

Understanding Religious Ethics

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vi
Introduction: Conviction and Argument	1
Part I: Preliminaries	19
1 God and Morality	21
2 Jewish Ethics	38
3 Christian Ethics	53
4 Islamic Ethics	65
Part II: Personal Matters	81
5 Friendship	83
6 Sexuality	91
7 Marriage and Family	106
8 Lying	118
9 Forgiveness	134
Part III: Social Matters	145
10 Love and Justice	147
11 Duty, Law, Conscience	157
12 Capital Punishment	167
13 War (I): Towards War	182
14 War (II): In War	199
15 Religion and the Environment	209
Part IV: The Last Things	223
16 Pursuits of Happiness: Labor, Leisure, and Life	225
17 Good and Evil	239
Conclusion: What's So Funny 'bout Peace, Love, and Understanding?	254
Notes	262
Index	270

Introduction

Conviction and Argument

*What's home
but arguments you can't escape?
(Dave Smith, "Isle of Wight")*

Who wants to live a good life? If we think about goodness in a sufficiently wide sense, as a matter not simply of being morally righteous, but of living a rich and flourishing life, it is hard to imagine anyone not wanting that – anyone not obviously crazy, anyway. Everyone in their right mind would want that, wouldn't they?

But how does one live such a good life? Well, there sometimes seem as many answers to this question as there are people in the world. (And given our ability to hold multiple conflicting views in our mind at the same time, perhaps there are more answers than people.) If the urgency of the question makes it one that we all care about deeply, the diversity of answers may well make us despair of finding the right answer to how we should live.

But despair is always only an avoidance strategy. And once we have recovered and returned to our conundrum, the same perplexities remain. What can help us then? This book tries to offer some resources. It introduces the major forms of ethical reasoning of the three "Abrahamic" religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – by looking at those traditions comparatively, across a series of important issues that they all, in different ways, confront.

These traditions are obviously enormously important for our world today. Christians comprise roughly a third of the world's population – 2.1 billion believers, in 2006 – while Muslims constitute roughly a fifth – 1.3 billion. No other religion comes close in numbers of faithful. Judaism is a small faith, with only 15 million or so members alive today; but its influence – both direct and, through its Abrahamic progeny, indirect – on all aspects of our world is enormous. To talk about these three traditions of religious faith and moral enquiry is to talk about a substantial portion of the world – both historically and today.

How are we to introduce these traditions? How are we to begin to understand what they are about? This book suggests that one way of getting at them is to ask a simple question: what do they understand a flourishing moral life to look like, and what do they say about some of the most pressing challenges to that life? That is to say, this book introduces the traditions of moral and religious reflection through asking each a simple question: *How do these traditions of thought deliberate and decide about issues that they deem significant?*

That last phrase is important. The key word in it is *they*: “issues that *they* deem significant.” What matters, what is most important, is not necessarily what you or I, were we to assess an issue, would initially call “ethically relevant.” These traditions are vision-forming realities, providing particular viewpoints on reality as experienced by their adherents, and concepts with which to describe that view. There is no naïve, innocent “mere description” upon which we can fall back, when the viewpoints diverge. The way they see the world is crucially complicated, and at times irreducibly peculiar. We must get clear on the nature of the problem that they see – for, as we will see time and time again, their understanding of it is not always identical with the understanding that we bring to the issue. Never think that everyone faces the same difficulty, in the same way, that you do; there are few ways to go more quickly wrong about the world than that one.

Other phrases in our central question are no less significant. Consider the nature of the activities this book studies, and which it collects under the remarkably loose catch-all of “deliberate and decide.” Quite a lot goes into that phrase. After all, the moral life is not always a matter of direct and immediate logical reflection. Much of the time morality is habitual, not deliberative at all: we rarely reflect on the propriety of politeness, or the impropriety of simply pushing our way past people on our way into a building, or the wrongness of slipping packs of gum into our pockets while we wait in the check-out line of a supermarket. And anyway, who would want us to deliberate about those things? Indeed, there are arguably some situations where thinking may be more wrong than right: we admire the person more who rushes over to save someone from a burning car “without a thought,” as we say, than one who struggles to overcome their fear of dying before doing it. A parent who does not instinctively protect their child by sacrificing themselves is someone for whom we may feel scorn – or perhaps pity. As the philosopher Bernard Williams once put it, in a situation where immediate action is required it is possible to have “one thought too many.”

Yet it is not quite right to say we are asking about how participants in our several traditions deliberate and decide about what is to be done. After all, none of us are very good at such deliberations. None of us think very well in any dimension of our lives; for evidence of this, just ask anyone for directions. We’re lousy representatives of whatever traditions are willing to claim us as their own; why should we expect anyone else to fit more smoothly into their traditions than we do into ours?

Truth be told, we are not actually undertaking any directly empirical studies of members of these traditions; we are looking at the abstract idea of the traditions

themselves, at what and how the traditions *represent* their deliberations and decisions. We will not directly concern ourselves with describing how members of the traditions actually go about thoughtfully making their way through the world with its moral and spiritual challenges; all we want to do is come to see perspicuously the stories the traditions tell, both to themselves and to others, about how their adherents should be and behave.

