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An Introduction to Ethics

This book examines the central questions of ethics through a study of theories of right and wrong that are found in the great ethical works of Western philosophy. It focuses on theories that continue to have a significant presence in the field. The core chapters cover egoism, the eudaimonism of Plato and Aristotle, act and rule utilitarianism, modern natural law theory, Kant's moral theory, and existentialist ethics. Readers will be introduced not only to the main ideas of each theory but also to contemporary developments and defenses of those ideas. A final chapter takes up topics in meta-ethics and moral psychology. The discussions throughout draw the reader into philosophical inquiry through argument and criticism that illuminate the profundity of the questions under examination. Students will find this book to be a very helpful guide to how philosophical inquiry is undertaken as well as to what the major theories in ethics hold.

JOHN DEIGH is Professor of Philosophy and Law at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *The Sources of Moral Agency* (Cambridge, 1996) and of *Emotions, Values, and the Law* (2008).

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To the memory of my father and mother
Maurice Deigh (1913–2004)
Dorace B. Deigh (1915–2006)

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Preface

Ethics is one of the main branches of philosophy. Its range, extending from fundamental questions about the nature of our humanity and freedom to very practical questions about the morality of physician-assisted suicide and experiments on animals, is vast. An introduction must, therefore, be selective in its coverage. I have chosen, as a way of covering the central questions of ethics, to concentrate on different theories of right and wrong that we find in the great works of Western philosophy and that continue to have a large presence in the field. Sustained study of these theories illuminates systematic connections among the field's central questions and the ideas the philosophers who produced the theories invented to answer them.

A good introduction to a branch of philosophy not only surveys its major ideas and theories but also exemplifies philosophical inquiry into them. I have tried to do both. In doing so, I hope to draw the reader into inquiry of the kind that philosophers undertake when they examine a philosophical question as well as to inform him or her about the major ideas and theories in which philosophers who study ethics traffic. Philosophical inquiry requires argument and criticism, and the reader needs to be aware that some of the arguments and criticism I make in the course of examining these different ethical theories represent my own reflections on them rather than settled opinion among the experts. Some of what I say, then, is bound to be controversial. And if it provokes objection or skepticism, I will then have succeeded in the second of my two aims.

I have benefited from the advice of several friends who read some of the chapters in draft. I am indebted to Reid Blackman, Daniel Brudney, George Graham, Hugh LaFollette, and Martha Nussbaum, all of whom gave me valuable comments and suggestions. Brad Cokelet read the entire manuscript and offered many perceptive pointers and observations that helped me prepare the final draft. I am very grateful to him for his efforts and

wisdom. I also wish to thank my editor, Hilary Gaskin, not only for the advice she gave me throughout the project on how to improve my exposition, but also for her patience and kindness. The book has had a lengthy gestation. My greatest debt is to the teachers of ethics with whom I studied as an undergraduate and who introduced me to the subject. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., in particular, taught me not only to appreciate the intricacies and subtleties in the works of Hume, Kant, Mill, and others, but how to read these works at once critically and sympathetically. It gives me pleasure to think that with this book I have in part discharged my debt to him.

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