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Ethics for Life
A Text with Readings

Judith A. Boss

Ethics for Life

A Text with Readings

Seventh Edition

JUDITH A. BOSS, PhD

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To My Interns

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Preface

Aristotle wrote that "the ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it." *Ethics for Life* is a multicultural and interdisciplinary introductory ethics textbook that provides students with an ethics curriculum that has been shown to significantly improve students' ability to make real-life moral decisions.[1]

One of the frustrations in teaching ethics is getting students to integrate moral theory into their lives. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life, at one time the highest priority among entering college freshmen, has declined rapidly in the past thirty years as a motive for attending college. Criminal activities—including sexual assault, hate crimes, burglary, drug dealing, and murder—remain a problem on many college campuses. On the other hand, while the number has leveled off in the past few years, more college students are engaging in community service since 2001.[2] In addition, today's college students are increasingly committed to political activism and civic involvement.[3] Despite their good intentions, the moral reasoning of 20 percent of college students is at the level of that of a junior high student. By the time they graduate from college, 90 percent of students will not have made the transition from cultural relativism (in which morality is equated with cultural norms and laws) to independent principled reasoning.

How can ethics teachers provide students with the skills necessary to make better moral decisions in their lives? Traditional ethics courses, which restrict the study of ethics to the purely theoretical realm and avoid any attempt to make students better people, have been found to have little or no impact on students' ability to engage in moral reasoning outside the classroom.[4] While students are able to memorize theories and lines of reasoning long enough to pass the final exam, there is little true understanding and carryover into their moral reasoning outside the classroom. When confronted with real-life moral issues, most students simply revert back to their earlier forms of reasoning based on cultural norms or self-interest.

In the 1970s and 1980s, some professors who were dissatisfied with the traditional theory-laden ethics course replaced it with the values-clarification or value-neutral approach. This approach involves "nonjudgmental" and "nondirective" discussions of popular moral issues where students are encouraged to express their own opinions without fear of criticism or judgment. Unfortunately, the values-clarification approach has been found to have no positive effect on students' moral development and may even inhibit moral growth by sending the message that morality is all relative and hence anything goes as long as it feels good.

These findings have prompted researchers and instructors to look for new approaches to ethics education. *Ethics for Life* provides a curriculum that combines traditional ethics theory with a pedagogy based on the latest research on how to enhance moral development in college students. This approach has been found effective in improving students' moral judgment, moral behavior, and self-esteem.[5]

Objective

The primary objective of *Ethics for Life* is to provide a text that is solidly based in the latest research on moral development of college students, while at the same time providing students with a broad overview of the major world moral philosophies and case studies based on real-life issues.

Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Approach

One of the main obstacles students face in taking an ethics course is its perceived lack of relevance to their lives. Most ethics students are not philosophy majors. Ethics courses also tend to attract a widely diverse group of students, many of whom do not personally relate to the traditional European approach to moral philosophy. *Ethics for Life* includes coverage of, to name only a few, Buddhist ethics, Native American philosophy, ecofeminism, Confucianism, the utilitarian philosophy of Mo Tzu, feminist care ethics, and liberation ethics. The inclusion of moral philosophies from all over the world and from both women and men makes the book more appealing to nontraditional students, and it helps students move beyond the implicit cultural relativism in most ethics textbooks that privileges traditional Western male approaches to ethics.

Moral theory does not occur in isolation nor is morality practiced within a social vacuum. While the primary focus of this text is philosophical ethics, *Ethics for Life* adopts a more holistic approach. The book is presented in a historical and interdisciplinary context and includes extensive material from anthropology and sociology, political science, religion, psychology, and literature.

Because many students taking an ethics course are weak in critical thinking skills, Chapter 2 on moral reasoning includes sections on constructing moral arguments, resolving moral dilemmas, avoiding logical fallacies, and the relation between moral analysis and practice.

A Developmental Pedagogy

There is a saying that if students cannot learn the way we teach them, we have to teach them the way they learn. In creating ethics curriculums that promote moral development, one of the approaches that has held out the most promise is the use of a cognitive-developmental approach to ethics education combined with experiential education, generally in the form of community service and the discussion of real-life moral dilemmas.

Ethics for Life is organized using a developmental or progressive approach. This approach has been shown to have a higher success rate than the more traditional or values-clarification approaches to teaching ethics in terms of helping students move beyond ethical relativism and become principled moral reasoners.

Most ethics textbooks focus only briefly on ethical relativism. However, more than 90 percent of college students are ethical relativists. Rather than talk over students' heads, *Ethics for Life* starts at their level by including material on ethical relativism. The chapters in the book are arranged in the same order that these stages appear in a person's actual moral development. Only later are the students introduced to in-depth discussions of more advanced theories such as deontology, rights ethics, and virtue ethics.

Rather than lecturing from a higher stage of development (the traditional moral-indoctrination approach) or ignoring differences (the values-clarification approach), this approach entails building a bridge to the students and then guiding them across that bridge toward a higher stage of moral development and respectfully engaging them by challenging them to question their own assumptions. This process is also known as a cognitive apprenticeship whereby the teacher or mentor (the "expert") teaches the student (the "novice") a new skill by collaborating with him or her on a task—in this case the application of moral theory to hypothetical and real-life issues.[6] Respectful engagement also requires that the teacher takes an active role in the dialogue, including challenging students rather than creating an atmosphere of passive indifference and superficial tolerance.

To avoid reinforcing the belief that morality is all a matter of personal opinion and the mistaken impression that most moral decisions involve moral dilemmas, the case studies used in the first part of the book present situations where what is morally right and wrong seems clear-cut. This helps students sort out the relevant moral principles so that they later have a solid foundation for resolving more difficult moral dilemmas.

The book makes extensive use of exercises throughout each chapter. The purpose of the exercises is to encourage students to relate the theories in the text to real-life events and issues as well as to their own moral development. In addition to case studies that relate to students' own experience, case studies and personal reflection exercises are chosen with an eye to expanding students' concept of moral community. This is accomplished through the use of readings, case studies, and reflective exercises that focus on multicultural issues and problems of racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism. In addition, each chapter features pictures along with discussion questions related to issues raised in the chapter.

Also important for moral development is the integration of students' experiences by means of readings in developmental psychology and discussions of the personal meaning and relevance of these experiences to their own personal development. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth discussion of the latest research on moral development. Students are also encouraged throughout the text to relate the material to their own experience and their own moral growth.

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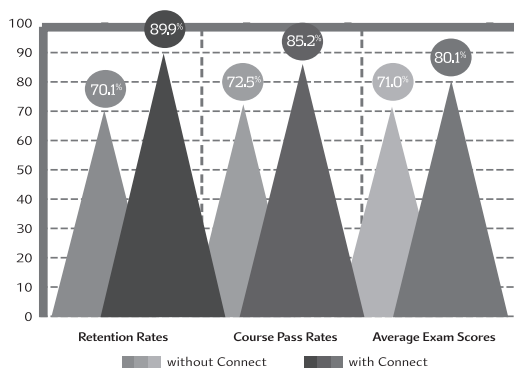
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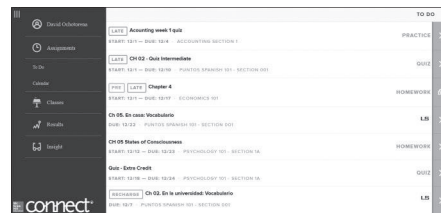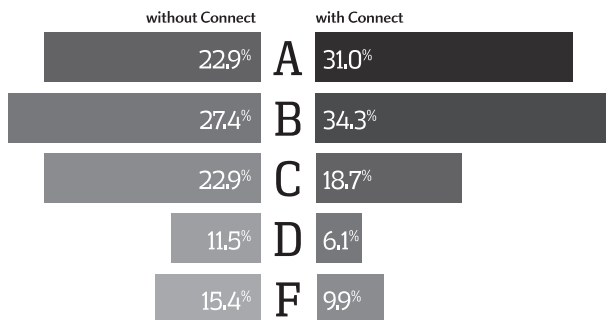
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Instructor's Manual

An online Instructor's Manual provides summaries of the chapters and readings, helpful teaching tips, and a bank of test questions for each chapter. Please contact your local McGraw-Hill sales representative for more details.

Ethics for Life is set up so it can be used with or without a community service component. Studies show that participation in community service as part of an ethics class has a positive effect on students' self-esteem and level of empathy as well as their ability to engage in moral reasoning. Community service gives them an opportunity to integrate what they are learning in class into real-life situations. To assist in this goal, exercises are provided in each chapter to help students relate classroom theory to their community service. These exercises are marked with asterisks.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Judith A. Boss, "Adopting an Aristotelian Approach to Teaching College Ethics," *Philosophy and Community Service Learning* (Washington, DC: Association for the Advancement of Higher Education, 1997); and Judith A. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students," *Journal of Moral Education*, 23 (1994): 183–198.
2. U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Volunteering in the United States, 2015," http://www .bls,gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm
3. Cooperative Institute Research Program, *The American College Freshman Norms for Fall 2015*, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, January 2016.
4. James Rest, "Why Does College Promote Development in Moral Judgment?" *Journal of Moral Education* 17, no. 3 (1988): 183–184.
5. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students."
6. See William Damon, *Greater Expectations* (New York: The Free Press, 1995). See also Chapter 7, for a discussion of this method of moral education.

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The Study of Ethics

Many college ethics students want to skip ethical theory and immediately begin with discussions of compelling moral issues. However, productive discussion of issues requires first establishing a solid foundation in the nuances of ethical theory and moral reasoning.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live as well as the justification of these values and guidelines. The first chapter, "Ethics: An Overview," begins with an introduction to ethics and a brief discussion of different types of ethical theories. It also addresses some of the fundamental philosophical questions that underlie ethics, including questions about human nature, free will versus determinism, moral knowledge, and the nature of philosophical inquiry.

The second chapter, "Moral Reasoning," provides the reader with the skills necessary to analyze and evaluate different moral theories and lines of reasoning. Developing critical thinking skills enables students to make better moral judgments and makes them less likely to be taken in by faulty reasoning.

