

“The essays in this edited work shed light on the undeniable intersection between religion and ethics in society by challenging readers to understand how we should move forward for the betterment of human existence. Religious ethical values can make or break a political candidate’s chance for election or reelection; religious ethical values can influence and mobilize large and small humanitarian relief organizations to intervene at a local and/or global scale; religious ethical values can lead to laws that recognize the rights of alienated minorities; religious ethical values can expose the crimes of the capitalist system; religious ethical values can create awareness for a more conscientious use of natural resources and the preservation of our world. These essays offer an investigation on these and other issues and a place for us to reflect critically on where we are today.”

—Lourdes Rincón, PhD, Xavier University of Louisiana

“Paul Myhre has assembled an impressive collection of essays from scholars working at the intersection of social justice advocacy and theological inquiry. Students will appreciate the accessibility and contemporary relevance of each chapter, while professors will welcome the breadth of topics discussed and the clarity of their organization. Scholars of religion will value the critical insights offered on subjects as diverse as the communal impact of HIV/AIDS, the ethics of food production and consumption, religion and violence, and the alarming extent to which the media and social networks govern our daily lives. This volume is a timely and important exploration of the technological, environmental, and social issues that have come to define the early twenty-first century. I recommend it highly for use in the college and seminary classroom.”

—Daniel G. Deffenbaugh, professor of philosophy and religion, Hastings College

“This important book provides an American snapshot of the dramatic effects the twenty-first century context is having on ethical inquiry. With a focus on practical ethics and religion, the authors wade into age-old questions, including war, peacekeeping, politics, and health care, and grapple with how these interface with emergent issues, including social networking, technology, the 2008 Crash, and planetary and food ethics.

“Constructively, the book is not designed to arrive at answers but to expose morally relevant assumptions and questions. Using an engaging conversational tone, these United States authors explore the global consequences of our active or passive choices. This thoughtfully crafted selection of essays is meant to disrupt and unsettle the reader. Ultimately, the reader is challenged and helped to imagine new possibilities that do not always fit comfortably with established paradigms.

“In the classroom, this book will contribute well to the development of students’ critical thinking skills and knowledge of some of the most pressing contemporary issues.”

—Tracy J. Trothen, associate professor of ethics and theology
Queen’s School of Religion at Queen’s University (Kingston, Ontario)

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Religious
and **Ethical**
Perspectives
for the Twenty-First Century

Paul O. Myhre, editor



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Introduction

PAUL O. MYHRE

*Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning
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Learning Objectives for the Book

1. Explore different aspect of religion and ethics in the twenty-first century
2. Expose and reflect on assumptions about religious and ethical values concerning select topics
3. Provide a foundation for subsequent study of the topics in this book
4. Investigate options and opinions about how to live well in the twenty-first century
5. Learn to address issues with religious and ethical responses

Chapter Goals

- Introduce the main ideas and themes of this book
- Provide students with a sense of religious and ethical challenges in the twenty-first century
- Present questions pertaining to these challenges

Introduction

This book attempts to sort through issues, clarifying positions and ideas, to better understand the many religious and ethical choices people face. It is not a compendium of answers to pressing or emerging questions. The book brings together some of the brightest scholars and educators of religion and ethics to reflect on and discuss what they deem the most relevant issues in this century.

The issues and topics herein are hotly contested. No simple solutions are offered. Practical ethics rather than normative, prescriptive, or

purely philosophical ethics percolates through these pages. The authors identify and explore congruities and incongruities among religious beliefs, ethical teachings, and social practices. Perhaps another purpose of this book is to prompt thought about the ways ethics is understood and practiced by people living in diverse religious, social, and cultural contexts in the twenty-first century.

The book supports the study of religion and ethics by helping readers tackle tough questions and rest lightly with uneasy answers, unresolved conundrums, and even no answers at all to complicated questions. This area of study

encourages the unmasking of and reflection on one's assumptions concerning what matters and why. It is about coming to terms with the results of one's decisions and recognizing the consequences of corporate decisions on the planet and our place and participation in those decisions. It is about all of these things and so much more.

Walk through just about any small town or big city in the United States and you will find yourself bombarded by signs, symbols, messages, and structures that convey particular religious and ethical ideals and values. Some are explicit in their declarations of ethical bias and religious perspective. For example, there is no shortage of billboards in the United States with an image of an unborn fetus or fetus footprints accompanied by words like "choose life," "endangered species," or "It's a gift—life is from God—not a choice!" Clearly, a belief about life beginning at conception is the intention, coupled with an ethical stance against the practice of abortion in the United States. Another example: a billboard shows four images of a man morphing into a chimpanzee accompanied by the words "Are they making a monkey out of you? *www.whoisyourcreator.com.*" Plainly, those funding the billboard's advertising oppose theories of evolution and advocate a strict and likely literal interpretation of the biblical stories of God's creation of people in God's image and likeness. Some billboards simply invite reflection from a religious perspective: take, for example, the billboard of the Twin Towers standing in a New York City skyline accompanied by the words, "Imagine a World with No Religion," or "Imagine No Religion," which was funded by the Freedom from Religion Foundation.¹

It seems that those with various convictions about what is right or wrong are anxious to sway others to their point of view. In the United States, Christian messages are ubiquitous across

landscapes and cityscapes, greeting and inviting you to reflect on your core ethical and religious convictions. Billboards and placards move from expressions of God's love to God's wrath regarding what lifestyle you lead, what personal commitments you make, and what theological or religious positions or values you hold regarding a host of twenty-first-century social and political issues. Such messages can spark deep emotional responses. In Fairbanks, Alaska, a Christian church sign located on College Road in the early 1990s had to be repaired almost monthly because of the reaction by some to its messages regarding unrepentant and non-Christian people going to hell, declarations against homosexuality, and so on. Clearly, some individual or group objected to that congregation's interpretation of who God is and how God would have people believe and behave. There are even antireligion billboards cropping up, warning "Keep Religion Out of Government," "All Religions Are Fairy Tales," and "God and Government—A Dangerous Mix."

Sprinkled among such signs are symbols of ethical and religious ideas that convey core religious convictions and ethical longings. One sees these expressed in flags, flowers, ribbons, lawn ornaments, wooden cutout figures, chimes, decorated geese, and so on. They adorn porches, front lawns, and roadside areas—each declaring a religious or ethical stance, value, or ideal held by the person or people who set them there. Thousands of small, white crosses can be found standing along roadways, on church lawns, and elsewhere to show solidarity with the antiabortion movement. Panels are sewn together in an enormous quilt displayed in public places to remember those who have died from AIDS, as well as to offer healing to the bereaved, advance the aims of social justice on behalf of those afflicted with the disease, and promote social action.² Murals

1. See <http://ffrf.org/publications/freethought-today/articles/War-of-the-Billboards/>.

2. For additional information about the AIDS quilt project, see <http://www.aidsquilt.org/>.

associated with religious and ethical ideas can be found in almost any major city in the United States.³ Religious and ethical expression is alive and well. Far from dead or dying, it is thriving.

Values are part of the very fabric of what it means to be human. Perhaps the unease shared by many today has to do, in part, with the erosion of what some claim was a once dominant constellation of values that are being replaced or supplanted by an array of different value systems. Although a uniquely American value system was once held up as an ideal by many with power and privilege, rarely was it realized and never could it serve the needs of all. Today the world changes so rapidly that new value systems replace older ones as quickly as older computers find their way to recycling centers. Sometimes a value system simply becomes obsolete or so obscured by new choices that it becomes nearly impossible to discern the best course of action. Further, value questions are interlaced with religious ideas and ethical systems. For the purposes of this book, *values* are those principles and qualities that individuals and groups regard as of utmost importance. For example, in the United States, freedom is a fundamental value, so much so that decisions on other matters are weighed against this value.

Jérôme Bindé, in his book *The Future of Values*, claims that people worldwide and particularly in North America are experiencing a crisis of value discernment. “[T]here have never been so many values in contention in the history of humanity,” Bindé claims. “It may even be that there are too many values today. For the crisis we are experiencing suggests that we have lost our

ethical bearings and are unable to discern a horizon toward which to move. What we are facing is not so much a crisis of values but rather a crisis concerning the very meaning of values and our capacity for self-governance. The urgent question is thus how to orient ourselves among values.”⁴ Bindé clarifies his concern, asserting that there is a rising fear about the human capacity to effectively imagine what ought to be done in an array of venues—not least of which is the political one. In his words, “The political crisis has largely coincided in the West, the East and the South, with the ‘crisis of the future’ and it’s increasing indecipherability.”⁵ Ought we to conclude that there is no hope because global changes are outstripping the human capacity to adapt and change to well meet future ethical decisions?

People today are confronted daily by the blistering pace of innovation and invention. Each generation is clawing its way toward accommodation, opposition, or a combination of both in response to these developments. Every technological advance seems to prompt dozens or even hundreds of religious and ethical responses. For example, stem cell research initiatives in the United States have prompted flurries of responses, pro and con, from political and religious sectors. Positions taken on both sides of this debate are largely rooted in religiously influenced ethical ideals. Catholic, Baptist, and conservative Christian groups consider the practice abhorrent if it means using embryonic stem cells. To do so, they argue, is tantamount to saying that abortion is acceptable if it means saving another person’s life.⁶ More progressive Christian groups,

3. For information about the murals in Philadelphia, see http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1649278_1421152,00.html.

4. Jérôme Bindé, *The Future of Values: 21st-Century Talks* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing/Berghahn Books, 2004), ix.

5. *Ibid.*, 344.

6. See the Pontifical Academy for Life statement, “Declaration on the Production and the Scientific and Therapeutic Use of Human Embryonic Stem Cells,” for more insight about the Roman Catholic Church’s position on this question: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdlife/documents/rc_pa_acdlife_doc_20000824_cellule-staminali_en.html. For a lesson plan on stem cell research, see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/lessons/stem-cell-research/procedures-for-teachers/389/>.

however, contend that the use of stem cells is a vital means of saving and enhancing lives. The diversity of religious responses to this research is exemplified by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's list of religious groups' official positions on stem cell research, posted on their Web site.⁷ As people move into the next decades of this century, the pace of change shows no sign of slowing down. On the contrary, it is accelerating. Religious and ethical questions about technological developments will continue to prompt debate.

Religion and ethics will be pushed to provide solutions to ever more complex problems. *Religion* is a general term used to denote a range of ideas that people contend are true. As I have written elsewhere, "Throughout history, people have performed actions and held beliefs that are considered religious. Although the term *religion* is relatively recent, it has been used to describe time-honored actions and beliefs that are aimed at connecting people with what could be identified as most true, real, sacred, or divine."⁸ *Ethics* can be roughly defined as a system of moral principles that guides or influences humans in determining what might be the right or best choice in any given context.

Turn your gaze toward nearly any Web site, watch almost any program on television, or read any one of a hundred print media offerings and immediately you are hit by an array of religious and ethical ideas and issues. Religious and ethical ideals are great provocateurs, as many a magazine cover attests. For example, on the February 2006 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Kanye West poses as Jesus; on the May 6, 1991, cover of *Time* magazine the words "Scientology: The Cult of Greed" are placed over an image of an exploding volcano (similar to the one on the cover of Scientology

founder L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*), and on *Time's* April 2, 2007, cover is the declaration, "Why We Should Teach the Bible in Public School (But Very, Very Carefully)." A quick scan of magazine covers in the past decade alone reveals an array of images and words targeting particular religious or ethical themes and ideas.

Whatever the media, such messages typically generate any number of reactions. The commitments, values, and ideas that people hold are powerful forces in human interaction and society. Some might say it has always been so. Perhaps the main difference between today and earlier eras is the growing awareness of the array of religious and ethical responses to a host of issues that previously did not exist. Also, past innovations affected relatively small numbers of people. Today, social, political, religious, and scientific changes pose formidable challenges worldwide for people holding time-worn religious and ethical commitments. For example, social change is ubiquitous with the global rise of social networking Web sites like Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace; the very meaning of *friend* is being redefined in numerous languages. Revolutionary change in political regimes is being spurred by new technologies allowing for the swift organization of grassroots movements—Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya are three recent examples. Change in religious arenas is occurring as people are forced to rethink their convictions when confronting truths emerging from scientific and technological developments, truths that could redefine what it means to be human. Change in science is accelerating as scientists continue to unlock new mysteries. In 2001, the human genome was mapped for the first time, and in 2010 the J. Craig Venter Institute created the first laboratory-made self-replicating

7. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Religious Groups' Official Positions on Stem Cell Research," <http://www.pewforum.org/Science-and-Bioethics/Religious-Groups-Official-Positions-on-Stem-Cell-Research.aspx>.

