
Applying Moral Theories, C.E. Harris, Jr.

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In the past, ethics courses were technically oriented, focusing on presentation and critique of theories rather than application. Since the trend now is to show students how to apply moral theories, the market has been besieged with ethics texts that are more problem-oriented. Trying to choose from among them is no easy task for teachers since many such texts are deficient in various ways—some are too unsophisticated for the college level, some are too narrow in scope, and some do not have both a good discussion of major moral theories *and* clear demonstrations of theoretical applications. Because C.E. Harris, Jr. has, for the most part, successfully avoided these problems in *Applying Moral Theories*, it is a welcome addition to the market.

Many, if not most, students enrolling in ethics courses are not philosophy majors and have not had a prior philosophy course. So not only do they not know how to think through a problem carefully, they do not know how to make important distinctions. Also, many think that by taking an ethics course, they will receive a neat list of morally permissible behaviors that they will be able to consult when in doubt about what they ought or ought not to do. *Applying Moral Theories* will help alleviate these problems for students; and even if they don't end up with the neat list they expected, at least they will have been given the opportunity to learn the bases for making their own lists.

Obviously Harris is sensitive to how students respond to material. Understanding that they enjoy reading case studies, he uses this fact to pique their interest by beginning most chapters (including the first, "What is Ethics?") with a case that poses a moral problem. The concept summaries at the end of shorter chapters and at crucial parts in longer ones provide students with a ready access for review. These two aspects of the book indicate that he is aware of methods that will not only get students interested in an ethics course but also of methods that will facilitate their learning the material.

In general, students tend to assume either that what is right or wrong depends on societal norms or that ethics is based on religion. Harris challenges these assumptions early in the book—Chapter II ("Are Morals Relative?")—and argues convincingly that neither is a legitimate foundation for making moral judgments. Some students cling to one of these assumptions during the entire course. Those teachers who find that they waste time having to do what Harris does in this part of the chapter will be grateful for his approach here.

In that same chapter, he gives a brief discussion of moral skepticism in which he addresses the theory of intuitionism, pointing out objections that are typically raised against it. Another important view he briefly presents is non-cognitivism (though he does not refer to it as such but should have, since that is how the view is typically referred to in the literature). He notes the important point that facts, on this view, do have some role in moral judgments and mentions that agreements or disagreements ultimately rest on one's attitudes or moral beliefs—but this should come as no surprise to anyone. (This is one place where Harris gives a superficial exposition of a theory, but as one reads on, it will become evident that his intent is to focus on theories that reflect the title of the book.)

After showing how moral theories are structured and evaluated (Chapter III), he devotes the next four chapters to explaining, applying, and evaluating four major ethical theories—egoism, natural law, utilitarianism, and respect for persons (a modified and more plausible version of Kant's theory). In doing so, he leads the student through the process of moral reasoning, theory application, and evaluation for which he uses a checklist for rating each and then gives his justification.

Harris makes very good use of cases and concrete examples to illustrate the moral decisions

dictated by the theory under discussion. The topics of his examples and cases are contemporary issues so students should already be familiar with at least some of those moral problems. He draws from a variety of professions (e.g., business, law, medicine) and topics (e.g., abortion, animal rights, euthanasia, sex, reverse discrimination, and nuclear retaliation and deterrence). (In Chapter VII he applies all four theories to the latter topic and shows that while all four theories reach the same conclusion—that nuclear retaliation is impermissible—the justifications of each are different.) Such diversity of topics may introduce students to some ethical problems of which they may not have been previously aware; and it may also stir up *some* interest even in the most apathetic student.

Harris presents somewhat subtle distinctions (e.g., “nontrivial permissible actions” and “trivial permissible actions” (37), “heroic” vs. “supererogatory” (37-8), and “moral standards,” “moral rules,” and “moral judgments” (33-6)) in such a manner that students will not accuse him of being nitpicky because he uses examples to illustrate the distinctions. Concepts that are central to discussions in ethics such as “normative,” “factual,” “morally relevant,” “consistency,” “paternalism,” “moral agent,” “double effect,” “natural,” and “impartiality” are clearly explained and Harris is careful to point out difficulties that some of them pose. Where relevant, he refers to these concepts in subsequent chapters, and this contributes to the book’s cohesiveness. His application of each moral theory to social issues broadens students’ understanding of how a moral theory dictates answers to certain questions in social and political philosophy. Hence students should get a sense of the interrelatedness of various philosophical problems.

