Our values shape our lives – what we do and think, what we feel, even what we see or notice. Our norms, too, shape our lives – how we speak and act, what we feel is correct or out of line, what we treat as evidence, what we expect of ourselves and others. Since it seems neither desirable nor possible to remove values and norms from our lives, the question whether values and norms can be other than subjective, relative, or arbitrary becomes pressing. We do sometimes speak of learning what really matters, or how best to do things, from our choices and experiences. We speak, too, of “lessons of history” in ethics and politics and of “the test of time” in aesthetics and the practical sciences. Can any of this be understood as learning about values and norms themselves? A philosophical account of values and norms should help us to answer this question, and yet as we delve deeper, we encounter a host of difficulties in developing a credible picture of learning and objectivity about values and norms.

In this collection of essays, Peter Railton develops some of the elements needed for such a picture. He suggests ways of understanding the nature of value, and its relation to judgment, that would permit ordinary human experience to be a source of genuine understanding and objectivity. Using realistic examples and an accessible style of analysis, he presents a unified approach to such questions as: What is the meaning or function of evaluative and normative language? What role do consequences play in assessing moral rightness or wrongness? Is a moral perspective inherently alienating? Can there be genuine moral dilemmas? What is “normative guidance,” and how does it emerge in individual and social practice? Does ideology exclude objectivity? To what extent, and in what ways, can we subject our moral, evaluative, or aesthetic judgments to criticism and revision?

The essays in this book are addressed to professionals and students in philosophy and also to those in other fields who seek an engaging but rigorous discussion of some basic philosophical questions about ethics, values, norms, and objectivity.

Peter Railton is the John Stephenson Perrin Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan.
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Facts, Values, and Norms

ESSAYS TOWARD A MORALITY OF CONSEQUENCE

PETER RAILTON

University of Michigan
For John and Thomas
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*Foreword*  

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“Oh... Philosophy. Well, what sort of philosophy do you do?”
“Mostly ethics.”
“Ethics? Do you think there really is any such thing?”

A fair question. Indeed, a host of fair questions. For there are many ways to be puzzled about ethics, and few easy answers. Some examples:

Moral claims are often made as if they possessed a kind of objectivity – as something more than personal or partisan preferences. But where in the world can we find anything like objective values or principles to back this up? Even when we disagree morally, we typically act as if there were something at stake, something to be right or wrong about. And those who argue that moral principles are “cultural” or “relative” typically are on their way to making a case for tolerance, understanding, cooperation, fairness – but this itself looks like a moral view. What is the meaning of moral terms, and what sort of objectivity, if any, does it commit us to? And, if there is such a commitment, can we identify properties of moral practice, or values in the world, that would vindicate it? This is one family of questions.

The objectivity of ethics, it seems, would have to be different from the objectivity of science. Morality gives practical guidance – it purports to say not how things are, but how they ought to be, or how it would be good for them to be. This guidance, moreover, claims to be rational – moral concerns present themselves as good reasons for action, reasons serious enough to outweigh or even cancel certain other pressing concerns or interests. But what is this idea of “practical guidance”? And if morality has “rational
force,” where does this force come from – inside us? outside? nowhere? How is rational force weighed, and how is such a force to make itself felt among the real forces driving action? A second family of questions.

And what might this practical guidance be? It is one thing to say that there are objective, rational principles, and another thing to say what they are, and how one tells. Is morality based on goods and values, or on rules, commandments, and duties? And does moral evaluation reach into every corner of our lives, or is it sometimes out of place? Is it partial or impartial, local or global, general or particular? A third family.

Lastly, one might ask: Whether or not morality should matter, does it? Does all our moral talk have any real force in the world – apart from escalating the rhetoric of agreements and disagreements in attitudes and interests? Morality is not supposed to be empty words, mere froth upon the surface of real life. Moral opinions of course influence how people act and feel, but then so do opinions about ghosts, gods, and astral influences. Could real moral considerations ever explain anything, in a way that would give us some confidence we are not simply making the whole thing up? A fourth family.

There are more questions besides, but this is enough for now. One can become impatient with all these questions, and begin to wonder whether high-sounding doubts about “the reality of ethics” express genuine doubts, or simply mask the real concerns and discomforts people have when moral issues are raised. Hume, for one, felt there was something “disingenuous” about certain disputatious souls, who fluently express doubts about morality, but who show none of the real anxiety one might expect such doubts to bestir, and who invariably fall back into unreflective moralizing as soon as the subject changes or someone else’s ox is gored. Moreover, this commonsense assurance about ethics might be very much stronger than our confidence in any argument contrived by a philosopher. So perhaps moral philosophy is beside the point – even when the doubts about morality are sincere, philosophical maneuvers cannot resolve them.