8. See *Introduction to Religious Studies*, ed. Paul O. Myhre (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2009), 3.

bacterial cell.⁹ Sweeping changes arise as sure as the sun with the dawn of each new day—changes that prompt questions about religious beliefs and ethical practices.

In this text, Maureen O’Connell’s chapter, “Ethics in the Twenty-First Century: Spheres of Relationship,” invites reflection on how social networking is redefining human relationships and how these new definitions intersect with older ones based on religious and ethical systems. The increasing complexity that characterizes relational dynamics will make moral decision making more challenging. O’Connell analyzes four spheres of relationship

and suggests some tools that readers can apply to the various areas of ethical reflection addressed in the remainder of the book. Mary Hess’s chapter, “Media Ethics and Religion,” discusses the four layers of communication in media ethics and prompts readers to consider the dynamic between contemporary media and people’s understanding of communication in the twenty-first century. For Hess, religion and ethics are woven into the fabric of human response to technological innovation. She draws on religious communities’ reaction to the Harry Potter series and an analogy with food to explore responses to technology.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What do you see as the key issues for religious and ethical reflection in the twenty-first century?
- When you reflect on your religious commitments or ethical values, do you think you are well equipped to face the issues of the twenty-first century? Why or why not?
- What most concerns you about the twenty-first century, and how might your values address this concern?

Values and Ethical Commitments

Sometimes personal value commitments will be pushed to the breaking point by the changes now emerging in the world. For example, assuming you value freedom, how would you define it? If it is the freedom to do as you please and go where you will without someone else knowing about it, those days have passed into history. Surveillance systems are commonplace in America. Cell phones and computer clicks are tracked. Even the television programs you select for viewing are monitored. Your freedom to search the Internet

or text someone is mitigated by the capacity of someone else to invade your privacy to track your actions. Your freedom to tweet is hampered by the capacity of someone to monitor your movements. If this isn’t an issue for you, then how about the value of freedom of speech? Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is an advocate for freedom on the Internet. Yet recently she has joined those who would like to restrict freedom in this domain so as to stop groups like WikiLeaks from divulging national secrets.

James Caccamo’s chapter, “You Are What You Tweet: Religious Ethics in the Age of Gadgets,” takes readers on a reflective journey about

9. J. Venter Institute, “First Self-Replicating Synthetic Bacterial Cell,” May 20, 2010, <http://www.jcvi.org/cms/press/press-releases/full-text/article/first-self-replicating-synthetic-bacterial-cell-constructed-by-j-craig-venter-institute-researcher/>.

their use of new and “indispensable” technologies. Why are certain technologies seen as necessities for living in the twenty-first century? What might a religious tradition have to say about one’s interaction with information technologies, and what might Christian ethics say about faith and engagement with these technologies? Reflection about technology and our interactions with it invite reflection on the depth and breadth of our core convictions and values.

Personal values are expressions of our ethical systems and interlinked with our religious commitments. How we respond to any technological change will affect not only us but also those with whom we interact. Stem cell research, genetic engineering, cloning technologies, biomedical and biomechanical implants for humans and animals, environmental pollution, soil degradation, human overpopulation, feedlots for cattle and hogs, complex weapons development such as nuclear, biological, chemical, and computer-mind interface technologies,¹⁰ and so on are but a few of the changes sprouting in the technological soil of our collective experience. Although there are no easy answers to the complex religious and ethical questions people now face, we cannot escape the future that is unfolding before us.

Turning toward religious and ethical values and health care, Aana Marie Vigen’s chapter, “Living and Dying: Ethical Challenges in Health Care and Bioethics,” examines our responses to the changing dynamics of the health care industry. What had once been regarded as a right in the United States—equal access to quality health care—has swiftly turned into an argument for affordable health care for some and

less or no health care for others. But what is meant by “health” care and what might be ethical in relation to specific choices about who has access to it? For example, what is appropriate for individual choices concerning health care, and what might be regarded as “just” when it comes to offering health care—doctor-assisted suicide, abortion, and so on?

For Jonathan Metzl and Anna Kirkland, “‘Health’ is a term replete with value judgments, hierarchies, and blind assumptions that speak as much about power and privilege as they do about well-being.”¹¹ Metzl and Kirkland contend that statements about health can mask values and assumptions about what we might individually regard as good or bad. For Metzl, “appealing to health allows for a set of moral assumptions that are allowed to fly stealthily under the radar . . . and the definition of our own health depends in part on our value judgments about others. We see them—the smokers, the overeaters, the activists . . . and realize our own health in the process.”¹² What we say about what others do often says volumes about our ethical and religious biases. Notions and definitions of “health” can also be joined with racial, cultural, and economic biases. Health care needs can be “based on race and disability,” “created and marketed,” and interwoven with systems of power and privilege.¹³ In the case of marketing, advertising companies, health care companies, and so on know the power of the human drive for “health” and well-being and capitalize on it. For example, the idea of “health” can be used by doctors to encourage liposuction and cosmetic surgery to help a person look and feel better. The

10. Computer-mind interface technologies, also called brain-computer interface, were introduced in the 1970s and are now beginning to appear in many contexts. The advent of supercomputers has enabled computers to make direct links between neural pathways and kinesthetic activity. One such example is the EEG cap created by Intendix; please see <http://www.intendix.com/>.

11. Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland, eds., *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 1–2.

12. *Ibid.*, 2.

13. *Ibid.*, 196.

question should be asked, “Who am I to look like to feel better?”

Examining “Religion, Ethics, and AIDS,” Kim Vrudny’s chapter provides an overview of HIV/AIDS and delineates issues associated with it, including its disproportionate effect on people who are socially disadvantaged. The chapter also explores religious foundations for responding to the pandemic.

Another arena posing new questions for time-worn religious and ethical values systems is that of national security. The United States has spent most of the first decade of the twenty-first century engaged in war with foreign nations and terrorist groups. Many of these wars resulted from religiously motivated actions taken by small groups that believed their actions to be ethically sound. The United States’ response to threats real and imagined has marked much of the first decade of the twenty-first century and promises to mark much of the second decade as well.

Shelly Rambo’s chapter, “War in the Twenty-First Century,” and Ellen Marshall’s chapter, “War, Revolution, and Peace,” invite readers to reflect on their own perspectives about violence, war, and peace. In what situations—if any—is violence or war justified? Religious and moral concerns are threaded through any discussion of war and peacemaking. No single answer will suffice since answers vary widely depending on one’s religion, ethics, and opinions on war and peace.

Religious and ethical ideas are as plentiful as the grains of sand in a beach. How can people find a way forward that honors this multiplicity of competing viewpoints? With the stakes so high, the time for a more substantive conversation is now.

The response of many US citizens to then-US Senator Barack Obama’s candidacy for

president in 2008 underscores the need for substantive conversation now. His candidacy placed religious and ethical values center stage before a nation with a long and checkered history of religious bias and racism. Many US citizens responded with religious and racially charged questions about Obama. Some questioned his Christianity, claiming that he is Muslim. Despite its constitutional separation of church and state, some view the United States as Christian and questioned whether a Muslim could govern the country. Others questioned Obama’s US birth and therefore his right to run for president. The racial aspect of such questions became even more transparent in nontelevised comments and placards found at Tea Party gatherings.¹⁴

These comments and placards did not go unnoticed. The NAACP passed a resolution in 2010 that called on the Tea Party to repudiate the movement’s “racist elements.”¹⁵ No doubt such comments rose from historical systems of racism and privilege in America, as well as from fear. People that I met on the campaign trail in Indiana voiced opposition to Senator Obama because he is African American. They regarded African Americans as unsuitable for president because of their racialized identities. The prejudice that had been voiced publically against the desegregation of US schools in the 1950s and the civil rights movement of the 1960s found new life among those afraid of what an African American president might mean for America.

Even the Christian church to which Senator Obama had belonged in Chicago—Trinity United Church of Christ—and its minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., were subjected to national public scrutiny. Acrid criticism was leveled against Reverend Wright for a sermon in which he blasted America’s history as one that was in many

14. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/20/tea-party-protests-nier-f_n_507116.html and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p37MmbLgMH4>.

15. See <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/07/13/tea-party-preempts-racist-resolution-condemns-bigoted-naacp/>.

ways counter to the law and gospel of God and thereby riddled with need for repentance. One wonders if a similar outcry would have ensued had the preacher been white, Asian, or Hispanic? In the same sermon, Reverend Wright offered hope that the government could change to better care for the well-being of the people it represents.

Many regarded Wright's declamations as unacceptable. Perhaps he had touched with too much force a sore nerve in the US experience. Whatever the reason for the national outcry, it was sure and swift. Many voiced a core value that you must not call down the wrath of God on one's home country. On the other hand, many deemed it acceptable to do so toward another country considered irreligious or worse, anti-Christian or anti-American.

In another address, to the National Press Club, Reverend Wright clarified his understanding of the gospel he preached by stating,

I call our faith tradition . . . “the prophetic tradition of the black church,” because I take its origins back past Jim Cone, past the sermons and songs of Africans in bondage in the transatlantic slave trade. I take it back past the problem of Western ideology and notions of white supremacy. I take and trace the theology of the black church back to the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and to its last prophet, in my tradition, the one we call Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁶

Even though Reverend Wright's claims were consistent with a particular stream of Christian experience and witness in the United States, he was regarded by many as socially misguided, misaligned with the Gospel, and just plain “un-Christian” and “un-American.” A curious set of claims against someone who had committed his life to serving Jesus Christ and the gospel of

social justice and grace. As a result of the firestorm of negative publicity and heated debate, then-Senator Obama distanced himself from his pastor and the church in which he and his family had worshiped for many years.

The reaction of some US citizens to Obama's candidacy provides an example of how ethical and religious commitments coalesce and diverge from one another. Readers may respond to the preceding comments with a variety of emotions and visceral responses. Some may decide at this point that they cannot read another page or any of the other chapters in this book because doing so will constitute a willingness to have their cherished convictions and values assaulted by counter viewpoints. Fine. But the academic study of religion and ethics is not really about reinforcing cherished positions or strengthening faith, political, or social convictions. It is about taking them apart to see what they are and why people might hold the positions they do. It is about discerning the weft and weave of religious commitments as they intersect with the ethical issues of one's time. It is about taking seriously the convictions that one holds and having the courage to lay them out in the sun to see what they are and from where they have come. It is about recognizing something of the vast array of ideas and religious viewpoints that intersect the range of personal ethical positions that people hold.

For some, the notion that anyone might disparage the United States and call it to task for injustices it has perpetrated is beyond the realm of acceptability. Even though the immigrant founders of this country were engaged in genocidal practices against Native Americans and actively involved in the enslavement of people from North America and Africa, comments against the founders and their former practices are seen by some as anti-American. Many people embrace the notion—perhaps rooted in manifest

16. See Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr.'s, speech to the National Press Club in the *Chicago Tribune*, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/politics/chi-wrighttranscript-04282008,0,3113697.story>.

destiny and popular civil religious imagination—that the United States represents the best for the world and that the country’s core ideals are above criticism. The United States is a city on a hill. It is a place for the tired, poor, and those striving to be free—unless of course you are an illegal immigrant or the offspring of an illegal immigrant, then you are excluded. A country’s ideals have implications for ethical and religious imaginations that will forge responses to the challenges ahead. Ideals are intimately connected to the histories of people and as such make sorting through choices only more complicated.

Hjamil Martínez-Vázquez’s chapter, “Religion and Politics,” invites readers to reflect on the

multidimensional intersections between religion, ethics, and politics. How are political landscapes shifting due to changes in religious beliefs and practices? The chapter asks readers to carefully examine their religious, moral, and political commitments. Ideas about religious nationalism, public religion in political arenas, and other topics are also explored.

The study of ethics and religion has increased dramatically in the past decade. Many people find themselves awash in uncertainty when it comes to making tough ethical choices or being able to accurately identify their own or anyone’s religious commitments and their influence on personal or corporate ethical decision making.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- How does the blurring of diverse religious and ethical boundaries affect you?
- How might religious convictions be helpful or hurtful for ethical decision making in the twenty-first century?
- Should one ethical or religious belief system dominate in the United States? Why or why not?

