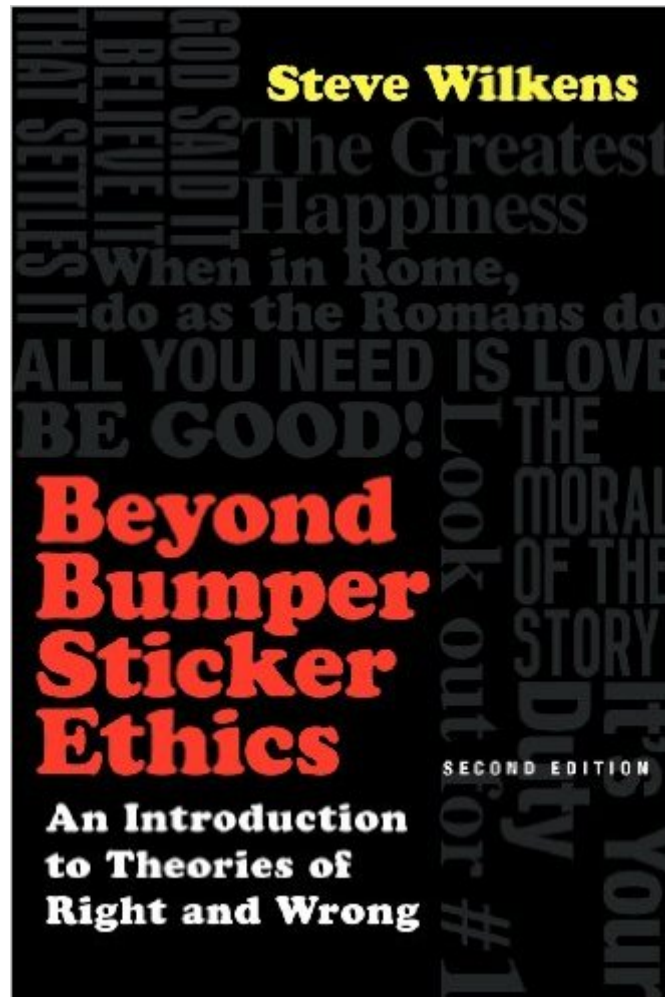


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# Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics: An Introduction To Theories Of Right And Wrong



## Synopsis

Ideas have consequences. And sometimes those ideas can be squeezed into slogans, slapped on bumper stickers and tweeted into cyberspace. These compact messages coming at us from all directions often compress in a few words entire ethical systems. It turns out that there's a lot more to the ideas behind these slogans--ideas that need to be sorted out before we make important moral decisions as individuals or as societies. In this revised and expanded edition of Steve Wilkens's widely-used text, the author has updated his introductions to basic ethical systems: cultural relativism, ethical egoism, utilitarianism, behaviorism, situation ethics, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, natural law ethics, divine command theory. He has also added two new chapters: evolutionary ethics, narrative ethics. With clarity and wit Wilkens unpacks the complicated ideas behind the slogans and offers Christian evaluations of each.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is the second edition of Steve Wilkens's introductory survey of ethical theories. Wilkens, who teaches at Azusa Pacific University in southern California, devotes chapters to cultural relativism, ethical egoism, utilitarianism, behaviorism, evolutionary ethics, situation ethics, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, narrative ethics, natural law ethics and divine command theory. The chapters on evolutionary ethics and narrative ethics are new in this edition. The idea behind this book is that various ethical theories can be summarized in short slogans, or "bumper stickers." Even people who do not think about ethical systems organize their lives around one or more of these slogans, and Wilkens wants to bring the theories behind the bumper stickers out into the open so they can be evaluated. Wilkens

writes from a Christian perspective, and places the ethical theories in the book into three categories: first he looks at ethical theories that contradict aspects of the Christian worldview, then theories that can be compatible with, but do not require, a Christian worldview, and finally theories that begin from a Christian standpoint. In each chapter, Wilkens introduces the reader to an ethical theory, primarily interacting with one or two proponents of that theory. For example, in his chapter on ethical egoism he interacts with Ayn Rand, in his chapter on evolutionary ethics he interacts with E.O. Wilson, and in his chapter on narrative ethics he interacts with Stanley Hauerwas. Then he gives the positive aspects of each theory--he believes that all of them have some truth; otherwise they would not be so attractive to so many people--and potential weaknesses. One potential weakness of the book is that dealing with just one or two proponents of an ethical theory in just a few pages can lead to oversimplification. Wilkens is conscious of that risk, but believes that it is a risk that must be taken in an introductory survey (217). Also, in the chapter on natural law, Wilkens talks about the U.S. Constitution setting forth the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He means the Declaration of Independence (185). In spite of small weaknesses, I highly recommend this book. All people organize their lives according to some ethical system, and relatively few people take time to reflect on where their ethical system came from and what its implications are. After reading this book, some Christians may realize that the ethical system they have adopted is not as rooted in a Christian worldview as it ought to be. This is a book that is especially well suited as a textbook for an introductory ethics class in a Christian high school or university.

Wilkens, Steve. *Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011, 2nd edition. \**Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics* (hereafter BBSE), now in its second edition, is an introductory text to normative systems of ethics focusing on the main ethical systems espoused throughout the centuries (e.g. cultural relativism, egoism, virtue ethics, divine command theory, etc.). While most people have never heard of names such as "egoism" or "Kantianism" and what they entail, Wilkens starts with an experience that is common to most everyone: catchy slogans one is likely to find on a bumper sticker that essentially sums up an ethical system. For example, one may have never heard of the phrase "Ethical Egoism" but may be well familiar with the phrase "Look out for number one," which ethical egoism asserts. And so Wilkens wants to use these various familiar phrases as a departure to explore the various ethical systems and make explicit what is only implicit in these various bumper sticker one-liners (13). The first chapter provides an introduction to the book where Wilkens discusses his method, along with other issues pertaining to ethics (worldviews, metaphysics, human nature, the discipline of ethics, etc.). Chapters 2-12 discuss

eleven different ethical systems from cultural relativism to Kantian ethics to virtue ethics and divine command theory. In each chapter Wilkens provides a helpful introduction to the particular ethical system by expounding, at a somewhat high level, the main features of the ethical system. Wilkens then summarizes what the ethical system espouses, offers positive commendation, and then follows with critique by asking critical questions and then elaborating on what he sees as problematic. Furthermore, Wilkens is not only a moral philosopher but also a Christian, so his critiques that he makes of ethical systems come from a Christian worldview. So for example, cultural relativism, ethical egoism, behaviorism, and evolutionary ethics are all hostile to the Christian worldview because they all assume the non-existence of God. In the final chapter Wilkens concludes by discussing how one may go about working through what one's belief is about which ethical system to hold, especially since the book may give the impression that Wilkens is throwing out all of these options but is himself not coming down on one himself. (One critique of this chapter is that it comes across very individualistic, where I think it may have been helpful, especially from a Christian standpoint, to discuss working these ethical systems out within the context of a community of believers.) One may quibble here and there with what Wilkens says, but if you are looking for an introductory textbook that assumes zero background knowledge of ethics, I would highly recommend this book! It would be a great book to give to a high school or freshman level college student. \*Review copy provided by Intervarsity Press

This is a very good introductory text in ethical systems. Eleven systems are briefly presented with a summary of the view the positives and potential problems. Everyone uses a system, but most of us have never thought about why we make our moral decisions. You will end up with many questions, but that is what life is all about.

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