INTRODUCTION

CAN WE THINK ABOUT ETHICS?

This book asks you to use case studies to reflect on the ethical aspects of being a college student. The very suggestion that you can think about ethics might raise some big questions: “Aren’t moral questions about values, and aren’t values private things? Are you going to try to impose your values on us?” And, “Aren’t ethics connected to religion? Can you really discuss ethics apart from religion, and can you get anywhere discussing ethics in religiously diverse situations?” Perhaps you might even ask, “Why should I be ethical? There may be times when I’m better off if I’m not. For example, I can get a better grade if I cheat cautiously on tests. If I can get away with it, why shouldn’t I?”

We are going to say a few things about these questions later. We think, however, that our suggestions will make more sense if we first explain how using case studies can help you learn to think through moral dilemmas, and then demonstrate what productive “thinking about ethics” might look like.

USING CASE STUDIES TO THINK ABOUT ETHICS

Using the case studies in this book can help you learn to think clearly and powerfully about ethical issues and moral dilemmas, especially those that come up in your life as a college student.

A case study tells the story of a real-life situation, focusing on the moral complexities involved. It gives you an opportunity to test your moral intuitions—those “gut feelings” you have about what’s right and wrong, and
why. It also provides an opportunity to practice moral reasoning, using the ethical principles that you will be learning, in order to expand on your moral intuition and help you develop a solution to the problem posed in the case.

The case studies in this book can help you make sense of the complex issues and situations you face in college. In fact, after reading some of our cases, you may want to write a case study of your own, based on a dilemma from your own experience.

Discussing these case studies with your fellow students has another benefit: it can help you develop meaningful dialogue about the important issues in your life. By “dialogue,” we mean a special kind of discussion or conversation that involves mutual understanding and, when possible, moral consensus. It is an argumentative process that requires an open mind. To participate, you have to be willing both to argue for your own views and to listen to the arguments of others with an open mind—even when you sharply disagree with them. You must also be willing to consult your conscience and to reason from your intuitive sense of right and wrong. Finally, in a dialogue everyone must be equal. No authority figure should dominate the conversation, because a dialogue is more like a conversation between friends than a lecture or a sermon. Everyone has a right to be heard and taken seriously.

This kind of conversation is essential in a moral community. People in a moral community don’t always agree, but they believe ethical discussions matter, and they try to achieve some shared understanding of what’s right and wrong. We want to encourage you to think of your college or university as a moral community, and we hope this book can help you make it one.

Each chapter in this book will open with a somewhat complex case study that is relevant to the topic of that chapter. After this main case there will be questions and then a discussion. But before you read our discussion of the main case, we urge you to develop your own reactions first—make a few notes about your initial reaction and your answers to the questions. The moral intuitions in your initial reaction are valuable! Then read the discussion. The discussion will analyze the issues involved in the case and suggest approaches you might use to construct a solution, but it won’t give you “the right answer.” (There is rarely one right answer to moral dilemma.)

It will be your job to decide which of the ethical principles that follow might best apply to the case, and then to use the principles you’ve chosen to judge the actions of the people in the case and to argue for what they should do, and why. (Each chapter also contains a number of related “Additional Cases” you can use to practice identifying issues and applying ethical principles.)

What do we mean by “issues” in the case studies and the “ethical principles” you can use to develop solutions to them? Issues are the morally controversial topics involved in the case, such as “cheating—is it sometimes OK?” or “diversity—a desirable goal?” or “alcohol use—the pros and cons.” Cases often will involve several related issues.
Ethical principles are ethical ideas or ideals that people have found useful in reflecting about morally complicated situations. (Because this term is sometimes used in a special, technical way by philosophers, we want to note that we have nothing technical in mind.) There are many ethical principles you could use; in this book, we will concentrate on five particularly useful ones. They come from different moral traditions.

SOME ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

1. The greatest good. This principle judges actions by looking at their consequences. It says that the best actions are those that have the best outcomes for the greatest number of people. So if we want to compare action A to action B, we need to know the consequences of A and B, whether these consequences are good or bad, and whether A or B has the best overall consequences for everyone affected. The principle of the greatest good requires that we always seek the greatest good for the greatest number (a philosophy sometimes referred to as utilitarianism).

