

FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

Knowledge aims to fit the world, and action to change it. In this collection of essays, Onora O'Neill explores the relationship between these concepts and shows that principles are not enough for ethical thought or action: we also need to understand how practical judgement identifies ways of enacting them and of changing the way things are. Both ethical and technical judgement are supported, she contends, by bringing to bear multiple considerations, ranging from ethical principles to real-world constraints, and while we will never find practical algorithms – let alone ethical algorithms – that resolve moral and political issues, good practical judgement can bring abstract principles to bear in situations that call for action. Her essays thus challenge claims that all inquiry must use either the empirical methods of scientific inquiry or the interpretive methods of the humanities. They will appeal to a range of readers in moral and political philosophy.

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Normativity and Judgement in Ethics and Politics

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11375-6 — From Principles to Practice
Onora O'Neill
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107113756
DOI: 10.1017/9781316286708

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First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: O'Neill, Onora, 1941– author.

TITLE: From principles to practice : normativity and judgement in ethics and politics / Onora O'Neill Emeritus, University of Cambridge.

DESCRIPTION: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018011098 | ISBN 9781107113756

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Ethics. | Normativity (Ethics) | Judgment (Ethics) | Practical reason.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BJ1031 .O535 2018 | DDC 170–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018011098>

ISBN 978-1-107-11375-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-53435-3 Paperback

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Acknowledgements

In this collection I focus on generic features of practical reasoning and judgement, including ethical reasoning and judgement, which have given rise to persistent disputes for a long time. The papers have been written across many years, and engage with persisting and in many cases recurrent features of ethical debate. However, in this collection I say little about the justification of practical principles, which I have discussed elsewhere.¹ My aim is to consider whether and how practical principles can guide action. If we cannot understand whether and how principles can guide action, questions about their justification will hardly matter, since their practical use and point will remain obscure.

I have puzzled about these questions across many years, and have discussed them with many patient friends, colleagues and students, as well as with wider audiences in innumerable seminars and conferences. I am deeply grateful to those who have shared my sense that questions about the relation of practical principles and practical judgement to action matter, and have helped to clarify what is at stake and how far answers can be given. These questions need answering if action is to be guided by principles, and matter not only for abstract philosophical purposes, but for leading our lives. I thank everyone who has had the patience to listen, to criticise, to encourage and to make fruitful suggestions.

¹ Including in Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Acting on Principle*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2014); *Constructing Authorities: Reason, Politics and Interpretation in Kant's Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).