

“In *Toward Thriving Communities*, Brian Stiltner provides us with a splendid text that teaches us the viability of virtue in social contexts. This timely contribution captures the best that ethics offers us today: a character and growth formation ethics that can be cultivated in families, schools, work, and community service. In these fundamental settings, we can become virtuous, and Stiltner offers us concrete ways to see how this can happen. The book is a welcome dream for any teacher wanting to convey a living, social ethics.”

—James F. Keenan, SJ  
Canisius Professor  
Boston College

“Virtue-based ethics can be found among the most ancient Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, yet it has been largely obscured in the past few hundred years by principle-based and consequentialist ethical systems. Brian Stiltner’s *Toward Thriving Communities* effectively extends the recovery of virtue ethics to concrete moral situations we face in our everyday lives. Integrating theoretical analysis with case-based application, Stiltner’s text illuminates the importance of virtue ethics in contemporary society: from parenting to politics, from being a good neighbor to being a conscientious global citizen. Stiltner’s approach prompts us to engage in our own personal reflection on what sort of moral character we should strive to embody and also to inculcate in the next generation in accord with our best philosophical, anthropological, and sociological understanding of what it means to genuinely flourish as a human being. Going beyond the narrow confines of many introductory ethics texts, Stiltner’s grounded elucidation of virtue theory—in contrast to other ethical approaches—will prove to be a useful guide for students and lay readers who haven’t yet been introduced to this most classical and time-honored of approaches to moral living.”

—Jason T. Eberl  
Semler Endowed Chair for Medical Ethics  
Marian University

“Eschewing hyperbolic lamentations over the challenges posed for the cultivation of virtue by deep pluralism and rampant materialism, *Toward Thriving Communities*, by Brian Stiltner, patiently attends to the ordinary communal contexts within which virtuous character is shaped and tested. In accessible, uncluttered prose, peppered with examples from daily life, Stiltner unpacks the interdependent character of personal and communal flourishing. Social contexts such as family, schools, workplaces, and volunteer organizations, he shows, have the potential either to help or to hinder the development of lives worth living, lives of virtuous activity directed toward the common good.”

—Professor Jennifer Herdt  
Yale Divinity School

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# TOWARD THRIVING COMMUNITIES

*Virtue Ethics as Social Ethics*

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BRIAN STILTNER

  
ANSELM  
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# Introduction

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Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good.

—Aristotle<sup>1</sup>

The film *Please Give* is a character study of a family living in New York City. Married couple Kate and Alex run an antique furniture store in the same swanky neighborhood where they live. They have one child, a teenage daughter named Abby. The family is reasonably happy and free from major crises. Yet the father, mother, and daughter deal with the ordinary stresses of life and each, it seems, is trying to figure out why they don't feel happier with the state of their lives. Their awkward searches for happiness and meaning are the point of the film. Abby dislikes her acne and feels fat. Seeking to feel more attractive, she wants her parents to buy her a \$200 pair of jeans, which Kate resists. Alex, trying to feel young again, stumbles into a brief affair with a young day-spa worker. Driven by feelings of guilt mixed with compassion, Kate gives money to homeless people.

In one scene, Kate and Abby pass a homeless man on the sidewalk. Kate pulls out her wallet and, having only a five-dollar and twenty-dollar bill inside, moves to give the twenty to the man. Abby snatches it and berates her mother for giving so much. "Just give him the five," she yells. Kate says that it is her money to do with as she wants. She orders Abby to pass along the twenty, which Abby refuses to do. Shocked at her daughter and mortified in front of the man, Kate gives him the five and then hurries away with her daughter. This tense moment represents the characters' anxieties and the strains in their relationship. Abby feels her mother is more generous toward strangers than toward her. Kate feels she would be less of a good person for giving only five dollars to someone in need. In addition, like most parents, she sometimes doesn't know how to deal with the wildly emotional creature that is her teenager.

This scene is interesting because it invites the viewer to consider the complexity of everyday decisions. Is it good to give money to a homeless person? If so, how much? There is no formula for deciding the right amount, although the

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1. Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1.1 (1252a1), trans. Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1. In *Toward Thriving Communities*, classical works will be cited in the translation used and according to their traditional divisions (usually books and chapters) and pagination. The current citation, for instance, is to book 1, chapter 1 of *The Politics*. Advanced readers can use the parenthetical number to find the specific location. Such numbers are printed in the margins of many editions of Aristotle, Plato, and other classical authors.

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context matters, as does the motivation with which one gives. Is it good to buy one's daughter a \$200 pair of jeans? Will it boost her confidence, send her the wrong message about emphasizing her looks, or encourage her to become self-ish? Outside of the context of the relationship, there is no way to know for certain. A mother or father has to make such decisions guided by parental wisdom, compassion for the child, and a sense of responsibility for the family's finances and the child's moral development. Yet, what is one's responsibility toward others who are struggling in society? The film's writer and director, Nicole Holofcener, commented,

One of the great things about living in New York (if you have money) is being able to buy a beautiful place and fill it with beautiful things. But how do you do that and feel okay about it when there are hungry people right outside your (beautiful, newly stripped solid walnut) door? I've been struggling to forgive myself for those contradictions my whole life, and I think that's a struggle I heaped upon my characters, especially Kate.<sup>2</sup>

There are no formulaic answers to these questions, because the questions are not of the form, "What is the right action to do?" but of the form, "What is the best way to live?"

### Character and Community: Two Important Dimensions of Ethics

This book is about two dimensions of ethics, *character* and *community*, that go beyond questions of right action. Character requires reflection about the people who act, the make-up of their moral personalities, their abiding values, their moral traits and habits, and the story of their lives and relationships. This diverse list sets the context for human decisions. A character-based approach to ethics starts with *virtues*, which are character traits (including well-known qualities such as honesty, compassion, courage, and fairness) that lead to a happy and well-lived life—a state that virtue ethicists call *human flourishing*. Humans flourish when they live well and excellently as the rational, emotional, desiring, and social beings they are. When ethics is framed in terms of character and flourishing, then its subject matter expands to encompass decisions about whom to choose as friends, what career to seek, where to work, how to parent, when and where to volunteer, and so on. In Western culture, the theory of virtue ethics was first shaped by ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca, who made "the shape of one's life" their preeminent philosophical

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2. Nicole Holofcener, director's statement, <http://www.sonyclassics.com/pleasegive/presskit.pdf>.

concern. Since “How should I live?” is such an important ethical question, this book explores virtue ethics as an indispensable resource for addressing it. To be sure, “What is the right thing to do?” is also an important question. Virtue ethicists say, though, that questions of right action are often more effectively addressed within a wider exploration of the best way to live.

The community dimension requires attention to the interpersonal and social relationships that shape and inform an individual’s moral actions. People live within many communities and institutions simultaneously—for example, one has a family, a neighborhood, a workplace, friends, social and civic clubs, and perhaps a religious community. These groups are the small and medium-sized communities to which people belong and in which they participate, enabling them to survive and thrive in many ways. Groups facilitate individuals’ participation in the large structure known as *society*, the network of persons and groups held together by cultural, economic, geographical, legal, and political ties. Each community or society has a moral character—or ethos—constructed during a long span of time by the ethical characters and choices of its members. In turn, the ethos of each community and society contributes to the characters that its members develop. So, an ethical approach that is sensitive to the community dimension examines the complex influences of persons and communities on each other.

A community-oriented ethical approach further affirms that when individuals develop a robust understanding of human flourishing, they are more likely to appreciate that their well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of others or from the quality of the social fabric. When individuals have developed a range of virtues, they can better understand what an improved world might look like and can work collaboratively toward its improvement. A good example is Bead for Life, a nonprofit organization started by three U.S. women.<sup>3</sup> Torkin Wakefield, while doing aid work in Uganda, encountered a woman making beautiful beaded necklaces from scraps of paper. Wakefield brought some of the necklaces home to the United States as gifts. They were popular among her friends, many of who wanted to buy more. This experience inspired Wakefield, her mother, and a friend to recruit entrepreneurial Ugandan women, train them in bead making, sell the necklaces in the United States through parties, and give the proceeds to the Ugandans. The women who make the necklaces earn as much as \$200 a month, which is deposited into savings accounts that they control. The fact that the women have protected financial assets wins them more respect from their husbands and communities. The women and their communities flourish because Bead for Life has a long-term plan for community development that includes helping the women start their own businesses.

This example illustrates that individuals with key virtues—such as the justice, compassion, and creativity of the program’s founders and the

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3. This example is drawn from Nicholas D. Kristof and Cheryl WuDunn, *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 30–32.

persistence and courage of the Ugandan women—can lead groups and communities toward a better future. The Ugandan participants flourish, as does their community. Those who volunteer with Bead for Life flourish, as does the organization itself. Entire societies—Uganda, the United States, and the international community—are positively influenced by such activities. The impact of one program on the global common good is tiny, but when many social movements and volunteer groups do similar work and share ideas, the effects multiply. From the work of people and communities pursuing their own flourishing, social change is born. Community-oriented ethics offers guidance for the combined pursuit of personal, communal, and social flourishing, since these are inextricably linked.

### Restoring the Connection between Virtue and the Common Good

Some books, especially those not written from a virtue perspective, give the misimpression that virtue ethics is limited to the personal level. Yet as theorists of virtue throughout history have appreciated, virtue ethics is valuable for articulating a vision of a good society and providing an ethical compass toward it. Aristotle's claim that "every community is established with a view to some good" indicates that this connection has been recognized from the beginning of the theory in fifth-century BCE Greece.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle described an ethical concept that came to be known as *the common good*.