2. Equal respect and the Golden Rule. The principle of equal respect assumes that every person is an object of intrinsic worth; that is, each one of us is someone of value and importance just because we are a human being. Therefore, each one of us deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Another way of saying this is that because people have intrinsic worth, they cannot be treated as though they are merely the means to someone else’s ends. It is not right, according to this principle, to use people to get what we want. Everyone is of equal worth, so we must treat everyone fairly.

One way to decide whether we are showing equal respect for people is to apply the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). The Golden Rule instructs us to treat others as we would like to be treated by them. It thus asks us to judge our actions by their consistency. Would we approve of a given action if we were in the other person’s shoes? If not, then very likely we are not treating that person with equal respect.

3. Relationship. This principle judges actions by their effect on the relationships of the people involved. It affirms that the relationships we form with other people add value and meaning to our lives; they are important. This doesn’t mean that our relationships are valuable only if they are useful in advancing our careers or in helping get people to do things for us. Instead relationships such as friendship, companionship, caring, love, and affection are intrinsically worthwhile. These relationships help make life worth living. Sports events, concerts, and trips are more enjoyable when we have someone to share them with. A good conversation may be thought-provoking or comforting. Loving and being loved in turn can provide some of our greatest joys.
But it is difficult to maintain such positive relationships while also treating people unfairly. No meaningful relationship can be built on a foundation of deceit and exploitation. This principle thus asks us to examine actions for their potential to build or to hinder meaningful relationships.

4. Community. This principle evaluates actions based on how they might affect the community involved. Activities that disrupt people’s sense of community are regarded as unethical. The idea of “community” has two aspects, and actions can affect each aspect in various ways.

First, a community is a network of relationships. In healthy communities, people can form nonexploitative and mutually beneficial relationships. In damaged communities, past actions have destroyed some of the personal relationships on which the community depends. Without strong relationships, the community will dissolve; therefore, actions that damage relationships between community members violate the principle of community.

Communities are also structured groups that allow people to pursue shared values and common goals: participants in a religious community desire to worship God together; members of a tennis club want to further their sport and play it with each other; the brothers of a fraternity seek friendship and camaraderie in their House. This principle condemns any action that is inconsistent with the values a community serves, for such actions weaken members’ feeling of shared beliefs and common goals.

For example, if a member of a tennis club constantly called shots “out” when they were in, this would violate both aspects of community. First, it is unlikely that a consistent cheater could retain many friends in the club. Who wants to play with someone who wins by cheating? Such cheating would thus disrupt the club’s network of relationships. Second, since fair scoring is essential to the game, cheating destroys the fairness of the competition and the fun of playing together. By undermining fair play, cheating thus hurts the tennis club community’s sense of shared values.

5. Character growth. Finally, one of the consequences of our actions is to contribute to making us into a certain sort of person. People who behave dishonestly become dishonest people. People who exploit others become exploitative “users.”

We can therefore judge our actions according to our image of the kind of person we would like to be, depending on whether our actions make us more or less like this ideal person. This principle asserts that behaving unethically is likely to harm you eventually, one way or another. Perhaps its ultimate harm is to turn you into the sort of person who no longer cares about being ethical. And if that happens, you are morally lost.

We might also use this principle to think about whether people have a duty to engage in moral leadership. If you observe some unethical behavior and stand by mutely without trying to stop it, might this damage your
character? Could ignoring evil (or merely unpleasantness) make you more evil (or unpleasant) yourself?

**A SAMPLE CASE STUDY ANALYSIS**

Now, let's explore a sample case study of ethically dubious behavior and show you what thinking about ethics can look like in this case.

