



Ethics and Morality

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter we will address the following questions:

- ◆ Are There Levels of Moral Development?
- ◆ What Is Involved in Moral Situations and Assessments?
- ◆ What Are Some Representative Ethical Norms?
- ◆ How May Ethical Standards Be Approached?
- ◆ Are There Useful Ethical Principles?
- ◆ Are There Differences Among Moral Certainties, Moral Relativism, and Moral Pluralism?

“Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the most important course in the college curriculum was moral philosophy, taught usually by the college president and required of all senior students. The moral philosophy course was regarded as the capstone of the curriculum. It aimed to pull together, to integrate, and to give meaning and purpose to the student’s entire college experience and course of study. In so doing it even more importantly sought to equip the graduating seniors with the ethical sensitivity and insight needed in order to put their newly acquired knowledge to use in ways that would benefit not only themselves and their own personal achievement, but the larger society as well.”¹

ents have a moral *duty* to aid their parents. Rights and duties are reciprocal: I have a right to my life and therefore have a duty *not* to take away your life. The same holds for my property. As regards *legal* rights, under the U.S. Constitution I have the right to free speech. I also have the duty to exercise that right such that other citizens may also exercise free speech, even when their expressions oppose my most cherished convictions. Rights and duties go hand in hand and are frequently the subject of debate in moral situations.

VIRTUES AND VICES

In society, certain approved traits, such as unselfishness, honesty, courage, and self-control, are almost universally encouraged; these qualities are called virtues. Other characteristics, such as treachery, murder, theft, and cheating are regarded as undesirable; these failings are called vices. The virtues and vices of one's own society is another fact of life at a particular time in history.

AGREEMENTS AND LAWS

One way for a group of people to protect their rights and lead an orderly social life is through agreements, including understandings, principles, and laws. All human societies have well-established rules of procedure. Some agreements are embedded in the customs of the group and are taken for granted; others are formally recognized, such as codes of law; still others may be subjects for discussion (e.g., whether to take one's pet on a family trip).

CHANGES IN MORALS

Morals evolve, as do social life and institutions. Moral standards may be the customs of primitive humans or the carefully reasoned theories of modern life. A society's moral practices and standards are influenced by its stage of social development, its general level of intelligence, and the knowledge (including new information from the

social and biological sciences) available to its citizens. That moral insights and codes change, however slowly, is another ingredient in the moral situation.

ASSESSING MORALITY

Finding the right course of action, choosing the right alternative, is not always simple. When conflicts of interest arise, the solution may require the greatest intelligence and goodwill, and even then we may doubt whether we have acted rightly. In judging conduct we have to consider **motives, means, and consequences.**

Motives. Motives, as Jesus, Kant, and others have pointed out, are basic for a determination of morality. A good motive is a prerequisite to conduct that we approve without qualification. If a good motive is present when an act, through some unforeseen factor, leads to harmful effects, we tend to disapprove less severely and to say, "Anyway, he meant well."

Kant, for example, defined the good as the "good will." "Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will."⁵ For Kant, a rational being strives to do what he or she *ought* to do and this is to be distinguished from an act that a person does from either inclination or self-interest. In other words, a person must act out of **duty** to the moral law—that is, do what one ought to do. The truly moral act, for Kant, not only agrees with the moral law, but is done for the sake of the moral law—not only *as* duty requires but *because* duty requires. In Kantian thinking the seat of moral worth is the individual's will, and the good will acts out of a sense of duty.

Means. Just as there may be many motives for desiring something, there may be many means for achieving it. The term *means* can be defined as an agency, instrument, or method used to attain an end. Though we expect people to use the best available means to carry out their purposes, we condemn them if their choice of means

impresses us as unjust, cruel, or immoral. On rare occasions we may approve of an act when means are used that under other conditions would be condemned. However, there is a danger in proposing that any means may be used, provided the end is good, or that “the end justifies the means.” Once chosen, the means become part of the general effect of an act.

Consequences. Consequences are the effects or results of a moral decision based on a value. We expect the consequences of an act that we call “right” to be good. Ordinarily, when people ask, “What is right?” they are thinking about the consequences of the action. This depends on what ethical principle is in operation. Kant agrees to the good motive, utilitarians to the result. In general, society judges conduct “right” if it proceeds from a good motive, through the use of the best available means, to consequences that are good. If these conditions are not fulfilled, we condemn the action or approve it with reservations. We rarely approve an action when the results are evil or wrong.

Ethics: The Study of Morality

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS AND CATEGORIES



The terms *morals* and *ethics* are closely related in their original meanings. The former comes from the Latin *moralis*, and the latter from the Greek *ethos*. Both mean “the custom or way of life.” Modern usage of *morality* refers to conduct itself and *ethics* (or moral philosophy) to the study of moral conduct. We speak of “a moral act” and “an ethical code.”

The word *right* comes from the Latin *rectus*, meaning “straight” or “in line.” It implies conformity to some standard. The term *good* applies to that which has desirable qualities, satisfies some need, or has value for human beings.

In **descriptive ethics**, we consider the actual conduct of individuals—or personal morality—and of groups—or social morality. This purely descriptive examination is distinguished from

normative ethics, which is concerned with the principles by which we *ought* to live. From the time of the early Greeks, principles of explanation have been formulated and ethical theories have been set forth. Plato expressed the importance of these principles more than two thousand years ago: “For you do see, Callicles, that our conversation is on the subject which should engage the most serious attention of anyone who has a particle of intelligence: in what way should one live one’s life.”⁶ The highest values by which moral judgments are made are often referred to as *norms*, *principles*, *ideals*, or *standards*. For example, happiness is chosen by some philosophers as the highest value by which we should judge morality; happiness may also be regarded as a norm, a principle, an ideal, or a standard. As one considers this norm, one might develop additional principles consistent with happiness, such as pleasure.

