Ethics for Life

A Text with Readings

Eighth Edition

JUDITH A. BOSS, PhD

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To My Interns

Contents

Preface xi

Section I The Study of Ethics 1

CHAPTER 1 **Ethics: An Overview 3**

What Is Ethics? 5
Analyzing Images: Plato and Socrates 7
Normative and Theoretical Ethics 7
Philosophy and the Search for Wisdom 11
Analyzing Images: "The Death of Socrates" by Jacques-Louis David 13
Metaphysics and the Study of Human Nature 17
Analyzing Images: Jerry Sandusky, former Penn State football coach 22
Moral Knowledge: Can Moral Beliefs Be True? 23
Summary 27
Notes 28

CHAPTER 2 **Moral Reasoning 30**

The Three Levels of Thinking 31
Moral Analysis and Praxis 35
Overcoming Resistance 37
Analyzing Images: Denial 40
Analyzing Images: January 6, 2021, angry mob storms Capitol 41
The Role of *Is* and *Ought* Statements in Ethics 45
Recognizing and Constructing Moral Arguments 47
Avoiding Informal Fallacies 53
Analyzing Images: Abortion protesters 56
Resolving Moral Dilemmas 65

Analyzing Images: Economic recession of 2020-2021 66
A Final Word 69
Summary 70
Notes 71

CHAPTER 3 **Conscience and Moral Development 72**
Ethics and Human Development 72
Conscience: Culturally Relative or Universal? 74
Analyzing Images: Skull of Phineas P. Gage 77
Analyzing Images: Black Lives Matter demonstration 79
The Affective and Cognitive Sides of the Conscience 82
Analyzing Images: Rosa Parks on bus 85
Lawrence Kohlberg: The Stage Theory of Moral Development 90
Carol Gilligan: The Care Perspective 95
Analyzing Images: Malala Yousafzai 96
The Four Components of Moral Behavior 99
Analyzing Images: Dharun Ravi, Rutgers Webcam spy 100
Analyzing Images: The Dalai Lama 104
Moral Maturity: Moving Beyond Ethical Relativism 106
Summary 107
Notes 109

Section II Ethical Relativism 113

CHAPTER 4 **Ethical Subjectivism: Morality Is Just a Matter of Personal Feeling 115**
What Is Ethical Subjectivism? 115
Analyzing Images: The Blind Men and the Elephant 117
What Ethical Subjectivism Is Not 119
Analyzing Images: James Holmes, mass murderer 120
The Roots of Ethical Subjectivism in Romantic Sentimentalism 123
Analyzing Images: Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lector 126
The Kitty Genovese Syndrome 127
Analyzing Images: The Kitty Genovese Syndrome 128
Critique of Ethical Subjectivism 130

Summary 133

The Basic Idea of Ethical Subjectivism by James Rachels 134

Student Relativism by Stephen A. Satris 135

Notes 136

CHAPTER 5 **Divine Command Theory and Civil Religion 138**

Religion and Morality 139

The Divine Command Theory 140

Analyzing Images: "God's Junk Mail" 141

Analyzing Images: Abraham and Isaac 142

Critique of Divine Command Theory 144

Analyzing Images: September 11th, 2001 147

Civil Religion, Society, and National Morality 148

Analyzing Images: American civil religion 150

Religion and the Moral Community 154

Does Morality Need Religion? 157

Summary 160

Euthyphro by Plato 161

Notes 163

CHAPTER 6 **Cultural Relativism: Is Morality Dependent on Culture? 165**

What Is Cultural Relativism? 166

What Cultural Relativism Is Not 168

Analyzing Images: Ku Klux Klan lynching 169

Analyzing Images: Chen Guangcheng, Chinese dissident 171

Distinguishing between Cultural and Sociological Relativism 172

Social Darwinian Ethics: The Concept of Moral Progress 176

Ruth Benedict: Cultural Relativism as a Protest against Social Darwinism 178

Analyzing Images: Polygamy in South Africa 179

Cultural Relativism and the Moral Community 182

Analyzing Images: Tuskegee syphilis study 186

Analyzing Images: Marginalized peoples 188

Cultural Relativism, Cross-Cultural Criticism, and Moral Progress 190

Analyzing Images: Child operatives in Massachusetts mill 192
The Holocaust and Disillusionment with Cultural Relativism 194
Analyzing Images: Adolf Eichmann on trial 196
Critique of Cultural Relativism 198
Summary 202
Anthropology and the Abnormal by Ruth Benedict 203
Notes 205

Section III Morality as Universal 207

CHAPTER 7 **Ethical Egoism: Morality Is Acting in Our Best Self-Interest 209**
What Is Ethical Egoism? 210
Thomas Hobbes: Psychological Egoism 212
Analyzing Images: Scene from Lord of the Flies 213
Analyzing Images: Firefighters rescuing a victim of 9/11 214
Ayn Rand: Objectivist Ethics and Rational Ethical Egoism 217
Ethical Egoism and Laissez-Faire Capitalism 220
Analyzing Images: Homeless man 222
Analyzing Images: Sweatshop in China 225
Ethical Egoism and the Moral Community 227
Self-Interest and Happiness 230
Critique of Ethical Egoism 232
Summary 235
Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes 237
Notes 239

CHAPTER 8 **Utilitarianism: The Greatest Happiness Principle 241**
Utilitarianism and the Principle of Utility 242
Analyzing Images: American drone in flight 246
Jeremy Bentham: Utilitarianism and Social Reform 247
John Stuart Mill: Reformulation of Utilitarianism 253
Analyzing Images: Protesters at University of Georgia 256
Mo Tzu: Utilitarianism as Universal Love 258

Utilitarianism and the Moral Community 260
Analyzing Images: Animal experimentation 262
The Principle of Utility in Public Policy 264
Critique of Utilitarianism 270
Summary 274
An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation by Jeremy Bentham 276
Utilitarianism by John Stuart Mill 277
Notes 278

CHAPTER 9 **Natural Law Theory: Morality Is Part of Rational Nature 281**
What Is Natural Law Ethics? 281
Thomas Aquinas: Catholic Natural Law Ethics 284
Just War Theory 288
Analyzing Images: Afghan town destroyed by military strike 289
Henry David Thoreau: Natural Law Theory and Civil Disobedience 290
Analyzing Images: Sioux engaged in civil disobedience 291
Analyzing Images: Civil dissident in Tiananmen Square 293
Analyzing Images: Martin Luther King Jr., "I have a dream" speech 296
Natural Law Theory and Contemporary Moral Issues 298
Critique of Natural Law Theory 302
Summary 304
The Summa Theologica by Thomas Aquinas 305
On the Duty of Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau 306
Notes 308

CHAPTER 10 **Deontology: The Ethics of Duty 309**
Deontology and Duty 309
Immanuel Kant: The Categorical Imperative 312
Analyzing Images: Young people using social media 316
The Good Will and Proper Self-Esteem 318
Analyzing Images: Immanuel Kant 320
Confucius: Duty and the Community 324
Analyzing Images: Polar bear on melting iceberg 325

Is the Duty Not to Lie Absolute? 327
Prima Facie Deontology 331
Analyzing Images: Slave ship 335
The Duty of Justice 338
Analyzing Images: Vietnam War protesters 341
Analyzing Images: The death penalty 343
Summary 348
The Analects of Confucius by James Legge, Translator 349
Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics by Immanuel Kant 350
Notes 352

CHAPTER 11 **Rights Ethics 354**
The Emergence of Rights Ethics in Modern Society 355
Analyzing Images: Signing of the Declaration of Independence 356
Analyzing Images: Students demanding equal education opportunities for undocumented students 359
John Locke: Natural Rights Ethics 360
Analyzing Images: The Cherokee on the Trail of Tears 362
The Marxist Critique of Natural Rights Ethics 365
Analyzing Images: Slums and wealth in New Delhi 369
Rights and Duties 370
Liberty (Negative) Rights and Welfare (Positive) Rights 374
Analyzing Images: Same-sex wedding 377
Rights and the Moral Community 381
Critique of Rights Ethics 386
Summary 388
Two Treatises of Civil Government by John Locke 390
Notes 391

CHAPTER 12 **Virtue Ethics and the Good Life 393**
Virtue Ethics and Character 394
Analyzing Images: Mahatma Gandhi 396
Aristotle: Reason and Virtue 399
Aristotle and Confucius: The Doctrine of the Mean 400

David Hume: Sentiment and Virtue 403
Analyzing Images: David Hume 405
Nel Noddings: Feminist Care Ethics 407
Analyzing Images: "Death with dignity" 408
Is Virtue Relative to Culture, Social Status, and Gender? 412
Moral Integrity and the Unity of Virtue 418
Analyzing Images: Superheroes 419
Virtue and Moral Education 421
Analyzing Images: College students serving in a soup kitchen 423
Critique of Virtue Ethics 424
Summary 426
Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle 427
Notes 429

AFTERWORD **Applying Moral Theory in Real Life 432**
Note 434

Glossary 435
Index 440

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, more college students are engaging in community service.[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. It also relates moral theory to current events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the election of President Joe Biden, the 2021 insurrection at the United States Capitol, and undocumented immigration.

