

# MORAL VALUE *and* HUMAN DIVERSITY



ROBERT AUDI

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Robert Audi

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*To my brother and sister*

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## PREFACE

The present age is marked by an ominous tension. Human diversity has never been so prominent, and the need for co-operation among utterly different people has never been so urgent. Differences in culture, education, ethnicity, religion, and lifestyles easily divide people. Can ethics provide standards of conduct that give everyone a sense of inherent worth and make it possible to resolve conflicts peacefully? This is a hope of most major writers in ethics. But they, too, differ among themselves, and their disagreements have, in many people, reduced confidence that ethics can provide standards we can all use in guiding our lives and our relations with others.

This book describes the most influential kinds of ethical views and, without neglecting their differences, draws on what they have in common to formulate moral standards that can help with some of the major challenges now facing us—individually and as societies. I divide these views into four categories. One category is the kind of virtue ethics found in Aristotle. The other three categories comprise three kinds of rule-based ethics: the moral theory of Immanuel Kant, the utilitarianism represented by John Stuart Mill, and the common-sense ethics that is associated with the intuitionism of W. D. Ross, though its origins go back at least to Aquinas.



The major proponents of these ethical views (all of which may have been also articulated in some version outside the philosophy of the Western Hemisphere) did not put them forward with the acute consciousness of human differences that is needed in the contemporary world. I will present the views with this in mind. Doing this requires considering “relativism,” a term used in ways that easily confuse. One way I clarify ethical relativism is by indicating some of the ways in which, despite appearances, ethics is like science. In this light I will show that major ethical views are universally applicable but also have a kind of relativity to circumstance that provides a degree of flexibility they have commonly been thought to lack.

Ethics has always been taken to concern both the good and the bad (the realm of value) and the right and the wrong (the realm of obligation). A well-developed ethical view should indicate how these two realms are related. This is largely a matter of how what we ought to do is connected with how we can live a good life. That question, in turn, is central for the theory of value. Most of what we do presupposes judgments of one or another kind of value. What kinds of judgments are these? And what sorts of things really have value? I am especially interested in what has value in a sense important for diverse people regardless of their particular culture or outlook.

The first part of the book takes up virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and common-sense intuitionism and formulates a broad ethical position that draws on all of these four kinds of view. It also proposes a conception of value that is readily integrated with that broad position. The second part of the book indicates how the ethical views introduced in part I might structure the kinds of lives people might lead regardless of major differences between them. This takes the reader beyond general and theoretical ethics into practical ethics. The final chapter goes a good distance into political philosophy and addresses some problems of applied

ethics. It considers a number of ethical challenges we face today.

All of the ethical views examined in part I can be applied to these contemporary challenges, but I naturally give prominence to the bearing of my own position in dealing with them. In a short book, however, it is enough to provide the basis for dealing with these and related challenges. Solving the problems is more than any single book can do.

In writing a short, non-technical book I have had to omit much that I would have liked to include, especially elaboration of the ethical views presented, discussion of relevant literature, analysis of argument and counterargument, and citations of data concerning the ethical challenges detailed in part II. Some of the gaps are filled in works referred to in the notes. But my hope is that the book says enough to make comprehension easy for those coming to ethics and political philosophy with little or no background in them, and that it is written with sufficient comprehensiveness and care to make it valuable for those with long experience in these fields.

I have also designed the book so that those interested mainly in general ethics can concentrate on part I, which is self-contained. Part II, if not entirely self-contained, can be read without study of part I and can certainly be taught separately by instructors familiar with the main ethical positions presented in part I and preferring to emphasize the questions of social and political philosophy prominent in part II. General readers and students in introductory college courses can understand the book throughout; and instructors in those courses can extend the discussions, in relation to their own ethical views, in ways that should be fruitful for both their teaching and their own work.

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## PART I

### MAJOR ETHICAL VIEWS AND THE DIMENSIONS OF VALUE