



AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**ETHICS**

KEVIN GIBSON

# An Introduction to Ethics

**Kevin Gibson**  
*Marquette University*

**PEARSON**

Boston Columbus Indianapolis New York San Francisco Upper Saddle River  
Amsterdam Cape Town Dubai London Madrid Milan Munich Paris Montréal Toronto  
Delhi Mexico City São Paulo Sydney Hong Kong Seoul Singapore Taipei Tokyo

**Editor in Chief:** Ashley Dodge  
**Acquisitions Editor:** Susan Hartman  
**Program Manager:** Reena Dalal  
**Director of Marketing:** Brandy Dawson  
**Senior Marketing Manager:** Kelly May  
**Marketing Coordinator:** Jessica Warren  
**Managing Editor:** Denise Forlow  
**Operations Specialist:** Eileen Corallo  
**Art Director:** Jayne Conte  
**Cover Designer:** Bruce Kenselaar  
**Cover Art:** Shutterstock  
**Digital Media Editor:** Brian Hyland  
**Full-Service Project Management:** Sneha Pant/PreMediaGlobal  
**Printer/Binder:** STP Courier  
**Cover Printer:** STP Courier  
**Text Font:** 10/12 Minion

Credits and acknowledgments borrowed from other sources and reproduced, with permission, in this textbook appear on appropriate page within text.

---

Copyright © 2014 by Pearson Education, Inc. All rights reserved. Manufactured in the United States of America. This publication is protected by Copyright, and permission should be obtained from the publisher prior to any prohibited reproduction, storage in a retrieval system, or transmission in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or likewise. To obtain permission(s) to use material from this work, please submit a written request to Pearson Education, Inc., Permissions Department, One Lake Street, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458, or you may fax your request to 201-236-3290.

Many of the designations by manufacturers and sellers to distinguish their products are claimed as trademarks. Where those designations appear in this book, and the publisher was aware of a trademark claim, the designations have been printed in initial caps or all caps.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gibson, Kevin, 1955–

An introduction to ethics / Kevin Gibson, Marquette University. — First edition.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-205-70854-3

ISBN-10: 0-205-70854-4

1. Ethics. I. Title.

BJ1012.G535 2014

170—dc23

2013022347

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

**PEARSON**

ISBN 10: 0-205-70854-4

ISBN 13: 978-0-205-70854-3

*With love to Elizabeth who brings out the best in me*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# CONTENTS

## **Introduction 1**

### **Chapter 1 Philosophy and Ethics 4**

- What Is Philosophy? 4
- What Is Ethics? 6
- What Are the Different Senses of Ethics? 6
- Can Ethics Give Us Answers? 8
- Summary 9

### **Chapter 2 Moral Foundations 10**

- Ethics and the Law 10
- Ethics and Religion 11
- The Nature of Conscience 12
- Ethical Projects 14
- Varieties of Philosophical Ethics 15
  - Descriptive Ethics 15
  - Metaethics 16
  - Normative Ethics 19
  - Recent Challenges to Ethical Theory 20
- Summary 21

### **Chapter 3 Egoism and Hedonism 22**

- Self-Interest or Cooperation? 22
- Machiavelli 23
- Hobbes 24
- Rand 25
- Strategic Ethics—Game Theory 26
- Challenges 28
- Hedonism 30
- Summary 32

### **Chapter 4 Relativism 34**

- Case—Edward Downes 34
- Challenges 36
- Relativism v. Absolutism 38
- Moral Imperialism 39
- Moral Imagination 40
- Summary 41

**Chapter 5 The Authentic Self 43**

- Summerhill 43
- Rousseau 44
- Nietzsche 47
- Sartre 51
- Buber 55
- Summary 58

**Chapter 6 Utilitarianism 59**

- Case—Vaccination 59
- Utilitarian Approaches 60
- Bentham 60
- Mill 61
- Act and Rule Utilitarianism 62
- Contemporary Utilitarianism 64
- Singer 65
- Challenges 66
  - Problems with Calculation 66
  - Autonomy 68
  - Impartiality 69
  - Agency 70
  - Adaptive Preference Formation 70
  - Probabilities 71
  - Defining Happiness 72
  - The Expanding Sphere of Moral Concern 73
- Summary 74