As people develop morally, they tend to be less likely to fall for faulty reasoning and more likely to be satisfied with their moral decisions. The third chapter, "Conscience and Moral Reasoning," looks at some of the theories of moral development. The study of moral development not only enhances our own moral development, it also helps us place the various types of ethical theory and own style of moral decision making in context.

Ethics education is making a comeback. As such, speculations about what morality is are bombarding us from all sides. This is exciting: We are challenged to be on our toes and to sharpen our analytical skills in order to discern which theories are workable and which ones we need to discard. By figuring out what doesn't work, we can learn a lot. We may not have come up with the perfect theory by the end of this course, but we will have a much better sense of how to make satisfactory moral decisions.

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Ethics
An Overview

*The ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other
inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not
conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order
to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it.*
   —ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 2

It's the beginning of a new semester. Tomorrow morning is your first ethics class. You signed up for the class only because it was required. "What a waste of time," you grumble as you climb into bed. "What's the point in studying ethics? It doesn't have anything to do with real life. I wish there was no such thing as ethics or morality."

The next morning you wake up and wearily grope your way to the bathroom. As you open the door, you find to your dismay that your roommate has left the bathroom in a total mess. Your roommate's clothes are soaking in cold slimy water in the sink and bathtub, and the toilet is caked with grime. Annoyed, you return to your room and shake your roommate's shoulder: "Come on, get up. You promised to clean the bathroom yesterday."

"So what?" your roommate replies. "I don't have to keep my promises if I don't feel like it." And with that, your roommate rolls over and, looking quite peaceful, goes back to sleep.

You are now feeling very annoyed, but you manage to get ready for class, although not in time to have breakfast. You arrive at class right on time; however, the teacher hasn't turned up. You take a seat next to another student who lives in your dormitory. But instead of returning your greeting, he grabs your book bag and heads toward the door. "Stop!" you protest. "That's mine. You can't take that."

He looks at you like you're nuts. "Why not?"

"Because it doesn't belong to you," you reply indignantly. "It's stealing!"

At which he laughs, "You're not making any sense."

"You have no right . . . ," you add.

The thief rolls his eyes: "Didn't you hear the latest news? Ethics, morality—they no longer exist. Isn't that great news! Now we can do whatever we like! And no one can pass judgment on anything we do, including you!"

You wait another twenty minutes for the teacher to show up; then you decide to head over to the cafeteria to get some breakfast. However, the dining staff didn't bother to report to work either. The back door has been smashed open, and trays of donuts and fruit have been taken out onto the quad, where a group of administrators and faculty members, including your ethics teacher, are squabbling over the booty. You step up onto a chair that has been tossed out on the curb, to get a better look, when someone comes rushing up from behind and knocks you down.

As you fall, you hear a sickening snap and feel a stabbing pain in your knee. You cry out in agony. Then, you recognize the person who knocked you over. It's the dean of your college. You plead for her to call for help. But she only pushes you out of her way and hurries on toward the skirmish on the quad. Off in the distance, you hear another cry for help as two men drag a terrified woman into the bushes. No one tries to stop them. A few people stop and peer at you out of curiosity before moving on. Most just stare blankly at you as they walk past. No one offers to help. And why should they? Sympathy and compassion no longer exist. The duty not to cause harm to others or to help those in need no longer exists. No one has any rights that we have to respect anymore. No more stupid obligations, such as sharing with others or keeping our commitments, to prevent us from doing what we enjoy.

As you begin to lose consciousness, you start having second thoughts about the importance of ethics and morality in your life. At that moment, your alarm clock goes off. You get out of bed and wearily grope your way to the bathroom. As you open the door, you realize that your roommate has left the bathroom in a total mess. Annoyed, you return to your room and shake your roommate's shoulder: "Come on, get up. You promised to clean the bathroom yesterday."

"Oh, no," your roommate groans. "I'm sorry, I forgot all about it." After a short pause, your roommate rolls out of bed, complaining under her breath, "I can't think of anything else I'd less rather do." You breathe a sigh of relief and go to the kitchenette to make yourself some breakfast while your roommate begrudgingly cleans the bathroom.

SELF-EVALUTION QUESTIONNAIRE*

Rate yourself on the following scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Culture determines what is moral and immoral.	1	2	3	4	5
There are no right or wrong answers. Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion.	1	2	3	4	5
I tend to stick to my position on an issue even when others try to change my mind.	1	2	3	4	5
It is important that we obey the law, even though we may disagree with it.	1	2	3	4	5
People ought to do what best serves their interests.	1	2	3	4	5
There are universal moral principles that hold for all people, regardless of their culture.	1	2	3	4	5

(continued)

Religion is the source of morality.	1	2	3	4	5
I would refuse to comply if an authority figure ordered me to do something that might cause me to hurt someone else.	1	2	3	4	5
I tend to sacrifice my needs for those of others.	1	2	3	4	5

* Explanations for each item on this scale can be found in the instructor's manual and online at www.mhhe.com/bossef17e.

What Is Ethics?

Ethics is a lot like air: It is pretty much invisible. In fact, for many centuries, people did not realize that such a substance as air even existed. So too we often fail to recognize the existence of ethics or morality until someone fails to heed it.

The term **ethics** has several meanings. It is often used to refer to a set of standards of right and wrong established by a particular group and imposed on members of that group as a means of regulating and setting limits on their behavior. This use of the word *ethics* reflects its etymology, which goes back to the Greek word *ethos*, meaning "cultural custom or habit." The word *moral* is derived from the Latin word *moralis*, which also means "custom." Although some philosophers distinguish between the terms *ethical* and *moral*, others, including the author of this text, use the two terms interchangeably.

The identification of ethics and morality with cultural norms or customs reflects the fact that most adults tend to identify morality with cultural customs. Philosophical ethics, also known as *moral philosophy*, goes beyond this limited concept of right and wrong. Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, includes the study of the values and guidelines by which we live and the *justification* for these values and guidelines. Rather than simply accepting the customs or guidelines used by one particular group or culture, philosophical ethics analyzes and evaluates these guidelines in light of accepted universal principles and concerns.

More important, ethics is a way of life. In this sense, ethics involves active engagement in the pursuit of the good life–a life consistent with a coherent set of moral values. According to Aristotle, one of the leading Western moral philosophers, the pursuit of the good life is our most important activity as humans. Indeed, studies have found that even criminals believe morality is important–at least for others. Although criminals may not always act on their moral beliefs, they still expect others to do so. Almost all criminals, when asked, state that they do not want their children to engage in immoral behavior and would get angry if one of their children committed a crime.[1]

Aristotle believed that "the moral activities are human *par excellence*."[2] Because morality is the most fundamental expression of our human nature, it is through being moral that we are the happiest. According to Aristotle, it is

through the repeated performance of good actions that we become moral (and happier) people. He referred to the repeated practice of moral actions as **habituation**. The idea that practicing good actions is more important for ethics education than merely studying theory is also found in other philosophies, such as Buddhism.

> [A] man becomes just by the performance of the just . . . actions; nor is there the smallest likelihood of a man's becoming good by any other course of conduct.
>
> —ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 4

At the age of seventeen, Aristotle became a student at Plato's Academy in Athens, where he remained until Plato's death twenty years later. The Academy was founded by Plato in 388 B.C.E. and lasted over nine hundred years; it is reputed to be Europe's first university.[3] Plato's famous Academy was not like universities today, with organized classes, degrees, and specialized faculty. Instead, it was more of a fellowship of intellectuals interested in Athenian culture and the opportunity to listen to and exchange ideas with the great philosopher Plato.

Aristotle later opened his own school, the Lyceum, in Athens. The Lyceum contained a garden known as "the walk," where Aristotle supposedly had the habit of walking while teaching his students. In 323 B.C.E., Aristotle was accused of impiety for teaching his students to continually question the accepted ideas

The philosopher Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.) with his disciple Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) at the Academy in Athens. The Academy is reputed to be Europe's first university.
©Bettmann/Getty Images

and norms of the time. Several years earlier, in 399 B.C.E., the Athenians had sentenced Plato's teacher, Socrates, to death on similar charges. Aristotle fled to Euboea rather than take a chance that "the Athenians should sin a second time against philosophy." He died in Babylon a year later.

Exercises

1. Complete the Self-Evaluation Questionnaire on pages 4–5. Relate your answers to your ideas regarding the ultimate source of morality. Discuss how this influences what criteria you use in making moral decisions in your life. Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.

2. One way to define what we mean by "moral" is to look at the lives of those whom we regard to be good people, as Aristotle looked up to Plato. Do you have a hero? If so, who is your hero and why?

3. Do all actions have a moral dimension? If not, why do some actions involve moral judgments while others are morally neutral? Explain using specific examples.

4. Discuss ways in which participation in an academic community has encouraged you, as it did Aristotle, to critically analyze your ideas and assumptions about morality and moral issues.

5. Do you agree with Aristotle that practicing moral virtues and behavior is more important for ethics education than the study of moral theory? How might his approach be integrated into a college ethics course?

Normative and Theoretical Ethics

. . . a complete moral philosophy would tell us how and why we should act and feel toward others in relationships of shifting and varying power asymmetry and shifting and varying intimacy.

—ANNETTE BAIER, *Ethics* (1986), p. 252

There are two traditional subdivisions of ethics: (1) theoretical ethics or meta-ethics and (2) normative ethics. **Theoretical ethics** is concerned with appraising the logical foundations and internal consistencies of ethical systems. Theoretical ethics is also known as **metaethics**; the prefix *meta* comes from the Greek word meaning "about" or "above." **Normative ethics**, on the other hand, gives us guidelines or norms, such as "do not lie" or "do no harm," regarding which actions are right and which are wrong. In other words, theoretical ethics, or metaethics, studies *why* we should act and feel a certain way; normative ethics tells us *how* we should act in particular situations.

Normative ethics affects our lives at all levels: personal, interpersonal, social (both locally and globally), and environmental. Normative ethics gives us practical hands-on guidelines or norms that we can apply to real-life situations.

Because of this, it is sometimes referred to as *applied ethics.* A professional code of ethics is an example of a set of practical moral guidelines.