Change Is Inevitable

Christian ethics in the twenty-first century is buffeted by waves of change from all directions. What had once been a field that could entertain a degree of smug certitude about living in a theologically connected and grounded modernist or rationalist¹⁷ appraisal of life has given way to pluralistic, postmodern¹⁸ perceptions that find certainty anything but sure. Innovation and

technological development have tipped the scales toward uncertainty about what might be considered “right.” According to Brian Brock in *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, “It is safe to say that the biblical authors never dreamed of technologies like modern genetics, the Internet, or nuclear energy, and therefore that Scripture does not directly address the ethical questions they might raise.”¹⁹ The technological advances that have swept the last half of the twentieth century

17. *Modernism* views truth as knowable if you have the right information or use the power of human reason properly. *Rationalism* views reason alone as the source of knowledge.

18. *Postmodernism* views truth as ultimately not knowable because it is a human construct that can change.

19. Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 2.

are increasing exponentially in the twenty-first century. Some argue that technology may outpace human capacity to determine or cope with what is ethical. Others claim that technological advances—biological, environmental, scientific, and so on—are so rapid that the average human can only grasp a small portion of the overall change arising from each advance.

Genetic engineering, for example, introduces a host of ethical issues. The value of an increase in food production might be negated by the genetic engineering that contributed to the higher yields. How does one discern if genetically engineering corn or cattle—or any food—is ethically good or consistent with a particular religious position? What are the issues that people in the twenty-first century should be concerned about? How does a religious or ethical viewpoint shift regarding a specific technological innovation? How does involvement or employment with a company engaged in genetic engineering impact ethical decision making?

What other technological developments might be dangerous to global life, even though they are currently viewed as beneficial? For example, in the 1980s and early 1990s, a plethora of advertisements touted the value of antibacterial soaps. Now, at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, doctors and scientists have found that the widespread use of antibacterial soaps and medications allows disease-resistant bacteria to form. In some cases, these strains prove nearly impossible to fight with medication. According to a September 17, 2010, issue of *USA Today*, “Bacteria that are able to survive every modern antibiotic are cropping up in many U.S. hospitals and are spreading outside the USA. . . . The bacteria are equipped with a gene that enables them to produce an enzyme that disables antibiotics.”²⁰ What had been

championed by medical and agribusiness professionals as something of a panacea for human and animal ailments has been overpowered by bacterial evolution. In short, nature often finds a way to overpower or resist human technological advances. Further complicating any discussion of the relationship between humans and nature, in some religious traditions—Native American, for example—humans are not placed at the apex of all life. Instead, they are regarded as organically and spiritually connected to all life and as such exist neither at the top nor the bottom of the matrix of life. Humans are one vital part among many. Everything has its place in the order of things.

The cultural, political, economic, and natural threads of the contemporary world are increasingly interwoven, and the fabric of relationships between people, animals, plants, and global concerns are becoming so complex that they are nearly impossible to separate. A choice made about one thing may impact ten others that are seemingly unrelated. People are faced with enormous challenges as the global human population escalates, the diversity of plant and animal species declines or disappears altogether, and technological advances outpace human capacity to keep up. For some, this may beg the question, “Will the will of people to change be enough to somehow redesign the fabric and meet the challenges with religious and ethical responses before it is too late or will the mounting changes be impossible to overcome?” Technology and technological advances and retreats provide people with possibilities and hopes for the future. At the same time, they foster and favor those religious and ethical imaginations that support rather than undermine their existence. It is as if technological advances are fostering a new cognitive framework in which people will uncritically embrace an interconnective ability to determine the direction

20. Steve Sternberg, “Drug Resistant ‘Superbugs’ Hit 35 States, Spread Worldwide,” *USA Today*, September 17, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/health/medical/2010-09-17-1Asuperbug17_ST_N.htm.

toward which humankind and global life will either progress or disappear altogether. In other words, technological advances may be changing how people learn and construct meaning. If so, the ability to determine if a particular advance is ethically sound becomes even more complicated. For example, Intel is working on a project that will allow computers to interact directly with human minds. Through detailed maps of the human neural activity generated through EEG, MRI, and magnetoencephalography, the technology will allow the user to interface with a computer simply by thinking words. It sounds like science fiction, but it isn't.²¹ For some this could mean liberation. Yet what does such direct interaction mean for ethical decision making?

That said, there are people scattered around the globe who are deeply concerned by the threats technological advances pose in many realms including genetics and the environment. This is evidenced by the development of organizations like Seed Savers, whose mission is to “save and share heirloom seeds.”²² It is also shown by those who financed the development of Norway’s “Noah’s Ark of seed samples” that is a repository for more than “100 million seeds representing every major food crop on Earth. . . . It contains seed samples from 268,000 plants.”²³ The vault was built and financed by Norway and is located in the arctic permafrost near Svalbard. What difference might this make for ethical decision making?

Julie Rubio’s chapter, “Food Ethics: Consuming with Compassion,” involves readers with questions of how consumer culture is part of the

US experience. Rubio examines where food is grown, methods of food production, and ethical implications of food choices. She addresses issues such as fair trade, animal welfare, and concern for the earth, and she invites reflection on the religious aspects of food choices. Whitney Bauman’s chapter, “Developing a Planetary Ethic: Religion and Ethics and the Environment,” examines the contested terrain of environmental ethics and invites reflection on personal religious and ethical convictions in relation to present and emerging global environmental issues. For some the task of understanding something of the complexity of ethical issues around food consumption and global environments will seem too immense and complex to engage adequately. But what alternative does one have?

Where does one begin to unravel the snarled ball of religious and ethical questions? The threads are so many, the challenge in unraveling them may seem insurmountable. The truth is we can never completely discern the dimensions of contemporary religious and ethical issues.

All is not lost, however. We can know something and can choose to be more intentional about the decisions we make in an effort to lessen the impact of our choices on ourselves, others, and plant and animal life. We can become aware of our unexamined assumptions about moral decision making and the religious biases impacting our decisions. We can assess technologies as we individually and collectively make ethical and religious choices, but we cannot ever really see the consequences of how widespread technological innovations impact our religious and ethical imaginations.²⁴ Citing

21. For additional details about this emerging technology, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/7957664/Computers-that-read-minds-are-being-developed-by-Intel.html> and <http://www.fastcompany.com/1665926/will-we-be-able-to-control-future-computers-with-our-thoughts>.

22. Seed Savers Exchange, <http://www.seedsavers.org/>.

23. Elizabeth Weise, “Noah’s Ark of Seeds Opens in Norway,” *USA Today*, February 26, 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/environment/2008-02-26-seeds_N.htm.

24. For additional information about assessing technology through ethical frameworks, see Ernest Braun, *Technology in Context: Technology Assessment for Managers* (London: Routledge, 1998).

the work of Willem Vanderburg, Lawrence E. Schmidt paints a grim picture for human capacity to engage the changes before us. “The problem is not that we have ‘an ingenuity gap,’” he writes, “but that we lack any ethical foundations upon which to evaluate technological development.”²⁵

Global climate change is a fact. Something is causing shifts in global weather patterns, sea levels, and glacial ice levels. Is it the sun as some might aver, or is it a direct result of the highest levels of carbon dioxide ever recorded in the planet’s atmosphere? Is the environment adversely affected by industrial agriculture, urban sprawl, and the underuse of renewable resources? Is there a sustainable path to the future, or will global population growth outstrip human capacity to live in harmony with the environment? Will scientific and technological advances overwhelm the human capacity to adjust?

Are we so inextricably connected to the changes now occurring that we cannot extricate ourselves from them? Does our use of computers, toasters, electric lights, alarm clocks, and so on convict us of our complicity with acid rain production from coal-burning power plants and nuclear waste? Does our use of medications to relieve our aches and pains, our depression, and so on implicate us in the genetic changes in aquatic life exposed to estrogen, progesterone, and other hormones? Are we willing or able to change our water-use habits, shift our recreational pursuits, and our work and travel plans in order to be more consistent with the values we hold? Are we so much a part of the problem facing the world that we cannot avoid contributing to it?

According to the US Census Bureau, the population of the United States in 2012 was nearly 314 million people and the global population was more than 7 billion people.²⁶ *EarthTrends*, an online database, provides information and statistics on current trends concerning ecosystems, climate, population, economics and business, and agriculture throughout the world. The statistics are staggering and beg the question, how many people can the earth sustain? The disproportionate wealth of some countries, such as the United States, cannot be sustained without people in other countries paying a price. There is a limited amount of resources to support the more than seven billion people currently living on the planet. Disproportionate wealth can lead to disproportionate consumption, creating scarcity for others.²⁷ The gap between the wealthy and poor is widening, and the number of poor people is rising, even in the United States. What had once been seen as hope for a rising middle class has succumbed to a grinding reality that sustaining a modicum of wealth is not easy in climates of scarcity. The natural environment pays a heavy price for the well-being of a few. How people understand the environment and their relationship to it is directly related to their own ethical foundations and religious worldviews.

Lorenzo Magnani, in his book *Morality in a Technological World*, argues,

Our technology has, for example, turned nature into an object of human responsibility, and if we are to restore and ensure

25. Lawrence E. Schmidt and Scott Marratto, *The End of Ethics in a Technological Society* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 9.

26. US Census Bureau, “U.S. and World Population Clocks,” <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>.

27. For more details about wealth disparities, see World Wealth Report 2012, http://www.capgemini.com/m/en/doc/WWR_INFOGRAPHIC_FINAL.pdf. For graphic depictions of global food disparities, see Average Weekly Food Consumption, <http://www.halbergphotographers.com/blog/weddings/average-weekly-food-consumption-of-families-around-the-world>; the Sierra Club, http://www.sierraclub.org/sustainable_consumption/food_factsheet.asp; and Anup Shah’s “Consumption and Consumerism,” <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/235/consumption-and-consumerism>.

her health, we must employ clever new approaches and rich, updated knowledge. The scope and impact of our current technological abilities have handed human beings the responsibility for, say, ‘nature’ and ‘the future,’ which were previously left to God or to fate.²⁸

Have we come that far or fallen that far back as human beings? Does the twenty-first-century world require of us a level of planetary responsibility and oversight never before known? Can human beings grasp the implications of their decisions, and will those decisions be ethical or congruent with religious convictions? What if old patterns for ethical decision making are eroding and religious positions on any given topic are outdated? Does that make them obsolete?

Herman Daly and John B. Cobb Jr., have reflected on contemporary environmental issues from a theological standpoint. In their view,

Rationality, apart from belief in God, may indeed dictate indifference to the yet unborn. Since they do not now exist, they have no wants to be respected. But rationality that includes a rational belief in God has quite different consequences. God is everlasting, and future lives are as important to God as present ones. To serve God cannot call for the sacrifice of future lives for the sake of satisfying the extravagant appetites of the present.²⁹

Environmental concerns are only a portion of the issues casting their long shadows over the

twenty-first century. Each issue has its own cluster of sub-issues that are interconnected with other sub-issues clustered under other topics. For example, consumerism was once touted as a hallmark of capitalism and regarded as an ethical good by many. Today, the idea of consumerism is welcomed and reviled at the same time. As David Schwartz notes, “many of the products we buy as consumers regularly come to us with histories steeped in highly unethical practices, such as exploitation, avoidable suffering, and environmental damage.”³⁰ Schwartz poses two questions for readers: “Exactly what sorts of unethical practices are implicated by today’s consumer products? And does moral culpability for these practices fall solely on the companies that perform them, or does it also fall upon consumers who purchase the products made with such practices?”³¹ The fact that we are consumers makes us culpable. The reality that we are consumers makes us able to make choices about what we consume. These choices have immense implications for ethical and religious decision making. They impact nearly every arena of life and can exact great tolls on people, animals, plants, and delicate ecosystems the world over.

The problem of wealth is that few have it. The problem of poverty is that most experience some aspect of it. Many reading this book as part of a college or university course have the luxury of reading instead of working, reading when they want to, instead of only when they can, and reading just for the sake of reading. A large number of people around the world do not have the educational preparation for higher education or the economic capacity to attain it. Even with

28. Lorenzo Magnani, *Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiv–xv.

29. Herman Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., in Wolfgang Sachs, *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 29.

