This is a book about moral issues. What are moral issues? To answer this question, we need to consider the definition of philosophy. If the word itself is any guide, philosophy is the love of wisdom. A simple definition of wisdom, in turn, is good judgment. Philosophy, then, is the love or pursuit of good judgment. Moral philosophy, or ethics, is the pursuit of good judgment about character and action—about what kind of person to be and about what to do. Ethics addresses questions about virtue and vice, good and bad, right and wrong.

Such questions, clearly, have varied answers; they are often the subject of controversy and debate. The moral issues considered in this book—abortion, euthanasia, pornography, capital punishment, affirmative action, and many others—are among the most controversial our society faces. Most of this book consists of moral arguments, in which a moral issue is considered and a particular position is supported or a particular conclusion is reached through reasoning.

How can we think moral issues through carefully and systematically? How do we develop arguments for ethical conclusions? These are questions that I attempt to answer in this introduction. I also consider an important objection to the idea of moral argument, namely, the view that different groups have different values and it is therefore impossible to argue logically about right and wrong. This position, known as relativism, is common today and poses a serious challenge to ethical thinking.

Relativism

Allan Bloom began his 1987 book The Closing of the American Mind with the statement, "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative." This is especially so in philosophy courses and in ethics courses in particular. Ethics consists of principled reflection on questions such as How should I live? and What should I do? It takes as its central tasks criticizing, justifying, and deciding on various answers to these questions. No one, of course, likes to be criticized, no one likes to think that his or her particular answer to the question How should I live? is unjustified or just plain wrong. So it can be tempting to deflect these questions by saying that truth in ethics is relative.

But relative to what? To an individual person? To a society, a culture, or the currently popular formulation, "interpretive community"? To humanity as a whole? The last, relativity to humanity, does not challenge the traditional project of ethics at all; Aristotle characterizes ethics as the search for the good life for man. Even the second, relativity to a society or a culture, has little effect on the discussions of contemporary issues in this book. The readings debate social problems in the context of affluent, technologically advanced societies such as those of the United States, Canada, and Europe. Problems such as welfare, abortion, and world hunger might look very different from the perspective of a poor developing nation. Relativity to a society or a culture does, however, have an impact on the theoretical discussions in the classic readings in this collection, which

generally purport to say something about what is good for human beings, not just residents of the United States, Canada, or Europe. And relativity to an individual makes ethical thinking absurd; what is good for me may differ so completely from what is good for you that ethical reflection and argument make no sense.

To be more precise, let us say that an ethical relativist believes that fundamental ethical truth—the basic truth about how one should live and what one should do—is relative to a group smaller than humanity as a whole. Something may be fundamentally right for one group but fundamentally wrong for another. A cultural relativist holds that fundamental ethical truth is relative to a culture; an individual relativist holds that it is relative to each individual person.

These definitions depend on the idea of fundamental ethical truth. Certain answers to ethical questions presuppose other answers to more basic questions. An ethical truth is fundamental if it does not depend on facts and derivative if it does. Disagreement over fundamental ethical truths is thus purely ethical; it does not stem from a factual disagreement. To say that something may be fundamentally right for one group but fundamentally wrong for another is thus to say that there may be different answers to the questions of how to live and what to do for these groups, even though the factual circumstances and the groups’ beliefs about the factual circumstances are exactly the same.

If we make no distinction between fundamental and derivative truths, individual relativism is obvious. Suppose that John has murdered someone and Mary has done no harm to anyone. Then John deserves to be punished and Mary does not. John should turn himself over to the police; Mary should not. John’s obligations differ from Mary’s because of the facts. Relativism is interesting only when it pertains to the most fundamental ethical truths, which are independent of facts. What these are, of course, is controversial. Different moral theories espouse different candidates. But it is at the level of fundamental truths—Maximize good, Treat others as ends, not merely as means, Treat others as you would want to be treated—that the issue must be decided.

Relativism is often motivated by toleration or openness. Since tolerance is a virtue, relativists see their own position as morally required. Bloom observes,

That it is a moral issue for students is revealed by the character of their response when challenged—a combination of belief and indignation. “Are you an absolutist?,” the only alternative they know, uttered in the same tone as “Are you a monarchist?” or “Do you really believe in witches?” This latter leads into the indignation, for someone who believes in witches might well be a witch-hunter or a Salem judge. The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. *

But tolerance and relativism are not the same thing. I may believe that I am right and you are wrong, while still tolerating your behavior and respecting your right to be wrong. The traditional belief in freedom of thought and freedom of speech requires just such an attitude.

