

# 1

## CHAPTER

# Concepts and Misconceptions

TO ENGAGE IN ETHICS is to engage in a particular type of human activity, one that involves thinking and talking about how we should act—what we should do, say, think, or even feel in certain situations. Like many kinds of activities, ethics is not a simple, straightforward matter. Various ways of thinking and talking constitute “doing ethics,” just as many different sorts of actions constitute doing science; for example, hypothesizing, gathering evidence, evaluating, and measuring. Just as it is essential to know the difference between forming a hypothesis and gathering evidence in the scientific realm, it is important to know the difference between the diverse types of thinking that constitute ethics. Examining these—learning how to use them better and to recognize when others are using them—is the chief focus of this book.

Thinking more clearly and consistently about ethical issues requires having a shared understanding of what ethics is. Part of developing a shared understanding consists of finding out what terms mean in order to use them in ways that enhance rather than detract from productive discussion. When the terms we are interested in learning about are already widely used in our society and are used in many different ways by different people, it is necessary first to address common misconceptions before examining how to use ethical language more constructively. Addressing common misconceptions in ethics will remove some potentially serious obstacles at the outset.

### MISCONCEPTION 1: ETHICS AND MORALITY ARE DISTINCT

The terms *ethics* and *morality* both originally referred to the same thing. The Latin term *mores* was a translation of the Greek term *ethike*, and they both meant something like “custom” or “habit.” The closest contemporary equivalent would probably be what sociologists call a norm, a social standard or expectation of appropriate behavior. The meanings of words change over time, though, and during the past one hundred years or so the terms *ethics* and *morality* have begun to drift apart. Most people now tend to use the term *ethics* when referring to the study of appropriate behavior in public or professional contexts and to use the term *morality* when the behavior referred to is relatively personal or private. Because we as a society have also come to think of religion as belonging primarily to the private rather than to the public sphere, we have come to use the term *morality* in connection with religion. Hence, we refer to legal ethics, health care ethics, and business ethics, because these are regarded as areas of public accountability. One rarely hears someone speak of legal morality or health care morality, but people will refer to Christian morality or to an individual’s personal morality.

Despite the different senses that the terms *ethics* and *morality* have acquired, in many contexts the terms may be used interchangeably because there is little benefit in making a hard and fast distinction between the two terms. Indeed, such a distinction, as we shall see later, cannot be philosophically defended, since ethical (or moral) decisions arise primarily in the context of relationships. Even actions normally considered personal or private often have public implications. For example, my decision to stay up late last night watching television has made me irritable this morning and affected how I interact with my coworkers. Is the question of whether I should have stayed up late last night a matter of ethics or morality? In a case such as this, using one term or the other matters little in helping answer the question of what I should have done. This is not to say that there is no difference between private actions and public actions. There is significant difference, which is important to observe when discussing, for example, what kinds of behavior governments may legitimately regulate or what kinds of rules an employer may impose upon an employee.

In the remainder of this book, the terms *ethics* and *morality* will be used, for the most part, interchangeably, with no great significance attached to slight differences in meaning between the two.

## MISCONCEPTION 2: ETHICS IS “NOTHING BUT WORDS”

A fairly frequent objection to the study of ethics—actually, to the study of philosophy in general—is that it consists of “nothing but words.” Although the study of ethics, like the study of most things, is done primarily in words, assuming that words amount to nothing is a mistake. Words matter immensely.

The laws that shape our society are made up of words. Oaths and vows, which mark the most significant passages in our lives, are composed of words. Wars are begun with a declaration and ended with a treaty built from words. Long-standing relationships are broken up by an insult and repaired with an apology. Without words we would not have a recognizably human life at all.

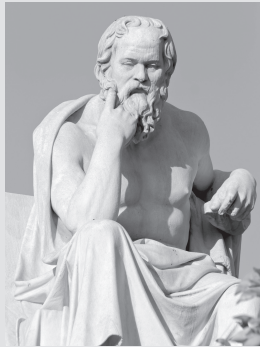
No one would think of saying to an engineer, “What you do is nothing but numbers.” If an engineer gets his calculations wrong, terrible things may happen: bridges may fail, buildings may collapse, or oil rigs may blow up. What happens if we get crucial words wrong? What if a jury misunderstands instructions from a judge? What if a pharmacist misreads a prescription from a physician? What if a college student studies the wrong material for an exam?

One person who fully appreciated the importance of words for human life was the Greek philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE). Of all the memorable expressions attributed to him, the best known is this: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The way in which one examines one’s life is with words—by reading, and writing, and, most importantly, talking. The rest of the sentence reads: “. . . I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day . . . for the unexamined life is not worth living. . . .”<sup>1</sup> Socrates put his life on the line for words and for what they can do to shape human life

1. Plato, *Apology*, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1975), 38a, 39.

in society. He uttered these particular words while on trial, charged with corrupting the youth and believing in false gods. At the end of the trial he was found guilty by a jury of about five hundred citizens and executed a short time later.

### SOCRATES (469–399 BCE)



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**Socrates**

More has been written about Socrates than perhaps any other philosopher in history, yet we actually know very little about him. He wrote nothing himself, and most of the stories and legends passed down about him came from dialogues written after his death by his student Plato. From those dialogues, and a few other sources from the same era, historians have pieced together a compelling portrait

of an original, courageous, and controversial thinker who has continued to inspire people for over two thousand years.

Socrates was a citizen of Athens, Greece, during the height of that city's cultural achievements, but it was also a time of war with Sparta and Persia, internal political turbulence, and revolution. He was a polarizing figure, spending most days in the agora (or marketplace) having conversations with leading figures in the city about how best to live one's life. Those conversations attracted a great deal of attention, especially from young men who would gather to listen to the dialogues and then try to emulate his method.

Socrates developed a method of question-and-answer dialogue (called *dialectic* or "the Socratic method") in which he would ask for a definition of some key term, and when the definition was provided would point out difficulties or inconsistencies in the answer, which would then call forth a new definition, to which he would point out additional problems,

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**Socrates Continued**

and so on. His purpose in such dialogues was to help people see for themselves what is true and false.

Although Socrates was a citizen, he was poor and lived a simple, some would even say ascetic, lifestyle. He was probably a stonecutter by trade, though he seems never to have practiced it, preferring to spend his days talking. He wore the same cloak year round and went about barefoot, even in the winter. The only times he ventured beyond the city walls were when he went on military campaigns, serving as a citizen soldier. He served with distinction on those occasions, even saving the lives of fellow soldiers during a retreat.

In 399 Socrates was charged with the capital crimes of believing in false gods and corrupting the youth. He was tried and convicted by a jury of about five hundred citizens and executed a short time later by being compelled to drink a cup of poison hemlock.

Socrates' enduring influence is chiefly due to three things: (1) his question-and-answer method of inquiry; (2) his insistence that all wrongdoing is the result of ignorance; and (3) the calmness and courage with which he faced death.

Most would perhaps agree that the greatest good is to be virtuous every day. But to discuss virtue? Did Socrates really mean that discussing virtue is more important than being virtuous, that words are more important than actions?

