I agree completely with Michael Pritchard’s view that “the standard philosophical approach — a brief survey of leading philosophical theories of morality, along with efforts to fit the moral landscape of the professions into those theories” does not work. This was one of the reasons that I wrote Common Morality. I intended to provide an account of our common morality that could actually be used by people in dealing with the moral problems that arise in their professional life as well as those that arise in the rest of their lives, e.g., with friends and family. Because my view of morality is that everyone who is legitimately subject to moral judgments must know, at least implicitly, what kinds of actions morality prohibits, requires, discourages, encourages and allows, I tried to write in a way that everyone could understand. I hope that I have used a minimum of philosophical jargon, but having been a philosopher for fifty years, I realize that I do not always recognize what counts as philosophical jargon.

Since I intended the book to be used in introductory ethics courses, where philosophers such as Mill and Kant would also be read, I have included some short comments and criticisms of their views. In this context I considered it important to make clear how my views were related to the standard ethical theories that are taught in introductory ethics courses. However, since I also intended Common Morality to be used in courses in professional ethics where no other philosophical accounts of morality would be used, I state explicitly in note 2 to the preface, “it is not necessary to know any of these views [those of other philosophers] in order to understand my description of morality and its justification.” It is in these professional ethics courses that the standard philosophical approach is most harmful. Presenting a brief survey of leading philosophical theories of morality and telling students to use the one they find most useful for each moral problem leads to a new kind of ethical relativ-
philosophical ethical relativism is the view that there is no correct account of morality, and so for each moral problem one can use whatever account of morality that one finds most congenial. Often, this degenerates into a kind of moral nihilism, the view that since there is no correct account of morality, anything goes.

I also agree with Mike that Common Morality "is about the shared moral ground of thoughtful people." Because I intend my account of morality to include all and only those features of morality that all thoughtful people share, I cannot provide a unique correct answer to every moral question. I am forced to acknowledge that on many controversial issues, e.g., abortion, even complete agreement about the facts of the case, does not result in all equally informed rational persons agreeing. I realize that this is contrary to all of the standard philosophical accounts that claim, or strongly suggest, that they can provide unique correct solutions to all moral problems. But this misguided attempt to demonstrate the objectivity of morality, as pointed out above, actually has the opposite result. By providing a unique correct answer only to those moral problems about which all equally informed impartial rational persons agree, I am able to establish the objectivity of morality. That I acknowledge a range of morally acceptable answers to many controversial moral questions undercuts the standard criticism of the objectivity of morality, that it does not acknowledge legitimate moral disagreement. But, at the same time, by pointing out that the range of morally acceptable answers is quite limited and that some answers, even to very controversial moral problems, are unacceptable, I show that moral disagreement does not lead to moral relativism or nihilism.

I am also in complete agreement with Mike’s statement, “The idea of rationality is fundamental in Gert’s account of our common morality.” As he points out, I try to show that, by placing some plausible limitations on the beliefs that they can use, all rational persons will endorse the public teaching of morality and its enforcement. But I also show that it is not irrational to act immorally. By embracing what initially seems like an inconsistency, I am not only able to account for the prevalence of hypocrisy, but also can show how hypocrisy supports the objectivity of morality. Of course, I acknowledge that it is always rational to act morally, but by recognizing the category of rationally allowed actions, a category missing from most philosophical accounts of rationality, I can account for those ordinary situations in which it is rational to act either morally or immorally. Thus I can show that rationality provides the foundation for morality, that is, for endorsing morality as a system to be publicly taught
and enforced, but still acknowledge that rationality does not provide the basic motivation for people to act morally. That motivation is concern for others, and without it, people are unlikely to act morally when they believe that no one will find out about their immoral actions.

Mike is also right that Part I “is more accessible to non-philosophers,” and Part II is more challenging. For courses in professional ethics, only limited sections of Part II need be read, but for those who are not satisfied with knowing what morality is, but want to be shown that it is not merely some arbitrary social construct, Part II is essential. I do not intend *Common Morality*, to be merely a description of the morality that is accepted by thoughtful people, I also want to show that this morality can be rationally justified.

Mike is correct that legitimate moral disagreement may sometimes result in a person having difficulty in deciding what action to take when more than one action is morally acceptable. If there are only two possibilities it may be possible to flip a coin, not so much to determine what to do, but rather to see how one feels. If the coin comes up heads, which means that I should do A, and I am pleased, then I do A. However, if I am displeased, then that may show that I really feel that I should do B. But this is not the procedure I recommend. For deciding about whistle-blowing in the situation that Mike describes, I recommend a slight variation of the two-step procedure that I talk about on pages 58 to 76. Describe the alternatives using only the morally relevant features, then estimate what would be the consequences of everyone knowing that alternative A is adopted and compare that to your estimate of the consequences of everyone knowing that alternative B is adopted. Then, given your own rational ranking of the harms and benefits, choose that alternative that you estimate would have the best consequences.

Equally informed impartial rational persons can, within limits, make different estimates, and can also rank the harms and benefits differently. Recognizing this should lead a person to acknowledge that there is often more than one morally acceptable decision that can be made, while still providing that person with a procedure and justification for her own moral decision. Thus, common morality can help a person make her own moral decision in a situation where she acknowledges that other persons might legitimately make a different decision. She can therefore both defend and argue for her own moral decision while still respecting the moral decisions of others. There are not many accounts of morality that have this feature. (For a more extended discussion of this topic see,

As should be evident from Mike’s comments and from my response to them, we are in almost total agreement about the nature of morality. I have known Mike for about 30 years. Given my great respect, not only for Mike’s philosophical abilities, but also for his moral character, I am delighted to see how much we agree. I regard this agreement as being as close to a confirmation of a philosophical view as one is likely to find.