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 exercises that focus on multicultural issues and problems of racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism. In addition, each chapter features Analyzing Images boxes 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.

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.

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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): 183–98.
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): 183–84.
5. Judith A. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students," *Journal of Moral Education* 23, no. 2 (1994): 183–98
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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- Jordan Cunningham, Eastern Washington University

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SECTION I

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.

CHAPTER 2

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

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


At a September 2017 rally former President Donald 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/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, pages 56–57.*

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*.

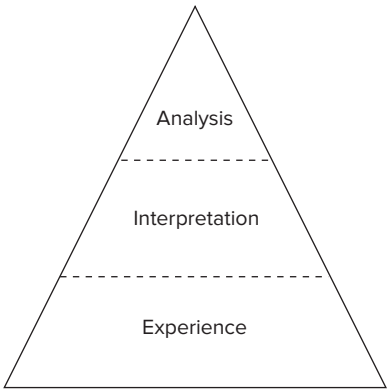


FIGURE 2.1 The Three Levels of Thinking

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:

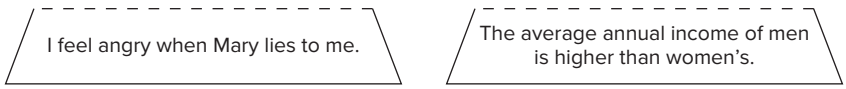


FIGURE 2.2 Statements at the Experience Level

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.

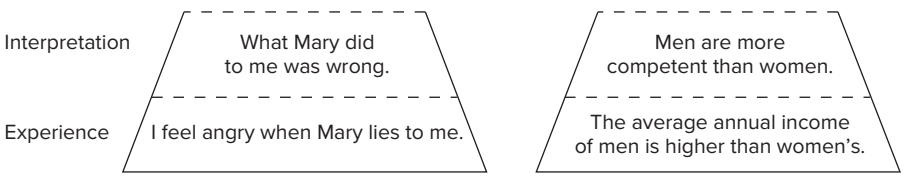


FIGURE 2.3 Statements at the Interpretation Level

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.

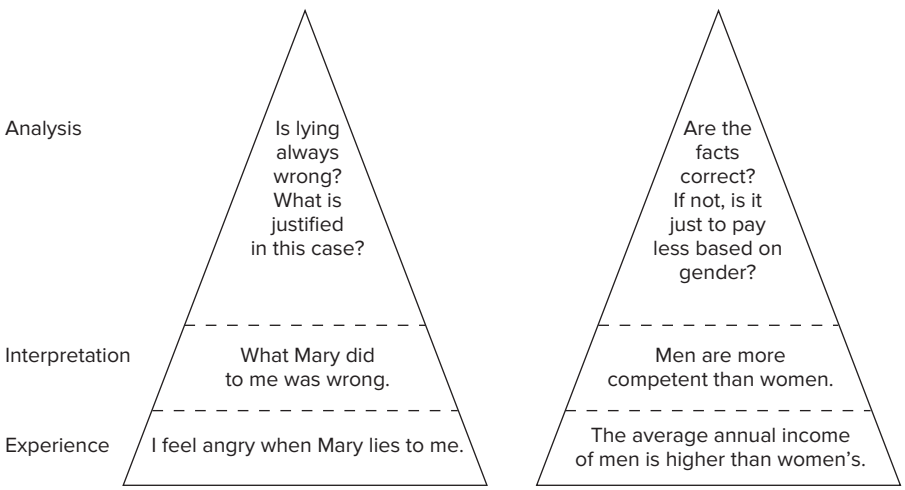


FIGURE 2.4 Statements at the Analysis Level

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

Connections
At what level of thinking are cultural relativists and how does this affect their moral decision making? *See Chapter 6, pages 166–167.*

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.

Connections
How do cultural relativists define who is in the moral community? *See Chapter 6, pages 182–184.*

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 13.4 percent of the U.S. population, they make up 37.5 percent of the prison inmates.[3]
b. In 2020, only 53 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the presidential election, well below the 66 percent for all voters. Although this was the highest voter turnout since 1900, it was still lower than that of most other Western democracies, including Australia, Canada, and most European countries. Why do you think this is so? Should voting be mandatory as it is in some countries? Support your answers.
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 illegal in many U.S. state.
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

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

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, 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.

Connections
What role does moral sensitivity play in women's moral development?
See Chapter 3, page 95.

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.

Connections
Do we behave altruistically simply out of self-interest?
See Chapter 7, pages 212–216.

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

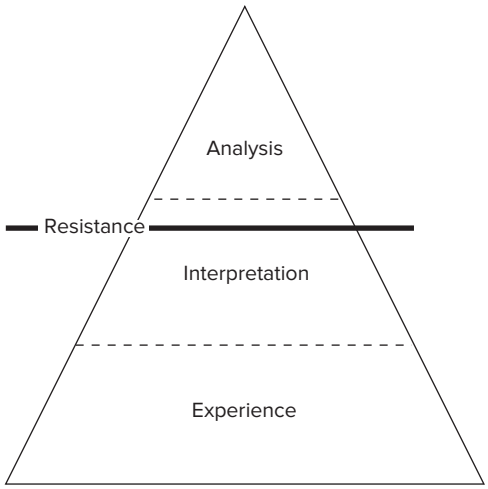


FIGURE 2.5 Resistance as a Defense Mechanism

stand in the way of our making effective moral decisions in our lives. In identifying our resistance, we may find that we rely primarily on one type of resistance, or we may have a repertoire of several types depending on the situation. The following are a few of the types of resistance that people are prone to use when their moral views are challenged.

Ignorance There are situations where we are ignorant simply because the information is not available. Sometimes, however, we avoid learning about particular issues because we just do not want to know. Some people think that not knowing excuses them from having to think about the issue or take a stand. As a result, problems such as global conflicts and poverty continue to get worse. Ignorance is regarded as a vice and a hindrance to the good life in virtually all world philosophies. Socrates is reputed to have said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Confucius taught that "ignorance is the night of the mind." "Ignorance," writes Hindu Yogi Swami Prabhavananda, "creates all the other obstacles."[11]

Avoidance Rather than seeking out people who have different points of view, we may avoid certain people and situations and instead hang out only with people who agree with us. Some people who hold very strong opinions about certain moral issues, yet are insecure in the face of challenges to their position, only read literature or watch news shows that support their opinion and only attend social and political events, meetings, or rallies attended by people who agree with them, a phenomenon known as *confirmation bias.* More and more Americans have been choosing to live in communities of like-minded people and to watch television news shows that support their views.[12] The tendency to avoid controversial situations or people with opinions unlike our own can lead to a serious lack of communication and even hostility between people who hold widely opposing points of view.

YAY Media AS/Alamy Stock Photo

Analyzing Images

1. Has there ever been a time when you've preferred ignorance to being informed? Compare the outcome of your experience to that of the businessmen in the cartoon above.
2. Some people accuse college students of taking the attitude that "ignorance is bliss" when it comes to public life and policies. Do you agree? Support your answer. Relate your answer to the issue of low-voter turnout among young people in national elections.

Denial Andrè Trocme, a leader in the French Resistance in World War II, defined denial as "a willingness to be self-deceived."[13] During World War II, most Germans tacitly supported the war effort by denying the cruelty of the Nazi policies. Similarly, parents may be in denial regarding their children's destructive lifestyles until it is too late. Mothers in incestuous families may fail to take action to halt the sexual abuse, not because they don't care about their children but because they have convinced themselves that such a terrible thing could not really be happening. Denial is also common in people who are addicted to alcohol or drugs. Denial keeps people from acknowledging and working on solutions to these pressing moral problems.

Anger We cannot always avoid people who disagree with us. Some people respond by getting angry when they are confronted with a challenge to their views. Anger may be expressed overtly by physical violence or threats, or it may be expressed more subtly in angry phrases such as "don't force your views on me," an expression that implies, ironically, that the person challenging another's

views is somehow threatening his or her autonomy. Anger as a form of resistance is most effective in thwarting disagreement when backed by a large group of supporters or when a person has greater social, political, or physical power. In this case the rioters miscalculated the support they would get from Trump and their fellow Republicans.

