WHY STUDY ETHICS?

Today we live in a dangerous world. Whether it is more dangerous than in times past is an open question. One can think, for example, of the fourteenth century when Genghis Kahn (and later his successors) swept across Asia, Europe, and northern Africa and threatened to destroy all of Arab civilization, and of the bubonic plague, which, in 1348, wiped out one-fourth of the population of Western Europe. On the other hand, today’s threats may be more powerful and have the capacity to affect millions more people. For example, we have recently been made only too aware of the extent and capacity of terrorist networks around the world. Unstable nations and rulers possess powerful weapons of mass destruction. Individuals with a cause or out of revenge or in frustration or for no clear reason at all can randomly kill people simply going about the business of life. We question what we may rightly do to lessen these dangers or prevent great possible harm. In some cases, the only way to do it seems to involve threats to other important values we hold—for example, rights to privacy and civil liberties.

These are matters not only of practical and political bearing, but also of moral rights and wrongs. They are also matters about which it is not easy to judge. We do not always know what is best to do, how to balance goods, or what reasons or principles we ought to follow.

For example, what do you think about the practice of downloading music for free from the Internet? Is this a form of stealing or is it a harmless acceptable practice? On the one hand, the material is probably copyrighted and thus the musicians and technicians and music companies in a way own the material for which they are not being compensated. On the other hand, it may also be viewed as simply sharing of tunes between peers. Apart from the possible legal repercussions, one may also want to know whether there is anything morally objectionable about the practice. Or consider academic cheating, such as the buying and selling of term papers or cutting and pasting pieces from Internet sites and passing them off as one’s own work and ideas. One may admit that this is clearly dishonest, and yet one might argue that if professors make it easy to do by the assignments they give or their lack of oversight, then it should not be considered morally wrong.

In this text, we will examine some of the moral dilemmas we face as individuals and as peoples. Hopefully, by an explicit focus on such dilemmas, the decisions we must make will be more well-informed and, in fact, better decisions. At least that is the aim of this study of ethics.

WHAT IS ETHICS?

I have asked students on the first day of an ethics class to write one-paragraph answers to each of two questions: “What is ethics?” How would you answer? There have been significant differences of opinion among my students on this issue. Ethics
is a highly personal thing, some wrote, a set of moral beliefs that develop over the years. Although the values may initially come from one's family upbringing, they later result from one's own choices. Others thought that ethics is a set of social principles, the codes of one's society or particular groups within it, such as medical or legal organizations. Some wrote that many people get their ethical beliefs from their religion.

One general conclusion can be drawn from these students' comments: We tend to think of ethics as the set of values or principles held by individuals or groups. I have my ethics and you have yours, and groups also have sets of values with which they tend to identify. We can think of ethics as a study of the various sets of values that people do have. This could be done historically and comparatively, for example, or with a psychological interest in determining how people form their values and when they tend to act on them. We can also think of ethics as a critical enterprise. We would then ask whether any particular set of values or beliefs is better than any other. Are there good reasons for preferring them? Ethics, as we will pursue it in this text, is this latter type of study. We will examine various ethical views and types of reasoning from a critical or evaluative standpoint. This examination will also help us come to a better understanding of our own and various societies' values.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy. It is also called moral philosophy. Although not everyone agrees on what philosophy is, let's think of it as a discipline or study in which we ask—and attempt to answer—basic questions about key areas or subject matters of human life and about pervasive and significant aspects of experience. Some philosophers, such as Plato and Kant, have tried to do this systematically by interrelating their philosophical views in many areas. According to Alfred North Whitehead, "Philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted." Others believe that philosophers today must work at problems piecemeal, focusing on one particular issue at a time. For instance, some might analyze the meaning of the phrase "to know," while others might work on the morality of lying. Furthermore, some philosophers are optimistic about our ability to answer these questions, while others are more skeptical because they think that the way we analyze the issues and the conclusions we draw will always be colored by our background, culture, and ways of thinking. Most agree, however, that the questions are worth wondering and caring about.

We can ask philosophical questions about many subjects. In aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, philosophers ask questions not about how to interpret a certain novel or painting, but about basic or foundational questions such as, What kinds of things do or should count as art (rocks arranged in a certain way, for example)? Is what makes something an object of aesthetic interest its emotional expressiveness, its peculiar formal nature, or its ability to show us certain truths that cannot be described? In the philosophy of science, philosophers ask not about the structure or composition of some chemical or biological material, but about such matters as whether scientific knowledge gives us a picture of reality as it is, whether progress exists in science, and whether it is meaningful to talk about the scientific method. Philosophers of law seek to understand the nature of law itself, the source of its authority, the nature of legal interpretation, and the basis of legal responsibility. In the philosophy of knowledge, called epistemology, we try to answer questions about what we can know of ourselves and our world and what it even is to know something rather than just believe it. In each area, philosophers ask basic questions about the particular subject matter. This is also true of moral philosophy.

Ethics, or moral philosophy, asks basic questions about the good life, about what is better and worse, about whether there is any objective right and wrong, and how we know it if there is.