The common good is the idea that the well-being of individuals and of society are interdependent. As an ethical principle, the common good requires that society create conditions that provide everyone with what they need to flourish. Government has a significant responsibility in promoting the common good, but the common good is about much more than government programs. Individuals, families, and civic groups of all sort—such as Bead for Life—are essential. The common good is a vibrant reality only when it includes everyone in a society. Achieving this requires that a critical mass of people and groups honor this principle in their words and deeds.<sup>5</sup>

A notion of the common good can be distilled from Aristotle's writings and the writings of most thinkers associated with virtue ethics. The ancient and medieval virtue thinkers believed that society inevitably shapes its individual

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4. The roots of Greek philosophy start with the Pre-Socratics of the fifth century BCE. Aristotle, the most famous and influential of Plato's students and the tutor of Alexander the Great, lived in the fourth century.

5. Clearly, there need to be enough good people in a society to make the society good, but there is no way to specify how many or what proportion of people are needed. The factors for the common good are highly complex and variable; nevertheless, certain ethical baselines can be identified, and that is one of the purposes of this book.

members' characters, that society has a duty to try to educate people to have good character, that society may rightly expect its adult members to act with virtue, and that society cannot have a good ethos without its leaders and many of its citizens having good characters. But these long-held beliefs are debated in modern societies for many reasons, such as: the pluralism of worldviews, the separation of church and state, and the development of the rights of conscience and privacy. These developments are not bad, but they question old assumptions about who is a virtuous person and what a good society resembles. If the common good is an ideal that can appeal to contemporary people, it needs to be defined in light of contemporary realities, such as pluralism and democracy.

An updated understanding is possible. As Aristotle recognized, people want good things; hence, they want to live in a good society. Yet people do not agree on what those good things are and, therefore, do not agree on the way society should be arranged. This is a challenge, not an intractable problem. The methods of social ethics are designed to sharpen thinking about the goods people *in fact* want and that they *should* want, so they can get a clearer picture of how to live their lives, individually and collectively.

Members of a democratic society will never reach complete agreement on the complex issues facing them. Disagreement is part of human nature and free societies. Indeed, there is much that is good about disagreement, for it is a byproduct of political freedom. Despite the challenges of disagreement, citizens need to find ways to talk, listen, argue civilly, deliberate, and cooperate. To be capable of those activities, citizens must have characters that enable them to apply their virtues within social contexts. The intermediary groups examined in this book—families, schools, workplaces, and volunteer groups—are instrumental for the development of character that encourages people to contribute to the common good. While virtue ethics will not provide simple, indisputable answers, it recommends productive ways to think about social and political impasses and, just as importantly, civil ways to work on them.

## About This Book

This book differs from most books on ethical theory by presenting virtue ethics as a combined approach that offers guidance for individuals, groups, and society. A contemporary renewal of interest in the common good occurred at roughly the same time as a revival of virtue ethics—in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> One might

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6. A large wave of academic interest in virtue ethics followed the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). A few years later, both academic and popular interest in the common good was stoked by the bestseller *Habits of the Heart* by Robert N. Bellah et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). However, a number of otherwise very good philosophers of virtue ethics—such as Phillipa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Bernard Williams—did not pay much attention to MacIntyre or to works on the common good.

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expect that virtue ethicists promoted this attention to the common good. Yet, especially among the philosophers of virtue, this was not the case, with a few exceptions. Theological virtue ethicists and the diverse group of sociologists, political scientists, and philosophers known as communitarians were the ones advocating for the common good and linking personal and social flourishing.<sup>7</sup> But since the connection of character and community is so long-standing, contemporary philosophers of virtue have many guideposts to point them toward a deeper inquiry.

The field has begun to respond with both theoretical and applied works. The theoretical contributions have been by authors following in the footsteps of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose 1981 book *After Virtue* was a trailblazer, not only for redirecting attention to the virtue tradition, but for powerfully arguing that virtue is a highly social reality. An example of applied work is a 2007 anthology titled *Working Virtue*. Its editors wrote that, even though the contemporary revival of interest in virtue had been happening for several decades, there was still “a relative paucity of writings that offer clear examples of virtue ethics actually at work in various practical fields.”<sup>8</sup> With articles applying virtue ethics in such areas as medicine, psychiatry, education, law, business, race relations, and the environment, *Working Virtue* has helped fill the gap.

This book further contributes to advancing this new horizon for an ancient ethics by addressing both theoretical and practical tasks to give a comprehensive picture of the value of virtue ethics for social analysis. A work of applied ethics, this book examines how one who adopts the ethical theory of virtue might use it to analyze social problems and argue for practical responses to those problems. Many readers could benefit, including those new to philosophical ethics or theological ethics, those familiar with virtue ethics who would like to understand the theory’s social implications, and those interested in one or more applied areas, such as business or education, who would like to understand what virtue ethics has to say about that area. *Toward Thriving Communities* helps readers reflect on two interconnected, fundamental human questions: What is the good life for me? What is the good life for society? Readers of this book can expect to do the following:

- understand more about virtue ethics in its classic formulation and its value as a resource for contemporary social ethics
- gain perspective on obstacles to human flourishing and resources for overcoming them

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7. As a guide to some of this literature, see Brian Stiltner, *Religion and the Common Good: Catholic Contributions to Building Community in a Liberal Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

8. Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 1.

- learn how to apply virtues to the pursuit of personal, communal, and social flourishing in several social contexts

Part 1, “Virtue Ethics as Personal, Communal, and Social Ethics,” begins by framing virtue ethics within the context of two other ethical theories: deontology (based on duties) and consequentialism (based on consequences). While the ethics of duties and the ethics of consequences are both valuable methods for ethical analysis, chapter 1 argues that virtue ethics is particularly attractive for its holistic approach, including its ability to connect ethical concerns about personal flourishing to ethical concerns about communal and social flourishing. Ethical theories are complex. To make it easier to understand and compare ethical theories, chapter 1 introduces three features of moral experience to which every ethical theory pays attention:

- the guidelines by which people live and think they should live
- the purpose of human life in general, an individual’s life in particular, and the lives of communities and societies
- the situational factors influencing the choices made by people and communities

Ethical theories address these features by proposing moral *norms*, giving accounts of moral *purpose*, and critically examining the *contexts* of moral living.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explain a virtue-ethical perspective on each of these features. These chapters develop important ethical tools, including the following:

- a list of virtues relevant to the needs of human beings, and particularly to their needs for communal and social living
- a specific account of what human flourishing means, so the well-being of persons, groups, and society can be assessed
- an understanding of how social capital is built or eroded in society through the activities of communal groups, so the health of a society’s network of relationships can be assessed and its unhealthy elements targeted for improvement

The goal is to provide a roadmap for virtue ethics as a combined personal-communal-social ethic, so that ancient wisdom about character might help modern people live together in a just and flourishing manner.

Part 2, “The Pursuit of Flourishing in Social Contexts,” shows how virtues enable people in groups to promote their own flourishing and that of society. The closer society comes to a mutually beneficial relationship among its members, the more it achieves the common good. In this part, four major groups are addressed: families, schools, workplaces, and volunteer organizations. These are neither the only groups involved in the promotion of character and flourishing, nor the only contexts where the common good is a major concern. As

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a result, these other groups figure in the discussion occasionally: friends, who are extremely important for individual well-being, and religious groups, which inculcate virtues in their members and influence society as communities of moral deliberation and philanthropic activity. Institutions of government also arise often in part 2, since public policies make a significant impact on the material resources that are part of personal and social flourishing. As for other, large contexts—such as international relations and the global environment—even these are amenable to improvement by the virtuous activity of groups. However, the challenges in these settings involve technical details that are beyond the scope of this book.

The strength of virtue ethics is that its norms, purpose, and appreciation of context enable people to pursue personal, communal, and social flourishing. Yet the entire picture of the interrelationships of persons, groups, and society, with implications for the character and flourishing of each, is complex. Thus each chapter in part 2 examines four main topics regarding the particular type of group being examined:

1. how the mutual relationships among a group and its members promote the character and flourishing of both
2. how the mutual relationships among a group and society promote the ethos and flourishing of both
3. ethical challenges encountered within a group, and how virtue ethics can be used to develop responses to those challenges
4. ethical challenges placed on a group by external social forces, and how virtue ethics can be used to develop the group's responses and society's obligations to assist that group

In short, what is the proper relationship among groups and society, such that the character and flourishing of each benefits the other?

For the sake of offering specific, useful examples, the context in part 2 will be U.S. society, that is, the United States as a cultural, geographic, economic, and political entity. To say that that the United States presents obstacles to the flourishing of the groups within it is not to make a negative judgment on the country overall. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that U.S. society, like any society, both helps and hinders social flourishing. Civic-minded persons are concerned to know how they can improve their society. This book presumes, as Aristotle would, that the United States is organized with a view toward certain goods and that its citizens want to know how to live virtuously and promote the common good. Whether it is “most,” “many,” or “a few” who want to know does not matter; this book is written for those who *do* have such an interest. This approach follows the lead of Aristotle, who did not address his writings on ethics to those concerned only with satisfying their own wants. Aristotle said that other readers,

“those who regulate their desires and actions by a rational principle,” would greatly benefit from studying virtue ethics.<sup>9</sup>

For those interested in the journey toward the flourishing of individuals, groups, and societies, virtue ethics is an ethical compass for the voyage.<sup>10</sup> It is an approach both old and new—an ancient ethics that has remarkably much to say about contemporary concerns.