In January 2021, an angry mob of Donald Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, ransacking offices and assaulting police, in an attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election that they believed had been stolen from Trump, rather than legitimately won by Joe Biden. The riot resulted in five deaths, millions of dollars of property damage, and the arrest of more than 140.
Valerio Pucci/Shutterstock

Analyzing Images

1. Discuss whether or not this is an example of anger as a form of resistance. Support your answer.
2. How did you respond to the election of Joe Biden? If you felt that Trump actually won, or that the election was unfair, how did you react? Did you engage in resistance and, if so, which type of resistance? Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.

Not all anger involves resistance. We may feel anger or moral indignation when we hear that one of our favorite professors was denied tenure because he

is Arab. Rather than acting as a barrier to analysis, this type of anger may motivate us to correct this injustice by writing a well-argued letter of protest to the local newspaper. We'll look more into the role of moral sentiments in Chapter 3.

Connections

Why was Eichmann a "good" citizen from the point of view of a cultural relativist? *See Chapter 6, pages 195–196.*

Clichés "Don't force your views on me." "It's all relative." "To each his own." "Things always work out for the best." "I have a right to my own opinion." Hannah Arendt wrote that when Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann was challenged to analyze the contradictions of his society, he became "genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché."[14] Used sparingly, clichés can be useful for illustrating a point; however, the habitual use of clichés in responding to challenges to our worldview keeps us from thinking seriously about issues.

Conformity/Superficial Tolerance Many people are afraid that they will not be accepted by their peers if they disagree with them. Even though they may actually disagree, they go along with the group rather than risk rejection. For example, suppose that someone at a party makes an offensive ethnic or sexist joke. Rather than speaking up or leaving the room, some people will either laugh or say nothing, thus tolerating and perpetuating the bigotry.

> Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything, and so popular that it will include everyone.
>
> —Martin Luther King Jr.

Some people who engage in superficial tolerance really do not have a point of view of their own. The expression "I can see both sides of the issue" often masks a reluctance to analyze the various and often contradictory sides of a moral issue. Italian poet Dante (1265–1321) had a dim view of people who use this sort of resistance. In his *Divine Comedy*, he reserved "the darkest places in Hell" for those who decide to remain neutral when confronted with a moral conflict.

"I'm Struggling" During the Nazi occupation of France in World War II, the 3,500 people of the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon provided refuge for Jews who were fleeing the Nazis. In doing this, the villagers took tremendous risks. When Pierre Sauvage, who directed *Weapons of the Spirit*—a documentary about the resistance movement of Le Chambon—was asked years later why the people of Le Chambon acted, while others were still struggling about what to do, Sauvage replied: "Those who struggle don't act; those who act don't struggle." It is appropriate to wrestle with moral issues before reaching at least a tentative stand; but for some people, the struggle is used to avoid taking a stand while still creating an appearance of being concerned.

Distractions The use of distractions is a popular means of blocking out conflicting thoughts. Some people hate silence and being alone with their thoughts. They turn on the television or have loud music playing whenever they are home alone. Or they use alcohol, drugs, food, partying, work, talking on their cell phones, logging onto the Internet, or shopping for things they don't really need as a means of keeping their mind off of their problems. Indeed, some enterprising people have become wealthy marketing distractions to the public.

Mental hindrances, according to Buddhist teaching, keep us from having clear understanding. For this reason, most Eastern philosophies emphasize the importance of stillness and quiet contemplation for achieving wisdom. Putting aside resistance often means experiencing uncomfortable feelings and ideas that we have been defending ourselves against. Because giving up old ways of thinking can be both painful and confusing, people will rarely change without being challenged through *knowledge perturbation*, also known as **cognitive dissonance**. Knowledge perturbation occurs when our worldview is called into question, thus throwing us into a state of ontological shock. Socrates was a master at knowledge perturbation. It is also practiced by some Eastern philosophers and masters.

Connections

Why was Socrates put to death by the state? *See Chapter 1, pages 6–7.*

Types of Resistance

Resistance is the habitual use of immature defense mechanisms when our worldviews are challenged.

Ignorance Not learning about a particular issue because we don't want to know.

Avoidance Staying away from people and situations that challenge our worldviews.

Denial Refusing to acknowledge problems and issues.

Anger Using threats or violence to keep others from challenging our views.

Clichés Responding with trite sayings or expressions when our views are challenged.

Conformity/Superficial Tolerance Agreeing simply for the sake of agreeing.

"I'm Struggling" Wrestling with an issue as a substitute for taking a stand.

Distractions Turning to diversions to keep from thinking about troubling issues.

Philosophy is a social pursuit. Both the Socratic method and the traditional master–disciple relationship used in Eastern philosophy provide a supportive context in which the student can engage in self-examination. An experienced teacher or supportive friends can help us identify and work through our resistance by challenging us and offering constructive criticism.

Doublethink

Because most people resist analyzing their worldviews, they may unwittingly get caught up in *doublethink*, a term coined by author George Orwell. **Doublethink**

involves holding two contradictory views at the same time and believing both to be true. Orwell's novel *1984* was written in 1948, in part, as a warning that, unless we recognize the insidious role of doublethink in our society, we will continue to head down the path toward destruction.

In Allan Bloom's book on U.S. colleges and universities, *The Closing of the American Mind*, the author claims that most students believe morality is relative and that there are no universal moral values. At the same time, however, these students profess to believe that human equality and tolerance are universal moral values!

> There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. . . . Students nowadays are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality. . . . The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. . . . The point is not to correct the mistake and be really right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.

Connections

What are the moral issues in the debate over animal rights? *See Chapter 11, pages 383.*

Doublethink often takes the form of supporting double standards. For example, surveys indicate that most college students believe that women should be the primary caregivers of children, but these students will just as vehemently argue that they believe in equality and freedom of choice for all humans in regard to lifestyle and career. Many people also claim that they believe in animal rights. They point out that they are morally opposed to hunting or to the mistreatment of pets. Yet, they have no qualms about eating meat or wearing animal products (leather shoes or fur coats).

Sometimes, doublethink involves a conflict between our expressed worldview and our actual actions. In 2006, students at Boston College were up in arms when President Bush's secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, was invited to speak at graduation and receive an honorary degree. Student groups called for the invitation to speak to be revoked because the Bush administration had such a bad record when it came to the issue of freedom of speech. In other words, the students demanded that Rice's freedom to speak at graduation be squelched in order to demonstrate their support of freedom of speech!

To use another example, most teachers, even those who claim to be ardent feminists, treat their female students differently than their male students. They call on the boys more often, praise their accomplishments more often, and are more tolerant of their disruptive behavior.[15] Yet, when teachers are told this, the great majority will deny that it happens in their classroom. When teachers are shown videotapes of their classes, most are shocked at the extent to which they ignore the girls in the classroom and downplay their abilities.

In other words, doublethink often goes unnoticed. For this reason, it is important to be on the alert for doublethink in our lives. This involves learning what type of resistance we are most likely to use when our views are challenged. It may seem that, by avoiding conflict, life will be more tranquil; in fact, habitual resistance takes a lot of energy. When we shut out ideas and experiences that conflict with our cherished worldview, we also shut out much of life's richness.

Exercises

1. Name some of your healthy coping mechanisms. What can you do to strengthen these?
2. What type of resistance are you most likely to use when one of your cherished worldviews is challenged? Illustrate your answer with a specific example of a time you used this type of resistance during a discussion about a moral issue. What can you do to make yourself less prone to use this type of resistance?
3. Relate Orwell's concept of doublethink to a specific current political issue or foreign policy and to your own thinking on these issues and policies.
4. Studies focusing on the college experience have found that college freshmen are particularly influenced by peer opinion. Do you think that you were more of a conformist when you first entered college? How did this tendency to conform affect your views on morality?
5. Do you agree with Allan Bloom that the morality espoused by most students involves doublethink? Why or why not? What about the belief that morality is relative? How might this theory itself involve doublethink?

*6. If you are doing community service, has it helped you to strengthen your healthy coping mechanisms and to overcome your immature coping mechanisms (resistance)? If so, give specific examples.

The Role of *Is* and *Ought* Statements in Ethics

Descriptive Statements

Descriptive statements tell us what *is*. Descriptive statements are either true or false. As Detective Joe Friday, of the old *Dragnet* television series, used to say, "Just the facts, ma'am." Here are some examples of a descriptive statement:

> I saw a man pulling a screaming woman into the bushes outside the Classroom Building at 8:54 a.m.
>
> At 11:17 p.m. last night, my roommate said to me, "I promise to clean the bathroom before I go to bed."
>
> This morning I saw Olivia coming out of John's room.
>
> The average temperature of Narragansett Bay has increased by 3°F in the past fifty years.