Moral guidelines are not simply a list of dos and don'ts that others impose upon us, however. As adults, it is not enough just to do as we are told. We expect to be given good reasons for acting certain ways or taking certain positions on moral issues.

Theoretical ethics operates at a more fundamental level than normative ethics. Theoretical ethics takes, as its starting point, the most basic insights regarding morality. Moral norms and guidelines need to be grounded in theoretical ethics; otherwise, morality becomes arbitrary. In this text, we will concern ourselves primarily with the theoretical underpinnings of ethics.

Metaethical theories can be divided into cognitive and noncognitive theories. **Noncognitive theories**, such as **emotivism**, claim that there are no moral truths and that moral statements are neither true nor false but simply expressions or outbursts of feelings. If moral statements are neither true nor false, there is no such thing as objective moral truths.

Cognitive theories, on the other hand, maintain that moral statements can be either true or false. Cognitive theories can be further subdivided into relativist and universalist theories (Table 1.1). **Relativist theories** state that morality is different for different people. In contrast, **universalist theories** maintain that objective moral truths exist that are true for all humans, regardless of their personal beliefs or cultural norms.

TABLE 1.1   Metaethical Theories

NONCOGNITIVE	COGNITIVE		
	Relativist Theories	**Universalist Theories**	
Emotivism	Ethical Subjectivism	Ethical Egoism	Deontology
	Cultural Relativism	Utilitarianism	Virtue Ethics
	Divine Command	Natural Law Ethics	Rights Ethics

Relativist Theories

According to the **relativist theories**, there are no independent moral values. Instead, morality is *created* by humans. Because morality is invented or created by humans, it can vary from time to time and from person to person. **Ethical subjectivism**, the first type of relativist theory, maintains that moral right or wrong is relative to the individual person and that moral truth is a matter of individual opinion or feeling. Unlike reason, **opinion** is based only on feeling rather than analysis or facts. In ethical subjectivism, there can be as many systems of morality as there are people in the world. Many college students—especially freshmen—maintain that morality is relative to each individual. We'll be studying this theory in more depth in Chapter 4.

> Moral values are not absolute but relative
> to the emotions they express.
>
> —EDWARD WESTERMARCK (sociologist)

Cultural relativists, on the other hand, argue that morality is created collectively by groups of humans and that it differs from society to society. Each society has its own moral norms, which are binding on the people who belong to that society. Each society also defines who is and who is not a member of the moral community. With cultural relativism, each circle or moral system represents a different culture. The majority of Americans believe that morality is culturally relative (see Chapters 3 and 6).

> We recognize that morality differs in every
> society, and is a convenient term for
> socially approved habits.
>
> —RUTH BENEDICT (anthropologist)

A third type of relativist theory is **divine command theory**. According to this theory, what is moral is relative to God. There are no universal moral principles that are binding on all people. Instead, morality is dependent on God's will and may differ from person to person or from religion to religion. We'll be examining this theory in depth in Chapter 5.

Ethical subjectivism, cultural relativism, and divine command theory are mutually exclusive theories. When theories are mutually exclusive, a person cannot consistently hold more than one of the theories to be true at the same time. For example, either morality is created by the *individual* and the opinion of the individual always takes precedence over that of the collective, or else morality is relative to one's *culture* and the moral rule of the culture always takes precedence over that of the individual.

Universalist Theories

Universalist theories, the second group of cognitive theories, maintain that there are universal moral values that apply to *all* humans and, in some cases, extend beyond the human community. Morality is *discovered*, rather than created, by humans. The basic standards of right and wrong are derived from principles that exist independently of an individual's or a society's opinion.

Do not do to others as you would not wish done to yourself.

—CONFUCIUS (philosopher)

Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should be a universal law.

—IMMANUEL KANT (philosopher)

Connections

How did a belief in ethical relativism contribute to the rise of Nazism and the internment of Jews? *See Chapter 6, pages 194-196.*

Unlike relativist theories, most universalist theories include all humans in their moral community rather than only those living in their society, as often happens in cultural relativist theories. The **moral community** is composed of all those beings who have moral worth or value in themselves. Because members of the moral community have moral value, they deserve the protection of the community, and they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Universalist theories can be represented by one circle that includes individuals from all cultures.

Universalist ethics, also known as *moral objectivism*, is not the same as moral absolutism. **Absolutists** believe that there are moral norms or principles that should always be obeyed. Some people—though not most—who subscribe to universalist moral theories may be absolutists when it comes to certain moral principles.

There is a great deal of overlap between the different universalist theories. Instead of being mutually exclusive, like ethical subjectivism, cultural relativism, and divine command theory, universalist theories, for the most part, emphasize one particular aspect of morality rather than providing a comprehensive picture. Almost all ethicists include aspects of more than one of these theories in their moral philosophy. The different universalist theories are covered in Chapters 7-12.

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, however, begins in wonder—not theory. Theories, by their very nature, oversimplify. A theory is merely a convenient tool for expressing an idea. Some theories are better than others for explaining certain phenomena and providing solutions to both old and new problems. When studying the different moral philosophers, we must be careful not to pigeonhole their ideas into rigid theoretical boundaries.

Theories are like telescopes. They zoom in on certain key points rather than elucidate the total extent of thinking about ethics. Because morality covers such a broad scope of issues, different philosophers tend to focus on different aspects of morality. Problems arise when they claim that their insight is the complete picture—that morality is merely consequences or merely duty or merely having good intentions. Morality is not a simple concept that can be captured in a nice tidy theory; it is a multifaceted phenomenon.

Exercises

*1. Choose a moral issue from your life as a college student. Discuss how this issue affects decisions in your life in terms of the norms you adopt to guide your behavior. If you are doing community service, relate your answer to your service learning.

2. Discuss which of the ethical theories you would most likely use in judging the morality of the different people—including the messy roommate, the thieving classmate, the tardy professor, and the uncaring dean—in this chapter's opening scenario. To what moral theories, universalist or relativist, did the subject of the scenario appeal?

3. Looking back at the scenario at the beginning of this chapter, what ethical theory is the roommate promoting? Discuss some of the problems with the roommate's approach to ethics. Use examples from your own experience to illustrate your answer.

Philosophy and the Search for Wisdom

To do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth.

—Iris Murdoch

In most North American and Western European universities, ethics is taught as a course in a philosophy department. Although some aspects of the study of ethics extend beyond the purview of philosophy, philosophical inquiry is at the heart of the ethical enterprise.

The word **philosophy** comes from the Greek words *philos*, meaning "lover," and *sophos*, meaning "wisdom." To be a lover (*philos*) entails not only having a positive attitude toward the object of our affection (wisdom, in this case) but also taking action and actively pursuing that object. This interplay of attitude and action is reflected in the study of ethics. Ethics education also goes beyond theory by challenging us to live consistently with our moral values.

Philosophy arises out of a natural sense of wonder and what many philosophers regard as a basic human need to find higher meaning and value in our lives. As small children, we wondered and asked countless questions about the world around us. Indeed, child psychologists note that curiosity and ethical concerns about justice and sharing emerge spontaneously in children sometime between the ages of eighteen and thirty-six months, regardless of their culture and without prompting from adults.[4]

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* An asterisk indicates that the exercise is appropriate for students who are doing community service learning as part of the course.

We all share a common humanity, but how we proceed in our quest for wisdom and the good life will vary to some extent from person to person and from culture to culture because we all have different personalities and different experiences. This does not imply, however, that wisdom is relative. Rather, it suggests that there are several paths to wisdom, just as there can be several paths to the top of a mountain.

Becoming Autonomous

In seeking answers to questions about the meaning of life and the nature of moral goodness, the philosopher goes beyond conventional answers. Rather than relying on public opinion or what others say, it is up to each of us to critically examine and analyze our reasons for holding particular views. In this way, the study of philosophy encourages us to become more autonomous.

The word *autonomous* comes from the Greek words *auto* ("self") and *nomos* ("law"). In other words, an **autonomous moral agent** is an independent, self-governing thinker. A **heteronomous moral agent**, in contrast, is a person who uncritically accepts answers and laws imposed by others. The prefix *hetero-* means "other."

Because philosophy encourages people to question the deeply held beliefs of their society, most people, as Socrates discovered, resist philosophical inquiry. Socrates, who is known as the Father of Western Philosophy, was born in Athens, Greece, in 469 B.C.E. At that time, Athens was a flourishing city-state and a democracy. Socrates never wrote any books or papers on philosophy. What we know of him comes primarily from the writings of his student, Plato. Like most of the early philosophers, Socrates was not a career philosopher; he most likely made his living as a stonemason or artisan. His real love was philosophy, however. As Socrates got older, he began hanging out more at the market and other places where people congregated, talking to the populace and questioning conventional answers to issues regarding justice and virtue.

According to Socrates, wisdom is important for achieving happiness and inner harmony as well as the intellectual and moral improvement of community. His approach to philosophy, known as the **Socratic method**, consists of a didactic dialogue using questions and answers. The Socratic method is one of the most popular and productive methods used in philosophy.

The road to wisdom, Socrates believed, begins with the realization that we are ignorant. In his search for wisdom, Socrates would stop people on the street to ask them questions about things they thought they already knew. In doing this, he hoped to show people that there was a difference between *truth* and what they *felt* to be true (their opinions). By exposing the ignorance of those who considered themselves wise, Socrates taught people to not simply accept the prevailing views but to question their own views and those of their society in a never-ending search for truth and wisdom.

Not everyone appreciated having their views challenged by Socrates. People in positions of power were especially threatened and outraged by Socrates's habit of asking people to question existing laws and customs and encouraging

"The Death of Socrates," by Jacques-Louis David. Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.). Socrates remained true to his principles right up to the moment of his death.
©Universal Images Group/Getty Images

them to think in new ways. At the age of seventy, Socrates was arrested and charged with blasphemy and corrupting the youth of Athens. He was found guilty and was sentenced to death by drinking poison hemlock.