Norms regarded as absolute are unchanging moral certainties; in this view there are absolute moral truths to which we must adhere in all situations.

There is also the area of critical ethics, or **metaethics**. Here interest is centered on the analysis and meaning of the terms and language used in ethical discourse and the kind of reasoning used to justify ethical statements. This area has received considerable emphasis in recent years, and involves highly technical issues. We shall be more concerned with normative ethics, as we seek to establish criteria by which individuals can judge whether an action should be regarded as right or wrong.

A Variety of Ethical Standards—Normative Ethics



Awareness of the moral situation leads us to the issue of ethical standards. Ethical standards are principles by which we judge whether a moral action

is right or wrong; examples are statute law, religious authority, public opinion, or conscience. These standards often conflict; we need to have

a hierarchy of values to help us make satisfactory moral decisions.

Since the time of the early Greeks and Hebrews, humanity has been reflecting on the principles and problems of right and wrong. Ethical thought has been expressed in many forms. Some that have been influential and that have persisted include the writings about pleasure such as those of Epicurus; the philosophy of Kant, the ablest representative of principles of duty and obligation; John Stuart Mill, the outstanding proponent of utilitarianism; and Plato, the supreme humanist. Other standards have stressed civil law, self-realization, or religious ideals.

PLEASURE OR HAPPINESS AS THE ETHICAL STANDARD

Teleological ethical theories are those that judge conduct as right or wrong in relationship to some end or goal considered good. The doctrine that pleasure or happiness is the greatest good in life has been known by three labels: **hedonism**, *Epicureanism*, and *utilitarianism*. The first of these is derived from the Greek word for “pleasure”; **Epicureanism** is named for Epicurus (see biography and excerpt, pp. 122–123) an early Greek exponent of the pleasure theory; since the time of Jeremy Bentham (see biography and excerpt, pp. 124–125) and John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century, the term **utilitarianism** has been used.

According to John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), utilitarianism “accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, which holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”⁷ Mill’s brief but brilliant treatise *Utilitarianism* should be read by all students of moral philosophy. Mill accepted the general position of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), who used the phrase “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” Bentham asserted that nature has placed humans under the guidance of two masters, pleasure and pain. Humans are

“pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding” creatures. Bentham stated his theory in quantitative terms and hoped to establish utilitarian ethics on a strictly scientific basis. In answering the criticisms directed against Bentham’s position, Mill modified the position and added some new elements.

The most important change that Mill made in utilitarianism was to add a qualitative standard. Human beings with refined faculties are not satisfied with the pleasures of the body; they seek the higher pleasures of the mind. The pleasure of the intellect, of feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments have a higher value than the pleasures of sensation. Although Mill had referred to these higher pleasures originally to answer the critics of utilitarianism, his concern over higher pleasures led him to criticize the very foundation of Bentham’s doctrine of utility: he said that “it would be absurd that . . . the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.” Once an individual has lived on a higher level, he or she can never wish to sink into a lower level of existence. This is because of the human sense of dignity. “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

Mill vigorously defended utilitarianism against the charge that it encourages selfishness. He maintained that the good of all, or the greatest happiness of the greatest number, must be the standard of what is right in conduct. Because we live in an unjust society, some have to sacrifice themselves for the happiness of others. Such sacrifice is not an end in itself; it is a means to the greater happiness of a larger number of people. Although all people may not actually seek happiness, they ought to do so. To promote not individual pleasure but the greatest total happiness is the essence of Mill’s position.

THE MORAL LAW AS THE ABSOLUTE

One of the great systems of ethics was formulated by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) (see biography and excerpt, pp. 126–127). To

Excerpt from Epicurus:

Principal Doctrines (c. 310 B.C.E.)

I. The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour. For all such things exist only in the weak.

II. Death is nothing to us: for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.

III. The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body nor of mind, nor of both at once.

IV. Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh.

V. It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honourably and justly, not again to live a life of prudence, honour, and justice without living pleasantly. And the man who does not possess the pleasant life, is not living prudently and honourably and justly, and the man who does not possess the virtuous life, cannot possibly live pleasantly.

VI. To secure protection from men anything is a natural good, by which you may be able to attain this end.

VII. Some men wish to become famous and conspicuous, thinking that they would thus win for themselves safety from other men. Wherefore if the life of such men is safe, they have obtained the good which nature craves; but if it is not safe, they do not possess that for which they strove at first by instinct of nature.

VIII. No pleasure is a bad thing in itself: but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures.

IX. If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another.

W. Oates, ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers* (New York: Random House, 1940).

Jeremy Bentham



Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was born in London, studied at Oxford University, then entered Lincoln’s Inn to study law. Although law was his major concern throughout his life, he never practiced law, but set himself the task of reforming both civil and criminal law, which he considered harsh, antiquated, obscure, and expensive. Bentham wrote many thousands of pages, including pamphlets on a variety of subjects. The major work published during his lifetime was *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). Bentham is a widely recognized leader of the English Utilitarians and a proponent of the view that we should judge ideas, actions, and institutions on the basis of their utility or usefulness, or their ability to produce happiness. Other writings include *Manual of Political Economy* (1793) and *Panopticon* (1791).

appreciate Kant fully, we need to read his ethical writings, especially *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant’s moral philosophy is sometimes called **formalism**, because he was looking for moral principles that are inherently right or wrong apart from any particular circumstances. These moral principles, or laws, according to Kant, are recognized immediately or directly as true and binding. This approach, in contrast with the **teleological** theories (sometimes referred to as “consequentialist” because of their emphasis on ends or results), is one representative of normative ethical theories called **deontological**. *Deon* is the Greek word for “duty.” Both the Judeo-Christian ethic and that of Kant primarily emphasize duty and obligation.

