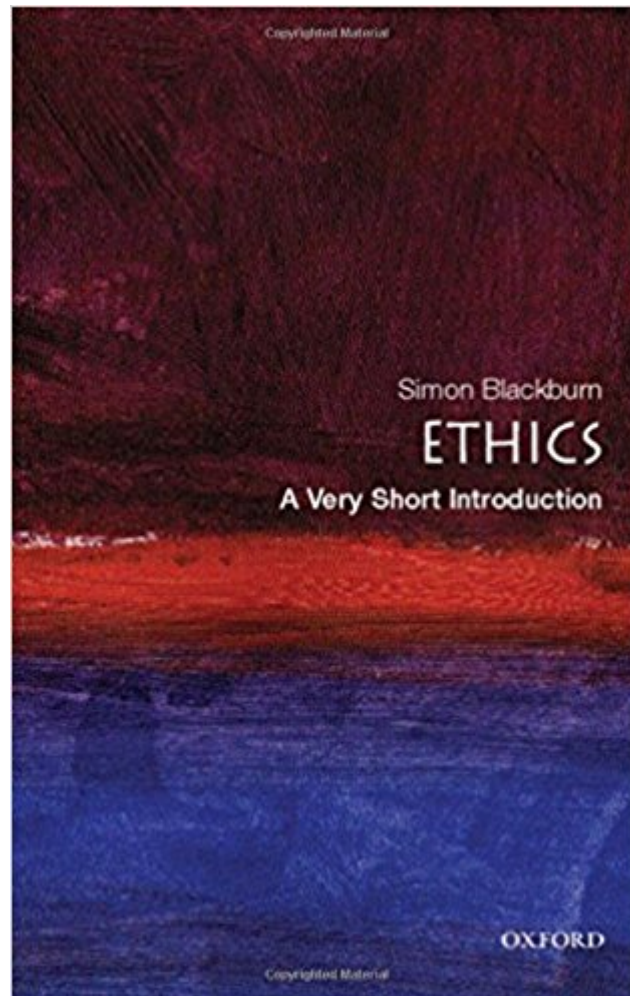




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# Ethics: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

Our self-image as moral, well-behaved creatures is dogged by scepticism, relativism, hypocrisy, and nihilism, by the fear that in a Godless world science has unmasked us as creatures fated by our genes to be selfish and tribalistic, or competitive and aggressive. In this clear introduction to ethics Simon Blackburn tackles the major moral questions surrounding birth, death, happiness, desire and freedom, showing us how we should think about the meaning of life, and how we should mistrust the soundbite-sized absolutes that often dominate moral debates. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

`Review from previous edition Simon Blackburn's short book takes the big moral questions head on and does so brilliantly. . . a witty, vivid writer with an enviable popular touch . . . this is a wonderfully enlightening book.' Ben Rogers, Sunday Telegraph, 'full of good sense' Sunday Times `But for anyone wondering how big questions have bothered us over the years, this witty, rigorous book fills in the gaps.' PLAY, The Times `always lively and never simplistic' Waterstone's Quarterly January 2002 `Good clearheaded stuff' Ted Honderich, The Times `enjoyable and extremely readable . . . Blackburn . . . is breezy, helpful, reassuring' The Philosopher's Magazine `sparklingly clear' Guardian `a first rate and accessible guide which tackles the huge, perpetual

questions' Nottingham Evening Post

Simon Blackburn is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. Until recently he was Edna J. Doury Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, and from 1969 to 1999 a Fellow and Tutor at Pembroke College, Oxford. His books include *Spreading the Word* (1984), *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (1993), *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (1994), *Ruling Passions* (1998), and *Truth* (co-edited with Keith Simmons, 1999), and the best-selling *Think* (1999). He edited the journal *Mind* from 1984 to 1990.

Excellent--the book has stirred lots of thought and given me a grasp on an important field of thought. I recommend it. A few examples of stirring up thinking: 1. "There must be a course between the soggy sands of relativism and the cold rocks of dogmatism" (p. 26). 2. "But when it comes to ethics we are in the domain of preference and choice. And here, reason is silent" (p. 95). 3. "Nature is gradual, through and through" (p. 55).