Even as Socrates faced death, he did not cease being a philosopher. At his trial, Socrates is reputed to have said the following in a speech in his own defense before the 501 members of the jury:

> I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying . . . Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?
>
> And if any of you disputes this . . . I shall question him and examine him and test him . . . I shall do this to everyone that I meet.[5]

Self-Realization

Some of the most important philosophical questions are those regarding the meaning and goals of our lives. What kind of person do I want to be? How do I achieve that goal? Many philosophers define their life goal in terms of **self-realization**—also known as *self-actualization* and *enlightenment.* Self-realization is closely linked to the idea of moral virtue. According to psychologist Abraham Maslow, self-actualized people are autonomous: They do not depend on the opinions of others when deciding what to do and what to believe. Philosophers such as Socrates and Buddha exemplified what Maslow meant by a self-realized person.[6]

Self-realization is an ongoing process. People who are self-actualized devote their lives to the search for ultimate values. People who are not honest with themselves will have a difficult time making good life choices. Being honest involves the courage to be different and to work hard at being the best one can be at whatever one does. People who are lacking in authenticity or sincerity blame others for their own unhappiness, giving in to what French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) called "the temptations of the easy way."[7]

People who are self-actualized, in contrast, are flexible and even welcome having their views challenged. Like true philosophers, they are open to new ways of looking at the world. They are willing to analyze and, if necessary, change their views—even if this means taking an unpopular stand. This process involves actively working to recognize and overcome barriers to new ways of thinking; chief among these is cultural conditioning.

Skepticism

Philosophers try to approach the world with an open mind. They question their own beliefs and those of other people, no matter how obviously true a particular belief may seem. Rather than accepting established belief systems uncritically, philosophers first reflect on and analyze them. By refusing to accept beliefs until they can be justified, philosophers adopt an attitude of skepticism, or doubt, as their starting point.

Skepticism, unlike cynicism, is grounded in wonder. The skeptic is always curious and open-minded, with an eye to the truth. Cynicism sometimes masquerades as philosophy; however, it is very different. **Cynicism** is closed-minded and mocks the possibility of truth, especially in ideas that go against the mainstream. Cynicism denies rather than analyzes.

> The first [rule for seeking truth] was to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitation and prejudice in judgments, and to accept in them nothing more than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it.
>
> —RENÉ DESCARTES, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637)

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" has been used to illustrate the nature of philosophical thought. In the reading from his *Republic*, Plato compared us to prisoners who have been chained and left in a cave since childhood. Our heads are

held fast in place, so we face the back wall. When people and animals pass by the entrance of the cave, we see them only as shadows on the back wall. We hear the sounds of the outside world only as echoes.

Now, suppose that one of the prisoners has been unchained and turns to face the entrance of the cave. At first, the prisoner is frightened and blinded by the light. At this point, most people will try to return to the comfort of the cave. But if our prisoner is forced or cajoled out of the cave into the light, his eyes will begin to adjust. Once the prisoner is out in the light and freed of the shackles of everyday opinion, he begins to see and learn about wonderful truths that he never before imagined.

After a period of study, he feels the urge to return to his fellow prisoners and share his knowledge with them. Each step back into the cave, however, is painful. He is ridiculed for his beliefs. At this point, the budding philosopher has three options: (1) He can leave the cave again and return to the light. In this case, his newfound wisdom will become irrelevant to the world of human experience. (2) He can give up the wisdom he has acquired and return to his old beliefs. By doing so, he gives in to public opinion rather than risk being unpopular. Or (3) he can remain in the cave and persist in his quest to share his wisdom with others. This last option, according to Plato, is the path of the true philosopher.[†]

Plato believed that truth was embodied in changeless universal forms that could be discerned by the use of reason. Other philosophers see truth, rather than being static and absolute, as dynamic and as constantly revealing itself to us. Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (c. 535–475 B.C.E.) taught that an essential feature of reality is that it is ceaselessly changing, like a flowing river. Just as you cannot step into the same river twice, permanence is an illusion. Everything is in flux. And Zen Buddhists speak of truth as being found in "the continued or repeated unfolding of the one big mind."

Some people believe that morality demands a sort of rigid, absolutist attitude and that a person should stick to his or her principles no matter what. However, if we believe that truth is constantly revealing itself to us—whether through reason, experience, or intuition—we must always be open to dialogue with each other and with the world at large. If we think at some point that we have found truth and, therefore, close our minds, we have ceased to think like a philosopher. We will lose our sense of wonder and become rigid and self-righteous.

For a philosopher to stop seeking truth is like a dancer freezing in one position because he thinks he has found the ultimate dance step or an artist stopping painting because she thinks she has created the perfect work of art. Similarly, to cease wondering is to cease thinking like a philosopher. To cease thinking like a philosopher is to give up the quest for the good life.

Connections

What role does sympathy play in Plato's moral philosophy? *See Chapter 12, pages 405–406.*

[†] To read the complete text of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," go to http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/Republic.html

Exercises

1. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? Which are you acquiring at college? How does one actively seek wisdom or live wisely? What is the connection between wisdom and morality?

2. Critically analyze whether Socrates did the right thing in sticking to his principles during his trial (see pages 12–13). Discuss a time when you did what you believed was right even though it ran counter to cultural norms. How did you justify your actions?

3. According to Socrates, the first step on the path to wisdom is to "know thyself." Discuss the following questions in light of this mandate.

   a. What is my goal or plan of life?

   b. What sort of person do I want to be?

   c. How close am I to my goal?

   *d. For those of who are doing community service, how does your service fit in with or assist you in clarifying and achieving your life goals?

4. Do you agree that self-actualization is linked to virtue and to happiness? Explain. To what extent are you a self-actualized person? What barriers are holding you back from achieving self-actualization? What can you do to remove some of those barriers?

5. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche asked us to imagine what sort of life we would create for ourselves if we knew that it would be repeated over and over again for the rest of eternity. This is known as the theory of *eternal recurrence.* Nietzsche described it as follows:

   > What if, some day or night a demon were to . . . say to you: This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sign and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!

   > Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? . . . Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?[8]

   How would you answer Nietzsche's questions? Are you satisfied with the life you are now creating for yourself? If not, what could you do to make it a better life, one that you would want to repeat over and over.

6. Discuss your own life in terms of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." Where are you now in your journey? Explain.

Metaphysics and the Study of Human Nature

> *In every writer on philosophy there is a concealed metaphysic, usually unconscious; even if his subject is metaphysics, he is almost certain to have an uncritically believed system which underlies his specific arguments.*
>
> —BERTRAND RUSSELL, *The Philosophy of John Dewey*

Ethical theories do not stand on their own but are grounded in other philosophical presumptions about such matters as the role of humans in the universe, the existence of free will, and the nature of knowledge. **Metaphysics** is the branch of philosophy concerned with the study of the nature of reality, including what it means to be human.

Our concept of human nature influences our concept of how we ought to live. Are humans basically selfish? Or are we basically altruistic? What is the relationship between humans and the rest of nature? Do we have free will? Or is all of our behavior subject to the laws of physics?

Metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality are not simply abstract theories; they can have a profound effect on both ethical theory and normative ethics. Metaphysical assumptions play a pivotal role, for better or for worse, in structuring relations among humans and between humans and the rest of the world.

Connections

What is the theory of psychological egoism and how does it differ from ethical egoism? *See Chapter 7, pages 212–216.*

Metaphysical Dualism

According to **metaphysical dualists**, reality is made up of two distinct and separate substances: the material or physical body and the nonmaterial mind, which is also referred to as the soul or spirit. The body, being material, is subject to causal laws. The mind, in contrast, has free will because it is nonmaterial and rational. Some philosophers believe that only humans have a mind, and hence, only humans have moral value. The belief that adult humans are the central or most significant reality of the universe is known as **anthropocentrism**.

According to most dualists, humans express their nature or essence through reason, which is the activity of the nonmaterial mind. Only through reason can we understand moral truth and achieve the good life. Dualistic philosophies tend to support a hierarchical worldview and a morality based on the exclusion of some beings from the moral community—particularly nonhuman animals and humans who are regarded as not fully rational. Aristotle writes:

> *For living is apparently shared with plants, but what we are looking for is the special function of a human being: hence we should set aside the life of nutrition and growth. The life next in order is some sort of life of sense-perception; but this too is apparently shared, with horses, oxen and every animal. The remaining possibility, then, is some sort of life of action on the part of the soul that has reason.*
>
> *. . . the human function is the soul's activity that expresses reason. . . . The excellent man's function is to do this finely and well. Each function is completed well when its completion*

expresses the proper virtue. Therefore, the human good turns out to be the soul's proper function.

—ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 1

Ecofeminist Karen Warren argues that the domination of women and the domination of nature that typify Western dualism are inexorably connected.[9] Both, she claims, are based on a hierarchical and dualistic metaphysics and a "logic of domination" that assumes that certain beings (whether human or non-human) are morally superior and that those who are superior have a right to dominate those who are subordinate.

Hindu metaethics, like Western dualism, at one time supported a hierarchical view of reality.[10] This hierarchy manifested itself primarily within the caste system that was believed to reflect the natural order of the universe. In India, the Hindu caste system and the hierarchical metaphysics upon which it was based were challenged by Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948). He denounced the caste system as "evil" and "an ineffaceable blot that Hinduism today carries with it."[11] Gandhi's demand for change was strongly influenced by the teachings of another Indian philosopher, Siddhartha Gautama (563–c. 483 B.C.E.), better known as Buddha or the "Enlightened One."

One of the main problems with dualism is coming up with an explanation of how two apparently completely different substances—mind and body—are able to interact with each other, especially on a causal level. Because of the mind-body problem, many philosophers have rejected dualism.[12]

Metaphysical Materialism

There are many variations of nondualistic or one-substance theories. One of the more popular is **metaphysical materialism**. In this worldview, physical matter is the only substance. While materialists do not have to deal with the mind-body problem, they have a difficult time explaining the phenomenon of consciousness and intention. Because metaphysical materialists reject, or consider irrelevant, abstract concepts such as mind or soul, morality must be explained in terms of physical matter.

