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WHY STUDY ETHICS?

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 thirteenth century when Genghis Khan and his successors swept across Asia, Europe, and northern Africa and threatened to destroy all of Islamic civilization. We can also think of the bubonic plague in the mid-fourteenth century, which wiped out one-fourth of Western Europe’s population and still reappeared in the following three centuries. On the other hand, today’s threats may be even more powerful and have the capacity to affect many 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 promoting a cause, acting out of revenge or in frustration, or for no clear reason at all, can randomly kill people who are 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 so seems to involve threats to other important values we hold—for example, rights to privacy and our basic civil liberties.

These are matters not only of practical and political bearing but also of moral rights and wrongs. They are also matters which are 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, on October 24, 2001, six weeks after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the U.S. Congress passed the Patriot Act. Among its provisions are “enhanced surveillance procedures.” One of these is the “authority to intercept wire, oral, and electronic communications relating to terrorism.” This act amended the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) to include terrorism. Warrants to surveil were still required but could be delayed for a few days. Since that time, questions have been raised about whether such warrants are required. This is both a legal and an ethical matter. Whatever the legal conclusions, we can still ask whether the dangers are such that personal and private communications should be open to certain investigations without notification. How does one balance the supposed value of protection with the value of privacy? In February 2010, Congress voted to extend the act for one year as it was set to expire at the end of the month. However, they did so without adding any new privacy protections. Another example of a conflict between safety and privacy is exemplified by whole-body scanners at airport security.

Or consider academic cheating, such as buying and selling 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, yet one might argue that if professors make it easy to do so by the assignments they give or by 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 make will be more well-informed and, in fact, better decisions than without that focus. At least that is the aim of this study of ethics.

METAETHICS
Questions about the nature of ethics are actually matters of metaethics. Metaethics seeks to understand the meaning of ethical terms and judgments. Thus this chapter as well as the following chapter on ethical relativism belong more properly to metaethics. The other chapters in Part One are more properly designated as ethical theory.

WHAT IS ETHICS?
I have asked students on the first day of an ethics class to write one-paragraph answers to the question, “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 convictions. Other students 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. We would compare and evaluate the sets of values and beliefs, giving reasons for our evaluations. “Are there good reasons for preferring one set of ethics over another?” As we will pursue it in this text, ethics 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.” 1 Other people 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
Ethics, or moral philosophy, asks basic questions about the subject matter. This is also true of moral philosophy. Philosophers ask basic questions about the particular something rather than just to believe it. In each area, 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 to 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 with regard to particular ethical issues. This is generally called normative ethics, to distinguish it from metaethics. Ethics, however, can be understood in another way. From the mid-1930s until recently, metaethics predominated in English-speaking universities. Again, 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 examine 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 people 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 and given that the problems of contemporary times are different from those of the past.

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, 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 conception 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. In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, ancient Greek philosopher Plato critically examines this view. Plato’s Socrates 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 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.

Religion, however, may still provide a motivation or inspiration to be moral for some people. They believe that if life has some eternal significance in relation to a supreme and most perfect being, then we ought to take life and morality extremely seriously. 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 what lies ahead in another world. 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 or just and unjust, including religious views. 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 to practice no 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 that 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.** We speak of 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 for 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 right, 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. In fact, moral reasons often form the basis for certain laws. For example, consider copyright laws and the practice of downloading free 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. Whether the artistic worth of an art object ought to be in any way judged by its moral value or influence poses another interesting question that may arise here.

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 the difference is between calling something "right" and calling it "good." Consider the ethical meaning for these terms. **Right** and **wrong** usually apply to actions, 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 is 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, we may talk of these things 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 “praiseworthy” to do so in some cases. Ethical terms that are somewhat more specific 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 whether 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 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. Biases 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.

Alternate Theories: Intuitionism and Emotivism
Philosophers differ on how we know what is good. In one view, to say that something is good is very different from saying that something is yellow or heavy. The latter two qualities are empirical, known by our senses. However, “good” or “goodness” are held to be non-empirical properties, said by some to be knowable through intuition. One of the main proponents of this view is G. E. Moore. According to Moore, “goodness” is a specific quality that attaches to people or acts. Although we cannot observe it (we cannot hear, touch, taste, or see it), we intuit its presence. In another view, when we say something is good, we are showing our approval of it and recommending it to others rather than describing it. A main proponent of this view is Charles Stevenson, in his work “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms.”

Both of these views differ from the more rationalistic view so far described in this chapter.

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 for making a good case for something you believe is right as well as in critically evaluating positions held by other people.

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, however, there is no time for reasoning, as you would have to act promptly. On the other hand, if this were an imaginary case, you would have time 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 (although, 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, although 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: 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 done well or done poorly. Ethical arguments can be constructed well or constructed 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 constructed when it is fallacious or when the reasons on which it is based are not true or are 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 8 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 that relate 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 such punishment 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 in Part 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 kinds of things one must consider 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 both about 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 are always matters of opinion and factual matters are 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 fallacy 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
right or wrong. You can find out more about these and other fallacies from almost any textbook in logic or critical thinking.

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. In 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 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 instead to give reasons that show not why one does, in fact, believe something, but why one should believe it. Nor do rationalizations justify reasons. Rationalizations 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 to ourselves. To argue well about ethical matters, we need to examine and give reasons that support the conclusions we draw.

**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 Part One of this text, we will consider the following types of moral theory: utilitarianism, Kant's moral theory, contractarianism, natural law, virtue ethics, and feminist ethics. These theories exemplify different approaches to doing ethics. Some of these theories 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 or 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 of these types of reason. Take a situation in which I strike a person, Jim. We can make the following judgments about this action.

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<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
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That was good because you intended to do Jim good by awakening him—or it was bad because you meant to do him harm. (Motive)

That was good because it was an act of generosity—or it was bad because it violated the bodily integrity of another, Jim. (Act)

That was good because it helped form a sense of community—or it was bad because of the great suffering it caused Jim. (Consequences)

Although 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 our 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 nonconsequentialist 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 nonconsequentialist 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, then such theories differ from
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Ethics and Ethical Reasoning

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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.

With regard to teaching or taking a course in eth-
cis, 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 concep-
tual 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 rea-
on 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 pro-
vides opportunities to consider the reasonableness
of at least some viewpoints that they 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 eth-
cis 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 chap-
ters to come, and we will see how they might help
us analyze and come to conclusions about particular
ethical issues.

NOTES

1. Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality (New
4. C. L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical
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 and between ethical theory and ethical reasoning.

5. As they occur in the following statements, label the reasons for the conclusion as it appeals to the motive (M), the act (A), or the consequences (C).
   a. Although you intended well, you did badly 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.