Kant inherited the Christian reverence for

divine law and the worth of the individual self. He also was profoundly influenced by the Greek and the eighteenth-century respect for reason. According to Kant, moral philosophy is properly concerned not with what is, but with what ought to be. Each of us possesses a sense of duty, the “I ought,” or the moral law, which is logically prior to experience and which springs from our innermost nature. The moral law brings us into contact with the order of the universe itself, because the laws of nature and the laws of reason are essentially one.

Next to the moral law, or the sense of duty, Kant emphasized the good motive, or the good will, as central. “Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will.” Intelligence and courage are usually

Excerpt from Bentham:

The Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789)

The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever; according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness . . . or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

J. Bentham, *On Government and an Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. W. Harrison (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948).

good, but they may be used to promote evil. Happiness may be gained in ignoble ways: we may contribute to charity because we want publicity or lack the courage to refuse requests. The good will is the dutiful will, which acts solely out of respect for the principle of duty. If an individual acts from a good motive, the act is good regardless of the consequences. Kant did not say that consequences are not to be considered or that they are unimportant; he did say that the moral quality of the act is not determined by the consequences.

If the will or the motive is governed by reason and not by mere desire, it is absolute and unconditional—that is, obeying it is one’s duty, admitting of no exceptions. This call to duty that comes from within is the moral law, or, to use Kant’s phrase, “the categorical imperative.”

He gives us three criteria, or formulations, of the moral law.

The Principle of Universality. “Act in conformity with that maxim, and that maxim only, which you can at the same time will to be a universal law.” Actions should spring not from desires or inclinations but only from principles that can be universalized. Kant uses the example of the man who, after a series of misfortunes, contemplates suicide. When he attempts to universalize such behavior, he realizes at once that it cannot be approved. If everyone were to commit suicide, it would lead to the elimination of humanity. Kant universalized the general type of conduct and not the particular act under particular circumstances. The latter interpretation might lead to extreme laxness; the former leads

Immanuel Kant



Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a little man, physically frail, whose life was an undeviating routine of meals, daily walks, lectures, hours of reflection, and writing. He seldom ventured beyond the city of his birth, Königsberg, and never went outside the province, East Prussia, Germany. Yet in his thinking, he was a giant. His thoughts and writings brought a far-reaching revolution in modern philosophy. He was influenced by the pietism of his mother, but he lived in an age of skepticism and read the works of skeptics like Voltaire and Hume; consequently his problem became: What can we know? What is the nature and what are the limits of human knowledge? Kant spent most of his life investigating the knowing process and studying the relation among the logical processes of thought, the external world, and the reality of things. Since his time, philosophers have had to consider and reckon with his arguments.

Although Kant's minor writings are many and encompass a variety of topics, his major works are his three critiques: *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which discusses reason and the knowing process, on which he worked for fifteen years and which startled the philosophic world; *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), which sets forth his moral philosophy; and *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which supplements the earlier critiques and depicts nature as purposive in its laws.

to a rigorism that admits few if any exceptions to moral principles.

The Principle of Humanity as an End, Never as Merely a Means. “Act so as to use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always as an end, never as merely a means.” This principle has received more widespread approval than any other part of Kant's moral philosophy. People, as rational beings, are ends in themselves and should never be used merely as means to other ends. We may use physical things as means, but when we use people simply as means, as in slavery, prostitution, or commercial exploitation, we degrade them and violate their innermost beings as people.

The Principle of Autonomy. The moral laws that we obey are not imposed on us from the outside. They are the laws that we impose on ourselves. The sense of duty and the reason that we obey come from within; they are expressions of our higher selves.

SELF-REALIZATION AS THE IDEAL

The theory of self-realization considers as right that which tends to promote the development of all the normal capacities of humans as thinking, feeling, and acting individuals. Many able philosophers in both ancient and modern times have subscribed to this theory. It has frequently been referred to as *humanism* and has two es-

Excerpt from Kant:

Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)

Since my purpose here is directed to moral philosophy, I narrow the proposed question to this: Is it not of the utmost necessity to construct a pure moral philosophy which is completely freed from everything which may be only empirical and thus belong to anthropology? That there must be such a philosophy is self-evident from the common idea of duty and moral laws. Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally, i.e., as a ground of obligation, must imply absolutely necessity; he must admit that the command, “Thou shalt not lie,” does not apply to men only, as if other rational beings had no need to observe it. The same is true for all other moral laws properly so called. He must concede that the ground of obligation here must be sought in the nature of man or in the circumstances in which he is placed, but sought a priori solely in the concepts of pure reason, and that every other precept which rests on principles of mere experience, even a precept which is in certain respects universal, so far as it leans in the least on empirical grounds, may be called a practical rule but never a moral law.

I. Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. T. Abbott (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949).

sential characteristics. First, it does justice to the entire nature of humanity. Enjoyment of pleasure, on which the hedonists build their theories is only one part of our nature. A sense of justice is equally our concern. Second, the ethics of humanism finds its center in humanity and does not reduce people to a fragment of some larger whole—whether nature, society, or God.