Sociobiology is based on the assumption of metaphysical materialism. As a branch of biology, sociobiology applies evolutionary theory to the social sciences—including questions of moral behavior. Sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson claims that morality is based on biological requirements and drives.[13] Human behavior is governed by the same innate **epigenetic rules** as other animals.

According to sociobiologists, human social behavior, like that of other social animals, is primarily oriented toward the propagation of the species. This goal is achieved through inborn cooperative behavior that sociobiologists call **biological altruism**. Biological altruism accounts for the great sacrifices we are willing to make to help those who *share our genes*. We will be looking more at the concept of biological altruism in Chapter 7 on ethical egoism.

One of the problems with basing ethics on metaphysical materialism is that it gives us no guidance in a situation where two epigenetic rules, such as egoism

and altruism, are in conflict. For this and other reasons, the majority of philosophers, although not denying that biology is important, reject biology as the *basis* for morality.

Buddhism and the Unity of All Reality

Buddha, like Socrates, did not leave behind any writings. What we know of his philosophy comes from the writings of his disciples. Leading a moral or right lifestyle is central to Buddha's philosophy. Buddha rejected metaphysical dualism, emphasizing the unity of all reality rather than differences.

According to Buddha, the natural order is a dynamic web of interactions that condition or influence, instead of determining, our actions. Mind and body are not separate substances but are a manifestation of one substance or the "One." Because all reality is interconnected, Buddhism opposes the taking of life and encourages a simple lifestyle in harmony with and respectful of other humans and of nature in general.

Like Buddhists, the Lele, a Bantu-speaking tribe living in the Democratic Republic of Congo, believe that the world is a single system of interrelationships among humans, animals, and spirits. Avoiding behavior such as sorcery that disrupts this delicate balance of interrelationships is key to the moral life.[14] Some Native American philosophies also stress the interrelatedness of all beings; they do not divide the world into animate and inanimate objects but rather see everything, including the earth itself, as having a self-conscious life.[15] This metaphysical view of reality is reflected in a moral philosophy based on respect for all beings and on not taking more than one needs.

Key Concepts in Metaphysics

Metaphysics   The study of the nature of reality.

Anthropocentrism   The belief that humans are the most important reality in the universe.

Metaphysical Dualism   The theory that reality is made up of two distinct substances—mind and matter.

Metaphysical Materialism   The theory that reality is made up of one substance—matter.

Determinism   The theory that all events are governed by causal laws; there is no free will.

Determinism versus Free Will

Another question raised by metaphysics is whether humans have free will. The theory of **determinism** states that all events are governed by causal laws: There is no free will. Humans are governed by causal laws as are all other physical objects and beings. According to strict determinism, if we had complete knowledge, we

could predict future events with 100 percent certainty. The emphasis in the West on the scientific method as the source of truth has contributed to the trend in the West to describe human behavior in purely scientific terms.[16]

> I do not at all believe in human freedom in the philosophical sense. Everybody acts not only under external compulsion but also in accordance with inner necessity.
>
> —ALBERT EINSTEIN

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) claimed that humans are governed by powerful unconscious forces and that even our most noble accomplishments are the result of prior events and instincts. **Behaviorists** such as John Watson (1878–1958) and B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) also believed that human behavior is determined by past events in our lives. They argued that, rather than the unconscious controlling our actions, so-called mental states are really a function of the physical body. Rather than being free, autonomous agents, we are the products of past conditioning and are elaborately programmed computers—an assembled organic machine ready to run.

Existentialism goes to the opposite extreme. According to existentialists, we are defined only by our freedom. Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) argued that "there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. . . . Man [therefore] is condemned to be free."[17] As radically free beings, we each have the responsibility to create our own essence, including choosing the moral principles upon which we act. Because we are free and not restricted by a fixed essence, when we make a moral choice, we can be held completely accountable for our actions and choices.

Buddhist philosophers also disagree with determinism, although they acknowledge that we are influenced by outside circumstances beyond our control.[18] This is reflected in the concept of karma in Eastern philosophy. Karma is sometimes misinterpreted as determinism. However, **karma** is an ethical principle or universal force that holds each of us responsible for our actions and the consequences of our actions, not only in this lifetime but in subsequent lifetimes. Rather than our being predetermined by our past karma, karma provides guidance toward liberation from our past harmful actions and illusions and toward moral perfection. In Chapters 11 and 12, we will learn about the influence of this metaphysical view on Buddhist ethics.

Determinism and Excuses

The determinism versus free will debate has important implications for ethics. In particular, it raises serious questions about to what extent we can hold people morally responsible for their actions. Making excuses for our actions is as old as humankind: Adam excused his behavior by blaming Eve for the apple incident. Eve in turn blamed the serpent.

The trend toward seeing forces outside our control as responsible for our actions has contributed to relabeling behaviors such as alcoholism and pedophilia as illnesses or disabilities rather than moral weaknesses. The belief that human behavior is determined has also influenced how we treat people who commit crimes. In his book *The Abuse Excuse*, criminal defense attorney Alan Dershowitz examined dozens of excuses that lawyers have used successfully in court to enable people to "get away with murder"[19] and to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Excuses such as "battered woman syndrome," "Super Bowl Sunday syndrome," "adopted child syndrome," "black rage syndrome," "the Twinkies defense," and "pornography made me do it syndrome" have all

Jerry Sandusky, former Penn State University football coach, 2011. In June 2012 Sandusky was found guilty of 45 counts of child sexual abuse involving boys who were part of a charitable football program serving underprivileged and at-risk youth. During the trial, it was revealed that college administrators and head coach Joe Paterno had known about the sexual abuse since 2001 but had chosen not to go public with the allegations. Their excuse for not reporting the abuse to authorities? They didn't want to damage the reputation of Penn State's football program. Sandusky is currently serving a life sentence in prison.
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been used in court cases. In 1978, former San Francisco supervisor Dan White entered City Hall carrying a loaded gun. He shot and killed Mayor George Moscone along with supervisor and gay rights activist Harvey Milk. The claim at White's trial that his diet of junk food may have caused an imbalance in his brain came to be known as the "Twinkie Defense." Excuses may also be used by people who collude in covering up another's misdeeds or crimes, as happened in the case of former Penn State University football coach, Jerry Sandusky (see Analyzing Images, page 21).

Analyzing Images

1. Group loyalty can result in a person failing to report a crime or misdeed. For example, the majority of fraternity men who witness a rape by a brother refuse to disclose the information to authorities. Think of a time when you or a friend withheld information about an offense you witnessed. What was your excuse for not reporting the incident? Discuss the moral implications of your decision.

2. Dozens of women came forth recently with allegations of rape and sexual misconduct against members of Congress and other high profile men. In several of these cases the women were paid off with money from a congressional or corporate slush fund in exchange for their silence. Discuss whether the people who were complicit in the cover-up should be held morally responsible for their actions and, if so, should they be punished.

3. Should people who sexually abuse children be held responsible for their actions or are pedophiles simply a product of their biology and culture? Critically analyze how both an existentialist and a behaviorist would answer this question.

When, if ever, are we responsible for our actions? At one extreme, the existentialists claim that we are completely responsible and that there are no excuses. At the other extreme are those, such as the behaviorists, who say that free will is an illusion. Most philosophers accept a position somewhere in the middle, arguing that although we are the products of our biology and our culture, we are also creators of our culture and our destiny.

Exercises

*1. Discuss how your concept of reality and human nature influences the way you think about morality. For example, are humans made of two distinct substances—mind and body? Or are we made of the same substance as the rest of reality as metaphysical materialists and Buddhists claim? Use specific examples to illustrate your answer. If you are doing community service work, relate your answer to your service.

2. Do you agree with Karen Warren's theory that sexism and naturalism are linked? What is the relationship of sexism and naturalism to anthropocentric metaphysics? How does this affect how you define your moral community? Discuss how Aristotle might have responded to Warren's theory.

3. Warren talks about the importance of using the first-person narrative to raise philosophical questions that more abstract methods of philosophy might overlook.

   a. Find a comfortable spot outside or by a window. Putting on the mantle of a metaphysical dualist, look at others, including humans of a different ethnic background or gender, nonhuman animals, plants, and inanimate objects. After five minutes, or however long you need, write down your thoughts and feelings regarding the different beings you see and their moral worth.

   b. Repeat this exercise, putting on the mantle of a nondualist, such as Buddha or Warren.

   c. Again, repeat the exercise, now looking at the world through the eyes of a metaphysical materialist such as B. F. Skinner.

      When you have finished the exercise, compare and contrast your experiences. Discuss how adopting the different metaphysical viewpoints affects how you see others and how you view your place in the world.

4. Alan Dershowitz argues that the current vogue of making excuses for violent actions threatens the democratic ideal of individual freedom. Do you agree with him? If we are merely products of our environment, should we be held morally responsible for their actions? Discuss your answer in light of the determinism versus free will debate as well as your own personal experience.

5. Because medical resources are limited for such things as organ transplants, we must decide how they should be allocated. If a person knowingly engages in behavior that could jeopardize his or her health, should this be taken into consideration when allocating scarce resources? For example, baseball superstar Mickey Mantle received a liver transplant, even though the damage to his liver was mainly the result of his years of heavy drinking. Mantle died shortly after receiving the transplant. Was it right to give him the liver? Or should someone else who needed a new liver because of an inherited liver disease have been given priority over Mantle? How does your position in the determinism versus free will debate influence your answers to these questions?

*6. Discuss how our current policies toward vulnerable populations such as the homeless, children, prisoners, and families living in poverty are influenced by a philosophical view of human behavior as free or determined. If you are doing community service work, illustrate your answer using examples from your service.

Moral Knowledge: Can Moral Beliefs Be True?

Opinion is that exercise of the human will which helps us to make a decision without information.

—JOHN ERSKINE, *The Complete Life* (1943)

In the 1991 movie *Terminator 2*, the "terminator," an android played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, is about to kill two unarmed men who are harassing his friend John Connor. Connor jumps in, just in the nick of time, and pushes the terminator's gun aside:

Connor: You were going to kill that guy!

Terminator: Of course. I'm a terminator.

Connor: Listen to me very carefully. You're not a terminator anymore. You just can't go around killing people.

