

How Should We Live?

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Everyday ethics in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Contents

Foreword

page 8

Introduction

STEPHEN CHADWICK

page 10

1

Capital Punishment

GERALD K. HARRISON

page 14

2

Freedom and the State

STEPHEN CHADWICK

page 38

3

The Treatment of Animals

VANYA KOVACH

page 71

4

Cyber-ethics

NICK MUNN

page 96

5

Sex and Intimacy

VANESSA SCHOUTEN

page 121

6

Inequality
STEPHEN CHADWICK
page 144

7

Whānau Ora:
Transforming Health and Wellbeing
KRUSHIL WATENE, TIM ROCHFORD
AND NATALYA TAMARIKI
page 169

8

The Environment
STEPHEN DUFFIN
page 196

9

War and Peace
MARCEL ZENTVELD-WALE
page 221

10

Abortion
GERALD K. HARRISON
page 261

About the contributors
page 292

Index
page 297

Foreword

Philosophy is sometimes criticised as having no practical use, and indeed philosophy contrasts with disciplines in areas such as the social sciences, where the assembling and analysing of empirical data is a significant part of the work. Philosophy is about what to do with the data when you have it. In particular, the empirical data alone will only tell you how things *are*, not how they *ought to be*. Philosophers have for centuries worried about the nature of claims about what ought to be, and about the role of empirical data in determining what ought to be. To take an example from an issue discussed in one of the chapters of this book, a person may believe it is acceptable to eat meat because they are unaware of the processes used in its production — or they may be well aware of how meat is produced but believe that such facts have no moral implications. These are very different reasons, and disentangling what is involved in such differences is why philosophy, as undertaken here, is needed.

This anthology contains chapters written by philosophers currently working in New Zealand and addressing questions which concern every New Zealander. Although the questions are universal, the application to twenty-first-century New Zealand society makes the volume a unique contribution, both to scholarship and to the encouragement of clear thinking about some of the most difficult questions which face us all.

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Introduction

Without necessarily realising it we make ethical decisions every day of our lives. In many situations our actions are simply directed by the rules that our society lays down in law — I may not speed, or lie about my income on my tax returns, simply because I do not want to get caught and face the legal consequences. But there are many situations in which we have to decide what is the right and wrong thing to do irrespective of what the law requires. Telling lies is an obvious example. We are taught as children that it is wrong to tell lies but we soon realise, as we grow older, that this is not necessarily true and that the issue is much more complicated.

A distinction is often drawn between three related and interconnected areas of ethics (or moral philosophy). At the deepest level there are questions that are concerned with the fundamental nature of morality, including whether such a thing exists at all. This is often referred to as *meta-ethics*. In a book of this nature we will simply assume that there is something called morality, without enquiring as to its exact nature. The second area, known as *normative ethics* (or ethical theory), attempts to discover whether there are any fundamental moral principles that underpin ethical decision making. Lastly, questions in *applied* or *practical* ethics consider the moral status of particular actions that humans can and do perform in their everyday lives. These questions are the main focus of this book,

although normative principles and theories will be discussed where and when they are useful and informative.

All individuals face everyday ethical dilemmas, wherever they happen to live in the world, but given the particular circumstances that they find themselves in, some may seem more relevant than others. For example, the ethics of over-population might seem of little relevance to someone living in New Zealand, with a population of only 4.5 million, but of great relevance to someone living in the Philippines, a country of comparable size but with a population of over 108 million. However, in a highly interconnected world, with a global economy and with instant access to world news and social media, it is less easy to simply dismiss such issues as being irrelevant. Like never before in human history, all ethical issues are relevant to everyone.

That being said, some ethical issues are more pressing to some people than to others, and this book concentrates on dilemmas that seem particularly immediate to the lives of New Zealanders. Some of the questions raised may be relevant to individuals on a day-to-day basis, including: should I eat meat, download copyrighted music, hire a prostitute, use pornography or have an abortion?

Other issues we face collectively, as members of New Zealand society are: how we should treat the environment, protect online data, deal with inequalities of wealth, treat those who commit murder, or use our armed forces. Although these may seem more distant from our everyday lives, it is only through the actions of individuals that such ethical decisions can be made at a societal level, for in a democratic and relatively free society we can engage in the decision-making process to ensure that they are not simply made for us. Given that New Zealand is a multicultural society it is also crucial that we all acknowledge the importance of different world views and perspectives, particularly those of Māori, and ensure that these inform and help shape our responses to the ethical debates in which we engage.

It is true to say that many people derive their ethical beliefs from religious teachings. However, the number of people in New Zealand who profess to have no religious belief equals those who do, and even of those who do, only a minority regularly engage in religious activity. Furthermore, the wide variety of religious organisations in this country often proclaim conflicting ethical doctrines. In recognition of this, this book does not address comparative religious ethics. Rather, it examines the moral issues from a secular point of view. But it must be acknowledged that secular arguments for moral positions often rely on factual claims, and such facts are easily disputed. Facts as well as arguments must, therefore, always be scrutinised for impartiality and accuracy.

It is important to stress at the outset that everyday ethical questions are controversial, and this is what makes them so interesting to engage with. We have all had different experiences in our lives, and may have been directly confronted with difficult ethical decisions, and so certain readers might find some of the issues this book tackles uncomfortable to consider. This is, however, an unavoidable aspect of considering such questions from a moral point of view.

The views, arguments and ideas presented here are simply a few among many. Although they may be presented clearly and rigorously, it is likely that the reader will disagree with some of them. While the authors are mostly professional philosophers, these issues are central to all our lives and so everyone has an equal right to advance their own opinions. It is hoped that presenting the issues in this way will challenge the reader to think more critically about them. In an ever-changing world it is important that we all consider everyday ethical issues critically, and this book is intended to assist New Zealanders on their journey to discover *how we should live*.