta-
ethical presumptions. We depend on *some* meta-ethical con-
cepts to describe the nature of meta-ethics. Creating a scheme
for meta-ethics is an instance of persuasive definition. We
propose that people should conceive of an issue in a certain
way which we believe is helpful *given some notion of what
ethics is.* What we present in this book, openly and non-
apologetically, is a critical, liberal, and rational proposal on
how to think about ethics. There is much meta-ethics con-
tained in the phrase "critical, liberal, and rational." We rely on
meta-ethics to develop meta-ethics. This is not circular in
some logically offensive way. It is simply the recognition that
we are always thinking from some conceptual scheme. Later,
we will describe this by using the metaphor of sailing in a
boat while improving the vessel, plank by plank, as we go
along.

Finally, meta-ethics is not detachable from the applied pro-
jects of ethics. As a project, ethics is inherently practical. It is
the analysis, evaluation and promotion of correct conduct and
virtuous character in light of the best available principles. Eth-