Part Three (chapters 7-14): The Questions, Beliefs, and Values of Wisdom

Having begun to develop a few skills of wisdom, you are now ready to look at the different questions of philosophy. Note: I say *philosophy*. By "philosophy" here, I mean both philosophical discussion and the love of wisdom that is philosophy as a way of life. Let us return for a moment to some things we explored in part one of this text.

Remember the shopping conversation in chapter one? There, and again later in chapter two, we learned that humans live out of certain *guiding values*: like "getting ahead," "respecting family," "convenience," "honoring local business" "taking care of the earth" and so on. We also learned that our guiding values are developed consciously or unconsciously with reference to other, more *philosophical beliefs* (about what is real, how we know the truth, what is right and wrong, and so on).

Most people generally live from the guiding values of our surroundings without asking *questions* about those values. Part of an "examined life," however, is the application of the skills of wisdom (paying attention, asking questions, practicing reality) to our guiding values. We pay attention to our shopping habits. We ask questions like, "Just why do I think *getting ahead* is important?" or "What do we really mean when we say we want to "care for the earth"?" An examined life may also involve an exploration of the more philosophical beliefs and values which lie beneath our guiding values. Here we may find ourselves paying attention to what we trust to give us knowledge, or asking questions like, "Do I think this world is all there is or not?" and "What do our words really mean anyway? As we examine our guiding value about "getting ahead in life," we may discover that underneath this belief is a philosophical egoist ethic, a belief that it is natural or right to advance one's own interests. As we examine our values of family, we may discover that we hold a fundamental belief that humans are essentially social beings, reflecting the character of a social Deity. When we take the step of examining our lives, we find ourselves exploring a wide range of often unexplored questions and issues. Our world view itself becomes the topic of examination. And when we ask questions of our basic view of the world, we enter into "discourse about philosophy," the universe of traditional academic philosophy. But academic philosophy may not be as tame as we might think. For as we have learned, a transformation of world view usually means some other changes as well. This is why one must learn the wisdom of how to ask questions. They can be very dangerous.

Yes, the discourse about philosophy is full of questions, issues and different schools of thought. That's what most people think of philosophy. Philosophers are people who ask difficult questions and think complicated thoughts. And in this Part of *Love Wisdom*, we will survey those issues and approaches that have dominated academic philosophical discussion in both East and West. We will ask questions like:

- Is there any unchanging reality?
- How do we know if anything is true?
- What happens to us after death?
- Should governments make war with other governments?
- Is there a god?

and many, *many* other questions like these. They are fascinating questions to ponder in and of themselves. They are difficult to answer.

But again, do not be overly distracted by the interesting and complicated questions. For these are not only the questions of philosophical discussion, but also important questions for philosophy as a *love of wisdom*. These questions unveil the fundamental values by which we live

our lives. We ask, “What should I do when I’m out of school?” We ask, “Is this relationship *real* or is it only a game we are playing?” We ask, “Should I take out a loan to buy this nice house or not?” At the point we ask these questions our *values* begin to show. The wise ask questions not merely to occupy their minds, but in order to discover and to practice guiding values in life. Values like:

- treating things the way they really are (reality)
- honoring what you do--and what you don’t--know (truth)
- appreciating the finer things in life (beauty)
- promoting fairness among other peoples (justice)

When we ask questions about living, we are joining our contexts, questions, and values together. If we are skilled in wisdom, we do so with care: paying attention to the contexts, asking the right questions expressed in various philosophical schools (for example, “what does *this* model of life express?”), and practicing what needs to be practiced. Wisdom is attentive to the *values* that are (or are not) honored in one or the other ways of living. And our values are clarified by exploring the questions that philosophers have asked from the beginning, questions about truth, beauty, reality, justice, rightness, meaning, religion and so on.

In this third part of *Love Wisdom* you will have a chance to clarify the most important values in your life. You will get a chance to consider what you value and why you value it. You will explore new sets of questions and schools of thought in each chapter. We will address the following basic questions in the chapters ahead (each with many underlying questions):

7. What is Right (Good, Happy)?
8. What is a (Just) Ordering of Society?
9. What is (True) Knowledge?
10. What does You (Language) Mean?
11. What is Life (About)?
12. What is (Real)?
13. What is Beauty (Art, Excellence)?
14. What is Ultimate (Religion)?

You will be introduced to the ways that both Eastern and Western philosophers consider these questions. You will learn the kinds of things you must consider in the process of answering them (and coming to a decision about your values in life). Along the way, you will be documenting your own developing philosophical beliefs through the journal assignments. You will also have a chance to experiment with making these questions, these values, more practical. We will explore the practice of values in a general and introductory way in Part Three. In Part Four, as we move to the Life of Wisdom, our orientation will become more practical still.

CHAPTER 7
WHAT IS RIGHT (Good, Happy)?

Chapter Outline

Introduction: Paying Attention to “Right”

1. The Content of Ethics
    - a. Hebrew Scripture
    - b. Aristotle
    - c. Hajji Khalifah
2. Defining Ethics
    - a. Choices and Actions
    - b. Performed by a Self
    - c. Embodied in the Contexts of Life
    - d. Directed towards Ends
    - e. An E-value-ation
3. The Meaning and Possibility of Ethics
    - a. Ethics and the Other
    - b. Relationships, Obligations, and Ethical Orientation
    - c. The Possibility of Ethics
4. Choice, Act, End: Foundations and Principles of Ethical Reasoning
    - a. Virtue Ethics: the character of the actor
    - b. Motive: the state of the heart
    - c. Rule: the act itself
    - d. Social Contract and Sociobiology: context theories
    - e. Consequences: the end of it all

Conclusions: Putting Ethics into Practice

Chapter Objectives

In this chapter we consider what we think is right and wrong, what the "good" and the "good life" is about, what our obligations to ourselves, to nature, to others or to some Ultimate might involve. First you will sample from ethical literature around the globe, giving you an experiential "taste" for the subject matter of ethics. Having had this experiential taste, you will be able to understand more clearly the definitions and key questions of the field of ethics which follow. You will explore the meaning of ethics and the various webs of relationships around which our ethical reasoning and decisions are oriented. You will consider whether ethical decisions are actually possible. Finally you will explore a range of criteria which people use as guides to ethical reasoning. Your journal exercises should give you an opportunity to apply the wisdom of ethics to situations in your own life. After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- define ethics, giving an example of that definition
- identify the basic questions addressed in philosophical ethical discussion
- name some of the relationships and obligations around which our ethical reasoning and decisions are oriented, giving examples of how that works in practice
- distinguish between ethical skepticism, ethical relativism, and ethical objectivism
- describe the different primary approaches to ethical reasoning
- give a preliminary statement about your own basic ethical principles

Introduction: Paying Attention to "Right"

We face ethics regularly whether we know it or not. Just imagine: you find out that one student-- the favorite of your teacher--received a much higher grade than you at the end of the class, in spite of the fact that you worked far harder and knew the material much better than she. Whether you say it or not, perhaps your mind is screaming "Unfair!" Or you hear about another school shooting: twenty children gunned down at point blank range. Your heart drops with disgust, rage, grief. This kind of thing should not happen. It is evil, inhuman. Or you see a young child just beginning to get into trouble. And you just know that in time this path will lead that

child into a world of unhappiness. You want to step in and help. Or you passionately tell a friend about one of your heroes. And in doing so you realize that you are not speaking merely about their skills, but about their character, their virtues.