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9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.3 (1095a10), trans. Martin Ostwald (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 6. This work will be used extensively in this book. Usually, the translation will be from Terence Irwin but two other translations are occasionally used. After a first mention of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in each chapter, the subsequent references will be simply to the *Ethics*. (Aristotle also wrote a work called the *Eudemian Ethics*, which might have been compiled from his students' lecture notes. The content of the *Eudemian* is similar to the content of the *Nicomachean*, and the latter is believed, by most scholars, to be the superior work.)

10. The metaphor of a compass is suggested by Jim Wallis, *Rediscovering Values: A Moral Compass for a New Economy* (New York: Howard Books, 2010).



# 1

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## PART

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# Virtue Ethics as Personal, Communal, and Social Ethics

The first part of *Toward Thriving Communities* provides an in-depth summary of virtue ethics, with particular attention to the connections among its expressions at the personal, group, and social levels.

The background provided in chapter 1, “Approaches to Ethics,” defines ethics and locates this book’s analysis at the normative and applied levels. Virtue ethics is explained in relationship to two other ethical theories: deontology and consequentialism. Together these are applied to a case study of ethics in the workplace that illustrates similarities and differences among the theories. Virtue ethics is recommended for its realistic and holistic approach. All ethical theories attend to three important features of the moral life: norms, purpose, and context. The next three chapters take up each feature in turn and examine it from a virtue-ethical perspective.

Virtues display an individual’s excellence of character and contribute to the flourishing of that person and others. Virtues help people live well—in their personal lives and in community. To better understand them, chapter 2, “Virtues: Norms for Acting and Living,” precisely defines virtue, illustrates its definition through a school-shooting case study, and organizes virtues into categories.

Drawing on ancient and contemporary virtue theorists, chapter 3, “Human Flourishing: The Purpose of Life, the Purpose of Ethics,” presents human flourishing as the best way to understand happiness. Flourishing is defined as doing

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good and living well in the domains of body, mind, character, and relationship to others—a status that requires sufficient material resources. This account of flourishing is a standard against which the well-being of persons can be measured, as illustrated by a case study comparing the lives of two schoolchildren.

The mutual influences among persons, groups, and society is the focus of chapter 4, “Communities: The Contexts for Becoming Good and Living Well.” Social capital is built up or eroded in society through the activities of groups, so the health of a society’s network of relationships can be assessed and its unhealthy elements targeted for improvement. As people and groups move their society toward improvement—toward social flourishing—the common good becomes an increasing reality. Intermediate social groups are instrumental in developing the personal and social virtues that tend to move society toward the common good.

# Approaches to Ethics

Ethics has to do with things to be chosen or avoided, with different ways of life, and with the purpose of life.

—Epicurus (341–270 BCE), Greek philosopher<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter Overview

- defines ethics and explains its personal and social dimensions
- summarizes three ethical theories—deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics—and applies these theories to a case study
- discusses three core elements of the moral life addressed by ethical theories

## Levels of Ethics

In a letter to a newspaper advice column called “The Ethicist,” a college student named L. T. asks how to handle an everyday ethical dilemma. “At my university, many students use tests from previous quarters to study for exams. These old tests are available to about 75 percent of the students—fraternities and sororities and some dorms keep them on file—but not all. Every time I consider using one, I find myself in moral conflict. Is it ethical to use these tests?”<sup>2</sup> The column’s author, Randy Cohen, begins his answer by focusing on the specific action involved—using an old test to study for exams: “As long as you’re not using the actual test you’ll be taking, and as long as your professors permit this

1. Epicurus’s statements survive only in fragments; this one is from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 10.30, in Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness*, trans. George K. Strodach (New York: Penguin, 2012), 85.

2. The letter and the response appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on September 14, 2003, and was reprinted in Randy Cohen, *Be Good: How to Navigate the Ethics of Everything* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 253–54.

practice—i.e., as long as you're not cheating—you're free to employ these old tests as review material." This answer is guided by the rules of a university community and the contracts between individual professors and their students.

But even an unambiguous, action-oriented question such as this has multiple dimensions. First, L. T. is probably thinking about more than a single action, as his<sup>3</sup> statement suggests, "Every time I consider using one, I find myself in moral conflict." The reference to "moral conflict" suggests the student is considering matters of character and conscience and whether or not, if he uses one of the old tests, he will be able "to look at himself in the mirror," as the saying goes. L. T. also is thinking about the possibility of gaining an unfair advantage over other students. The ethical question is, therefore, not simply about the personal dimension of L. T.'s discrete action, but about the fairness of a system that impacts many others. L. T. is not sure what, if anything, to do about the system. Before one can begin to address either the personal or the social dimension of the situation, however, it is helpful to understand exactly what is meant by "ethics."

L. T. asks, "Is it ethical to use these tests?" But it would have made just as much sense to ask, "Is it moral to use these tests?" *Ethical* and *moral* derive, respectively, from Greek and Latin words (*ethos* and *mores*) for the same concept: the character of individuals or groups. All English words based on these roots have something to do with the way people live by beliefs and values regarding right and wrong, and good and bad. The adjectives *ethical* and *moral* are used, usually interchangeably, to characterize ideas relating to how people should live. These terms do not need to be put together. It is redundant to say "an ethical and moral issue." However, there is a difference between the noun forms. *Ethics* is associated with formal analysis, academic study, and social and professional codes of conduct. *Morality*, on the other hand, is associated with one's personal living based upon values. As one author puts it, "morality" is what we live, whereas "ethics" is what we study."<sup>4</sup> This book often refers to ethics, since the overall topic is the academic theory of virtue as applied to social contexts. However, virtue ethics is a lived approach. One of its appealing features is that it is an ethics for regular people. People intuitively know what good character is. Therefore, one source for virtue ethics is the morality of ordinary people.

The investigations in this book are *normative* and *applied*. In normative inquiry, ethicists develop (or refine and comment on) theories that justify ethical *norms*, which are basic guidelines for ethical action in any context. These theories and their norms then can be applied to practical questions. In applied inquiries, ethicists analyze concrete problems encountered in jobs and careers

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3. It is unknown whether L. T. is a male or female student. For the sake of simplicity in the retelling of this case study, a gender was assigned.

4. Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1996), 16.

(a subtype of ethics called *professional ethics*), in large social and political systems (a subtype called *social ethics*), and in technical fields such as medicine, technology, law, and so on (these subtypes are called *applied ethics* or are named according to the context, such as *medical ethics*, *legal ethics*, etc.).<sup>5</sup> *Toward Thriving Communities* draws upon the works of normative ethicists throughout the ages, largely in the Western tradition and, above all, Aristotle and those influenced by him. The Aristotelian tradition is prominent because this book advances virtue ethics as the most helpful ethical theory for addressing the combination of the personal and social dimensions of ethics. When this investigation turns to contemporary issues, the ideas of applied ethicists, especially those associated with virtue theory, will be examined.

## A Definition of Ethics

As a field of study and a method of analysis, normative ethics can be defined through four characteristics:

Ethics is (1) reflection (2) on principles, consequences, and virtues (3) to determine what acts to do or avoid and what kind of person to be, (4) creating standards to which persons hold themselves and their communities.<sup>6</sup>

As each part of this definition is explained in more detail, keep the L. T. example in mind.

## Ethics Is Reflection

Ethics is, first of all, reflective. To be ethical, one must consider one's actions and be able to give reasons for one's moral viewpoint and behavior. Making an ethical argument is not the same as being argumentative; rather, it means making a reasonable case so that, even if others do not agree, they at least understand one's point of view. As a reflective process, ethics usually benefits from discussion among reasonable and well-meaning people. Individual and group reflection are strongest under conditions of freedom and knowledge, exercised by people using

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5. Besides (a) normative ethics and (b) applied ethics, two other major types of ethics are (c) descriptive/comparative ethics, which depicts, compares, and contrasts the moralities of groups or cultures, and (d) metaethics, which analyzes the meaning and sources of ethical values. Reference works and textbooks describe these main types of inquiry, although the exact terms may vary. For further information, see an encyclopedia of ethics, such as *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993); *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Lawrence and Charlotte Becker, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2001); and "Ethics," "Applied Ethics," and "Comparative Philosophy," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu>.

6. A version of this definition appears in David L. Clough and Brian Stiltner, *Faith and Force: A Christian Debate about War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 29.

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sound reasoning and wise discernment.<sup>7</sup> A process of self-reflection is seen in L. T.'s letter: L. T. is thinking about what to do and knows that it is important to get advice from others. A process of reflective argument is seen in Cohen's response as well, when he shows a process for thinking through the nature of the action, the people affected, and the codes in force.

### Principles, Consequences, and Virtues

Ethics reflects upon three key resources:

- *Rules and principles*: specific and general guidelines to action, such as “do not misreport your finances on your tax return” (a rule) and “help a person who is in need” (a principle)<sup>8</sup>
- *Consequences*: the good results of actions balanced against the bad results, such as the well-being of a friend who is helped and the satisfaction felt by the one who helps balanced against the time taken to help and the possible neglect of another obligation
- *Virtues*: character traits of persons, such as friendliness and compassion<sup>9</sup>

The relevance of these key resources is seen in L. T.'s question and Cohen's response. L. T. and Cohen discuss principles of fairness and honesty. L. T. is concerned about consequences for students who do not get access to old tests and about his own character. Cohen appeals to the values and principles that bind a university community.