Let us assume that he chose his words carefully.<sup>2</sup> First, he said that discussing virtue is the “greatest good.” Such a claim would not make sense if one already possessed a clear understanding of how one ought to act. But suppose one doesn’t already have such clear understanding. One could then make sense of Socrates’ claim as meaning

2. This is known as a “charitable” interpretation of a text. An interpretation is charitable when credit is given to the author for the intentional use of her or his words. An interpretation is uncharitable when the reader assumes that the author didn’t choose the words carefully or didn’t understand what the words meant. As a general rule, it is a good idea to give the benefit of the doubt to authors for understanding and intending their own words, unless one has some good reason for thinking otherwise.

something like: as long as we don't already *know* how we ought to act, the most important thing to do is to *find out* how we ought to act. Second, by "discuss virtue," Socrates most likely means we don't discover what is good simply by observing or imitating others, nor simply by meditating or reflecting on what we should do. We find out how we should live by talking to others. Finally, we must engage in such talk "every day." We shouldn't wait until we have a problem in urgent need of resolution, nor should we think just reading a book or taking an ethics course will give us sufficient knowledge of ethics. On the contrary, ethics is a matter of gradually acquiring an understanding of how one should live through daily discussions with others throughout one's lifetime.

### MISCONCEPTION 3: ETHICS IS JUST A MATTER OF OPINION

Who decides what counts as ethical? Who decides what is right or wrong, good or bad, when a dispute arises among people about what to do?

The difficulty in answering this question is one of the reasons people sometimes give up on ethics and declare it is "all just a matter of opinion." In a sense, that is correct: ethics is a matter of opinion. Then again, not all opinions are equal. Some opinions are true and some are false, and it is important to know the difference. It may be my opinion, for example, that it is raining outside right now, but that is not *just* an opinion; it is also a statement about something that is either true or false independently of what I happen to think. It is a statement of fact.

Ethical statements are both like and unlike factual statements. One interesting characteristic of ethical statements is that they almost always indicate the speaker's attitude about the topic under discussion. For example, if I say, "lying is wrong," you can be fairly confident that I disapprove of lying. That is not the case with most factual claims a person makes during the course of a day. If I say, "It is raining outside," you would not be able to tell (apart from tone of voice or facial expression) whether I was delighted or disappointed by the rain.

In this respect moral statements are similar to expressions of personal opinion. If I were to say, for instance, “Broccoli is delicious,” or “Bob Dylan is a fantastic songwriter,” you would be justified in believing that I like to eat broccoli and listen to Bob Dylan’s music.

This similarity may lead some people to equate moral statements with statements of opinion, but there is a significant difference between the two. When I make a personal statement, I am really just telling you something about myself (my attitude toward something), whereas when I make a moral statement, I am telling you something both about myself (my attitude toward something) and about something external to myself (the thing I’m talking about). That explains why people can have a meaningful disagreement about moral statements but not about personal statements. If you objected to my claim that broccoli is delicious, we would just have to conclude that our tastes differ: I like broccoli and you don’t. The fact that you do not find it delicious does not mean I was wrong to say it is. Both of us are just trying to make clear to the other what we ourselves like to eat. We are not making an objective (that is, independently verifiable) claim about the nature of broccoli.

Disagreement about moral statements results in a very different situation. If I say “lying is wrong” and you say “lying is permissible,” we are doing more than merely insisting that we have different *feelings* about lying. I am saying both that *I* dislike lying and that *you* (among others) should not tell lies. Whereas you are saying that *you* do not dislike lying and that it would be okay if *I* (among others) occasionally tell lies. Because we are making claims about what would be appropriate for others to do, it would be reasonable for me to ask you to give *reasons* for thinking that lying is permissible or for you to ask me for reasons why I think lying is wrong. In other words it is perfectly normal to have rational arguments about whether certain actions are right or wrong, good or bad, in the same way that it is perfectly normal to have rational arguments over a variety of factual claims, like whether it is raining outside, whether there was once life on Mars, or whether the Cubs will ever win the World Series. We could not have a rational argument over whether broccoli tastes good. In matters of personal opinion, once we make clear our different preferences, the discussion is over. There is no room for meaningful disagreement.

This demonstrates that moral statements are not merely statements of personal opinion. They resemble personal opinion in that they typically reveal our attitudes about something, but they are also like factual statements in that they assert something about the world outside us, something that may be either true or false.

Another reason why some people think of ethics as just a matter of opinion is that it seems like so little progress is made in settling ethical disputes. Some controversies in our society, like abortion and capital punishment, seem to go on and on without resolution. Moreover, very good people take up positions on both sides of the controversies. Because ethics textbooks and courses tend to focus mainly on the difficult controversies, it may appear that ethical agreement is a rare thing and that the arguments on each side of a controversy have roughly equal merit. That is a deceptive appearance. There is near universal agreement across cultures about fundamental ethical behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Ethicists find most disagreement in those cases where it is difficult to agree on what kind of behavior a certain action is. For example, nearly everyone agrees that people should not tell lies, but when it comes to whether someone should tell a lie to save another person from harm, we do not find such universal agreement. This does not mean that the permissibility of lying is a matter of opinion; it just means that people do not share a thorough and consistent understanding of what constitutes a lie in every instance.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, nearly everyone agrees that it is wrong to commit murder, but they may disagree about what falls under the description of murder. Is it murder to kill a fetus? Is it murder to kill a murderer? These questions are admittedly difficult and finding answers that result in widespread agreement even more so. But consider all the actions a typical person performs in the course of a day that are morally unproblematic, and then compare that to the number of actions per day society would consider to be deeply controversial. To insist that all of ethics is just

3. See, for example, the discussion in chapter 5 of the “Golden Rule,” many versions of which are found throughout the world.

4. There is a long history of attempts by philosophers to define lying. For a recent effort, see Thomas L. Carson, “Lying, Deception, and Related Concepts” in *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. Clancy Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 153–187.

a matter of opinion because of difficulties resolving the (relatively few) controversial cases, would be like insisting that the difference between night and day is a matter of opinion because we cannot agree on the precise times of sunrise and sunset.

Why should ethics be different from any other area of academic study? Every discipline has its points of agreement and disagreement. Economists, for example, nearly all agree that spending stimulates the economy, but they disagree about how much debt should be encouraged to increase spending. The fact that sincere and competent economists disagree does not reduce economics to a matter of opinion. It means that economies are extremely complex and difficult to understand. The same goes for ethics.<sup>5</sup> The world is complex, and so the study of how human beings should act in the world is a difficult subject. This does not mean ethics is just a matter of opinion; it does, however, call for a certain amount of caution, especially in areas where there is significant disagreement. Claims of moral certainty should not extend beyond one's understanding of the issues.

#### MISCONCEPTION 4: ETHICS CONSISTS OF A SET OF VALUES

It has become commonplace to talk about people's ethical beliefs as "values": we speak of "personal values," "shared values," "value statements," and "corporate values." Yet, what does it mean to say that I (or we) value something?

Houses, cars, books, coffeemakers, and bicycles have value. How much? Whatever someone is willing to pay for them. Some items may also have personal or sentimental value, things like family photographs or heirlooms. We might say such things are "priceless"; in other words, we wouldn't take any amount of money for them. But the underlying assumption about anything we value is that it has a certain amount of worth. The relevant question is always, "How much worth does it have?"

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5. It could be argued that there is a great deal more subjectivity in ethics than in other fields of study. The point of this section of the book is simply to insist that such a claim must be argued for and supported with good reasons; it cannot simply be assumed on the basis of disagreements within the field.

In that context, what does it mean to say, for example, that I value honesty? Does it mean I think it is important? How important? What if I would be greatly embarrassed by admitting I had done something, so I decided to tell a lie? Would that mean I do not value honesty, or would it mean merely that I value it less than avoiding embarrassment? Could it perhaps mean that I did value honesty in the past, but now, in this circumstance, I don't? However, that would not rule out the possibility that I may value it again in the future—say, right after I finish telling a lie.

Such questions indicate one of the problems with value terminology: it is hopelessly vague. Saying one values something doesn't commit one to any particular behavior. It expresses little more than a positive attitude toward something, and ethics, as we will see, is a great deal more than positive attitude.