30. David T. Schwartz, *Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), vii.

31. *Ibid.*

the advance of the Internet, people are restrained from gaining access to that which might provide a better life for them and their families. They are, in short, servants or slaves to an oppressive economic system that is interlinked with a larger multinational, multikorporational, multitiered system that favors maximization of profit for a few and minimal compensation for the many. It is a system larger than any one country, corporation, or plan. It is as if it has a life of its own that relies on the hard work of many to support the lifestyles of a few. This may seem to be a bit oversimplified with regard to the impact of capitalism and the ethics of capitalism. Do you think an argument can be made in favor of the positive impact of capitalism on global distribution of wealth and elements of positive ethical or moral behavior in connection with it? If so, what might that be? Jorge Aquino's chapter, "Poverty and Prosperity after the Crisis of 2008: Insights from Liberation Theology on Zero-Sum Capitalism at the Twilight of American Exceptionalism," examines some of this complex matrix of ethical decision making in detail. How wealth is distributed can make a big difference on how ethical decisions are made.

For example, Nike Corporation, Kathie Lee Gifford's clothing line company, cocoa companies, and other multinational companies that rely on low-paid workers are partially responsible for the injustices occurring around the globe. According to writer Jon Robbins,

hundreds of thousands of children in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Togo are being purchased from their destitute parents and shipped to the Ivory Coast, where they are sold as slaves to cocoa farms. These children, ranging in age from 12 to 14 years (and sometimes younger),

are forced to do hard manual labor 80 to 100 hours per week. They are paid nothing, barely fed and beaten regularly. They are viciously beaten if they try to escape. Most will never see their families again.³²

We may get choked up at the thought of young children forced into harsh labor as we sip on our mocha cappuccino or cup of hot cocoa. How could anyone be so cruel? Yet as we lace up our shoes, don our shirt, eat our chocolate bar, or do any of a hundred daily tasks, we may become troubled: satisfying our wants may be supporting the suffering of millions of people. The diamonds and gold we seek, the foods we eat, the clothing we wear, the cars we drive, the computers we use, the books we read, and so on all may be linked to practices we abhor and would never engage in ourselves. Our choices have consequences for more than our life or the lives of those we know. Our choices may fund drug lords in Mexico, radical religious groups bent on violence, or any number of different people or groups whose lifestyles, ethics, and religious commitments may be dramatically different than ours. Our choices have power and are also swept into vortices of power beyond our immediate control. Is there no way out of this mire? David Schwartz claims, "in buying a product consumers become intentional participants in—and beneficiaries of—the methods used to produce it. If that practice is child slavery, then my purchase morally implicates me in the deeply immoral practice of enslaving children."³³

Our involvement as consumers of products—though at a distance—may be precisely what implicates us in the web of problems besetting the world in the twenty-first century. We cannot escape being consumers. Yet we are not without

32. Jon Robbins, "The Good and Bad and the Savory: Is There Slavery in Your Chocolate?" *Earth Island Journal* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 30–32, cited in David T. Schwartz, *Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 22–23.

33. Schwartz, *Consuming Choices*, 85.

capacity to make critically informed choices. This capacity extends to all facets of life. The environment and the living beings that inhabit the planet are affected by the choices we as individuals, communities, and societies make. Is there any way to lessen our contribution to widespread suffering? Are there tangible steps that people can take that will lighten the burden of others and lift the load of complicit guilt from our backs? Can we slow or stop human trafficking, or are we too complacent or complicit to make any real difference? Are there specific ways that people can be attentive to the moral implications of what is purchased and why?

Rays of hope poking through the dark clouds of despair. Organizations like the Sustainable Forest Initiative work to “insure that consumer wood products are built from sources that are ecologically sustainable and do not cause long-term harm.”³⁴

Magnani, in his book *Morality in a Technological World*, spins a positive view of an emerging world in which a new knowledge will take hold that is enabled by global advances. This knowledge will give birth to new ethical frameworks allowing people to live in the world ethically and actively. He claims,

The new knowledge I passionately endorse will supply us with the moral poise required to handle controversial technology now and in the future. With such knowledge, we will be better prepared to accept rather than fear the new types of hybrid people that will result from technology . . . I contend that as our ethical knowledge evolves and strengthens, so too will our free will, consciousness, and intentionality, some of the central components of human dignity.³⁵

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- How are environmental changes causing you to reflect on your own religious and ethical commitments and choices?
- How are technological advances impacting how you perceive religion and ethics?
- Which changes in the twenty-first century would you embrace and which would you oppose?

Twenty-First-Century Religion and Ethics

The topics covered in this book represent a sampling of religious and ethical perspectives for the twenty-first century. They focus on the environment, politics, social ethics, worker

justice, peacemaking and violence, war and religion, economic stratification and its implications for prosperity and poverty, technology, religion and the media, peacemaking and violence, food production and consumption, health care, and AIDS. This book is not about laying out theories of ethics to see how practices might

34. Ibid., 25.

35. Magnani, *Morality*, 245–46.

align with them. Nor is it about providing readers with philosophical theories about ethics or religious teachings as solely authoritative over human actions. Instead, it concerns what people actually regard as that which is most worth believing, most worth valuing, and most worth doing. This book considers many of the ways people practice religion and ethics today. Each location—geographic, cultural, and so on—has specific socially agreed-on rules, legal codes, ethical standards, and patterns by which people regulate their own lives and encourage others to do likewise.³⁶

This book is designed to take readers on an expedition. The expedition will not see everything there is to see, but readers will see something. The journey will provide opportunities to explore common terrains and less common places where issues and ideas may be hidden or obscured by dominant viewpoints. The authors selected for this book represent a cross-section of scholars who have been wrestling with religious and ethical responses to pressing issues. It is my hope that their writing will prod, provoke, encourage, enlighten, and inspire you to extend your thought beyond the confines of this book. It is my hope that their thoughtful seeds might sprout in you new ideas about how people might become more vitally active in addressing the issues we all face in this century.

The religious and ethical perspectives explored in this book represent those that might be found around the globe in greater or lesser numbers. The question of what is religion or how one might study it is handled more completely in my prior book, *Introduction to Religion Studies*, and will not be handled here in detail. Each author assumes that you as reader have already given some thought to the question of what constitutes a religion and how each religion spins out an

array of ethical systems that adhere somehow to the core. Some would argue that the United States even has something that could be called popular religion—a diffuse spiritual movement that finds expression in politics, social events, and sporting arenas.

Religion and religious practice are common components of human experience. Most Americans would claim some kind of religious affiliation or at the least affirm having a set of beliefs or values that guide their life and thoughts. Clearly, the practice of religion is widespread and multifaceted. Religion and its practice may well be part and parcel of what it means to be human.

Religion can involve worship of a deity or deities, a quest for enlightenment, a desire for some type of spiritual experience, a hope for balance, or something else. It can be focused on what comes after this life—if anything, what is most important to know for living, what should be avoided for life to flourish, and what the order of the world and all that is might be. Religions are often oriented around specific deities and their involvement with human life. For example, Christians believe in a supreme being that is understood as a triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hindus believe in not only a supreme being—Brahman—but also the more than 300 million manifestations of this Brahman—Krishna, Devi, Lakshmi, Hanuman, Ganesh, and so on. The Naabeehó Bináhásdzo (Navajo nation) balances connection with Yei spirits and living in harmony with all that is through a life *hozho*.

Given the disparity of religions and religious practices it is surprising that people get along as well as they do. That said, each religion and each set of religious practices carry with it a host of ideas about how people ought to act. Ethical imaginations are fueled by religious ideas.

36. This approach is not unlike that of Robert Hinde in his book *Bending the Rules: Morality in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). In it, Hinde declares, “I argue that our moral rules come from our human nature in interaction over time with our social environment, and are stored by individuals so as to become virtually part of their natures” (5).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Should countries unite or separate church and state? Why or why not?
- Should countries lift a particular church or religious perspective over the state, or something else? Why or why not?
- Should politicians be able to dictate ethical policies for the masses of people living in a particular area or country? Why or why not?
- Should one pattern or ethical agenda rule over all others? Why or why not?

Conclusion

Each theory or pattern of ethics carries with it a whole set of choices by which pressing issues might be addressed. The truth is they don't agree with one another about which choices to make in addressing the issues. Hence, each individual is faced with something of a conundrum in determining how best to act in any given circumstance. People like their thermostat set at what they regard as a comfortable indoor setting. The problem is that they don't agree on what is comfortable. Preferences might range anywhere from 60 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit in both summer and winter. How are decisions about personal thermostat settings relevant for religious and ethical decision making? Does it really matter?

Ethical value systems relate directly to particular ideas that people hold to be true, valid, and worth having about any given topic. Whether an idea is correct is not really the question. It is more a question of how the idea relates to the value systems by which people orient their lives. Do our ideas really matter? How does what we think about translate into what we do and say? Would we be willing to die for our ideas and values or can they be easily discarded as so much trash?

Elie Wiesel, in the preface to a collection of essays entitled *An Ethical Compass: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, asks,

What makes us moral? Hereditary beliefs? Unusual circumstances? Epiphanies? Moments of great fear or pain? On the other hand, what makes someone immoral? Did the SS killers of Jewish children feel guilty at all? But what of more recent wars? Can *they* be justified? How do we weigh the destruction of war against the noblest of all commandments—"not to stand idly by"? How many good men and women raised their voices forcefully enough to defend victims of racism and fanaticism in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur? What lessons are we teaching our young people? Have we taught them to stand against indifference? Have we taught them to develop an ethical compass within?³⁷

Shelly Rambo's chapter, "War in the Twenty-First Century," wrestles with complicated issues associated with religious convictions, ethical values, and the making of war in the twenty-first century. The United States has been involved with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for nearly the entire first decade of the century. Is this going to be the weft and weave of this century? What would it mean for entire generations to know nothing of peace? Religion and the practice of it will be pushed to redefine core convictions about ethical stances in relation

37. Elie Wiesel, preface, in *An Ethical Compass: Coming of Age in the 21st-Century: The Ethics Prize of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), xiii–xiv.

to war in this century. Technological changes and big business push an unrelenting sophistication of war making to maximize desired outcomes. By so doing however, war making has become more personally removed and thereby heightens challenges for ethical decision making.

The age in which we live is one of unrelenting change. Scientific and technological advances

are so rapid that our old answers for ethical decisions may no longer easily fit current and arising questions. Some claim our capacity to keep up with change is diminishing, slipping through our fingers like water. No sooner than we think we have a hold on an issue, it falls to the ground, leaving only a wet spot where once was certainty.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What does this introduction provoke in you about the study of religion and ethics in the twenty-first century?
- What does this introduction invite you to consider that you hadn't previously?
- What questions do you have after reading this introduction?
- In what ways does this introduction invite you to reflect on your own ethical or religious commitments?
- What are the most important questions you think people ought to ask today, and what makes them so important?

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Ethics in the Twenty-First Century: Spheres of Relationship

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Preface

Major changes in how people interact with each other in the twenty-first century will push ethical thinking and values from familiar twentieth-century paradigms toward new methods of ethical reflection and problem solving. Smart technology and social networking Web sites are reshaping and redefining not only how human beings relate to each other but also what it means to be a relational being. Meanwhile, an increasing awareness of humanity's negative impact on earth's biosphere has heightened our responsibility to other living things. As a result, the ground for ethical thinking and decision making is shifting from what was thought to be somewhat solid to that which is liminal, uncertain, and at times uncomfortable. Old solutions may not suit emerging problems and questions. Innovations in science, medicine, and technology are pushing human capacities to determine what is right and wrong, good and bad, or where on a continuum of ethical decision making a decision may lie. In this chapter, Maureen O'Connell invites readers to reflect on the dimensions of relationality in their own life as well as in the larger national and global spheres for ethical formation and decision making. This chapter invites you to consider what it is you value and why. It is intended as a place for reflection on the implications chosen values carry for the self, others, and the world.