**The File**

The Co-op was a cooperative residence unit at Memorial College. Memorial was a commuter school. Most of its students were local and lived either with their families or in their own apartments. The Co-op had started as a way for students to save a few dollars on rent and food. A large, somewhat decrepit old house near campus, it was owned and operated by its 25 current residents. It provided a social life for students who would otherwise have been disconnected; members often studied together and hung out together. New members were admitted only with the consent of a governing board, and many students wanted to join, not so much because they needed housing, but because they needed friends. Unfortunately, Co-op members were not known to be models of industry or studiousness. They were only occasionally successful athletes. While they usually managed to avoid failing outright in their academic work, some made it a matter of pride to get by with minimal effort. Few Co-op members permitted intellectual activity to interfere with the real work of having fun and making friends.

John wasn't entirely certain that he wanted to join the Co-op. He had been a reasonably serious student in high school, and he felt that academic work was important to his future. Nevertheless, his college experience so far had been lonely and joyless. He lived alone. He didn't have any place to belong, and he had only a few friends. Thus, when one of those few friends decided to seek admission to the Co-op, John did, too. He was a little surprised that he was admitted, but he was pleased that his social life seemed secured.

Somewhere near the end of his first semester of membership, John began to get a new picture of his role in the Co-op. Carl, the Co-op's vice president, introduced him to The File. The File contained A papers that members of the Co-op had collected from a wide range of large courses. The role of The File was to provide a database of successful papers that Co-op members could use in developing their own papers for various courses. What “developing” seemed to mean was that members were under strict instructions to modify any paper that they turned in sufficiently so that the plagiarism would not be obvious. The File even contained a meticulous record of when each paper had been used and to whom it had been submitted. Each paper was on disk so that adaptation was easy.
Carl explained to John that because he seemed academically talented, it was expected that he would be more of a provider than a user. Apparently each year the Co-op carefully selected a few providers to assist their less fortunate members. They would contribute their better papers to The File. Indeed, they were occasionally advised as to which courses needed additional contributions, and were expected to “seriously consider” enrolling for such courses. The providers, Carl assured John, were especially valued members of the Co-op, except for those selfish few who put their own interests ahead of the interests of the group. They often seemed to move out after a year or so because they just didn’t fit in. Carl knew that John would fit in.

ISSUES

Consider some of the things we might ask about the ethical issues in this case. First, is anything wrong with the Co-op’s maintaining The File? It seems intended to assist members in cheating or plagiarism. Why might cheating or plagiarism be wrong? Might The File have legitimate uses? Is it wrong for a student to get a grade that the student hasn’t earned?

Is John being exploited? Carl seems to be offering John a trade of friendship for work. Is there anything wrong with such a trade? If so, what? Aren’t many human relationships based on such exchanges? How does a trade of friendship for work differ from a trade of a salary for work? Is John being coerced?

What are the effects of The File on the college community? Is the community being harmed? Does the college community have purposes that are undermined by The File? Does the Co-op have any responsibility for the welfare of the college community? Are the students of this college even members of a community, or are they just customers paying a fee for a service?

APPLYING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES TO THE CASE

Let’s see how each of the moral principles previously discussed can be used to think about why the behavior in “The File” is unethical. Each principle can be the basis for a different argument about the case. You may want to consider whether you agree with the arguments we make using each principle, and if there might be other applications of these principles besides those developed as follows.

1. The greatest good. We can apply the principle of “the greatest good” to the case by thinking about the consequences of using The File to plagiarize or cheat. Does cheating benefit a greater number of people than not cheating? Well, there are some benefits to cheating, especially for those who are not caught. But it seems likely that there are also many negative consequences, for the cheaters themselves as well as for others. First, when
students cheat, they do not learn, and so they deny themselves the benefit of learning. Second, when some students cheat and others do not, cheating distorts the value of the cheater’s grade in comparison to the grades of those who don’t cheat. Honest students are denied the benefit of their work, and so they are harmed by cheating. (Indeed, if cheating were so commonplace that all students’ grades became suspect, everyone would be harmed; no one would believe college transcripts or grade point averages. See Chapter 2.)

Using this principle, it seems that cheating cannot provide the greatest good for the greatest number, and thus The File is unethical.