Platonic Humanism. In his great work, *The Republic*, and in other writings, Plato says that there are three active principles within humans. There is, first, the rational part; this is the mind, or intellect, the proper function of which is to rule other parts of the soul. Reason alone comprehends the true nature of things. There is, sec-

ond, the “spirited” part; this includes the emotions and is the seat of the heroic virtues. There are, third, the appetites, or the desiring part. There is no order within the human soul except as the appetites and emotions are controlled by reason. Each part or function has its proper place and role in life, and when the three parts operate in harmony, each carrying out its own function, there is order and peace.

Aristotle and Self-Realization. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, wrote the first systematic treatise on ethics. Reason, well-being, and moderation are central concepts. Just as the excellence of the sculptor lies in the skill with which she or he applies his art, so the excellence

of humans lies in the fulfillment of their function as human beings. The function peculiar to humans is their life of reason. They should live a life that fully actualizes their rational capacities, and by principles that best express what it means to be a human being.

According to Aristotle, human action should aim at its proper end. Everywhere people aim at pleasure, wealth, and glory. But none of these ends, although they have value, can occupy the place of the chief good for which we should aim. To be an ultimate end, an act must be self-sufficient and final—"that which is always desirable itself and never for the sake of something else"—and it must be attainable. Aristotle seemed certain that all people would agree that happiness is the only end that meets all the requirements for the ultimate end of action. Indeed, we choose pleasure, wealth, and glory only because we think that "through their instrumentality we shall be happy." Happiness, it turns out, is another name for the good for human beings; like the good, happiness is the fulfillment of our distinctive function as human beings—our self-realization. The highest good is *eudaimonia*, or well-being. The good life avoids the extremes of both excessive repression and excessive indulgence. The good life involves the harmonious development of the normal functions of the organism. The theory of self-realization has emphasized the development of all the functions of the person as the greatest good. Nothing short of the harmonious development of all sides of human nature can be accepted as a satisfactory standard.

Classical Moral Philosophy. Plato and Aristotle's use of reason to discover moral truths is representative of *classical moral philosophy*. Ethical absolutes, like the certainties of their notions of geometry, may be determined rationally; after self-evident moral norms are established by means of disciplined reflection, other moral principles can be deduced logically. (John Locke, a seventeenth-century philosopher, argued that all rational persons would agree on those self-evident moral absolutes.)

NATURAL LAW ETHICS

The medieval period (thirteenth century C.E.) revived interest in Aristotle by showing the compatibility of Aristotelian thought with Christian dogma. At the center of medieval ethics was the concept of natural law. This ethic stemmed from Aristotle's view of nature as *teleological*—as having a purpose and end. According to these thinkers, there is an inherent tendency in the nature of man expressed in moral conscience and informed reason; by conforming to this nature, man fulfills the commands of God as revealed in the Scriptures. *Natural law is the divine law as discovered by reason*; the teachings of the Church and the Bible, therefore, are a standard of ethical judgment. Today, belief in natural law ethics is the basis for the Roman Catholic Church's position on abortion and birth control as well as homosexuality.

RELIGIOUS ETHICAL IDEALS: JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN NORMATIVE VIEWS

There are two broad types of religious ethics, and these two approaches are found in Judaism, Christianity, and other religions. The first view is that ethical duties neither have nor need a justification or reason beyond the fact that they are God's will. This keeps ethics strictly theological and requires that it be expressed in theological concepts. The more conservative form of this approach is a biblical literalism in which religion is viewed as a final body of truth that has been completely revealed. All we need to do is to discover this truth through reading the sacred writings, and obey its laws. God does not require certain things because they are right; they are right because God requires them. The task of ethics is to ascertain what God expects us to do.

According to the second type of religious ethics, we are inspired by our view of humanity and of God and our love of God to discover the good and to live so as to achieve it. Loyalty to Christ or to God means leading the best possible life in the situation in which we find ourselves. The religious or ethical spirit is best expressed as

a supreme concern for people. We discover through experience and growing knowledge the tasks that we need to do; then we view these tasks as part of our duty to God. Religion is thus a strong motivating force, emphasizing both purity of motive and the continuous quest for a more abundant life for all.

Judaism. The ethical ideals of Judaism are based on the Hebrew Bible (Law, Prophets, and Writings) and the belief in **ethical monotheism**, or the doctrine of the “One only and Holy God” who has disclosed his righteous will for all to follow. Religion and morality are bound together; Judaism is a way of life that has to do with the individual, the home and family, and the welfare of the group as a whole. To do God’s will, one must “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” Truth, justice, faithfulness, and loving kindness are stressed. Depending on the branch of Judaism, the emphasis varies from strict obedience to the revealed Law among the more orthodox to an emphasis on the changing experiences and needs of people as they seek fulfillment in today’s world.

Christianity. Christian ethics regards ethics and religion as inseparable. To live the good life is to obey God. Central to all Christian ethics have been the teachings of Jesus as found in the New Testament. Jesus swept aside many old requirements that did not appear to have a vital relation to persons or to human need and welfare. Jesus brought together certain central convictions of morality and religion in a simple and direct fashion and exemplified them in his own life. Inheriting a rich legacy of morality from Judaism, he gave it a different emphasis. He took the rather exclusive nationalistic morality of his day and made it into a universal morality that embraced all humankind.

Central to the ethical teachings of Jesus is his emphasis on the value of the self, or person. Individuals are treated as ends in themselves. Humans, who are seen in relation to God, are of greater value than anything else. When asked a question regarding the observance of the Sab-

bath, the most sacred of institutions at that time, Jesus replied, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Only people are ends in themselves; all other things are means.