Chapter Goals

- Provide an argument for relationships as a moral key to ethical reasoning and decision making in the twenty-first century
- Provide distinctions among various traditional religious and ethical frameworks and how they might be adapted to respond to twenty-first-century ethical problems
- Present different aspects of an ethics of relationality for moral choices

Introduction

The words *religion* and *morality* tend to get a bad rap today, especially among increasingly “spiritual but not religious” young adults. What comes to mind when *you* hear or think of those words? Rules and authority? Judgment and punishment? Rigid fundamentalism or slippery moral relativism? Too frequently in the contemporary cultural climate in the United States, when religious leaders draw hard and fast lines on a variety of moral issues from sex and marriage to reproductive rights and abortion, *religion* and *morality* are synonymous with the words *no* and *don’t*. But that does not have to be the case, especially considering that both religion and morality focus on human relationships and what we are called to do and become in the context of our relationships.

Religions arise from the relationships that have long shaped human experience: the relationship between life and death; between the material world and the transcendent realm; between the past and the future; between men and women, parents and children, authority figures and followers; between humanity and the rest of creation. As religions have evolved over the millennia, they have become increasingly concerned with the kinds of relationships that define the human experience: the unique relationship each person has with him- or herself (of which God is often a central component), the special relationship each person has with those closest to them such as family members or friends, the general relationships that bind each person to all others in our ever more global economy and culture, and our ecological relationship to all living things on the planet.¹ Religions attempt to offer road maps for navigating

the overlapping and sometimes-uncharted terrain of these spheres of relationships.

One way religions steer people through these various spheres of relationship is by offering what Catherine Albanese calls “codes” of behavior that remind religious adherents of their relationship to their God, their relationship to fellow members of their religious communities, and their responsibilities to others, including nonhuman creatures.² Religious codes have multiple sources: the sacred texts of the various religions such as the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Qur’an; the teachings of prophets and religious authorities such as Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, the Dalai Lama, or the Pope; the practices of believers throughout the centuries such as saints, martyrs, cloistered communities, and social activists; and the lived experiences of the religious community in the here and now. And while religious codes certainly contain proscriptions against certain kinds of behaviors, they also encourage believers to engage wholeheartedly in practices that remind them of their innate condition as relational beings. Muslims, for example, follow the codes of the Five Pillars, a set of daily and once-in-a-lifetime rituals that remind them of their relationship to Allah, to their neighbors, and to Muslims all over the world. On the Sabbath, Jews honor the codes of the covenant established between them and Yahweh upon their liberation from slavery in Egypt, codes that required devotion to God, just dealings with others, and care for the most vulnerable. Corporeal works of mercy—including feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and visiting the incarcerated—stem from a code that reminds Christians of just who their neighbors are and how they ought to love them. A code of mindfulness of the self cultivated through awareness of the breath

1. James Keenan discusses these dimensions of human relationality in *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 134–54.

2. Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 5th ed. (Independence, KY: Wadsworth Publishing, 2013).

and an emptying of all that distracts people from the present moment lies at the heart of Buddhist spiritual practices. In short, religious codes are the “how to” guides for navigating the many layers of human relationships.

Likewise, religious ethics—the discipline through which we evaluate dimensions of religious codes in light of the ever-changing circumstances in which they are practiced—attempts to direct the demands and expectations of our condition as relational beings.

As with religion, the core of ancient Greek philosophy concerns our innate condition as relational beings, creatures that need and want meaningful ties to other creatures. The Hellenistic philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, and their predecessors publicly debated the optimal strategies for creating a healthy polis or civil society, insightfully noting that vibrant relationships among people requires a healthy relationship among the parts of the individual person—their desires, will, and intellect. Indeed, the Hellenists’ humanist or secular ideas about love and friendship, virtue and duty, mercy and justice, provide an important common framework for religious ethics in today’s increasingly pluralistic society.

Attending to relationships as the basis for ethics not only leads to a positive approach to religion and morality but also makes religious ethics a particularly helpful resource for tackling the social injustices of the twenty-first century. Many of today’s social problems—such as cyberbullying, terrorism, species extinction, and racial profiling—stem from compromised relationships with self, others, and the earth. For example, compromising the unique relationship we each have to ourselves can result in anxiety, depression, substance abuse, abuse of our bodies, sexual promiscuity, or binging on the world’s resources. Broken relationships with other people drive us to fear them and their basic human needs and desires, fueling violence in families, vitriolic speech in civil society, and

armed conflict within and among nations. And increasingly, we are discovering what happens when we fail to take our relationship to the earth seriously: the depletion of natural resources, the contamination of food and water, the accelerated extinction of species, and natural disasters exacerbated by climate change.

In this chapter, we will explore the four spheres of human relationship—to self, to specific others, to others generally, and to the earth—by applying the following to each sphere:

- Asking a series of questions that helps to clarify “what is going on”
- Naming a few ethical dilemmas and identifying shared root causes
- Identifying some basic tools from religious ethics, in most instances from the Judeo-Christian tradition with which I am most familiar, that can guide the analysis of these dilemmas
- Suggesting practices that can bolster healthy relationships as well as one’s ability to respond to problems

Through this exploration, this chapter aims to underscore the complexity of the human being’s moral life, a complexity that arises because each person is made by and for relationships with other people. This chapter also prepares readers to identify the relational dimension of the ethical problems explored in subsequent chapters of this book.

Relationships as the Moral Key

When we make our innate relational condition (or the study of making choices the focal point of ethics), the following three things emerge in our thinking, each of which can be helpful in responding to the ethical dilemmas of the

twenty-first century: (1) we attend to the descriptive step of ethics before drawing conclusions, (2) we view human experience as a source of moral wisdom, and (3) we see more clearly the relevance of ethics for religious belief and practice.

In other words, first, we attend to the details, circumstances, or conditions in which we find ourselves, before jumping prematurely to what we ought to do or how we ought to respond: we devote time to the *descriptive* step of ethics. Twentieth-century Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr explained descriptive ethics in terms of what he claimed to be the most essential moral question: “What’s going on?” Only when we have the fullest sense possible about what’s going on in a particular situation can we move to the second step of moral discernment, known as *normative* ethics—discerning what we ought to do or how we ought to act in that situation. For example, we cannot evaluate a particular sexual act without a full understanding of its context—who is engaged in the act, when it occurs, under what circumstances, what are the intended outcomes, and so on.

This subtle shift toward attending to what is going on can have a profound impact on our choices. Often, we make normative judgments using one of two approaches: (1) *consequentialism*, which considers the end result of our actions and attempts to maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative ones—often captured in the maxim to act so as to create the greatest good for the greatest number of people; or (2) *deontology*, which considers what we ought to do in light of our basic duties or obligations, such as the obligation not to kill innocent people or the duty to not treat people as a means to someone else’s ends.

Paying attention to what is going on in human relationships, however, illuminates the limitations of consequentialist and deontological thinking. We can neither accurately calculate the end results of actions nor fully identify a person’s

moral duties without sufficiently discerning what is really going on in the person’s relationships—with self, with people they know, with strangers, and with the earth and its creatures. Therefore, ethics in the twenty-first century will require one to ask the right questions about what’s going on—questions that can bring the subterranean dimensions of one’s connection to others to the surface of moral consciousness so that one can make decisions in light of the web of relationships that characterize human existence. More and more this makes ethics an interdisciplinary endeavor: ethicists work with sociologists, psychologists, social workers, environmentalists, political scientists—and perhaps most important, people affected by social injustices—to map from as many perspectives as possible the relational fault lines underlying situations that require an ethical response.

Second, placing human relationships at the heart of ethical thinking prioritizes human experience as an invaluable—and often overlooked—source of moral wisdom for normative ethics. In religious frameworks of normative ethics, particularly the Catholic framework with which I am most familiar and which therefore shapes this chapter, ethicists often turn to sacred texts, insights of great philosophers such as Aristotle or Immanuel Kant and theologians such as Augustine or Karl Barth, and proclamations of those in positions of religious authority, for answers to complex ethical problems. Ethical dilemmas in the twenty-first century, however, demand that we also consider the wisdom of human experience latent in those texts, thinkers, and teachings so that we might more accurately apply them to totally new situations. For example, Saint Paul’s letters to the early Christian communities in and around first-century Palestine are obviously silent on the ethical implications of “sexting” but had quite a bit to say on what it feels like to channel desires in fruitful and just ways. Saint Augustine did not write a moral treatise on being the son of a

hovering mother in the fourth-century, and New York social activist Dorothy Day did not expound on being a single mother in the twentieth. Yet paying attention to the relational aspects of these iconic figures' identities—as son to Monica and mother to Tamara—illuminates new insights in their moral writings for emerging adults and their parents in the twenty-first century.

We then need to use the wisdom gained through critical reflection on human experience to evaluate the traditional and even authoritative teachings in our religious traditions. For example, married people living with HIV/AIDS contributed much to recent changes in the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on the use of contraception for HIV prevention. Similarly, Americans' experiences with knowing LGBTQ (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and queer) people in their families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and churches have contributed to changing attitudes about homosexuality, as well as changes in public and ecclesial policy regarding equality and respect for the LGBTQ community. And the experiences of all stripes of religious believers with the majesty of creation have sparked interfaith groups around the globe to demand religious leaders and fellow congregants to go green in their discipleship. Clearly, wisdom arising from the experience of relationship is a powerful ethical resource in the twenty-first century.

Third, the emphasis on relationality in religions underscores the need for ethics in religious belief and practice. Critical evaluation of human experiences is necessary to avoid moral relativism, which can encourage an irresponsible “any experience goes” mentality or a dismissive view toward any attempt to articulate universally applicable ethical principles. Both attitudes can make it difficult if not impossible for individuals and communities of faith to respond to what is going on in their neighborhoods, churches, nation, or world. In other words, we need tools to mine human experience for critical ethical

insights that lie beneath the surface. Finding such insights requires that moral decision makers orient themselves toward what is fundamentally “good” and not necessarily only toward what is considered socially “right.”

Plato referred to the good as a “transcendental” or an essential component of human existence that does not depend on the particularities of time, place, ethnicity, gender, age, or ability. Because what is “good” extends beyond any particular time and culture and speaks to a common denominator in human experience, the good does not change, though our ability to recognize it evolves and our commitment to it wavers. What is “right,” on the other hand, often depends on the social mores and customs of a particular culture, which in turn revolve around such factors as gender, ethnicity, and age. Because cultures are dynamic, what we understand to be “right” constantly changes.

Religious laws about slavery, for example, reveal the shifting sands of what is considered “right” by the “social body.” A growing awareness of the plight of some 27 million people trapped in slavery today shows that the “social body” still wrestles with questions of equality and human rights. Only appeals to the inherent “good” of upholding the equality and dignity of all persons will allow valid ethics in today's pluralistic and global society. Otherwise, what is “right” too frequently leads to conflicts or stalemates among the competing mores of religious and cultural traditions.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on the four spheres of human relationship—with self, with particular others, with general others, and with the earth—and will identify tools for ethical reflection in each sphere that will help us surface those dimensions of human relationships that orient us toward the good. You can then apply these tools to the various areas of ethical reflection in the remainder of this book—all of which consider situations that arise in one or more of the four spheres of relationship.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- In what ways might spheres of relationships be understood as a moral key to the twenty-first century?
- What issues are most pressing in US moral and ethical reasoning today?
- Do any of the current advances in science, medicine, or technology cause you moral concern? If so, which ones and why? If not, why not?
- What role(s) does your ethical experience play in your ethical decision making?
- If you have religious commitments, how do they influence your ethical decision making?
- What is the difference between seeking what is “good” and what is “right” in ethical reflection and decision making?

Ethical Dimensions of the Four Spheres of Human Relationships

Relationship with Self in the Technological “Age of i”

Perhaps no sphere of human relationship has changed more dramatically as a result of technological development in the last two decades than the relationship we have with ourselves. For some of us, the turn of the millennium brought with it the technological power to augment almost every facet of our lives with a few simple clicks on our “smart” devices. Perhaps more than ever before, the individual self now stands at the center of the individual’s universe. This universe, customized to personal preference with the help of smart “i” technologies, is orbited only by the things, people, and ideas the individual values—from music, news, and religious beliefs to political platforms, humanitarian campaigns, and faces in online social networks. Our circles of concern are both global and narrow, as we are updated with the extraordinary and the mundane at the same time. We are only just beginning to understand the implications of the “Age of i” for social forces such as economies or political movements

or revolutions let alone for individuals and personal relationships. At this point, the reviews are mixed at best.