Prescriptive Statements

Prescriptive statements deal with values. They tell us what *ought to be:*

> We *ought* to tell the truth to Detective Friday about what happened on campus this morning.
>
> It is wrong to (that is, we *ought* not to) hurt other people for our own amusement.
>
> People *ought* to keep their promises.
>
> We *ought* to cut down on our use of fossil fuels, which contribute to global warming.

Moral values are only one type of value. *Nonmoral values* include good health; aesthetic values; social values such as power, fame, and popularity; economic values; and political values such as national integrity and solidarity. Only moral values carry the force of the *ought*. Although it would be awfully nice to be healthy, wealthy, popular, and a straight A student, moral values, by their very nature, demand that we give them precedence over nonmoral values when they conflict.

Connections

How can the utilitarian calculus help us make better moral decisions? *See Chapter 8, pages 249–252.*

Unlike science, which is descriptive, ethics is primarily *prescriptive* with descriptive statements playing a supportive role. When making moral decisions, we use descriptive statements about the world and about human nature, along with prescriptive statements about moral values. It is important for making an informed moral decision that we first get our facts straight. For example, in the current debate over same-sex marriage, has legalizing same-sex marriage weakened traditional marriage, as some critics claim it will?

The social sciences are important to ethics because they systematically test our ideas about human nature and society. Our ideas may be useless, and even harmful, if they are not grounded in reality. For example, many moral philosophers in the past have operated on the assumption that women are not as capable of rationality as are men. Domination of women by men was morally justified on the grounds that women needed the guidance and protection of men. Good intentions alone, in other words, are insufficient to guide our moral decision making.

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

—old English proverb

To use another example, until relatively recently, many physicians lied to patients who were dying. Physicians justified the practice based on their limited experience with a few distressed patients. When properly controlled studies were carried out regarding the effects of knowing the truth, it was discovered that people with terminal cancer actually did better and lived longer if they knew the truth about their condition.[16]

Ethics goes beyond science and observation, however. We cannot go directly from a descriptive statement about how things are to a statement about how things ought to be. For example, most patients with terminal cancer do better if they know they are dying, but this does not mean that we *ought* to tell Juan, who is depressed and suicidal, that he has cancer. Similarly, social scientists have found that individuals are more likely to help those who are most like them, but we cannot decide, based on this description alone, that Professor Smith, who is blond and blue-eyed, *ought* to offer tutoring only to her blond and blue-eyed students. Instead, moral judgments and values—such as "do not lie," "be fair," and "do no harm"—need to be brought into the picture when we are making a decision about the right course of action.

Exercises

1. Looking back at the scenario at the beginning of Chapter 1, construct an imaginary dialogue between yourself and the student who took your book bag. You are trying to convince the student to return your book bag. Which statements in the conversation are descriptive and which are prescriptive? Discuss how these two types of statements support each other.
2. Do you think it is morally acceptable for Professor Smith to give preferential treatment to her blond, blue-eyed students? Would it make any difference if she believed it was right? What if her intentions were "good"? For example, suppose that she genuinely believed that only blue-eyed people had intellectual potential and that it was unfair to give non-blue-eyed people the false hope (by providing tutoring) that they might be able to succeed in college. Support your answers.
3. Make a list of general guidelines that you use in making moral decisions. Where did you get these guidelines? Compare your list with those of other students in the class. To what extent do the lists correspond to each other? Is there a general theme or themes underlying your list of guidelines? If so, what are these themes?
4. Some people claim that *knowing* what is right is harder than *doing* what is right. Others say just the opposite: that doing what you know to be right is harder. Which do you find harder? Explain why using specific examples.
5. Discuss a time when you put, or were tempted to put, nonmoral values over moral values. How did you resolve the conflict? Were you satisfied with how you resolved the conflict? Explain.

Recognizing and Constructing Moral Arguments

> *The very first lesson that we have a right to demand that logic shall teach us is how to make our ideas clear; and a most important one it is, depreciated only by minds who stand in need of it.*
>
> —Charles Sanders Peirce

Logic

Logic, the study of correct and incorrect reasoning, provides us with the methods and skills to formulate sound moral arguments and to distinguish good arguments from poor arguments. Logic enables us to analyze the logical consistencies and inconsistencies of the different ethical theories. Logic also helps us to make better moral decisions. Without correct reasoning, even a person with good intentions can end up causing more harm than good. Although people may be motivated to do what is right, they cannot always figure out *what* is the best course of action to accomplish this goal.

Connections

Why is cultural relativism based on faulty logic? *See Chapter 6, pages 198–201.*

In addition, there may be times when we know that a person's argument is faulty, but we refrain from speaking out because we cannot figure out exactly what is wrong with the argument. When this happens, we are more likely to back down on our own position or even adopt the other person's and possibly do something that we may later regret. When individuals fail to take appropriate moral action or make a moral decision that they later regret, we call it a **moral tragedy**. A knowledge of logic helps us to break through patterns of resistance—our own and those of others—and thus avoid moral tragedies.

Recognizing Moral Arguments

The Components of an Argument To distinguish between correct and incorrect reasoning, we need to be able to recognize arguments. An **argument** is made up of two or more propositions; one of these is claimed to follow from or be supported by the others. A **proposition** is a statement that expresses a complete thought. It can be either true or false. The **conclusion** is the proposition that is affirmed or denied on the basis of other propositions in the argument. The **premise** is a proposition that supports or gives reasons for accepting the conclusion. An argument can have one or many premises.

In an argument, we move from the premise(s) to the conclusion through a process known as *inference:*

Premise(s) ⟶ Inference ⟶ Conclusion

There are two types of logical arguments: inductive and deductive. In a **deductive argument**, the conclusion *necessarily* follows from the premises *if* the premises are true and the reasoning process is valid. For example:

> All killing of unarmed people is morally wrong. Capital punishment involves the killing of unarmed people. Therefore, capital punishment is morally wrong.

In the above argument, we must accept the conclusion as true, if we accept the premises. Of course, not everyone accepts the first premise.

With an **inductive argument**, the conclusion *probably* follows from the premises but we can't be 100 percent sure. The stronger and more complete the premises, the stronger the argument. For example:

> Murder rates are not significantly lower in states that have capital punishment. Therefore, capital punishment is probably not an effective deterrent.

In the above example, we cannot accept the conclusion as necessarily true because there may be other factors at work that influence the murder rate.

Ethical arguments usually contain both descriptive and prescriptive statements or propositions. A proposition in a moral argument can also be a lexical definition of a key term. The proposition "lying is any intentionally deceptive message that is stated" gives us a lexical definition of *lying.* We determine the truth or falsehood of a lexical definition by looking up the term in a dictionary.

Different sentences can express the same proposition. For example, the statements "torturing children is wrong," "it is wrong to torture children," and

"Kinder zu quälen ist unmoralisch" are the same proposition because they all express the same thought. Several propositions can be found in one sentence. French philosopher René Descartes's famous *cogito* argument can be summarized in one sentence, "I think, therefore I am," which contains two propositions: "I think" and "I am."

Tips for Recognizing and Breaking down Arguments

- The entire argument may appear in either one sentence or several sentences.
- The conclusion can appear anywhere in the argument.
- Identify the conclusion first. Ask yourself: What is this person trying to prove?
- The conclusion is often, though not always, preceded by words or phrases known as conclusion indicators, such as

therefore	which shows that
hence	for these reasons
thus	consequently

- The premises are often, though not always, preceded by words or phrases known as premise indicators, such as

because	may be inferred that
for	the reason is that
since	as shown by

- Underline, or highlight, the conclusion and the premises.

Premise and Conclusion Indicators Some arguments contain terms known as *premise indicators* and *conclusion indicators* that can help us identify the conclusion and the premises. Words such as *because, since*, and *for* can serve as premise indicators. The words *therefore, thus, hence, so, as*, and *consequently* are examples of conclusion indicators. Indicators signal that a premise or conclusion follows. In the argument "I think, therefore I am," the word *therefore* tells us that the conclusion is "I am."

The bad news is that not all arguments contain indicators. In addition, words such as *since, for, therefore, because*, and *as* can serve as premise or conclusion indicators in one context but not in another context. For example, *because* and *therefore* can be used in explanations. In the statement "Ying stole the food because his children were starving," we are not trying to prove that Ying stole the food; rather, we are explaining why he stole the food.

Breaking Down Arguments When breaking down an argument into its components, if there are no premise or conclusion indicators, it is usually easiest to identify the conclusion first. To do this, we should ask ourselves: What is the

argument trying to prove? Let's look at the following inductive argument from an article by Dr. Joseph Collins entitled "Should Doctors Tell the Truth?"

