Review of Ian Stoner and Jason Swartwood’s *Doing Practical Ethics*

*Doing Practical Ethics*. By Ian Stoner and Jason Swartwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 256 pages. $39.95.

Ian Stoner and Jason Swartwood’s *Doing Practical Ethics* is an exceptional, skills-based introduction to critical thinking in applied ethics. Stoner and Swartwood are instructors at Saint Paul College with an extensive background in teaching applied ethics and informal logic. Their book is a primer on analyzing, evaluating, and developing ethical arguments, where they provide numerous demonstration questions with answers, along with practice problems without answers, used to build component logic skills, to habituate students to putting arguments in standard form and thinking critically about the premises. Other textbooks of this kind are lengthy, expensive, and include an anthology. *Doing Practical Ethics*, however, is brief, easy to read, inexpensive, and does not contain preselected readings. These features make the skills-based book a useful addition for any course on normative questions or, even, informal logic.

The book has four main sections that can be used in any order with a few exceptions. In the first, we get a section on basic skills. Chapter One aims to develop the student’s ability to distinguish between moral and descriptive arguments. Chapters Two and Three build the ethicist’s toolset by developing the students use practical and fanciful illustrative examples and provides guidance on use of counterexamples. Chapter Four, however, is key; it targets condensing and deriving premises and conclusions from philosophical prose and presenting the content in standard form.

The second section of *Doing Practical Ethics* turns to Argument from Principle. Chapter Five introduces basic skills of analyzing this argument form and presenting it in standard form. Stoner and Swartwood give a series of popular examples in the text, demonstrate sound reasoning, provide solutions, and highlight common mistakes, which is followed by “demonstration” and “practice problems” at the end of the chapter. The former provides questions (e.g., arguments with a missing moral premise or conclusion) with answers at the end of the chapter, useful for a student to check her work. The latter provides questions without answers, which are useful for in-class discussions, quizzes, or homework (for the instructor, the answers are given in the *Instructor’s Manual*).

This content is followed by a chapter on the evaluation of the Arguments from Principle, where use of counterexamples is the focus, highlighting how to use them against moral and non-moral premises in the Argument from Principle and on how to respond to objections. Last, in Chapter Seven, Stoner and Swartwood provide a brief guidance on how to develop one’s own argument, listing “pitfalls” that identify common mistakes.

The third section of the book focuses on moral Arguments from Analogy. Stoner and Swartwood present the form of the argument—x is like y; x has moral status m; thus, y has moral status m—and, then, proceeds to its application in Chapter Eight. They give us simple problems where a student is to condense ethical prose and present the content in standard form, but, in other problems, Stoner and Swartwood ask for the missing moral premise or the analogical one. They do well with proceeding, step-by-step, to more difficult problems, adding context and supporting arguments in later ones, where much of the content must be discarded, leaving only the core premises. One weakness of the chapter is the skill of presenting supporting arguments for the premises, which an Argument from Analogy depends, is not developed. Overall, the chapter meets the mark and helps to demystify many of the well-known moral arguments by analogy: e.g., Alistair Norcross’ puppy-torture argument, Peter Singer’s pond argument, and Judith Jarvis Thomson’s violinist argument.

Stoner and Swartwood’s Chapter Nine covers how to test the soundness of the premises of an Argument from Analogy. Like Chapter Six, this chapter provides guidance on using fanciful and realistic counterexamples against the moral premise, but, additionally, walks through how to use disanalogies to make a case against the analogical premise, as well as how to respond to such criticism. The final chapter of this section advises on how to develop one’s own Argument by Analogy, providing heuristics on creating moral and analogical premises.

The last section of the book takes up the logic of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) applied to ethical questions. Chapter Eleven depends on Chapter Five, analyzing Arguments from Principle, for the IBE serves to establish the moral premise for such an argument. In the former chapter, Stoner and Swartwood give paradigm cases of a moral issue and ask the student to make a hypothesis that best explains the cases, an IBE, which is a probabilistically justified moral principle. The student is, then, to use this principle in an Argument from Principle to establish a moral conclusion. Like similar chapters, they follow the chapter with ample, well-ordered interesting problems that procedurally get more difficult.

In Chapter Twelve, Stoner and Swartwood focus on the cogency of an IBE. They provide a useful discussion of decisive paradigm cases, but the main strength of the chapter is the account of the standards for comparing competing moral explanations, where they hold, like similar textbooks on inductive inference, a probable hypothesis is simpler, more salient, and more comprehensive. In the final chapter, they provide step-by-step advice how to formulate an IBE, beginning with paradigm cases and proceeding to skills on enumeration of plausible moral explanations and distinguishing the better hypotheses from the worst.