This definition of ethics assumes that its primary objective is to help us decide what is good or bad, better or worse, either in some general way or in regard to particular ethical issues. This is
generally called normative ethics. Ethics, however, can be done in another way. From the mid-1930s until recently, metaethics predominated in English-speaking universities. In doing metaethics, we would analyze the meaning of ethical language. Instead of asking whether the death penalty is morally justified, we would ask what we meant in calling something “morally justified” or “good” or “right.” We would analyze ethical language, ethical terms, and ethical statements to determine what they mean. In doing this, we would be functioning at a level removed from that implied by our definition. It is for this reason that we call this other type of ethics metaethics, meta meaning “beyond.” Some of the discussions in this chapter are metaethical discussions—for example, the analysis of various senses of “good.” As you can see, much can be learned from such discussions. The various chapters of Part Two of this text do normative ethics, for they are concerned with particular concrete issues and how to evaluate or judge them.

ETHICS AND RELIGION
Many people get their ethical or moral views from their religion. Although religions include other elements, most do have explicit or implicit requirements or ideals for moral conduct. In some cases, they contain explicit rules or commandments: “Honor thy father and mother” and “Thou shalt not kill.” Some religious morality is found in interpretations of religious books, lessons such as: “In this passage the Bible (or Koran or Bhagavad Gita) teaches us that we ought to...” Some religions recognize and revere saints or holy people who provide models for us and exemplify virtues we should emulate.

Philosophers, however, believe that ethics does not necessarily require a religious grounding. Rather than relying on holy books or religious revelations, philosophical ethics uses reason and experience to determine what is good and bad, right and wrong, better and worse. In fact, even those for whom morality is religiously based may want to examine some of these views using reason. They may want to know whether elements of their religious morality—some of its rules, for example—are good or valid ones given that other people have different views of what is right and wrong. Moreover, if moral right and wrong were grounded only in religious beliefs, then nonbelievers could not be said to have moral views or make legitimate moral arguments. But even religious believers should want to be able to dialogue with such persons. In fact, in fact, even religious believers regularly make moral judgments that are not based strictly on their religious views but rather on reflection and common sense.

Thinking further about religious morality also raises challenges for it. A key element of many religious moralities is the view that certain things are good for us to do because this is what God wants. This is often referred to as the “divine command theory.” The idea is that certain actions are right because they are what God wills for us. The reading at the end of this chapter from Plato’s dialogue Euthyphro examines this view. He asks whether things are good because they are approved by the gods or whether the gods approve of them because they are good. To say that actions are good just because they are willed or approved by the gods or God seems to make morality arbitrary. God could decree anything to be good: lying or treachery, for example. It seems more reasonable to say that lying and treachery are bad and for this reason the gods or God condemn or disapprove of them and that we should also. One implication of this view is that morality has a certain independence; if so, we should be able to determine whether certain actions are right or wrong in themselves and for some reason. (Further discussion of this issue may be found in Chapter 6, in the section “Evaluating Natural Law Theory.”)

Religion, however, may still provide a motivation or inspiration to be moral for some people. If life has some eternal significance in relation to a supreme and most perfect being, then we ought to take life and morality very seriously, they believe. This would not be to say that the only reason religious persons have for being moral or trying to do the morally right thing is so that they will be rewarded in some life beyond this one. Rather, if something is morally right, then this is itself a reason for doing it. Thus, the good and conscientious person is the one who...
wants to do right just because it is right. However, questions about the meaning of life may play a significant role in a person's thoughts about the moral life. Some people might even think that atheists have no reason to be moral or to be concerned with doing the morally right thing. However, this is not necessarily so. For example, a religious person may disvalue this life if he or she thinks of it as fleeting and less important than the things to come or what lies ahead in another world beyond this one. And atheists who believe that this life is all there is may in fact take this life more seriously and want to do well in it. Furthermore, the religious as well as the nonreligious should be able to think clearly and reason well about morality.

For at least three reasons, we all must be able to develop our natural moral reasoning skills. First, we should be able to evaluate critically our own or other views of what is thought to be good and bad, just and unjust, including religious views in some cases. Second, believers of various denominations as well as nonbelievers ought to be able to discuss moral matters together. Third, the fact that we live in organized secular communities, cities, states, and countries requires that we be able to develop and rely on widely shared reason-based views on issues of justice, fairness, and moral ideals. This is especially true in political communities with some separation of church and state, where no religion can be mandated, and where one has freedom within limits to practice a chosen religion or not to practice any religion at all. In these settings it is important to have nonreligiously based ways of dealing with moral issues. This is one goal of philosophical ethics.

ETHICAL AND OTHER TYPES OF EVALUATION

"That's great!" "Now, this is what I call a delicious meal!" "That play was wonderful!" All of these statements express approval of something. They do not tell us much about the meal or the play, but they do imply that the speaker thought they were good. These are evaluative statements. Ethical statements or judgments are also evaluative. They tell us what the speaker believes is good or bad. They do not simply describe what the object of the judgment is like—for example, as an action that occurred at a certain time or affected people in a certain way. They go further and express a positive or negative regard for it. However, factual matters are often relevant to our moral evaluations. For example, factual judgments about whether capital punishment has a deterrent effect might be quite relevant to our moral judgments about it. So also would we want to know whether violence can ever bring about peace; this would help us judge the morality of war and terrorism. Because ethical judgments often rely on such empirical or experientially based information, ethics is often indebted to other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and history. Thus, we can distinguish between empirical or descriptive judgments, by which we state certain factual beliefs, and evaluative judgments, by which we make judgments about these matters. Evaluative judgments are also called normative judgments. Thus,

- Descriptive (empirical) judgment: Capital punishment acts (or does not act) as a deterrent.
- Normative (moral) judgment: Capital punishment is justifiable (or unjustifiable).