Certainly, smart technology makes it possible to stay connected and informed, and to express our ideas and discover what others think. With it we can be more efficient, socially conscious, and discerning. We can find potential marriage partners or quick answers to puzzling questions, avoid getting lost in unfamiliar places or find items we’ve misplaced. We have access to satellite maps of the heavens or views of neighborhoods on the other side of the globe. We can accept invitations to parties or revolutions. We can go wireless, paperless, handless, and ticketless.

And yet the “Age of i” has its downsides. Smart technology users, particularly emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25, speak of the anxiety that comes with being constantly connected and available to respond to texts, phone calls, and tweets and to keep up with high-speed virtual relationships. Technology is one of the factors researchers attribute to the spike in the last ten years in the number of college students reporting mental health issues such as depression. Technology is also exhausting younger Americans, negatively affecting sleep patterns.

Technology also makes it difficult to maintain boundaries that give us a sense of security—between private and public information, space, time, and commitments—or to do much more than react to everything flooding our inboxes, virtual message boards, and missed call logs. Sherry Turkle, a professor of technology and society at MIT, notes that technology has made us so reactionary in our thinking and emotions, that we increasingly turn to it to manage thoughts and feelings—we want to experience an emotion and so we text someone in order to spark that feeling.³ Multitasking is at least as likely to undermine effectiveness as it is to boost it. Consider, for example, that “texting while driving” has become the new “drinking while driving” for state legislatures and teenage safety advocates.

Standing at the center of a customized universe does not come without responsibility. These examples invite us to think critically about the relationship each of us has with ourself—the “I” behind all those “i” gadgets that increasingly shape our interactions with and experiences of the world. Being responsible moral agents begins with distinguishing the socially constructed “right” from the internally discerned “good” in order to identify our values and align our moral decisions with them. To make that distinction, we need the moral tenacity of an authentic identity that emerges from within rather than one constructed by push technologies.

Dilemmas in the Sphere of Self

If you are one of the 800 million people on the planet with a Facebook account, what might people learn about you from your Wall and status updates? Do the things and people you “like”

or the comments you make offer an accurate picture of you? Is the “face” you present to your social network the same face you wear in your everyday relationships? Do *you* recognize your Facebook “you”?

Identity formation is a critical ethical issue in our twenty-first-century “Age of i” because social networking platforms like Facebook make it easy to conflate the terms *profile* and *identity*, and to yield to the often inauthentic external expectations of the former at the expense of the more authentic internal desires of the latter. Facebook users construct profiles with images, status updates, upward thumbs, links, and running commentaries for the purpose of public consumption in a consumer-driven virtual environment. While Facebook allows profiles to capture the changes in one’s sense of self on a daily and sometimes hourly basis, these profiles remain undeniably one-dimensional snapshots or projections of the self people want others to see and “like.” Since they are intended for public consumption, we often create them more for others than for ourselves. As a result, the preferences we choose to customize our profile often reflect the social expectations of others in our networks and what these people determine to be “right.” This raises the emotional stakes on the virtual feedback we give each other in social networks, and too often it is precisely the disembodied and distanced nature of social networks that permits, if not encourages, feedback we might not otherwise offer in face-to-face encounters. Virtually unthinkable just a decade ago, social networks and smartphones provide virtual spaces⁴ and tools for *cyberbullying*—posting hurtful photos and comments, spreading rumors, or intentionally harming others

3. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 151–70.

4. Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, “Cyberbullying: Identification, Prevention, and Response,” Cyberbullying Research Center, http://www.cyberbullying.us/Cyberbullying_Identification_Prevention_Response_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

using the Internet or communication devices. A 2010 study by the Cyberbullying Research Center indicates that 20 percent of American adolescents have experienced cyberbullying and another 20 percent report having cyberbullied others.

Images of the self can easily become distorted in an American culture that values certain body types, personalities, physical abilities, genders, sexual orientations, and religious affiliations over others. The amplified pressures we often experience in trying to meet the expectations of the “social body”—our peers, our elders, our religious traditions, the media, and the corporations that shape our consumerist culture—get worked out in our physical bodies. The body is increasingly the terrain where the self navigates these unreasonable and often dangerous cultural demands and expectations—for beauty, for social acceptance, for success. Often, what is considered “right” or “ideal” by the social body—weight, intelligence, gender, sexual orientation, marital status—perpetuates a dualistic way of understanding the self that ultimately devalues the physical body. Communications technology inundates us with images, and overt and subliminal messages about our bodies, all of which cultivates disordered relationships to food, alcohol, drugs, and exercise, evidence of a lack of a healthy relationship with one’s self. Long before the emergence of communication technology, Naomi Wolfe noted in *The Beauty Myth* that “more women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers.”⁵

In constructing profiles we think others will like, we can easily lose sight of what *we* like or our own sense of what is good in light of our truest selves. An online profile can easily become

indistinguishable from our “real” or “authentic” self when we uncritically assume that the self presented online is the true self.

What is the common denominator among the ethical dilemmas in the “Age of i”? Each one points to the challenge of seeking and forming an authentic identity in the twenty-first century, when it is increasingly easy to conflate the face we project to the world with ways we actually face the world. Authentic identities are oriented toward what we discern as good for us—life-giving, healthy, with the promise of flourishing—rather than toward what our culture, social networks, or authority figures expect of us or tell us is likeable right. Identity is the intangible dimension of the self that assures us we are more than our actions or physical traits. Identity is an expression of freedom to shape our futures in ways that reflect our values, to say, “Yes!” to the things that matter most to us and live in a way that reflects that affirmation. It is the element of our personhood that keeps us from being reduced to mere objects to be ogled or commodities to be consumed. It is the stance we take to the givens of our reality and the orientation we have toward things we value. It is fundamentally about the relationship we have with ourselves.

Ethical Tools for Navigating Identity

Recall what we said about the driving question for the descriptive step of ethics that illuminates the various relationships at the heart of ethical dilemmas: *What is going on?* To answer this question in the context of our unique relationship with the self, we have to sharpen the question a bit: *Who is it that I am trying to become?* Amid the shifting sands of the “Age of i,” when the “i” (intentionally lowercase) of social networking profiles or smart devices has never

5. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 10.

been more susceptible to the harmful influences of cultural and social expectations of what is “right,” asking ourselves about what kind of person we hope to become can begin to illuminate the “I” (intentionally uppercase) of our deepest longings, our most important values, and perhaps even our hidden yearnings. Surfacing these things can orient us toward the good, toward the long-term flourishing that makes it possible to become the person we want to be.

So how do we go about answering that all-important question: *Who is it that I am trying to become?* Religious ethics highlights three important tools: the human conscience, the virtues, and the capacity to love and be loved.

First, we have to sift through layers of cultural and social expectations of what others think we should become and unearth our own desires for who we want to become. Conscience is the moral capability we need for this task.

Christian ethicist Richard Gula notes that contrary to popular belief, conscience is not the inner voice telling us what we should or should not do. In fact, conscience has nothing to do with “shoulds” since “shoulds” and the inner voice that communicates them are what psychologist Sigmund Freud considered the *superego*. The superego, Freud argued, is the authoritarian or controlling facet of our subconscious or the container in our psyche for all of the external forces that dictate our behavior through fear of failing to meet social, cultural, or religious expectations. In many cases, Freud might recognize our online social networks as a kind of virtual superego that constantly reminds of what our status updates should be, what we should “like,” what we should be twittering about. This is particularly true in

light of Gula’s distinction between *shoulds* and *wants*: “‘Shoulds’ and ‘have tos’ belong to someone else. ‘Wants’ belong to us.”⁶

Gula succinctly defines *conscience* as the activity by which “you come to a decision for yourself but not by yourself.”⁷ Rather than worry about whether our actions are consistent with the expectations of others and the external authority of peer pressure, we use conscience to consider whether our actions are consistent with our desires and values.

While conscience might prevent us from overrelying on others when it comes to making decisions, it does not expect that we become rogue moral agents, acting in isolation. We constantly need to evaluate our desires, our wants, and our visions for the future in light of their impact on others. Conscience is the ability to be able to take those things into consideration as we discern our moral choices. It is something that gives shape to our character. “Character is not a mere public appearance that leaves a more fundamental self hidden,” explains Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. “It is the very reality of who we are as self-determining agents.”⁸

Once we’ve put conscience to work identifying our desires and weighing our actions in light of the future trajectory for our lives, we need to cultivate a second tool: virtue. Virtues are those dispositions and practices that nurture desires and dreams. Aristotle defined *virtue* as “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.”⁹ In other words, virtue is about finding the middle way between

6. Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 126.

7. *Ibid.*, 124.

8. Stanley Hauerwas, “Toward an Ethic of Character,” in *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Ronald P. Hammel and Kenneth R. Himes (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 155.

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.6, 1106b35–1107a3.

extremes—both in the circumstance of a moral decision and within ourselves as moral agents—and then doing it on a regular basis. He suggests that this sort of intentionally habitual behavior is essential for achieving the end goals we might set for ourselves, whether that's becoming a brave person, or a compassionate person, or a just person. Brave, compassionate, or just people must think and act bravely, compassionately, or justly on an ongoing basis if they want to become brave, compassionate, and just. "Morality does not take root in people except through physical, concrete actions," explains contemporary Catholic virtue ethicist James Keenan, SJ. "We do not become virtuous by merely wishing or intending to be virtuous. We acquire virtue only through repeated and habitual courses of action that eventually affect the way we live and act."¹⁰

Keenan also suggests that we might best understand practices associated with conscience in terms of the virtue of self-care. While many of the virtues assist us in who it is we are trying to become in the other spheres of relationship, as we will see in each of the remaining sections of this chapter, self-care is the virtue that makes us attentive to what is going on in our relationship with ourself: our desires, the new things we are being invited to consider, the direction our life is headed, insights we can learn from our mistakes so that we can keep moving forward. As we saw at the outset of this section, coming of age in an "Age of I" brings with it a variety of anxieties, social expectations, and unhealthy proclivities that threaten a vibrant relationship with the self and as such make the work of forming an authentic identity that much more difficult. The virtue of self-care cultivates important dispositions and practices that strengthen our

relationship with ourself and empower the self for the difficult work of striving for who we want to become. Self-care may involve, among many things, spiritual contemplation or meditation, balanced diet, sleep, and rejuvenating activities. After more than thirty years studying human interaction with computers and other technological devices, Sherry Turkle has reached an important conclusion connected to the virtue of self-care: "To make our life livable we need to have spaces where we are fully present to each other or to ourselves, where we are not competing with the roar of the Internet and where people around us are not competing with the latest news on Facebook."¹¹

Finally, the third tool for fashioning an authentic identity is the capacity to love and be loved. The Abrahamic traditions hold that human beings are created in God's image (*imago dei*) and have innate God-like qualities. Creation accounts in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible indicate that God made man and woman in God's own likeness or image: "Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion" (Genesis 1:26). So what does it mean to be the reflection of the *imago dei* or the image of God? Although sacred texts ascribe a variety of characteristics to God, a common thread that might be identified is God's relational nature, God's desire to reach out in love and to be loved. The *imago dei* reminds us of this fundamental aspect of our human nature—that we too are capable of reaching beyond ourselves to love and be loved and that we must protect this essential aspect in ourselves and others. This desire and capacity for love gives rise to the ethical principle of human dignity, which

10. James F. Keenan, SJ, "How Catholic Are the Virtues?" *America* 176 (June 7, 1997): 16.

11. Sherry Turkle, "Alive Enough," *On Being* from American Public Media, April 1, 2011, <http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/alive-enough/>.

provides the cornerstone of every ethical principle. Human dignity is the respect we award to ourselves and others that fosters the freedom to

commit ourselves lovingly to things, people, or projects that make it possible for us and others to flourish.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What does it mean for you to be living in the “Age of i”?
- How is your “online self” different or the same as your “real-time” self?
- Do you show different sides of yourself online than in face-to-face situations? Why or why not?
- If you chose to disconnect from social networks, computer and cell phone use, and other forms of twenty-first-century technology would you think and act differently? Why or why not?
- What is your authentic identity?
- Who are you trying to become?
- In what ways might self-care be helpful for ethical and moral reasoning and behavior?
- Do you regularly engage in any of the following: spiritual contemplation or meditation, balanced diet, regular sleep, or rejuvenating activities? If so, what are they and what are the benefits? If not, why not?
- How does your religious preference, if any, influence your ethical values and decisions?