I think you will end up agreeing with me that this is task enough for one book. Just consider the range of issues that rightfully fall under even so restricted a goal as this; even to pretend to fulfill this task, we should discuss moral issues such as friendship, marriage, homosexuality, lying, forgiveness and its limits, the death penalty, the environment, warfare, and the meaning of work, career, and vocation. We should investigate the resources available to address these problems in the Abrahamic faiths, however we identify those resources (on which more in a minute). And we must pay particular attention to what the faiths say about these issues, how these faiths explain and/or defend their conclusions, and how the theological or philosophical convictions of those faiths shape their moral judgments.

I think that is enough, don't you? More than we are used to finding in an introductory book, anyway. Most of the time, introductory textbooks in a topic of academic study are fairly rudimentary – which means, for specialists in a topic, ridiculously rudimentary. Were you to take a physics class, you would not expect to be introduced to the most fundamental issues vexing those working at the frontiers of the field. But that is not the case in a field like religious ethics. Here you will run across the issues and the concerns that remain the most vexing and pressing for specialists who have dedicated decades of their lives to thinking about these matters. Here you will encounter debates in Islam about the proper relation between the sword verses and the peace verses; discussions in Christianity about the propriety or impropriety of homosexual acts and whether marriage is a category that can accommodate same-sex unions; debates in Judaism about the propriety of the death penalty for convicted murderers. Here you will encounter Plato's famous "Euthyphro problem;" different understandings of the moral and religious rectitude of God's demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac (or, in Islam, that he sacrifice Ishmael); debates about whether Christians are better advised to see their ethics as emerging from a "natural law" available to all people or in the distinct particulars of Jesus's life and teachings properly apprehended and understood by Christians alone; Jewish debates about the religious propriety of gossip and deception, Islamic discussions about the nature of evil as seen through the figure of Iblis, or Satan, in the Qur'an; debates within and between all these traditions about the character and extent and even possibility of forgiveness; and much more.

This book does not offer you summary digested views. It tries to give you a sense of the arguments animating the traditions, as their most serious and profound exponents have understood them. Beware: in this pool there is no shallow end; every part is deep.

Structure and Definitions

That said, we will not actively try to make this harder than necessary. The book is structured in such a way as to move from some more proximate, more close-to-home issues – “personal” issues, issues of moral concern in our everyday lives (for example, the ethics of lying and truth-telling in speech) – to larger, more intimidatingly vast issues of “social” ethical import (for example, how to think about the ethics of war), and finally some truly vast issues on a galactic scale (for example, the nature of good and evil). And within each of these units, the topics will try to move from the relatively more easy to the more difficult as well. We are trying to make things as manageable as possible.

As part of that task, it will help to get clear on some important words we’ll use throughout the book. Consider the terms *ethics* and *morality*. Roughly, they both mean ways of deliberating about the right way to live or behave, either as regards particular acts or as regards overall courses of life. Some people will try to tell you that there’s a real and important difference between these two terms. Don’t believe them. The distinction between “ethics” and “morality” is like the distinction between “religion” and “spirituality.” “Ethics” comes from *ethos*, the Greek word for “way of life,” which in Latin is *mores*, from which we get – you guessed it! – “morality.” People can claim that there’s a useful distinction between the two terms, but in fact their co-presence in our language is more an etymological happenstance than a sign that there are two distinct things there already, before we begin talking.

Therefore, I do not distinguish much between ethics and morality. There is no principled distinction between them. Simply put, these different terms come from Greek (*ethos*) and Latin (*mores*) roots. Some philosophers – in the nineteenth century, G. W. F. Hegel, in the twentieth, Bernard Williams – like to make a big hullabaloo over the differences they stipulated between them. And over time they have come to have faint connotations of more or less deliberateness and self-awareness, with ethics being considered more self-reflective, morality as less so, morality concerned with rules and laws, ethics concerned with virtues. But the truth is, in terms of their everyday use in English today, the distinction between them can’t bear very much weight. When I talk about either “ethics” or “morality” here, I do not mean that to suggest any disrespect for the term I am not using.

That said, I do note two distinct senses of the term *ethics*. First, it can refer to one’s lived life as a whole; second, it can refer to certain difficult situations or cases that can arise in your life. We will approach these matters largely through specific topics of ethical concern that arise most palpably in specific situations regarding more or less concrete issues – what we can call “doing ethics from below.” But we will eventually use these topics to ask questions about the whole shape of life that the various answers to these particular concrete problems imply. So we’re interested in studying the moral issues not only in their intrinsic interest and urgency, but also as routes into understanding several profound and abiding traditions of moral reflection.