Terminator: Why?

Connor: What do you mean "why"!? 'Cause you can't!

Terminator: Why?

Connor: Because you just can't.

In this passage, John Connor is making two important points. First, morality transcends our nature. We cannot use the excuse "but it's my nature" to justify our hurtful actions. Morality, including the principle of **nonmaleficence**, or "do no harm," is binding on everyone. The terminator is by nature a killer, but this does not mean that he *ought* to kill. Morality creates in us obligation to refrain from carrying out certain harmful actions in a way that our nature or natural tendencies may not. Second, basic moral knowledge, according to Connor, is self-evident. We may need to justify our behavior, but we do not have to justify the general moral principles that inform our moral decisions.

Of course, not everyone would agree with John Connor that the principle of nonmaleficence entails that it is *always* morally wrong to kill unarmed people. Disagreement or uncertainty, however, does not negate the existence of moral knowledge. We also disagree about empirical facts, such as the age of our planet, the cause of Alzheimer's disease, whether people in comas can feel pain, and whether it is going to rain on the weekend. When we disagree about an important moral issue, we don't generally shrug off the disagreement as a matter of personal opinion. Instead, we try to come up with good reasons for accepting a particular position or course of action. We also expect others to do the same. In other words, most people believe that moral knowledge is possible and that it can help us in making decisions about moral issues.

Even the most egoistic people generally accept a sort of **moral minimalism**. That is, they believe that there are certain minimal morality requirements that include, for example, refraining from torturing and murdering innocent, helpless people.

Epistemology and Sources of Knowledge

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the study of knowledge—including moral knowledge. As such, epistemology deals with questions about the nature and limits of knowledge and how knowledge can be validated. There are many ways of knowing: Intuition, reason, feeling, and experience are all potential sources of knowledge.

Many Western philosophers, like Plato, believe that reason is the primary source of moral knowledge. **Reason** can be defined as "the power of understanding the connection between the general and the particular."[20] **Rationalism** is the epistemological theory that most human knowledge comes through reason rather than through the physical senses.

Other Western philosophers, such as Bentham, Ross, and Hume, and many non-Western philosophers have challenged the dependence on reason that characterizes much of Western philosophy. They suggest that we discover moral truths primarily through intuition rather than reason. **Intuition** is immediate or self-evident knowledge, as opposed to knowledge inferred from other truths. Intuitive truths do not need any proof. Utilitarians, for example, claim that we intuitively know that pain is a moral evil (see Chapter 8). Confucians maintain that we intuitively know that benevolence is good. Rights ethicists claim that we intuitively know that all people are created equal (see Chapter 10).

Cognitive-developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987) believed that certain morally relevant concepts, such as altruism and cooperation, are built into us (or at least *almost* all of us). According to Kohlberg, these intuitive notions are part of humans' fundamental structure for interpreting the social world, and as such, they may not be fully articulated.[21] In other words, we may *know* what is right but not be able to explain why it is right.

The difficulty with using intuition as a source of moral knowledge is that these so-called intuitive truths are not always self-evident to everyone. White supremacists, for example, do not agree that all people are created equal. On the other hand, the fact that some people do not accept certain moral intuitions does not make these moral intuitions false or nonexistent any more than the deafness of some people means that Beethoven's symphonies do not exist.

A similar problem exists with grounding moral knowledge in religious faith. Since knowledge gained by faith is not objectively verifiable, we have no criteria for judging the morality of the actions of someone such as a Muslim extremist who, for example, commits an act of terrorism in the name of their faith. Most religious ethicists, such as Thomas Aquinas, overcome this problem by grounding morality not in faith but in objective and universally applicable moral principles based on reason.

Connections

What is Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development? *See Chapter 3, pages 91–92.*

Key Concepts in Epistemology

Epistemology   The study of the nature and limits of knowledge.

Rationalism   The theory that most human knowledge comes through reason.

Empiricism   The theory that most human knowledge comes through experience or the five senses.

Intuition   Immediate or self-evident knowledge.

Emotivism   The position that moral judgments are simply expressions of individuals' emotions.

The Role of Experience

Experience is also a source of moral knowledge. Aristotle emphasized reason as the most important source of moral knowledge, yet he also taught that ethics education needs an experiential component to lead to genuine knowledge. Some philosophers carry the experiential component of moral knowledge even further. **Empiricism** claims that all, or at least most, human knowledge comes through the five senses.

Positivism, which was popular in the first half of the twentieth century, represents an attempt to justify the study of philosophy by aligning it with science and empiricism. Positivists believe that moral judgments are simply expressions of individuals' emotions; this is known as **emotivism.** Because statements of moral judgment don't seem to convey any information about the physical world, they are meaningless. Emotivists such as Alfred J. Ayer (1910–1989) concluded that these moral judgments are merely subjective expressions of feeling or commands to arouse feelings and stimulate action and, as such, are devoid of any truth value.

He writes:

> *We begin by admitting that the fundamental ethical concepts are unanalysable . . . that they are mere pseudo-concepts. The presence of an ethical symbol in a proportion adds nothing to its factual content.*[22]

The statement "torturing children is wrong," in the context of emotivism, is neither true nor false. It is nothing more than the expression of a negative emotion or feeling toward torturing children—much like saying "yuck" when tasting a food that disagrees with one's palate. Someone's preference for torturing young children and another person's preference for a particular flavor of ice cream are both morally neutral.

This alliance between ethics and science (as interpreted by the positivists) proved fatal to ethics. If science is the only source of knowledge, then moral statements such as "killing unarmed people is wrong" and "torturing children is wrong" are meaningless because they do not appear to correspond to anything in the physical world, as do statements such as "tigers have stripes" or "it was sunny at the beach yesterday."

Emotivism was never widely accepted as a moral theory. The horrors of the Nazi Holocaust forced some emotivists to reevaluate their moral theory and to commit themselves to the position that some actions such as genocide, terrorism, and torturing children are immoral regardless of how one feels about it.

Philosopher Sandra Harding (b. 1935) also maintains that experience is an important component of knowledge; however, she disagrees with the emotivists that moral knowledge is impossible. Moral knowledge, she claims, is radically interdependent with our interests, our cultural institutions, our relationships, and

our life experiences.[23] To rely solely on abstract reasoning, she argues, ignores other ways of experiencing the world and moral values within the world. Instead, knowing cannot be separated from our gender and position in society. Moral knowledge and moral decision making lie within the tension between the universal and the particular in our individual experiences. By emphasizing the importance of experience, feminist epistemology reminds us that we must listen to everyone's voice before forming an adequate moral theory—not just the voice of those, such as "privileged White males."[24] This concern with experience has led to an increased emphasis on multiculturalism in contemporary college education.

Exercises

1. Referring to the different epistemological theories, discuss how you would respond to someone who thinks that torturing infants is either morally right or, in the case of the positivists, morally neutral.

2. Discuss Alfred Ayer's claim, in the selection from his essay "Emotivism," that moral judgments are nothing more than expressions of feeling and have no validity. If morality is simply an expression of feeling, is there any such thing as moral responsibility? Are Gandhi and Hitler morally equivalent? Support your answer.

3. Sandra Harding suggests that there may be different ways of knowing moral truths for different groups. Do you agree with her? Are there certain basic moral truths that transcend our particular experiences? Relate your answer to the current conflict between terrorists and anti-terrorist government forces in Syria and the Middle East.

Summary

1. *Ethics* is concerned with the study of right and wrong and how to live the good life.

2. The two main subdivisions of ethics are theoretical and normative ethics. Theoretical ethics, or *metaethics*, is concerned with appraising the logical foundations of ethical systems. *Normative ethics* gives us practical guidelines for deciding which actions are right or wrong.

3. There are two types of *ethical theories. Noncognitive theories*, such as emotivism, claim that moral statements are neither true nor false. *Cognitive theories* claim that moral statements can be true or false. Cognitive theories can be further subdivided into relativist theories and universalist theories. *Relativist theories* maintain that right and wrong are creations of either individuals or groups of humans. *Universalist theories* claim that there are universal moral values that apply to all humans.

4. *Philosophy* is, literally, the "love of wisdom."

5. The *Socratic method* involves a dialogue in which a teacher questions people about things they thought they already knew.

6. Wisdom begins in self-knowledge, which in turn leads to *self-realization* or self-actualization.

7. True philosophers approach the world with an open mind. They begin the process of inquiry by adopting an initial position of *skepticism* or doubt.

8. Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" defines the task of the philosopher: moving out of our conventional mode of thinking (the darkness of the cave) into the light of truth. This experience of truth should in turn be shared with others who are still living in darkness.

9. *Metaphysics* is the philosophical study of the nature of reality, including human nature.

10. *Metaphysical dualism* claims that reality is made up of two distinct substances: physical matter and nonmaterial mind. *Metaphysical materialism*, in contrast, claims that physical matter is the only substance.

11. Buddhist metaphysics maintains that reality is a unity and manifestation of one substance.

12. *Sociobiologists* claim that morality is genetically programmed into humans and other animals. *Behaviorists*, on the other hand, claim that morality is shaped by our environment.

13. *Determinism* claims that all events, including human actions, are caused by previous events (predetermined) and that *free will* is an illusion. If there is no free will, then of course there is no such thing as moral responsibility.

14. *Epistemology* is the study of knowledge. Most traditional Western philosophies emphasize reason as the primary source of moral knowledge; most non-Western and feminist philosophies emphasize intuition or sentiment.

15. *Emotivism* is the theory that moral statements are meaningless because they do not correspond to anything in the physical world. Emotivism arose from an attempt by the *positivists* to scientifically legitimate the study of philosophy.

Notes

1. James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993), p. 11.
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1953), p. 305.
3. Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 3.
4. For more information on the emergence of a moral sense in children, read James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993). Also see Chapter 3 in this textbook.
5. This speech was reputedly recorded by Plato, Socrates's disciple, in the dialogue entitled "Apology." Most of what we know about Socrates comes from the dialogues of Plato.
6. Abraham Maslow, "Self-Actualization and Beyond," *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 1971), pp. 41–53.

7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 728.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 341.