> Every physician should cultivate lying as a fine art. . . . Many experiences show that patients do not want the truth about their maladies, and that it is prejudicial to their well-being to know it.[17]

There are three separate propositions in this argument.

> 1. [*Every physician should cultivate lying as a fine art*] 2. [*Many experiences show that patients do not want the truth about their maladies*] and 3. [(many experiences show) *that it is prejudicial to their well-being to know it* (the truth).]

If you cannot identify the conclusion and there are no conclusion or premise indicators, try inserting a conclusion indicator, such as *therefore*, before the proposition that you suspect might be the conclusion. Or try inserting a premise indicator, such as *because*, before the proposition(s) that you think might be the premise(s). If the argument is not essentially changed by the addition of an indicator, this means that it is in the right place.

> 1. [*Every physician should cultivate the fine art of lying*] because 2. [*Many experiences show that patients do not want the truth about their maladies*] and because 3. [(many experiences show) *that it is prejudicial to their well-being to know it* (the truth).]

In the preceding argument, the first proposition is the conclusion, and propositions 2 and 3 are the supporting premises. The first premise (proposition 2) is a descriptive statement about an **empirical** fact. In this case, we might want to find out how many patients were surveyed and whether the sample was representative. The second premise (proposition 3) is also a descriptive proposition. The claim is that knowing the truth will bring harm to the patient in the form of anguish and earlier death.

Connections
Is lying always wrong? *See Chapter 10, pages 327–328.*

If the premises are found to be false or logically unrelated to the conclusion, as they are in this argument, then we have a poor argument. However, this does not necessarily mean that the conclusion itself is false or worthless: It is simply unsubstantiated.

Some arguments have unstated premises. It is sometimes assumed that certain beliefs are so generally accepted that there is no need to state them. In the preceding argument, there is an unstated third premise regarding a moral principle, the *principle of nonmaleficence*, also known as the "do no harm" principle. You may be surprised to learn that premises about general moral principles or sentiments are often the least controversial of the premises—an observation that runs contrary to the popular belief that morality is relative and varies from individual to individual.

Rhetoric Many people mistake rhetoric for logical argument. **Rhetoric**, also known as *the art of persuasion*, is often used by politicians as a means of promoting a particular worldview rather than analyzing it. In logical arguments, we end

with the conclusion. Rhetoric, in contrast, begins with a conclusion or position. The rhetorician then presents only those claims that support his or her particular position. The purpose of rhetoric is to win over your opponents through the power of persuasive speech; the purpose of argumentation is to discover the truth. Some people are so emotionally invested in certain opinions on moral issues that they may unknowingly manipulate their arguments to "prove" a conclusion that does not logically follow from the premise(s).

Constructing Moral Arguments

When constructing an argument about a moral issue, we begin by making a list of premises. *Never* begin by first stating your position or opinion and then seeking only evidence that supports your particular position in an attempt to persuade those who disagree with you to come around to your way of thinking while dismissing offhand any conflicting views.

When coming up with premises, it is generally most productive to work with others, especially those who disagree with us. According to Socrates, it is through the process of dialogue that we can test our views and, ideally, come closer to discovering the truth. The following is a summary of the steps for constructing an argument:

1. *Develop a list of premises.* In a good argument, the premises will be relatively uncontroversial and acceptable to all, or most, reasonable people. Much of the disagreement in moral arguments, as we noted earlier, stems not from disagreement about basic moral principles but from disagreement about empirical facts or the definitions of ambiguous key terms. It is important to be able to identify relevant moral principles and ideals; in addition, good moral reasoning depends on first getting the facts straight rather than relying on unsupported assumptions or opinions. Any ambiguous key terms should be clearly defined and used in a consistent manner throughout your argument.
2. *Eliminate irrelevant or weak premises.* After coming up with a list of premises, go back and eliminate any that are weak or irrelevant. Resist the temptation to eliminate premises that do not mesh with your particular opinion regarding the moral issue. Also make sure that there are no obvious gaps in the list of premises and no fallacies. We will learn how to recognize some of the more common fallacies later in this chapter.
3. *Come to a conclusion.* The last step in constructing a moral argument is drawing the conclusion. The conclusion should take into account the information in the premises but should not state more than what is contained therein. Conclusions that are too broad include more than the premises say; conclusions that are too narrow ignore certain premises.
4. *Try out the argument on others.* The next step is to try out your argument. When doing this, be careful not to slip into rhetoric. Remember, the mark of a good philosopher is to be open-minded.

5. *Revise your argument if necessary.* The final step in constructing an argument is to revise it in light of feedback and additional information you receive. This may involve changing or modifying your conclusion. If your argument is weak, you should be open to revising it.

Five Steps for Constructing Moral Arguments

1. Develop a list of premises.
2. Eliminate irrelevant or weak premises.
3. Come to a conclusion.
4. Try out your argument on others.
5. Revise your argument if necessary.

Exercises

1. Break down the following arguments into their premises and conclusions. In each of the arguments, ask yourself whether there are other premises that might strengthen the argument. Also, think of premises that might be unstated but simply assumed in each of the arguments.
   a. Racism and sexism are wrong because all people deserve equal respect.
   b. It is immoral to use rabbits in cosmetic experiments because causing pain is immoral, and animals such as rabbits are capable of feeling pain.
   c. People need to pass a driving test to get a license to drive a car. People should also have to take a test and get a license before they can become a parent. After all, parenting is a greater responsibility and requires more skill than driving.
   d. Embryos are not persons with moral rights. Furthermore, the embryos used in stem cell research are going to be discarded anyway. Because we have a moral obligation to help people suffering from disease and the use of stem cell research has the potential to help many of these people, stem cell research should be legal.
   e. We have an obligation to become the best person we can. One of the primary purposes of education is to make us better people. Therefore, colleges should seriously consider having a community service requirement for graduation, since community service has been shown to increase students' self-esteem and facilitate their moral development.
2. Choose one or more of the following controversial moral issues:
   a. Reinstating military conscription for men and women between the ages of eighteen and forty-five
   b. Capital punishment
   c. Giving legal status to undocumented immigrants who came here with their parents as children
   d. Abortion for sex selection

e. Legalization of marijuana
f. Using unmanned drones for assassination
g. Lowering the drinking age to 18
h. The high cost of college tuition

Working in small groups, construct an argument using the five steps listed on page 52.

3. Look back at the argument you constructed in the previous exercise. To what extent were you tempted to engage in rhetoric instead of logical analysis by using only those statements that supported your particular opinion on the topic? Did working in a group make it easier for you to avoid rhetoric? Explain.

Avoiding Informal Fallacies

. . . arguments, like men, are often pretenders.

—PLATO

Connections
On what grounds does W.D. Ross argue that moral duties are prima facie rather than absolute? *See Chapter 10, pages 331-332.*

Most moral arguments are inductive, in part because most moral principles and rights are *prima facie*; that is, they are binding unless they conflict with a pressing moral duty or right. There are several ways in which an inductive argument can be weak or invalid. For example, the premises may be weak or false. When an inductive argument is psychologically or emotionally persuasive but logically incorrect, it contains what logicians call an **informal fallacy**. We are more likely to use fallacies when we are unsure of how to suppprt our position. The use of fallacies may be effective in the short run, but thoughtful people will eventually begin to question the reasoning behind the fallacious argument. Being able to recognize and identify fallacies makes us less likely to fall victim to them or to use them unintentionally in an argument.

In this section, we will look at some of the fallacies that are most likely to appear in moral arguments. As you read through the following descriptions of these fallacies, consider which fallacy or fallacies you are most likely to fall victim to or to use in an argument regarding a moral issue.

Fallacy of Equivocation

Some words or terms—such as *right, duty*, or *relativism*—have several definitions. Most often, the context in which a particular word or phrase is used lets us know which definition is intended; however, this is not always the case. When the meaning of a particular term is unclear from its context, we refer to it as an *ambiguous* term. The **fallacy of equivocation** occurs when an ambiguous word changes meaning in the course of an argument. For example:

Hans: All people have a right to a minimal level of health care.

Beth: That's not true. Our constitution says nothing about people having a right to health care; therefore, as taxpayers we have no obligation to provide it.

Connections
What is the difference between a legal right and a moral right? *See Chapter 11, page 358.*

In this argument, Hans and Beth are using differing meanings of the word *right*. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* gives sixty-two different meanings of *right*! By taking a closer look at their respective arguments, we can see that Hans is most likely talking about rights in terms of moral or human rights, while Beth is using the term to refer to legal rights. Their first task in resolving their disagreement is to agree on which definition of *right* they will use.

Stephen Colbert, host of *The Late Show* on CBS, frequently makes use of this fallacy as in the following example from the April 29, 2006, White House Correspondents' Association dinner in which he equivocates on the word *stand*:

> I stand by this man [President George W. Bush]. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message: that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound—with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world.