We will look at a variety of such traditions – Jewish, Christian, and Islamic – and work also with various secular approaches. We will want to be very clear about the distinct nature of the moral problem at issue for each tradition. In each case, we should ask: what exactly is problematic about this problem for this tradition? Why do they care, and what precise aspects of the issue do they care about? We'll find in doing so that the moral issues are handled very differently by the traditions because of theological and metaphysical commitments that may seem at first to be some distance away from their explicit ethical reflections. (For example, Christianity is marked very deeply by its emphasis on grace, forgiveness, and love, in a way that makes its position interestingly different from a tradition such as Judaism, which is centered more profoundly upon obligation, covenant, and law.) But at the same time, there are moments in all these traditions where the moral implications of theological or metaphysical convictions seem to be ignored or downplayed, because of some sense in the traditions that those convictions are palpably at odds with the most immediate judgment of the just or good thing to do or to be. (So, again for example, Christians seem convinced also of the idea that some things *may* be unforgiveable, or at least remain unforgiven – and so they develop a concept of Hell; while Jews seem confident that there are times that one must go beyond what is required and do more than is appropriate – and so they develop moral practices of supererogation, of going above and beyond what is sufficient.) But these are not simply differences between traditions; even within the traditions we will see various positions emphasizing different parts of their tradition as they see certain beliefs as more relevant than others. (For example, within Christianity, the Roman Catholic tradition has emphasized the importance of human nature as essentially – which is different from basically – good, while the Protestant tradition has often offered a more dour view of human beings as essentially marked by sin.)

None of these traditions stands alone, and so none of them can be studied in total isolation from one another. All three of these religious traditions have developed in conversation with one another, and all of them continue to be in conversation with each other, and the more secular worldviews that have recently developed. All are profound and deep, and our purpose is to deepen our grasp upon the profoundest roots of these traditions.

But we will see also that the traditions are alive and authentically themselves, not only in their settled views and convictions, but also in how these settled matters do not settle everything, but in fact leave some things even more unsettled than before. (For example, all three traditions understand the obligation of the community to protect the vulnerable, the poor and the weak, out of a conviction that human beings deserve profound respect. But does this commitment to care involve the use of violence on those who are perceived to threaten the vulnerable? If so, does that disrespect the persons on whom the state uses violence – say, in war or capital punishment?) So in a way we'll be moving forwards and backwards all at once – forwards, in terms of looking at particular ethical issues; and backwards, in terms of understanding the reasoning behind religious traditions' approaches to those

issues, reasoning often rooted in the traditions' metaphysical and theological convictions.

The Goals of this Book

This book means to give equal attention to the what, how, and why of these traditions. It means to study, first, these traditions' particular judgments on specific issues – that is, *what* they recommend to their adherents – and how they describe those recommendations to their adherents and others. Second, it will analyze the styles and modes of reasoning by which they reach those judgments – that is, *how* they justify their recommendations. Finally, third, it will also look, somewhat more indirectly, at *why* they decide as they decide – that is, how these judgments and forms of reasoning reveal some of the faiths' deepest theological and metaphysical convictions (and deepest debates or open questions) about God, the human, and the nature of creation, among other things – that is, *why* they come to these views. In these ways this book aims to explore the basic contours of three traditions' ethical programs, which are important both in themselves and for how they shape our common life. As will become clear, each of these goals is more complicated than it may first appear.

Audiences

A book like this might be read by different readers for different reasons. I imagine most of its readers fall into one of four camps. First, teachers and students (college and high-school) looking for a general introduction to the moral traditions of these faiths may find this a convenient entry into a rich comparison of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Second, those interested centrally in their own particular faiths may find it interesting both to look at their own traditions in conversation with others, and to discover how comparisons with other religious traditions highlight surprising or heretofore under-appreciated aspects of their own faith; while those interested, from within their faith, in the faiths of others may find this a relatively straightforward way to begin to engage those other traditions. Third, those who are interested in interreligious dialogue will find in the book concrete topics for interfaith discussion as well as helpful comparisons of the distinct ways in which these faiths individually understand and deliberate about moral issues. Fourth and finally, people who are not members of any of these traditions, but are interested in these matters out of “ethical” interests or from a general inquisitiveness into different systems of belief and behavior, may not only find the discussions of ethical issues interesting in themselves, but may also discover that the book provides insights into traditions of moral and religious reflection and behavior which continue to influence every person's life today.

Speaking personally, I am interested in it for all these reasons. But I have a special place in my heart for the fourth group – those who want more deeply to understand these traditions of reflection, irrespective of their own personal beliefs. After all, as the Roman Catholic thinker David Burrell puts it, these religious traditions all offer “palpable histories of holiness.”¹ They are reservoirs of millennia of wisdom about the perduring challenges of the human condition, reservoirs which we may find various ways to draw on in order better to live our lives. Furthermore, the main imaginative energies shaping our world today – ordering our lives and informing our conflicts – are more often than not fundamentally religious. The great secular ideologies of the twentieth century – nationalism, communism, even to some extent liberal capitalism – have fewer and fewer true believers.