### Determining What Acts to Do or Avoid and What Kind of Person to Be

It has been said that ethics is about both “doing” and “being.”<sup>10</sup> Ethical reflection leads one to determine appropriate actions. Ethical theories based on principles and consequences focus particularly on “doing.” Ethics is also a framework for thinking about the shape of one's life. As was seen in the book's introduction, this “being” dimension of ethics was of particular interest to ancient philosophers, and it's the special concern of virtue ethicists, both ancient and modern.

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7. See Michael R. Panicola et al., *Health Care Ethics: Theological Foundations, Contemporary Issues, and Controversial Cases*, 2nd ed. (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 5–7.

8. When describing guidelines for action, the key difference between a rule and a principle is that the former is specific about an action and a context while the latter is a general guideline that applies in many areas of one's life.

9. Another resource that could be identified is *values*, which are desirable qualities in life, such as friendship, peace, and compassion. However, such values can be translated into the language of principles, consequences, or virtues, so it is not necessary to add an additional term.

10. Panicola et al., *Health Care Ethics*, 6.

Relating this third characteristic to the question about using old tests, one can see that Cohen's and L. T.'s interchange is focused mostly on what to do, but one can also sense that L. T. is concerned about his character.

## Creating Standards to Which Persons Hold Themselves and Their Communities

Ethics creates strong standards. To say, "Action X is the only ethical course of action" means "I (or we) should do X." Ethical duties are morally obligatory, not optional, so people hold themselves to ethical standards under pain of self-contradiction. One should not say, "I know that is the ethical thing to do, but I don't have to do it," or, "but I don't want to do it."<sup>11</sup> Of course, people can and do advocate or act contrary to ethical standards, but according to the moral point of view, one cannot *reasonably* behave this way. Philosophers call this feature of ethics *normativity*, which means that people discerning what is right or wrong will recognize a certain *norm* or accepted standard as decisive when weighing options. For instance, for L. T., it matters more whether using an old test counts as cheating than whether L. T. has time to study because a favorite television show is airing.

Similarly, it is a characteristic of normative ethics that a community or society recognizes its need for normative standards. The ethical standards for a society ultimately derive from reason. Members of the society can discuss and claim those standards through public conversation. For example, from colonial times to today, people in the United States have held political freedom dear. Therefore, respect for freedom operates as a cultural and legal norm in the United States, but it also operates as an ethical norm when people claim that freedom is just and liberty is a human right. When conflicts and new questions about freedom arise, and citizens use reasoned arguments to figure out the answers to these conflicts and questions, they engage in normative ethics. The determinations may be political, legal, or cultural, depending upon the situation, but in all cases, the deliberative process is guided by accepted normative standards.

## The Personal and Social Dimensions of Ethics

In his response to L. T., Cohen argues that professors should not remain blithely unaware of the widespread practice of circulating old tests. In fact, he puts the onus to take action on the professors.

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11. Normative ethics stands against egoism (the claim that ethics should be based on what each individual wants) and relativism (the claim that ethical standards should vary according to the values of different people or different societies). See "Egoism" and "Moral Relativism," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu>. Drew E. Hinderer and Sara R. Hinderer make arguments against egoism and relativism in the context of professional ethics in *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Health Care Ethics* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 2001), chs. 2 and 4.

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But while you [L. T.] are meeting your ethical obligations, your professors are not. If they regard these old tests as legit study aids, they must make them available to all (online? at the library? printed on pastries in the dining hall?). In other words, this situation demands not student abstinence but faculty action. What you might do is make sure that your professors are aware of the problem and that they are indeed resolving it.<sup>12</sup>

Cohen's response is a good example of connecting the personal and social levels of ethical concern. He says L. T. should act on his conscientious concern about fairness for others by proactively mentioning the situation to one or more professors. He says the professors should ensure that all of their students have the same study aids. (If one is worried that Cohen is not emphasizing the dimension of cheating in his response, Cohen might say, "If the professors do not want students to use old tests, that is fine, but they need to be clear. Instead of simply banning the use of old tests, which would be ineffectual in a large university, they must make the effort to change the tests yearly.")

Thus an important task of ethics is to examine, question, and try to change the social contexts that create or exacerbate today's major ethical challenges. "Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good," says Aristotle.<sup>13</sup> This claim seems like common sense—even today—especially regarding communities that people set up intentionally, for people would not go to the trouble of setting up a community for no reason, even if their reasoning was merely survival and basic safety. For Aristotle, this insight entails that every society and community has an ethos, a set of habits and practices that shape how the community lives toward its goals. In short, every society has ethics.

Yet if the society is large and complex—such as a modern, democratic society comprising subcommunities and people of diverse worldviews—is it possible to discuss its ethics? The answer is, "Yes," for this diversity simply means that a society's ethics are large and complex and influenced by the groups within it. A society's ethics or ethos is constituted by the values for which the society is established; how it incorporates and validates the ethics of its subcommunities; the values, virtues, and principles that guide its daily activities; and whether it shows relative consistency in its conduct. While there is danger in making generalizations about the ethos of a society, it is still a

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12. Cohen, *Be Good*, 54.

13. Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1.1 (1252a1), trans. Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1. This quotation is also discussed in the book's introduction.

valuable practice for understanding the context in which people live. If one does not discuss society's ethos, one cannot begin improving it. As with any large culture, American culture is marked by values that are somewhat contradictory. Americans are influenced by an ethos of materialism and commercialism owing to the United States' prosperity, capitalist economy, advertising industry, and cultural myths and icons, such as the self-made man and the rugged pioneer. Yet, at the same time, Americans display a great deal of generosity, philanthropy, and appreciation for nonmaterial values, as is seen when the country responds to natural disasters at home or abroad. Personal ethics takes into account the fact that individuals have mixed motives and both good and bad traits; the point of personal ethics is to help people accentuate their good traits and act on their better motives. Social ethics takes the same approach toward the complex ethos of a society.

In *Politics*, Aristotle moves from the descriptive statement that citizens have shared goals to the normative task of describing the best ways for citizens to organize a democracy to achieve these goals. This form of reflection is called *political philosophy* or *social ethics*. This book typically uses the latter term, which emphasizes the role of social groups more than that of political institutions in addressing ethical problems at the social level.<sup>14</sup> Citizens and groups engage in social ethics, in a normative fashion, when they work from their moral commitments to try to shape society's ethics. They wrestle with questions about how to arrange society, what social values they should hold and promote, what political policies they should support, and how they should act as individual citizens and in the civic groups to which they belong. Professors and students who conduct social ethics are doing the same thing, but in a formal, reasoned manner. Their work might be more descriptive or comparative ("How do one or more societies live out ethical values or respond to a certain ethical problem?") but usually it is normative and applied ("How *should* a certain society live out ethical values or respond to a certain ethical problem, given its history, ethos, and the values of its members?").

The simple meaning of social ethics is: the application of normative ethics to the problems that society faces and to the question of how society should be arranged. For a formal definition, the previous definition of normative ethics can be modified to express the social dimensions:

Social ethics is (1) the normative deliberation of citizens, social groups, and public leaders (2) on ethical resources and on the results of social analysis (3) to decide on collective actions and express an ethos (4) so people can live together in a just and flourishing manner.

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14. By contrast, "political philosophy" is a much broader term, encompassing such topics as theories of political authority, accounts of citizenship, the structure of constitutions, and voting rights.

When one is engaging in ethical analysis of either a personal or a social concern, one uses normative ethical theories. The proper use of such theories is what makes one's ethical analysis coherent, enlightening, and persuasive.

## Normative Ethical Theories

Ethical theories are coherent frameworks of beliefs, ideas, values, and assumptions with corresponding methods of reasoning about moral questions. Three normative ethical theories have occupied the greatest amount of attention in Western philosophy: deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. These generally correspond to the three resources in the definition of ethics: rules and principles, consequences, and virtues. The three theories discussed here were developed and refined throughout centuries by philosophers who found that zeroing in on one of these three resources best accounts for people's moral intuitions and makes for the most rational and consistent approach to living. Although a person who adopts a particular theory does not necessarily exclude insights from the other theories, the adopter believes that the resource focused on by their preferred theory is the most important feature in ethical reflection.

## Deontological Ethics

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) developed the most well-known version of deontology. Kant says human reason is the fundamental source of duty. For Kant, morality is based on a rational respect for people as the foundation of value. Kant boils ethical duty down to a single “categorical imperative,” for which he gave two famous formulations. The first is: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”<sup>15</sup> This means people should act only on the basis of rules and principles<sup>16</sup> that they rationally believe all people in similar circumstances should follow. The categorical imperative is normative, as described earlier: one cannot exempt oneself from following what his or her own reason dictates. If, for example, a teenager reasons that it is *morally* wrong to lie to his parents about how he wrecked the family car, he *knows* that he cannot exempt

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15. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 30 (vol. 4, p. 421 of the Academy edition of Kant's works in German).