Appeal to Force

This fallacy occurs when we use or threaten to use force—whether physical, psychological, or legal—in an attempt to coerce another person to accept our conclusion. The phrase "might is right" summarizes the reasoning (or lack thereof) behind **appeal to force**. This fallacy is illustrated in the following argument:

> Don't disagree with me because if you do I'll slap your #@& face. Don't forget who's paying your tuition. I'll show you who's in charge around here!

Although most people would not be taken in by such overt threats of violence, others such as children may actually come to believe that might does make right. At other times, the intimidation is more subtle. There may be an implied threat to withdraw affection or favors if the other person does not come around to our way of thinking. However, there is no logical connection between being right and having the power to hurt someone else.

This is a particularly dangerous fallacy, not only because it can lead to injury or even death, but because we are taken in by it more often than most of us like to admit. People who have financial, social, or political power over others may come to believe that they deserve their privileged status. This is particularly troublesome when people who lack power start to agree with their oppressors and become resigned to or even blame themselves for their own oppression and inferior status. The disempowered person may also internalize the message that "might is right" and, in turn, attempt to impose his or her views on others by using force against those who are even more socially disenfranchised.

Abusive Fallacy

This fallacy occurs when we disagree with someone's conclusion, but instead of addressing their argument, we turn and attack or slur the character of the person(s) who made the argument. By doing so, we attempt to evoke a feeling of

disapproval toward the person, so that disapproval of the person overflows into disapproval of the person's argument. The **abusive fallacy** is also known as the **ad hominem fallacy**.

Lila: I think abortion is morally wrong.

Chloe: You pro-lifers are just a bunch of narrow-minded, anti-choice, religious fanatics who think they have a right to force their religious morality on others.

Lila: Oh, yeah? Well you pro-choice people are nothing but a bunch of selfish baby-killers who are out to destroy the family and all it stands for!

In the preceding conversation, the issue of the morality of abortion has been completely sidetracked. Instead, Lila and Chloe got caught up in slandering the character of the people who hold the opposing view. When we call people "narrowminded," "idiots," "fanatics," or "selfish baby-killers," we are dismissing their views without ever analyzing them. (See photo on page 56.)

Virtually all great thinkers and reformers, because they challenge us to rethink our cherished worldviews, have had detractors who have tried to discredit their ideas through character assassination. What distinguishes great thinkers is their ability to remain focused and not be distracted by critics' use of fallacies against them. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, for example, first met in 1840 at the World Anti-Slavery Society convention in London, where their husbands were attending as delegates.[18] The women delegates from the United States were denied seats at the convention because of the strenuous objections of some male delegates from the United States. Mott, in response, demanded that she be treated with the same respect accorded any man—white or Black. During these discussions, Stanton, who was then a young newlywed, marveled at the way Mott, a woman of forty-seven, held her own in the argument, "skillfully parried all their attacks . . . turning the laugh on them, and then by her earnestness and dignity silencing their ridicule and jeers."[19] This meeting and Mott's refusal to back down in the face of ridicule and attacks upon her character led to the first women's rights meeting in U.S. history.

Connections

According to feminist care ethics, how do women usually make moral decisions? *See Chapter 3, pages 95–96.*

Circumstantial Fallacy

The **circumstantial fallacy** occurs when we argue that our opponent should accept a certain position because of special circumstances, such as his or her lifestyle or membership in a particular group based on race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or religion. This fallacy, like the previous one, is a type of ad hominem fallacy because it entails attacking one's opponent rather than addressing his or her argument. Here is one example:

> Granted, you may be a vegetarian, but you certainly can't argue against the killing of animals. After all, you do wear leather shoes and use products that were tested on animals.

Antiabortion and pro-abortion rights students confronting each other at a rally in San Francisco. Arguments over abortion often contain fallacies including the abusive fallacy and name-calling.
Jeff McCoy/Shutterstock

Analyzing Images

1. Is the fetus a "person" or a human being? The controversy over abortion stems, in part, from an equivocation on the term *person*. Discuss how someone who is antiabortion and someone who is pro-abortion rights might each define "person" and how their definitions influence their position on abortion.
2. Have a debate in class on the issue of abortion without using fallacies. Afterward, discuss how avoiding fallacious reasoning helped clarify the issue for you.

As in the preceding example, someone can use animal products and still argue against the very practice in which they engage. Likewise, parents who are heavy drinkers or smokers, can give their children sound arguments regarding the evils of alcohol and drug abuse. Being a hypocrite or engaging in doublethink does not invalidate their arguments against alcohol and drug abuse.

Appeal to Inappropriate Authority

In an argument, it is appropriate to use the testimony of someone who is an expert in the field or area that is being debated. We commit a fallacy, however,

when we **appeal to inappropriate authority**, to an expert or authority in a field other than the one under debate. The assumption that someone who is an authority in one field must also be knowledgeable in all other fields is sometimes called the "halo effect." Here's an example:

> My priest says that genetic engineering and cloning are dangerous. Therefore, all experimentation in this field should be stopped immediately.

In this example, the person cited as providing support for the conclusion ("all experimentation in this field should be stopped immediately") is not an expert in the medical field; he is simply someone who is admired as an expert in his particular field of theology. Titles such as Doctor, Professor, President, and Lieutenant and the visual impact of uniforms such as white lab coats and police or military uniforms all increase our perception of a person's authority. We tend to believe and obey these authority figures even when they overextend their authority to the point where it would be appropriate to question their authority.

Postings on social media, especially when they are repeatedly reposted, may also be regarded as authoritative. For example a Facebook post claimed that the nasal swab test for COVID-19 damages the "blood–brain barrier" and can cause brain infections. Many people believed the post which was reposted many times. However, there was no evidence to support this claim. On the contrary, medical experts say the nasal swab test is completely safe.

Popular Appeal

This fallacy occurs when we appeal to popular opinion to gain support for our conclusion. **Popular appeal** can take several different forms. The most common one in moral arguments is the bandwagon approach, when a certain conclusion is assumed to be right because "everyone" is doing it or "everyone" believes it. The following is an example:

> Boston University student Joel Tenenbaum was ordered by the courts to pay $675,000 in damages for illegally downloading music from the Internet. When he was asked by a CNN news reporter if he thought what he had done was wrong, he replied he did not because "everyone in my generation is doing this." Therefore, he concluded what he did was "perfectly acceptable."

Tenebaum's conclusion, unfortunately, was based on the fallacious assumption that the majority of us, or at least the majority in his generation, know what is right.

This fallacy is also committed when we use polls to support the correctness of our positions on issues such as abortion or gun control. The conclusion is based upon the assumption that the majority of us know what is right. One of the dangers of living in a democracy is what philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) referred to as the "tyranny of the majority." Historian Alexis de Tocqueville, after visiting the United States in 1826, made the observation that, although democracy liberates us from tradition, the great democratic danger is

Connections

Why are cultural relativists most likely to fall for the fallacies of appeal to authority and popular appeal? *See Chapter 6, pages 166–167.*

enslavement to public opinion.[20] Studies show the majority of U.S. citizens define morality in terms of what the majority believe to be right and wrong. Young people often simply accept the norms of their peer group; adults are more likely to uncritically adopt the established norms of the wider community or nation. However, a particular position or conclusion is not necessarily correct just because most people agree with it. After all, the majority of people once believed that the earth is flat and slavery is natural.

Connections

At what stage of moral development are most high school and college students? *See Chapter 3, pages 90–93.*

Hasty Generalization

When used properly, generalization can be a valuable tool for gathering information in both the physical and social sciences. The fallacy of **hasty generalization** occurs when we use only unusual or atypical cases to support our conclusion. In doing so, we hastily generalize to a rule or conclusion that fits only these unusual cases rather than the whole group. For example, early doctors such as Joseph Collins hastily generalized from their experience with a few patients with terminal cancer to the faulty conclusion that no one with a terminal condition really wants to know the truth about their condition (see pages 46–47).

Unusual cases (Premises) → (Hasty generalization) → Odd rule about a whole group (Conclusion)

Stereotypes and *prejudices* are often based upon hasty generalizations. A woman who has been abused by her father or boyfriend may hastily generalize from her limited experience to the conclusion that all men are abusers. Negative stereotypes can lead to an unconscious devaluation of whole groups of people, particularly when not much interaction exists between the different cultural groups. During wartime, governments may intentionally create negative stereotypes of the enemy, thus justifying the dehumanization and destruction of that enemy.