**Chapter 7 Duty-Based Ethics—Deontology 75**

- Case—The Study of Aids 75
- Kant 76
  - The Good Will 77
  - The Categorical Imperative 78
  - The Conflict of Duties 81
  - Perfect and Imperfect Duties 81
- Moral Luck 82
- W. D. Ross 83
- The Doctrine of Double Effect 84
- Challenges 86
- Summary 88

**Chapter 8 Virtue-Based Ethics 90**

- Case—Booker T. Washington 90
- Virtue-Based Ethics 91
- Aristotle 92
- Alasdair Macintyre and “After Virtue” 95
- Challenges 98
- Summary 100

**Chapter 9 Rights and Justice 102**

- Case—E-Waste in China 103
- Rights 104
- Nonhuman Rights 107
- Challenges to Rights 108
- Justice 111
- Retributive and Restorative Justice 111
- Distributive Justice 112
- Libertarianism 113
  - Nozick 113
  - Market Morality 114
- Egalitarianism 114
  - Rawls 114
- Challenges 116
- Summary 118

**Chapter 10 Feminist Insights 120**

- Case—Margaret Hossack 120
- Essentialism and Equality 122
- The Ethics of Care 123
- Ethics and Patriarchy 124
- Separatist Feminism 127
- Challenges 127
- Summary 129

**Chapter 11 Postmodern Critiques 131**

- Case—The Herald Disaster 131
- Modernist Ethics 133
- Habermas 135
- Foucault 137
- Rorty 138



Levinas 140  
Challenges 142  
Summary 144

**Chapter 12 Non-Western Ethics 146**

Case—Spitting on the Buddha 146  
Confucianism 148  
    Jen 150  
    Li 151  
    Fate 152  
    Challenges 152  
    Summary 153  
Tetsuro Watsuji 154  
    The Individual and the Community 154  
    Trust 155  
    Challenges 155  
Taoism 156  
    Taoist Language 157  
    Challenges 158  
Buddhism 159  
    Suffering and Change 160  
    Challenges 163  
Africana Ethics 165  
    The Africana Sage Tradition 166  
Challenges 167  
Summary—Non-Western Ethics 168

**Glossary 171**

**Index 177**

# Introduction

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, post-modern, 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.

This text represents the efforts of many people. I especially want to acknowledge the editorial staff at Pearson Education, my department chair, James South, and my graduate assistant, Jennifer Fenton.

# Philosophy and Ethics

We all have beliefs and opinions that shape our lives. We often *do* philosophy when we question our assumptions and demand clear meanings, and we can do it without reference to grand theories or technical jargon. However, arguments often grind to a halt and become a contest of wills unless we look more closely at some of the ways people come to their opinions and link them to various conclusions.

## WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy is both an activity and a body of knowledge. Philosophers are rarely content to accept the status quo at face value. We want to know not so much how far we've gone in quantifiable terms, but instead whether we are on the right track. It would be wrong, though, to think that philosophers agonize over every decision and policy constantly—that would make everyday life impossible. However, we sometimes face serious issues, individually and as a society, when it is appropriate to take the time to reflect on what we are doing and why. Thankfully, many great thinkers have contributed to a body of knowledge that will help us sort out questions that vex us at this very fundamental level. Not everyone has to dedicate his or her life to philosophy, but it offers tools to help us confront and resolve some of life's most difficult problems—or to recognize more clearly what makes them so troublesome.

The discipline of philosophy is often associated with the seminal thinker Socrates (ca. 470–399 BCE). At one point, Socrates angered the city fathers of Athens so much that they put him on trial for his life on the charge of subverting the youth. According to the Plato's dialogue *The Apology*, Socrates' response was telling:

For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has given the state and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Plato, *The Apology*, 30e

His point is that we can maintain the way things are, but there is value in revisiting our working beliefs. This is true especially when we face novel or difficult issues.