This does not mean that the term *value* has no place in the discussion of ethics. Many daily ethical decisions consist of choices among competing values. For instance, if I value my friendship with Tom, and I haven't spent much time with him recently, I may decide to go have coffee with him instead of going fishing, an activity I value. From the time we wake up in the morning until we go to sleep at night we are making choices about things we value. But merely noting that we value a number of things doesn't help us choose as we should. Nor does the activity of clarifying our values, insofar as that is even possible, help us ensure the goodness or appropriateness of our choices, for the question always remains whether we *ought* to value various things to the extent we do.

Values language misleads when it replaces the language of ethics. It suggests something stronger than personal preference while not actually committing the person to anything more than personal preference. For example, people will frequently defend their position with regard to the abortion controversy by referring to their values. Those who generally oppose laws that would permit abortions are called "pro-life," and those who generally favor laws that would loosen restrictions on abortion procedures are called "pro-choice." The problem is this: nearly everyone on both sides of the controversy values both life and choice. Few rational people will argue that human life or freedom is unimportant. So the terms *life* and *choice*, which in this context refer to what people value, do not provide any

substantial reason for why people take the positions they do on the abortion issue.

Values language remains popular because it allows one to enjoy the illusion of having reasons for one's choices without having to do the hard work of figuring out and then expressing those reasons in ways that make sense to others. That's comforting because, in many cases, our reasons are inadequate to fully support our actions. When engaging in serious ethical disputes or facing hard choices about how to live, we want to be able to do more than just express preferences. We want to be able to give reasons that will be persuasive or even compelling. We want to be able to explain why we think certain actions are good or right, and to do that well requires something more robust than the language of values.

## MISCONCEPTION 5: ETHICS CONSISTS OF MORAL ABSOLUTES

People often use the term *moral absolute* to claim that certain kinds of behavior, for example, lying or murder, are always and everywhere wrong and that there are no exceptions. The trouble with this thinking is that it just isn't helpful. The hard work of ethics is not determining whether, for example, it is wrong to lie: every culture in the world agrees it is. The difficult part is determining what counts as a lie. That's where cultures and individuals differ. Insisting that "lying is wrong" is a moral absolute does not help anyone determine whether a certain action—say, misleading one's friend about his surprise birthday party or failing to provide complete information about a car when trying to sell it—is or is not a lie.<sup>6</sup> The same goes for the idea of murder, which is universally acknowledged as morally prohibited. The problem is in defining what constitutes murder. Is all intentional killing murder, or only the killing of innocents? In a country at war, are all civilians innocent? What about children who

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6. I would argue that the first example is not a lie and the second example is a lie, but that argument will have to wait for further explanation; the important point here is that the idea of moral absolutes is not helpful in deliberating about what is right or wrong. Fuller consideration of whether certain actions may be morally wrong in every instance is taken up in chapter 5.

are being used to transport ammunition to combatants? Is it murder to execute a justly convicted criminal? Is it murder to destroy a human embryo? These are all examples of important questions that are not settled by declaring that the prohibition against murder is a moral absolute.

Once we agree that moral statements may be either true or false and that reasons are required to support moral statements, nothing more is gained by insisting that moral claims are absolute. The difficult work of moral reasoning consists of figuring out, through careful deliberation, which claims are true and which are false and in what sense. This requires close attention to the meanings of words and their context. If asserting that moral claims are absolutes means that moral terms are somehow immune to the contextual ambiguity that affects all human language, then the assertion is false. If it simply means that some moral claims are true and others are false and that they are not merely a matter of opinion, then, yes, that is the case (see misconception 3).

## MISCONCEPTION 6: ETHICS CONSISTS OF A SET OF RULES

Many people assume ethics is about what one *has* to do, not about what one *wants* to do, that it is a matter of “following the rules.”

The typical family has more than two hundred rules that apply to daily behavior inside the house—rules like, “Don’t slam the door,” “Turn off the light when you leave the bathroom,” or “Put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket.”<sup>7</sup> Hundreds more guide behavior outside the house—in the yard, in the car, at the grocery store, in a restaurant—and for special occasions, such as visiting relatives or going on a vacation or to a movie theater. Schools, of course, are notorious for the number of rules they impose, and most workplaces are equally demanding, with some large corporations having layers upon layers of rules issuing from various departments, agencies, and governing bodies.

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7. Denis Wood and Robert J. Beck, *Home Rules* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

In the last thirty years or so, society has increasingly used the term *ethics* in the context of rules oversight and enforcement. Thus there are ethics compliance officers in many corporations; ethics commissions in federal, state, and local governments; health care ethics committees in hospitals; and professional ethics committees of the state bar associations. The list goes on and on. What they all have in common is the task of creating, implementing, and in some cases, enforcing rules and policies that, in effect, restrict people's freedom. Such restrictions are generally well intended. They aim to protect people from injury or abuse of power. There are laws prohibiting pollution, sexual harassment, bullying, and conflicts of interest: all are meant to protect people. Yet, ethics is more than just restrictions on behavior.

Thinking about ethics primarily in terms of rules for behavior is a relatively new development. For at least two thousand years, up until quite recently in our history, happiness was widely regarded as central to any robust understanding of the ethical life. This view goes back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who claimed that happiness was the highest good, that is, the thing everyone seeks and the ultimate reason we do everything we do. By happiness, he didn't mean a temporary state of amusement or pleasure (such as one might get from watching a funny TV show or getting a new car); he meant instead a lasting and deep-seated condition, something we might refer to as "satisfaction" or "fulfillment."

Somewhere along the way, the term *ethics* was applied to what used to be called, more simply and directly, rules, regulations, laws, policies, etiquette, or civility. A couple of dangers come along with this change in language.

The first danger is a tendency to think that the only way to create a more ethical society (or organization or family) is to put more rules in place. In fact the opposite is true. An overemphasis on rules corresponds to an underemphasis on character. Character, not rules, constitutes the heart of ethics.<sup>8</sup> As Plato observed, good people don't need rules to make them do what is right, and bad people will find ways around rules. Of those who try to stop people from acting irresponsibly through legislation, he says, "They always think they'll find

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8. For a defense of this claim, see chapter 6 on "Character."

a way to put a stop to cheating on contracts and [so on], not realizing that they're really just cutting off a Hydra's head."<sup>9</sup>

The second danger consists of losing sight of the point of ethics and thinking that the various rules, regulations, and policies that authorities put in place are, in themselves, the determinants of right and wrong. But if we have no conception of ethics that goes beyond the rules, how do we know when the rules themselves are unethical? How do we find the words to express our sense that something we are required to do is not right?

As any child can attest, parents can have rules that are nonsensical, contradictory, or flat-out unfair. Bosses can implement rules that are counterproductive, self-serving, or even demeaning. And a common complaint about governmental bureaucracies is that they produce rules that at times appear designed to set up unnecessary obstacles. Ethics cannot consist of any particular set of rules because we need a standard against which to evaluate whether various activities—and the rules put in place to govern them—are genuinely good or merely arbitrary.

Ethics is what supplies the reasons for various rules (laws, policies, procedures). An action is never right or wrong just because there is a rule in place; rather, rules are put in place because someone wants to reinforce certain types of behavior. And if good (i.e., ethical) reasons support the rule, then (generally speaking) it is right to follow the rule. The important thing to note is that ethics determines whether a rule is right or wrong, not vice versa.

