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ETHICS IN THE GRAY AREA

What should morally conscientious agents do if they must choose among options that are somewhat right and somewhat wrong? Should you select an option that is right to the highest degree, or would it perhaps be more rational to choose randomly among all somewhat right options? And how should lawmakers and courts address behavior that is neither entirely right nor entirely wrong? In this first book-length discussion of the "gray area" in ethics, Martin Peterson challenges the assumption that rightness and wrongness are binary properties. He argues that some acts are neither entirely right nor entirely wrong, but rather a bit of both. Including discussions of white lies and the permissibility of abortion, Peterson's book presents a gradualist theory of right and wrong designed to answer pressing practical questions about the gray area in ethics.

MARTIN PETERSON holds the Sue G. and Harry E. Bovay, Jr. Chair in the Department of Philosophy at Texas A&M University. He is the author of *The Dimensions of Consequentialism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), *An Introduction to Decision Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 2017), *The Ethics of Technology* (Oxford University Press, 2017), and *Ethics for Engineers* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

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ETHICS IN THE GRAY AREA

A Gradualist Theory of Right and Wrong

MARTIN PETERSON
Texas A & M University

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Preface

This book explores the idea that some acts are neither entirely right nor entirely wrong, but rather a bit of both. We can think of such acts as falling in a moral gray area. Philosophical theories of indeterminacy and vagueness (where vagueness is understood as indeterminacy with sorites susceptibility) can shed light on some aspects of the gray area, but they also leave important questions open. It is, for instance, not clear what morally conscientious agents should do if forced to choose among options that are somewhat right and somewhat wrong. Should one select an option that is more right than wrong, or at least as right as every alternative, or would it perhaps be more rational to choose randomly among all somewhat right options? And how should lawmakers and courts address behavior that is neither entirely right nor entirely wrong?

This work has been in the making for over a decade. Several individuals and organizations deserve my sincere thanks for invaluable help and support. Between 2009 and 2011, the Swedish Research Council generously funded a project on gradualism in ethics, which enabled me to set aside time to work on the core idea of this monograph. The project also enabled me to hire two post-docs, Nicolas Espinoza and Anna Bergqvist, who helped me organize a series of workshops. At the end of the project, Nicolas and I published an op-ed in a Swedish newspaper in which we argued that some abortions fall in a gray area (*Dagens Nyheter*, April 17, 2011). A cabinet minister wrote a response in which she made it very clear that she disagreed with our analysis. In her view, abortion is a binary moral issue. The minister's argument was that there is no gray area in the *legislation* about abortion, so therefore there cannot be any *moral* gray area. This struck me as a weak argument. Existing laws may not always reflect what we ought to think about an issue. However, this exchange made me realize that abstract philosophical questions about degrees of moral rightness can have important implications not just for moral theory but also for society.

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Nicolas Espinoza and Anna Bergqvist provided helpful feedback in the early phases of the project, as did numerous colleagues at TU Eindhoven, in particular Rosemary Lowry and Philip Nickel. In 2013, Vuko Andric and Attila Tanyi hosted a workshop at the University of Konstanz on my book *The Dimensions of Consequentialism*, in which one of the chapters is devoted to the idea that rightness and wrongness come in degrees. I am very grateful to all workshop participants for their helpful and stimulating comments (later published in a special issue of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*), which helped me develop my gradualist theory further. I hereby wish to thank all participants: Campbell Brown, Joanna Burch-Brown, Roger Crisp, Frances Howard-Snyder, Vuko Andric, Attila Tanyi, and Jan Gertken. Since moving to Texas A&M University in 2014, I have benefitted from stimulating discussions with my wonderful colleagues in the department of philosophy, in particular Nathan Howard, who has offered insightful feedback on many chapters, as well as the members of the Group for Analytic Metaphysics and Epistemology, who gave me good feedback on Chapter 7. Finally, I would like to thank my research assistant Sean Conte for helping me prepare the final version of the manuscript.

Six of the nine chapters have been written from scratch. Chapter 1 is a slightly revised version of "Moral Rightness Comes in Degrees," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 2022, and Chapter 3 is a revised version of "Radical Evaluative Ignorance," in R. Peels (ed.), *Perspectives on Ignorance from Moral and Social Philosophy*, Routledge, 2017. Chapter 5 is partly based on "Multidimensional Consequentialism and Population Ethics," in C. Seidel (ed.), *Consequentialism: New Directions, New Problems?,* Oxford University Press, 2018, and "The Dimensions of Consequentialism: Reply to Schmidt, Brown, Howard-Snyder, Crisp, Andric and Tanyi, and Gertken" in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 2016. A few sections also draw on "Abortion Is Neither Right Nor Wrong," in *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 2022.

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