16. Kant used the term *maxim* to indicate a person's guiding principle for action. In less technical discussions of deontology, *rules* and *principles* can be used as rough equivalents for *maxims*. In many studies of ethics, rules and principles are associated with deontology, since deontology emphasizes that one should act under general, rational guidelines, such as “tell the truth” and “do not kill.” But rules and principles can be, and are, employed in the other two theories. For instance, consequentialist philosophers have advocated “the principle of utility,” and some virtue philosophers have proposed “virtue-rules.”

himself from following through just because he is afraid of the consequences. Of course, people fail to follow through on such judgments all the time, but Kant's point is simply that people should know better. Deontologists use Kant's reasoning to block the path to self-serving rationalizations and relativism. Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative is easier to grasp and easier to use in ethical argument: one "should treat himself and all others never merely as a means but always at the same time as an end in himself."<sup>17</sup> According to deontology, respect for human persons underlies all ethical principles and rules.

Contrary to popular opinion, the ethics of principle, even Kant's version, need not be absolutist and rigid. Kant does not say others cannot serve as a means to some ends, only that one cannot treat others *solely* as means to ends. For example, if someone buys something at a store, that person is treating the clerk as means to the end of the purchase, but one can and must treat the clerk as "an end in himself" by respecting his personal dignity—for instance, by being kind, not stealing, and so on. Kant further states that the highest level of morality is when one acts not because of a rule (what he calls "acting in accordance with duty") but because one knows and understands it to be the right thing to do ("acting from duty").<sup>18</sup> Another point in favor of deontology's flexibility is that it does not bar one from considering consequences, as long as doing so does not lead to the violation of fundamental moral principles. It is acceptable to consider the ends, but the ends can never justify the means.

Many ethical principles might be relevant guidelines to one's actions, depending on the context. Also, philosophers differ about whether some principles take priority over others. As mentioned, most Kantians believe respect for persons is the fundamental principle. The Western religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam feature moral codes and divine laws that are deontological in form. An influential textbook of medical ethics structures the field according to four basic principles: respect for patients' autonomy, nonmaleficence (do no harm), beneficence (help people), and justice (distribute medical resources equitably). These principles are often interpreted and applied in deontological fashion.<sup>19</sup> Medicine is just one of many social contexts in which deontological ethics has been widely used.

Deontology's appeal lies in its clarity, rationality, and fairness, yet it also has weaknesses. Principles can conflict, and while deontological theories offer various ways of addressing the conflicts, no approach has been entirely successful.

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17. *Ibid.*, 39. (A less-often discussed third formulation of the imperative is "every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in a universal kingdom of ends" (43; 4.438).

18. *Ibid.*, 10–13.

19. Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). The authors' use of principles is neither fully deontological nor fully consequentialist. Their recommended approach is a case-by-case weighing of obligations based on a version of deontological ethics called "prima facie duties theory," developed by W. D. Ross.

The more absolutist theories—such as Kant’s complete prohibition on lying<sup>20</sup> and the Catholic Church’s rigorous pro-life principle—resolve conflicts but fail to convince many people that every other ethical value gives way to the main principle. Some may argue that all principles are initially obligatory but can give way on a case-by-case basis, but then disagreements ensue. For example, which should have priority—a dying patient’s right to choose suicide to avoid massive pain or society’s duty to prevent homicide and doctors’ duties to preserve life? Some criticize deontology for overlooking tradition, social context, and moral development. So while deontology is less susceptible than virtue ethics to the charge of being relativistic, deontology might also be weak since it fails to draw upon the distinctive values of a cultural tradition for a vision of the best way to live.

## Consequentialist Ethics

Consequentialism is the youngest of the three theories, even though the practice of weighing consequences before deciding on an action is not new. Consequentialism turns this commonsense into a theory. It holds that acts are right or wrong based on their expected good or bad consequences. For this reason, consequentialism is categorized as a *teleological* (goal-based) theory in ethics, a description it shares with virtue ethics. “Teleological theories are ones that first identify what is good in states of affairs and then characterize right acts entirely in terms of that good.”<sup>21</sup> Consequentialism defines the “greatest good for the greatest number” as the goal, while virtue ethics defines human flourishing as the goal. Yet both theories hold that actions are morally right when they contribute toward the defined goal of the theory. Deontology, by contrast, is a non-teleological theory, since it holds that right actions are defined by their conformity with moral duties.

The earliest consequentialist philosophers went by the name utilitarians, because they presented *the principle of utility* as the sole guideline in ethics. Utilitarianism focuses on the nature of happiness and the motivations of persons. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) made “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” the standard of what is right. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), by contrast, argued that utility is a collection of many intrinsic values—the things that most or all persons want, such as health, freedom from pain, beauty, knowledge, and so on.<sup>22</sup> Mill agreed with Bentham that the greatest happiness

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20. See Kant’s short essay, “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropic Motives,” bound with the Ellington translation of *Grounding*, 63–67.

21. “Theological Ethics,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 9:382.

22. The classic sources are Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) and Mill, “Essay on Bentham” (1838) and *Utilitarianism* (1863).

of the greatest number of people is the guideline, but he gave a more robust picture of happiness.

The broader term, consequentialism, focuses on the *method* of weighing good versus bad consequences. Two methods are commonly used.<sup>23</sup> The first, *act-consequentialism*, is straightforward: weigh all expected consequences of every action and do the action that is likely to create the greatest happiness for the greatest number. The second, *rule-consequentialism*, uses the principle of utility to support rules that, in turn, tend to produce good consequences. The philosophers who developed the rule-oriented approach were trying to overcome three problems with act-consequentialism: that charting benefits versus harms for every action is cumbersome; that the act-oriented method may give undue weight to the most obvious consequences; and that the act-oriented approach allows for unsettling instances of “the ends justify the means.” For example, act-consequentialists see nothing inherently moral about keeping a promise; rather, for each opportunity one might have to keep or break a promise, act-consequentialism requires figuring out which course leads to better results overall. Rule-consequentialists assert that their approach is better, since one does not have to think through every single action and since a society that respects the adage “honesty is the best policy” will be more stable in the long run.

Consequentialist ethics initially seems disruptive to traditional morality, and it can be—in both good and bad ways. On the positive side, consequentialists are often social reformers who use this ethic to bring into focus the fact that all persons and, indeed, all beings who can experience pleasure and pain deserve consideration. Mill, for instance, was an early and strong advocate for the rights of women. Peter Singer, a contemporary philosopher, pioneered the cause of animal welfare on the utilitarian ground that since animals can suffer, they have interests that must be incorporated in a consequentialist calculation. Consequentialism has also proven beneficial in social ethics by applying the method of cost-benefit analysis to complicated decisions about public policies.

On the negative side, many remain troubled by the willingness of consequentialists to make rules provisional and, perhaps, to override longstanding values. For instance, given the demand for transplantable human organs, a consequentialist might enact a law to harvest organs from everyone who dies, regardless of the families’ wishes, because, overall, the benefits would be tremendous. Further, why not allow living donors to sell their kidneys and benefit those in need of the organ as well as the seller? Based on “the greatest happiness for the greatest number,” consequentialists are more supportive of these practices than other theorists. However, consequentialist arguments for organ sales often overlook values such as bodily integrity and concerns about the vulnerability of those whose desperate poverty would drive them to consider selling their organs.

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23. See “Act and Rule Utilitarianism” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu>; and “Rule Consequentialism” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu>.

## Virtue Ethics

Julia Annas, a philosopher of ancient ethics, says, “In ordinary life, although we may not often use the term ‘virtue,’ we think and talk all the time in terms of virtues. We think (and frequently say) of others and ourselves that we are generous or stingy, kind or mean, helpful or selfish.”<sup>24</sup> Virtue ethics is ancient theory that identifies virtues, that is, character traits, as the foundation of actions leading to human flourishing. The ancient Greek and Roman philosophers—though affiliated with various schools, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism—understand virtue to be the core of ethics. Virtue also has been central to the moralities of the world’s religions.

Virtue ethics says that morality should not be as focused on *what to do* so much as on *what kind of person to be*. Virtue ethics is flexible in two ways: it is tailored to the unique features of each person’s life story, and it resists giving a simple procedure for decisions, suggesting instead that people develop the habit of wise reflection. This theory considers the external purposes that people have in their roles and relationships and the internal purposes they have for moral, spiritual, and intellectual growth. As Annas puts it, the entry point for virtue ethics is the question, “How ought I to live?” or “What should my life be like?”<sup>25</sup> After looking at what one is trying to become, one must discern the courses of action and qualities of acting that help achieve those purposes. The Greeks described the ultimate goal of human activity—and thus of virtue—as “happiness” or “human flourishing.”

*Virtues* are character traits disposing one to act, feel, perceive, or think in a way generally recognized as excellent—excellent because such actions, feelings, perceptions, or thoughts are admirable, humane, and beneficial to self and others. Examples of such character traits are justice, temperance (self-control), courage, practical wisdom, compassion, patience, forgiveness, good humor, and more. The first four items in this list emerged from the Greek tradition as the four foundational virtues, later dubbed *the cardinal virtues*. Classical authors, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, broadly distinguish moral from intellectual virtues. Other authors recognize an even greater diversity. There are intellectual virtues, virtues for creative and artistic endeavors, and virtues for physical activity. There are virtues for specific roles, professions, and practices—such as business, parenting, sports, and so on. What is common to all virtues is that they lead one to act effectively and excellently in the field of the virtue, whatever it happens to be, and they contribute to human flourishing.