## MISCONCEPTION 7: EACH PERSON DECIDES WHAT IS ETHICAL

Occasionally one may hear someone say something like “What’s right for you is different than what’s right for me,” or “Everybody has to decide for themselves what’s right and wrong,” or “You shouldn’t impose your morality on someone else.” Such sentiments express the

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9. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 426e, 102. In Greek mythology the Hydra is a serpent with many heads. Every time one head is cut off, two grow back in its place.

notion that ethics is an individual choice. This is known as *egoism*, the doctrine that the scope of ethical statements is limited to the person who makes the statement. In other words, if I say it is wrong to lie, what I really mean is that it is wrong for *me* to lie.

There is an element of truth in this notion, namely, that we should be cautious about thinking we understand enough about another's situation to determine how that person should act. However, the idea that a person cannot make ethical judgments for and about others is contradicted by the ways in which people actually do make and employ ethical judgments. For example, Andrea believes people must decide right and wrong for themselves, and she also happens to think it is wrong to steal. According to the doctrine of egoism, her ethical statement merely means it is wrong for *her* to steal—other people must decide for themselves whether stealing is wrong for them. Then suppose Tim comes along and steals Andrea's bicycle. Would Andrea have to ask Tim whether he thinks stealing is wrong before she could object to what he did? If Tim said he didn't find anything wrong with stealing, would that mean Andrea would have to think it was okay for Tim to steal her bicycle? After all, he had to decide right and wrong for himself, and he decided that stealing was not wrong. Notice, however, that if Andrea wanted to get her bicycle back, she would have to ask Tim's permission to take it; she couldn't just take it back without asking. After all, that would be stealing, and by her own admission, Andrea believes stealing is wrong.

This is a preposterous situation. Few people actually limit their ethical judgments to themselves in practical situations. Calling ethics a matter of individual choice is equivalent to saying there is no such thing as ethics; it reduces all talk of right and wrong to questions of personal opinion (likes and dislikes). But, as shown earlier in this chapter, ethical statements are not just statements of personal opinion; they make claims about what *we ourselves and others* should or should not do. If Andrea really believes it is wrong to steal, then that implies, among other things, that she thinks people should not take other people's bicycles without permission. If she thinks that, then she does not really believe that all people must decide right and wrong for themselves. She cannot believe both things at the same time without being logically inconsistent.

## MISCONCEPTION 8: CONSCIENCE DECIDES WHAT IS ETHICAL

“You should always do what you think is right.” This is generally good advice, except, however, when what a person thinks is right, isn’t. How does one know when moral judgments are reliable?

The capacity for making moral judgments is sometimes referred to as conscience. One could call this a sense of right and wrong or moral sense. In most instances, it is probably best to follow our conscience when a situation arises that requires a quick decision. At other times, when the need for action is not immediate, it is more important to examine one’s conscience, to figure out through critical conversation with others how one should act, because conscience is not an infallible guide.

In a famous passage from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is floating down the Mississippi River on a raft with Jim, a slave who has escaped from Miss Watson.<sup>10</sup> Huck likes Jim and considers him a friend, but he also considers Jim to be the property of another character in the book, and he believes that helping Jim escape is wrong because it is stealing. He wants to help Jim escape, but he thinks it wrong to do so.

I tried to make out to myself that *I* warn’t to blame, because *I* didn’t run Jim off from his rightful owner; but it warn’t no use, conscience up and says, every time, “But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could a paddled ashore and told somebody.” That was so—I couldn’t get around that, noway. . . . My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever, until at last I says to it, “Let up on me—it ain’t too late, yet—I’ll paddle ashore at the first light, and tell.”<sup>11</sup>

A short time later, when Huck has an opportunity to turn Jim over to some men searching for him, he doesn’t do it. He instead

10. For a well-known interpretation of this passage, see Jonathan Bennett, “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn,” in *Philosophy* 49 (1974): 123–134.

11. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 2nd ed., Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and Thomas Cooley (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 73–74.

makes up a tale about smallpox that causes the men to steer clear of the raft. But he doesn't feel good about it. He still thinks he did something wrong by saving Jim.

They went off and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get *started* right when he's little ain't got no show—when the pinch comes there ain't nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat. Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on,—s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up; would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad—I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what's the use you learning to do right when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.<sup>12</sup>

Huck feels inclined to give up on ethics altogether because he is convinced that doing what is right is the same as doing what his conscience tells him to do, and in this case conscience is telling him to do something that feels wrong. Huck's conscience is personified, so that it seems to him like an indisputable voice of authority on all matters of right and wrong conduct. That makes it harder for him to question it. He has no way of distinguishing the different sources of moral judgment, such as what he has learned through friendship, what he has been explicitly taught, and what he has acquired through the experience of growing up white in a racist culture. By acknowledging that conscience is really just a set of internal judgments about how to act and that such judgments are by no means infallible, we can take measures to avoid Huck's dilemma.

When somebody says, "You should always do what you think is right," the proper response is simply to say, "No, you should always do what *is* right, whether you think it is right or not." Of course, that is easier said than done, because how can one do what is right when

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12. Ibid., 76.

one thinks it is wrong? But recalling what Socrates said in the *Apology* proves instructive: “It is the greatest good to discuss virtue every day. . . .” The study of ethics is important precisely because no one possesses an infallible guide (as Huck Finn imagines his conscience to be) to tell us how to live. Figuring out how to live well requires daily conversations with others, so when the time comes to act, we may do so on the basis of our considered judgments, which is the best we can do.

### MISCONCEPTION 9: EXPERTS DECIDE WHAT IS ETHICAL

If we cannot rely on conscience to provide guidance in difficult circumstances, and if the only way to determine right or wrong is by developing the capacity for moral judgment, what do we do in the meantime? Can we look to experts to guide us about what to do and how to live? Perhaps in some cases, but ethics is not a field that lends itself to expertise, unless by *ethics* we mean some narrowly defined context, such as biomedical ethics in a particular health care system or legal ethics in a particular state (where the state bar association has published a set of ethics rules or guidelines for attorneys licensed to practice in the state). In such contexts an ethics “expert” is somebody who knows the agreed-upon rules in the profession and has experience interpreting how those rules apply to particular cases. Seeking ethical advice from an expert (in such contexts) is similar to seeking advice on fishing from a fishing guide or seeking advice on building a house from an experienced contractor.

When talking about ethics in general, the person who studies ethics for a living generally does not possess the kind of knowledge or authority required for expertise. The world is just too large, and the variety of ways in which human beings interact with one another is too great, for a single person to be able to make repeatedly reliable judgments. That is not to say that some people don’t know more than others about how to live well or that there is no benefit to studying ethics. It points out, instead, that the benefit of studying ethics is a better knowledge of how to use ethical language precisely and consistently, so the discussion of ethical issues is more fruitful than it would be otherwise.

In ancient Athens individuals called sophists claimed to be able to teach others how to win arguments. Their name came from the Greek term *sophia*, which means “wisdom,” and they were widely regarded as knowing how to tell the true from the false and the good from the bad. Even more significantly, they were regarded as knowing how to teach others how to know those things as well, and wealthy citizens would pay the sophists a great deal of money to teach their male children<sup>13</sup> how to win arguments in public debates and become successful, honored citizens. In contrast to the sophists, Socrates described himself as a philosopher (from the Greek terms *philo*, or “love,” and *sophia*, or “wisdom”). In other words, he described himself not as having wisdom, but as loving—or desiring—wisdom. Thus his favorite method of discussion consisted of asking questions, partly to learn more for himself, but primarily as a way of helping others learn.

Socrates understood that one of the problems with “experts” in ethics has to do with how words are interpreted, so he was always asking people to articulate and defend their ideas about how to act.<sup>14</sup> The most important part of learning to be a moral agent is learning to see the world (people, things, activities) in a certain way. If the moral perception of the listener does not fit well with the moral perception of the speaker, the listener cannot recognize the sense in which the words are spoken. Thus a great deal of ethics consists of talking with others in an attempt to reach a shared understanding of the meaning of words.

