

# Reason and Professional Ethics

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

Many professionals confront ethical issues concerning their proper roles and the manner in which they should carry out those roles. University and College courses for the preparation of such professionals usually address some of these matters to some extent. Sometimes the treatment is cursory (little more than the inculcation of a 'professional code of ethics' as stipulated by some professional body). Sometimes the issues are raised and discussed but without students having the 'tools of thought' with which to think their way through what are quite complex issues. The book aims to provide students (and, for that matter, their instructors) with a 'stepped' introduction to those tools of thought. It would be best utilized in tandem with another text discussing the particular issues that arise within the profession in question.

Briefly put, those tools of thought are drawn from the critical thinking, or informal logic, corpus. In particular, given that the issues being deliberated upon concern what one should *do*, the book belongs in the field of so-called practical reason. Three features distinguish it from other works in the field. The first is its explicit focus upon professional ethical issues and its brief portrayal of some normative and meta-ethical theory that bears upon many such issues. The second is its unusual focus upon the acceptability of an argument's *premises*. The third is its concern with reasoning of an *extended* sort rather than merely with the features of a single argument.

Concerning the first, the treatment is necessarily brief. It touches on both normative ethics and metaethics. Within normative ethics I consider just utilitarian cum consequentialist theories and deontological-rule theories. Appeal to one or other of these seems to be what mostly goes on when people engage in principled defence of a position. If people wish to supplement this with a consideration of virtue ethics, evolutionary ethics or whatnot or whether more complex treatment of varieties of the above then that it would be an easy thing to do. With respect to metaethics, I focus upon two main puzzles: 'is there any such thing as ethical truth?' and: 'if there is, then how would we know it when we had it?'. Finally, threaded throughout this chapter is a consideration of how someone of some sort of religious persuasion might fit themselves into one or other of the taxonomic 'boxes' portrayed. Although my own view is that religious belief is one of the things that philosophy has successfully debunked, I have noticed that many students in the so-called 'caring professions' have some religious belief.

Concerning the second, much (not all) of the critical thinking literature focuses upon getting particular individual arguments being logical. Yet an argument, however logical, is only acceptable as a case for its conclusion to the extent that its premises are acceptable. A lot of the time one's complaint against

an argument is that one or other of its premises are dubious and deserving of support and/or criticism.

As for the third feature, extended enquiry (in soliloquy or in dialogue) is comprised of a series of arguments with some 'connective tissue' between them (this criticizes or supports that ...) which relates them together as parts of the one enquiry. At any given point in an enquiry, working out which option of the available options is the best next move is dependent upon the particular enquiry history to date, the interests of the particular enquirer and so on. And this situation of multiple possible paths forward, to be deliberated among as an exercise in self-conscious meta-cognition, continues and becomes more complicated as an enquiry unfolds. Thoughtfully handling such extended enquiry in a metacognitively self-conscious way is, in my view, a matter that is under-done in the extant literature. Yet carrying out such a connected series of particular arguments in a metacognitively thoughtful, rigorous way is a key part of thinking in depth about an issue. A notable feature of my approach is to 'grow the complexity' from the ground up, starting from the issue at hand and not getting too many 'cards on the table' at once. A usual result of this is that the broad principles that were thought to apply to the case at hand come judged to be too simplistic and somewhat more nuanced versions of them emerge. A related result is that, as a result of criticizing the premises is pressing some underlying principles, people's willingness and ability to be self-critical rather than defensive is enhanced. What I am concerned to resist is the tendency to simply list 15 'for' arguments and 14 'against' arguments and call that a balanced appraisal of the issue. This is sometimes the style of the 'controversial issues in XYZ' readers for professional ethics courses. Rather than such breadth without depth, I am tending more to focus upon depth and teasing out underlying conflicting issues as slowly as possible whilst keeping the number of new elements down unless very deliberately introduced for reasons that can be metacognitively warranted.

The book is usable in several ways and I would not expect some of its complexities to be utilized with introductory undergraduates. Chapters 2 to 6 cover the basic skills of argumentation at the level of an individual argument, the two basic operations upon a premise (criticizing it or defending it) and the idea of metacognitively tracking the emerging features and tensions of an enquiry and deliberating upon the path forward. Given the amount of 'junk jargon' that seems to be in circulation in professional circles, Chapter 8 is probably also worth a read by even introductory students. Chapter 7 is rather complex and I would suggest that it would be more suitable as something to be read by advanced students or, for that matter, by tutors/instructors for their own interest. I do not know of anywhere else in the literature that some of the complexities of extended reasoning have been teased out in this manner.

Much of what is in the book is just general critical thinking and ethical literature material of a sort that I would hardly know now how to attribute in any specific detail. I make no claim for originality here and acknowledge multiple diffused debts to other philosophers. The focus on metacognition is a bit more

original and most of the detail of Chapter 7 is, as far as I know, largely an original contribution.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the forbearance of my family and the support of my university in the production of this book and, in particular, to thank a colleague, Rainie Douglas, who laboured through the onerous task of translating my draft into Ashgate's house style.