

Book Review Examples for College Students

Title of the book: Introduction to Ethics

Author: Reginald M.J. Oduor

This book is a product of more than a decade of Oduor's experience in teaching ethics (moral philosophy) at the University of Nairobi. In the course of this introduction, the reader gets to see the techniques of philosophic reflection in action, as they are employed to scrutinise various pertinent moral questions.

Chapter 1 sets forth the main components of Oduor's approach. He presents morality as a tool for the promotion of social harmony. In this regard, he points out that since actions emanating from any individual or social institution affects other individuals and social institutions, there is need to regulate such action. In the author's view, moral philosophy proceeds from five assumptions about the human person, namely, that he/she is self-conscious (aware of his/her uniqueness), social (at his/her best when he/she interacts with fellow human beings), rational (able to provide grounds for his/her claims), creative (capable of coming up with new ways of performing old tasks), and moral (able to distinguish right action from wrong action, and virtuous 106 Samson O. Gunga character from vicious character). The author then introduces his readers to the four main approaches to the study of morality, namely, descriptive ethics (which is the province of the social sciences), normative ethics, meta-ethics and applied ethics.

In chapter 2, the author uses Socrates' response to his trial and execution to paint a picture of sound ethical reasoning, with a view to helping his readers to gain a deeper appreciation of the content and methodology of the three aspects of moral philosophy. Socrates refused to escape from unjust trial and execution because he was of the view that doing so would have been contrary to the dictates of morality through the violation of requirements such as loyalty and civic responsibility. The author argues that Socrates is an exemplar of deep commitment to ethical principles, in that he (Socrates) insisted on the need for sobriety, independent thinking and the necessity of upholding morality above prudence.

In the third chapter, Oduor introduces his readers to the nature and function of ethical theories. He then presents the two main normative ethical theories, namely, deontology and teleology. He also presents the views of the proponents of authoritarian accounts of morality, which are usually based on public opinion or divine commands, but points out that no further attention will be given to this viewpoint because it is not part of ethical theory proper.

Chapter 4 presents the deontology of Immanuel Kant, which emphasizes the need for universalisability of moral maxims, the intrinsic infinite worth of every human being, and the important place of freedom in morality. Chapter 5 examines three teleological ethical theories, namely, ethical egoism (which advocates maximisation of selfinterest), ethical universalism (which prescribes maximisation of advantage to the greatest number of people), and altruism (which champions the exclusive maximisation of the welfare of others).

Chapters 6 and 7 introduce the reader to meta-ethics - the exploration of the meaning of moral judgments and concepts, and the justification of moral judgments. The purpose of meta-ethics, the author tells us, is to attempt to answer the question of the possibility of achieving objectivity or intersubjectivity with regard to our understanding of moral judgements and concepts. Chapter 6 examines the meaning of Book Review: Reginald M.J. Oduor's Introduction to Ethics 107 moral judgments, with special reference to cognitivism (definism and intuitionism) and non-cognitivism (emotivism). It also briefly addresses the

vibrant debate between ethical absolutists and ethical relativists, and helps the reader to view it in the light of the discussion presented so far (chapters 1-6). Chapter 7 examines some pairs of moral concepts, namely, freedom and responsibility, rights and duties, equality and justice, and conscience and conscientiousness.

The last chapter, the eighth, is a masterly summary of the discussion, and an appeal to the reader to pursue the study of ethics beyond the introductory presentation in the book. All in all, Oduor's Introduction to Philosophy is of great relevance to both undergraduate and post-graduate students of "pure philosophy" and "philosophy of education". The author has gone out of his way to balance the unavoidable technical terminology of the discipline of philosophy with prosaic language that makes it easy to follow the discussion. The study questions at the end of each chapter are carefully designed to enhance the reader's own involvement in the penetrating reflection that the book is intended to introduce him/her to.

Title of the book: This One Looks Like a Boy: My Gender Journey to Life as a Man

Author: Lorimer Shenher

Ten years ago, I read a book called *Almost Perfect*. The young-adult novel by Brian Katcher won some awards and was held up as a powerful, nuanced portrayal of a young trans person. But the reality did not live up to the book's billing. Instead, it turned out to be a one-dimensional and highly fetishized portrait of a trans person's life, one that was nevertheless repeatedly dubbed "realistic" and "affecting" by non-transgender readers possessing only a vague, mass-market understanding of trans experiences.

In the intervening decade, trans narratives have emerged further into the literary spotlight, but those authored by trans people ourselves – and by trans men in particular – have seemed to fall under the shadow of cisgender sensationalized imaginings. Two current Canadian releases – *Soar*, Adam, *Soar* and *This One Looks Like a Boy* – provide a pointed object lesson into why trans-authored work about transgender experiences remains critical.

To be fair, *Soar*, Adam, *Soar* isn't just a story about a trans man. It's also a story about epilepsy, the medical establishment, and coming of age as seen through a grieving father's eyes. Adam, Prashaw's trans son, died unexpectedly at age 22. Woven through the elder Prashaw's narrative are excerpts from Adam's social media posts, giving us glimpses into the young man's interior life as he traverses his late teens and early 20s.

But Prashaw makes choices that render the narrative difficult to read, in particular his insistence on using Adam's former name (an appellation that, among trans people, would be known as his "dead name") and feminine pronouns to refer to Adam at any point before he announced his true gender at age 17. Combined with Prashaw's tone when referring to many of Adam's other choices about his body and relationships, the narrative veers far closer to paternalistic than paternal: judgment about relationships, budgeting, and body modifications infuse parts of the story that could have been framed through the lens of a young person's independence and individuation. We don't get to feel the fierceness of pride and sweetness one might expect when Adam is able both to find work while trans (remarkable considering the high rate of unemployment among trans people) and retain jobs while living with active epilepsy.

The loyalty and love of Adam's friends eventually get a chapter, but this doesn't happen until Adam has died – a literary choice that further underscores the ways in which *Soar*, *Adam*, *Soar*, though putatively the story of a teenager's journey through transitioning, is in fact Rick Prashaw's book, not Adam's. The searing and intensely felt final third, in which Prashaw is free to write from his own experience as a grieving father, is beautifully observed in heartbreaking, granular detail. I imagined tearing out just those pages to offer as a balm to parents I know who are awash in the same intractable, inconceivable undertow of pain and loss.

In contrast, Lorimer Shenher's *This One Looks Like a Boy*, which traces Shenher's own considerably emotional journey through transitioning, is much stronger and more interesting. Told in a linear fashion and reaching back to Shenher's earliest memories of gendered experiences, the book grapples with how starkly the author's insistent, internal sense of his gender identity was at odds with the gender expression required by his circumstances. This story reveals itself over the span of decades, from grade school through Shenher's work as an investigator for the Vancouver Police Department, including brief but harrowing references to the case of serial killer Robert Pickton, on which he was a lead detective for a period of time.

Using finely observed detail and spare, unadorned prose, Shenher answers many common questions about trans men's experiences with unflinching honesty. So many of Shenher's experiences – including struggles with alcohol and complicated relationship narratives – feel searingly true, almost to the point of being painful to read. Shenher remains thoughtful toward the end, discussing the ways that living as a man reshaped his interactions with women. Like many of us, he struggled to re-learn gendered expectations and bring his feminist ideals into his new embodiment.

Shenher's descriptions of how hard he worked to please or soothe the people in his life by pretending, even to himself, that his name and the use of incorrect pronouns or gendered attribution didn't bother him clang noisily against Prashaw's choices (and justification of them) on the same topics in *Soar*, *Adam*, *Soar*. Where Prashaw imagines, Shenher reports – and does so movingly.