One kind of ethics “expert” is the professional philosopher who writes or teaches classes about ethics. People who do this for a living

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13. In Athens at that time, girls were not given the same kind of education as boys, because only men were citizens, and women were not expected to play a public role in the life of the city.

14. A particularly good example of this method occurs in the *Euthyphro*, where Socrates questions Euthyphro about why he thinks it is right to charge his own father with murder. Readers of Plato’s dialogues often express frustration at the way in which Socrates interrogates his subjects without offering his own judgment about how to act in the situation in question, but that is to miss the point that there is no advice Socrates could give that would be practically relevant to his subject. What Euthyphro—and the reader who identifies with Euthyphro—needs is not a moral rule to follow but rather the willingness to surrender his certainty so he will start paying attention to what is significant.

are sometimes expected to know something more than or different from what the average person does. Professional philosophers (for the most part) know theories, which help people make sense of things that go on in the world.<sup>15</sup> Theories provide explanations and reveal patterns in events that might otherwise be confusing. By understanding the theories, and the rich variety of concepts that go along with them, the philosopher can help people reason clearly and consistently about their actions. However, that kind of knowledge does not necessarily make one better at figuring out how to act in a particular situation, especially if the situation is complex and requires specialized knowledge of the practical circumstances involved to understand adequately. For example, the typical philosopher would not be good at determining what military officers facing an ethical dilemma in a battlefield situation should do; however, the philosopher may help the officers figure things out for themselves, by listening carefully to their reasoning, spotting inconsistencies or errors of reasoning, suggesting they think about things in different ways, and so on.

Understanding the nuances and complexities of what is going on in a particular setting is one kind of skill; understanding how to use ethical concepts clearly and consistently is another. Competent ethical reasoning requires both. Sometimes (as discussed in chapter 2) that means more than one person needs to be involved in the decision making for ethical reasoning to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Another kind of ethics “expert” in our society is the advice columnist. There have been several popular and respected ones over the years, such as Ann Landers and Abigail van Buren. Currently, Amy Dickinson writes a daily advice column titled “Ask Amy,” which appears online and in newspapers all over the United States. Sometimes the advice-seeker just wants some straightforward information, and such advice is generally not problematic. Frequently, however, the advice-seeker wants help interpreting the significance of certain events in life, and in such cases it remains unclear whether the person who needs the advice has the ability to understand and then follow the kind of advice Dickinson is prepared to give.

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15. There are many kinds of ethical theories. Some of the more prominent, such as *utilitarianism* and *deontology*, will be discussed later in this book.

In a recent “Ask Amy” column, the writer “Baffled Bride” wanted to know whether she was justified in scheduling her wedding just two weeks before her cousin’s wedding. Her mother was upset because two large weddings so close together would be stressful for the family, but Baffled thought her wedding should come first, because she had been engaged for eighteen months and her cousin had been engaged for only eleven months.

What kind of advice could possibly be useful in a situation like this? Dickinson tells Baffled she is being “petty and just a little hostile,” and she should change her wedding date. It is good advice, but will it do any good? Will someone who thinks a wedding is a competition be able to understand why she should change the date?

Such situations occur regularly in most of our lives. Over the years they have made excellent material for novelists. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia is discovered to have run off with the disreputable Mr. Wickham. Her older sister, Elizabeth, reflecting on the lack of judgment that must have led to such a foolish action, observes that Lydia “has never been taught to think on serious subjects; and for the last half-year . . . has been given up to nothing but amusement and vanity. She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner, and to adopt any opinions that came in her way.”<sup>16</sup> It turns out that even after Lydia’s reputation has been saved by the timely intervention of her uncle and Mr. Darcy, she remains unable to appreciate her own foolishness. She refuses to listen to any conversation that calls her behavior into question.

Austen’s novels consist mostly of dialogue. She seems to know that doing what is right requires understanding what is right and that understanding comes through discussion. Recall, once again, the statement by Socrates: “The greatest good is to discuss virtue every day . . . for the unexamined life is not worth living for human beings.” Such a claim would not make sense for people who possess a clear and complete understanding of how they should act in the wide variety of circumstances that life presents, but nobody has such comprehensive understanding. The great virtue of Austen’s novels is

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16. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, in *The Complete Novels* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 363.

that the most admirable characters are not the ones who think themselves perfect but rather the ones who are troubled by their inability to know what to do, and who therefore persist in talking, questioning, and being questioned.

Like Austen and Plato, Amy Dickinson seems to understand that no set of rules will provide infallible guidance on how to live—no foolproof rules, that is, for how to run a company, how to raise children, or how to be a friend. Rules are only as reliable as the judgment of the person who comprehends them. Acquiring good judgment does not happen in a few hours or a few days. One can't go to the library and check out a copy of *Good Judgment for Dummies*. But one can talk about how to live. One can keep trying to figure things out, a little bit at a time.

It may be the case that advice is least useful for the person who needs it most. But a good advice column may help the reader for whom it constitutes a small part of her daily conversation about how to live well.

This alerts us to the real function of an “ethics expert” in a society. He or she does not solve particular ethical problems facing people, but rather helps people—whether readers of an advice column or students in a classroom—enhance their moral perception, gradually, by directing them to distinguish the morally significant from the morally insignificant, saying, “Pay attention to this” and “Pay attention to that.”

## MISCONCEPTION 10: SOCIETY DECIDES WHAT IS ETHICAL

An old and popular expression says, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Some use it to defend the idea that right and wrong are really just cultural conventions. This idea is known as *cultural relativism*. The earliest articulation of this notion occurs in *The Histories* by the Greek historian Herodotus (484?–425? BCE). He recounts a story about Darius I, the Persian king who reigned from about 522 to 486 BCE. Darius was interested in learning about the various cultural beliefs and practices of the people he encountered, and so he would question people from the lands bordering his kingdom.

During his reign Darius summoned the Hellenes [Greeks] at his court and asked them how much money they would accept for eating the bodies of their dead fathers. They answered that they would not do so for any amount of money. Later Darius summoned some Indians called Kallatai, who do eat their dead parents. In the presence of the Hellenes, with an interpreter to inform them of what was said, he asked the Indians how much money they would accept to burn the bodies of their dead fathers, as the Hellenes did. The Kallatai responded with an outcry, ordering him to shut his mouth lest he offend the gods.<sup>17</sup>

On the face of it, the Hellenes and the Kallatai have very different and inconsistent moral beliefs: the Hellenes believe it is necessary to burn their dead relatives, and the Kallatai believe it is necessary to eat them. Yet everything depends on how one describes the situation, for both the Hellenes and the Kallatai have distinctive cultural rituals by which they express reverence for the dead. Ignoring those rituals, by doing something else with dead bodies, is regarded as an act of sacrilege. So one could say that both the Hellenes and the Kallatai have the same ethical views, namely, that one should always express reverence toward dead relatives. To put it another way, they have different rules for proper treatment of the dead but base their respective rules on the same ethical principle.

In the time since Herodotus, historians, journalists, and anthropologists have recounted thousands of instances of cultural practices that appear to the observer from another culture as strange, abhorrent, or, occasionally, amusing. In many cases, the differences among cultures stem from particular ways of doing things that reveal an underlying commonality: different methods of punishment that reveal an underlying commitment to deterring theft or different ways of conducting oneself in battle that reveal an underlying commitment to courage. This is not to say there are no fundamental ethical disagreements among cultures, but they are not as common as they appear to be when one looks at only the surface description of behaviors. In fact an examination of basic ethical commitments

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17. Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Andrea L. Purvis, in Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Herodotus* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 3.38.3–4, 224.

shows widespread agreement across cultures regarding the importance of honesty, courage, generosity, hospitality, and respect. This becomes evident, however, only if one understands the broader significance of specific behaviors within particular cultural contexts.