Relationships with “Specific” Others

Reflect on your day yesterday. Who did you encounter or with whom did you interact? What brought you in contact with these persons? What did you talk about or connect over?

More than likely, you interacted with specific people with whom you share a particular aspect of your life at this point in your journey: siblings or parents, roommates or teachers, teammates or good friends, a boyfriend or girlfriend. Perhaps you discussed the mundane details of the ins and outs of your shared interests or maybe an event or crisis of some sort loomed over your conversation. The moral dilemmas or decisions that arise in the context of our relationships with these folks—from the mundane to the urgent—often get overshadowed by the attention-grabbing headlines of our day. But in actuality, our daily interactions

with people to whom we are related in a specific way, as a sibling, roommate, close friend, or significant other, are the “meat and potatoes” of ethics, since it is such routine encounters that form our character. It is in our relationships with the folks we know well or love deeply that we make the decisions that impact who it is that we—and they—are trying to become. It is in relating to our siblings, significant others, roommates, teachers, or coworkers that most of us do our daily ethical work.

Our relationships to specific others only become more complex as we continue to develop our character through a loving relationship with our self. Increasingly, achieving clarity around our wants or what we discern to be good according to our conscience eventually brings us into conflict with the moral codes of the various groups that have been a source of our identity or have long told us what is “right.” What ought

you to do, for instance, when your religious tradition tells you that your relationship with your significant other is sinfully disordered or when your new friends have different ideas about drugs and alcohol than your posse from high school or when you and your parents disagree about your career path? In addition, it is in the context of specific relationships that we mediate the tension between the competing responsibilities we may have to different people or groups. What do you do when commitments to the team conflict with your desire to invest more of yourself in a romantic relationship? Or what is more important for your future—counseling a friend in need or studying for a final exam?

Dilemmas in the Sphere of Specific Others

Consider a few ethical dilemmas that life in twenty-first-century United States presents to our relationships with friends, significant others, and family members.

Just as social media affect personal identity formation in ways we have yet to fully grasp, they are also changing the dynamics of friendship. Certainly, online networks make it possible to reconnect with people from previous chapters of our lives or remain in contact with people we meet along the way. That they allow us to weave new webs of relationships or preserve older ones is unquestioned. But social networks raise other questions where friendship is concerned. Should we call the hundreds of people we accumulate on our social networks “friends”? Is *friendship* really the term to use for our virtual interactions with these folks if we are little more than voyeurs or commentators on their lives? Do our encounters with people online effuse *philia*, the mutual love that the ancient Greeks saw at the heart of

friendship, the kind of love that enables people to be confident that they matter in each others’ lives and to remain committed to the joint endeavor that is the relationship between them? And what effects do online “friendships” have on our real-time and face-to-face relationships? Are the ways we interact with friends online consistent with the way we engage off-line? Do they prepare us for the hard work of embodied engagement in others’ lives, or do they make us more inclined to remain safely behind our screens? “In retrospect,” observes essayist William Deresiewicz, “it seems inevitable that once we decided to become friends with everyone, we would forget how to be friends with anyone. . . . We haven’t just stopped talking to our friends as individuals, we have stopped thinking of them as individuals. We have turned them into an indiscriminate mass, a kind of audience or faceless public. We address ourselves not to a circle, but to a cloud.”¹²

If an online culture increasingly shapes twenty-first-century friendships, then a “hookup” culture increasingly dictates sexual and romantic relationships on campus. In extensive surveys and interviews with 2,500 college students from around the country, Christian theologian Donna Freitas discovered a distinctive set of dispositions and practices around sex—sex is casual and unplanned, sexual partners are intoxicated and may not even speak to one another during their intimate acts and certainly not afterward. These are so pervasive on college campuses they make the search for meaningful romantic partnerships difficult at best and condone behaviors that endanger physical and emotional well-being at worst. “Within hookup culture,” explains Freitas, “many students perform sexual acts because that’s ‘just what people do,’ because they are

12. William Deresiewicz, “Faux Friendship,” in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 6, 2009, <http://chronicle.com/article/Faux-Friendship/49308/>.

bored, because they've done it once before so why not again and again, because they're too trashed to summon any self-control, because it helps them climb the social ladder, and because how else is a person supposed to snag a significant other in a community where nobody ever dates."¹³ In addition to putting students' physical and reproductive health at risk, hookup culture creates its own schizophrenia among college students since a successful hookup requires people to completely disassociate or disconnect their emotions from their physicality, remain emotionally detached from their partner even in the most intimate of activities, compartmentalize elements of their experience such as spirituality or a desire for romance that conflict with hooking up, deny feelings of vulnerability or loneliness, and participate in this culture even if they do not necessarily agree with it.

And finally, the new millennium brings with it challenges to relationships among family members. More than anything else, emerging adults indicate a desire to "stand on their own," but a variety of social and economic conditions makes that increasingly difficult.¹⁴ Technology ensures that children and parents are constantly "tethered" to one another, often putting off or impeding the important—and at times necessarily painful—process of individuation and autonomous decision making. More significantly, as a result of the 2008 economic downturn, as well as the rising costs of college education, changing attitudes about parenting and young adult well-being, and the advancing ages of partners in the average first marriage, more and more young adults remain under their parents' roofs well into their late 20s, "boomeranging" back into the

nest after college, losing a job, or failed relationships. The specific relationship between parents and children in the twenty-first century can be rife with opportunities for conflict: negotiating living costs such as food, rent, car insurance, and cell phones; mediating different lifestyle choices; attaining self-sufficiency while not denying family interdependence.

Ethical Tools for Navigating Specific Relationships

A common thread that runs through the various ethical dilemmas of our relationships to specific people in our lives is that each of these relationships takes place in the context of various communities with spoken or unspoken codes of moral values and conduct. Families have their codes as do residence halls, athletic teams, and groups of friends. The ethical question that can reveal how our relationships are shaped positively or negatively by these codes, as well as the responsibilities we have to these folks is this: *Do the values and practices of the communities in which I participate help me become the person I want to be in the context of my relationships with others?*

Religious traditions offer a few tools for asking and answering this question, especially when we understand the two meanings of the word *tradition*. From the Latin *tradare* (most often thought of as a noun), *tradition* refers to the beliefs, doctrines, and stories of a particular group that are handed down from one generation to the next. However, in its etymological roots, *tradition* (first and foremost a verb) also refers to the process by which beliefs, doctrine, and stories are handed down through rituals, sacraments, and symbols.¹⁵ So traditions are not just the stuff

13. Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xviii.

14. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33–87.

15. Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

that gets handed down to us but also how we receive what is given to us and how we pass it on. Traditions provide tools for balancing the often opposing demands of continuity and change that we experience in a variety of relationships.

Returning to the concept of virtue, or habits of disposition and practice that help us move toward a particular end, Catholic feminist ethicist Margaret Farley suggests that fidelity is critical for strengthening our relationships with those with whom we have close connections. Lasting “[c]ommitment,” she explains, “is our way of trying to give a future to a present love . . . [Commitment’s] primary meaning is not the negative one of ‘letting go’ but the positive one of realizing something new.”¹⁶ Fidelity is the virtue that sustains us in committed relationships, reminding us of the importance of being present—not only in terms of giving of ourselves but also in terms of living these relationships with an attention to the present moment. Relationships shaped by fidelity, in Farley’s opinion, are also just relationships or connections between persons that affirm them “according to their concrete reality, actual and potential.”¹⁷ In other words, Farley notes that relationships oriented toward justice acknowledge that those with whom we have special relationships are complex beings with physical and spiritual needs, particularly the need to love and be loved. Like us, they are free to choose the direction of their lives, and those choices will be shaped but not determined by concrete circumstances, which we may or may not fully know. To

be faithful to these persons is to be mindful, in the present moment, of their past and future.

Finally, in order not to lose sight of the needs of others, respect can serve as a central principle for guiding our relationships with specific others. Respect ultimately involves acknowledging the dignity of others—their inherent and inviolable freedom to strive for whoever it is they are trying to become, not only in the present moment but also in light of their own futures. In friendships, sexual or romantic partnerships, and family relationships, respect involves *philia*, the Greek word for the mutual love people share for a connection that binds them. According to Catholic ethicist Edward Vacek, *philia* involves a willing partnership of freely consenting persons, who agree to belong in some way to each other and to continually reveal themselves to each other. *Philia* is what he calls a “progressively involving” relationship in which “we desire to be desired by the one we desire,” respecting the distinctiveness of the two persons and yet honoring the mutuality created by their desire.¹⁸

Christian ethicist Paul Wadell’s observations about friendship are particularly fitting for our examination of the ethical issues that arise in the context of “special” relationships. “Friendship is a fitting model for the moral life,” he notes, “because it respects that the change of the self necessary for wholeness is impossible apart from those relationships in which love for that wholeness can be shared . . . The fullness we seek can only be reached through others who seek it too.”¹⁹

16. Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 44.

17. Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 209.

18. Edward Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 286–87.

19. Paul J. Wadell, CP, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 25.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What steps or processes do you use when making ethical or moral decisions?
- Who is in your “web” of relationships? Do you relate to these people in the same way?
- What culture is dominant at your school regarding sexual and romantic relationships? Critique that culture—what do you think of it and why?
- If you are an undergraduate student, do you think of moving back into your parent’s home after graduation as a viable option? Why or why not?
- What are the “codes” by which ethical decisions are reached in your family and personal life? Are they the same or different? Why?
- What are the roles of fidelity and respect in your relationships? Explain.

Relationships with Anonymous Others

In his extensive research of emerging adults in America, Christian Smith notes that “what makes emerging adults most happy are their good relationships with family, friends, and interesting other associates; by comparison their larger public world, civic life, and the political realm seem to them alien and impenetrable.”²⁰ This generational disconnect from civic, social, or global relationships—what I call here the relationships with anonymous others—is troublesome for ethics in the twenty-first century, since thanks to global media and the Internet we are far more aware of the daily lives of people in distant places and our connection to them than generations before us. We have at our fingertips easy access to the stories of people around the world—their working conditions, approximate weekly incomes, average life expectancies, and literacy rates. And with an astonishing network of nongovernmental organizations dedicated to raising awareness

of global equity issues, it is more difficult today to ignore that a life- and planet-threatening gap between rich and poor is a direct result of human choices in an ever more complex web of human relationships. It is increasingly difficult to deny or protect ourselves from how the countless choices we make every day—from the food we eat and clothes we wear to the energy we buy and the waste we generate—affect these anonymous others and the environments in which they live.

And yet we do. As has been the case throughout history, there are those among us who have the privilege of denying our connections to people we don’t know. In an opinion piece on global justice to mark the tenth anniversary of 9/11, political philosopher Martha Nussbaum poignantly noted, “As soon as things returned to ‘normal,’ most people went back to their old habits and their daily lives, continuing to put themselves and their friends first in the old familiar ways. . . . [W]e all need to get involved in efforts to engage with the boring, unsexy daily problems, building global concern into the fabric of our lives.”²¹

20. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 73.

21. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Why Talk about Global Justice on the Anniversary of 9/11?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 7, 2011.

Dilemmas in the Sphere of Anonymous Others

To begin building global concern into the fabric of your life, start with the fabrics on your body. A quick look at the labels on your clothing can raise a host of questions about the living and working conditions of the people who made them. Given that the vast majority of the world's population struggles to survive on a few dollars a day, there is a good chance that the hands that made the shirt on your back struggle to feed children, secure safe drinking water, ward off sexual predators, control reproductive health, or accumulate the resources needed for social mobility.

Or think about the food you've eaten today. There is a good chance the hands that harvested or butchered it, loaded or unloaded it, prepared it for consumption, or transported it may belong to undocumented workers, who make up 5 percent of the American workforce, or perhaps to one of the 17,500 people caught up in human trafficking in the United States, forced against their will to work in the under-the-table informal economy or in unregulated factories and farms. Undocumented and trafficked workers are among the 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States as of 2011, many of them fleeing countries negatively affected by US trade policies aimed at keeping costs low for food, clothing, and manufactured goods for American consumers like us.

If by chance the hands that have handled your food from seed to table do belong to American citizens, it is likely they receive little more than minimum wage, which at the federal level in 2011 is \$7.25. In today's economy, \$1,160 a month *before* taxes does not provide these workers or their families with financial security, much less the basics of social mobility in the twenty-first century: home ownership, health care, and higher education.

