This article is an example of the collaboration that Dan Clouser and I have engaged in for several decades. Our views are so similar in so many ways that we often come up with the same conclusions independently of each other. We used to think that we could not remember who came up with the conclusion and told the other about it, but finally we realized that neither one had talked about it with the other. For the most part I have concentrated on a more general theoretical level and Dan has concentrated on applications, but we both think that theory and application are so closely connected that it is impossible for them to be done separately (Clouser, 1989). Not only can there be no application without a theory to apply, but applications have such an impact on theory, that it is not implausible to think of the theory as simply a generalization from the applications. This article is derived from our book, *Bioethics: A Return to Fundamentals* (1997), which we wrote together with Charles M. Culver. This book was just published by Oxford University Press, so it is the most recent example of our collaboration. Among other examples of this collaboration are our critiques of principlism (Clouser and Gert, 1990 and 1994).

I. INTRODUCTION

Morality at its core is a universal system of conduct though it is manifested variously in different societies and segments within societies. There are moral codes in business, in various health professions, in sports, in law, in government, in the many different occupations, and so on. Properly understood, these are all expressions of the ordinary morality incumbent on all rational persons, outcroppings of the same underlying rock formation. How this is so and what gives them their different forms is the focus of this article. In everyday life it is these outcroppings that are mostly confronted, so it is important to demonstrate how these manifestations are grounded in a common morality. Otherwise these multitudinous pockets of “moral practices” are seen as just so many diverse, unrelated, free-floating enterprises with rules, customs, and
practices peculiar to themselves. Revealing their close ties with the basic structure of morality constitutes a major argument against such a random view of moral conduct.

Those who deny the possibility of a comprehensive account of morality may, in actuality, be denying that any systematic account of morality provides an answer to every moral problem. But we maintain that the common moral system does not provide a unique solution to every moral problem. Readers should not expect that every moral problem will have a single best solution, one that all fully informed, impartial, rational persons will prefer to every other solution. In many cases, however, common morality does provide a unique answer. Although most of these cases are not interesting, in a very few situations an explicit account of morality does settle what initially seemed to be a controversial matter, such as some aspects of euthanasia. Most controversial cases do not have a unique answer, but even in these cases morality is often quite useful. It places significant limits on legitimate moral disagreement, that is, it always provides a method for distinguishing between morally acceptable answers and morally unacceptable answers. Although there is often no agreement on the best solution, there is overwhelming agreement on the boundaries of what is morally acceptable.

Most people, including most physicians and philosophers, tend to be interested more in what is controversial than in what is uncontroversial. It is routine to start with a very prominent example of unresolvable moral disagreement, such as abortion, and then treat it as if it were typical of the kinds of issues on which people make moral judgments. The fact that moral disagreement on some issues is compatible with complete agreement on many other issues seems to be almost universally overlooked. Many philosophers seem to hold that if equally informed, impartial, rational persons can disagree on some moral matters, they can disagree on all of them. Thus many philosophers hold either that there is no unique right answer to any moral question or that there is a unique right answer to every moral question. The unexciting, but correct, view is that some moral questions have unique right answers and some do not. Our view is that the matters on which there is moral agreement far outnumber the matters on which there is moral disagreement, although we admit that the areas of moral disagreement are more interesting to discuss.