The right, the good, virtue, that which leads to happiness. We often think of these words with relation to ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’. “It’s just not *right* to lie concerning where you went last night.” “Now be a *good* boy and share with your little sister.” “You’re not going to *like* it if you keep ruining your lungs with those cigarettes.” But what lies behind these ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’? What is it about life that gives our choices such significance? How do we make the decisions of life in the face of this significance? Such it the stuff of ethics and morality.

The Content of Ethics

Ethics and morality deal with “doing.” But, as we shall see, it is not so simple as doing *this* (sharing) as opposed to doing *that* (not sharing). Feelings, relationships, consequences and much more are all involved. It would be simple to think of ethical reasoning as a calculus for either approving or condemning certain behaviors. But this would not be the love of wisdom, would it? And when we examine morality *globally* we find that there is more to ethics than we might notice at first glance.

In an effort to let our definition of ethics arise from within, let us start by paying attention to a few samples of ethical literature from around the world. The selections are taken from influential pieces of moral literature, characteristic of the culture from which they originate. By being-present-with these different samples, we can begin to appreciate the range of issues that are involved in what we call “ethics.”

Hebrew Scripture

Our first sample is taken from sacred Jewish literature. Two excerpts will be taken from the Jewish scripture.[1] The first is taken from the book of Exodus (Exodus 20:1-14) and is one of the classic statements of “The Ten Commandments” revealed from God to God’s people:

God spoke all these words, saying:

I the LORD am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. “You shall have no other gods besides Me.

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep My commandments.

You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work--you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the LORD your God is assigning you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house: you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female slave, his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.

The second excerpt from Jewish scripture is taken from the book of Psalms (Psalms 15). It is a further reflection on similar topics, only this time voiced as prayer from the writer to God:

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1. Excerpts taken from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000). For an example of a commentary on the parallel “five sila of Buddhism,” (destroying life, stealing, sexual impropriety, untrue speech, intoxication) see the excerpt of the *Mangalasutta* found at http://sobhana.pbwiki.com/ThirtyeightBlessing and in Charles Hallisey, “Auspicious Things,” in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 412–13.

LORD, who may sojourn in Your tent,
who may dwell on Your holy mountain?
He who lives without blame,
who does what is right,
and in his heart acknowledges the truth;
whose tongue is not given to evil
who has never done harm to his fellow,
or born reproach for [his acts toward] his neighbor;
for whom a contemptible man is abhorrent,
but who honors those who fear the LORD;
who stands by his oath even to his hurt;
who has never lent money at interest,
or accepted a bribe against the innocent.
The man who acts thus shall never be shaken.

Aristotle

Now let's turn to an example from Greek philosophy. Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* is considered a starting point of ethical discussion in Western philosophy. Like other moral philosophers, Aristotle sees the aim of humanity as 'happiness': not simply momentary pleasure, but a deeper satisfaction and relationship with "what is." His concern, at the beginning and ending of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, is politics, how a society ought to be ordered; but the answer to this political question is dependent upon the structure of human life in general, what brings happiness into being. His conviction is that "happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue" (Book I, Chapter 13; 1102a 5). Consequently, Aristotle spends most of his time discussing the nature of moral "virtue." Have you ever thought about *virtue*? What *is* virtue (perhaps you might want to look up the word in a dictionary)? Can you name a few virtues? Aristotle argues that virtue--unlike a "faculty" (like memory) or a "passion" (like anger)--is a "state of character," a way in which we are predisposed to respond in given situations. He has suggested that in many "arts," human work is best performed by attending to a

“mean” or an “intermediate” (never too much or too little). In the excerpt below, Aristotle applies this principle of the intermediate to moral virtue.[2]

We must, however, not only describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy. Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well. . . .

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well- by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work), and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate.

Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult- to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue;

For men are good in but one way, but bad in many.

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on

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2. Excerpts are taken from Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book II, chapter 6. See Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 957–59. For an interesting example of the discussion of virtue from Chinese philosophy see Chu Hsi’s discussion of *jen* in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 632–33.

excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme.

Aristotle goes on, then, to elaborate on a number of "moral" and "intellectual" virtues (courage, temperance, generosity, humility, art, practical wisdom, deliberation, understanding, judgment and the others), each of which is exhibited in a mean between two extremes (for example, courage falls between timidity and rashness). From this sample you can get a brief feel for Aristotle's approach to the good life. What is this "virtue" which is neither an act nor a feeling? It is a state of character, a predisposition to act a certain way. In what way is virtue related to the "dos" and "don'ts" of ethics? We ought to do what expresses a disposition to act virtuously. How is virtue expressed? In a kind-of intermediate or "mean" between two extremes. What do you think of Aristotle's idea of virtue?

Hajji Khalifah

Finally, let us consider one more sample. The following is an example of "ethical reasoning" (the process of deciding what actions to choose, how to perform them, or evaluating actions already performed). "Hajji Khalifah" (Katib Chelebi, died in 1657) was a Turkish writer and official, spending the last years of his life in scholarship and writing. His *The Balance of Truth*, a collection of essays on a number of topics, was his last work. In the essay we excerpt from below, he reflects on the morality of cigarette smoking and coffee drinking and on the practical means to address these "problems" in his own Muslim culture. You must realize that much of Islam understands their religion not only as a "spiritual" reality, but as a system of ethics, politics, economics and so on. For this reason, the question of smoking or coffee drinking is simultaneously a moral, political, and spiritual issue. Space permits reprinting this essay in its entirety (and we will have to skip the section on coffee), but it is a delightful example of an

attempt to integrate "traditional" and "modern" values, through a practical example of moral reasoning. Khalifah died in Istanbul, while drinking a cup of coffee.[3]

At one time I drafted an essay on the tobacco-smoking now practiced by all mankind, but I never made a fair copy of it. What is offered here is a rough draft embodying the gist of that essay. Before we examine the matter, what was the case of the appearance of this practice?

[He then presents a brief history of the practice and its adoption in Turkey, describing how others had tried at great lengths to ban the practice with no success]

Now there are a number of possible ways of considering the subject, which we shall briefly set forth.