*Vices* are the character traits that lead one to perform badly. In Aristotle’s system, most vices reflect a deficit or an excess of a virtue in the sense of not being on the target for rational, excellent action. For example, cowardice and rashness are opposed to courage, and impatience and being overly patient (i.e.,

24. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

25. These are Annas’s two phrasings of the fundamental question of ancient ethics, which was classically posed by Socrates in the first book of *The Republic* (352d), in *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27.

so willing to wait that one would be used) are opposed to patience. For such traits of character, Aristotle says virtue consists in the proper “intermediate state,” or the *mean*, between the two extremes. Virtue is the state of character in which a person acts excellently and ethically—in just the right way, at the right time, with the best motivation.<sup>26</sup> Vices as well as virtues are *habits*—not in the sense of rote, unthinking routines, but as a person’s settled dispositions developed through a process of learning and practice called “habituation”; thus virtues can, in theory, be changed if one so chooses. However, change is not easy. Aristotle says that an everyday human action, such as “giving and spending money, is easy and everyone can do it; but doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is no longer easy, nor can everyone do it. Hence doing these things well is rare, praiseworthy, and fine.”<sup>27</sup> People know how to spend money, but not everyone knows how to spend it excellently and ethically. Almost everyone knows how to speak in a friendly manner to people they like, but not everyone knows how to relate respectfully and kindly to many sorts of people in many situations. In short, Aristotle says, it is “hard work to be excellent.”<sup>28</sup>

*Character* is the integration of one’s beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and habits, whether in a good, neutral, or bad fashion. “Having virtue” or “being a virtuous person” refers to having a predominantly good character. Aristotle says the point of ethical philosophy is to move from acting virtuously because one has been taught to do so, to acting virtuously because one sees the point of it and wants to do so.<sup>29</sup> In a principle-based theory, a principle, rule, or description of an action serves as the paradigm for one to follow. But in virtue ethics, real human beings are the paradigms, because only people in all their particularity and complexity can be exemplars of character. Thus, role models and moral educators are crucial resources for the theory.

As with the other ethical theories, philosophers have identified weaknesses of virtue ethics.<sup>30</sup> Proponents of consequentialism and deontology often say virtue is insufficient for guiding action. The exhortation, “Be virtuous,” even when citing a specific virtue, doesn’t tell one enough about what to do in a specific

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26. Aristotle first describes the concept of the mean in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.6, and he uses it throughout.

27. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.9 (1109a27–30), trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 29.

28. *Ibid.*, 2.9.

29. *Ibid.*, 1.4. Indeed, Aristotle thinks people need to have a starting point for the study of ethics: they need to have the beginnings of a good character through early education, else they will have no character with which to work. See also 2.1 and 10.9.

30. For these and some additional objections to virtue ethics, see section 3 of “Virtue Ethics,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>; and Robert B. Loudon, “On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics,” in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 201–16.

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situation. In response, virtue ethicists have employed various strategies, such as developing insights into the philosophy of action, exploring strategies for moral education and habituation, and developing a place for rules in the theory. Another concern is that virtue theory is relativistic. Virtue ethicists typically praise cultural and religious traditions for forming character, but traditions can be inflexible, even oppressive. For example, in the American South prior to the 1960s, many familial, cultural, religious, and political traditions conveyed attitudes of the racial superiority of white people. A warped understanding of virtue followed. While virtue ethics certainly does not recommend bigotry, the charge against the theory is that it does not have a vantage point from which to criticize a particular community in which members think they are teaching their children virtue instead of vice. This objection is met by acknowledging the potentially negative pull of community on character and identifying strategies for resisting it (ch. 4).

Virtue ethics is not flawless, and the other theories have important contributions to make to ethical reasoning (for a summary comparison of the theories, see table 1). One of the strengths of virtue ethics is its ability to recommend humility and prudence, so virtue ethicists themselves are inclined to learn from the limitations of their theory. Virtue ethics is a realistic ethical theory, because everyone is imperfect but capable of improvement.

**TABLE 1 Three Main Ethical Theories Compared**

	<b>Deontological Ethics</b>	<b>Consequentialist Ethics</b>	<b>Virtue Ethics</b>
<b>Focus of the Theory</b>	What to do	What to do	Who to be
<b>The Goal Proposed for Human Life</b>	Upholding the moral law	Promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number	Achieving happiness through human flourishing
<b>What Makes Actions Right?</b>	Right actions are those that one has a duty to perform, regardless of the consequences	Actions are right or wrong based on their expected good or bad consequences	Right actions are those based on virtue and that promote flourishing
<b>Strengths of the Theory</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Proposes principles that are rational, clear, and fair</li> <li>Resists rationalization and relativism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treats all persons and sentient beings with consideration</li> <li>Not constrained by outdated rules and traditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tailored to unique features of each person's life story</li> <li>Resists giving an overly simple procedure for decisions</li> </ul>

Three Main Ethical Theories Compared <i>Continued</i>			
	Deontological Ethics	Consequentialist Ethics	Virtue Ethics
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principles often conflict</li> <li>Overlooks tradition, social context, and moral development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to predict all consequences of an action</li> <li>Makes all rules provisional</li> <li>Might override longstanding values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insufficient for guiding actions</li> <li>Sometimes appears egoistic</li> <li>Relies on tradition, which may be limiting</li> <li>Risk of situationism</li> </ul>
Offers a Definitive Action-Guiding Procedure?	Yes: apply a categorical imperative, principle, rule, or moral law to a proposed action	Yes: weigh the consequences and do the action that will produce the best consequences overall	Partially: role models and the doctrine of the mean give guidance, but the virtuous way to act is specific to the person and the context
Versions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural Law Theory</li> <li>Social Contract Theory</li> <li>Kantian ethics</li> <li>Legal codes in many religions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hedonist interpretation</li> <li>Utilitarianism</li> <li>Act-consequentialism</li> <li>Rule-consequentialism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Platonic philosophy</li> <li>Aristotelian philosophy</li> <li>Stoicism</li> <li>Epicureanism</li> <li>Virtue traditions in many religions</li> </ul>
Classical Representative Thinkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Immanuel Kant</li> <li>W. D. Ross</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jeremy Bentham</li> <li>John Stuart Mill</li> <li>G. E. Moore</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plato</li> <li>Aristotle</li> <li>Seneca</li> <li>Confucius</li> <li>Thomas Aquinas</li> </ul>
Contemporary Representative Thinkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>John Rawls</li> <li>Onora O'Neill</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peter Singer</li> <li>R. B. Brandt</li> <li>Philip Pettit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phillipa Foot</li> <li>Rosalind Hursthouse</li> <li>Julia Annas</li> <li>Alasdair MacIntyre</li> </ul>

## Applying the Three Theories—A Case Study

One can see how the three normative ethical theories work and how they compare by using them to analyze a case study, such as the following from the medical profession.<sup>31</sup>

31. Hinderer and Hinderer, *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Healthcare Ethics*, 97.

Sandy R., R.N., has been a capable nurse whose generous nature and outgoing personality have made her popular with her patients and colleagues. About two months ago, however, her husband filed for divorce and custody of their two children because, he told Sandy, “we just can’t compete with your job; you just don’t have anything left for us when you get home; we’re just your codependency, not a family.” Although her colleagues try to be supportive, Sandy has become extremely depressed; and, probably because of this, she has made several medication errors.

Ann J. is doing quality assurance reviews and has discovered that Sandy incorrectly transcribed a physician’s order for morphine as 15mg q4h instead of 5mg q4h [15 instead of 5 milligrams every 4 hours]. Two doses were given at the higher level, but Ann checked on the patient and assessed him as having had no ill effects from the error. Seeing Sandy in the hall, Ann went with her to the conference room and explained the problem.

When confronted, Sandy fell apart. In tears she begged Ann to conceal the error because if it became known, hospital policy would require that she be suspended or even fired for having made more than three medication errors within a six-month period. But her upcoming divorce hearing makes it crucial that she have continuing, stable employment; otherwise she will probably lose custody of her children. What should Ann do?

No one would envy being in Ann’s position. Even if it were clear to her from the outset that she must report the error, she is likely to feel bad about Sandy’s unfortunate situation. According to the case study, Sandy is a capable, generous, and well-liked nurse and coworker. Must Ann report the error? What do the normative theories say?

## Applying Deontology

If Ann reasons as a deontologist, she has three related tools to use. First, she should look to relevant rules, principles, and duties. Ann’s job is quality control for the sake of patient protection. Her job-related duty is to report the error. As a medical professional, Ann should also follow medicine’s ethical standards. The principle of nonmaleficence—“do no harm to patients”—is a paramount principle. Patients are at risk if Sandy keeps committing errors, so Ann has a duty to protect them by ensuring that Sandy’s problems are addressed immediately.

Second, Ann should consider what “respect for persons” requires in this situation. Based on Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, Ann should treat others as ends in themselves and not (merely) as means to other ends. While Ann probably feels sympathy for Sandy, to give her a pass on

the error would be treating the patients as means to the end of helping Sandy: it would mean putting their health at risk to help Sandy keep her job. This response does not pass muster with the categorical imperative. In addition, it is probably more respectful to Sandy to require her to take responsibility for her actions than to let her off the hook out of a sense of pity.