One function of philosophy, then, is to critically examine basic concepts and ideas, and their wider implications for everyday life. By providing us with the analytical framework to examine ideas and competing claims, philosophy allows us to see if they are valid and justified. For example, one theory of justice suggests that we should help those who are unable to benefit from the virtues of the “genetic lottery”—intelligence, health, aptitudes, and even the capacity to do hard work. In other words, the theory suggests we have a responsibility to help others who have, through no fault of their own, a more difficult struggle to survive and prosper. A contrasting theory, however, says that we are entitled to whatever we earn and we don’t owe anything to anyone else. By this reasoning, if we are able to use our genetic gifts to generate wealth, we *could* help others, but doing so remains our individual choice.

When we look at these sorts of claims more closely, we realize that there is more going on than a simple matter of arbitrarily choosing this or that theory. If we explore the basic assumptions people make, then we have the possibility of finding areas of agreement and at the same time testing whether our own intuitions lead clearly to the conclusions we draw. For instance, it might seem obvious at first that we are entitled to what we earn and should spend it how we wish, but it turns out that people disagree about notions of property, ownership, and the scope of personal choice. Engaging in open dialogue with others, analyzing their reasoning and evaluating our own, challenges us to explain and justify our views and perhaps revise them if our logic or basic beliefs are somehow faulty.

Philosophy may not give us the means to reach conclusive answers—in fact, it frequently raises more questions than it resolves. On the other hand, it raises the standard of justification from **assertion** to **argument**. An assertion declares something without any support or need for justification. An argument is a connected series of claims leading to a conclusion, and when we proceed to examine every step in the series, we find that each individual claim may be true or false, or the links between them may be invalid. In philosophy all assumptions are up for reexamination. For instance, if we talk about why we should keep our earnings, we have to consider what it means to have the right to property and if that comes about by virtue of the society in which we live. Additionally, we might consider our duties to others and whether our ability to earn has a consequent responsibility to help the less fortunate.

Philosophers contend that it is always worth reflecting on our foundational beliefs and the way they play out in our actions. As Socrates famously observed:

The life which is unexamined is not worth living.<sup>2</sup>

While this phrase can be read in many ways, it chides us to reflect on our purpose and goals in life. We can go along from day-to-day, but it suggests that perhaps the best life is one where we have taken the time and effort to think deeply about what we do and why. Philosophy as a discipline gives us structure and tools that will enable us to do that well.

These tools include **logic**, which enables us to examine our reasoning to ensure it is consistent and reaches valid conclusions; the **history of philosophy**, which allows us to look at the works of philosophers across ages and cultures so we don’t have to constantly reinvent material that has been refined through discussion and criticism over many years, sometimes centuries;

---

<sup>2</sup>Plato, *The Apology*, 38a

**metaphysics**, which deals with issues not readily addressed by science, such as whether we are minds and souls as well as bodies; **epistemology**, or the study of knowledge, which challenges us to defend that we really know what we claim to know.

## WHAT IS ETHICS?

We can initially define **ethics** as the study of the origin and scope of the language of **morality**. **Morals** are the values that may derive from a theory or set of principles that concern good and bad, right and wrong, justice and fairness.

Ethics can be construed as theorizing about the proper regulating mechanisms for our behavior. It tells us what to aspire to and also constrains our actions. It is informed by psychological elements, for example, sympathy, generosity, compassion, kindness, concern for others, or even revenge or outrage. However, these traits can lead to confusing and sometimes conflicting impulses, and thus it is useful to codify them in some way. We can do that by using the power of reasoning to work out priorities, make our actions consistent and predictable, and communicate our ideas of right and wrong, and justice and fairness to others.

There are continuing debates about the origins and mix of our dispositions and reason: Some say that we can see the hand of the divine that allows us to rise above our animal nature, whereas others think that ethical practices are evidence of our evolution as a species. For the present we can put those debates aside and recognize that all human societies exhibit morality, for example, cooperation, child care, and the importance of keeping promises. Moreover, we not only have those traits but also are capable of critiquing and improving our behavior and perhaps that of others as well.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT SENSES OF ETHICS?

