THE DISCIPLINE OF ETHICS:
AN INTRODUCTION

1. The Vocabulary of Ethics

Of all matters in ethics, the meanings of the terms have caused the most acrimony and dispute. Since the earliest of the Socratic dialogues, we have argued about the meaning of key terms like morals, ethics, virtue, piety, justice, and others. Given the very limited purposes in this introduction, we will simply stipulate at this point how we intend to use the key terms of ethics, observing only that our usage is reasonably widely accepted and as far as possible, theory-free. More than that no philosopher will claim. In what follows you may expect the following words to be used in general in these ways:

- **Morals or Morality**: The rules that govern our behavior as persons to persons. Also, duties. Examples:
  - Don't hurt people.
  - Don't tell lies.
  - Don't take more than your fair share.

  A note on morals: all you really need to know you probably learned in kindergarten. The rules are easy to know and remember—but very hard to follow consistently.

- **Values**: States of affairs that are desired by and for people and that we want to increase; ends, goals. Examples:
  - Health (vs. sickness)
  - Wealth (vs. poverty)
  - Happiness in general
  - Freedom, justice, respect for human rights

- **Virtues**: Conditions of people that are desirable both for the people themselves (as part of a fully human life) and for the good functioning of the society. Examples:
  - Wisdom (vs. ignorance or irrationality)
  - Courage (vs. weakness or unreliability)
  - Self-control (vs. greed or violence)
  - Justice (vs. egoism, favoritism, or dishonesty)

- **Ethics**: Properly speaking, the study of morals, values, and virtues to discover:
  - Their theoretical links and relationships
  - How they work (or don't work) together in practice
Other understandings of the term **ethics**:

More generally, the whole field of morals, values, and virtues—the whole study of our attempts to order human conduct toward the right and the good.

More specifically, a **professional ethic** is a particular code of rules and understandings worked out by the members of a profession to govern their own practice.

- Ethical Principles: Very general **concepts that sum up a range of morals, values, and virtues** from which moral imperatives can be derived. In ordinary conversation we make no distinction between the notions of “morality” and “ethics,” “moral obligations” and “ethical duties,” “moral codes” and “codes of ethics.” But in philosophy, as above, we may distinguish “morals” from “ethics,” according to the level of analysis intended. “Morality” governs conduct, tells us to “obey the rules,” the rules that attach to our social roles or arise from our traditional communities or govern civil relationships generally. Morality calls our attention to the fundamental commitments with which we order our lives. Morality tells us not to steal: One tempted to steal is morally bound not to steal, and one who habitually succumbs to that temptation is an immoral person. “Ethics,” on the other hand, is primarily an academic discipline; it has to do with forms of reasoning rather than conduct; it reflects on, compares, and analyzes rules, and it traces the logical connections between fundamental principles and the moral commitments that guide us. Ethics derives the principle of respect for the property of others from which we further derive the rule that we should not take the property of others without authorization. Ethics describes the conditions under which the principle fails to apply or can be overridden. We can live moral lives without knowing ethics, but we cannot discuss the morality of our lives, defend it, put it into historical context, without the intellectual tools to do so. Ethics provides those tools.

### 2. The Moral Commitments of Ethics

Morality is a precondition for ethics, in two ways. First, morality, as a shorthand way of referring to all our transactions with each other, is the subject matter of ethics, just as our transactions with the physical world form the subject matter of science. Second, ethics is an activity, and any activity requires certain moral commitments of those who take part in it. We cannot do anything well without moral commitments to excellence, or anything for any length of time without the moral virtue of perseverance. The practice of ethics also has moral commitments appropriate to it. These commitments, to **reason** and to **impartiality**, can rightly be demanded of any person who would take ethics seriously.

In any troubling case, we have first an obligation to think about it, to examine all the options available to us. We must not simply act on prejudice, or
impulsively, just because we have the power to do so. We call this obligation the commitment to reason. The commitment to reason entails a willingness to critically scrutinize one's own moral judgments, and to submit them for public scrutiny by others; further, to change those judgments and modify the commitments that led to them if they turn out (upon reflection) to be not the best available. This commitment rules out several approaches to moral decision-making, including several versions of "intuitionism" (a refusal to engage in reasoning about moral judgment at all, on grounds that apprehension of moral truth is a simple perception, not open to critical analysis), and all varieties of "dogmatism" (an insistence that all moral disagreements are resolved by some preferred set of rules or doctrines; that inside that set there is nothing that can be questioned, and that outside that set there is nothing of any moral worth).

Second, we have an obligation of impartiality, a duty to examine the options from an objective standpoint, a standpoint that everyone could adopt, without bias. We want to take everyone who has a stake in the outcome ("stakeholders," we will call them) into account. Since this consideration for other persons is the foundation of morality, we sometimes call this perspective the moral point of view. The commitment to impartiality entails a willingness to give equal consideration to the rights, interests, and choices of all parties to the situation in question. This commitment to impartial judgment has one essential role in the study of ethics: Once we have decided that all persons are to count equally in the calculations and that each is to count as one and as no more than one, we have the unit we need to evaluate the expected benefit and harm to come from the choices before us, to weigh the burdens placed and the rights honored. We also know that if anyone's wants, needs, votes, or choices are to be taken seriously and weighed in the final balance, then everyone's wants and needs of that type must be weighed equally. That is, if anyone is accorded respect and moral consideration, then all must be. We can derive most of the moral imperatives that we use from this single commitment.

By way of example, the familiar Golden Rule, that we ought to treat others as we would have them treat us, is a fine preliminary statement of those commitments. With regard to anything we plan to do that will affect others, we ought not just to go ahead without reflection. We ought to ask, how would we like it if someone did this to us? That consideration is perfectly adequate as a satisfaction of the moral commitments that precede ethics. In general it may be said, that if we will not agree to submit our decisions to reason, and to attempt to see the situation from the point of view of all who are caught up in it, ethics is impossible.

