Preface

In presenting a coherence theory in ethics, I attempt to offer a comprehensive moral view, able to inform our understanding of morality and adequate as a guide to moral decision-making. Moral theories centering on a few values or on a special and limited base have been unsuccessful on both counts: they do not help us to understand or guide moral judgments. Too many different limited perspectives have been proposed, each easy to fault and each making some sense. Sooner or later an application of a restricted theory suggests that other values—declared meaningless, insignificant, harmful, or derived—must be used to mediate or amend limited approaches. Furthermore, whether we use a Kantian, utilitarian, virtue, or a rationality theory, attempts by philosophers to specify the meaning of dominant abstract values must incorporate, to be adequate, unaccounted for, yet entrenched, moral viewpoints. Theoretical investigation of systems based on special perspectives is instructive, but it does not produce a moral theory designed to help us make contextual moral judgments. I am convinced that any theory offering a proper base for moral judgments must take into coherent account all of moral experience.

This is not enough. An adequate moral theory should be agnostic about the proper ontological foundation of moral value. Its point of departure is moral experience, not some special view of where moral values come from. Views of this sort limit moral inquiry and restrict consensus on the results of application.

These two points, the rejection of single-minded attempts to do ethics and the rejection of ontological speculation on moral foundations, guided the development of my belief that a broadly conceived coherence over moral experience is the proper way to do ethics. However, I didn’t realize how difficult it would be to bring into mutual support all the required pieces. I present this work in the belief that I am now successful, at least in the basic outline of my position.

In this work I try to show that traditional and contemporary approaches fail when they avoid taking seriously moral experience as the data of moral inquiry. Yet the views examined contain much wisdom. I use the analysis of other views to help present my position, which I call “dynamic coherence.” My view is complex and is presented slowly, with each part developed as fully as I can in abstraction from the whole. Because the development of a coherence view is more difficult than I expected, I imagine it will be more difficult to read than an author would like. I hope that if it is
approached with some patience, the pieces will begin to fit as mutually supporting, the ultimate appeal of a coherence perspective.

The coherence theory I present has benefitted from discussion and writing with two colleagues, Richard M. Fox and Samuel A. Richmond. While neither would fully agree with my view, their influence is throughout. I feel fortunate to have such fine colleagues.

Robert Ginsberg has been a continual source of encouragement and assistance; without his help this book would have taken longer, and would have been more difficult to read. He has also encouraged me to survey moral experience in a college text; this as yet untitled foundational treatment of ethics will be published by Jones and Bartlett Publishers, Inc., in 1994.

I thank Cindy Kunzman and Cindy Belinger for their help in preparing the text. My wife, Bonnie, and my children, Lisa and Bill, have provided much encouragement, love, and support. I dedicate this book to my mother, Helena DeMarco, for all she has done.