To be honest, however, this book is not useful in any technical sense. It will not teach you any skills that will make you more marketable to employers, at least not obviously. And no one will care how much you know about the topics of this book – not really care, anyway. Its value lies wholly in its *impracticality*. It is not relevant to some career path; it is “useful” for your life. “Relevance” is not the only “relevant” thing to take into account. You’re at a job 40, 50, 60 hours a week; but you’re a human being all the time, 24/7, and your whole life you will think about what kind of a person you are, and what sorts of decisions you will make. And even in your career you will find yourself time and again confronted with questions that this book addresses. If you are a student reading this you may find that, as you age, you love to return to your alma mater for alumni gatherings. You will find it a nostalgia trip, to be sure; but you may also come to discover and treasure the opportunities you get then to talk about “big questions” with fellow alumni and faculty, and be exposed, once again, to the “great books” – books that raise those questions. This book is largely about those books, the thinkers who composed them, and the communities from which those thinkers emerged.

Intelligent judgmentalism

But most basically, beneath all of these benefits – beneath all the information it conveys – the book offers something else. More precisely, it urges something else on you, and tries to model it. It is a wager, the wager that issues of this existential grip, metaphysical and conceptual profundity, historical and social complexity, are amenable to dispute, debate, and deliberation. It assumes that humans can reflect on and within these worldviews, and that our minds are devices, however imperfect, for such reflection. The book wants to encourage more than simply a spectatorial appreciation of moral complexity. We must get beyond acknowledging differences of opinion and re-learn how to think about right and wrong, how to judge. That is to say, it professes, and attempts to exemplify, a pattern of intelligent judgmentalism.

“Judgmentalism” is a bad word today. Most people seem to have decided, at least tacitly, that judging one another is wrong and to be avoided. Of course, in forming such a thought they have made a judgment, the judgment that judgment of others

is bad; and they apply that judgment, usually unconsciously, willy-nilly across all realms of human affairs.

Why are we afraid to make judgments? That is a question lurking behind every page of this book. Now, there is a fairly honorable philosophical tradition that promotes such skepticism. From this perspective the really Big Questions cannot be properly answered, either because they are grandiose mis-formulations of everyday complaints, or because their answers are simply beyond the scope of human knowing. We are better off not bothering with such abstruse metaphysical issues, and more wisely led to attend to how we deal with one another in the everyday of our relations. The ancient Greek skeptic Sextus Empiricus, the sixteenth-century French thinker Michel de Montaigne, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume – they and others, some of religious faith, some of none, have made this argument. The founder of the university I teach at, the University of Virginia, made it most succinctly. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson famously said, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” This is a philosophically respectable approach to take to our situation.

Unfortunately, many today have significantly less coherent reasons for rejecting moral judgment as morally bad. There are lots of reasons local to our particular historical moment. After all, we live amid a dizzying plurality of ways of living. Students today – whatever their religious faiths – will regularly live with people who are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, and agnostic (and of any of those categories there are a myriad of variants). In such a setting, we are wary of presuming that we know enough about another’s views to judge them. We wisely appreciate that people experience the world in very different ways. And so we decide that the safest course, for social harmony, is simply to refuse to judge anyone for what they do. So we come to believe we must not do so, and we seek to extirpate all judgmentalism from our mind.

This is a regrettable position, for it assumes that there is some way to avoid judging. But there is not. Human thought is necessarily normative, because humans are normative – that is, because we cannot help but judge. We make sense of ourselves, and others around us, by following rules, more or less, and that means we are always thinking about right and wrong. We are even thinking about right and wrong when we are in the business of stepping outside the clearly appropriate – for knowing right and wrong involves knowing how to follow the rule and how to bend it, by knowing enough to distinguish “bending” a rule from “breaking” it. This is not a contingent fact about us that we should deplore and fix; it is rather a fact about our behavior as the kinds of creatures we are. And it is seen most potently in the powerful cultural moral proscription today – a moral commandment, in fact – that the first and greatest sin is to judge another person.

That we judge that judging is wrong does not mean that we in fact escape the act of judgment. (The fact that we *judge* judging to be wrong – and communicate that judgment to others who violate it – shows that.) It is rather that we never face up to the fact of our condition as necessarily exercising moral judgment, as creatures

who orient themselves in the world through such judgment. The problem is that all our tolerance is really little more than a *laissez-faire* indifference rather than a genuine apprehension and appreciation of one another's differences. And hence we never think, in direct and thoughtful ways, about how to orient ourselves morally in the world. So when the time comes for us to make such judgments, we often find ourselves less well prepared to make them than we need to be. And that is regrettable.

To do better, we need examples of intelligent judgmentalism. And that's what the traditions are: well-worked out means of living more or less coherent lives in a deeply puzzling and challenging world. They show us how to be thoughtful in our judgments, so that we can internalize these skills and learn to apply them for ourselves.