Even when fundamental ethical differences among cultures exist, it is still misguided to think that ethical views simply proceed from cultural practices, and that accepted practices within a particular culture cannot be morally questioned. If that were so, residents of a pluralistic society would have no way of determining what is right and what is wrong. Take, for instance, someone like Barack Obama, the forty-fourth president of the United States. His mother was from Kansas, and his father was from Kenya. He was born in Hawaii and spent a portion of his childhood in Indonesia. He attended college in New York and law school in Boston, and he began his political career in Chicago. Which culture determines what is right or wrong for him? The answer is that several different cultures have most likely contributed to how Obama views ethical issues, but no single culture has the final say on how he should respond to the various choices that face him. The same holds true for anybody who is raised in or lives in a pluralistic society. We bring different ethical points of view to the discussion, based in part upon cultural influences, but those cultural influences are not decisive in determining how we should live.

Another difficulty with cultural relativism is that it paves the way for what the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) termed the “tyranny of the majority.”<sup>18</sup> This refers to the problem of not being able to challenge dominant practices or laws because they express the will of the majority. According to the notion of cultural relativism, dominant cultural practices determine what is right and wrong, leaving no conceivable basis for objecting that something with wide acceptance within a culture is wrong. Cultural relativism says that individuals could not morally object to practices such as slavery, female genital mutilation, and infanticide if they enjoyed widespread acceptance within a particular culture. Significant social reform, such as the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s, would have no moral basis, because it is an effort to change dominant cultural practices, and by definition, dominant cultural practices are

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18. *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, ch. 16, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/>.

always right. According to cultural relativism, such practices are not only right, they also determine what it means to be right.

Different cultures have different norms or standards, but it is not possible to reduce ethics to those cultural norms. One task of the student of ethics is to look carefully at cultural differences and neither dismiss as ethically wrong those practices that are unfamiliar nor superficially accept all practices as equally worthy of adoption. Instead, one must try to distinguish the surface expression of a norm from the underlying basis of that expression and then critically examine those norms using one's best reflective judgment.

### MISCONCEPTION 11: THE POWERFUL DECIDE WHAT IS ETHICAL

There is an old and widely used expression: "Might makes right." This means that those who hold power in a society determine what is right and what is wrong. Although it is certainly true that those who hold power in any society can use their influence to shape laws and the enforcement of those laws, it is not the case that such influence extends to determining whether those laws are actually good. For example, plantation owners in the southern United States held considerable power in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They had the ability to influence the U.S. Constitution, state laws, court decisions, and law enforcement to establish and maintain an institution of slavery. That power, however, did not make slavery morally right. Their power allowed them to sustain a practice that was morally wrong, but it did not keep some people from recognizing the moral evil of slavery and resisting it. In fact, one of the chief limitations on the use of power in society is moral opposition to the abuse of power.

The Society of Friends (also known as Quakers) is known for the practice of "speaking truth to power," which comes from the determination to resist injustice by renouncing violence and using moral suasion to accomplish positive social reform.<sup>19</sup> Many social

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19. Hans A. Schmitt, *Quakers and Nazis: Inner Light in Outer Darkness* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

reformers, such as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, have used public ethical criticism of laws that favored the interest of the powerful in society to overturn those laws.

Even though power does not determine right and wrong, it does have considerable persuasive effect on the perception of right and wrong, particularly on those who wield power. Lord Acton, the nineteenth-century British historian, famously said: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”<sup>20</sup>

The idea of power as a corrupting influence has a long history. Yet, in and of itself, power is a good thing. It consists of the ability to get things done. It can take many forms: strength, intelligence, persistence, wealth, cleverness, reputation, experience. It can do harm to the people subjected to the effects of power if it is used negligently or without their consent. It may also be harmful to the person who wields it, particularly if it allows one to evade the social consequences of bad behavior.

In the *Republic*, Plato tells the story of a shepherd named Gyges, who found a magic ring:

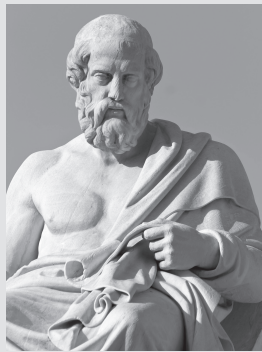
There was a violent thunderstorm, and an earthquake broke open the ground and created a chasm at the place where he was tending his sheep. Seeing this, he was filled with amazement and went down into it. And there, in addition to many other wonders of which we’re told, he saw a hollow bronze horse. There were windowlike openings in it, and, peeping in, he saw a corpse, which seemed to be of more than human size, wearing nothing but a gold ring on its finger. He took the ring and came out of the chasm. He wore the ring at the usual monthly meeting that reported to the king on the state of the flocks. And as he was sitting among the others, he happened to turn the setting of the ring towards himself to the inside of his hand. When he did this, he became invisible to those sitting near him, and they went on talking as if he had gone. He wondered at this, and, fingering the ring, he turned the setting outwards again and

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20. *Letter to Mandell Creighton* (April 1887), quoted in John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 364.

became visible. So he experimented with the ring to test whether it indeed had this power—and it did. If he turned the setting inward, he became invisible; if he turned it outward, he became visible again. When he realized this, he at once arranged to become one of the messengers sent to report to the king. And when he arrived there, he seduced the king's wife, attacked the king with her help, killed him, and took over the kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

#### PLATO (429–347 BCE)



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**Plato**

Aristocles Platon (“Plato”) was a member of the aristocratic elite in the city of Athens. At some point in his youth he encountered Socrates and joined the group of young men who regularly followed him to the agora to witness his public conversations. After Socrates died Plato began writing dialogues, most of which included Socrates as the central figure. He wrote about thirty-five dialogues and several letters.

Around 387 he opened a school called the “Academy,” but unlike other schools of that time, he did not charge tuition. Instead, he accepted donations of whatever students could afford to pay. Students lived in community, sharing everything in common, and were encouraged to challenge their teachers. It was a school based on the search for ideas, not obedience to authority.

The twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said famously that philosophy “consists of a series of footnotes

*Continued*

21. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 359d–360b, 35–36.

**Plato Continued**

to Plato.” And, in fact, it is hard to find any topic that Plato didn’t deal with in some fashion. Goodness, truth, beauty, evil, politics, war, poverty, evolution, love, hatred, dreams, death, poetry, music, mythology, mathematics: you name it, you can probably find it somewhere in one of the dialogues.

Plato is best known for developing what is referred to as the Theory of Forms. Though just what that theory is, or whether Plato even believed it himself, is difficult to tell, because all of his theories are presented by various characters in his dialogues, never in his own voice. But at least this much is clear: Plato held that the world we know through the intellect (the world of *eidos*, “forms” or “ideas”) is at least as real or even more real than the world we apprehend through the senses. The only way we can tell that somebody’s action is good, that somebody’s claim is true, or that somebody’s poem is beautiful, is because we have some notion of goodness, or truth, or beauty, against which to compare the particular instances. It is the business of philosophy to help us think more clearly and consistently about such ideas, by engaging in thorough discussion and argumentation.

Though Plato’s dialogues deal with many topics, his most frequent themes are ethics and politics, which for Plato, like most Greeks of that time, were intertwined, for he believed that a good life must of necessity be a public life as well.

Then Plato posed this question: If two people, one who is just and the other who is unjust, each found magic rings, would they both end up acting in the same way?