Certainly commonsense ethics seems unlikely to collapse without moral philosophy to underwrite it, but it does seem to me that commonsense moral life regularly leads people into quandaries of a philosophical nature. Far from being disingenuous, these quandaries are often most sharply felt by the very people who take moral concerns most seriously in
everyday life. One would be hard put, I think, to understand the shape of religion, or its importance in people’s lives, without taking into account the deeply felt need to say something about the basis of morality. Many do not find religious answers convincing, or find that the philosophical quandaries simply re-appear within religion. Philosophy should be able to help.

In that spirit, I offer this collection of essays. They were written over a span of twenty-five years, presenting, developing, and defending some ideas about how one might respond philosophically to the previously mentioned questions. The essays are just that—essays, trials, attempts. They exhibit a sense—a faith?—that ethics can find a solid place within the natural and human world, without mysterious faculties or supplementary metaphysics.

The more I read the great figures of moral philosophy in the past—Hume, certainly, but also Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, and many others—the more I think that the ideas I seem to have come up with could have been unearthed by more careful attention on my part to what they were trying to get across. Serious historians of ethics will wink at this remark. It is the vice of every amateur to find in The Greats admirable statements of whatever it is that he or she already believes. Now that I discover I have this vice, I feel that the essays reprinted in the following chapters largely pay inadequate tribute to philosophical ancestors, or worse, sometimes saddle these writers with views—“Humean,” “Kantian,” “Aristotelian”—that a closer or more thorough acquaintance would show The Greats did not themselves hold. I hope this is forgivable.

Less forgivable would be a failure to acknowledge the influence of my contemporaries, especially those who struggled hard to talk some sense into me. They include many colleagues, here at Michigan and elsewhere, and also many who do not think of themselves as philosophers, but who taught me much philosophy. I would be very pleased if the footnotes acknowledging the help of colleagues and others in the reprinted essays could be set in boldface—that might give a fairer idea of these good people’s importance in shaping my thought.

I have organized the essays into three groups.

PART I: REALISM ABOUT VALUE AND MORALITY

I’ve put the word ‘value’ ahead of ‘morality’ because it seems to me that the most credible entry into questions about the reality of ethics is through
the theory of value. A domain could have objectivity, principles, rules, practices, and even norms without taking what makes life worth living as its touchstone – witness mathematics or linguistics. But it wouldn't be ethics.

Now, some forms of value or worth themselves depend upon moral considerations, and so could not serve as entry points into ethics. Thus, the morally deserved happiness of someone whose generosity over the years has at last come back to her in friendship and gratitude has a moral value that the morally undeserved happiness of someone who has just become rich through cunning or accident does not. But the intrinsic value of subjective well-being is present in both cases, and explains why we think of happiness as an appropriate reward for past sacrifice.

Because subjective well-being has intrinsic value, it can serve as one of the entry points into morality. Which still leaves the question: Just what sort of thing is intrinsic value, and what explains why happiness, say, has it? This is not in the first instance a question about the concept of intrinsic value as such, which may be normative to its toes – as Moore in effect pointed out using the “open question argument.” It is a question about the property of being intrinsically valuable – what does it consist in, and how can it be judged? This property is held to “supervene” – as Moore also observed – on natural features, in the sense that value differences are always explained or justified by other kinds of difference. But what does value supervene upon, what features of the world and our relationship to it might constitute value?

Intrinsic value, as I understand it, intriguingly straddles the objective and the subjective. On the one hand, our opinions don’t determine the matter – Mill mentions the miser, who wrongly thinks money has intrinsic value because he has come to see it that way. On the other hand, intrinsic value does always seem to be related to, and realized by, subjects. Intrinsic value, for example, is thought to be related to intrinsic motivation – to questions of what is actually sought for its own sake. And we appeal to value when deliberating, and to explain and justify choices. If intrinsic value is to be considered an objective phenomenon, then we will have to explain the peculiar blending of objective features and subjective interests that gives rise to it. And if value inquiry is to make sense, we will have to explain how learning about value is possible. I attempt to develop a “naturalistic” approach to intrinsic value (including intrinsic aesthetic value) that would enable us to see how claims about objectivity could be well-founded and could support a critical evaluative practice.
If anything like the approach I suggest to intrinsic value is viable, then we have an entry point: ethics has something real to work with, something that answers to important human concerns and might provide an infrastructure to support some moral practices. This in itself could mitigate certain worries about “the reality of ethics,” but we would still need to connect intrinsic value to the rest of ethics—for example, to judgments of what is right or wrong, obligatory or permitted, virtuous or vicious. How to make the connection? Philosophers in the twentieth century developed the idea of a *moral point of view*, a standpoint of assessment that is distinctive not just because it is concerned with the realization of intrinsic value—after all, the prudential point of view is as well—but because it asks us to see ourselves as but one among others, whose good has no different intrinsic weight than theirs. Assessments of acts or states of affairs from this “non-personal” point of view might be worthy of the name *moral evaluations* if we can link them suitably to our moral practices. To do this requires analyzing the place of moral judgment, and the distinctive roles of the different moral categories, in our lives. It also involves capturing enough of the substantive *content* of commonsense moral judgment—including its practices of criticism and justification—to give us some confidence that we are deepening our understanding of our actual moral life, rather than attempting to replace it. If this were possible, then these categories of moral judgment could inherit whatever objectivity was possessed by the original moral evaluations themselves. Ethics proper might to that extent be seen to be more real.