9. Karen J. Warren, "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 434–444.

10. Cows are considered sacred not because of a belief that all animals have moral values but because humans can be reincarnated as cows.

11. C. F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas, Including Selections from His Writings* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 109–110.

12. For a more in-depth discussion of the mind-body problem, see Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation VI (1641); Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1992); and/or John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992).

13. For more on sociobiology, read Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); and Michael Ruse, *The Darwinian Paradigm: Essays on Its History, Philosophy and Religious Implications* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989).

14. Mary Douglas, "Animals in Lele Religious Thought," *Africa* 27 (1957): 51–56.

15. See Annie L. Booth and Harvey M. Jacobs, "Ties That Bind: Native American Beliefs as a Foundation for Environmental Consciousness," in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 519–526.

16. For a more in-depth discussion of the determinism versus free-will debate, see Thomas Hobbes, *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* (1656); Gerald Dworkin, *Determinism, Free Will and Moral Responsibility* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970); and Robert Nozick, "Choice and Indeterminism," in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 294–305.

17. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), pp. 15, 23. This brings up a question that Sartre does not adequately address—how other animals can have an essence or nature, if God is required for a human essence or nature to exist.

18. For more on this subject, see Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko, eds., *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

19. Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Abuse Excuse and Other Cop-Outs, Sob Stories and Evasions of Responsibility* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1994).

20. Immanuel Kant, *Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

21. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development*, vol. 2 (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984).

22. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (London: Victor Gollancz), p. 103.

23. Sandra Harding, ed., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1983).

24. Ibid.

Moral Reasoning

In a republican nation, whose citizens are to be led by reason and persuasion and not by force, the art of reasoning becomes of the first importance.
      —Thomas Jefferson

In 1960, Stanley Milgram of Yale University placed an advertisement in the newspaper asking for men to participate in a scientific study on memory and learning. The participants were told that the purpose of the experiment was to study the effects of punishment (electric shock) on learning. In fact, the real purpose of the study was to see how far people were willing to go in obeying an authority figure. Although no shock was actually being delivered, the "learner"—an actor—responded with (apparently) increasing anguish as the shocks being delivered by the participant supposedly increased in intensity whenever he gave a wrong answer. Despite repeated pleas from the learner to stop the experiment, two-thirds of the participants administered the requested 450 volts—enough to kill some people—simply because an authority figure told them to continue.* Were these results simply a fluke?

Several years later, Stanford University conducted a prison simulation experiment that involved twenty-one male student volunteers who were judged to be stable, mature, and socially well-developed. The volunteers were randomly assigned the role of guard or prisoner. The basement of one of the buildings at Stanford was converted to resemble a prison. Great care was taken to make the prison situation as realistic as possible. The "guards" and "prisoners" wore appropriate uniforms for their roles. The guards were expected to turn up for work, and the prisoners remained confined to prison twenty-four hours a day. As the experiment progressed, the guards became increasingly aggressive and authoritarian, and the prisoners become more and more passive and dispirited. After six days, the experiment had to be called off because of the atrocious and immoral behavior that the guards were exhibiting toward the prisoners.

What would you have done had you been a subject in the Milgram or the Stanford Prison experiment? Most of us like to think we have the resources to

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*The video "Obedience" is available on the Milgram experiment.

At a September 2017 rally President Trump, instead of directly addressing North Korea's nuclear ambitions, resorted to the ad hominem fallacy by referring to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as "little rocket man." Kim Jong Un returned the insult by calling Trump a "mentally deranged U.S. dotard.
©YONHAP/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock *(left)*; ©SHAWN THEW/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock *(right)*

resist authority or resist getting swept up in cultural roles that allow us to demean and even kill other people. But do we? Milgram writes:

> Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of the majority, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.[1]

What are some of the resources we need to resist authority figures, or even our peers, when they urge us to commit or turn a blind eye to immoral acts? Good moral reasoning skills are certainly one of these resources. Unlike those who obeyed, those who refused to continue in the Milgram study were able to give well-thought-out reasons for why they should stop. In this chapter we'll learn how to critically analyze moral arguments and how to recognize and overcome faulty reasoning and barriers in our own thinking.

Connections
Which logical fallacy might we be committing when we uncritically follow those in positions of authority? *See Chapter 2, page 55.*

The Three Levels of Thinking

By sharpening our analytical skills, we can become more independent in our thinking and less susceptible to worldviews that foster narrow-mindedness. The thinking process used in philosophical inquiry can be broken down into three tiers or levels: experience, interpretation, and analysis. Keep in mind that this division is artificial and merely one of emphasis. We never have *pure* experience or engage in *pure* analysis. All three levels overlap and interact with one another (Figure 2.1). Experience provides the material for interpretation and analysis; analysis, in the end, returns to experience. If the results of our analysis are inconsistent with our experience, then we need to start over and fine-tune our analysis so that it takes into account all relevant experience. Analysis also returns to experience in the form of action or *praxis*.
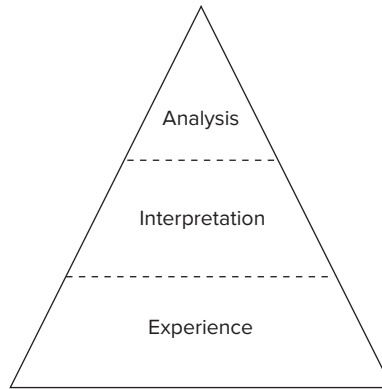
FIGURE 2.1   The Three Levels of Thinking

Experience

Experience is the first level of thinking. Experience goes beyond the five senses: We notice certain events happening, we observe different feelings within ourselves, we have certain intuitions, and we receive information about the world by reading or hearing about the experiences of others. Experience forms the foundation of the philosophical enterprise. Without experience, there can be no thought.

At this level of thinking, we simply *describe* our experiences. We do not, at least in theory, interpret or pass judgment on our experience. Figure 2.2 shows examples of statements at the level of experience:

FIGURE 2.2   Statements at the Experience Level

Interpretation

Interpretation involves trying to make sense of our experience. This level of thinking includes individual interpretations of experience as well as collective or cultural interpretations. Some of our interpretations may be well-informed; others may be based merely on our opinions or personal feelings. Upon analysis, an opinion may just happen to be true. Even opinions that make good sense and win the approval of others are still only opinions if we cannot support them with good reasons or factual evidence. Figure 2.3 provides some examples of statements at the level of interpretation.
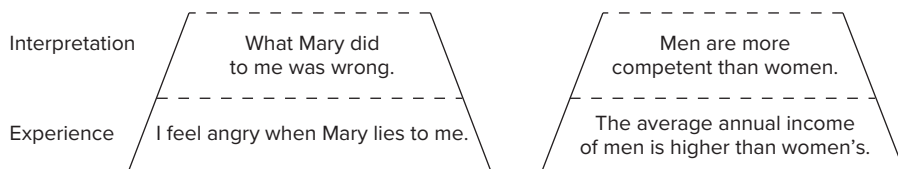

FIGURE 2.3   Statements at the Interpretation Level

The interpretations of our experiences taken together form our **worldview**. Most of us like to think that we came up with our worldviews regarding morality on our own. In reality, our worldviews are strongly influenced by our upbringing and by cultural norms. Our experience contributes to our worldview, and our worldview also shapes how we experience the world. For example, in a study on stereotyping, college students were shown a picture of a White thug beating up a Black man in a business suit. When students were later asked to describe what they saw, the majority reported that they saw a Black thug beating up a White businessman! By not analyzing our worldview, we can get caught up in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, or vicious cycle, where our worldview is verified by our "experience" and our experience, in turn, further confirms our distorted worldview.

Analysis

People often blend fact and opinion. It is important, therefore, to learn to distinguish between the two. By learning how to critically analyze our worldview, we can break the vicious cycle we just described. **Analysis** of moral issues draws on the findings of other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and the natural sciences; it also involves an examination of our worldviews in light of fundamental moral intuitions, moral sentiments, and collective insights.

Analysis demands that we raise our level of consciousness and refuse to accept narrow interpretations of our experience. As such, analysis often begins with questions about the assumptions underlying our interpretations. Figure 2.4 includes examples of statements at the analysis level.

Analysis

Is lying always wrong? What is justified in this case?

Are the facts correct? If not, is it just to pay less based on gender?

Interpretation

What Mary did to me was wrong.

Men are more competent than women.

Experience

I feel angry when Mary lies to me.

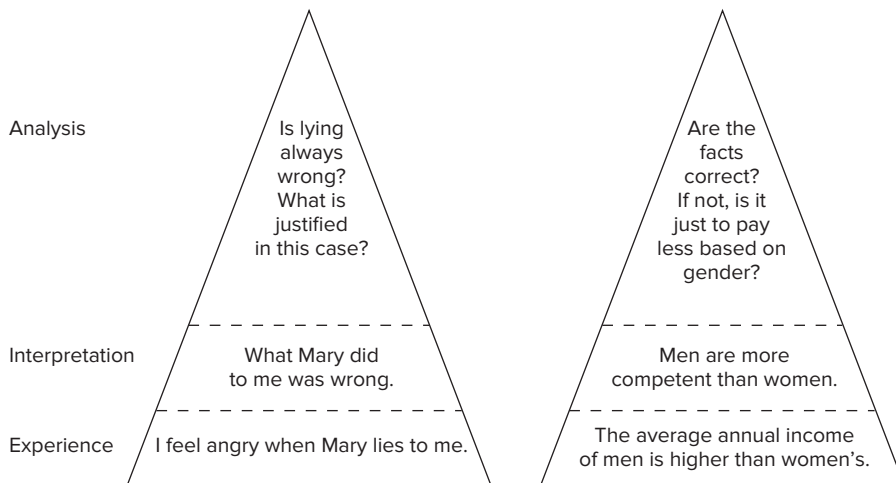The average annual income of men is higher than women's.

FIGURE 2.4   Statements at the Analysis Level

The process of moving from experience to interpretation to analysis and from there back to experience again is ongoing. Analysis is most productive when it is done collectively because people bring with them different

experiences. At the same time, we cannot simply accept other people's interpretations of their experiences at face value.