(1) The first possibility is that the people may be effectively prevented from smoking and may give it up [here he considers the benefits of a legal prohibition]. *This possibility must be set aside, for custom is second nature. Addicts are not made to give up in this way. . . .* [But there are those who would argue that prohibitions are not designed simply for success, but rather to be an affirmation of values, whether or not people live by them and he summarizes their views] *Consequently, it is the ruler's duty publicly to prohibit and chastise; thus do they perform their part. . . .* [and responds to these views]

(2) Is this tobacco found to be good or bad by the intelligence? If we set aside the fact that addicts think it good, common sense judges it to be bad. The criteria of goodness and badness may be either the intelligence or the sacred law. By either criterion it is bad, for the conditions necessary for intellectual approval are lacking in it, while the grounds for canonical disapproval are present in it. Yet if certain of the lacking conditions are fulfilled, it may then be found good; for example, if it be used medicinally. The fact that it is not used by judges in law courts, at council meetings, in mosques or other places of worship, is a consequence of its being found bad by the criterion of intelligence

(3) Its good and harmful effects [here he develops the evaluation of smoking "by the criterion of intelligence"]. *As to its harmful effects there is no doubt. It ends by becoming a basic need of the addict, who does not consider its evil consequences. . . . The influence exerted on the body by such things depends on the nature's disposition or aversion. . . .*

(4) Is it innovation? [having considered the criteria of reason or "intelligence," he now moves to treat four possible problems from the perspective of sacred law, accompanied by reason. "Innovation" is seen and rejected in Muslim culture as an independent "stepping outside" the law for the sake of personal benefit] *It may be conceded that it is innovation in the eyes of the sacred law, for it appeared in recent times, nor is it possible to class it as "good innovation." That it is innovation in the light of intelligence is sure, for it is not a thing that has been seen or heard of by the intelligent ever since the time of Adam. . .*

(5) Is it abominable [a second category of rejected behaviors in Muslim law]? There is no word of justification for this, in reason or in law. . . . It is perhaps not irrelevant to point out that the scent of burning tobacco has curative uses as an inhalant. But an evil odour arises in the mouth of the heavy smoker, by comparison with which, in the nostrils of the non-smoker,

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3. Excerpt taken from James Kritzeck, ed., *Anthology of Islamic Literature* (New York: Mentor Books, 1964), 326–34.

halitosis is as aloes and ambergris. To sum up, just as there is abomination in the eating of raw onion, garlic, and leek, which inevitably produce an abominable odour in the mouth, so also heavy smoking is disapproved as producing a smell in the mouth, the body, and the clothing. . . .

[He then draws a preliminary conclusion about the situation in general, but also to admit the practical problem]

The conclusion must be to recommend abstention. The fact that addicts do not concede this scent to be disapproved is irrelevant and not to be taken into consideration. for they are at liberty not to disapprove the smell of one another's mouths.

The purpose of all this is to demonstrate the facts: there is no question of interference with those who have the addiction. To try to put them off [through some kind of forced abstention] is not a practical possibility, and is generally agreed to be in the category of preaching to the winds.

[Now, having concluded that abstention from the practice must be recommended, but that it will do nothing in practice for addicts, he considers two more factors related to sacred law]

(6) Is it canonically forbidden? It is written in the manuals of jurisprudence that in any particular matter where there is no decisive ruling in the law, the jurisconsult may exercise his own discretion. . . .[T]he following course is preferable: not to declare things forbidden, but always to have recourse to any legal principle that justifies declaring them permitted, thus preserving people from being laden with sins and persisting in what has been prohibited

(7) Is it canonically indifferent? As the rise of smoking is of recent occurrence, there is no explicit treatment or mention of it in the legal manuals. This being so, some say that in accordance with the principle that permissibility is the norm--i.e. that in the absence of a clear prohibition things are permitted--smoking is permitted and lawful.

The great doctors of the law have in former times pronounced it disapproved, while certain provincial muftis have declared it forbidden. . . . [a list of precedents regarding both prohibition and permission follows]. Although the prevalence of smoking, together with all the attendant circumstances does not suffice to put it in the class of permissibles, yet an objection arises against pronouncing forbidden or disapproved, which overrides any consideration of its undesirable qualities. And what is that objection? It is that the people will persist in using the forbidden thing, with shameful results. . . .

[And now he faces an objection]

Admonition. Some may ask, Can one thing be simultaneously indifferent, disapproved, and forbidden? Is this not self-contradictory? The answer is that it is possible, with a change of aspect and viewpoint. For example, while it is permissible to eat baklava, it is forbidden to do so when one is sated, as this is harmful.

[An so in the end, Khalifah offers a more "practical" solution]

Hereafter the most necessary and useful thing for the rulers of the Muslims to do is this: they should farm out exclusive concessions to deal in tobacco-leaf in every part of the Guarded Domains, appointing custodians. Tobacco will bear a fixed contribution to the Treasury of 20 piastres per okka. It should be sold in one appointed place in every city and should not be allowed in the markets at large. This will yield 100 million aspers a year.

What did you notice in this example of ethical literature? What principles of ethical reasoning were used? How do you reason out ethical situations? What principles do you appeal to? Now, ask what features tie all of these examples together? Just what *is* ethics? And what does it have to do with philosophy?

Defining Ethics

Antony Flew, in his *Dictionary of Philosophy*, argues that philosophical ethics, as a theoretical study, differs from ethics understood more generally in that any practical body of ethical belief "will be intended to be a practical guide to living and not merely an exposition and analysis of certain doctrines."[4] In this text, however, we are considering philosophy specifically as a global and *practical* love of wisdom. Consequently our aim here is to understand ethics not only as an analysis of doctrines, but also as a "practical guide to living." So how do we approach ethics both philosophically (academically) yet with respect to the practicality of life?

Drawing a few features of our readings together, it might be helpful to consider the right, good, and happy under the following definition:

> *Ethical reflection considers the value of choices and actions which are often: performed by a self, in the context of relationships and obligations, directed toward anticipated ends.*

In order to clairify, let us unpack this definition.

Choices and Actions

First, ethics considers *choices and actions*. Ethics deals with what we "do." Whether we are talking about the Ten Commandments, the practice of virtue, or decisions about smoking, we are faced with choice and action. But while ethics is oriented around human activity, it involves

4. Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979),105.

much more than the *mere* fact of an action. The choice to welcome (instead of murder) another is clearly an ethical moment. But welcome involves more than what we might normally think of as an "action." It is also a kind of attitude to another.

Similarly, when we talk about virtue we are clearly talking not only about the habit of particular actions, but also about *how* our actions are expressed (or how life is lived). Here emotion and thought are all mixed up in action. As we have learned in our discussion of the depth dimension of human experience, as we move deeper--from choice to act, act to habit, and further to lifestyle--the different elements of human experience all get involved. Thus to express an act from a settled character (a deep integration of world view, emotional core, and lifestyle) is not just to choose a particular act for a situation, but to include, in that very act, a fuller expression of human experience. So while the emphasis in ethics is on choice and action, we must understand that much more is involved.

Performed by a Self

Second, ethics deals with actions performed by a *self*. We can think of individual "selves" (is it ever wrong for me to lie?). In chapter 2 we lerned something about the construction of our "selves." We can also think in terms of corporate "selves" (in what way is a government responsible for false information being "leaked" to the media creating a certain impression on the public?). Actions are performed by actors. Needless to say, our understanding of just what we mean by "self" affects how we see our choices and actions. Are we representatives or members of a local community? Are we fleeting arisings of feeling and consciousness? Are we collections of atoms and cells, determined by the forces within and without us? Are we independent, free individuals? Are we no-different than Universal Mind? What are we "meant" to be?

Embodied in the Contexts of Life

Third, ethics is embodied in the varied *contexts* of life, and in particular in the context of different *relationships and obligations*. Again, in chapter 2 we were introduced to relationships

and forces. Each of our relationships confronts us with a unique influence or force. Influence or force lead to obligation. Sometimes our obligation to another reflects the simple fact that this other in front of me is a human and I must treat them in a certain way simply because of their *humaness*. At other times particular interpersonal or larger social relationships bring with them their own obligations. Ethical discourse considers the impact of context upon the character and evaluation of our actions and choices.