For Jesus morality was inner and positive, a matter of the “heart” or a disposition of the feeling and will. Goodness resided not simply in obedience to The Law, but in one’s heart. Love was the supreme virtue. When asked about the great commandments, Jesus said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.” Love of God and love of other humans is required. Each of us is under an obligation to promote the interests of the other people with whom we come in contact. Mutual love, unselfishness, humility, equal regard, and generosity of spirit received a new emphasis in human relations. As a general rule, Christian ethics has included belief in God’s grace (gift) as necessary for human beings to behave morally; people are unable by their unassisted efforts to be good.

Throughout history, some Christians have thought that Christian ethics is a repository of absolute truth revealed by God. For an increasingly large number of Christians, however, the Christian life is a loving concern for the welfare of persons under the inspiration of devotion to the ideals of Jesus. We are thus encouraged to discover the tasks that need to be done and then to view these tasks as part of our duty to God and to our fellows.

Approaches to Ethical Standards



There are three quite different approaches to the problems of morality. The first, called ab-

solutism, is to hold to some belief or line of conduct and to appeal to some absolute authority for its support. The second is to claim that morality is entirely relative and that there are no fixed moral standards; the ethical relativists

regard morality as a matter of personal or group opinion, preference, or custom. The third approach is situation ethics: a norm is applied to situations, each somewhat unique and perhaps calling for varying applications of the norm; the situational approach is often confused with relativism, which acknowledges no norm.

AUTHORITY

Reliance on authority has been widespread in human history. The authoritarian was almost entirely in control in the past, and even today most people behave as though right conduct means conduct in obedience to some established authority. For some people, it is a matter of habit and inertia; they are glad to let others do the thinking or deciding for them, because they do not want to assume the responsibility. Others want the assurance of certainty that comes when they invest some established authority with final wisdom and infallibility.

Many authorities have been chosen. They include custom and tradition, moral codes, creedal statements, churches and other institutions, sacred literature or some portion of it, natural law, commands of the state or of “divinely ordained” rulers, statute law, or the word of some individual.

Much of our knowledge is gained through the testimony of others, or from authority, and authority that is open to free and honest examination is a legitimate source of knowledge under certain circumstances. Authority accepted without regard for the extent to which it harmonizes with one’s experience and reason, however, is a dangerous thing and is regarded by some philosophers as fallacious. Today, we live under rapidly changing conditions, and we face problems about which the ancient authorities were silent. They did not tell us whether it is right to prosecute homosexuality as criminal behavior, to impeach a president of the United States, to grant amnesty to those who refuse to fight in what they regard as an unjust war, or to withhold life-support from a severely impaired infant. Authoritarian ethics are likely to delay progress in a

changing society. They also are likely to be destructive of a sound moral perspective; acts are condemned because they violate the code rather than because they are injurious to human welfare. Whatever tends to discredit the authority tends to discredit all its pronouncements, leaving no system at all.

Many people in our society accept custom or public opinion as the basis of right and wrong. Although many customs are beneficial insofar as they represent a sort of collective wisdom, custom may not be a good gauge of morality. To accept custom and tradition as the standard is to submerge the individual’s morality to that of society. In the past, progress has come mainly through some individual’s challenging the customary actions of the group.

Divine law in one of its forms is not as certain a standard as it may appear to be at first. Even if we decide that it is right to do the “will of God,” there is no set of rules that can be identified as “God’s will.” The codes and commands attributed to God are diverse, and they have changed with the development of society. Many modern religious leaders say that God inspires us to discover the good and to live in pursuit of it. They do not think of religious ethics as an authoritarian and fixed system.

The role of authority has been weakening in modern society, partly because of the influences of the Renaissance, the Reformation, modern science, the democratic spirit (which stresses the worth of people and their right to think and judge for themselves), historical studies, and rapid changes in our life and work.

RELATIVISM

The position that rejects ethical absolutism and the appeal to any external authority is **ethical relativism**—the view that there are no fixed moral values. Some people, having rejected the older authorities, have discovered no new ones that they believe have any objective validity. Many people also have been influenced by the findings of anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists concerning the great diversity of

moral practices and codes found among the cultures of the world.⁸ Human views of what is right and wrong vary over time and from place to place. Morals, ethical relativists assert, come from the *mores*, the folkways that have grown up and are considered the right ways.

The ethical relativists claim that there are no standards accepted by all people everywhere and that custom can make anything appear right. They do not merely say that what some people *think* is right in one place or at one time is *thought* to be wrong by some other people in another time or at another place; they claim that what *is* right at one time or place *is* wrong at another time or place (or even at the same time and place, if judgments differ) because there are no objective or universal standards.

Subjectivism. Ethical relativism holds that all ethical norms and pronouncements originate in the human intellect or emotions and are therefore subjective. There is nothing about moral standards that is objective or independent of human experiences; there are no moral absolutes. Moral principles are not divinely revealed, built into nature, or rationally self-evident. Value statements, including moral values and their diverse elaborations, express only sentiments or feelings.⁹

APPEAL TO THE SITUATION

In the 1960s, especially in the United States and Great Britain, philosophers have been interested in **situation ethics**. It has appeared in various forms and has often been confused with relativism; proponents see it as a middle ground between two extreme approaches: absolutism and relativism.

On the one hand, absolutism in its legalistic application consists of final codes, prefabricated rules, and regulations that permit few if any exceptions. These absolutes are derived philosophically through reason (Kant); through divine revelation in the form of natural laws; or through consensus, tradition, and laws enacted by human beings.

