

Tauber Institute Newsletter – Author Spotlight

Modern Jewish Ethics Since 1970: Writings on Methods, Sources, & Issues

Jonathan K. Crane, Emily Filler, and Mira Beth Wasserman, editors

How do you describe this book and its significance as an anthology?

This volume encapsulates the field's expansion and maturation over the last half century. In addition to including pieces that have since become "canonical" or "classic," it incorporates voices and perspectives that challenge prevailing norms and conventional thinking. As one might expect in a field-defining anthology, its scope ranges from heady metaethical arguments to fleshy pragmatics. Yet perhaps its biggest value for the classroom are the curated conversations, the creative juxtapositions, that invite readers to appreciate the field's rich and diverse approaches to common concerns. The scholars we bring together within the volume have diverse disciplinary backgrounds – reflecting the degree to which Jewish ethics functions as a broad field of knowledge or inquiry and less as a specific, narrow, discipline.

Our decision to put these pieces and perspectives into conversation was to enhance the volume's significance for teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level. Anthologies can be useful generally, but in this one, it's basically impossible for students to read only one approach to or position on a given issue. As teachers, we're always warning students against making claims about "what Judaism says" or "what Jews believe" or "the Jewish position on this topic is," but it's an uphill battle. With the conversations we stage between thinkers, students and their teachers have at least two different plausible approaches to the same question at their fingertips. This multiplicity is both fact (there is no singular answer to most moral dilemmas) and pedagogic tool.

How did the dynamics of an editorial trio shape the volume?

As Jewish Ethics—like any field of study—is an ongoing conversation among people with different perspectives and strong opinions, the editorial process is all the more so. The year we spent discussing this volume's goals, scope, and structure engendered heated debate and hearty laughter as we quickly discovered the limits of our own knowledge. I found these roaming exchanges rewarding, as I watched these friends demonstrate how, *qua* Derrida, Jewish ethics is good to think with. Once we decided on its structure, selecting the pieces to include was the most difficult. That's when our chats got really feisty.

Throughout the process, our exchanges were both constructive and fun—the best kind of learning. At some level, our positive experience of being in conversation with each other is what led to the dialogic structure that organizes the book. It's true, we laughed a lot over the two years we worked on this volume, and also did a lot of comfortable arguing. The deadlines we set for ourselves were a crucial part of our process: each of us knew we'd be presenting our work to our colleagues and that helped keep us on task. Toward the end of the editorial process, we had online work sessions where we were all working on the same small portion at the same time – a paragraph of the introduction, or a question of where to place the ellipses in an excerpt, or an obscure detail in one of the author

biographies. In addition to meeting each other's high standards, it was reassuring to know that we each had insight into the others' sections: we were truly a team.

How do you think this book speaks to the most pressing ethical dilemmas facing Jews and Judaism right now?

Modern Judaism faces a crisis of connection. Skepticism and distrust are fracturing Jewish communities in the United States, Israel, and beyond, while indifference, degradation, and feelings of betrayal threaten to sever whatever bonds remain. As lines of communication break and mutual listening ceases, the survival of meaningful Jewish community is jeopardized. Sincere and sustained conversation about difficult topics is becoming increasingly fraught, yet it has never been more necessary.

This volume models the kinds of conversations so urgently needed today: reasonable, internally consistent, and respectful, especially when addressing thorny and intractable issues. Rather than attempting to keep pace with volatile news cycles during the difficult years of this book's creation, we chose to equip readers, teachers, and students with enduring models and conceptual frameworks they can bring to new questions as they arise. The book's various sections—covering war and domination, speech and protest, and technology—provide a foundation for engaging the ethical issues that confront us daily, even if they don't offer definitive answers to today's specific challenges.

The anthology also offers something equally valuable: the humbling virtues of historical perspective. Though its time span covers only about fifty years, these decades reveal significant shifts in Jewish ethical thinking. Some questions that preoccupy contemporary Jewish thinkers were virtually unthinkable in 1970, while some "older" questions from that era remain subjects of active debate today. This historical view reminds us that certain ethical questions are truly hard and resist easy resolution. It takes courage to take responsibility for our ethical claims and conduct, and each generation must do this work anew.

What were some things that you learned along the way about this field and your places within it?

MW: I think of myself as a relative newcomer to the field, as I was trained in rabbinics and found my way into Jewish ethics because that is where scholars (like Emily and Jonathan) were asking questions and having conversations that interested me—and that made my engagements with rabbinic texts more lively and interesting. Joining in the creation of this volume helped me claim my place within the field.

EF: I'm trained in Jewish philosophy, and my interaction with contemporary Jewish ethics scholarship is almost entirely meta-ethical; as regards particular ethical queries "on the ground," it turns out I had no idea what was out there. Diving into this project, I read about everything from head transplants to autonomous weapons systems. Though only a fraction of what we considered was ultimately able to be included, I was humbled by the amount of minute technical knowledge scholars had accrued in order to take up these questions with integrity.

JC: Though I was trained in modern Jewish thought and ethics and considered myself moderately familiar with the field's scope and depth, this project propelled me into genuinely novel territory. I expected Mira and Emily to introduce me to unfamiliar scholars, questions, and sources—and they did. What I didn't anticipate was how often we would find ourselves marveling together: "Wow! I had no idea Jews grappled with this issue before." These moments of shared discovery became a defining feature of our collaboration. What thrilled me most, and for which I remain deeply grateful to my co-editors, was experiencing together this sense of wonder about a field that revealed itself more urgent, expansive, and dynamic than any of us had fully realized.