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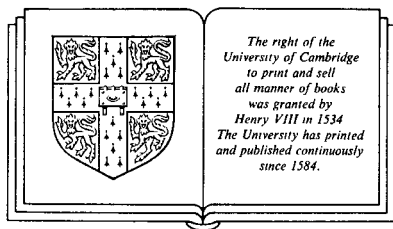
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# *Moral realism and the foundations of ethics*

*David O. Brink*

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*



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## *Preface*

As the Introduction explains, this book concerns the foundations of ethics; it examines issues of metaethics, moral epistemology, moral psychology, value theory, and moral theory. I defend a number of positions on these issues; in particular, I argue that a realist metaethics, a coherentist moral epistemology, an externalist moral psychology, a nonreductive form of ethical naturalism, an objective theory of value, and an objective form of utilitarianism are individually plausible and mutually supporting. In the course of examining these issues and defending these claims, I discuss and assess both traditional and contemporary views. I have usually tried to introduce, explain, and motivate the issues and the positions that have been taken on them. To this extent, the book should be accessible to a fairly wide audience with varied interests and backgrounds. But it is not strictly introductory; nor is it in any way a survey of established terrain. I have generally assumed a certain threshold familiarity with traditional positions and disputes about the foundations of ethics and with traditional and contemporary issues in metaphysics and epistemology. Against this background, I argue for my own particular set of views about the foundations of ethics. So even if the book is accessible to a fairly wide audience, it speaks most directly to a somewhat narrower audience of more advanced students and specialists.

This book grew out of the doctoral dissertation I submitted to Cornell University in 1984; though recognizably related to the dissertation, the book is in many ways quite different. Its scope is considerably larger, in order to provide some defense of ideas and assumptions taken for granted in the thesis, and the organization and argument of the central project have changed in important ways.

I have tried to record in the body of the book my intellectual debts to authors of published writings. Here I'd like to mention more



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special debts. During the various stages of the book's gestation, I've been the fortunate beneficiary of a good deal of philosophical stimulus and moral support from a number of people. It is a pleasure to acknowledge these personal and intellectual debts and to express my gratitude to these people.

Because the book began as a doctoral thesis, I owe some of my greatest debts to members of my dissertation committee. Richard Boyd argued the merits of his own version of moral realism and helped me grapple with some of the metaphysical and epistemological parallels between ethics and science. I'm sure I'm still not quite the right sort of realist in his view, but the articulation of my own view owes much to stimulating discussions with him. David Lyons provided prompt and helpful comments on versions of each chapter of the thesis. His suggestions and complaints helped me avoid confusions and identify positions and arguments demanding articulation. I owe still greater debts to my two other readers, Nick Sturgeon and Terry Irwin. Nick provided detailed written and oral comments on each draft and has provided similar input on almost all of my subsequent work on these issues. I know that I've been profoundly influenced by Nick's views about moral realism, related metaethical issues, and consequentialism. Anyone familiar with his published work will notice the extent of my debt to him in my discussions of the significance of the realism-antirealism dispute in ethics (Chapter 4) and of the explanatory power of moral claims (Chapter 7, sec. 3). These are just the most salient features of a much larger intellectual debt I owe Nick. Perhaps my greatest debt is to Terry Irwin. Only those who know Terry, and perhaps only those who have been fortunate enough to work with him, will fully understand the nature of this debt. Terry provided copious, detailed, constructive comments and criticisms on every draft of every chapter of my thesis, comments we then often pursued in long and, for me, extremely fruitful discussions. He has provided similarly judicious comments and advice on much of my more recent work on these issues. Terry has made me rethink, reorganize, and reargue my position on almost every topic in this book. Perhaps most important, Terry's own work and his help with mine provided me with a model of philosophical integrity. Although my work does not approximate this model as closely as I would like, I know that Terry, especially, deserves credit for what is of value

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here, and I hope he finds some return on his investment in what follows.

Changing the thesis into a book proceeded in fits and starts. Teaching duties and work on shorter projects both interrupted and interacted with work on the book. A number of people read and commented on one or another version of the entire book during this period. Alan Sidelle read the thesis and a subsequent version of the book manuscript, as well as many of these shorter projects, and provided valuable suggestions. Perhaps more important, over the last seven years Alan has been both a constant source of philosophical ideas and advice and the best of friends. Jennifer Whiting read a version of the manuscript and provided several pages of very helpful written comments. Gilbert Harman was the reader for Cambridge University Press. In addition to influencing an earlier version of Chapter 3 (Brink 1986a), he gave me several pages of instructive comments on the penultimate version of the manuscript. Phil Gasper, David McNaughton, Julius Moravcsik, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong each read a version of the manuscript and gave useful advice.

Two groups of graduate students, one at Stanford and one at MIT, helped sort through this material and its formulation. In this connection, I would especially like to thank Charles Dresser, Susan Dwyer, Richard Heck, Larry Kaye, Kwong-loi Shun, Eric Lormand, and Paul Pietroski. Others read or heard portions of this manuscript in one form or another and provided valuable input; they are John G. Bennett, Michael Bratman, Joshua Cohen, Norman Dahl, John McDowell, John Post, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, Milton Wachsberg, and David Wong.

I'm sure that I've not taken full advantage of these people's comments, criticisms, and advice; there must be many places where I've ignored their worries or where the changes I've made still don't quite satisfy. But I've tried to answer (or avoid) what seemed to me to be their most serious worries and to take advantage of their good advice, and I know that the book is vastly better than it would have been without their careful and generous attention.

A final debt needs to be recorded. My wife, Bonny Sweeney, provided, during this long period, love and patient understanding without which work would have gone more slowly and painfully, and without which I certainly would have been much less happy.

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The book has had a rather incestuous relationship with several shorter works written over the last five years or so: Papers formed the basis of chapters, whose revision sometimes suggested new papers, whose ultimate form sometimes required revision or reorganization of parts of the book. I would like to thank the following journals for permission to make use of material published in their pages: the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (1984), *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* (1986a), *The Journal of Philosophy* (1986b), and the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (1987).