That’s a hard question to answer. We don’t have any magic rings lying around to do an experiment. But we do have examples of many people—movie stars, athletes, politicians, entrepreneurs—who have risen from humble origins to positions of wealth and prestige. Many of them have acted despicably. The news media are replete with stories of powerful people behaving irresponsibly, but we could probably name just as many powerful people who lead decent or even exemplary lives. Chapter 6 in this book looks more closely at how various

circumstances and character traits influence people's perception of right and wrong. For now, it is enough to recognize that even though might may influence the perception of right, might does not "make" right. Even if everyone would act just as Gyges did if they came into possession of great power, it would not prove that right and wrong are determined by the possession of power. It would just show that people who want to maintain their ethical sense must be cautious when it comes to acquiring and wielding power over others.

## MISCONCEPTION 12:

### ETHICS IS SEPARATE FROM RELIGION

When considering the relationship between ethics and religion, one confronts two different questions. The first concerns the conceptual relationship between the two areas of study; philosophers and theologians tend to be most engaged with this question. The second question concerns the practical connection between ethics and religion; it is the question at issue in most popular discussions of the topic. For example, when someone says, "You don't have to be a Christian to be a good person," they are responding to the second question, but when someone says, "The *Analects* of Confucius are philosophical and not religious," or "Ethics should be based on an impartial, objective system of values informed by natural science instead of religious prejudice," they are addressing the first question. Let's consider this question first.

**Is there a conceptual connection between ethics and religion such that thinking about one necessarily involves thinking about the other?** Because ethics concerns potentially anything we say or do in our lifetimes, it is difficult to draw a line in the sand and say, "Everything on this side of the line is a matter of ethics, and everything on that side is not." That is not because everything actually is a matter of ethics but rather because anything we study is potentially relevant to ethics and therefore may be included in our deliberations when trying to figure out what to do. Take, for example, the study of science. Science and ethics are different subjects with different methodologies, yet much of what science does is relevant to

ethics—in fact, one could even say indispensable. If a person does not accept or understand certain basic things about the world as revealed by the scientific method, then she or he will not be able to make good, responsible choices about how to live in the world. The person who dismisses all evidence regarding global climate change or who refuses to consider sociological and economic studies of the effects of the death penalty will be unable to deliberate responsibly on the topics of pollution or capital punishment. In the same way, the person who declares that religion has no relevance for ethics discounts in advance the significance of many beliefs and motivations of believers from across the religious spectrum. So in this way, ethics and religion are interdependent, just as ethics and science are interdependent: to make coherent, responsible judgments about how to act, one must be familiar with the basic orientations toward the world by means of which human beings understand themselves and their relationships. Because a majority of people in the world consider themselves to be followers of some particular religion, religion must be considered fundamental to how people perceive themselves and the world.<sup>22</sup>

Religion and ethics have an even stronger connection than this. A religion is composed, in part, of a worldview—a picture of the universe and the place of humans and other beings within the universe that gives coherence and meaning to life. The ethical judgments of adherents of any particular religion tend to make sense (if they make sense at all) within the context of their religious worldview. A significant part of the Christian worldview, for example, is the belief that human beings are created by a good God. Certain ethical implications about how to live follow from this picture of human existence, implications that may not make sense in the context of some other worldview. Thus, in Catholicism for example, Pope John Paul II writes:

It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed

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22. According to the Gallup International Millennium Survey, 87 percent of respondents claimed to belong to some religious group. Sixty-three percent of respondents claimed that God was very important in their lives. Results of the Gallup International Millennium Survey are available online at <http://www.gallup-international.com/ContentFiles/millennium15.asp>.

towards “having” rather than “being,” and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself. It is therefore necessary to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments. In this regard, it is not a matter of the duty of charity alone, that is, the duty to give from one’s “abundance,” and sometimes even out of one’s needs, in order to provide what is essential for the life of a poor person. I am referring to the fact that even the decision to invest in one place rather than another, in one productive sector rather than another, is always a moral and cultural choice.<sup>23</sup>

In passages such as this, it is important to note not only that the reason for doing something good ties in conceptually to a religious picture of human existence but also that what it *means* to do something good is conceptually tied to that picture. The claim that it is morally wrong to spend one’s life in “enjoyment as an end in itself” is put forth in the context of human life as created—as opposed to accidental—and as intended for “communion with others.” Thus Pope John Paul II proposes an ethical way of life based upon a religious understanding of human nature. One cannot take the religious understanding of human nature out of the picture and still have a coherent expression of *that kind* of ethical obligation.

However, some people claim that religious beliefs are simply false and that, therefore, religion is either detrimental or irrelevant to ethics.<sup>24</sup> That’s perfectly understandable. Most people would agree that any false beliefs, regardless of whether they are religious in nature, are detrimental or irrelevant to ethics. The key thing to remember is that when people disagree about the relevance of religion to ethics,

23. *Centesimus Annus* 36, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html).

24. Of the many recent books arguing for that claim, perhaps the best is Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s *Morality without God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). There are also many popular, but less reasonably argued, books advancing similar ideas, such as Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), and Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007).

the basis of their disagreement rests on whether they think religious beliefs are true or false.<sup>25</sup>

Sincere followers of any of the world's major religions must believe in a conceptual tie between religion and ethics. If truly sincere, they will think that their religiously informed understanding of the world is true (or more or less true) and that their judgments about how to live (i.e., what's right and wrong, good and bad) follow in some sense from that understanding of the world. People who don't subscribe to one of the world's religions will, of course, think differently, but they will do so not just because they think ethics and religion are different subject matters but also because they think any particular religiously informed understanding of the world is, for the most part anyway, false.<sup>26</sup> It is reasonable for adherents of a religion to think that ethics and religion are conceptually linked. It is also reasonable for critics of religion to think that ethics and religion are independent of each other. The only way to settle that disagreement is to address the truth or falsity of religious beliefs.

**Is there a practical connection between certain kinds of religious beliefs and practices and being able to live a good (i.e., ethical) life?** A church in my neighborhood regularly sends a team of people to Haiti to staff a temporary health care clinic. Some go in response to Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). One could say, many of the people who go on the mission trip do it for religious reasons. But could they have done it instead for entirely secular reasons? Yes, they could have done it for other reasons, just as most of our actions could be done for reasons other than those for which we actually do them. It matters little what other reasons could be given for going on the mission trip; the reasons people actually give are what count. If people actually do good things for religious reasons—and the things do not just happen to be good, but

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25. There is another kind of argument one can give for the relevance of religion to ethics, namely, that without God, morality lacks authority. This is the kind of argument given by John Hare in *Why Bother Being Good? The Place of God in the Moral Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

26. The only way to settle this disagreement between believers and unbelievers is by addressing the question of whether religious belief is (or can be) true, and that goes beyond the scope of this book.

their purpose in doing them is to accomplish something good (for example, to save lives)—then ethics does depend upon religion *in the lives of those people*.

This is not to deny that people also do good things for secular (or nonreligious) reasons. Of course they do. Nor does it deny that people may also do bad things for religious reasons. People have started wars, tortured, cheated, lied, and committed all sorts of foul deeds for religious reasons. But that those things have happened (and do happen) doesn't affect the claim that religious beliefs and practices often supply crucial motivation for ethical behavior.

Suppose someone were to ask whether health depends on diet and exercise. Everyone would agree it does. Some people, through fortunate genetic circumstances, may remain healthy while eating mostly junk food and exercising very little, but such people are the exception. There are other people who injure their health through diet and exercise, for example, by going on some extreme diet that deprives them of essential nutrients or by participating in some form of exercise that causes injury. Such examples, however, don't mitigate the claim that health depends on diet and exercise, because what one means by such a claim is that proper diet and exercise are significant factors in the health of most people.