Furthermore, they give us models of *thinking like* others, by showing us the basic categories and convictions out of which some other people have tried to organize their thinking and their lives. Understanding that is the direct goal of this book's introduction of the moral vernaculars of these traditions: for these traditions do not offer rigorously reasoned programs of moral decision-making, but rather vernaculars in which moral matters can be made visible and vivid, so that we may reflect on them from multiple angles. Each of these vernaculars will make some aspects of the problem, some facets of the situation, more prominent than others, and these vernaculars will differ in what they make so prominent – so that two thinkers from these traditions will often look at the same topic and see very different moral problems. But that is not to be bemoaned, it is an achievement to be proud of: increased competency in the traditions' languages will not lead to resolution of all problems, but rather to the increased specificity and precision of the disagreements.

So that's what we'll do. But before we get started, we must spend a little time on some fairly technical matters about how to choose what counts as “properly” Jewish, or Christian, or Muslim; so those of you not inherently interested in these matters may want to skip the next few pages.

Methodological Matters

Still here? Great. You've obviously realized I was lying a little bit just above, when I suggested this was boring. In fact, these “technical” puzzles of apparently merely methodological interest are actually quite gripping – I mean, who can decide what is properly Christian or not? What sort of criteria can we use for that? Who said I get to choose what is “authentically” Muslim, or Jewish or Christian?

Authenticity?

Well, there is no straightforward answer to that question. In a way, I want to avoid it, by relying on voices from within those traditions themselves. I will try generally

(but not exclusively) to depict those faiths as they are represented by various, often conflicting, classical and modern authorities and thinkers. This doesn't really avoid the problem entirely, as I have to choose among many different thinkers when I do this. The only selection criterion I will use here is that the figures should not stand too far outside the "center" of their traditions. How do I determine what is the center? Well, I don't, not really; I do not try to pinpoint a center, but rather recognize a wide zone of more-or-less common convictions, beliefs, and arguments (the last is important) that a significant majority of the historical manifestations of the tradition would recognize as their own. Precision is less important here than conceptual capaciousness, because I want to err on the side of generosity of inclusion. Why do I want to do that? Because I am not looking to determine some "orthodox" vision of these three traditions – as we will see, the desire for orthodoxy first and foremost is a quite distinctively *Christian* desire – but rather to see the traditions not in some clear and distinct doctrinal formulae, but as large-scale ways of living life.

There is an important point at issue here. These traditions are not so much composed of a collection of settled conclusions, but are instead sets of live and enlivening arguments, arguments that are still ongoing. We can think of them as what the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott called "languages of self-disclosure." Such a language "does not impose upon an agent demands that he shall think certain thoughts, entertain certain sentiments, or make certain substantive utterances. It comes to him as various invitations to understand, to choose, and to respond. ... It is an instrument to be played upon, not a tune to be played."² When we look at these traditions, we are not trying most fundamentally to get a perfect representation of some configuration of convictions, but rather get a sense of *how* they argue, *what* they argue about and with whom, and *why* they argue how, about what, and with whom they do.

Incommensurability?

Besides this concern, others will be dubious of any such comparison because they think that it is impossible to make such comparisons useful or illuminating, simply because the standards of judgment in these traditions are so fundamentally different. Who are we to judge among them? What can we do but confirm our own prejudices in doing this? (I note that this actually strikes to the heart of liberal education – but I won't go into that here.) In some fundamental ways, these views suggest, these discourses are *incommensurable* – unable to be reconciled, brought to agreement or synthesis, or even compared in terms that they would all recognize as reasonable terms of comparison. They're just too different. What, that is, can we really learn from bringing them together like this?

Part of the job is the job of all comparisons: in short, to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange. When we undertake such comparisons, we enter into a weird and liminal zone – a frontier region of uncertainty and suspension. But it is

a productive experience. By juxtaposing things that we do not normally compare, we discover things that would otherwise go unnoticed. The positions enrich one another, not least by provoking each other. And besides, none of the religious traditions lack resources to understand that experience of suspension, nor must they all condemn it as wholly anathema. These traditions know what it is to encounter the stranger, and even to learn from her or him; they will approve of these encounters, even if we may find them strange and alarming.

Accuracy?

There is yet one more set of concerns, these ones even more powerful. These concerns all are ways of expressing a salutary appreciation of the real and rich complexity of the traditions, and the profound difficulty of finding useful ways of comparing such different traditions. People impressed by such concerns argue for a more fine-grained, close to the ground, understanding of the contours and contextual character of traditions' moral formulations. First of all, such worriers charge, aren't we confusing breadth of scope with depth of understanding? Aren't we, that is, skipping over the surface of deep and profound issues, and deep and profound traditions, in a rapid tour that leaves everything the same blurry shape? Secondly, how can we know that we are not simply imposing procrustean categories – that is, categories that simply don't fit – on these traditions? And thirdly, aren't we doing the same thing within any tradition itself – that is, aren't we simply arbitrarily imposing an illusory stability on what some tradition says? Judaism is a three-thousand year old religious tradition; who should speak for it? Contemporary Jews (and if so, which ones?); The “greatest minds” of the tradition – but who are they and how do we decide who they are? You see the problem.