Connections

In what ways does cultural relativism contribute to stereotyping and a "we/them" mentality? *See Chapter 6, pages 182–186.*

More recently, stereotypes of Muslims as radical extremists and former President Trumps' call for a ban on immigration from certain Muslim countries have contributed to the belief that many, if not most, Muslims are terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. In fact, according to a senior political scientist at the Rand Institute, less than 1 percent of Muslims are at risk of becoming radical.[21]

Fallacy of Accident

This fallacy occurs when we apply a rule that is generally accepted as valid to a particular case whose exceptional or accidental circumstances render the rule inappropriate. The **fallacy of accident** is the opposite of hasty generalization. In this fallacy, we start with the rule and apply it to an unusual or accidental case or circumstance:

Good rule (Premise) → (Inappropriate application of rule) → Exceptional or accidental cases (Conclusion)

The vast majority of rules have exceptions. However, rather than spelling out all the circumstances that might produce an exception, people are expected to use their powers of discernment and reason to decide when a rule should be applied and when it is inappropriate.

Following is an example of a person taking a rule to be absolutely binding that was never intended to be so:

> Going through a red light is illegal. Therefore, Wanda should be given a ticket for going through that red light on the way to the hospital with her dying child.

Almost everyone would accept the rule "stop at red lights" to be a reasonable law. This law is good for *most* cases, but that does not mean it is appropriate in all cases. In the preceding case, preventing the child's death—the moral duty of nonmaleficence—should take precedence over obeying the law about stopping at red lights. Indeed, a police officer who pulled Wanda over and gave her a ticket would be considered overly rigid in interpreting the law as well as remiss in his or her moral duties. Like legal rules, moral rules can also have exceptions:

> You should keep your promises. You promised to pay back the money I loaned you today. So give it to me—I need it to buy the last few parts for my bomb.

As with the law to stop at red lights, most of us consider "keep your promises" to be a good moral rule. However, circumstances can render a normally good moral rule inappropriate. In the above example, the moral duty not to abet a malevolent action is more important than the duty to fulfill one's promise to pay back the money on time.

A rule that is universally accepted as a good rule need not be absolute. We need to consider the context in which the rule is being considered. People who rigidly apply moral rules regardless of the circumstances are known as **absolutists**. Some people, in their rejection of absolutism, swing to the opposite extreme, moral relativism. They believe that, because moral rules have exceptions, all rules should be thrown out. Indeed, many college freshmen respond to the plethora of ideas that they encounter and the realization that rules are not absolute by subscribing to moral relativism.

Connections

On what grounds does deontologist W.D. Ross reject the idea of moral duties as absolute? *See Chapter 10, pages 331–332.*

Fallacy of Ignorance

Ignorance, in this fallacy, does not indicate that we are stupid. It simply means that we are ignorant of how to go about proving something. The **fallacy of ignorance** is committed whenever it is argued that our conclusion is true simply because it has not been proven false or that it is false because it has not been proven true. However, our being ignorant of how to prove the existence of something such as UFOs or free will does not mean that they do not exist. When we lack proof of a particular phenomenon, the most that we can logically conclude is that we do not *know* whether or not it exists.

Kwesi: God is clearly the creator of the moral order. Ethicists have been unable to come up with any other explanation of the source of universal moral principles.

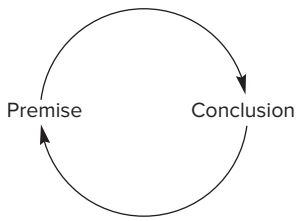
Mercedes: You're mistaken. The fact that no one can come up with a proof regarding the source of universal moral principles just goes to prove that there are no universal moral principles and that morality is really just a matter of personal opinion.

In this example, both speakers are guilty of using the fallacy of ignorance. Kwesi makes the claim that his conclusion must be true because his opponent cannot prove it false. Mercedes, on the other hand, commits the fallacy of ignorance when she counters with the argument that, if we cannot identify the source of universal moral principles, then they don't exist.

The ultimate source of universal moral principles has been a source of puzzlement to many ethicists. This does not mean, however, that universal moral principles do not exist. We also don't know the source of the laws of physics, but this ignorance on our part does not prove that the laws of physics don't exist, nor does it diminish the hold that the laws of physics have upon us as physical beings.

Begging the Question

Begging the question is also known as *circular reasoning.* This fallacy occurs when a premise and conclusion are actually rewordings of the same proposition. In other words, when making the argument, we assume the truth of our conclusion rather than offering proof for it as illustrated below:



The premise may simply be just a definition or synonym of a key term in the conclusion. At first glance, it may appear to us that the person using this fallacy has an airtight argument because the premise seems to support the conclusion so perfectly. However, upon closer inspection, it will become clear that this is so because, despite differences in language, the premise and conclusion both express the same idea and, in fact, are the same proposition as in the following example:

Connections

Why does psychological egoism commit the fallacy of begging the question? *See Chapter 7, pages 214–216.*

> Voluntary euthanasia is morally acceptable because people have the right to choose when and how they will end their lives.

The conclusion of this argument is a rewording of the premise. Rather than offering proof that voluntary euthanasia is morally acceptable, the premise

assumes that it is morally acceptable. If we reverse the conclusion and the premise, we are left with exactly the same argument: "Voluntary euthanasia is morally acceptable; *therefore*, people have the right to choose when and how they will end their lives."

This fallacy can be very frustrating if we fail to recognize it because there seems to be no way to disprove the person's position. The best way to recognize this fallacy is to reverse the premise and conclusion. If this can be done without changing the essence of the argument, then chances are the argument contains the fallacy of begging the question.

Irrelevant Conclusion

In one sense, all the conclusions in fallacious arguments are logically irrelevant. However, in the **fallacy of irrelevant conclusion**, the conclusions are irrelevant in a particular way. This fallacy is committed when we support or reject a conclusion using premises that are, in fact, directed at a different conclusion. In other words, we change the topic to a related but different subject that we feel more comfortable discussing.

Sometimes, people will avoid a specific topic that makes them feel uncomfortable by changing the topic to something more general or less controversial. At the January 12, 2017, Senate Armed Services Committee meeting regarding his nomination as Trump's Secretary of Defense, General James Mattis was asked if ". . . openly gay service members are undermining U.S. Forces." Rather than answer the question directly, Mattis replied that he believes "the U.S. must stay focused on a military that is so lethal that it would be the worse day for enemies in the field." Thus, Mattis avoided directly answering the question about gays in the military by changing the topic to a less controversial issue.

Irrelevant conclusion in a moral argument can also take the form of changing the topic from what one *ought* to do (a prescriptive question) to what one *would* do (a descriptive question). In one study, 20 percent of the teenagers interviewed did not seem to understand questions about "what ought (or should) you do?" They chose to reframe them instead as "what would you do?"[22]

Rosa: Don't you think that it was wrong for Michael to copy the test answers from the person sitting next to him?

Katrina: Oh, I don't know about that. If I had been in his situation, I probably would have done the same thing.

In this example, Katrina answers Rosa as though the question was about what she *would* do rather than what she thinks a person *ought* to do in a similar situation. In doing so, Katrina changes the topic. To say that a student probably *would* cheat on a test, if they had the opportunity, is not the same as saying that they *ought* to cheat on the test. Indeed, we often do things that we know we ought not do.

Naturalistic Fallacy

The **naturalistic fallacy** is a specific type of irrelevant conclusion. We commit this fallacy when we go from an *is* to an *ought* statement. We cannot assume, because something *is* natural, that it is morally acceptable or *ought to be* that way. Homosexual relations have been condemned as immoral on the grounds that homosexual relations are unnatural because they cannot lead to procreation—the "natural" result of sex. The following example illustrates that nature is certainly not the sole determinant of what is good.

> Only women are physically capable of bearing and nursing children. Therefore, women ought to be the primary caregivers of children.

While it may be true that women are physically capable of bearing and nursing children, and men are not (what *is*), this does not mean that women have a moral obligation to be the primary caregivers of children (what *ought to be*). On the other hand, nature sets the limits on what ought to be. We cannot argue that men ought to share equally in the bearing of children because men, by nature, are incapable of bearing children!

People who use the naturalistic fallacy may refer to the natural activities of other animals to support their position. However, the fact that other animals eat meat, that they sometimes kill and eat their young, or that most animals have several sexual partners (and a few even eat their partner after mating!) does not imply that it is morally acceptable for humans to do so. The morality of these behaviors must be evaluated on grounds other than that it is natural.

Appeal to Tradition

This fallacy also goes from an *is* to an *ought* statement. Whereas the naturalistic fallacy points to what is natural, this fallacy appeals to tradition or cultural norms as a reason for a certain practice. The following argument is based on the 1857 U.S. Supreme Court *Dred Scott* case (see pages 184–185 for a selection from the ruling).