This example can help one understand how to interpret the claim of a practical connection between religion and ethics. It means that proper religious practices tend to lead to a better (i.e., more ethical) life. To determine whether such a claim is true we would have to ask a number of specific questions. For example, does the practice of praying regularly help one live a better (i.e., more ethical) life? Or does the practice of daily meditation help one to live a better life? Or is forgiveness crucial for happiness? Possible answers to some of these questions will be considered in chapter 6, in the context of a discussion of virtue ethics. For now, it is important simply to keep in mind that different religions emphasize the significance of different kinds of practices for living a good life, and so the only way of responsibly answering the question of the practical connection between ethics and religion is to look at how such practices manifest themselves in the lives of people who embrace them. It is the same approach one would take to discover whether any sort of activity in which people regularly engage supplies practical motivation for ethical behavior.

### MISCONCEPTION 13: HUMAN BEINGS KEEP GETTING MORALLY WORSE

My grandfather's favorite complaint was the moral degeneration of society, and he had a long list of examples to illustrate the downward path: hippies with long hair, rock music, drug use, illegitimate children, disrespect of elders, women driving pickup trucks, TV shows (except *Bonanza* and *Hee Haw*), cities, politicians, movie stars (except John Wayne), littering, the failure to remove one's hat when the flag passed by during parades, and graffiti (especially the graffiti on the town's water tower and on the back of his garage).

Being an impressionable youth, and curious to know what things were like before my generation had come along to mess them up, I would sometimes ask him to tell me what it was like when he was growing up. Then I would hear stories of his early adventures: tipping outhouses on Halloween, stealing watermelons, disassembling a neighbor's wagon and reassembling it on top of his barn, hustling pool, making plugged nickels. The stories went on and on. One of his favorites was about how he and other kids in his North Dakota town would go up to an aging Civil War veteran who had been a soldier in the Confederate Army. They would stand in the street and sing "Marching through Georgia" until the old man would grab his cane and chase them down the street. "He'd get so angry he couldn't even speak," my grandfather would say. Then after a reflective pause, "Oh, we were a terrible bunch of kids."

We find worries about the moral character of the succeeding generation expressed in all cultures at all times in history. We find them in Plato's *Dialogues* from 350 BCE. Socrates, remember, was executed after being convicted on the charge of corrupting the youth, a pretty fair indication that the people of Athens thought their youth had, in fact, been corrupted. We find similar worries about the youth expressed in the writings of Roman historians Sallust and Livy during the height of the Roman Empire about the time of Jesus. We find them in newspapers from Victorian England and in early American diaries.

It is easy to find evidence that certain things in society are getting worse, because society is large and complex. There will always be someone ready to point out the latest survey showing that dishonesty in the workplace has increased by 5 percent over the past three years

or that the high school graduation rate in some large city has reached an alarming new low.

In response one could point out that although some aspects of our society are getting worse, other aspects are getting better. Studies show steadily increasing numbers of young people volunteering in their communities and crime rates that have been steadily dropping.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the tendency of people to say that society is getting worse, there's no way of backing up that claim with reliable evidence. Every generation seems worse than the previous one in some respects and better than the previous generation in others. Moreover, as society changes and new types of ethical problems arise, people's actions have implications and consequences they did not previously carry, and so it may appear that more and more ethical problems are arising. But until we decide on consistent criteria for measuring "better" and "worse," all we can bring to bear on the argument is anecdotal or partial evidence. In the meantime we can ask ourselves the question: Which is more likely, that every generation in the history of the world was morally worse than the previous generation, or that the observers tend to be biased?

## CONCLUSION: ETHICS AS COMMON SENSE

There is an old joke about a drunken man pacing back and forth under a streetlamp and looking down at his feet. A passerby stops and asks what he's doing. "I'm looking for my car keys," the drunken man says. So the passerby begins pacing under the streetlamp as well, looking earnestly for the keys. After about fifteen minutes, he stops and says, "I don't see your keys anywhere. Are you sure this is where you lost them?" "Oh no," replies the drunken man, "I dropped them way over there in front of the bar. But it's no use looking over there; it's so dark you can't see a thing."

27. For a summary of trends on youth volunteering, see Mark Hugo Lopez, "Volunteering among Young People," a report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning on Engagement, February 2004, available at [http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_Volunteering2.pdf](http://civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Volunteering2.pdf). For crime rates see the Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics from the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice, available at <http://www.ucrdatatool.gov/Search/Crime/State/RunCrimeStatebyState.cfm>.

Most of the widespread misconceptions about ethics share a common feature: they attempt to reduce ethics to something less than it is, something that may be compartmentalized into a more easily managed area of life or academic study. But looking for answers only in well-defined and comprehensible areas doesn't mean the answers to ethical questions can be found there. Those who insist that ethics is just a matter of cultural practice, for example, tend to think that ethics can be confined to the study of sociology or anthropology. Those who think ethics is not related to religion sometimes claim that ethics really is just a branch of psychology or evolutionary biology. But ethics has always resisted efforts to reduce its scope.

Questions about how to live come up in every aspect of life, and so every area of study is potentially relevant in the attempt to answer ethical questions. Every profession has questions that come up regularly about how to engage in that profession honestly, responsibly, in ways that are fair and that benefit—or at least do not harm—others. Questions of ethics come up outside the professions, as well, in areas of life that everyone shares, questions about how to be a good parent, friend, neighbor, or citizen. Different aspects of our lives generate questions about how to live, but they also provide knowledge and insights about how to answer those questions, none of which can be ruled out in advance as irrelevant. This makes the study of ethics complex, confusing, and, often, frustrating. We want to know: Where are the answers found, and how do we know when we have found them?

We find the answers in conversation with others, that is, in discussion or dialogue. Some people might say we find the answers in books, or in some books in particular, say the Bible, the Koran, or Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. But a book is just conversation with someone who is absent, or, we might say, someone whose presence is mediated by the printed word. Finding the answers in a book always depends on the ability of the reader to converse (from a Latin term meaning to "turn together") with the author and participate in the making of meaning. In the same way, learning from a speaker requires an ability to listen and speak in return, to discover meaning in shared words. All of this is to say that ethics comes from common sense, that is, from the ability to find shared

meaning in the words we use together to make sense of our lives.<sup>28</sup> In making sense of our lives together, we also give shape to them, by creating rules, policies, laws, conditions of praise and blame, standards of excellence and of failure.

Perhaps we never do know when we have found the answers. At least, one never can be sure of having found the final answers to questions of what is right and wrong or good and bad, for those answers are inextricably bound up in descriptions of the world, and our comprehension of the world is partial (to say the least). Claiming to have the final word in ethics is tantamount to claiming to know everything.

So what do we do if we want to know how to live good lives? We keep learning, we keep listening and talking, we keep taking part in the attempt to reach some sort of shared understanding. Then we test that understanding, seeing what becomes of a life lived with such an understanding, making our very lives part of the conversation. That is the best we can do, and it is a great deal.

However, we don't start with a clean slate, attempting to discover everything for ourselves for the first time. We start with where we find ourselves, and we find ourselves in a culture with a rich inheritance, in the middle of an ongoing conversation about how to live that has been taking place for centuries.

We turn next to consideration of the key terms of that conversation so we can become meaningful participants in it, knowing better how to read, how to listen, and how to speak to one another.

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28. This idea of common sense (i.e., making sense of things in common) is nearly opposite in meaning to the way in which people often use the phrase *common sense* to mean something like relying only upon what one already thinks.