On the other hand, schools of relativism stress freedom from all norms other than what is the practiced morality of a given time. This view is concerned not with the rightness or wrongness of what is chosen, but with what actually has been chosen and is practiced in a given culture.

In theory, situation ethics has an absolute norm or standard; this approach calls for the selection or acknowledgment of an absolute, but a nonlegalistic, flexible application of the standard to each individual situation. This norm could be love, personal power, or any other principle around which one could build an interpretation of morality. Guidelines that assist in the application of the selected norm may or may not be included in a given interpretation. For example, a certain dictator views personal power as his moral absolute; if he takes a situational approach, he reflects on every situation in which he finds himself and involves himself such as to acquire personal power. He may or may not have useful guides in mind as he enters new situations.

The uproar that occurred in religious circles in the 1960s was the result of a view interpreting Jesus as a situationist. Many Christians understood the Old and New Testaments as containing clear-cut moral laws. Some scholars now claim that Christian ethics is situational, not authoritarian in the legalistic sense. Advocates of this position respect the ethical maxims and the wisdom that have come down from the past. As Joseph Fletcher proposed in his controversial book *Situation Ethics*:

The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside *in the situation* if love seems better served by doing so.¹⁰

For these Christians, the only absolute is love (*agapé*); only love is universally good. “Anything and everything is right or wrong, according to the situation,” says Fletcher, because the good is the most loving, concerned act.¹¹ Love can

rightly be directed only toward a person and not toward some abstract good.

The supporters of situation ethics claim that many cases or decisions are unique and must be considered on their merits. This approach allows freedom in a changing society. Ethical judgments are meaningless apart from the benefiting or the injuring of persons. The critics, on the other hand, say the view that circumstances alter cases is as old as Aristotle. In its modern form, perhaps situationism places too great an emphasis on the motive and attitude of the one who makes the decision and carries out the action, and not enough on the fact that we always act within a community that is affected by our acts. Love can be blind and uninformed; it may be prudent to add some principles or guidelines based on knowledge and reason.

Contemporary Principles

A DILEMMA

If the question of morality is the central issue of our time, we may

appear to have a dilemma! On the one hand, we might agree on such matters as the levels of moral development, ingredients of the moral situation, and the many basic terms and categories of ethics. On the other hand, philosophers and other reflective people have never agreed on a method for *doing* normative ethics. Varying methods employing reason, inferences from nature, divine revelation, and/or intuition have led to contrasting moral standards both ancient and modern. Where does this variety leave us as we attempt to make sound moral choices individually and as a society?

PRINCIPLES IN USE TODAY

Hospital ethics committees—often composed of nurses, physicians, clergy, ethicists, lawyers, and others—would never be able to offer advice or make decisions if consensus on the many issues we have been studying were required. Instead, several principles have been widely adopted, be-

cause they seem to offer practical guidance for discussion of specific cases. These principles are justified on the grounds that their opposites are repugnant to the cross section of people wrestling with moral dilemmas. For some persons on a committee, these principles are of divine origin; for others, they are reasonable; and, for others, they are built into human nature or the very fabric of reality. For some individuals, these norms are absolutes; for others, they function as highly valued guidelines. In all instances, the meanings of the principles must be interpreted and applied, and sharp differences frequently remain.

Respect For Persons. There is, however, one clear area of agreement: human beings should be treated as subjects, not objects; human life is of significant value. This principle is essentially the same as Kant's *Principle of Humanity as an End, Never as Merely a Means* (see page 126). A primary value of this norm is that it excludes its opposite—treating individuals as objects, as things, whether in medical research, business activities, or social relationships. However, this standard's application to specific situations of health care, employment, or human relationships is subject to debate and may result in more than one reasoned conclusion. For example, when an employer must fire 10 percent of her employees for legitimate financial reasons, how does *respect for persons* apply to issues of age, seniority, gender, competence, severance pay and benefits, possibilities for future recall, personal and vocational counseling, and so forth? Although different policies will result from the application of this principle, at least employees will be treated as human beings instead of mere numbers or objects. The final choice of policies will be made according to the decision-making process in place, such as a negotiated compromise, a management committee, the "boss," or the courts.

May this principle ever be set aside? If a maniac is about to lower an ax on your head, are you morally obliged to respect this person? One might affirm the principle and call for martyrdom of the intended victim. Others might claim

that such attackers have waived their rights to personhood and may be killed in self-defense. No doubt other reasoned options are possible; in this situation, the intended victim is the decision maker, who will be accountable morally and legally afterward.

The following principles are equally difficult to apply; our discussion of them will be brief.

Autonomy. Human beings deserve personal liberty in order to make informed judgments and decisions about their lives; individual informed consent is valued. Women and men should be self-determining within the context of their own societies. (Note Kant's principle of autonomy; see page 126.)

As with the principle of humanity as an end, the ideal of autonomy rejects its opposite—absolute external control. However, the degrees of autonomy in actual situations are subject to debate; to what extent should autonomy be offered to prisoners, the mentally ill, children, the military, property owners, and employees? Resolution will occur, according to available decision-making procedures in each case.

Beneficence. Do good; promote goodness! This standard rejects knowingly doing evil.

Nonmaleficence. Do no harm; prevent harm. This principle rejects knowingly doing harm.

Justice. Human beings ought to be provided with what is fair and what is deserved; goodness should be distributed among people in fair and equitable ways. Does this mean distribution according to need? according to merit? or equally without regard for need, ability, or merit? Calculated injustice is ruled out, but arguable interpretations of justice remain.

