Ideas change the world. Every revolution, and every transformation in human history, has been based on an idea about what makes individual lives and communities better. Ideas frame our world, linking us to the past, giving the present relevance and meaning, and allowing us to project ourselves into the future. They provide context for our lives and offer the promise that things can be different. Some ideas are ideals that guide us by articulating a conception of the best possible way of being. Others are practical constructs that help us shape our lives by expressing what our priorities should be and where we should direct our energy and resources. When we analyze or assess our ideas, we evaluate them; we craft value systems. The values we adopt might arise from many sources: our upbringing, education, experiences, or personal reflection. But values are dynamic, and our encounters with the world might render what we once held dear to be less important—or they may completely change the way we think.

Ultimately, our values underpin our deliberations, guide our behavior, and give purpose to our lives. They shape our identity and steer our actions. Values are captured by concepts such as right and wrong, fair and unfair, good and bad, just and unjust, and others that are often hard to label: A student believes the right thing to do is to never cheat on an exam. A child claims that getting a smaller allowance than his older brother is unfair. A diplomat accuses another country of human rights violations. A society views with disgust some unfamiliar practice of another cultural group. Values tend to be the most influential motivators for human action, even more powerful than economic incentives or orders from authority. People work for money and generally comply with laws or regulations, but they rarely risk their lives for those things. Yet time and again people are willing to die for ideals such as freedom, faith, honor, or glory.

Generally we do well enough on our own without looking too deeply into issues, but there are times when we are confronted by new or difficult questions that demand some reasoned framework for analysis. In this text, we will examine the foundational value-based concepts that we use to understand and govern our actions. With the help of philosophy, we can look critically at the assumptions at work behind our judgments to see if they necessarily lead to their purported conclusions. Perhaps we can even propose better ways of thinking about the issues.

Sometimes we find ourselves reflecting on our assumptions after a dramatic event with wide publicity suddenly puts them into sharp relief; at other times we are just unsatisfied
with how things are and wonder if they could be improved. The issues we often ponder and deal with are not only the big ones that dominate our actions but also those that may at first glance appear trivial or inconsequential. This is typical because we live our lives in a series of small encounters with one another. Consider the following questions:

- Should we allow people to engage in dangerous activities, or should we encroach on their liberty by regulating them?
- Should we hold companies responsible for injuries their products cause?
- Should we favor some groups over others, or should we treat everyone exactly the same?
- In health care, what determines the best way to allocate limited resources? Do we spread out as much as we can to as many as possible or use some other means such as personal ability to pay?
- Should we educate students in the sciences or emphasize the arts?
- Ought women and men have the same rights worldwide?

All these questions have embedded assumptions, and part of the role of philosophy is to bring these unstated ideas to the surface and examine them in some detail.

Philosophy helps us make thoughtful and reasoned choices that others can defend. Philosophical thinking, whether or not we realize it, helps form the principles that we use to shape our communities, and ultimately the way we deal with other nations and the planet. Many people want to make the world a better place to live—a fine and noble goal. However, in practical terms, our value-based or ethical decisions turn out to manifest themselves in mundane encounters—the way we treat individuals in our daily lives and in the scores of decisions we make all the time about our consumption and disposal of goods in our market economy. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that these routine decisions are framed by general principles that have long been the subject of philosophical inquiry.

This book introduces you to the central concerns of classical and contemporary ethics, using examples and cases to highlight particular issues, show how theory can inform our discussions, and reflect on how we ought to treat one another and the world around us.

Chapter 1 situates ethics within the wider discipline of philosophy and examines some of the enduring questions philosophers have examined since the times of Ancient Greece. Chapter 2 looks at the nature of ethical theory and how it differs from legal and religious approaches. The following two chapters deal with the persistent issues of egoism and relativism. An egoist believes a person should promote his or her own interest. The relativist argues that there are no absolute rules and everything needs to be considered in terms of its own circumstances, to the point where we have no right to impose our views on anyone else. Chapter 5 reflects on the nature of the self and our relationship to others. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 present the classical ethical theories of utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue-based ethics, respectively, and examines their various strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter 9 integrates some of the abstract theory to discuss issues of rights and justice. Whatever our personal ethical views might be, in a very real sense, notions of rights and justice connect broad ethical principles to the way we govern ourselves and interact with others. They are fundamental in determining our laws, how we view ownership of property and the imposition of taxes, the care we accord those unable to look after themselves, our handling of end-of-life questions, our attitudes toward military intervention overseas, and the many other ways we create our world.
Chapter 10 looks at some significant feminist insights in ethics: Do men and women have a common nature, or are there essential differences in the way they view the world? If ethical thinking has been framed by a gendered approach that brings in biases, are there responses that can address them? Are there alternative approaches such as care and empathy that provide an adequate philosophical basis for our dealings with one another?

Chapter 11 examines some of the dramatic challenges philosophy has faced in the last fifty years from so-called postmodernist movements. These approaches have questioned not only the assumptions within philosophical traditions but also the way that philosophy has emerged as a unique discipline. Drawing on material from history and psychology, postmodernists point out that ethics relies on certain stories we use to explain how things are, and that we are often unaware of institutions and power relationships that frame these narratives.

Ethical theory can also be informed by non-Western traditions, and so Chapter 12 examines Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and Africana approaches to morality. These traditions have stood the test of time and give us perspectives which put community and social harmony at the forefront, or ask us to find moral enlightenment in nature or within ourselves.

The text paves the way for three outcomes. First, readers will become acquainted with the main figures and movements in classical and contemporary ethics, including feminist, postmodern, and non-Western perspectives. Second, it models a critical analysis of the material that encourages readers to take a justified stand on many of the issues and points of view. Third, numerous cases and real-life examples allow the reader to apply general principles to their own particular real-life experience.

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