**PART II: NORMATIVE MORAL THEORY**

Actual moral life at any time is not a systematic body of precepts or set of fixed procedures for resolving disputes. Moral agreement and moral disagreement are both part of the stuff of daily life, although the points of agreement and disagreement have not been constant across societies or times. All this might make ethics look very different from areas of inquiry such as natural or social science, and cause one to think that the ambition of finding some systematic or theoretical order in it is vain at best, dangerous at worst.

This contrast is readily overdrawn. Shifting patterns of agreement and disagreement can be found in the history of natural and social thought, or across the contemporary world once one looks beyond the groves of academe. Even within the groves at a given time, one can find great and impassioned disagreement over matters of substance and method.
in empirical inquiry. The fundamental differences between ethical inquiry and inquiry into the natural and social world do not really lie in this dimension.

Moreover, both morality and empirical inquiry contain norms of practice as well as substantive claims. In the first respect, they show remarkable parallels, as I try to argue in some of the essays included here. Where they most differ, I would guess, is that ethics gives a special place to substantive claims that are themselves of a normative character, and could not play the role it does in our lives if it did not. Given a substantive empirical theory, I can attempt to predict what I will be doing a day or a year from now, much as I might predict what someone else will be doing. But predicting this is not deciding it – and I can defy my own predictions on principled grounds as much as I might defy yours. A theory suited to the predictive task can greatly aid deciding, but will not suffice for it. Ethics is not alone in offering normative claims as part of its substantive core – so do prudence, jurisprudence, military strategy, engineering standards, pedagogical manuals, and so on. And it would be a reckless discipline that offered normative guidance without consulting a substantive body of empirical knowledge – prudent people and good doctors try to learn the facts, anticipate consequences, measure effects. But it would be no practical discipline at all that could only describe actions or explain outcomes, without ever advising us to seek some and shun others.

To be sure, prudent people and good doctors typically do not consult elaborate, systematic normative theories in acting. They act on personal experience; acquired skills and knowledge; and advice and consultation. We should not expect anything different to be typical in ethical decision making. So we would do well not to think of normative moral theories as specifying a “decision procedure” to be internalized and applied, but as schemes that enable us to assess the motives, strategies, skills, habits, practices, rules, etc. that people might defer to, act on, consult, and encourage. Such a scheme of assessment gives us critical purchase on practices that prudence, medicine, and moral choice as actually practiced badly need if they are to be done well.

Some such schemes afford greater critical purchase than others, and one of the pressing questions in contemporary ethics is whether moral theory has been given too much leverage in moral philosophy. The resistance of actual moral thought and practice to ready systematization might be trying to tell us something deep. I try to diagnose some of these forms of resistance, and learn from them how better to do moral theory. But my
optimism on this score is not, I know, widely shared – doubt about the continuing usefulness of theory in normative ethics is rife.

Within normative ethics, philosophers have long disputed the relative priority of notions of right versus notions of value, or notions of principle versus notions of virtue. I believe that a coherent picture of normative ethics as a whole can emerge from a value-based, broadly consequentialist standpoint. This picture has the virtue (or vice, in some eyes) of bringing a great deal of empirical science to bear on normative conclusions. However *a priori* normative concepts might be, their guidance in conduct becomes very *a posteriori*. This is unsettling to many moral philosophers, but it does throw into relief those features we are most likely to cite, I suspect, for explaining why morality matters as much as it does – the ways we can affect one another and the values at stake as we live together.