Moral judgments are evaluative because they "place a value," negative or positive, on some action or practice such as capital punishment. Because these evaluations also rely on beliefs in general about what is good or right—in other words, on norms or standards of good and bad or right and wrong—they are also normative. For example, the judgment that people ought to give their informed consent to participate as research subjects may rely on beliefs about the value of human autonomy. In this case, autonomy functions as a norm by which we judge the practice of using people as subjects of research. Thus, ethics of this sort is called normative ethics, both because it is evaluative and not simply descriptive and because it grounds its judgments in certain norms or values. "That is a good knife" is an evaluative or normative statement. However, it does not mean that the knife is morally good. In making ethical judgments, we use terms such as good, bad, right, wrong, obligatory, and permissible. We talk about what we ought or ought not to do. These are evaluative terms. But not all evaluations are moral in nature.
a good knife without attributing moral goodness to it. In so describing the knife, we are probably referring to its practical usefulness for cutting or impressing others. People tell us that we ought to pay this amount in taxes or stop at that corner before crossing because that is what the law requires. We read that two styles ought not to be worn or placed together because such a combination is distasteful. Here someone is making an aesthetic judgment. Religious leaders tell members of their communities what they ought to do because it is required by their religious beliefs. We may say that in some countries people ought to bow before the elders or use eating utensils in a certain way. This is a matter of custom. These normative or evaluative judgments appeal to practical, legal, aesthetic, religious, or customary norms for their justification.

How do other types of normative judgments differ from moral judgments? Some philosophers believe that it is a characteristic of moral “oughts” in particular that they override other “oughts” such as aesthetic ones. In other words, if we must choose between what is aesthetically pleasing and what is morally good, then we ought to do what is morally right. In this way, morality may also take precedence over the law and custom. The doctrine of civil disobedience relies on this belief, because it holds that we may disobey certain laws for moral reasons. Although moral evaluations are different from other normative evaluations, this is not to say that there is no relation between them. For example, moral reasons often form the basis for certain laws. For example, consider the copyright laws and the earlier example of downloading music from the Internet. In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously that this is a form of illegal piracy and that file-sharing services are engaging in copyright infringement. There may also be moral reasons supporting such opinions, considerations of basic justice, for example. Furthermore, the fit or harmony between forms and colors that ground some aesthetic judgments may be similar to the rightness or moral fit between certain actions and certain situations or beings. Moreover, in some ethical systems, actions are judged morally by their practical usefulness for producing valued ends. For now, however, note that ethics is not the only area in which we make normative judgments.

Thus, we can distinguish various types of normative or evaluative judgments (and areas in which such judgments are made) from descriptive judgments about factual matters (and areas or disciplines that are in this sense descriptive).

Ethical Terms
You might have wondered what is the difference between calling something “right” and calling it “good.” Consider the ethical meaning for these terms. Right and wrong usually apply to action—as in “You did the right thing” or “That is the wrong thing to do.” These terms prescribe things for us to do or not to do. On the other hand, when we say that something is morally good, we are not explicitly recommending doing it. However, we do recommend that it be positively regarded. Thus, we say things such as “Peace is good, and distress bad.” It is also interesting that with “right” and “wrong” there seems to be no in-between; it is either one or the other. However, with “good” and “bad” there is room for degrees, and some things are thought to be better or worse than others.

We also use other ethical terms when we engage in moral evaluation and judgment. For example, we sometimes say that something “ought” or “ought not” to be done. There is the sense here of urgency. Thus, of these things we may talk in terms of an obligation to do or not do something. It is something about which there is morally no choice. We can refrain from doing what we ought to do, but the obligation is still there. On the other
hand, there are certain actions that we think are permissible to do but we are not obligated to do them. Thus, one may think that there is no obligation to help someone in trouble, though it is “morally permissible” (i.e., not wrong) to do so, and even in some cases “praiseworthy.” Somewhat more specific ethical terms include just and unjust and virtuous and vicious.

To a certain extent, which set of terms we use depends on the particular overall ethical viewpoint or theory we adopt. (See the following discussion of types of ethical theory.) This will become clearer as we discuss and analyze the various ethical theories in this first part of the text.

ETHICS AND REASONS

When we evaluate an action as right or wrong or some condition as good or bad, we appeal to certain norms or reasons. Suppose, for example, I said that affirmative action is unjustified. I should give reasons for this conclusion; it will not be acceptable for me to respond that this is just the way I feel. If I have some intuitive negative response to preferential treatment forms of affirmative action, then I will be expected to delve deeper to determine if there are reasons for this attitude. Perhaps I have experienced the bad results of such programs. Or I may believe that giving preference in hiring or school admissions on the basis of race or sex is unfair. In either case, I also will be expected to push the matter further and explain why it is unfair, or even what constitutes fairness and unfairness.