> The Negro has never been recognized as a person in this country or by the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, slavery should remain legal.

Connections

On what grounds do rights ethicists argue that moral rights are universal rather than cultural creations? *See Chapter 11, pages 372–373.*

People who use **appeal to tradition** may argue, as in this example, that a certain practice is moral because it is constitutional. However, the U.S. Constitution is a legal rather than a moral document. Our constitution has allowed slavery and prevented women from voting, but this does not necessarily mean that these traditions are or were moral. On the contrary, the provisions of the constitution itself should be judged in the light of moral principles.

The fallacy of appeal to tradition is used primarily by cultural relativists to legitimate the status quo. Once a practice becomes a tradition, people begin to accept it as normal and natural, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that it harms people. Our current attachment to armed conflicts as a means of resolving international disputes is a good example of how appeal to tradition inhibits us from thinking of creative alternatives. The traditions of other countries, such as lack of legal and social protection for women and children, have also been used as excuses for exploiting people living in those cultures.

Thirteen Informal Fallacies

Informal fallacies are psychologically persuasive but incorrect arguments.

Equivocation A key term shifts meaning during the course of an argument.

Appeal to force Force, threat of force, or intimidation is used to coerce our opponents into accepting our conclusion.

Abusive We attack our opponent's character rather than address his or her conclusion.

Circumstantial We argue that our opponent should accept a particular position because of his or her lifestyle or membership in a particular group.

Appeal to inappropriate authority The testimony of someone who is an authority in a different field is used as support for our conclusion.

Popular appeal The opinion of the majority is used as support for our conclusion.

Hasty generalization Our conclusion is based on atypical cases.

Accident We apply a generally accepted rule to an atypical case where the rule is inappropriate.

Ignorance We argue that a certain position is true because it hasn't been proven false or that it is false because it hasn't been proven true.

Begging the question The premise and conclusion are different wordings of the same proposition.

Irrelevant conclusion Our argument is directed at a conclusion different from the one under discussion.

Naturalistic We argue from what *is* natural to what *ought* to be the case.

Appeal to tradition We argue that something is moral because it is traditional.

Exercises

1. Identify the fallacy in each of the following arguments.
   a. Human activities are not the primary cause of global warming. No scientists have come up with any definitive proof that human activities are the cause.
   b. Capital punishment is morally acceptable because murderers should be put to death.
   c. Euthanasia is wrong because it interferes with the natural dying process. We should wait until it is our time to die.
   d. I'm not surprised you're arguing that hate speech should not be banned on college campuses. After all, you're one of the most hateful, racist, and insensitive people I've ever met. Why, you couldn't care less about the effect of hate speech on its intended victims.
   e. I support racial profiling and the questioning of all Arabs and Muslims by security officials in airports. Remember, it was Arabs who blew up the Twin Trade Towers. They just can't be trusted.

f. Why all this concern about the way women are treated in Afghanistan? After all, women in this country still suffer from discrimination in the workplace.

g. My parents used to get into arguments all the time, and they ended up getting divorced. Logic teaches people how to make arguments. Therefore, if you want a happy marriage, you should stay away from logic.

h. "The bullying and humiliation of detainees at Abu Ghraib is," as George W. Bush said, 'a strain on our country's honor and our country's reputation.' . . . But let us also recognize what this scandal is not. There is a large difference between forcing prisoners to strip and submit to hazing at Abu Ghraib prison and the sort of things routinely done there under Saddam Hussein. This is a county where mass tortures, mass murders and mass graves were, until the arrival of the U.S. Army, a way of life."[23]

i. It is morally wrong to cause pain to another person. Therefore, dentists are immoral people.

j. My philosophy professor doesn't think that the loss of animal and plant species due to the destruction of rain forests is going to permanently upset the balance of nature. Therefore, it is morally acceptable to continue clearing rain forests for cattle grazing.

k. So you're going to argue in class that alcohol should be banned on campus. Well, this is the last time we're going to ask you to go out with us on the weekend.

l. How can you be in favor of human cloning? After all, you're a Catholic and the church supports a ban on all human cloning.

m. Science has not been able to explain every movement from single cell organism to human beings. Therefore, the theory of evolution is false.

n. President Biden's son Hunter is clearly guilty of selling access to his father to get the Ukraine to increase its sale of natural gas to the United States. After all, Biden and his son haven't been able to prove otherwise.

2. Which fallacy are you most likely to use in a discussion about a moral issue? Give an example of a time you used this fallacy. Which fallacy are you most likely to fall for in a discussion about a moral issue? Give an example of a time this fallacy was used on you. Discuss strategies you might use to make yourself less prone to using or falling for these particular fallacies.

3. Consider the argument that you constructed in exercise 2 on pages 52–53. Are there any fallacies in your argument? If necessary, rework the argument so it is fallacy-free.

4. How might you have responded had you been a subject in Milgram's study (see page 30) and wanted to stop but the experimenter said that "you must continue"? Think of a time when you went along with an authority figure, even though you knew what they were doing was wrong. Discuss some strategies you could use to make yourself less prone to falling for appeal to authority.

5. The Bill of Rights was put forth to protect minorities or dissenters from the "tyranny of the majority." Should those in the minority be protected from the dictates of the majority? Or should the will of the majority always prevail in a democratic nation? Support your answers. (For a copy of the full text of the Bill of Rights and the other amendments to the U.S. Constitution, go to www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcipt.html.)

6. Discuss some of the common stereotypes of groups found on your campus. Are these based on hasty generalization? How do these stereotypes harm or diminish the autonomy of the people being stereotyped? What effect do the stereotypes of your group have on your life. Are there steps you and others on your campus could take to overcome these stereotypes?

*7. Contact with diverse groups of people has been found to decrease a person's tendency to stereotype or prejudge people. If you are doing community service work, discuss how, if at all, your work has helped you overcome negative stereotypes about people such as senior citizens and the homeless.

Resolving Moral Dilemmas

Moral conflicts are neither systematically avoidable, nor all soluble without remainder.

—Bernard Williams, *Problems of Self* (1973), p. 82

In the movie *Sophie's Choice*, a guard in the Nazi internment camp tells Sophie, who is standing in a line with her two children, to make a choice: She can choose to have one of her children killed and save the other, or she can choose not to choose, in which case both children will be killed. The choice facing her is especially agonizing because she is not sure if the guard is serious or if he is only playing a cruel mind game.

What Is a Moral Dilemma?

Situations in which we have a conflict between moral values are known as **moral dilemmas**. We do *not* have a moral dilemma when the conflict is between moral values and nonmoral values such as economic success or popularity. In a moral dilemma, no matter what solution we choose, it will involve doing something wrong in order to do what is right. Solutions to moral dilemmas are not right or wrong, only better or worse. In deciding what to do, like Sophie, the best we can hope for is to find the solution that causes the least harm.

The great majority of moral decisions are straightforward. Moral decision making is such a normal part of our everyday life that we generally don't give it a second thought. We don't struggle about whether we should run down a pedestrian, even though he or she is jaywalking. Instead, we stop or at least try to avoid hitting the person. We don't kill a person, even though we may want to, because he irritates us. Nor do we clobber the person sitting next to us in class and take her textbook simply because we forgot ours. We wait our turn, learn to share, apologize if we hurt someone, refrain from stealing, and for the most part, get along with others without having to think too much about it.

Sometimes, however, we encounter a situation where the right thing to do is not so clear-cut. Most of us have struggled with moral dilemmas at one time or another. We may be torn between our loyalty to a friend and telling the truth—particularly when it involves bad news. Or we may have to decide whether to get out of a relationship with an abusive spouse or partner.

The economic recession of 2020–2021 caused by the COVID virus epidemic left more than half a million Americans homeless, many of them children.[24]

Con Tanasiuk/Design Pics

Analyzing Images

1. A person on the street who appears to be homeless asks you for money. Working in small groups and using the steps for resolving a moral dilemma listed on page 67 come up with a plan of action.
2. Homelessness has also grown among college students due in part to rising tuition and housing costs. Many of these homeless students keep their situation secret for fear of being stigmatized. You have just discovered that one of the students in your class is living out of her car. When you approach her about it, she becomes flustered and denies it. What should you do?

Most people try not to let troublesome problems get out of hand, but this can occur if we do not have the requisite skills for resolving moral dilemmas when they first arise. Even worse, we may not recognize a situation as a moral dilemma. Because of resistance or inability to resolve moral dilemmas, problems can accumulate and worsen until we find ourselves in a crisis.

Practice at resolving moral dilemmas has been found to be an effective means of improving our skill at moral reasoning in real-life situations. Dilemmas, by their very nature, demand that we sort out and take a closer look at moral values and learn how they are relevant to making decisions about our lives. In a study of moral