Directed toward Ends

Ethical action is often *directed toward anticipated ends*. A country supports medical research using (and destroying) fertilized human eggs in order to prevent future sickness. A mother writes a birth date for her child that is one month different than the actual date to insure that the child will be accepted into the little league team with his friends. A holy person fasts from meat and sweets as a means of purifying desires and facilitating illumination. While actions are not always chosen with particular ends in mind, ethical reflection often considers actions in terms of the aims toward which they are directed.

An E-value-ation

But ethical reasoning is more than analysis of choices actions. It is an *evaluation* of those choices or actions. And for an e-*value*-ation, one must consider the norms of value and how we establish and maintain value. What makes one choice "right" and another "wrong"? How do we decide what act is better (more profitable, resulting in greater happiness, more conforming to some rule of behavior, etc.) than another?

Needless to say, questions of ethics are intimately connected to other questions: questions of knowing (how do we *know* what is right and wrong?), of being (what *are* "actions" or "actors" anyway?), of language (is the notion of "choice" a meaningful word at all?), questions of human meaning (what is the aim of human experience toward which all actions should be directed?),

and more. Each question of philosophy both depends upon and informs the others. Nonetheless, the primary questions specifically addressed in the philosophical discussion of ethics include:

- What is admirable in life? What is it about another that makes him or her worth special regard as a person?
- What is it good to *be*? What are we to aim after in our actions? What is the nature of the good life?
- Is ethics possible? Can we determine what is right or wrong?
- Does the evaluative language of ethical discussion (words like "right" "wrong" and such) have any real meaning?
- From where do we derive the standards that govern or evaluate our actions as individuals and communities?
- By what principles or procedures do we justify our reasoning with regard to the ethical value of particular choices, actions, or policies?

The Meaning and Possibility of Ethics

Now that we have both tasted and defined ethics, we are ready to explore ethics further. It is one thing to propose a formal definition of morality. It is another to understand what morality *means*. We will explore the meaning of ethics through an examination (1) of the relationships toward which we choose and act, and (2) of the use of the norms through which we evaluate our choices and actions, which is essentially an exploration of the possibility of ethics.

Ethics and the Other

As mentioned in chapter 2, we live our life in the context of relationships. We are confronted with life. Our actions are performed in the contexts of the world that confronts us. And when we recognize this, we find ourselves in the midst (and the obligations) of the "other,"

the "something that is not us, though present within our experience, and demands a response from us".

We step on a nail. The point of the nail confronts us with a force, obligating us to respond. We may choose to ignore that obligation, but that choice will have repercussions on our world. Each of our relationships confronts us with a unique influence or force. And each influence or force confronts us with a unique obligation. The way the point of a nail confronts me is different than the way my fellow student (or the federal government) confronts me. The ecosystem as a whole confronts humankind with a still different kind of obligation, inviting us to respond according to its own "way" of being. Again, we may choose to reject these obligations, but our choices will have repercussions.

The point for us in this chapter is to see that we evaluate our choices and actions in the midst of this being-confronted-with-others for which our choices and actions have consequences. There is a sense in which we are response-able (and, consequently, responsible) for the others that confront us in life. Ethics, then, is the world of navigating our response-abilities for others.

One of the most significant ethical thinkers of the twentieth century, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), spoke precisely about the importance of our understanding the meaning of ethics in light of our relationship with "the Other" that confronts us. William Shakespeare wrote, "To be or not to be, that is the question." Emmanuel Levinas questions Shakespeare's question. It is not *being* (metaphysics) that is primary, but *acting* (ethics). He responds to Shakespeare at the conclusion of his article "Ethics as First Philosophy." He writes, concerning "the face of the Other" (the visible presentation/confrontation of the Other to us), that "whether he [the face] regards me or not, he 'regards' me. In this question, being and life are awakened to the human dimension. This is the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb [not the job of figuring out what the word "being" means], but the ethics

of its justice."[5] For Levinas, ethics--and indeed all of philosophy--has its origins and receives its meaning from our response to the Others that confront us in life.

Relationships, Obligations and Ethical Orientation

These "others" which confront us, then, constitute the context of relationships within which we choose, act, and evaluate our choices and actions. Our decisions and actions are shaped by our location in relationship, a location which gives our own obligations in life a kind of "ethical orientation." By this I mean that for each of us some configuration of relationships seems to carry more weight or focus: central concerns which guide the evaluation of choices and actions.

For example, some ethical systems are oriented toward the transcendent, toward *Ultimate* religious realities. Here divine command or sacred text (whether we are speaking of written Qur'an, eternal Veda, or a dream ushering from a local spirit) functions as a starting point or at least a boundary point in ethical reasoning. It is not that reasoning is necessarily neglected in favor of some divine word, but rather that reason is employed with relationship to the "givens" of the Ultimate revealed. Consider, for example, Khalifah's consideration of the issue of smoking. One question asked was whether smoking is reasonably identified as an "abomination." Clearly whatever "abomination" is, it is prohibited in Muslim sacred teaching. Once we decide that an action fits under the category of "abomination," the question of the moral value of the action is settled (though, as we have seen, how to deal with the action in practice may be another question). Moral reasoning which evaluates choices on the basis of a set of approved or forbidden actions is known as ***casuistic*** ethics, treating choices in terms of their similarity to central "cases."

But ethics oriented toward the divine is not necessarily (or even primarily) a casuistic ethics. Our sense of "obligation" to the divine is more than a matter of rules. Quite often

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5. Emannuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, eds. Richard Kearny and Mara Rainwater (New York: Routledge, 1996), 134.

religious ethics are ***aesthetic*** in character. We are moved by the life of a religious leader (say, the compassion of Jesus), and we act so as to imitate that life. Or we evaluate the choice of another upon the basis of whether it is expressed as an act of love, a primary value in the Christian faith, or whether it leads to the elimination of attachment, a primary value in the Buddhist community. The fact is, a wide range of forms of ethical reasoning attend ethical systems oriented around relationship with the Ultimate. The power of an ethic orientated around Ultimate matters is that it points to standards that transcend historical era or culture. The Christian value of love is valid for all cultures in all times (even if Christians themselves do not always live up to these standards).

Other ethical systems are more oriented toward our relationships with *nature*. Perhaps Taoist ethics would serve as some kind of border between an ethics of divine revelation and an ethics of nature, for in Taoist thought the "Way" of heaven and earth are seen as the same. Think: what would it look like to consider our choices in terms of their consequences upon the patterns of nature itself? Or, to take it one step further: what would it look like to consider the very *nature* of "choice" not as the product of individual or communal freedom, but rather to see choice itself as the adaptation of one part of an interrelated environment with regards to the whole. Such is the perspective of the ethical system of deep ecology.

Still other ethical systems are oriented toward the *self*. We evaluate our actions in order to maximize "happiness," or some other similar self-oriented value. There is a sense that the "right," and the "good" are connected somehow with the "happy." At times this self-orientation is expressed in terms of a kind of individualistic "hedonism" (maximizing personal pleasure). Other times we are considering the concerns of a wider "self" (thus we say that an action should be directed toward the *summum bonum*, the greatest good for the greatest number). Sometimes an ethics of the self may be oriented toward the self in the sense of the self being the object of the consequences of action. Sometimes, however, philosophical discussion of ethics is oriented toward the self in the sense that it places attention to the actor as the source of ethical action, exploring the various dynamics of human choice and action (asking questions about human freedom, language, cognitive evaluation of possibilities, the role of habits and so on).

