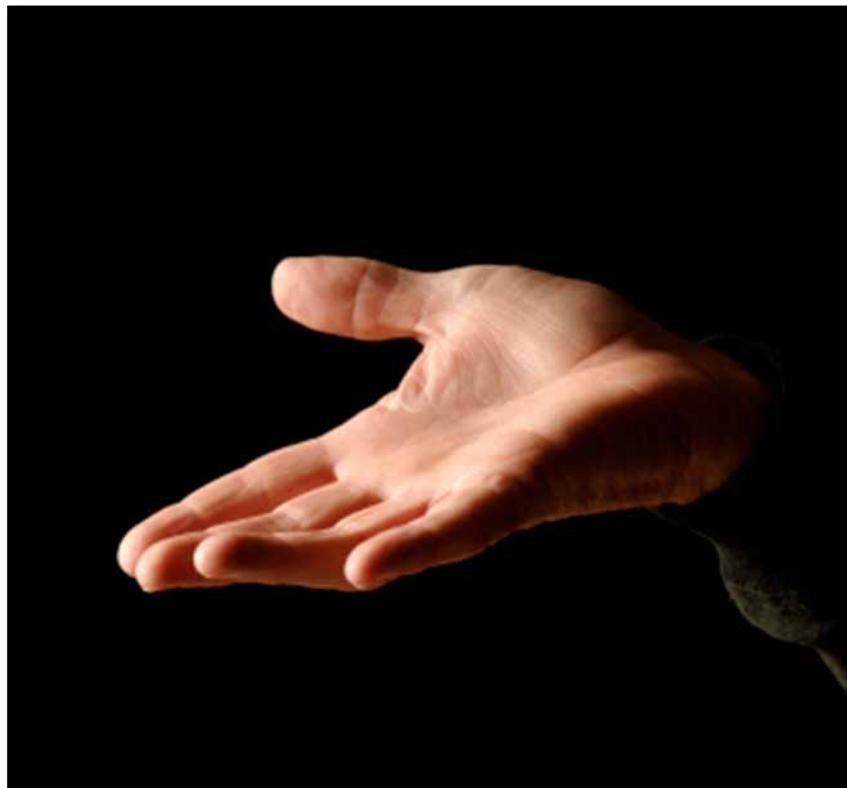


A TEACHING AND STUDY GUIDE for MORAL GROUND

Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril
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Sample syllabus

Sample student essays

Introduction to the Study Guide

For Moral Ground, we asked one hundred of the world’s moral leaders to answer this question: Do we have a moral obligation to the future to leave a world as rich in possibilities as our own? Their answers are collected in the book.

But that is not nearly enough.

Meeting the challenges of climate disruption and environmental degradation is going to take the greatest exercise of the moral imagination this world has ever seen. For that, we need a global conversation—not just a hundred leaders, but thousands of people in all walks of life, putting their heads together in every place that people gather, in church groups and mosques, in universities and schools, in neighborhoods and libraries, in parent groups, in book clubs, in environmental and service organizations, in senior centers, in restaurants and bars, at work, at farmers’ markets and family gatherings. What are our responsibilities to the future? How will we honor them?

Anyone can start a conversation about the ideas in Moral Ground. It can be as simple as a group of friends reading together, or as complex as a university course. In Sitka, Alaska, a group of friends are reading a couple of essays each week and meeting to talk about them. In Corvallis, Oregon, students in a science class are reading Moral Ground together. In Crystal Lake, Illinois, two emeritus professors are leading a discussion group drawn from various environmental groups in town. In Fort Collins, a husband and wife take turns reading an essay aloud before bed. A church book group in Lake Oswego, Oregon, has chosen Moral Ground as their spring project.

We want to make these conversations easy and useful.

The book itself is organized so as to create discussion about the central question that climate change presents: Do we have an obligation to take action to protect the future of a planet in peril? We have divided the book into fourteen sections, corresponding to the fourteen reasons the authors cite. Each section includes:

- Short, inspiring, and often provocative essays by leading thinkers.
- An introductory argument summary, explaining the moral reason.
- A follow-up “action items” essay, with suggestions for what one might do in response to that reason.