Because we are social beings who do not exist apart from a culture and a particular cultural worldview, it is all too easy for us to be lured into accepting cultural interpretations of reality as truth. Even well-trained philosophers can become captivated by the prevailing cultural worldview or the traditional philosophical interpretations of their professional colleagues.

When we succumb to the temptation to follow public opinion or accept traditional assumptions without question, we become maintainers of the status quo. As such, we may even become part of the problem. Analysis that ignores certain relevant aspects of experience can become distorted. The complicity of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) in destructive ideologies like Nazism and the promotion of sexism, elitism and religious intolerance in the name of philosophy are all instances of a philosopher accepting a prevailing worldview as truth without bothering to analyze it thoroughly.

Some liberation ethicists claim that certain groups of traditionally disempowered people, such as African Americans, women, and economically disadvantaged people, have **epistemological privilege**. Those who do not benefit from or are harmed by conventional interpretations of reality, it is argued, are the least likely to buy into or defend the interpretations that oppress them. Being the least biased in favor of traditional interpretations, they also have the least resistance to analyzing them. This is a reversal of the conventional wisdom that favors insight and the logical, abstract thinking processes used by well-educated White males.

Whether or not being disempowered or disadvantaged gives one an epistemological advantage is up for debate. However, we do know that engaging in dialogue with people from diverse backgrounds, rather than only with people who are like us—whether we are socially and economically advantaged or disadvantaged—can help us make more effective moral decisions.[2] For more on conditions that promote moral development see Chapter 3.

Exercises

1. Select a simple experience, such as a man holding a door open for a woman or a student giving a dollar to a beggar on the street. In groups, discuss different interpretations of the experience, being careful not to let prejudice distort your interpretation.

2. Use the three-tiered model of thinking to discuss the following experiences. The interpretations you list do not have to be ones that you personally accept; you might also want to write down some interpretations that are common in our culture. Discuss how your interpretation of this experience has shaped your past experience and actions and how analyzing this issue might affect future actions regarding the issue.

a. Although Blacks represent only 13.3 percent of the U.S. population, they make up 37.8 percent of the prison inmates.[3]

b. In 2016, only 50 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the presidential election, well below the 55 percent for all voters. In addition, voter turnout was the lowest in 20 years.

c. More than half of the agricultural workers in the United States are undocumented immigrants.

d. Marijuana use has been decriminalized in Canada but possession for recreational use is still a crime in most U.S. states.

e. Men are much more likely than women to hold high-ranking faculty positions in science departments at Ivy League colleges in the United States.

3. Choose an experience from your life. Analyze this experience using the three-tiered model.

*4. Discuss the claim that people who have the least power in a society—those who see the world from "below"—are epistemologically privileged. If you are doing community service with a group of people such as the homeless, the economically disadvantaged, or elderly people in nursing homes, use examples from this experience to illustrate your answer. Explain.

Moral Analysis and Praxis

The following story, which is attributed to Buddha, illustrates what is meant by praxis in moral philosophy: A group of people came across a man dying from a wound from a poison arrow. Instead of trying to save the man, the crowd stood around debating about where the arrow had come from, who had fired it, and the angle of the trajectory. Meanwhile, the man dies. The proper goal of the philosopher, according to Buddha, is to save the dying man, not to stand around engaging in speculation.

Western philosophical methodology has traditionally focused primarily on one mode of analysis—abstract, logical reasoning—and downplayed praxis. Although logical reasoning is very important in moral philosophy, it represents only one aspect of what is meant by analysis in moral philosophy.

Feminist Methodology and Praxis in Ethical Analysis

In an article entitled "Shifting Perspective: A New Approach to Ethics," Canadian philosopher Sheila Mullett outlines a process for ethical analysis based on what she calls a feminist methodology. Mullett's approach to ethical analysis involves three steps or dimensions:

1. The first dimension, **moral sensitivity**, grows out of a collective consciousness raising. Until we develop an awareness of the experience of violence,

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*An asterisk indicates that the exercise is appropriate for students who are doing community service learning as part of the course.

victimization, and pain that surrounds us, we will continue to inadvertently perpetuate it. Only through actually experiencing—directly or indirectly—"this consciousness of pain," Mullett argues, "can we begin to cultivate a new attitude towards the social arrangements which contribute to suffering."[4] College community service learning programs have the potential to enhance our moral sensitivity.

2. The second dimension is **ontological shock. Ontology** is the philosophical study of "being" or the nature of being. Ontological shock is something that shakes us to the very core of our being, thus forcing us to call into question our cherished worldview or interpretations of our experiences. Simply being aware of the injustices and pain in the world are not sufficient to motivate us to do this. When we experience ontological shock, the worldview that we once took for granted is displaced, thereby forcing us to reanalyze our old assumptions. Freshmen who have never lived away from home often experience ontological shock when they go away to college and come into contact with different ideas and values.

3. The third dimension of analysis is **praxis**. Praxis refers to the practice of a particular art or skill. In ethics, praxis requires informed social action. True philosophical analysis always returns with an altered and heightened consciousness to the world of particular experiences. For example, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, which created ontological shock among Americans, were followed by an increase in altruistic behavior among New Yorkers.

Liberation Ethics and Social Action

Liberation ethicist Paulo Freire, in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, writes: "This shift in consciousness includes a search for collective actions that can transform the existing unjust social structures. . . ."[5] Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation."[6] Indeed, genuine praxis demands a shift away from the manner in which an individual routinely sees the world to viewing the world through the eyes of the collective "we." For example, there was an increase in hostility against Muslim-Americans following 9/11 and, more recently, the Boston Marathon shootings in 2013. This type of thinking is due in part to an error or bias in human thinking, known as the "one of them/one of us" error, in which we divide the world into the "good guys" (us) and the "bad guys" (them). Hispanic immigrants, especially those who are in the country illegally, also tend to be relegated to the "them" category. Praxis requires that we become aware of this tendency and work to overcome it by treating all people with proper respect.

Analysis, in this broader sense, is interactive, interdisciplinary, and directed toward praxis or social action. This approach is not only richer and more inclusive but also more effective for promoting moral growth. Praxis demands that we cultivate our own moral character. Until we overcome our own narrow

interpretations of the world and incorporate these changes into our personal life, it is unlikely that we will be able to sustain our involvement in praxis.

> Thought without practice is empty, practice without thought is blind.
>
> —KWAME NKRUMAH, former president of Ghana

Exercises

1. Relate the notion of ontological shock to a time when your worldview was shaken. How did you respond to the shock? Did it make you more morally sensitive and more likely to act upon your moral beliefs? Explain.

2. The civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s involved the application of moral analysis to praxis. Malcolm X (1925–1965) wrote the following about the importance of taking action in the ongoing struggle against racism:

   > I believe in political action, yes. Any kind of political action. I believe in action period. Whatever kind of action is necessary. When you hear me say "by any means necessary," I mean exactly that. I believe in anything that is necessary to correct unjust conditions—political, economic, social, physical, anything that's necessary. I believe in it as long as it's intelligently directed and designed to get results.[7]

   What do you think Malcolm X meant when he said "by any means necessary"? Relate his comments to the concept of praxis.

3. Who is your hero (your hero can be a real or fictional person)? Is your hero more willing than the average person to engage in serious analysis of his or her own cultural worldviews? More likely to engage in praxis than most people? Explain, using examples to illustrate your answer.

*4. Discuss your choice of community service in terms of the three levels of thinking and the concept of praxis. Relate your service learning as well to Mullett's three dimensions of ethical analysis.

Overcoming Resistance

Nothing strong, nothing new, nothing urgent penetrates man's mind without crossing resistance.

—HENRI DE LUBAC, *Paradoxes* (1969)

Most of us hate to be proved wrong. When a particular paradigm becomes thoroughly entrenched in our worldview, we may begin to see it as fact rather than an interpretation of experience, especially if we benefit by that particular

worldview. For example, when slavery was legal, it was seen as a natural part of the world order by those who benefited from it. Few White people bothered to analyze or even to question the morality of the practice. Even President Abraham Lincoln did not always support the abolition of slavery in his public statements. In his first inaugural speech, Lincoln reassured the Southern voters that "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."[8] Fortunately, Lincoln had the moral courage to reevaluate his position on slavery.

To avoid having our worldview challenged, we may use a type of defense mechanism known as resistance. **Defense mechanisms** are psychological tools, which we usually learn at an early age, for coping with difficult situations. Defense mechanisms can be divided into two main types: (1) coping and (2) resistance.

Healthy Defense Mechanisms

Coping, or healthy defense mechanisms, allows us to work through challenges to our worldview and to adjust our life in ways that maintain our integrity. Healthy ways of coping include logical analysis, objectivity, tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, and suppression of harmful emotional responses.

Immature Defense Mechanisms

Resistance, in contrast, involves the use of immature defense mechanisms that are rigid, impulsive, maladaptive, and nonanalytical. Isolation, rationalization, and denial are all examples of immature defense mechanisms.[9] Everyone uses defense mechanisms at times to keep from feeling overwhelmed. Children from abusive backgrounds often find it necessary to construct rigid defenses to avoid being crushed by their circumstances. The problem arises, though, when people carry these once-appropriate defense mechanisms into their adult life. When resistance becomes a habitual way of responding to issues, it acts as a barrier to critical analysis of interpretations or worldview (Figure 2.5).

Connections

What are the stages of moral development? *See Chapter 3, pages 90–94.*

The use of immature defense mechanisms or resistance impedes our moral development. Daniel Hart and Susan Chmiel, in a study of the influence of defense mechanisms on moral reasoning, found a strong relationship between the use of immature defense mechanisms in adolescence and lower levels of moral development in adulthood.[10] The habitual use of resistance entails avoiding experiences and ideas that challenge our worldview. This, in itself, can create both anxiety and boredom. Resistance can also numb us to the needs of others, immobilize us in the face of moral outrage, and prevent us from devising a plan of action.

Rather than being prisoners of our past, we can take steps to overcome immature defense mechanisms, including recognizing which ones we use, that stand in the way of our making effective moral decisions in our lives. In