To be required to give reasons and make arguments to justify one’s moral conclusions is essential to the moral enterprise and to doing ethics. However, this does not mean that making ethical judgments is and must be purely rational. We might be tempted to think that good moral judgments require us to be objective and not let our feelings, or emotions, enter into our decision-making. Yet this assumes that feelings always get in the way of making good judgments. Sometimes this is surely true, as when we are overcome by anger, jealousy, or fear and cannot think clearly. Bias and prejudice may stem from such strong feelings. We think prejudice is wrong because it prevents us from judging rightly. But emotions can often aid good decision making. We may, for example, simply feel the injustice of a certain situation or the wrongness of someone’s suffering. Furthermore, our caring about some issue or person may, in fact, direct us to think about the ethical issues involved. However, some explanation of why we hold a certain moral position is required. Not to give an explanation, but simply to say “X is just wrong,” or simply to have strong feelings or convictions about “X,” is not sufficient.

ETHICAL REASONING AND ARGUMENTS

We also should know how to reason well in thinking or speaking about ethical matters. This is helpful not only for trying to determine what to think about some questionable ethical matter but also to make a good case for something you believe is right as well as to critically evaluate others’ positions.

The Structure of Ethical Reasoning and Argument

To be able to reason well in ethics, you need to understand something about ethical arguments and argumentation, not in the sense of understanding why people get into arguments, but rather in the sense of what constitutes a good argument. We can do this by looking at an argument’s basic structure. This is the structure not only of ethical arguments about what is good or right but also of arguments about what is the case or what is true.

Suppose you are standing on the shore and a person in the water calls out for help. Should you try to rescue that person? You may or may not be able to swim. You may or may not be sure you could rescue the person. In this case, there is no time for reasoning, as you would have to act promptly. However, if this were an imaginary case you were considering, you would have to think through the reasons for and against trying to rescue the person. You might conclude that if you could actually rescue the person you ought to try to do it. Your reasoning might go as follows:

Every human life is valuable.
Whatever has a good chance of saving such a life should be attempted.
My swimming out to rescue this person has a good chance of saving his life. Therefore I ought to do so.

Or you might conclude that someone could not save this person and your reasoning might go like this:

Every human life is valuable. Whatever has a good chance of saving such a life should be attempted. In this case, there is no chance of saving this life because I cannot swim. Thus, I am not obligated to try to save him (though, if others are around who can help, I might be obligated to try to get them to help).

Some structure like this is implicit in any ethical argument, though some are longer and more complex chains than the simple form given here. One can recognize the reasons in an argument by their introduction through key words such as since, because, and given that. The conclusion often contains terms such as thus and therefore. The reasons supporting the conclusion are called premises. In a sound argument, the premises are true and the conclusion follows from them. In this case, then, we want to know whether you can save this person and also whether his life is valuable. We also need to know whether the conclusion actually follows from the premises. In the case of the examples given above, it does, for if you say you ought to do what will save a life and you can do it, then you ought to do it. However, there may be other principles that would need to be brought into the argument, such as whether and why in fact one is always obligated to save another when one can.

To know under what conditions a conclusion actually follows from the premises, we would need to analyze arguments with much greater detail than we can do here. Suffice it to say here, however, that the connection is a logical connection—in other words, it must make rational sense. You can improve your ability to reason well in ethics first by being able to pick out the reasons and the conclusion in an argument. Only then can you subject them to critical examination in ways we suggest below.

**Evaluating and Making Good Arguments**

Ethical reasoning can be either well or poorly done. Ethical arguments can be done well or poorly. A good argument is a sound argument. It has a valid form in that the conclusion actually follows from the premises, and the premises or reasons given for the conclusion are true. An argument is poorly done when it is fallacious or when the reasons on which it is based are not true or uncertain. This latter matter is of particular significance with ethical argumentation, because an ethical argument always involves some value assumptions—for example, that saving a life is good. These value matters are difficult to establish. Chapters 4 through 7 will help clarify how to analyze value assumptions. The discussion below of the relation between ethical theory and ethical judgments also suggests how thinking about values progresses.

However, in addition to such value assumptions or elements, ethical arguments also involve conceptual and factual matters. Conceptual matters are those relating to the meaning of terms or concepts. For example, in a case of lying we would want to know what lying actually is. Must it be verbal? Must one have an intent to deceive? What is deceit itself? Other conceptual issues central to ethical arguments are questions such as, "What constitutes a 'person'?" (in arguments over abortion, for example) and "What is 'cruel and unusual punishment'?" (in death penalty arguments, for example). Sometimes, differences of opinion about an ethical issue are a matter of differences not in values but in the meaning of the terms used.

Ethical arguments often also rely on factual assertions. In our example, we might want to know whether it was actually true that you could save the person. In arguments about the death penalty, we may want to know whether it is a deterrent. In such a case, we need to know what scientific studies have found and whether the studies themselves were well grounded. To have adequate factual grounding, we will want to seek out sources of information and be open-minded. Each chapter
Two of this book begins with or includes factual material that may be relevant to ethical decisions on the particular issue being treated. Even though they are limited, these discussions show the kind of thing one must do to make good ethical decisions.