Third, respecting the universal scope of deontology, Ann should ask herself whether all people in similar situations should do the same thing. Thus she will avoid making her situation a special case and focusing too closely on her own interests or feelings. While it may be difficult to consider all people in similar situations, it does seem more reasonable to say that every quality-control person should report morphine dosing errors than to say that every quality-control person should hide those errors if the person who made them is having a personal crisis. Working from these three tools, deontological ethics supports Ann's reporting of the error.

## Applying Consequentialism

The ethics of consequences says to weigh the positive versus negative consequences of the possible courses of action. So Ann would think through the two main courses of action. The first option is reporting. If Ann reports the error and Sandy loses her job, Sandy will be unhappy: she may not be able to support herself and she may not retain custody of her kids. Moreover, the hospital will lose a capable nurse. There is much disvalue here, especially for Sandy but even for patients and coworkers. The positive results of this action would be that no other patients would be at risk from Sandy's recent tendency to errors. The risk could be significant, namely, a patient's death.

Ann's other option is to keep quiet about Sandy's error. If she chooses this course, all the negatives for Sandy will be avoided. In the long run, the world will be better off with Sandy being happy and functional: she and her patients and coworkers will flourish. However, if Sandy gets this reprieve and fails to address the stresses in her life, her patients remain at risk. If Ann chooses this course, it would make sense that she would do so only if Sandy agrees to take a leave of absence to get her life in order. Or, similarly, Ann might work with Sandy and keep careful watch on her work until Sandy overcomes her current problems.

If Ann reasons as a rule-consequentialist, she is likely to recommend reporting, because she would reason that it is too complicated and risky to try to predict the future; "honesty is the best policy," including when it comes to reporting medication errors. If Ann reasons as an act-consequentialist, her decision is not easy to predict: it depends on how Ann reads the situation, weighs the gravity of the consequences, and decides how she will monitor Sandy. Some consequentialists will be impressed by the strong negatives for Sandy and the positives that could result if she gets her life together. So there is a consequentialist case to be made for Ann not to report—if Sandy shows resolve to improve.

But is it wise for Ann to take on the responsibility for breaking her duty to report? And has she weighed *all* the consequences? For instance, what happens if Ann's failure to report is discovered? What if Sandy doesn't improve? Does Ann know that Sandy's kids would not be better off in the custody of their father? Is it even clear that Sandy's worst-case personal scenario will happen as she fears? These considerations suggest the complications of conducting act-consequentialist reasoning, for it is difficult to anticipate consequences, know how to measure different kinds of consequences against each other, and be sure that one is not being pulled by emotional factors. This is not to say that consequentialism has no value, but its best use might not be as the primary approach to cases such as this—cases where disparate consequences compete and, therefore, are difficult to measure and weigh, and cases where deontological obligations are already in force, as with medical and job-related obligations.

## Applying Virtue Ethics

To use virtue ethics in this case, Ann would begin by thinking about the kind of person and professional she tries to be. If Ann is virtuous, she strives to be careful and responsible in her duties, respectful and just toward patients, and compassionate and supportive toward coworkers. What would that kind of person do in response to Sandy? A seeming problem is that some of Ann's traits favor reporting the error to protect patients, but other traits favor being a compassionate coworker or friend who helps Sandy avoid dire personal consequences.

Virtue ethics has some tools to help resolve such tensions. First, the person who is fully developed in virtue has practical wisdom. If Ann possesses this skill, she will be able to reason through her obligations, the consequences of her possible actions, and the personal factors involved. Then she will be able to make the best decision and carry it out. Second, if Ann is unsure, virtue ethics recommends she consider what other virtuous people do or would do. If possible, one can seek out the wisdom of others who have faced such situations. If Ann is in the early years of her career, she should think about what the person who trained her would say or what a seasoned professional would do. The tool Ann would use in this situation has been called a virtue-rule or v-rule: for example, "Do what a wise and responsible person would do in this situation."<sup>32</sup>

A wise and responsible person in Ann's situation would likely report the error or ensure that Sandy reports on it herself. The virtue approach sometimes deemphasizes the importance of determining what rule to follow, since it depends on the situation. But some situations carry obligations because the person in that situation has a specific role or relationship or has made a prior

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32. On v-rules, see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36–39 and 58–61.

promise. A virtuous person in such a situation needs to acknowledge the relevant obligations. This is true of Ann: she is engaged in a professional role that carries an expectation of reporting. Where virtue ethics gives Ann more leeway is in *how* to fulfill her duties. As a virtuous professional, Ann could say to Sandy:

I understand that you are in a bad place, and I feel really badly for you. But please understand that I cannot put patients at risk to cover up this error. I know you want to do your best for the patients and so do I, but that system of care is going to fall apart if we start taking into our own hands what to report. I know that you are a terrific nurse, and I would like to help you if I can, as long as it fits with my duties. If you've made errors more than once recently, you really need a break to get yourself back on track. What I suggest is that we both go to the supervisor and report the error, and I will strongly urge her or others involved that you should be given a short leave of absence. Or you could go self-report, and I'll hold off on turning in my report until tomorrow.

Since this speech might not please Sandy, Ann would need to listen patiently and console her but hold her ground with conviction. Virtue ethics leads Ann to the same basic conclusion as deontology and, perhaps, rule-consequentialism, but it gives her more help in reasoning out how to communicate and carry out that decision. It gives her more help in being the sort of person who communicates to Sandy with both compassion and courage.

## Comparisons and Contrasts among the Theories

In the case study involving Ann and Sandy, the application of the three normative theories illustrates broader similarities and differences among them. Each theory has several characteristics that are true:

- *It considers relevant rules and guides action.* A thoughtful use of consequentialism and virtue ethics does not ignore these features.
- *It requires critical reasoning.* Ethical situations are often complex. The users of each theory have to think carefully about the competing values and potential consequences.
- *It considers the context.* While virtue ethics and consequentialism seem more attentive to context, in deontology the situation also must be described properly so the relevant principles can be determined.
- *It involves acknowledging and responding appropriately to values and goods.* All moral theories give accounts of the values and goods that moral agents should support. In deontology, one honors the moral law and the dignity

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of others; in consequentialism, one promotes the greatest happiness for the most people (or sentient beings); and in virtue ethics, one promotes flourishing by acting virtuously. In the case study, Ann is called upon to promote values and goods that are important to each theory.

- *It disdains egoism and relativism as legitimate options.* Each theory establishes that there is a right or better way for Ann to act, rationally defends the course of action, and recommends it to anyone in Ann's situation.

However, the theories differ in regard to other characteristics:

- *Primary focus.* Each theory respectively emphasizes principles, consequences, or character traits.
- *Concern for end results.* Deontology is least concerned with a good end result—not that it doesn't want to see good results, but it doesn't want to let ethical reasoning slip into the mentality of “the ends justify the means.” Consequentialism is highly concerned with promoting good end-results, such that the act-version affirms that the ends do justify the means. The concern of virtue ethics for end results lies in the middle of these. It wants to promote the result of flourishing, but in a way that is consistent with moral values—good means are expected to lead to good ends.
- *Emphasis on procedure.* Deontology and consequentialism offer clear procedures for applying their norms to cases. Virtue ethics is less codifiable and provides more tentative answers to the question, “What should one do?” Instead, virtue ethics gives its most concise answers when a person acts in light of his specific virtues and relationships after reflecting on the particulars of a situation.
- *Attention paid to the particularities of the agent's life.* Consequentialism and deontology rely upon an understanding of human nature. They appreciate that people are emotional and social beings but assert that moral decisions are to be guided by reasons that transcend feelings and culture. These theories recommend how *any* person should act. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, takes a greater interest in how a *particular* person makes a *particular* decision and carries it out.

After considering the differences among the theories, the question arises: must one choose among them and adopt a preferred theory? The answer is both “no” and “yes,” depending on whether one is engaging in applied ethics or normative ethics. Since all of the theories contain moral wisdom, and each highlights a feature that is part of the ethical life, there is no reason not to use all of their resources when making ethical decisions. Checking the options against all three theories is more likely to produce the best choice. Ann (indeed, anyone making significant decisions in the workplace) would benefit from using each theory as a resource. Applied ethicists recommend decision-making procedures

that incorporate the insights of all three theories.<sup>33</sup> When responding to a specific case or real-world problem, the point of using normative theories is not to drive the person reflecting on the case to choose exclusively one of three irreconcilable options. Rather, it's to develop a strong answer that promises to build consensus among the people involved in the situation.

Yet even so, one has to make choices. In making formal, ethical arguments, one argues for a particular theoretical framework as the most defensible approach. Such a framework need not be limited to a single normative theory, but the framework must be coherent and informed by at least one normative theory. The argument must be backed with explanations as to why it is reasonable and essential to adopt this theory's beliefs, ideas, values, and assumptions about the world. The argument should also take account of potential objections from those with competing interpretations of the theory and advocates of other theories. At the normative ethics level, moral philosophers adopt single theories or develop frameworks in which one or more theories are given a larger guiding role. It is necessary to do so, for the theories have enough differences that they cannot be completely harmonized. In Ann's case, the differences among the theories suggest a comparative strength of virtue ethics: it pays more attention to the particular person making a decision and how she or he becomes a person who can act well in such situations. One could say that a virtue-ethical method of reasoning and decision making has a greater role for emotional intelligence than do the other theories.<sup>34</sup> When addressing the social dimension of ethics, which is the focus of this book, virtue theory overcomes some limitations of the debates between deontology and consequentialism. Even so, to perform social ethics well, the other theories must be part of the conversation and their resources drawn upon when making applied ethical arguments.