My conviction is that religious traditions are *not* infinitely plastic. There are boundaries beyond which those who claim to be in the traditions are actually becoming something else. Sure there are contestable zones, where some will say the innovator is out, and others will say they're still in. But such cases offer their own kind of illumination too, as both sides reveal, in the arguments they use for their debating, what they take to be central to the tradition and what is more marginal.

Moreover, abstraction is not necessarily our enemy, so long as we recognize it as abstraction. We must not assume that the concepts we use are in fact perfect representations of the realities that we try to describe by their use; nor should we despair, because we must use such imperfect concepts, that the task of conceptual understanding is itself a futile endeavor. So long as we know that we are undertaking a pragmatic task of getting a better understanding of matters that would remain thoroughly obscure to us if we did nothing, we cannot be faulted if our findings remain sketchy and, from the perspective of the expert, vague. There is a famous saying in ethics, that “we must not make the best the enemy of the good,” meaning that a person's dissatisfaction with anything less than perfection can blind them to the value of things that are only partly successful, partly accomplished. We can

agree, and suggest to these critics that they misunderstand our ambitions in this book. The best should not be made the enemy of the adequate.

Arguments You Can't Escape

This book may well vex your expectations. You'll want to find clear answers. You'll want solid solutions. You'll want closure. But there won't be. You'll find debates; you'll encounter imponderables, decisions for which we lack sufficient evidence, on either side, to make them in confidence. And these things will insinuate themselves in your mind. They may unsettle your own views. Why won't I make this book simpler? Why don't I want to make this as digestible as possible? Why won't it be tidy, or easy?

It's not because I don't care – rather, I care, but in the *opposite* direction: I care that this book try to approach the level of moral sophistication these traditions reflect – the sophistication that people use every day, in our ordinary living.

And to do that, it has to be hard, because what each of us do, every day, in thinking about our lives, is incredibly complex – more complex than any of us can grasp. No computer can ponder the simple question “what ought I to do in this situation?” No computer ever will; if it does, we will no longer call it a computer, we'll call it a person.

In one sense, humans are deeper than what they take to be their settled convictions seem to tell them they are. There is a deep complexity to what we are doing all the time. You use arguments all the time, without thinking about it. But beginning to think about it can have an effect on us similar to that produced by thinking too much about how to ride on a bicycle – that is, you may fall off.

But I think that, unlike riding a bicycle, we're not all already morally competent, let alone experts – we're all still only beginning to understand what our moral convictions ought to lead us to do. So we'll think about those moments you fall off the moral bike – the ruptures in your normal life, the moments when you stop and wonder – what ought I to do? I'm in a situation of moral ambiguity here – and different people have different suggestions about what to do. In short, theory has broken out: what am I going to do now?

The crux of the book, then, is argument – I want to expose you to arguments, like radioactive isotopes, in the hopes of you catching something of their force. I want you to become more fully what you already are. I want to help you become owners of and participants in the arguments that already, at a less conscious level, constitute you, make you who you are in your being. You think of yourself in certain terms – a person, a student, a daughter or son, a citizen, a believer – and these ways of thinking about yourself give you a certain series of vocabularies to think about yourself. What I want to do here is help you to more actively (that is, more thoughtfully) inhabit those roles – to extend your understanding both horizontally, across the full scope of moral resources that you've inherited, and vertically, to deepen your understanding of what these moral beliefs mean.

But what are the ingredients of argument? First of all, real argument is not sheer disagreement. Disagreement is simple contradiction, and that is boring. Argument, genuine argument, is anything but that. It is threatening, imperiling, thrilling, and sometimes even useful. Nor is it simply differences that make an argument. You need some common thing to differ over, something to disagree about. Argument is reasoned debate, not just for the sake of more debate, but for the sake of getting things right. After all, it is your life that is at issue here. (Often, the argument is not a matter of two sides having different information, but a matter of interpreting things differently – understanding the force of claims differently, or weighing different facts differently.)

Arguments of this sort – real arguments – are rarely resolved. In fact, you'll find that the traditions we're studying are not alive so much in their settled convictions, but rather in their unsettled and unsettling arguments, the arguments they are having with themselves. Traditions, that is, are essentially ongoing arguments, in much the same way that families are defined by ongoing debates.

This complexity means that people beginning from similar or identical premises will often differ about where to go with their claims. Often, two friends or spouses will differ dramatically. (Often, the fiercest fights we have are with those with whom we feel we have no need to fight – the ferocity here is fed by our outrage that there could be any disagreement on the matter at hand.) Major religious traditions – traditions that people have tried to inhabit, faithfully, for centuries – are no different. They're not just answers; they provide the questions as well. The assumptions don't settle all the disputes – they open up other questions, enable new difficulties to come into view. So the traditions not only differ between themselves about these matters, for any number of reasons (especially their theological and metaphysical commitments); they also differ within themselves.

This truth is not just useful for understanding those traditions most alien to us. It may well be just as illuminating to those most familiar. All too often we confuse familiarity with understanding, and distance with incomprehension. What is closest to us; what lies ready for use beside our chair; the one who walks at our side; the home we've always known; the family we've belonged to, and who have belonged to us – all these things are so close to us, so handy, that we do not often wonder at them, at the mystery of their bare being, let alone ponder what it is like to be them. But familiarity and comprehension are not the same thing.

