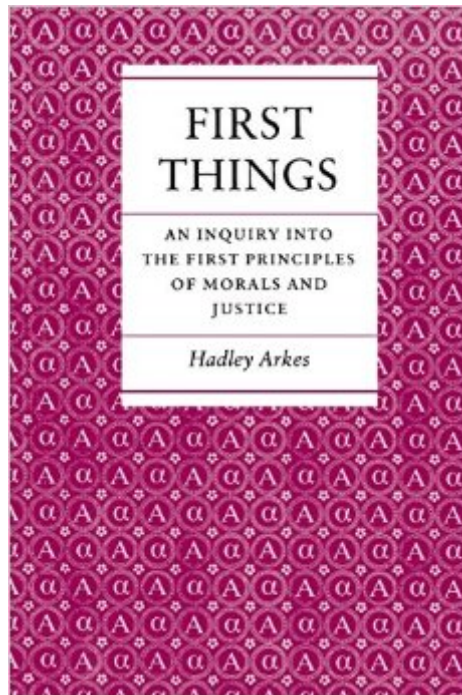


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First Things: An Inquiry Into The First Principles Of Morals And Justice



Synopsis

This book restores to us an understanding that was once settled in the "moral sciences": that there are propositions, in morals and law, which are not only true but which cannot be otherwise. It was understood in the past that, in morals or in mathematics, our knowledge begins with certain axioms that must hold true of necessity; that the principles drawn from these axioms hold true universally, unaffected by variations in local "cultures"; and that the presence of these axioms makes it possible to have, in the domain of morals, some right answers. Hadley Arkes restates the grounds of that older understanding and unfolds its implications for the most vexing political problems of our day. The author turns first to the classic debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. After establishing the groundwork and properties of moral propositions, he traces their application in such issues as selective conscientious objection, justifications for war, the war in Vietnam, a nation's obligation to intervene abroad, the notion of supererogatory acts, the claims of "privacy," and the problem of abortion.

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Customer Reviews

Throughout the years, Professor Arkes has established himself as one of the nation's finest natural law thinkers, and this book presents a thorough overview of his philosophy. In short, he attempts to show that moral principles can be discovered through human reason and not just based on emotion or tradition. This represents the foundation of natural rights, which includes the right to all aspects of freedom except those which can be shown to contradict the logic of morals (such as slavery). Since moral principles are universal and can be discovered by reason, freedom cannot be infringed simply

based on majoritarian beliefs (the "might makes right" argument), but neither is freedom simply following one's conscience, since this will sometimes lead one to act in contradiction to moral laws. The argument is of course much more richly elaborated in the book and only by reading it in Arkes's own words can you appreciate it fully. The book is more than theory, however, and Arkes applies his principles to such controversial issues as religious exemptions, the obligation to rescue, and abortion. Even one who does not agree with all of the Professor's thoughts will still find this an enjoyable book written in an engaging yet witty manner.

Other reviewers here have written about Dr. Arkes' argument re: slavery and moral principles; it is marvelous to see a superb intellectual argument for something that many of us, raised traditionally, accepted as established fact: "of course" there are moral principles, "of course" there are standards of behavior. To work through this soul-activity of arriving at the apprehension of the truth of those "of courses" is an important exercise that needs to be accomplished by a larger number of members of this polity. There is sufficient evidence to make a logical connection from the argument Lincoln and Douglas contested over slavery to the current public debate about the definition of human life - not in just abortion, but in cloning and euthanasia too. That argument is succinct: Simply having a plurality of popular opinion in one's favor does not finally establish the moral vindication of a position. Just because the voters in one state "legalize" euthanasia - or "legalize" property rights over other human beings - does not make it right. There's an interesting discussion in First Things about the morality of pacifism and our society's acceptance of the refusal of certain groups to participate in military service. Now is a good time to recall that argument - that refusing to serve is not necessarily a more moral position than serving, that there is a moral good in performing a duty that the nation has called one to. "Conscientious objectors" may be good people - but "conscientious riflemen" may be good people, too.

This book was mandatory for my college philosophy class over seven years ago and was used for the entire duration of the semester. It changed my way of thinking. I now have the tools to think and form opinions independently of upbringing, cultural norms, and tradition. I have recommend this book to my friends, family, and acquaintances who demonstrate any interest in looking deeper into laws - into the philosophical realm of their existence. No other book has influenced my way of thinking more.

Arkes tone is at times superior and argumentative. However, this book offers a rare insight into a

little known story, the underlying struggle to justify political action. The thesis, that objectively discernable morals exist, is born out by an analysis that is clear, thorough, and thought provoking. I highly recommend it to anyone and everyone who can handle a bit of fun, if heavy, reading.

Excellent

There is no doubt that Prof. Arkes is a legal scholar. However, his grasp of the philosophical arguments centering on the subject here is conspicuously lacking. While invoking a traditional argument for the objectivity of morality passed down from Kant and Sidgwick, Prof. Arkes' "First Things" ignores EVERY substantive criticism these positions have received. There are very good reasons why none of the top contemporary philosophers working in metaethics and analytic normative ethics have settled for the naive moral realism that Arkes argues for here. The only criticism Arkes countenances is that advanced by the long defunct movement of logical positivism. In fact, Arkes fails even here. He appeals to a question begging argument given by John Searle which totally misses the crucial problem with logical positivism (an argument which even Searle didn't construe as an argument for what Arkes takes it to be). In a nutshell, this is a book written by a very opinionated political science professor whose philosophical naivety and overzealous attachment to morality has quite ironically resulted in a very weak argument for the view he (understandably) treasures. As a student at Amherst College I have had the experience of debating the issues discussed in "First Things" with Prof. Arkes. Contrary to the rhetoric of this book, his views do not cohere with some 'moral logic', and neither does he. Given a formal argument against his position he neither rejects premises nor accuses the argument of being invalid, but rather does a rhetorical song and dance, appealing to common sensibilities and emotional attachment to moral values: 'I mean come on, really, of course there are objectively true moral principles'. This is as illogical as it gets. There may be a tenable version of moral realism but this book contains no such view. For those seriously interested in the issue of moral realism and anti-realism see Alexander Miller's excellent and accessible book "An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics" (Cambridge: Polity, 2003). In closing, I must recognize that Prof. Arkes' extrapolations from ethics to politics are, at times, nothing short of brilliant. But this is of little consolation given the extremely suspect ethical theses held by Prof. Arkes.

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