Notice that one can have an opinion about a matter of good and bad as well as an opinion about factual matters. For example, I might indicate that my opinion about whether random drug testing is a good thing is only an opinion because I do not feel adequately informed about the matter. This is an opinion about a moral matter. I can also have an opinion about the connection between passive smoking (inhaling others' tobacco smoke) and lung cancer. This would be an opinion about a factual matter. Because I can have an opinion about both values and matters of fact, I should not use this criterion as a basis for distinguishing values and facts. To do so would imply that moral matters were always matters of opinion and factual matters were never such.

Those who analyze good reasoning have categorized various ways in which reasoning can go wrong or be fallacious. We cannot go into detail on these here. However, one example that is often given is called the "ad hominem" fallacy. In this fallacy, people say something like "That can't be right because just look who is saying it." They look at the source of the opinion rather than the reasons given for it. Another is called "begging the question" or arguing in a circle. Here you use the conclusion to support itself. An example of this would be something like "Lying in this case is wrong because lying is always wrong." You can find out more about these and other fallacies from almost any textbook in logic or critical thinking, some of which are listed in the bibliography at the end of this chapter.

You also can improve your understanding of ethical arguments by being aware of a particular type of reasoning often used in ethics: arguments from analogy. This type of argument, one compares familiar examples with the issue being disputed. If the two cases are similar in relevant ways, then whatever one concludes about the first familiar case one should also conclude about the disputed case. Thus, in a famous use of analogy that is included in Chapter 9 of this text, an argument about abortion by Judith Thomson, one is asked whether it would be ethically acceptable to unplug a violinist who had been attached to you and your kidney to save his life. She argues that if you say, as she thinks you should, that you are justified in unplugging the violinist, then a pregnant woman is also justified in "unplugging" her fetus. You would critically examine such an argument by asking whether or not the two cases were similar in relevant ways—that is, whether the analogy fits.

Finally, we should note that giving reasons to justify a conclusion is also not the same as giving an explanation for why one believes something. One might say that she does not support euthanasia because that was the way she was brought up. Or that she is opposed to the death penalty because she cannot stand to see someone die. To justify such beliefs, one would need rather to give reasons that show not why one does in fact believe something but why one should believe it. Nor are rationalizations justifying reasons. They are usually reasons given after the fact that are not one's true reasons. These false reasons are given to make us look better to others or ourselves. To argue well about ethical matters, we need to examine and give reasons that support the conclusions we draw as well as we can.

**ETHICAL THEORY**

Good reasoning in ethics involves either implicit or explicit reference to an ethical theory. An ethical theory is a systematic exposition of a particular view about what is the nature and basis of good or right. The theory provides reasons or norms for judging acts to be right or wrong and attempts to give a justification for these norms. It provides ethical principles or guidelines that embody certain values. These can be used to decide in particular cases what action should be chosen and carried out. We can diagram the relationship between ethical theories and moral decision making as follows.

We can think of the diagram as a ladder. In practice, we can start at the ladder's top or bottom. At the top, at the level of theory, we can start
by clarifying for ourselves what we think are basic ethical values. We then move downward to the level of principles generated from the theory. Moving next to conclusions about moral values in general, the bottom level, we use these principles to make concrete ethical judgments. Or we can start at the bottom of the ladder, facing a particular ethical choice or dilemma. We do not know what is best or what we ought to do. We work our way up the ladder by trying to think through our own values. Would it be better to realize this or that value, and why? Ultimately and ideally, we come to a basic justification, or the elements of what would be an ethical theory. If we look at the actual practice of thinking people as they develop their ethical views over time, the movement is probably in both directions. We use concrete cases to reform our basic ethical views, and we use the basic ethical views to throw light on concrete cases.

An example of this movement in both directions would be if we started with the belief that pleasure is the ultimate value and then found that applying this value in practice would lead us to do things that are contrary to common moral sense or that are repugnant to us and others. We may then be forced to look again and possibly alter our views about the moral significance of pleasure. Or we may change our views about the rightness or wrongness of some particular act or practice on the basis of our theoretical reflections. Obviously, this sketch of moral reasoning is quite simplified. Moreover, this model of ethical reasoning has been criticized by feminists and others, partly because it shows ethics to be governed by general principles that are supposedly applicable to all ethical situations. Does this form of reasoning give due consideration to the particularities of individual, concrete cases? Can we really make a general judgment about the value of truthfulness or courage that will help us know what to do in particular cases in which these issues play a role?

**TYPES OF ETHICAL THEORY**

In this first part, we will consider four types of moral theory. These theories exemplify different approaches to doing ethics. Some differ in terms of what they say we should look at in making moral judgments about actions or practices. For example, does it matter morally that I tried to do the right thing, that I had a good motive? Surely it must make some moral difference, we think. But suppose that in acting sincerely I violate someone’s rights. Does this make the action a bad action? We would probably be inclined to say yes. Suppose, however, that in violating someone’s rights I am able to bring about a great good. Does this justify the violation of rights? Some theories judge actions in terms of their motive, some in terms of the character or nature of the act itself, and others in terms of the consequences of the actions or practices.

We often appeal to one or the other type of reason. Take a situation in which I strike a person, Jim. We can make the following judgments about this action. Note the different types of reasons given for the judgments.