Finally, most ethical systems, to one degree or another, are oriented around others. In the West, in India, in China, indeed throughout the world, moral values seem to collect around how we treat our fellow human beings. Some systems of ethics, like many in the modern West, admit the interpersonal context but spend more time reflecting on the process of personal choice. Others, like Confucian ethics, consider moral reasoning predominantly in terms of appropriately honoring one's various social obligations. We think of our obligations to family (is there an obligation to ensure care for elder family member in their old age simply because they are family?). We think of our obligations to maintain order as a society (what kinds of responsibilities do we have as citizens of a country?). We think of the value of other humans simply for who they are (hence debates about abortion, stem cell research, and such). Ethics can be seen as the navigation of our social obligations as brother, as teacher, as employee, as citizen, as human.

The character of our ethical reflection is shaped by the configurations of "Others," the relationships and obligations, closest to us. Our sense of what is admirable, of what it is good to *be*, of the foundational standards and the basic outlines of ethical reasoning are all shaped by our orientations in life.

The Possibility of Ethics

I suggest, in our chapter on metaphysics, that perhaps "possibilities" have a kind of reality. Our possibilities shape "the way things are" for us. Our reality is this right here, where we are, in the midst of these possibilities. As such our possibilities are a real part of our context. And when it comes to ethics, we often keenly sense the reality of our possibilities (for example, I am aware that I *could* acquire this item at a significantly lower price, but I would have to lie in the process). But this issue of the "reality" of our possibilities must be pushed further, especially for some philosophers. Because perhaps what we imagine to be real possibilities are not possibilities at all. Perhaps we *think* we have the possibility either to lie or not to lie, but really what we choose is a determined result of previous causes. Or perhaps what we call "ethical"

decisions are not based on actual norms and principles, but are only made from personal or cultural preference and have no universal obligating application. What of ethics in this perspective?

Are our ethical decisions merely illusions of choice? The analysis of ethics as an exploration of "choices and actions" invariably wanders into the questions of human freedom discussed in the chapter on meaning. If my choices are simply the outcome of the play of atoms--or the necessary consequences of genetics, upbringing, and circumstances--then how can I be responsible (or punished) for my choices? Why do we find ourselves praising our heroes and blaming our criminals? Perhaps ethics (along with authentic choice) is fantasy. But if there *is* human freedom--if humans contribute significantly to the collection of causes bringing ones life into being from one moment to the next--then ethics as ordinarily understood has meaning.

It may be, however, that choice *has* meaning, but we lack ethical knowledge, the ability to acquire the foundations of ethical knowledge. What if we simply cannot *determine* any standard by which "right" and "wrong" can be measured? Some philosophers, for example, argue that terms like "right" and "wrong" express, not cognitive meaning corresponding to real moral states of affairs, but rather conditions of one's own mental and emotional condition (shaped as it is by culture and such). In this case my conviction that lying is "wrong" is *really* saying that I have a negative attitude toward lying. And here we are dealing with issues discussed in our chapter on language. But there is not just a language issue, but also a knowledge issue. Just as some philosophers question the possibility of knowing generally (epistemological "skepticisms" and "relativisms"), so in ethics we find similar forms of skepticism and relativism. ***Ethical skepticism*** questions the possibility of obtaining adequate knowledge about moral norms. An ethical skeptic might argue that our language about right and wrong communicates clearly; it's just that there is no way for us to determine how right or wrong could be identified. An ethical skeptic might argue that we can know our preferences, our desires, our habits and predispositions as individuals and cultures, but that we simply have no possibility of determining why one action (say lying) might be absolutely wrong. ***Ethical relativism*** assumes that knowledge about norms

may be established within a given community, but that any given norm is “relative” to that community. Those in power, argues German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), by nature of their position develop their own “master morality.” The masses, however develop their own “slave morality.” Neither can be established as authoritative over all. Ethical systems are so embedded in their different contexts that no universal norms are possible.

The claim that at least some universal ethical norms exist in the world is called ***ethical objectivism***. For the objectivist, context may shape our comprehension of, but does not prevent the knowledge of, ethical norms. The ethical objectivist might argue, for example, that while we could dispute individual cases of lying, the value of truth-telling is recognized by all cultures. Human society would crumble without it.

We decide in the midst of our own contexts. Our context influences our ethical reasoning by shping our thoughts about morality around an “ethical orientation.” What is central, important to us? Our understanding of what makes a decision *ethical* is informed by what we see, what we regard, what we value. Part of the context of our moral life is also the way we view ethical decisions themselves. Are ethical decisions possible, relative, objective? What do we think we are *doing* when we choose to lie or not to lie in a given case?

Now take a look at your own situation. What relationships and obligations weigh most heavily for you? To what are you most sensitive? Think about when you are upset at someone’s behavior or choice? What was “wrong”? What values would you uphold at all costs? Why? To what are you oriented when you evaluate choices and actions? Do you think others should uphold these values as well? Why? What do you think about the possibility of ethics? Would you consider yourself a skeptic, a relativist, or an objectivist? What do you think you are doing when you decide?

Choice, Act, End: Foundations and Principles of Ethical Reasoning

Having explored the contexts of our ethical reflections, we now turn to the process of ethical reasoning itself. How do we navigate ethical decisions in real time? Let's explore an example. Your mother is at death's door, being kept alive by hospital machinery. She did not leave instructions for this time, but you know her to be one who would not want excessive expense given to keeping someone alive on life-support. The rest of the family, however, wants to "do everything we can to keep mom alive," because "you never know." You are the eldest child and have been the primary care-giver for mom these past few months. What do you do? More important, *why* do you do it? What is your process of reasoning? Upon what grounds do you make this decision? What do you communicate to everyone around you?

In the West, a variety of schools of thought have developed in answer to these kinds of questions. The basic emphases of these schools can be divided in a few ways. Some emphasize the character of the actor (***virtue ethics***). Others emphasize the motive of the actor in the action (***egoism*** and ***altruism***). A third group emphasizes the act itself or the rule within which the act is performed (***deontology***). Still others emphasize the context, the social, biological or historical developments which shape the character of ethical rules (***social contract and sociobiological theories***). A final group emphasizes the aim or ends toward which the act is intended to produce (***consequentialism*** or ***utilitarianism***).

Virtue Ethics: The character of the actor

Given the situation of the dying parent and asked to explain why one made the choice one did, the virtue ethicist might answer, "because that's the kind of person I am." Those who emphasize virtue see ethical reasoning not as a matter of values clarification in the midst of a crisis situation. Rather they see ethics in terms of a slow nurturing of values and habits (*character*) within a person that ultimately will, under pressure, act spontaneously and consistently with right living. For the virtue ethicist the *decisions* of morality arise from a *training* in morality.

Think about this. Who would you like at your bedside making these decisions as you are about to die? Think beyond personal relationship to virtue, to wisdom. What kind of a person makes a good partner in life and death situations? What does it mean for a person to be virtuous? What makes a person virtuous? One way we see virtue is how people handle pressure. Confucius said, "Those who are without virtue cannot abide long either in a condition of poverty and hardship, or in a condition of enjoyment. The virtuous rest in virtue; the wise desire virtue" (*Analects* 4-2). The virtuous person might not choose the exact same action for similar situations. It is not a matter of this particular act, but of the freedom of a person trained in right living.