2. Equal respect and the Golden Rule. This principle supports an argument that Carl is exploiting John. Carl does not seem to care about John. He treats John as if he is worth being nice to only insofar as he is useful. Thus he treats John as a means to his, Carl’s, ends, not as someone who is worthy of dignity and respect in himself.

If we apply the Golden Rule here, we might ask: “Would Carl approve of The File, and of recruiting some bright but friendless person to provide for it, if Carl himself were the person being exploited?” Quite likely Carl would not be willing to be used in such a way. If so, then Carl is being inconsistent and not treating John with equal respect. Because his behavior violates this principle, it is unethical.

3. Relationship. It seems likely that Carl couldn’t have recruited John to the Co-op if he had been honest about the role he expected John to perform. Because Carl means to exploit John, he must also deceive him; and deceit and exploitation are no basis for friendship. John is outside the circle of friends in the Co-op. As long as its members do not care for John’s welfare, they cannot be his friends, no matter what they pretend; their relationships with him will be false and insincere. This principle thus condemns Carl’s behavior as unethical because of its effects on his (and other Co-op members’) relationships with John.

4. Community. College is a kind of moral community. A college or university is organized around shared values such as the pursuit of truth and the dissemination of knowledge. Dishonesty disrupts such a community, because when some people are intellectually dishonest, learning cannot thrive, and friendships cannot form around the collective pursuit of shared values. So according to this principle, maintaining The File is unethical because it would seem to disrupt the college community.

5. Character growth. This principle asks us to think about how Carl's actions could be affecting his character. What kind of a person is he becoming? His behavior with John seems deceitful and exploitative, but he might not want to think of himself as a deceitful, exploitative person. How can he avoid it?

Carl might justify his conduct by rationalizing, saying to himself that he’s not really hurting John. He might even claim to be helping him in some
way. Or he might tell himself that John deserves this treatment, by attaching a disparaging name to John like “nerd” or “dork,” and persuading himself that somehow it’s all right to exploit someone with such unfavorable traits. If John is a member of a different race, religion, or ethnic group, Carl might use this as a justification.

Such reasoning would suggest that Carl’s moral damage to himself is even greater than we had supposed. Not only is he becoming deceitful and exploitative, but in order to keep thinking of himself as a good person, he must engage in rationalization and self-delusion. To feel good about his behavior, he must lie to himself—both about himself and about John. He thus increases the harm done to both of them.

This principle also suggests that students who use The File to cheat may hurt their character development in the long run. Not only do they fail to learn when they plagiarize papers, but by passing off someone else’s work as their own, they must knowingly lie. This lack of integrity can lead them to be distrusted by others and may eventually become a source of pain to themselves.

Are other principles involved in this case? Of course. In fact, in developing these we have hinted at others, such as honesty, privacy, and trust. Our reasons for selecting these principles are that we believe that they are broad enough to allow you to reflect seriously about most ethical problems, and that using them to discuss issues will eventually lead you to other important ethical concepts. It is also significant that many thinkers throughout the history of philosophy have viewed these concepts as among those most central to ethical reflection.

As you analyze the case studies that follow in this book, we’d like you to keep in mind three ideas that will help you come to workable—and ethical—solutions to the problems they pose.

First, remember that people have thought about these issues before, even if not in exactly this form. Your dialogues and solutions will be much better if you learn all you can about what previous thinkers in religion, law, philosophy, art, and culture have said about ethics in their fields. Be respectful of these traditions of moral reflection, but not subservient—you may see something they didn’t.

Second, keep in mind that you have a conscience as well as a mind. Dialogues and analyses of case studies must appeal to your conscience as well as to your judgment. Whatever decisions you reach, they should be both reasonable and conscientious; they should not only make sense but also feel fair. And assume that other people have a conscience too—at the end of the day, everyone is responsible for his own actions and decisions.

And last, the fact that you are ultimately responsible for your own choices does not mean you should ignore the views of others, nor become a moral isolationist. In life, many times what “we” decide counts more than what “I” want. There will be occasions when you will need to act and
decide as a member of a group. Engaging in moral dialogue with your group can help you learn a lot, and what's more, it can produce better solutions to the cases.