That was good because you intended to do Jim good by awakening him or bad because you meant to do him harm. (Motive)

That was bad because it violated the bodily integrity of another, Jim, or good because it was an act of generosity. (Act)
That was bad because of the great suffering it caused Jim or good because it helped form a sense of community. (Consequences)

While we generally think that a person's motive is relevant to the overall moral judgment about his or her action, we tend to think that it reflects primarily on the moral evaluation of the person. We also have good reasons to think that the results of actions matter morally. Those theories that base moral judgments on consequences are called consequentialist or sometimes teleological moral theories (from the Greek root telos, meaning "goal" or "end"). We also may think that what we actually do or how we act also counts morally. Those theories that hold that actions can be right or wrong regardless of their consequences are called non-consequentialist or deontological theories (from the Greek root deon, meaning "duty"). One moral theory we will examine is utilitarianism. It provides us with an example of a consequentialist moral theory in which we judge whether an action is better than alternatives by its actual or expected results or consequences; actions are classically judged in terms of the promotion of human happiness. Kant's moral theory, which we will also examine, provides us with an example of a non-consequentialist theory according to which acts are judged right or wrong independently of their consequences; in particular, acts are judged by whether they conform to requirements of rationality and human dignity. The naturalistic ethical theories that we will examine stress human nature as the source of what is right and wrong. Some elements of these theories are deontological and some teleological. So, also, some goal-oriented or teleological theories are consequentialist in that they advise us to produce some good. But if the good is an ideal, such as self-realization, such theories differ from consequentialist theories such as utilitarianism. As anyone who has tried to put some order to the many ethical theories knows, no theory completely and easily fits one classification, even those given here. Feminist theories of care provide yet another way of determining what one ought to do. In Part Two of this text we will examine several concrete ethical issues. As we do so, we will note how these ethical theories analyze the problems from different perspectives and sometimes give different conclusions about what is morally right and wrong, better and worse.

CAN ETHICS BE TAUGHT?

It would be interesting to know just why some college and university programs require their students to take a course in ethics. Does this requirement rely on a belief that ethics or moral philosophy is designed to make people good and is capable of doing that?

On the question of whether ethics can be taught, my students have given a variety of answers. "If it can't be taught, then why are we taking this class?" one wondered. "Look at the behavior of certain corporate executives who have been found guilty of criminal conduct. They surely haven't learned proper ethical values," another responded. Still others disagreed. Although certain ideals or types of knowledge can be taught, ethical behavior cannot because it is a matter of individual choice, they said.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato thought that ethics could be taught. He wrote, "All evil is ignorance." In other words, the only reason we do what is wrong is because we do not know or believe it is wrong. If we come to believe that something is right, however, it should then follow that we will necessarily do it. Now, we are free to disagree with Plato by appealing to our own experience. If I know that I should not have that second piece of pie, does this mean that I will not eat it? Never! Plato might attempt to convince us that he is right by examining or clarifying what he means by the phrase "to know." If we were really convinced with our whole heart and mind, so to speak, that something is wrong, then we might be very likely (if not determined) not to do it. However, whether ethics courses should attempt to convince students of such things is surely debatable.

Another aspect of the problem of teaching ethics concerns the problem of motivation. If one knows something to be the right thing to do, does there still remain the question of why we should do it? One way to teach ethics to youngsters, at least, and in
the sense of motivating them, may be to show them that it is in their best interest to do the right thing. This is a matter that is discussed in the reading that follows from Plato's The Republic and can be considered further in thinking about the points raised in it.4

With regard to teaching or taking a course in ethics, most, if not all, moral philosophers think that ethics, or a course on ethics, should do several other things. It should help students understand the nature of an ethical problem and help them think critically about ethical matters by providing certain conceptual tools and skills. It should enable them to form and critically analyze ethical arguments. It is up to the individual, however, to use these skills to reason about ethical matters. A study of ethics should also lead students to respect opposing views, because it requires them to analyze carefully the arguments that support views contrary to their own. It also provides opportunities to consider the reasonableness of at least some viewpoints that they previously may not have considered.

In this opening chapter, we have questioned the value of ethics and learned something about what ethics is and how it is different from other disciplines. We have considered the relationship between ethics and religion. We have provided a description of ethical reasoning and arguments and have examined briefly the nature of ethical theories and principles and the role they play in ethical reasoning. We will examine these theories more carefully in the chapters to come, and we will see how they might help us analyze and come to conclusions about particular ethical issues.

The reading selection for this chapter is taken from the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. It is in the form of a dialogue and features Plato’s mentor, Socrates. It treats one of the problems about ethics that we have noted in this chapter. In this reading from the Euthyphro, Socrates discusses the possible connection between ethics and religion.

NOTES
3. I wish to thank one of my reviewers, J. E. Chesser, for this distinction.
4. Some issues raised in this selection can also be discussed in relation to relativism (see Chapter 2).

Reading

Euthyphro

Plato

Study Questions

Socrates and Euthyphro both have a practical interest in knowing what piety (or goodness) is—Socrates because he has been accused of impiety, and Euthyphro because he thinks he is doing the right thing in bringing a case against his father in court. His father had put a servant who killed another in chains and left him to die.