**PART III: THE AUTHORITY OF ETHICS AND VALUE – THE PROBLEM OF NORMATIVITY**

I first encountered “the problem of normativity” in trying to respond to critics of naturalism. A naturalistic theory of value, I was told, could not account for the normative force of value judgments. My first effort in this direction was a talk entitled “Naturalism and Normativity,” but I was advised that “Naturalism and Prescriptivity” made a better title for publication, since the latter term was much more familiar. There is no danger of unfamiliarity nowadays. But despite heavy use, the term ‘normativity’ remains shrouded in a certain mystery. Thus far in the Foreword, I have used ‘normative’ freely, even to make important distinctions, without saying much of anything to explain it. We do have a sense of the ways in which notions of what *is* differ from notions of what *ought to be*, or of the gap between a generalization describing actual usage and a principle of *correct* usage. Can we add anything to illuminate this? A useful phrase seems to be ‘direction of fit’: an *is*-statement or descriptive generalization is supposed to fit the way things are, while the way things are is supposed to fit – or to be made to fit – *ought*-statements or principles of correctness. But ‘supposed to fit’ is itself a normative phrase. So it would seem we must begin a step further back.

We should not be too hard on ourselves. It is unsurprising that a very basic contrast, like that between normative and descriptive, is hard to characterize at any deeper level. Just try saying what ‘true’ and ‘false’ mean in an informative way without simply using near-synonyms. So let’s
not try that straight off. We can say a good deal that is informative about “what truth conditions are” or “what it is for a language to have a truth predicate.” So let’s talk of “what it is to be normative” or “what it is for a practice to have a norm.” That is, let’s talk in terms of functions or roles rather than meanings or concepts proper. Or so I suggest. We could demystify somewhat the question of what it would be for ethics to be real if we could see how a real property or state could come to have a normative function or role in a practice, and why. This I begin to do in the essays grouped in Part III, which I hope suggest a way beyond the “circle of synonyms.”

Is any progress possible within the circle? Unless “normative guidance” and “rule following” are primitive concepts, then it should be possible to do a bit of anatomy. When we do, I think, we find two quite different components, roughly the “norm”-part and the “guided”-part, or the “rule”-part and the “following”-part. The first part must be in some sense external to the agent, a norm or rule that encodes a standard in some way independent of her will but with which she ordinarily can comply through some sort of voluntary activity (ought implies can, in some sense). The second part must be in some sense internal, a deference that is a will or volonté of hers, but itself a feeling rather than a product of will (lest regress follow). This is, I argue in the following text, a point of agreement between Hume and Kant—who have been thought to differ so deeply on normativity. Much later, Wittgenstein reaffirmed the point. Indeed, I find this idea present in Durkheim’s analysis of religion. That at least this much of a shared conception of normativity can be found in these thinkers, despite their differences, gives me some hope (what else, with my amateur’s vice?) that we can make progress in demystifying the concept of normativity, thereby removing another obstacle to seeing how there might “really be such a thing as ethics.”

Finally, some will think I cannot be a serious person if I do not recognize the ideological role of moral discourse throughout history. They are right. I try to make a case that this recognition can strengthen, rather than weaken, our sense that ethics—real ethics—can be a force in the world. Moralities and mores come and go, ideologies rise and fall. But human suffering and well-being, exclusion and empathy, denial and recognition, struggle and solidarity, are realities that help explain why. And ethics can be as real as they are.

I subtitle this collection “Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence” because we aren’t there yet.
I gladly dedicate this volume to my children, John and Thomas, because of what they have taught me about facts, values, and norms, and because an old and good saying has it that the only real way to thank one’s parents is to give what one can to one’s children in turn.

There are a dozen others, teachers and friends, to whom I would dearly love to dedicate a volume to tell them how much they have helped me along the way. Some are no longer alive for me to put it in their hands. And there are many others who deserve special thanks for thoughts, criticisms, and encouragement. Any dedication or expression of debts will also be an omission, but I would be remiss not to set down at least these names: Elizabeth Anderson, Nomy Arpaly, Kent Berridge, Paul Boghossian, Richard Boyd, Richard Brandt, Michael Bratman, Monique Canto-Sperber, Stephen Darwall, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, William Frankena, Allan Gibbard, Alan Goldman, Gilbert Harman, C.G. Hempel, David Hills, Otfried Höhreit, Thomas Holt, Frank Jackson, Richard Jeffrey, Mark Johnston, James Joyce, Shelly Kagan, Jaegwon Kim, David Lewis, Burns Lloyd, Harry Lloyd, Louis Loeb, Richard Miller, Thomas Nagel, Randolf Nesse, Richard Nisbett, Derek Parfit, Philip Petitm, Gideon Rosen, T.M. Scanlon, Samuel Scheffler, Andrew Scott, Anne Scott, Rebecca Scott, Holly Smith, Michael Smith, Daniel Sperber, Nicholas Sturgeon, David Velleman, Peter Vranas, Kendall Walton, David Wiggins, and Susan Wolf.

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Peter Railton
Ann Arbor, Michigan
NOTE

1. I will be using ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ (and ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’) interchangeably. Some philosophers wish to mark a worthwhile distinction by distinguishing them—for example, Bernard Williams, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985). But the roots *more* and *ethos* are close, and usage seldom differentiates the modern terms.