If any criticism is to be made of *Applying Moral Theories*, it will not be from a student’s perspective but rather from that of a moral philosopher. While *students* won’t be surprised when Harris says “...we shall define...*right* and *good*...” (12), most moral philosophers will probably raise their eyebrows. Nor is it likely that students will wonder why no distinction is made between individual and cultural relativism; but in an age where “Do your own thing” is a typical attitude, some attention should have been given to individual relativism.

He correctly points out that “Conceptual issues, or issues of definition, are often prominent aspects of a moral debate” (5). But he ends by saying “...you must recognize when you are faced with a conceptual issue and know how to go about resolving it” (6). Readers might take this to imply that resolving such disagreements is not difficult because he gives no hint as to how to do so. Yet his own very good example of a conceptual issue, “Is the fetus a person?” (5) illustrates the fact that such issues are *not* easily resolvable.

What some moral philosophers might find even more surprising (and perhaps objectionable) is Harris’ presentation of utilitarianism. He says, “...we will use ‘utilitarianism’ to mean ‘rule utilitarianism’; ‘act utilitarianism’, when discussed, will be indicated” (103). Students should find his demonstrations of how rules in rule utilitarianism are formulated to be insightful and helpful. However, he overlooks the fact that Mill, though an act utilitarian (which Harris does not acknowledge), did not deny that moral rules had a place in his theory. In fact, Mill advocated following particular moral rules because, in the long run, doing so tends to be in accord with the utility principle. Only when following a rule would clearly violate the principle, or if an appeal to particular rules could not determine whether an act was right, did he say that one must resort to the utility principle to make a decision. And Harris himself says this: “If you cannot decide which of two alternatives is morally right by evaluating the utility of the rules underlying the two alternatives, look directly at the utility of the two actions themselves” (103). Thus his claim that “Act utilitarianism is an important adjunct to rule utilitarianism” (103) undermines any clear distinction between the two that he seems to want to maintain. This blurring of rule and act utilitarianism could be frustrating for philosophers who have more than a superficial acquaintance with the two versions and who are familiar with commonly-cited journal articles that discuss them (e.g., Rawls’ “Two

Concepts of Rules" and Smart's "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism").

However, leaving aside these technical objections, *Applying Moral Theories* is probably one of the best on the market for use in a general introductory ethics course or in a specialized applied ethics course (those that address moral problems in a particular profession or occupation). If this text is used in a course of the former type, however, one might want to supplement it with some traditional readings by original authors. Also, additional varieties of case studies dealing with contemporary moral problems should be given to students in order to see how well they can apply the moral theories, following Harris' approach. These cases could either be presented after each theory is discussed or after students have first read and discussed the book in its entirety, after which students can work on applying all four moral problems.

In specialized applied ethics courses, the primary objective is to teach students to identify moral problems in a particular field and think carefully about how such problems should be resolved. But even though Harris' approach is not technical, theories and relevant concepts are discussed in sufficient detail, as well as the process of moral decisionmaking, to provide students with sufficient understanding so that students should be able to justify moral decisions they make. Thus *Applying Moral Theories* will suffice as the primary ethics text in such a course. Because non-philosophy professionals are becoming increasingly aware of ethical problems in their fields, the book lends itself quite well to a course that is team-taught by a philosopher and a professional in the topic field since each can complement the other's expertise in class discussions, a good experience for students.

Harris has skillfully produced a readable yet comprehensive and versatile introductory ethics book. Because it shows students how to think carefully about ethical problems and the process of moral decisionmaking, after completing the course, many students may actually do this on their own.

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The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character, Robert B. Kruschwitz, Robert C. Roberts, eds.

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The tenacity of philosophers in attempting to ground moral beliefs without reference to human beings is matched only by the effort of other, more skeptical thinkers to undermine their work. Contemporary Anglo-American philosophy has displayed a growing dissatisfaction with the enlightenment project that hoped to fix an objective morality outside historical context. A partial result has been a turn toward a metaethics that some have considered arid, trivial, uninspiring and remote in comparison with the significance and the frequency of moral decision-making for the average moral agent. A second consequence has been a "mere" application of the seemingly unfounded principles to areas like medicine, business, and nuclear war.

In recent years, however, there has been a dramatic shift in the course of ethical theory. Alisdair MacIntyre's panoramic *After Virtue* (1981) is often considered at the heart of this new direction, an approach sometimes known as "virtue ethics" since it has helped reactivate interest in the Aristotelean account of the virtues as well as in the logically related ancient question, "What is the best way to live?"