1. What does Euthyphro first propose as a definition of piety?
2. How does Socrates suggest that those who have differences settle them?
3. What about the gods—do they have differences about what is good and evil, just and unjust? Why does this pose a problem for Euthyphro’s first definition of piety (or goodness)?
4. What is it that people argue about when discussing whether the guilty, such as murderers, should be punished?
5. How does Socrates relate this to Euthyphro’s situation?
6. To respond to Socrates, Euthyphro amends his definition of piety. How?
7. Socrates then asks another question of Euthyphro. What is it?
8. How does Socrates compare the question to the matter of what is carried or led or is in a state of suffering?

9. How does this help them to agree on which comes first—being pious or being loved by the gods?

10. What does Socrates suggest is yet needed to give a definition of piety or goodness?

_Euthyphro_. Piety, . . . is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them.

_Socrates_. Very good, Euthyphro; you have now given me the sort of answer which I wanted. But whether what you say is true or not I cannot as yet tell, although I make no doubt that you will prove the truth of your words.

_Euthyphro_. Of course.

_Socrates_. Come, then, and let us examine what we are saying. That thing or person which is dear to the gods is pious, and that thing or person which is hateful to the gods is impious, these two being the extreme opposites of one another. Was not that said?

_Euthyphro_. It was.

_Socrates_. And well said?

_Euthyphro_. Yes, Socrates, I thought so; it was certainly said.

_Socrates_. And further, Euthyphro, the gods were admitted to have enmities and hatreds and differences?

_Euthyphro_. Yes, that was also said.

_Socrates_. And what sort of difference creates enmity and anger? Suppose for example that you and I, my good friend, differ about a number; do differences of this sort make us enemies and set us at variance with one another? Do we not go at once to arithmetic, and put an end to them by a sum?

_Euthyphro_. True.

_Socrates_. Or suppose that we differ about magnitudes, do we not quickly end the differences by measuring?

_Euthyphro_. Very true.

_Socrates_. And we end a controversy about heavy and light by resorting to a weighing machine?

_Euthyphro_. To be sure.

_Socrates_. But what differences are there which cannot be thus decided, and which therefore make us angry and set us at enmity with one another?

I dare say the answer does not occur to you at the moment, and therefore I will suggest that these enmities arise when the matters of difference are the just and unjust, good and evil, honourable and dishonourable. Are not these the points about which men differ, and about which when we are unable satisfactorily to decide our differences, you and I and all of us quarrel, when we do quarrel?

_Euthyphro_. Yes, Socrates, the nature of the differences about which we quarrel is such as you describe.

_Socrates_. And the quarrels of the gods, noble Euthyphro, when they occur, are of a like nature?

_Euthyphro_. Certainly they are.

_Socrates_. They have differences of opinion, as you say, about good and evil, just and unjust, honourable and dishonourable: there would have been no quarrels among them, if there had been no such differences—would there now?

_Euthyphro_. You are quite right.

_Socrates_. Does not every man love that which he deems noble and just and good, and hate the opposite of them?

_Euthyphro_. Very true.

_Socrates_. But, as you say, people regard the same things, some as just and others as unjust—about these they dispute; and so there arise wars and fightings among them.

_Euthyphro_. Very true.

_Socrates_. Then the same things are hated by the gods and loved by the gods, and are both hateful and dear to them?

_Euthyphro_. True.

_Socrates_. And upon this view the same things, Euthyphro, will be pious and also impious?

_Euthyphro_. So I should suppose.

_Socrates_. Then, my friend, I remark with surprise that you have not answered the question which I asked. For I certainly did not ask you to tell me what action is both pious and impious: but now it would seem that what is loved by the gods is also hated by them. And therefore, Euthyphro, in thus chastising your father you may very likely be doing what is agreeable to Zeus but disagreeable to Cronos or Uranus, and what is
acceptable to Hephaestus but unacceptable to Heré, and there may be other gods who have similar differences of opinion.

**Euthyphro.** But I believe, Socrates, that all the gods would be agreed as to the propriety of punishing a murderer; there would be no difference of opinion about that.

**Socrates.** Well, but speaking of men, Euthyphro, did you ever hear any one arguing that a murderer or any sort of evil-doer ought to be let off? Euthyphro. I should rather say that these are the questions which they are always arguing, especially in courts of law: they commit all sorts of crimes, and there is nothing which they will not do or say in their own defence.

**Socrates.** But do they admit their guilt, Euthyphro, and yet say that they ought not to be punished?

**Euthyphro.** No; they do not.

**Socrates.** Then there are some things which they do not venture to say and do: for they do not venture to argue that the guilty are to be unpunished, but they deny their guilt, do they not?

**Euthyphro.** Yes.

**Socrates.** Then they do not argue that the evil-doer should not be punished, but they argue about the fact of who the evil-doer is, and what he did and when?

**Euthyphro.** True.

**Socrates.** And the gods are in the same case, if as you assert they quarrel about just and unjust, and some of them say while others deny that injustice is done among them. For surely neither God nor man will ever venture to say that the doer of injustice is not to be punished?

**Euthyphro.** That is true, Socrates, in the main.

**Socrates.** But they join issue about the particulars—gods and men alike; and, if they dispute at all, they dispute about some act which is called in question, and which by some is affirmed to be just, by others to be unjust. Is not that true?