Or look around your classroom and notice the ethnic and racial groups that are not represented because of the institutional racism that pervades social systems in our country, placing higher education out of reach for the vast majority of citizens. By social systems I mean the institutions and agencies that distribute the goods and services people need to live in community—educational systems, health care systems, parks and recreation systems, sanitation systems, homeland security systems, for example. And by institutional racism I mean cultural dispositions and attitudes about inferiority and superiority that inform the way we distribute social goods such as education, vaccinations, green space, clean air and water, and citizenship. The United States' systems of education, health care, employment, criminal justice, housing, childcare—the list could go on and on—have a disproportionately high negative impact on people of color. These systems do not simply put some at a disadvantage based on the color of their skin, but rather, the systems do this so that others might benefit.²²

It might be easy to think we are not connected to the various people who anonymously and invisibly make it possible for us to move through our daily routines or to the people who do not share our social advantages. But indeed, we are linked to them in a tangled web of advantage and disadvantage, social mobility and marginalization, entitlement and disenfranchisement, privilege and penalty. The question becomes how to relate responsibly with these anonymous folks.

Ethical Tools

So what do these very different and yet interrelated examples of brokenness in our relationships with people—around the world and in our own communities—have in common?

22. For a helpful analogy for unpacking the complexities of racism, see Camara Phyllis Jones, "Levels of Racism: A Theoretic Framework and a Gardener's Tale," *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no. 8 (August 2000): 1212–15.

At their root is a willful or deliberate ignorance on the part of people not directly negatively affected by these broken relationships to deny their magnitude and more important their connection to them. This denial makes it impossible to understand what is going on in these broken relationships, which is the crucial descriptive task of ethics. More important, our voluntary ignorance makes it hard to embrace our interdependence with all living things, a central part of our nature as human beings. In other words, we are denying not only others' full humanity by allowing them to struggle in conditions that preclude their flourishing, we are also denying our own full humanity by cutting ourselves off from life-sustaining relationships with other people. There is a key question that can help us remove our blinders and reach out to those beyond our immediate circles of concern: *How am I connected to what is going on?* And, as has been the case throughout this chapter, religious ethics offers tools for answering that question.

Most religious traditions invite followers to participate in an ongoing process of conversion, turning away from something—a value, an unhealthy practice, a limited framework of understanding—and toward something else perceived as more holy, more complete, more fulfilling. For Christians, conversion involves following more attentively the way of Christ; for Buddhists, it involves living fully in the present moment; for Muslims, it involves embracing the many names of Allah; for Jews, it is following the commandments of the Torah. To identify what we want to turn toward, we can ask what we value, particularly when it comes to our choices as consumers: do we value goods made with fair labor practices enough to take time to research and realign our preferences and cost expectations? We can also ask what we desire to do or become, which can be expressed in terms of solidarity—the desire to think through our own gifts and talents in terms of social responsibility.

And we can also consider how we might best understand what is happening around us, which can be exercised in terms of ways we inform ourselves: for example, conversations with people most affected, connections to organizations on the ground, or alternative news sources.

Returning again to the concept of virtue, religious traditions encourage dispositions and practices rooted in solidarity, the ultimate other-regarding virtue. The late Pope John Paul II, perhaps the first pope of the global age—defined *solidarity* as “a firm and preserving commitment to acknowledge that we *all* are truly responsible for all.” Rather than foster an exclusivity rooted in similarity or like-mindedness (often associated with solidarity in the political realm), in religious frameworks solidarity provides a radically inclusive stance when it comes to human relationships. Solidarity involves identifying the commonality that unites all human beings without dismissing the significant differences among us and then taking responsibility to change those systems and structures that create opportunity for some by denying it to others. To that end, solidarity will involve conflict, since those who practice it must necessarily challenge persons of privilege and power who deny their connections to others' oppression or suffering.

Lastly, many religious ethical frameworks prize life in community as essential for flourishing, because by resisting self-interest and egocentrism, vibrant communities are better able to care for members in need and collectively pursue values that give life meaning and purpose. The Catholic tradition, for example, promotes the common good or the minimum conditions necessary for life in community. In keeping with the importance of resisting the human tendency toward self-interest or egocentrism, those committed to the common good recognize that life in community or in relationships with others provides the ideal context for individuals to flourish. “The common good is not

simply a means for attaining the private goods of individuals,” explains Catholic ethicist David Hollenbach, SJ. “It is a value to be pursued for its own sake. This suggests that a key aspect of the

common good can be described as the good of being a community at all—the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being.”²³

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Do you think illegal immigration into the United States is a fundamental ethical problem for the twenty-first century? Why or why not?
- What do you think about the author’s claim that we deny our own humanity when we deny the humanity of others?
- How are you connected or unconnected with what is going on in your region, country, and world?
- How would your ethical decision making change if everything you did was ruled by the principle that it should be for the common good?
- How do you reach ethical decisions about how you will relate to regional and global natural environments?

Relationship with All Earthly Creatures

Questions about our relationship to the earth are perhaps among the oldest captured in the ancient sensibilities of many religious traditions. Interdependence between humans and the land is a theme in the Hebrew Bible that begins with the second of two Creation accounts in the book of Genesis. God creates humans by breathing into the dust of the earth and then appoints humans as caretakers of Eden. Jesus used examples from nature and nonhuman creatures to tell stories of God’s relationship to human beings: mustard seeds and vineyards, sheep and birds, lilies. Islamic ethics turns to the Qur’an to underscore the interdependence of living things in light of their shared source in the Creator, whose grandeur and majesty is reflected in the natural

world. Indigenous peoples on every continent embrace a cosmic and earthy spirituality that is completely immersed in the cyclical and mystifying power of the galaxies and of our planet. And perhaps because it rejects the notion of a single “Creator God,” Buddhism has long cultivated the now vogue sensibility of countering religious anthropocentrism and secular egoism with interdependence.

Dilemmas in the Sphere of the Earth

The vibrant earth consciousness that has come to define the twenty-first century is not new to religious traditions but rather a renaissance or rebirth of the questions that first sparked religious sensibilities. However, while an earth consciousness has been a centerpiece of religious traditions across the earth, the monotheistic

23. David Hollenbach, *Christian Ethics and the Common Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 81–82.

traditions—particularly Christianity—have fostered an anthropocentrism or human-centeredness that has fueled and justified the depletion of the earth’s resources and the exploitation of nonhuman creatures in the name of the most Godlike creature on the planet. To contribute to the growing efforts to live in right relationship with the earth, religious ethics will need to critique this anthropocentric emphasis in religious traditions and highlight instead latent themes of interdependence and creation care.

Since there is an entire chapter in this volume devoted to questions of ecological ethics, let me quickly point out just a few ideas that surface in ethical thinking when we consider ecological issues from the perspective of our relationship to the earth and nonhuman life.

Tools for Navigating Relationships with Earthly Creatures

A lack of awareness of our interdependence with all forms of life on earth—not only with creatures alive now but also with those of future generations—can lead to decisions that degrade the environment. As with the previous sections of this chapter, religious ethics offers a variety of resources to amplify our sense of relationality to the earth. Let me offer just three.

Certainly, our capacity for *practical reason*—our innate sense of good and bad that shapes our moral decisions—is essential to ethics. We don’t necessarily need authority figures or laws to tell us there is something fundamentally wrong with the abrupt extinction of an entire species or a lack of clean drinking water. We intuitively know these things are bad; we have a gut sense about them. Likewise, ethical decision making relies on *technical reason* or our ability to hypothesize about a variety of questions and then to examine the accuracy of our conjectures using empirical evidence. We cannot make ethically

responsible decisions about reducing carbon emissions, implementing mandatory recycling programs, or investing in alternative fuels, for example, without rigorously applying the scientific method to inform our recommendations. An environmental consciousness, however, also awakens in us the less frequently used *speculative reason*, or our distinctively human ability to wonder, be amazed, fantasize, and imagine. It is often this more speculative dimension of human reason that fosters fresh and innovative thinking, offering us new perspectives on familiar problems. Since speculative reason about the mysteries of the cosmos and earth sparked the ancient human sensibilities we later categorized as “religious” (where did we come from, why are we here, where are we going, what is the meaning behind it all?), religious ethics can contribute to green movements by cultivating speculative wonder.

Consider, for example, physicist and scholar of religion Brian Swimme’s claim that even though we are the youngest species in the 14 billion-year-old cosmos, we are unique in our ability to be amazed by its grandeur and to articulate its beauty. “The human provides the space in which the universe feels its stupendous beauty,” he reminds us. “We enabled some of the depth of the universe to be tasted, and we have only just begun our venture; much awaits our maturity.”²⁴ Naming us the “heart and mind of the Earth,” Swimme heightens our responsibility to the planetary common good, since we are the only creatures in the cosmos capable of participating in an intentional way with the ongoing process of creation through the gravitational-like pulls of our “allurements” or loves. “All communities of being are created in response to a prior mysterious alluring activity,” Swimme explains of the “primal dynamism” of “atoms, galaxies, stars, families, nations, persons, ecosystems, oceans,

24. Brian Swimme, *The Universe Is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1984), 32.

and stellar systems.” “Allurement evokes being and life. That’s what allurement is. Now you can understand what love means: Love is a word that points to this alluring activity in the cosmos. Love ignites being.”²⁵ It makes you wonder, yes? That’s the point.

The Abrahamic traditions offer the concept of covenant as a way of integrating an ethical dimension into our loves and allurements. In the covenant established with the Israelites—a kind of contract that shapes relationships of fidelity discussed in a previous section—YHWH promises the fullness of life to those who live in right relationship; in other words, those who live with an eye to the power dynamics inherent in our interactions with each other and nonhuman creation. Kenneth and Michael Himes suggest that “companionship” might be the best way to understand the type of relationship YHWH has in mind, particularly when it comes to our covenantal relationship to earth and other living things. Recalling what we said previously about *philia*, companionship with other living things requires that we acknowledge them as we do other human beings—as wondrous entities with their own distinct purposes and ends. Tapping into what the Himes brothers call “the ‘thou’ dimension of all creation” avoids a one-sided or instrumentalizing approach to environmental ethics that motivates an ecological consciousness for the sake of humans alone.²⁶

Finally, religious ethics might consider sustainability—what Christian ethicist Tobias Winright defines as “the ability of biological systems to remain diverse and productive over time”—as the primary virtue for the twenty-first

century.²⁷ Respecting the diversity of the biological systems requires that we acknowledge the individuality of each species and their singular contribution to the ecosystem. Allowing this diversity to flourish now and well into the future requires that we refrain from destroying them, their habitats, or other creatures on which their well-being depends. Dispositions and practices connected to sustainability might include intellectual curiosity about the living things in our geographical region, wonder at the multitude of things we might discover there, humility that comes with the awareness of the number of creatures unknown to us on whom our well-being rests, and satiability that can temper our consumerist impulses that deplete natural resources or destroy ecosystems. Practices associated with the virtue of sustainability might include political advocacy for the protection of natural habitats, recycling and composting, supporting local agriculture and community gardening, eating seasonably appropriate foods, and walking, biking, or using public transportation. Nancy Rourke implicitly notes that the virtue of sustainability links goodness and wellness since “an ecological system made of such flourishing beings is itself a flourishing environment, and a flourishing environment facilitates the health, enjoyment, and happiness of all who live in it.”²⁸

Conclusion

“In terms of how we act,” says feminist theologian Sallie McFague in a book on climate change, “probably nothing is more important than who

25. *Ibid.*, 49.

26. Kenneth and Michael Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1993), 113.

27. See the glossary in Winright’s volume of essays, *Green Discipleship: Catholic Theological Ethics and the Environment* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 165.

28. Nancy M. Rourke, “The Environment Within: Virtue Ethics,” in *Green Discipleship: Catholic Theological Ethics and the Environment*, ed. Tobias Winright (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 165.

we *think* we are. Our unconscious or subconscious assumptions concerning our place in the scheme of things lie at the heart of our behavior.²⁹ In this chapter, I have suggested that in the twenty-first century, religious ethics can help us to think of ourselves as relational beings—as creatures in a cosmos 14 billion years in the

making, who are constituted by and for relationships: relationships with ourselves, with the specific people in our lives, with people we don't even know, and with the rest of the planet. Paying attention to our unique capacity for relationship can help us navigate the ethical challenges that lie ahead.

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29. Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 43.