Conversely, I may be a relativist, holding only that my opinion is right for me, yet show little tolerance for any deviation from my opinion. The intolerance of relativists is not only possible but common enough to have a label: political correctness. Friedrich Nietzsche predicted that the twentieth century would be a century of great wars, precisely because it would be a century of relativism. Without truth, Nietzsche understood, there is only power.

Bloom frets that his students cannot defend their opinions. But it is possible to think through issues in ethics, including ethical relativism, carefully and systematically, as mentioned earlier. This introduction provides you with some tools—the basic elements of reasoning—that will help you do this. It tells you how to recognize and evaluate arguments. The examples used are arguments for and against ethical relativism. At the end, you should not only know how to analyze an argument critically but also have greater insight into relativism.

**Arguments**

Arguments are bits of reasoning in language. Frequently, we think of arguments as conflicts. In that sense, this issue is perhaps a struggle. But “argumentation” is an abstraction. A text may justify

...
sense, this book presents a series of arguments over issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and affirmative
action. But philosophers and logicians primarily use
"argument" in the sense that one argues for a conclu-
sion. An argument starts with some assertions and
tries justify thesis.

Components of Arguments

The initial assertions of an argument are its premises;
the thesis that the argument tries to justify is its conclu-
sion. Arguments consist of statements, sen-
tences that can be true or false. Almost every sen-
tence in this book falls into this category. Statements
are declarative, in the indicative mood; they say
something about the way the world is, correctly or
incorrectly.

Here, for example, is a simple argument that
some have advanced in favor of cultural relativism:

(1) Societies differ in their fundamental ethical
beliefs.

.: Ethical truth is relative to culture.

(This format lists the premises in the order in which
they are given and then gives the conclusion. The
symbol :. means "therefore.")

How can we recognize arguments? The premises
of an argument are meant to support the conclusion.
We can recognize arguments, then, by recognizing
when some statements are offered in support of oth-
er. We can do this most easily, in turn, if we can dis-
tinguish premises from conclusions. But how can we
pick out the conclusion of an argument? In English,
various words and phrases can signal the premises or
the conclusion of an argument.

- Conclusion Indicators: therefore, thus, hence, con-
sequently. It follows that, in conclusion, as a result,
then, must, accordingly, this implies that,
this entails that, we may infer that
- Premise Indicators: because, as, for, since, given
that, for the reason that

Beware: These words and phrases have other uses as
well.

Extended or complex arguments contain other
arguments. Simple arguments do not. Because ex-
tended arguments are good only if the simple argu-
ments within them are good, it is best to break
extended arguments down into their simple compo-
nents and analyze them separately.

Validity and Soundness

To evaluate arguments, we need to ask, What dis-
tinguishes good from bad arguments? What makes a
good argument good?

A good argument links its premises to its conclu-
sion in the right way. In a (deductively) valid argu-
ment, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth
of the conclusion. If the premises are all true, then
the conclusion has to be true. Or, equivalently, if the
conclusion of a valid argument is false, at least one
premise must also be false. Consider, for example,
the argument:

(2) All promises ought to be kept.
Your promise to Joe is a promise.
.: You ought to keep your promise to Joe.

In any circumstance in which the premises of this argu-
ment are true, the conclusion must be true as well.
It is impossible to conceive of a state of affairs in
which, while all promises ought to be kept, and your
promise to Joe is a promise, you nevertheless should
not keep your promise to Joe. If it is false that you
should keep your promise to Joe, then either there
are promises that shouldn’t be kept, or your "promis-
" wasn’t a real promise.

Valid arguments are only one species of good argu-
ment. Others are inductively strong (or reliable).
The truth of the premises of such an argument does
not guarantee the truth of its conclusion, but it does
make the truth of the conclusion probable. Consider,
for example, this argument:

(3) Every generous person I’ve ever known has
also been kind.
.: All generous people are kind.

It is possible for the premise to be true while the
conclusion is false. There may be generous but nasty
people I’ve never met. So the argument is invalid.
Nevertheless, the premise lends some support to the
conclusion. The argument is inductively strong; how
strong depends on how many generous people I’ve
known, among other things.

In general, good arguments not only are valid or
inductively strong but also have true premises. A