I like all these short introductions. They expose one to the major questions and arguments in the field.

A worthy introduction to the field of ethics....

A+

Interesting and informative. Good brain food.

Once again a book from the VSI series that really accomplish what it promises. Excellent first reading on the topic, it was really helpful preparing a lecture on biomedical ethics for undergraduate students.

The VSI book series tends to contain serious and useful works in their chosen topic space. However, I would have to advise any serious reader NOT buy this book and I myself will be very hesitant to buy any more from the series. This book reads more like an openly biased editorial than a serious academic work. The reader is treated to incredibly slanted and half digested thoughts such as: trees which grow by depriving others of nutrients or light are like western white males who

flourish because of the inferior status of those not like them. But don't worry dear reader... understanding ethics is just understanding that "Racists and sexists, like antebellum slave owners in America, have to tell themselves a story that justifies their system". One can only conclude that the irony of such a statement, following a blanket condemnation of white males, must have eluded the author... And editor. One might think a book on ethics might need to point out that ALL belief systems require a story to justify its system. Certainly this author and editor must have told themselves a Tolkien level story that this was an unbiased and scholarly work. This book continues to at once preach and then fail to take its own advice. The bias of the author is obvious in the question of God and ethics. I myself believe that God is unnecessary in ethics but I whole heartedly agree with other reviews that the author let his bias completely corrupt his arguments. The rest of the book continued much the same. Lest this seem too harsh a review, there is some good content in this work if the reader wades through the tangential hash of Social Justice nonsense that the author mixes in. But the discussion of ethics is confusing enough without the preachy lecturing from the pulpit that this author is unable to resist. Pass on this book, read a free Al Gore speech instead. Because of the note about the heavy involvement of the editor, I will hold off on any more purchases in the series for a while.

I love these short introductions, but their space limitations are obvious, so take that into account in this review. I am particularly educated in the Christian ethical tradition, so I was somewhat frustrated that Blackburn rejected religiously founded ethics quite glibly in the first section, with largely straw-man critique, but this is forgivable as it is not the author's perspective. With deity based ethics dismissed, he leads readers through possible retorts that this undermines ethical foundations thus allowing all ethical perspectives to stand equally valid; his format that took these concerns on straightforwardly were the principle reason I was interested in this work, even more so than his thoughts on nihilism. He dismissed the relativism critique rather shorthandy since he has an entire section on foundations to close the book. This was where I was expecting to find some meat to justify the dismissal of religious ethics and its accompanying concerns of moral relativism, but I was a bit disappointed. His short summaries of Kant and Rawls' attempts to ground ethics rationally are commendable, though he acknowledges that they still seem to come up short. In the end, he seems to argue that there is enough in common humanity to ground ethics reasonably, if not Reasonably. I struggled to get an answer for how ethical disputes might be settled reasonably if different groups have competing conceptions of what is "good." This to me is a key question of ethics, how can we make judgments about what is right or good that can be backed by more than our social or violent

power to enforce them? Blackburn argues that humanity largely agrees on such "unpretentious things" as "Happiness is preferable to misery, and dignity is better than humiliation. It is bad that people suffer, and worse if a culture turns a blind eye to their suffering. Death is worse than life; the attempt to find a common point of view is better than manipulative contempt for it." I think only recently of popular American debates about torture, and it does not seem at all clear that American humans (much less a wider sampling of human cultures) can agree on several of these things. And if humanity did have some kind of mysterious common moral center as Blackburn seems to believe, wouldn't that open up a whole other set of metaphysical questions about how/why this came to be or what it might be in the future? Overall, not a bad "short introduction," he does hit several hot button ethical issues like abortion and violence, and covers a number of important names in ethics such as Aristotle, Hume, Locke, and Rawls. As a Christian and a historian, I'd like to have seen some engagement with folks like Augustine and Aquinas, who have profound influence in the Western tradition whether one agrees or not, but again, it's a short introduction so cuts must be made.

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