In the chapters that follow, we are going to provide you with a set of cases that seem to us to represent a reasonable range of ethical issues that are especially important to students. We are not going to attempt any deep or detailed analysis of these cases. We will, however, follow each case with some questions that will point to possible applications of some of the principles we have sketched. When we have finished, we will return to some of the questions asked in the first paragraph of this introduction.

**FOR FURTHER INQUIRY**

Where do the five different principles we've discussed come from? Do some of them conflict with others? Are some merely applications of other, more important principles? And how do you know which ones to apply to which issues?

Reading the ideas of some of the thinkers who helped to develop these principles can help you answer such questions. Here are a few of the original sources for each ethical principle we've described:

**The greatest good.** Utilitarianism, the idea that the best or most just society is the one that produces the greatest good for the greatest number, is represented in two works by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73). In *Utilitarianism*, Mill lays out the basic principles of utilitarianism; *On Liberty* provides a utilitarian argument for individuality (freedom of lifestyle) and freedom of opinion. Mill's arguments are, perhaps, the best source for understanding the commitments required for a free society.

**Equal respect and the Golden Rule.** In the modern era, the main philosophical competitor to utilitarianism has been the ethics of German thinker Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant resisted the view that actions should be judged primarily by the desirability of their consequences, and argued instead that actions should be evaluated according to whether or not they show consistency and respect for persons. These views are developed in Kant's central ethical works, *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Mill's and Kant's Enlightenment philosophies have had a profound impact not only on how we understand our own ethical choices, but also on how we evaluate the morality of liberal democratic institutions. For a contemporary classic that takes a Kantian rather than a utilitarian approach to political philosophy, see American philosopher John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*.

**A Theory of Justice.** Rawls argues that utilitarianism is defective, in part, because it permits some to benefit at the expense of others so long as
the average welfare is increased. He insists that justice consists not in the greatest good for the greatest number, but in a scheme of social cooperation that all can accept under conditions of equality and impartiality.

**Community, relationship, and character growth.** Some contemporary philosophers have argued that both of these Enlightenment philosophies fail to take into account the centrality of community in human life. One important source of this argument is Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. In his book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that our sense of self and our moral beliefs are necessarily shaped by our family backgrounds and the communities that form us. Thus our ethical choices are not purely rational, as Mill or Kant believe, but deeply influenced by our personal and cultural histories, which we must try to understand.

Many communitarians consider themselves influenced by the works of Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), who tries to show how community, relationships, and character growth are linked. Aristotle argues that human beings are social and political animals who live best only in well-ordered communities that sustain the virtues, such as honesty, justice, courage, and moderation, necessary for both good lives and good communities. Aristotle also argues a point that we will frequently echo: in judging conduct it is important to remember that moral virtues or habits are formed by engaging in moral acts. Aristotle’s major works include *Politics*, which contains his philosophical theory of the state, a detailed study of the forms and methods of government, and a vision of the ideal state; and *Nicomachean Ethics*, which summarizes his ethical views at the end of his life.

Some contemporary religious ethicists have also argued for the centrality of community. An illustrative work is *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* by Stanley Hauerwas.

Some feminist philosophers have recently developed an ethic that emphasizes relationships and character growth in opposition to the more abstract concerns involved in ethics emphasizing justice. Two examples are *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* by American philosopher Nel Noddings and *In a Different Voice* by American Carol Gilligan. Noddings sets out “an ethic of caring” in which caring for others and being cared for by them, rather than principles or rules, form the basis of our moral responses; ethical judgments should be particular to each situation, rather than universally applicable. Gilligan’s work contrasts women’s moral reasoning, in which relationships are central, to the more typically male emphasis on justice, described in Lawrence Kohlberg’s developmental theory of moral reasoning.

Finally, two works specifically discuss the character of university communities: *The Idea of a University* by John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801–90) and *The Ideal of the University* by contemporary thinker Robert Paul Wolff.
REFERENCES