In doing this, you'll find that the foundational conventions you rely on are themselves the products of arguments; in fact, that they are moments in an argument that continues to this day. That shouldn't surprise us, even though it does. As the poet Dave Smith has said, "what's home / but arguments you can't escape?" Home is not a place of settled safety but the place where you live – and we live by changing, not by staying the same. You should realize something of the profound complexity of the issues facing you in your moral life, *and* the deep sophistication of your own thought as you think about those issues, *and* the enormous diversity and richness of the resources available in the religious traditions we study to help you think about these issues.

However, this destabilization is not a paralyzing skepticism, but an enabling humility, that allows us to go forward in fear and trembling, with a deeper appreciation of what you always already know.

“Tradition” and the “liberal arts”

You’ll find the traditions are like this as well – more ongoing arguments and deep questions than settled convictions. So this book will *not* teach you some things as well. It will not teach you what is the right Jewish, or Christian, or Muslim way to think about various topics. Nor will it teach you what Jews or Christians or Muslims have always believed about various topics. I will use phrases like “for Jews,” or “for Muslims,” but in fact this is always simply a short-hand to introduce some general way of approaching a matter. As you will see again and again, I am not making any claim that my account is the only right way to understand these traditions; I am merely proposing it as one useful way of beginning to understand their views.

This will still make many of these traditions’ faithful quite nervous. They want to say that there is a right way – namely, their own. And of course ultimately they may well be right. We must forthrightly recognize a tension this sets up between our project and many of the traditional projects of the religious traditions we aim to study here. This tension exists because the program of “liberal education” stands in interesting and palpable conflict with the agenda of these traditions. The traditions are emphatic in their single-minded normativity – this is right, all else is wrong, all should be seen from this perspective. This can sound like a contrast between the close-minded “them” and the open-minded “us,” but that contrast is a bit too tidy (not least for manifesting a remarkable close-mindedness itself).

It is ignorant and cowardly of us to say that this tension is simply the traditions’ fault, that it exists because the traditions are premodern, or unenlightened, or primitive; it is equally the fault of “liberal education” itself. For that education has a worldview of its own, a worldview that conflicts in some basic ways with these traditions’ own. This tradition, of liberal education, is more optimistic about the individual’s capacity to comprehend, more hopeful about the powers of individuals so educated to come together to shape their societies for the better, and more confident that the intelligence developed in such an education can serve the public good and make a better world and better individuals. That we may resonate with this worldview in ways that make it hard for us to see it as contestable is no reason for us to ignore the fact that it quite clearly *is* contestable. But it is; and these other traditions do, in fact, tacitly contest it quite radically.

Possibly some will dislike liberal education being so fundamentally, so radically challenged in this way. But that’s too bad, for the challenge is good. In fact, a large part of the value of this engagement lies in the radical character of each side’s critique of the other, the way that neither side can accommodate the other’s self-representation, or even more the other’s representation of them – each side’s picture of the other. To struggle with how another sees you – to learn how you appear to

them – is one of the most valuable aspects of such a project. And after all, “liberal education” is purportedly ideologically committed to this sort of radical critique, and so should welcome it; this book is premised on the hope that it will. Traditional religions, on the other hand, also must find resources, from within their heritage or from without it, for understanding and responding to the condition of radical contestability in which all of us today find ourselves.

In a way this book is a wager, a wager that we can in fact try to do what it sets out to do. If we can’t – if a book like this is impossible – it says something important about matters larger than just this book. It says something about the prospects for human learning and understanding in the twenty-first century, and indeed something about the prospects of liberal education – and perhaps the worldviews that have informed it – in the future. And the somethings that it says are not happy somethings. So we should give it our best effort.

All this can sound like a wildly Romantic vision of free-thinking individuals bravely striking out on their own, the past be damned. But I’m not encouraging you to sound your barbaric yawp across the rooftops of our multi-religious world. This is not about expressivism or liberation. It is about self-knowledge, about learning more fully the arguments that make you up, that compose *you*. This book won’t make you morally “better.” No book can do that, on its own. But there is a way that, in reading this book, I hope you become a better person – better in the sense of a richer, more thoughtful “owner” of the arguments you can’t escape.

The question of modernity

A book like this – a comparative project of all three Abrahamic faiths – is only possible in the conditions of liberal modernity. This is not meant to be a self-congratulatory statement; it is meant to get at three important truths.

First, it is simply an expression of fact. This book is not, then, a *historia errorum*, a history of the errors believed by other cultures or other times, nor is it a record of the curious and unintelligible customs of other benighted peoples. It is an effort to represent fairly and frankly a series of quite significantly diverse models of life within a single frame of vision. But attempting such a project is distinctly modern. In no earlier era, nor in a culture not fundamentally informed by liberal habits of mind and behavior, could such a comparative undertaking be attempted – an undertaking which tries strenuously not to misrepresent the objects of comparison by accepting uncritically the categorical schema of one of the traditions as true and then cramming the others into it. This is not to say that this book succeeds at this task, but rather that such an ideal is the author’s aim – and also, and no less significantly, it is an aim that you the reader can understand, is likely to approve of, and would almost certainly assume to be the *right* one.

