

Ethics for Beginners: Big Ideas from 32 Great Minds,

2022, Peter Kreeft, United States Word on Fire

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Peter Kreeft's "Ethics for Beginners: Big Ideas from 32 Great Minds" is a commendable introduction to the field of ethics, specifically tailored for newcomers. In this book, Kreeft distills the essential ideas of 32 of history's most influential ethical thinkers, making complex philosophical concepts accessible and engaging. Each chapter in the book focuses on a different philosopher, ranging from ancient figures like Socrates and Aristotle to modern thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. This structure allows readers to understand the historical progression of ethical thought and the varied approaches to morality, virtue, and ethical decision-making.

Kreeft's writing is clear and straightforward, ensuring that even readers with no prior background in philosophy can grasp the fundamental principles discussed. The book includes helpful explanations of key terms and concepts, making it an excellent resource for beginners. For example, in the chapter on Socrates, Kreeft effectively illustrates the key aspects of Socratic ethics, including the Socratic method, the identification of virtue with knowledge, ethical elitism, and the importance of self-examination. Through clear and engaging explanations, Kreeft makes Socrates' contributions to ethical thought accessible to beginners, highlighting the enduring significance of his contributions in the broader context of philosophical inquiry.

In the Immanuel Kant chapter, Kreeft explains the concept of the categorical imperative with clarity. He breaks down Kant's philosophy into understandable segments, ensuring readers can follow Kant's reasoning about duty and moral law. Kreeft effectively lays out the foundational elements of Kantian ethics, particularly the categorical imperative and the emphasis on duty, autonomy, and rationality. Through clear and engaging explanations, Kreeft makes Kant's complex ideas accessible to beginners, demonstrating their enduring significance in ethical thought. Next, Kreeft, while describing Saint Thomas Aquinas, provides an insightful analysis of his synthesis of Christian theology with Aristotelian philosophy. Kreeft explains Aquinas' natural law theory, emphasizing that Aquinas believed ethical principles are rooted in human nature and accessible through reason. According to Aquinas, natural law is a part of the divine order, and human beings can discern it through rational reflection. The idea that morality is based on an objective order which humans can understand sets Aquinas apart from purely religious or purely secular ethical systems. Kreeft's chapter on Saint Thomas Aquinas effectively showcases how Aquinas blends Aristotelian ethics with Christian theology, creating a rich and enduring ethical system. Again, through clear explanations and thoughtful analysis, Kreeft makes Aquinas' contributions accessible to beginners, emphasizing their importance in the broader history of ethical thought.

One of the strengths of this book is its breadth. By covering 32 different thinkers, Kreeft provides a comprehensive overview of the history of ethical thought. This wide-ranging approach allows readers to see how different theories have evolved over time and how they relate to one another. Additionally, the biographical context provided for each philosopher adds depth to the understanding of their ethical views. Finally, clarity and explanation of terms set this ethical text apart. Many ethical texts require some prior knowledge of ethics, Kreeft provides a strong introduction to ethics for a larger audience than most. The text is particularly beneficial for students, educators, and anyone interested in gaining a foundational understanding of ethics. It is a valuable resource for introductory courses in ethics or philosophy and a general guide for those

curious about ethical theories. When compared to Simon Blackburn's "Ethics: A Very Short Introduction" (2nd edition) and James Rachels' "The Elements of Moral Philosophy" (7th edition), Kreeft's book stands out for its historical and biographical approach. While Blackburn and Rachels focus on thematic and problem-oriented discussions, Kreeft provides a narrative that traces the development of ethical thought through individual philosophers. Blackburn's updated edition continues to offer a concise overview of ethical theories with added contemporary relevance, maintaining its suitability for beginners who seek a thematic introduction. Rachels' "The Elements of Moral Philosophy" (7th edition) is often used as a textbook for undergraduate courses, making it slightly more detailed and comprehensive than Kreeft's introduction. It covers a wide range of ethical theories, including utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, social contract theory, and more. Rachels and Rachels take a thematic and problem-oriented approach, offering a deeper dive into specific ethical issues compared to Kreeft's broader historical overview.

Michael Sandel's "Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?" also offers a more applied approach to ethics, discussing contemporary issues and real-world dilemmas, whereas Kreeft's work remains more theoretical. In contrast to classic texts like Immanuel Kant's "Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals," which delve deeply into specific ethical theories, Kreeft's book provides a broader and more accessible overview, making it a suitable entry point for those new to the subject.

Overall, "Ethics for Beginners: Big Ideas from 32 Great Minds" is an excellent starting point for anyone interested in exploring the field of ethics. Peter Kreeft's ability to simplify complex ideas without losing their essence makes this book an invaluable resource for beginners. Its comprehensive coverage and clear presentation ensure that readers gain a solid foundation in ethical thought, making it highly recommended for a broad audience.