Honesty. Telling the truth is the norm; it is essential to promote and maintain respect for persons and for autonomy. However, there is a question as to whether a “moral lie” may ever be justified.

Other Principles. In addition to the principles heretofore discussed, others are helpful; they may be viewed as deriving from those we have mentioned or as having equal status. *Informed consent* is the understanding of and consent to a procedure an individual is about to undergo. *Confidentiality* is the restriction of information based on the right to privacy. *Double effect* means that the intended good result requires a secondary harmful or bad effect. *Paternalism* involves the interference with an individual's liberty of action.

WHEN PRINCIPLES COLLIDE

In certain situations, honesty may conflict with confidentiality; for example, a supervisor might not be able to reveal pending dismissals to workers in her department. Autonomy might be in opposition to paternalism, as when adult children face the problem of nursing home placement unwanted by their parents. Beneficence collides with nonmaleficence when individuals defend themselves from unjust aggressors. Solutions to such conflicting norms are shaped according to the principle(s) valued most highly by the decision maker(s) in the actual situation.

Reflections

MORAL CERTAINTIES



“I just want to do the right thing,” is a familiar statement made by morally concerned women and men. The moral codes of some absolutists are persuasive to people seeking clear-cut ethical certainties. When their absolutes and implications are perceived as divinely revealed, unmistakably located in nature, or discovered by infallible reason, one can live “by the book” with moral clarity.

MORAL RELATIVISM

Other people also wanting to do the right thing propose that the global community will continue to develop contrasting and conflicting moral norms and practices. This observation will

lead some individuals to the conclusion that no universal norms are appropriate and the practice of the moment is the only actual norm.

MORAL PLURALISM

Others will formulate and/or choose principles believed universally applicable, principles such as those explored in the previous section of this chapter. Where these ideals originate is less pivotal than our agreement to apply them with utmost care and reasonableness. Hospital, business, political, and educational committees attempting to come to grips with current moral dilemmas are already functioning quite well with these principles. Only those individuals con-

vinced that their positions are the only viable ones are difficult to deal with, but they deserve to be heard, too.

“Moral pluralism” refers to the existence of thoughtful, contrasting interpretations of moral matters. The use of moral principles, such as those discussed in this chapter, does not lead to one clear and certain conclusion. For example, a committee might adopt these principles and yet conclude differently about the morality of capital punishment. Schools of thought exist in virtually all areas of human inquiry, including the range of moral issues. Nonetheless, the principles outlined above provide a reasoned framework for moral discourse, a distinct alternative to relativism.



Glossary Terms

CONSEQUENCES The effects or results of something occurring earlier.

DEONTOLOGICAL Refers to theories which hold that right and wrong is determined by true and binding, formal rules of conduct, independently of any consideration of consequences.

DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS The study of the ingredients of a moral situation, of the actual conduct of individuals, groups, and peoples.

DUTY Doing what one ought to do.

EPICUREANISM The doctrine that pleasure (as understood by Epicurus) or freedom from pain is the highest good in life.

ETHICAL MONOTHEISM The belief in one God who has revealed moral standards all must follow.

ETHICAL RELATIVISM The view that there are no fixed, universal moral values; also called moral relativism.

ETHICAL STANDARDS Principles or norms by which moral actions are judged right or wrong.

FORMALISM Adherence to prescribed forms. In ethics, *formalism* means that certain types of acts follow fixed moral principles, apart from consideration of any particular situation or probable consequences.

HEDONISM The doctrine that the chief good in life is pleasure.

MEANS An agency, instrument, or method used to attain an end.

METAETHICS The study of the meaning of terms and language used in ethical discourse and the kind of reasoning used to justify ethical statements. Differs from *normative* ethics, which is the study of the principles underlying the moral forms of human conduct.

MORAL AGENT The individual who is participating in a moral situation.

MORAL OUGHT Used to express duty or moral obligation.

MOTIVE Whatever it is that prompts a person to act in a certain way or that determines volition (willing).

NORMATIVE ETHICS The area of ethics that is concerned with principles by which we *ought* to live.

SITUATION ETHICS According to Joseph Fletcher, the doctrine contending that truly moral actions produce the greatest amount of love possible in each situation; love is the only moral absolute. A version of teleological ethics.

TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS The theory that the consequences of a moral act determine its rightness or wrongness.

UTILITARIANISM An ethical theory that claims that utility, in the sense that whatever increases pleasure

and decreases pain, should be the aim of acts and the criterion by which we judge them.

VICES Immoral or evil habits or practices.

VIRTUES Particular moral excellences; righteousness, goodness.

VOLUNTARY Done, made, or brought about by one's own accord or by free choice.



Chapter Review

MORAL JUDGMENTS

1. The question of morality may be the central issue of our time; there is a renewed interest in rethinking goals and values in contemporary society.
2. Kohlberg's levels of moral development are the preconventional, conventional, and postconventional.

THE MORAL SITUATION

1. The moral situation involves moral agents with both rights and duties.
2. Other ingredients in the moral situation are virtues and vices, agreements and laws, and change.
3. In assessing morality we have to consider motives, means, and consequences.

ETHICS: THE STUDY OF MORALITY

1. "Morality" generally refers to conduct itself, whereas "ethics" refers to the study of moral conduct.
2. Ethics includes descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and metaethics.

A VARIETY OF ETHICAL STANDARDS— NORMATIVE ETHICS

1. Ethical standards are principles by which we judge whether a moral action is right or wrong;

they include statute law, religious authority, public opinion, and conscience.