But what *is* virtue, and how does it act as a guiding force for choices and actions? We have already seen that Aristotle understands virtue as a predisposition to act a certain way, "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean . . . ." Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa (fifth century c.e.), a systematizer of Buddhist thought, defines virtue as "the states beginning with volition present in one who abstains from killing living things, etc."[6] What he means by this is a "state" (as Aristotle, involving a complex of mental and emotional dispositions), "beginning with volition" (again, as Aristotle, concerned with choice), "present" (this state actually "exists" - remember we talked about states of affairs having reality), in one who abstains from killing living things, etc (here he assumes the five 'sila' or precepts) - in other words Buddhaghosa is describing the kind of person who naturally lives the five precepts "from within." We might look at virtue as a nexus of core emotions, world view, and lifestyle. As habits and feelings are trained and reinforced, they become part of our very being. This is what we call "character." Character, then, influences choice and action by shaping the "natural" choices we make in given situations, developed over time , experience and training.

But how is virtue "trained"? Frequently the ancient philosophers spoke of the training of virtue in terms of the mastering of the "passions." Plato, for example, speaks of the mastering of the passions with the metaphor of a driver training a wild horse,

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6. Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Perfection*, Bhikku Nanamoli (Seattle, WA: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975), 10.

"But the driver, with resentment even stronger than before, like a racer recoiling from the starting rope, jerks back the bit in the mouth of the wanton horse with an even stronger pull, bespatters his railing tongue and his jaws with blood, and forcing him down on his legs and haunches delivers him over to anguish. And so it happens again and again, until the evil steed casts off his wantonness; humbled in the end, he obeys the counsel of his driver . . ."[7]

Stoics, Epicureans, Pythagoreans, Platonists--nearly every school of ancient philosophy in the West--saw philosophy as a way of life, and in doing so, saw the training of virtue (and especially the mastery of the passions) as an important part of the philosophical life. Thus they encouraged various "disciplines" or "exercises" (just as athletes have exercises they practice in order to prepare them for competition). Paying attention, self-denial, meditation, self-examination, education, consideration of one's death: these and more were staple "exercises" of the virtuous life.[8] Different virtues were facilitated by different exercises. Humility was facilitated by the practice of silence, for example. Wisdom was facilitated by accountable relationships with a mentor. And so on.

In recent years we have seen a renewal of interest in "virtue ethics" in the West. People have sought a way out of the modern debates between "rule" and "utility" based ethical systems (see below) by attempting to recover the spirit of the ethics of much of the ancient West.

Consider your own character. If you were placed under pressure, how would you choose? Why? What training have you had in the good life? What disciplines have you practiced? What particular virtues are your strongest, your weakest? What could you do to become a virtuous person?

[for an exploration of the discipline of self-examination, try JA 7.1 Self-Examination]

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7. Plato, *Phaedrus* 254e.
8. For this see Pierre Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995),81–125.

Motive: the state of the heart

Another way of looking at ethical reasoning is to consider the *motive* of the action performed. What makes a moral act praiseworthy is not that is was performed by a virtuous person, but that it expresses a worthy motive. Even a kind act performed out of an evil motive (we've all done these, haven't we?) is not a moral act. But the reverse is also true. A harmful act performed for generous motives is easily forgiven.

But this leads to the obvious question, what makes for a good motive? And at this point we find ourselves in the midst of a debate. Some argue that appropriate self-interest is a legitimate (and perhaps the best) motive for action. This position is called ***egoism***. Others, however disagree, and argue that interest in others is a higher motive than self-interest. This is called ***altruism***. The egoist, in the hospital situation, might answer that a particular choice was in her own best interests. When others might reply in shock to such an answer, the egoist would simply say that the world as a whole profits best from each person advancing their own best interests. The altruist, however, might answer that she chose her course of action because that was what "mom" would have liked best (or perhaps because it was what would bring harmony to the family . . .). The egoist might argue that we are incapable of weighing the needs of all affected by a situation, or even deciding to which need our heart should respond. We are best acting for ourselves. The altruist would say that an act is moral because our heart is in the right place, that "an interest in other people *for their own sake* is a necessary condition for morality"[9]

Now it must be said that there are many kinds of egoism that contribute to the performance of an action. The practice of Tonglen (remember in your chapter on Practicing?) is an approach to compassionate action often performed as a means of ridding ourselves from attachment and facilitating enlightenment. Ascetics practice self-denial in an effort to facilitate virtue. Others make an effort to "climb the corporate ladder" in order to reach a place where they can influence a number of people for good. Few actions are performed from *purely* egoistic or

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9. Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979),10.

altruistic motives. Take a look at your own actions. What kind of a mix of motives appear to be involved in your key decisions?

Perhaps the most mentioned motive is the motive of love. Consider these two reflections on love from the Christian tradition:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames,but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (Christian New Testament, 1 Corinthians 13)

But what does this love look like in practice? Jesus was once rebuked by the religious leaders of his day for hanging around with low-lifes. In response, he told this story, the well-known story of the prodigal son.

A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." '

So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him,

and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet;and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.'But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' "

Love is the Father, ready to embrace even when rejected. Christian theologian Miroslav Volf reflects on the nature of embrace (and the story of the prodigal son) in his *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, a book that grew out of his own experience in the midst of the conflict in the Balkans. He identifies four moments of embrace: I open my arms (an unconditional welcome, a sign I have created space in myself for the other), I wait (I postpone my desires and expectations), I close my arms (we enter one another's space and touch), I open them again (we let the other go). Here is the ethical point of it all, the point that communicates the motive of love, Volf states "*the will to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.* The *will to embrace* precedes any 'truth' about others and any construction of their 'justice.'"[10] This will to embrace is, for Volf, the motive of love.

Part of the value of our choices and actions lies in the purity of our motives, in the sincerity of our love. Consider your own motives. What do you think about "egoism" and the role of appropriate self-interest? What kinds of egoisms and altruisms tend to be combined in your own choices and habits? What does "love" look like for you?

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10. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 29, italics his.

Rule: The act itself

A third way we might respond when asked why we made the choice we did as our mother was dying, is that “it was the right act to do.” Here the matter is not our own character, nor the motive from which we act, but the nature of the act itself. We might argue that removing life-support is “killing her” and taking the life of another is wrong. In this kind of moral reasoning, what matters is the act itself and the rules by which we value those acts. This approach to moral reasoning which emphasizes the rule of an act or the duty to perform certain acts in known as the ***deontological*** approach to ethics.

On the one hand, this seems simple. We have the ten commandments, the five precepts or something similar. We decide if the act fits the rule and then we do it (or avoid it in the case of prohibitions). But things are not always so clear. If mom would have died naturally without the machines, is removing her from these machines, “killing” her, or is it just letting her live the rest of her (albeit short) life normally? What are the distinctions between doing everything you can to keep someone alive and killing them?

