

Prologue

This *Outline of General Ethics* has gone through four editions in Italian and one in Portuguese. The present edition is the second in English. The relative success of the book demonstrates both the public's interest in ethics and the need for a supple, understandable, and comprehensive method for teaching ethics.

The book grew out of my work as Chair of Moral Philosophy at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome. Several decades ago, I was asked to teach a course on General Ethics. I felt my students needed a “manual” that observed two conditions: on the one hand, it had to be suitable for their needs; on the other hand, it had to be consistent with the “perennially valid philosophical heritage” that constitutes the constant reference point for instruction in ethics.

If, at that time, texts existed that fulfilled these conditions, I did not find them. Hence, this volume.

Our students today come from many different cultures and represent many different approaches to learning. Some come from a Western style of learning, while others come from different horizons. As a young professor of philosophy, I thought that my first duty was to study these different cultures in order to “incarnate” my teaching in the lives of my students ... But they came from all five continents and over a hundred different countries. Moreover, in a single country there can be multiple cultures and traditions. Where was I to start?

I realized I had to take another path: the *phenomenological option*. I would not start from theories (even the very important ethical theories elaborated over the long history of philosophical thought). Nor would I begin with cultures (though I would admire their riches). Instead, I determined to go “back to things themselves” and concentrate on the moral experience of every human being, drawing out of this experience guiding moral principles.

The challenge was to describe moral experience in terms understandable to every person. In doing so, I hoped to help other schools of philosophy and theology in which the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural dimension of our “global” (or “globalized”, as I would prefer to say) society had begun to manifest itself. Up until a few decades ago, these schools were attended by students with a “classical” high school education. They now welcome students from the most diverse educational backgrounds, often lacking an education in history and philosophy, but very motivated to learn. This text was designed to be useful to both these schools and their students.

These considerations led me to give the presentation a *maieutic character*. The book has a highly discursive tone – like a conversation. I believe that this is the best method, not only for a basic text, but for the philosophical approach *tout court*. I wished to involve the reader in a sort of Socratic dialogue, to bring out that “minimum-of-philosophy” that everyone engages in, reflecting on personal experience to achieve critical awareness of ones thoughts without uprooting them from the world of life. This text thus aspires to insert itself, with all humility, into the thousand-year tradition that from Socrates to Kierkegaard and from St. Augustine to Gabriel Marcel has been at the service of the concrete human being so as to put him or her in contact with the truth that lives in the intimate core of the heart.

As a result, I have tried to emphasize on almost every page the existential implications of philosophical-moral research. I am, in fact, deeply persuaded that philosophy is *sapientia vitae*, and that precisely for this reason it can and should be cultivated with love.

All of this is intrinsically connected to the setting of moral philosophy as an “ethics of the first person,” explicitly expressed in *Excursus 2*. This option seems justified to me, in the first instance, not so much by loyalty to a tradition (that of classical and medieval philosophy, but also contemporary approaches that have rediscovered *virtue*, *phronesis*, *praxis* and *ethos* as essential coordinates of ethics), as from the very need for and essence of moral discourse itself. This approach has not only theoretical consequences (in the sense of the theoretical-practical identity of moral science), but existential, pedagogical, didactic, and social, as well.

The manner in which the material is presented follows from the approach just described.

Chapter 1 constitutes a “presentation” of the discipline of ethics regarding its aims and its method. Here we find the most significant changes in this new edition concerning the relationship between philosophy, culture, and tradition.

In Chapter 2, we proceed to a phenomenological examination of moral experience in order to grasp its constituent elements.

Chapter 3 continues with a study of voluntary behavior, highlighting the structure of human action.

Chapter 4 considers the central theme of the good life and its connection to virtue.

Virtue’s general traits are followed by a deeper consideration of the individual cardinal virtues; hence, Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 are dedicated respectively to wisdom, justice, fortitude and temperance.

Only at this point, in Chapter 9, will the discussion take a more “theoretical” approach (without abandoning its roots in experience), dedicating itself to determining the “foundation” of morality, in dialogue with contemporary thought.

Chapter 10 presents the essence and function of the moral law, with special reference to natural law.

Finally, in Chapter 11, we examine the dynamics and role of conscience in morality.

This “first person” approach to ethics uses a “style” of presentation that allows the “I” of the author to appear and call upon the “you” of the reader, probing him or her with questions and provoking reactions. Hopefully the text as a whole justifies this approach.

My aim throughout is clarity and a grasp of the essentials, along with the comprehensiveness required of an institutional course of study.

Perhaps it would have been easier to use the sophisticated language of “experts,” but I would have then ended up talking to colleagues rather than students. Certainly, using a cryptic, initiatory tone, I could have better avoided objections ... but I would have betrayed my professional (and ultimately human) conscience. I preferred to put my thinking into play without pretense.

Perhaps with double the number of pages, the book would have appeared “more important” and – paradoxically – I would have spent less time writing it. I preferred to undergo the effort of synthesis and the thankless work of “cutting” and “filing” to give students a supple and genuinely useful tool without, however, renouncing the rigor of argument, science, and completeness. Obviously, it is up to the reader to judge whether and to what extent I have succeeded.

In this fourth (italian) edition, I have tried to build on the reflections gained over the last few years. In the epilogue, as in the first edition, I express the hope that the ideas presented in the book will continue to “work” in the mind of the benevolent reader: in fact, they do continue to work, incessantly, even in the mind of the author and force him to review and reformulate his theses, particularly with regard to educational needs. The broader innovations here compared to the previous edition concern some details in Chapter 1 about the method of ethics, as well as the discussion in Chapter 2 of the role of intelligence in the human act, the good, and duty. The bibliography has also been updated.

My gratitude remains unchanged for all those who have contributed to the publication of the several versions of this book: my colleagues, for their precious suggestions; my translator Cynthia Nicolosi, PhD; the Urbaniana University Press; the academic authorities of the Urban University; and, especially, the students, thanks to whom I have been able to “focus” on the issues presented here, understanding more deeply the need to anchor moral thinking in the “world of life.”