Second, even as we tacitly approve such an aim, our very commitment to understand others on their own terms should make us aware of why such a project would seem alien and anathema to many representatives of those traditions. It would be alien

because the idea that one's own tradition cannot adequately represent another's views at least tacitly suggests that one's own tradition is in some deep way inadequate – and if that is so, why continue to affirm it? So premoderns would raise the question about the possibility of being Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, and participating in this project; or they would accuse the participants of being *only superficially* Jews, Christians, or Muslims, and more profoundly something else – members of the tradition of “Enlightenment liberalism,” perhaps.

Third, this approach raises questions about modernity's opportunities and dangers. These opportunities and dangers seem to me to be both inextricably intertwined and inescapable for us. They are inextricably intertwined, for it is the sheer fact of real pluralism that dislodges us from our traditional habits of parochial self-satisfaction, and starts us down the road of questioning and skepticism, a questioning and skepticism that can lead to tolerance and appreciation of the manifold goods of our world, as well as a more profound and enormously enriched appreciation of our own traditions. But it can also lead to a shallow and superficial attitude of glibness about reality and our lives. And these opportunities and dangers are inescapable, because there is nowhere to go in our world where we could avoid these realities. I mean this geographically and in terms of our values and commitments. In my town of Charlottesville, we have manifold kinds of Christians, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews, Hindus, Buddhists (from China and Tibet, as well as California), Muslims from all across the *dar-al-Islam* – and I live in a small town in central Virginia. Migration and global mass communication ensure that the diversity of human religious and existential commitment is brought unavoidably before our eyes, wherever we are. Furthermore, there is no way of living that shuts us off from these matters; as scholars have been arguing for several decades, fundamentalism, of whatever religious version, is itself a modern solution to a modern problem. Even the Amish who turn their backs on this world still live with the knowledge that there is a world to which their backs are turned. For all these reasons, the challenges of modernity are inescapable for all the traditions in this book. So this too is a challenge that this book must, and will, address.

Conclusion

None of this will be easy. Indeed, in some ways, being moral is increasingly difficult today. We are increasingly seduced by two pressures that do damage to our understanding of moral agency. One is a kind of pharmacological fatalism, the other is a kind of consumerist nihilism. Let me explain what I mean.

Today, we are confronted by a kind of *pharmacological fatalism* – the belief that we are determined by our genes, our chemical make-up, and what drugs we take to improve ourselves. Recent advances in medicine and psychiatry have led many people to reject accounts of moral responsibility in favor of biological determinism, in which what you do (and thereby who you are) is out of your control – you're a compulsive liar, or a sex addict, or a workaholic, or you had a terrible childhood,

or you're prone to violent mood swings – but in no way are you responsible for these maladies or for their effect on other people (like, say, if you physically assault someone for no reason when you're drunk). We should be careful here – I'm not saying that people who take medications to keep themselves stable are not helped, nor am I saying that there are no such real problems. What I'm saying is that other people, people who aren't actually sick at all, have begun to use these excuses to excuse themselves. (It's worth noting, on this, that these excuses are never used when we do good things, but only when we do bad. When was the last time you saw anyone say "but I'm a compulsively kind person, I can't help it" or "I was raised in a just family and that's why I'm a just person"?) These temptations, then, press on our understanding of *bad* agency, when we are wicked or weak.

On the other hand, we also feel the seductions of a certain picture of *consumerist nihilism* – the other kind of temptation – that presses on our understanding of good agency. This is the belief that, in selecting goods for ourselves, we best understand the moral life as a project of becoming a certain kind of person on the model of consumerist shopping – we pick a kind of moral self off the rack, so to speak, with no really relevant guidelines for selecting one kind of moral self over another. I don't mean this to be a direct attack on the sort of "live and let live" relativism we find a lot today (not a *direct* attack, mind you); rather, I mean to highlight, and I aim to make you doubt the idea that, what you want to do with your life is a matter wholly of personal *whim*, which is uninformed by anything deeper than your own personal choice on the matter.

None of us are actually so totally bereft of moral resources as this picture wants to paint us. In thinking about our lives, and in thinking about our actions as they make our lives, we have not too little information to guide us but too much – we are saturated with moral beliefs that can help (or hinder) our moral decisions and moral formation. Perhaps what we need is a way of organizing our moral worlds.

That's what we want to do here – to do a partial inventory of the resources we have available in our world, fairly close at hand, in thinking about the shape of proper human life. This book will help you, I hope, to use that enormous inheritance to think articulately about your life and decisions. In all likelihood it will not make you better. But it will, I hope, make you more thoughtful about what is right and wrong, and bad and good.