Perhaps the most well-known “rule” of life is the “Golden Rule.” Consider this rule in the context of a few religious communities:

Christianity *All things you wish that men should do to you, do you so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.* (Matthew 7:1)

Confucianism *Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in the family or in the state.* (Analects 12:2)

Buddhism *Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.* (Udana-Varga 5,1)

Hinduism *This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you.* (Mahabharata 5,1517)

Islam *No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.* (Sunnah)

Judaism *What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.* (Talmud, Shabbat 3id)

Taoism *Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.*
(Tai Shang Kan Yin P'ien)

Perhaps the most famous deontological ethical philosopher in the West was Immanuel Kant. He believed that acts were moral, not because of their consequences, or because of our feelings associated, but rather because of the principle or *maxim* that was followed in the act itself. For Kant that maxim needed to be tied not to private subjectivity but rather to a universal law. We call this law Kant's "categorical imperative." He states it twice. "I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a natural law*." "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[11] Sound familiar?

Another way that the nature of the act itself can guide ethical reasoning is by expressing an aesthetic sense of choice, action, and life. There is a sense we have, at times, of what a "beautiful" (excellent, admirable . . .) act would be in a given situation. Perhaps we are aware of a few models of a well-lived life. Perhaps it is more intuitive than that. But we decide to act, stepping into an expression of what we think is a life of beauty lived in this moment. Here again, from a different angle, the act itself provides the guiding principle for ethical reasoning.

Take a look at your own practice. Do you follow any rules when you decide about ethical considerations? What rules do you follow? Why? Have you ever wondered what a beautiful life might look like? Have you ever tried to walk into a beautiful life in practice?

Social Contract and Sociobiology: Context Theories

Some look not to the rule itself, but to the context within which the rule arises. By looking at the context of the rule, we may have a stronger sense of the meaning of the rule,

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11. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 70,88.

which, in turn, can guide us in how to apply the rule. Two context theories are common today. A ***social contract*** theorist might look at our situation of the dying mother and talk about how our society today has mutually agreed to keep life going when reasonable, through the use of machines, but that the same society also recognizes that there are limits to the reasonability of this practice. Where did this rule of preserving life come from? Perhaps we might argue that society has agreed to preserve life in order to maintain the health of society as a whole. If we all killed one another whenever we felt like it, things would go bad for society. So we develop laws and unwritten values about the preservation of life. But what about *this* case? Perhaps in this case, preservation no longer "preserves" the health of society, but rather chains us to unreasonable efforts to maintain particular signs of life. What concerns, what "contracts," really bind our society together and must be upheld for the sake of the whole? Not always an easy question to answer.

A ***sociobiological*** theory of ethics takes a slightly different approach. Rather than looking to some contract in society which determines our norms, a sociobiological theorist looks to the trajectory of society in *evolutionary history*. Over time, behaviors that promoted our survival as a race of humans were valued and those that hindered survival were devalued. In this case it is not the agreement of society that makes a given value normative (though, as you can see, none of these values are *absolutely* normative), but rather the function that the value serves for the well-being of society as a whole. A sociobiologist might reason, regarding the dying mother, that while humans have evolved to the stage of preserving our lives to increase productivity, we now are on a trajectory to allow life to pass away when life no longer serves a productive purpose. An interesting possibility to ponder, yes?

Consequences: the end of it all

Finally we choose because of the consequences we expect to follow, because of what the act is likely to produce. On the one hand, this approach is inseparable from motive (consequences "for whom," and "why"?). But on the other this approach moves us more to the

practical question of why *this* choice, *this* decision, here and now? For the ***consequentialist*** the issue is not so much an issue of the heart, but rather a question of reason: what is the best way to produce the best results for the situation concerned. Some do not see the consequences of an action as having much import for ethical reasoning. You do the right act, whether it will have favorable consequences or not (for example, the deontological schools). Others however think that reflecting upon consequences is a very important part of ethical reasoning (consider the sociobiologist trying to reason what actions both reflects and promotes the development of the species).

The effects of one act (or moment) upon another is often discussed in the East with the notion of *karma*. Picture it this way. If we look at reality as a flow of events in time, each event having some ever-so-sleight impact upon the character of the next event and ultimately upon the whole (remember "the butterfly effect"?), then the impact of *this* moment upon the *next*--the tendencies that are re-enforced or altered however slightly--can be thought of as the "karma" of this moment. Now for the next frame. You are caught in a ever-repeating cycle of misery and suffering. Lifetime after lifetime you arise again, only to suffer. But within each lifetime small changes happen, each influencing the next, so that many lifetimes in the future there is a chance for the experience that brings final release from this wretched existence. Now let's put a "moral" spin on the whole picture. Each choice, each act, each attitude has some ever-so-slight moral value. Some acts more than others. Each choice for good strengthens the *karma* in one direction. Each choice for ill strengthens the *karma* in another direction. A complex of multiple, mutually influencing "causes." Acts and consequences. *Karma*. From this perspective, ethical reasoning is very concerned with consequences, although it is not always the immediate consequences that are necessarily in view.

One ethical viewpoint in the West that has gained a great deal of attention among philosophers is known as ***utilitarianism***. Utilitarianism states that the value of actions is determined by a given action's "utility," or results. The best actions are those which are likely to produce the greatest good. ***Act utilitarianism***, for example, argues that we should perform that

action which is most likely to produce the greatest good. ***Rule utilitarianism*** proposes that those actions are good which are performed according to the rule which is most likely overall to produce the greatest good. Thus, even if a particular act does not produce the greatest good *in this situation*, if it is performed in light of some principle that is likely to produce the greatest good overall, that makes it a good act. Consider, for example Jeremy Bentham's famous "principle of utility":

> "*that principle which states the greatest happiness of all whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper, and only right and proper and universally desirable, end of human action--of human action in every situation, and in particular that of a functionary or set of functionaries exercising the powers of government.*"[12]

Once again, if you think about it, it kind-of sounds like the Golden Rule, doesn't it?

Of course, our sense of consequences is shaped by our orientations. For some divine pleasure is the desired consequence. For others the greatest good for the greatest number (often referred to as the *summum bonum*) is the desired end. Sometimes the aim toward which the consequences are considered is seen in terms of universal values (such as "love" or "righteousness"). At other times the aims of utilitarian choices are seen as products of social contracts. Utilitarians can be objectivist or relativist, egoist or altruist. Indeed, *feminist* philosophy has, in recent years, alerted ethical reflection to the fact that people of different genders, like people of different cultures, process ethical reasoning differently, and even may be oriented toward different aims, consequences, and relationships. The recognition of our differences does not need to lead us into a thoroughgoing skepticism, but rather an appreciation for our ethical fallibilism in the face of the need for communication.

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12. Jeremy Bentham, "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation," in *The English Philosohers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin Burtt, Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1939), 791n1.

Conclusions: Putting Ethics into Practice -

So what does all this mean in practice? Let's consider each aspect of ethical reasoning in review. Give yourself a moment to examine your own ethical reasoning processes. First consider what it might look like to become "an ethical person." What would it look like to receive the *training* of an ethical person? Here we are in the arena of virtue. We are at the deep levels of world view, core emotional concern, lifestyle, character. What does it mean to train character to the point that it spontaneously and naturally chooses the good? What might this mean for *you*?

Now think of *motive* as part of ethical reasoning. This requires a bit of paying attention. Stop, wait, notice your motives. What blends of egoist and altruist motives are present ordinarily in your experience? What blend of these would you *like* to see? Why do you normally act? What is present in your heart? What steps, however minor, could be taken to facilitate ethical motives?