In this teaching and study guide, there are materials for each section. They include:

- A short summary or headnote for each essay in the section.
- Discussion questions for each essay.
- A case study or application.
- A short explanation of an ethical concept that illuminates the arguments.

For professors, we have included additional materials that, together with the above, comprise all the elements of a course, including:

- A poster announcing the class.
- A syllabus, reading schedule, and assignment/assessment guide.
- Additional references and class materials, such as videos and articles.
- Sample student essays, with places for others on a moralground.com blog
- Links to a blog where teachers can share their ideas and experiences.

With this guide, we invite everyone to be part of a national conversation about our obligation to the future. Tell us how it goes.

Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide

Introduction

Ethics Background 1: What is ethics?

Ethics is the study of what is worthy in our characters, right in our actions, just in our policies, and virtuous in our characters. The subject matter of ethics is thus moral claims—judgments about better and worse. Moral claims are not about what is; they are about what ought to be. This distinguishes them from factual claims of all kinds (including sociological claims about people’s ethics).

Ethics can also be distinguished from the religious, legal, and other normative claims that they sometimes seem to resemble. Religions often embed a set of moral claims based on a religious authority. If one is a follower of Jesus, for example, one will believe it is right to love one’s neighbor. But there are many sources of moral claims in addition to religious authority, including reason and moral sentiments. Likewise, legal codes often embed a set of norms or standards for behavior. These sometimes (but not always) match a citizenry’s moral principles, but they differ from morality in that conformity to the code is enforced by punishment.

Ethics is not concerned primarily with telling other people how to act or compelling others to behave as we might wish. Rather, it is concerned with offering and analyzing good reasons for why one ought to act in a certain way. Moral reasoning is thus the primary tool of ethics, and the moral argument is the form used in moral reasoning.

Ethics Background: What is the form used in moral reasoning?

Moral reasoning can often be represented as a practical syllogism. (A syllogism is an argument made up of three statements, one of which, the conclusion, follows from the other two, the premises.) The first premise of the practical syllogism is factual, often based on science. It states the facts that are relevant to the situation. The second premise is normative. It states the moral principle or articulates the moral values that will help shape a decision. The conclusion tells what ought to be done. Here is the form of the practical syllogism:

P1. Descriptive, empirical	This is the way the world <i>is</i> .
P2. Normative, ethical	This is what we value, this is what we believe is right, this is the way the world <i>ought</i> to be.

Conclusion	This is what we <i>ought</i> to do.
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Here is an example from President Barack Obama:

P1. Factual premise: Scientists have evidence that stem cell research can relieve human suffering.
P2. Normative premise: My mother always said that if we can relieve human suffering, we should.
Conclusion: We should relax the prohibitions on stem cell research and bring their benefits to the people.

It is often very clarifying to try to represent your moral reasoning as a practical syllogism. Doing so requires you to affirm the moral principle that you believe is ruling in that situation. Further, it requires you to be clear about what facts are important.

Activity / Application 1: A starting survey

On a scale from 0 (There is no hope that we can prevent a catastrophic climate change) to 10 (What climate change? There’s no such problem), where are you positioned today, at the start of this class? Make a note of the number. We will revisit it several times this term. Go around the class circle, telling your number and the reasons that led you to that position.

Activity / Application 2: A practical dilemma

Read the following poem, “Traveling through the Dark,” by William Stafford

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

*I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.*

*William Stafford, “Traveling through the Dark” from *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*. Copyright © 1962, 1998 by The Estate of William Stafford. Used with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Graywolf Press, www.graywolfpress.org.

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide

What would you have done in the same situation?

What would your reasons have been?

Notice that a conclusion and reasons to support it create an argument. When the conclusion is about what you ought to do, you have created a moral argument. The sort of reasons you cite tells you what kind of moral thinker you are:

- Are the reasons about the consequences of the alternative actions (i.e., consequentialist)?
- Are the reasons about the nature of the act itself (i.e., deontological)?
- Are the reasons about the intentions of the act or the qualities/virtues that give rise to it (i.e., virtue ethics)