### Three Elements of the Moral Life: Norms, Purpose, and Context

Ethics involves several dimensions, as seen in this chapter: it conducts various types of inquiry, such as normative and applied; it attends to being and doing; it speaks to persons and communities; and it uses three major resources, each of which is matched with a theory that champions that resource. There is a big picture that keeps the details organized. At minimum, all ethical theories address guidelines for acting and living, goals for acting and living, and ways to think about the situations in which people act and live. In short, all ethical theories attend to three features of the moral life: norms, purpose, and context.

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33. See, for example, Panicola et al., *Health Care Ethics*, 75–77.

34. The concept of emotional intelligence was popularized by psychologist Daniel Goleman in *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995). On virtue ethics and emotion, see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, ch. 5.

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**Norms.** Norms in ethics are guidelines for how to act and live as a person. These are explained and defended by normative ethical theories. Regardless of whether one adopts deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, or some other approach as a primary theory, the ethical resources of rules and principles, consequences, and virtues figure into normative analysis. When reasoning regarding an ethical decision, a person should ask these questions:

- Are there moral rules, principles, codes, or laws in force here?
- What decision is likely to promote the best overall consequences?
- Are there teachings or expectations in my culture or religion that give guidance?
- What is the best way to be or respond? What would a virtuous person, a role model, or influential teacher of mine do?
- Are there ways of acting that would be too much or too little of a good thing (that is, expressions of vice)? Am I prone to one of these extremes?
- Have I taken enough time to think through all aspects of a difficult decision? Have I reasoned creatively and courageously? Have I prayed, meditated, or deeply reflected upon it?
- Have I consulted my conscience, and is my conscience normally trustworthy? Is this a decision of which I will be proud?

**Purpose.** Purpose refers to an account of the basic goal or goals of life. Ethical theories are situated in philosophical or theological traditions that pose basic questions about the meaning of life. If an ethicist aspires for a theory to be more than simply a decision-making process, that theory must be guided by a vision of a well-lived life. To restate a major theme of this chapter, ethical visions are typically both personal and social. A key task of ethical reasoning is to clarify personal and societal purpose by reflecting upon questions such as these:

- What kind of person do I aspire to be?
- What kind of community do I aspire to help create and participate in?
- What is flourishing for me? What is flourishing for the community?
- Are others in the community flourishing or failing to flourish?
- Am I living in line with my values? Are we, as a community, living in line with our values?

**Context.** Context refers to the role of ethical theory in providing a critical understanding of situations that influence ethical living. The *general* moral context includes people's personal histories and personalities; their identities in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, and worldview, and particularly, the meanings they assign to those identities; their physical, psychological, and material resources; their interpersonal relationships; and their roles and

responsibilities in the institutions and social networks in which they participate. In other words, at the general level, context is everything that makes a person who he or she is, and it is all the personal and social relationships in which the person participates.

When making a particular moral decision, the *specific* context includes questions of what is happening and why, who is involved, what happened before the moment, what might happen after, what responsibilities one has to others, and so on. In short, context is everything that makes a person who he or she is at a given moment, and it is the people influencing and affected by one's potential decision. A few of the possible contextual features can be mentioned by example. First, the *practical and psychological features* of the situation can create opportunities and constraints. For example, an important choice is significantly constrained if one only has five minutes to decide, while many decisions can be improved when there is time to research and consult. Second, *institutional features* can make it easier to act in some ways and more difficult to act in others. For example, if a professor catches a student plagiarizing and the school has a policy in place about this, the policy can help the professor respond. Indeed, the professor probably warned the students about the policy. But if the school has no policy or does not reinforce its policy with meaningful consequences, this laxity might make it difficult for the professor to enforce standards of academic integrity.

Communal relationships and contexts are major features of moral living. Each ethical problem arises in a particular social context. A problem has to be understood and analyzed in that context, which requires looking, for instance, at the people and institutions that might be *causing* the problem, are *affected* by the problem, and can *help resolve* the problem. Contextual analysis, then, requires reflection on a diverse set of questions, including analysis of the total situation, consideration of the persons involved, and attention to nurturing better ethical responses throughout the long term. Contextual questions include the following:

- What is the ethical problem? Why is it a problem? Do others define the problem differently or not see it as a concern?
- What is relevant in the context surrounding an ethical problem? For instance: people and institutions affected; applicable laws, rules, and codes; practical opportunities and constraints, such as finances, available time, etc.
- What research should be done on the problem? What experts and relevant parties could be consulted?
- Who is involved? Who has expectations, rights, stakes, and vulnerabilities in this situation?
- What does it mean to respect the dignity of others in this case?
- What special relationships am I involved in that I must honor?
- How is the context helping or hindering my own and others' decision making?

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- How do I, and we, learn from this problem and the decisions made? How should we teach others, based on this experience?
- What habits have to be developed so that I, and we, might act better and more reliably in the future?
- What changes should be made to rules, systems, policies, and so on, after reflecting on this situation?

## Conclusion

Personal ethics is a process for deciding how one should act and what kind of person one should be. The critical, creative thinking that informs ethical decision making helps one live a meaningful and upright life. The same style of thinking is necessary for social ethics, which enables people to live together in a just and flourishing manner and encourages them to embrace an ethos that inspires and sustains them. The three normative theories—deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics—are methods for conducting both personal and social reasoning in ethics. Deontology emphasizes the rules and principles that should guide actions, consequentialism emphasizes weighing the consequences of actions, and virtue ethics emphasizes developing character traits so one can deliberate and act well. While each theory can be consulted when making a decision, it makes sense to adopt one as the leading approach if it consistently has more strengths and fewer weaknesses than other approaches.

By this standard, virtue ethics is attractive as a primary approach. It pays more attention than the other theories to the particular person making a decision and how he or she becomes a person who can act well in all situations. Moreover, virtue ethics is especially well suited to exploring the connections between the personal and social dimensions of ethics and between personal and social flourishing. The next three chapters give a complete picture of how virtue ethics works as a normative theory, focusing, in turn, on the theory's norms, its understanding of life's purpose, and its analysis of the contexts in which character and community shape each other.

## Questions for Review

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1. What is the meaning of *ethical* and *moral*, and what is the difference between ethics and morality?
2. How does consideration of the social dimension influence each part of the definition of ethics?
3. What is normativity?
4. What is the difference between the first and second versions of Kant's categorical imperative?

5. What is the difference between act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism?
6. What is the entry point for virtue ethics?
7. Why are virtues and vices considered habits?
8. Describe a weakness ascribed to each of the ethical theories.
9. Describe some ways the three normative theories are similar in their approach to ethical issues.
10. Describe some ways the three normative theories differ in their approach to ethical issues.
11. What are norms, purpose, and context?

### Discussion Questions and Activities

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1. Evaluate Randy Cohen's advice to L. T. Support your position using concepts from the chapter.
2. Do you agree that it makes sense to talk about the ethics of an entire society? Would you characterize the United States as a virtuous country? Why or why not?
3. Which of the three normative ethical theories most appealed to you initially, and why? Did anything in the chapter change your mind or give you stronger reasons for your initial preference? An activity that can assist you in this reflection is to take an informal self-assessment quiz that matches your responses to ethical issues to theories.<sup>35</sup>
4. Using the responses to the case of Ann and Sandy as models, describe an ethical issue that you or someone you know faces and use concepts from the normative ethical theories to analyze possible responses.
5. Write a reflection on your personal ethical framework, based on the three elements presented. (a) By what values, virtues, and principles do you try to live? Where did you get your values? (b) What do you see as the purpose of your life, and what is flourishing for you? (c) Which people and contexts have helped you grow as a moral person, and which have, perhaps, held you back?

### Recommendations for Further Reading

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"The Ethicist." *New York Times Magazine*. <http://www.nytimes.com/column/the-ethicist>.

An archive of letters to the newspaper's ethical advice column and the responses from the current columnist. Good fodder for discussion.

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35. A highly recommended quiz is in Panicola et al., *Health Care Ethics*, 31–39. Another quiz can be found at <http://selectsmart.com/philosophy/>.

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Kyte, Richard. *An Ethical Life: A Practical Guide to Ethical Reasoning*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2012.

An accessible introduction to ethics. Kyte first clears away several misconceptions about ethics, such as, “ethics is just a matter of opinion,” and, “ethics consists of a set of rules,” and then presents four ways of ethical thinking: truth, consequences, fairness, and character.

Panicola, Michael R., et al. *Health Care Ethics: Theological Foundations, Contemporary Issues, and Controversial Cases*. 2nd ed. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011.

A medical ethics textbook that begins with an excellent overview of ethical theories and ethical decision-making. Includes many short case studies.

Marino, Gordon. *Ethics: The Essential Writings*. Modern Library Classics. New York: Random House, 2010.

A comprehensive and affordably priced anthology of primary readings from both classic and contemporary authors.

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Based on the author's famous course, “Justice,” at Harvard University. Deontology and consequentialism are presented as conflicting interpretations of the right thing to do. Videos from the course and further resources are at <http://www.justiceharvard.org>.

Weston, Anthony. *A Practical Companion to Ethics*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

A handbook for ethical reasoning and argumentation that shows how to build strong, ethical positions through creative thinking and constructive dialogue. Each chapter concludes with several “try-it-yourself” exercises.