In daily language we use the term **ethical** in a variety of ways. Sometimes when we talk about an ethical person or discuss others doing something ethical, the connotation is that a person is doing something unusual and praiseworthy. For example, we may use the term to refer to people who do deeds such as serving at a soup kitchen, as if their actions are somehow distinctly heroic or saintly. We might suspect they are content with either less material wealth or less free time than we are, or perhaps they were born with an exceptional disposition to serve others. The problem with this view is that it makes ethics remote and something which applies only to a select few, with the implication that the rest of us need not aspire to behave or act any better than we already do.

In contrast, we can consider a compelling alternative by treating moral decisions in a broad sense as just as much a part of our lives as any other choices. We are not born with a full-fledged sense of right and wrong, but we learn through trial and error as we mature, and even people who do admirable deeds have inevitably made mistakes along the way. Thus, it is not a matter of such people living in a different reality of personal martyrdom or misguided notions of happiness. Rather, some people simply put more weight on certain values than others. Morality, then, should not be seen as some sort of special state for some individual saints in special situations, but as a common dimension of the regular choices we all face routinely.

When we live day-to-day, we probably don't ordinarily distinguish moral questions from all others, deciding in each such case whether to be good or bad. More typically we judge people on their moral consistency in various situations and fault them if they adapt their values to changing circumstances around them. Thus rather than thinking of moral actions as things like

working in a soup kitchen, a more suitable model of morality might be to say that moral elements are mixed in with everything we do. We make choices all the time using a constellation of factors, one of which will be the morality of the issue. The moral aspect isn't always at the forefront and has to compete with other impulses and considerations.

Consider when you buy soap; it probably matters that it is effective, smells good, and is priced reasonably. The question of whether the manufacturer made animals suffer unnecessarily in testing the product may come into the decision, but it has to battle with the other considerations. Perhaps if the concern has been highlighted in the media, or you as the buyer are particularly sensitive to the issue, it will tip your purchasing decision. The point remains that for most of us morality is not a separate and isolated activity, but part and parcel of our regular existence and the various choices we make.

A narrower sense of *ethical* describes a set of rules or conventions within a specialized field. Thus some institutions or professions have “codes of ethics.” These codes tend to give specific rules about particular situations in which members might find themselves. For example, a doctor is prohibited by his or her professional organization from having a romantic relationship with a patient, or an accountant doing an audit cannot invest in a company when he or she has discovered insider information not available to the general public. Significantly, although the doctor/patient relationship is a special and privileged one in our society, it is important to realize that medical ethics is *not* a distinct morality with a completely different set of governing principles. Instead it operates as a special case that overlies a general backdrop of principled behavior, such as telling the truth or treating patients fairly. That is, we work from the very widest sense of common ethics first, and then narrow it down to deal with ever more special circumstances. Hence, it is important to begin by understanding the broad picture about the way individuals and communities have reasoned about the proper ways to treat one another.

Seeing ethics only in a narrow sense may lead to two important misunderstandings. The first suggests that we have different sets of behavior for the various compartments of our lives—business, friendship, romance, and so forth. Someone with this approach might claim that we should behave differently in particular situations—“all is fair in love and war” or “business is business,” where all morality depends on the situation. While this might be true in some limited spheres, it demands that the individual knows where the boundaries of each compartment are, and that everyone involved has a shared knowledge of the appropriate practices. Thus we expect to be fooled by a magician, perhaps, but in general we operate with background conditions of trust and honesty. In normal interpersonal dealings, we anticipate that we aren't routinely being lied to or constantly duped. As it turns out, moral infractions are dramatic in large part *because* they depart from the shared expectations we have and use in our everyday lives. To illustrate the point, imagine, for instance, what a world would be like where no one could ever be trusted and everything had to be policed constantly.