Next, consider *acts* or *rules* in themselves. What do you think are "right" acts, or "wrong" acts? Having read this chapter, what ethical principles are now more solid for you? Where do you have doubts about "morality"? Are you an objectivist or a relativist? Why so? How will you choose to act in either case, and how will your views affect your actions? What does a beautiful life look like to you? Think about putting reality into practice. How do you think your view of "is" affects your sense of "ought"? What do you plan to do about this?

Or think of the contexts from which those rules regarding acts developed. How does society form rules? Do contracts or evolutionary progress accurately describe how human beings establish the morals by which they live? Does a description of the social formation of a rule make that rule "right"? In what sense, and why or why not?

Finally, think of consequences. Do you ever think in terms of "what will happen if I do this?" What is your goal in life? How do you make choices to get there? What kinds of results do you hope to produce for others? Now think about the practical consequences of your actions. How often do you consider the consequences of your actions? Short term? Long term? Ask, What does your *karma* look like? What utilitarian purpose does this action serve. Again, think about putting reality into practice. What might it mean for you to put morals into practice?

By now you can see that our philosophical beliefs about ethical matters--whether we are conscious of them or not--can play an important role in shaping our guiding values of life. Our value of truth-telling is a reflection of our belief that truth-telling is right and lying is wrong. And so we adopt a value and a rule by which our life is guided. Or we take one step further and adopt Kant's categorical imperative as a "source" of guidance for ethical reasoning. We ask ourselves, in complex ethical decisions, "What would it be like if everyone were to live by the maxim underlying my decision in this case?" Think of specific cases: your driving habits (do you speed?), your entertainment (do you watch violent movies?), your schooling (do you pursue education for the betterment of yourself or others?), your relationships (do you love?). Think of how you might describe a "good" day, a "good" human being, a "good" life. Again and again, our ethical beliefs help us construct the values from which our life is guided.

Well-examined ethical beliefs are not only helpful in the broader spheres of character development and the construction of guiding values. They are also essential for many decisions of daily life. Just ask yourself: "What areas of life or practices are more directly affected by my approach to ethics; what difference would it make what I believed about this or that question of ethics?" Certainly your community and child raising decisions are influenced by your ethical beliefs. How do you feel about the motive of love and altruism? What rules and standards do you insist on around the home (and why?)? Your employment is affected by your ethical beliefs. Do you decide to count *those* hours or *those* dollars as business time/expenses or personal (and why?)? Your sense of what is "fair" or "unfair" in school or government (and why?) will be shaped by your ethical beliefs. Is the freedom of the individual "right" in all cases? Why? As we will explore in the following chapter, politics is deeply interconnected with ethics. Our purchases are influenced by our ethical decisions (do you buy fair trade products?). Even our approach to another's suffering--the virtues we bring to the bedside of a sying mother--are influenced by our well-examined ethical training.

As you can see, the love of wisdom will require looking at the right, the good, and the happy from all sides (many-sidedness). Our acts, our motives, our aims and ultimately our character are all co-present as we (both individuals and communities) choose life. Wisdom requires the examination of all of human experience. But it is a very practical activity. By carefully evaluating our ethical beliefs we take one step closer to the “good” life in everything we do.

[for a case-study in putting ethics to practice, why not try JA 7.2 Ethical Reasoning: A Case Study]

JA 7.1 Self-Examination

"The unexamined life is not worth living " (Socrates).

One important means of growth in virtue used by philosophers throughout the globe is a practice called "self-examination." Historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot writes of this practice that it is "recommended by Pythagoreans, Epicureans, Stoics--especially Seneca and Epictetus--and many other philosophers, such as Plutarch and Galen" ("Ancient Spiritual Practices," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 134). It is simply the act of thinking over the events of one's day, especially at the close of the day, often paying special attention to areas of life in need of improvement. A variety of techniques for self-examination were developed throughout the West, especially in the context of Christian spirituality. The following is an outline for you to try.

At the end of the day, stop, before you go to bed, and sit still for a moment. Think about the day which has just ended. Let the video-tape of your mind go back, hour-by-hour. Let you mind rest at the key events of the day, reliving them for a while. Recall your thought, your feelings, your intentions, your actions. After you have remembered the day, now go back again and ask yourself a few questions.

- what were the best moments of my day?
- what were the worst moments of my day?
- what virtues did I express and how?
- what passions did I express and how?
- what gave me life (or took life away) and why?

Take notice of what was going on within and without as you expressed your virtues, your passions. See what factors facilitate the one or the other. Perhaps you have a hero or spiritual

model. Ask yourself how that person (or god) might live particular moments of your day. Don't just think about *what* you did. Spend time reflecting on *how* and *why* you did what you did. Compare your life with your values. Did you live what you believe?

Self examination is especially helpful when used in conjunction with the discipline of keeping a journal, for the journal can be used for recording your progress in areas, noting factors influencing growth in areas of virtue. You may want to keep inspiring quotes in the journal as well. You may want to share your growth in the context of relationship with a significant other. Self-examination is aimed at informing daily life. By noticing problem patterns at the end of the day, we hope to be able to recognize the same patterns next time, even earlier. Self-examination need not be a depressing habit of morbid introspection. Rather it can be an honest and thankful review of the day, grateful for the victories and pressing on toward further growth in virtue.

JA 7.2 Ethical Reasoning: A Case Study

Sometimes it is easy to decide the right action to take, to choose the good. Other times it is very hard to decide. Here is a chance for you to take some time and really explore a particular choice. Select a situation wherein you have made, or need to make a decision. This decision should have ethical implications, a question of living out obligations, choices that may have greater or lesser value and so on.

Now, review this situation. Spend some time thinking about the situation. Look at it broadly, examining "the whole." What is this situation all about? Then go back and review the situation in detail. Become aware of the various factors involved in this "case." Think of the various *relationships* involved (others, self, nature, spirit). What obligations are present in this situation? Are there any obligations that appear to conflict with each other? How? See if you can get an intelligent understanding of the situation.

Ethics deals with *choices or actions* (though it includes more than actions, as you have learned). Look again at this situation. What are the key choices involved, what are the various possibilities for action? Are there possibilities you haven't thought of yet? It this just a matter of *what* action you choose, but perhaps also of *how* you act? What attitudes might be involved?

Take a look at your *self*. Who are you right now? What is going on in your life and what might affect the decisions you make (for better or for worse)?

Then, consider the *content* of ethics. Do you have any favorite ethical literature that informs your life. What do the masters of living say about this particular kind of situation that you are facing? Spend a little time reading or listening. What do you think about what you

heard?

Now it is time to exercise some ethical reasoning. Keep in mind the details of this situation and ask yourself about:

- character and virtue - Who are you? What are your virtues and passions? Where do your core emotional concerns, lifestyle, world view meet this situation? What could be expressed in this situation . . .?
- motive - What is in your heart concerning this situation? Why would you choose this rather than that option. Imagine performing each of your different options. What is present in each for you? For others?
- rule - What rules might apply to this situation? Is there a Golden Rule which you frequently turn to? What about a categorical imperative? What maxims or duties loom in front of you and simply make one action "right"?
- context - What contexts in the nature of society and history influences the formation of the rules that surround this situation? How might they influence the character of your choices in this situation?
- consequences - Consider the possibilities for the future. Again imagine each option. What is likely to happen in each case? In the short run? In the long run?

Now, having explored your ethical options from various angles, see if you are now better prepared to make the best choice.