2. Teleological ethical theories are those that judge conduct as right or wrong in relationship to some end or goal considered good.
3. Hedonism, epicureanism, and utilitarianism consider pleasure or happiness to be the highest goal. John Stuart Mill denies the criticism that utilitarianism encourages selfishness; he maintains the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the standard of right conduct.
4. Kant proposes a moral philosophy in which principles are either right or wrong, regardless of the situation. This position is sometimes called formalism.
5. Self-realization, often referred to as humanism, promotes the development of humans to the highest possible degree. Platonic humanism and Aristotle's view of self-realization are historically significant.
6. Classical moral philosophy proposed that moral absolutes can be determined rationally.
7. Natural law ethics is based on natural law, which can be discovered by reason.
8. Religious ethical ideals, as found in Judaism and Christianity, include two major views: (1) the will of God is sufficient justification to obey traditional maxims, and (2) the love of God inspires people to do the best to live as caring individuals.

APPROACHES TO ETHICAL STANDARDS

1. Authoritarianism has been a dominant ethical standard. Revered authorities include custom, tradition, churches or other institutions, sacred literature, and statements made by rulers or other individuals.
2. Relativism and subjectivism reject authoritarianism.
3. Situation ethics has been called the middle ground between authoritarianism and relativism. A standard is chosen and then applied to each individual situation.

CONTEMPORARY PRINCIPLES

1. Ethical principles in use today include respect for persons, autonomy, beneficence, nonmalefi-

cence, justice, honesty, informed consent, confidentiality, and double effect.

2. When principles collide, the most highly valued principle(s) may lead to solutions for specific situations.

REFLECTIONS

1. Some people appeal to their moral certainties, others to the practice of the moment. Still others formulate or choose moral principles; moral pluralism is inevitable. Nonetheless, we have principles on which we can choose to rely.



Study Questions and Projects

1. In 1943 the founding author of this textbook, the late Dr. Harold H. Titus (1896–1984), wrote in his book *What Is a Mature Morality?* (New York: Macmillan, 1943, p. 1):

Many thoughtful persons in our time are speaking of the ‘decay’ or ‘decline’ or the ‘crisis’ of Western Civilization, or of the ‘end of an era.’ The older moorings and authorities seem to be disintegrating and people find it difficult to build new and stable foundations. Many of the standards and ideals that once were thought to be absolute and eternal are being questioned or disregarded. Many persons do not seem to know where to turn for guidance and direction. We are suffering not so much because of a lack of technology, of science, or even of general education, but because we have lost a sense of the meaning and goals of living.

Are Professor Titus’ words relevant today? Would a reflective person in every generation offer similar comments? What, if anything, is unique about the moral situation today?
2. State in your own words what you consider the basis of the distinction between right and wrong. Are you able to affirm that there is “an independent order of things” which is unaf-

ected by human wishes and beliefs and which should play a part in our moral judgments?

3. What is the relation between morality and religion? Does morality depend on religion for support, or does it stand on its own feet in that it is autonomous?
4. If one compares the outlook today with that of some centuries ago, how is one to explain the changed views of most members of society on such questions as hanging for theft, capital punishment, the status of women, slavery, homosexuality as a criminal offense, labor conditions, usury and interest, war, and the like?
5. Discuss the following comment: “Ethics is just a matter of opinion.”
6. Evaluate authoritarianism in ethics. When is it advisable to accept the authority of others, and when is it inadvisable or dangerous?
7. What is ethical relativism? What reasons are advanced for it? Evaluate this position critically, indicating its strengths and weaknesses.
8. What are the central points in the following positions: (a) formalism, or Kant’s appeal to the

the permissible ways of trying to achieve them. Self-knowledge and self-control, he asserts, enable us to realize our aspirations.

Louden, R. B. *Morality and Moral Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Using insights from both Kant and Aristotle, the author focuses his attention on the importance of moral theory and of morality in general. He asserts that morality serves as a unifying force for structuring and assessing the fabric of our lives.

MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2nd ed. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

MacIntyre reveals his dissatisfaction with the conception of “moral philosophy” as an independent area of inquiry. His conclusion that we must reject the modern *ethos*—particularly liberal individualism—to develop a morally defensible standpoint from which to judge and to act.

Mackie, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1977.

The author uses a systematic approach to discuss the content and status of ethics, considering such issues as moral skepticism, obligation and reason, and consequentialism.

Nolan, R. T., and Kirkpatrick, F. G. *Living Issues in Ethics*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1982. [5th printing 1991].

A companion to *Living Issues in Philosophy*, this text is organized into four parts: The Search for a Moral Philosophy; Personal Identity and Fulfillment; Health and Sexuality; and Social

Ethics. Ethical theory is presented in the first part's four chapters.

Rachels, J. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992.

An introduction to moral philosophy for those who know nothing about the subject.

Rogerson, K. (ed.). *Introduction to Ethical Theory*. Fort Worth, Tex.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1991.

An introductory anthology focusing on normative ethical theories. The central theme is that ethical theories are more careful, consistent, and coherent versions of familiar ethical ideas. The author hopes to encourage the reader to regard philosophical ethics as a part of everyday experience.

Wagner, M. (ed.). *An Historical Introduction to Moral Philosophy*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1991.

A collection of essays that approaches moral philosophy as a living tradition best understood by studying the great ideas and thinkers from every major period of Western thought.

Williams, B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.

A text which offers criticism of current philosophical issues while raising the question of how philosophy could help humankind recreate ethical life. The author introduces a picture of ethical thought with a set of ideas that apply to the current state of ethics while provoking thoughts about how it might be.