Second, a narrow view implies that ethics is an external set of rules that we are required to follow, and slavishly doing so discharges our moral responsibility. If this were true, then being ethical would just consist in knowing the rules and obeying them. It would not allow the individual to question values enshrined in the code. In contrast, most of us have significant freedom and discretion in the way we behave, and there is considerable latitude in the interpretation and application of the rules we live by. Even voluntarily joining a rule-oriented organization such as the military or a religious order involves initial assent by recruits, which represents their individual moral choice.



Taking an expansive view at the outset creates a baseline of mutual understandings which can then be refined or made more specific as necessary. Philosophy and ethics provide powerful resources for navigating both the more difficult fundamental questions and problems we face, and subsequently for those decisions we make in our regular activities, interactions, and relationships.

## CAN ETHICS GIVE US ANSWERS?

A complaint about philosophy in general and especially ethics is that it does not provide us with answers. This suggests that the goal of ethics is to come up with a computer-style algorithm where we feed in the facts and issues and get a neat answer to our problems in return.

While this has considerable appeal, think about what it would be like if we had this ability. When faced with a value question, we would fill in some sort of questionnaire, feed it into some impersonal machine, and then follow its commands to the letter. Suppose, for example, we are puzzled about whether to use our limited resources to either provide medical care or install traffic lights at an intersection. Both have the potential to save some lives and the cost is roughly the same. We could vaccinate a large population and ensure that, say, five people would not get a deadly disease. Alternatively, we could install traffic signals likely to prevent most accidents in a location that has claimed roughly the same number of fatalities over the last few years. We go to our computerized program, respond to a series of prompts on a screen, and get the response to use the money for vaccinations.

But how does that make you feel? Would you be comfortable delegating your moral decisions to a third party? In effect, that is what we are asking if we demand a definitive answer for each case we encounter.

First, we might legitimately worry that all factors haven't been included in the decision: An automated questionnaire may fail to consider all the relevant factors. Perhaps the vaccine has its own associated risks, for instance, and these need to be brought into the deliberations. Or perhaps some people may feel that there is a morally relevant difference between acting and failing to act, although the results may be the same; these concerns would need to be factored in somehow. Indeed, however we structure the formulaic questions around a moral issue, there is always a nagging feeling that there is more to be asked to pin down the most important aspects of a case at hand.

Moreover, we might be concerned about the way the computer was programmed. What assumptions were made, or what approaches were chosen if there were two or more opposing viewpoints? A program might give more weight to some factors than others, or make logical links between issues that we might dismiss as unimportant. The software could, for example, give great importance to the fact that drivers have responsibility for their driving, whereas it is hard to blame someone for catching a virus. Still, such a link isn't completely self-evident and universally accepted. Even if the machine had flawless logic, we would still likely have some objections to the guiding principles it uses to reach its conclusions.

One recurring theme in ethical thinking is that you are ultimately responsible for your own moral decisions, and there is rarely someone else better suited to make them on your behalf. Consequently ethical theory does not do the work for you—it is a tool that gives an analytical framework to help make appropriate distinctions and discover some of the more subtle areas in a moral argument. Hence it won't, by itself, provide answers, and perhaps it is the process of thinking through a problem that emerges as the most valuable part of reaching a suitable answer.

Theory will help provide the critical questions about which factors ought to be considered in our decisions, what sort of principles ought to direct our behavior, and how we should act.

---

## Summary

Ethical theory is tremendously helpful when we form our arguments and conclusions. Eventually we may adopt a specific theory completely, or we may choose to draw elements from several established theories, or we may combine some of their insights to create something new and unique. Whatever approach we take, studying ethics will enhance our thinking, giving us a theoretical conceptual apparatus with practical implications. Thus clarifying the questions and discovering what an adequate answer will look like are the least we can expect from studying philosophy. At its best, it can provide us with new perspectives and a richer understanding of the world and our place in it.

As we go through life, we will encounter moral issues. We will inevitably need to make choices or take stands one way or another. We are all individually responsible for choices we make and for the consequences of our personal philosophical views and actions. Good argument takes the time to lay out the groundwork and various positions involved, and experience suggests that it is therefore wise to give time to reflection and balanced consideration about what constitutes right and wrong before we make important decisions unreflectively in the heat of the moment.