**Euthyphro.** Quite true.

**Socrates.** Well then, my dear friend Euthyphro, do tell me, for my better instruction and information, what proof have you that in the opinion of all the gods a servant who is guilty of murder, and is put in chains by the master of the dead man, and dies because he is put in chains before he who bound him can learn from the interpreters of the gods what he ought to do with him, dies unjustly; and that on behalf of such a one a son ought to proceed against his father and accuse him of murder. How would you show that all the gods absolutely agree in approving of his act? Prove to me that they do, and I will applaud your wisdom as long as I live.

**Euthyphro.** It will be a difficult task; but I could make the matter very clear indeed to you.

**Socrates.** I understand; you mean to say that I am not so quick of apprehension as the judges: for to them you will be sure to prove that the act is unjust, and hateful to the gods.

**Euthyphro.** Yes indeed, Socrates; at least if they will listen to me.

**Socrates.** But they will be sure to listen if they find that you are a good speaker. There was a notion that came into my mind while you were speaking. I said to myself: 'Well, and what if Euthyphro does prove to me that all the gods regarded the death of the serf as unjust, how do I know anything more of the nature of piety and impiety? For granting that this action may be hateful to the gods, still piety and impiety are not adequately defined by these distinctions, for that which is hateful to the gods has been shown to be also pleasing and dear to them.' And therefore, Euthyphro, I do not ask you to prove this; I will suppose, if you like, that all the gods condemn and abominate such an action. But I will amend the definition so far as to say that what all the gods hate is impious, and what they love pious or holy, and what some of them love and others hate is both or neither. Shall this be our definition of piety and impiety?

**Euthyphro.** Why not, Socrates?

**Socrates.** Why not! Certainly, as far as I am concerned, Euthyphro, there is no reason why not. But whether this admission will greatly assist you in the task of instructing me as you promised, is a matter for you to consider.

**Euthyphro.** Yes, I should say that what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious.

**Socrates.** Ought we to enquire into the truth of this, Euthyphro, or simply to accept the mere
statement on our own authority and that of others? What do you say?

Euthyphro. We should enquire; and I believe that the statement will stand the test of enquiry.

Socrates. We shall know better, my good friend, in a little while. The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.

Euthyphro. I do not understand your meaning, Socrates.

Socrates. I will endeavour to explain: we speak of carrying and we speak of being carried, of leading and being led, seeing and being seen. You know that in all such cases there is a difference, and you know also in what the difference lies?

Euthyphro. I think that I understand.

Socrates. And is not that which is beloved distinct from that which loves?

Euthyphro. Certainly.

Socrates. Well; and now tell me, is that which is carried in this state of carrying because it is carried, or for some other reason?

Euthyphro. No; that is the reason.

Socrates. And the same is true of what is led and of what is seen?

Euthyphro. True.

Socrates. And a thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely, visible because it is seen; nor is a thing led because it is in the state of being led, or carried because it is in the state of being carried, but the converse of this. And now I think, Euthyphro, that my meaning will be intelligible; and my meaning is, that any state of action or passion implies previous action or passion. It does not become because it is becoming, but it is in a state of becoming because it becomes; neither does it suffer because it is in a state of suffering, but it is in a state of suffering because it suffers. Do you not agree?

Euthyphro. Yes.

Socrates. Is not that which is loved in some state either of becoming or suffering?

Euthyphro. Yes.

Socrates. And the same holds as in the previous instances; the state of being loved follows the act of being loved, and not the act the state.
once more what holiness or piety really is, whether dear to the gods or not (for that is a matter about which we will not quarrel); and what is impiety?

Euthyphro. I really do not know, Socrates, how to express what I mean. For somehow or other our arguments, on whatever ground we rest them, seem to turn round and walk away from us.

REVIEW EXERCISES

1. Determine whether the following statements about the nature of ethics are true or false. Explain your answers.
   a. Ethics is the study of why people act in certain ways.
   b. To say that moral philosophy is foundational means that it asks questions about such things as the meaning of right and wrong and how we know what is good and bad.
   c. The statement “Most people believe that cheating is wrong” is an ethical evaluation of cheating.

2. What is meant by the “divine command theory”? How does Plato’s Euthyphro treat this problem?

3. Label the following statements as either normative (N) or descriptive (D). If normative, label each as ethics (E), aesthetics (A), law (L), religion (R), or custom (C).
   a. One ought to respect one’s elders because it is one of God’s commandments.
   b. Twice as many people today, as compared to ten years ago, believe that the death penalty is morally justified in some cases.

   c. It would be wrong to put an antique chair in a modern room.
   d. People do not always do what they believe to be right.
   e. I ought not to turn left here because the sign says “No Left Turn.”
   f. We ought to adopt a universal health insurance policy because everyone has a right to health care.

4. Discuss the relation between ethical theory and ethical reasons; between ethical theory and ethical reasoning.

5. As they occur in the following statements, label the reasons for the conclusion as appeals to motive (M), the act (A), or the consequences (C).
   a. Although you intended well, what you did was bad because it caused more harm than good.
   b. We ought always to tell the truth to others because they have a right to know the truth.
   c. Although it did turn out badly, you did not want that, and thus you should not be judged harshly for what you caused.

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Selected Bibliography