3. Subjective Relativism as a Challenge to Ethics

One obstacle to doing ethics of any kind, business or otherwise, in the contemporary Western community, is the prevalence of a superficial ethical orientation known as "subjective relativism." Subjective relativism violates the commitments to reason and impartiality, and has the effect (usually intended) of making ethics impossible. To make the commitments clearer, it may be worthwhile examining the errors of subjective relativism.
Relativism denies any approach to ethics which holds that there are no absolute or unchanging moral principles, that the rules governing each situation are to be determined by their relation to something else—the customs or culture of the country, for instance, or the desires of the participants. Subjectivism insists that the sole source of knowledge or authority is in the perception of the individual. "Subjective relativism," then, as a philosophical position, declares that each person is his own authority on the moral life and the source and measure of his own moral principles. On this reasoning, each person has the right to decide on all matters of right and wrong. According to subjective relativism, what's right for you may not be right for me; no one has any right to impose morality on anyone else. So there is really no point, the doctrine continues, in arguing about decisions on matters of morals or learning about justifying moral judgments according to reason, because there is no need to justify them in any way at all. And that is why, subjective relativism concludes, there is no need to study ethics.

Note that the position is both anti-reason (there is no need, or way, to subject moral judgment to reasonable criticism) and dogmatic (on the areas of morality that affect me, my opinions constitute an absolute and final authority, not to be questioned by others). We will get nowhere with ethics as long as this view is taken seriously. But it is taken seriously, in that world that lies outside our classrooms and committees, and it is instructive to see why.

The common public justification of subjective relativism (setting aside the philosophers' more elaborate analysis) seems to follow this line of reasoning: First, we live under a constitutional government, protected by a firm Bill of Rights. "Freedom of speech" is the name of one of our fundamental beliefs. Freedom of speech entails freedom of conscience: Each person has the right, indeed the obligation, to think out ethical and political issues and to come to reasoned conclusions on ethical and political matters. (True enough.) Further, each person has the right (within certain obvious limits) to express that opinion without anyone else having the right to object to, or anyway interfere with, such speech. (Also true.) Further, we live in a pluralistic democracy. We are a collection of very different cultures, but we agree on two basic principles: first, the innate dignity of each individual and second, the right of each cultural community to maintain its identity, including its characteristic beliefs and teachings (as long as these are within the law). That means that we have a duty to treat all citizens with respect. We also have the duty to promote tolerance, or acceptance, of all our citizens, for what they are and for the culture from which they come. (So far, so good.)

Meanwhile, we consider it very bad manners to go around telling people that we think they are wrong, especially morally wrong. But if we have many different cultures, we are bound to have disagreements, including serious disagreements, about matters of morality.

All these points add up to a national culture of "respectful disagreement": In America, it is one of our proudest boasts that citizens can very seriously disagree with each other on matters of policy and moral right, and yet each will treat the other with respect and no instrument or agent
of the state will attempt to suppress either of them. (Nothing wrong so far; as a matter of fact, that statement is a good start for any American ethic.)

But it is psychologically a very short step, and a very wrong step, from respectful disagreement to "indifferentism" or subjective relativism. We make a very large mistake when we confuse a constitutionally guaranteed "right" with the moral category of "rightness." There is no logical connection between what you have a right to do, and the right thing to do; but there is a psychological temptation to move from one to the other. Let's say that again: In logic, there is no connection between "You have the right to think what you like," and "Anything you like to think is right." You have the right, after all, to contradict yourself; you have all the right in the world to think "2 + 2 = 5." That doesn't make it correct. But psychologically, once you have told me that no one has the right to correct me when I claim certain sorts of opinions, you certainly seem to have told me that any such opinions are right, or at least as right as opinions can be. That is the error we must avoid.

In mathematics, of course, at least at the levels most of us learned in school, there is one right answer. In ethics there may not be, since ethical concepts are logically independent (more on that presently), and the question of what weight to assign to them must often be decided on the configurations of a particular case. That is why there can be honest, and possibly irreconcilable, disagreement on matters of ethics. But there are always better and worse answers, answers more or less in conformity with our accepted values, real moral values. Several of these real values, by the way, are evident in the argument in defense of subjective relativism, given above: the integrity of the human conscience, the sanctity of individual rights, the autonomy and dignity of the human person, the appreciation of cultural variety, and general good manners.

Subjective relativism is not self-contradictory as a position. It makes perfectly good sense to posit the individual as a moral authority in his own case in all instances. But the thesis is self-annihilating: It is impossible to defend it without ceasing to be a relativist (since a defender must argue from a basis of absolute values like democracy and freedom), and it is impossible to maintain a consistently subjective relativist position without admitting the legitimacy of the attempts to impose moral beliefs that the proponents of subjective relativism aim particularly to oppose.

4. Ethical Principles and Human Nature

Since ethics is about human beings, we should be able to discover its ruling concepts in the lives of human beings and derive them from fundamental aspects of human nature. The human being, and human nature, are endlessly complex, of course, yet the human being is universally recognizable to others of the species and it seems that humans everywhere, if they have to, can work together. So, avoiding the complexities of the outer limits of human potentiality, it should be possible to learn about the fundamentals of human morality just from the easily discoverable truths about the human being. In the course of the discussion, we will make some initial attempts to foreshadow the major
ethical orientations that philosophers have, through our history, adopted as reflective of these most basic moral principles.

What are human beings about? Given the normative premise, that moral principles must be appropriate to human life if they are to govern human life, three basic, simple, readily observable facts about human beings determine the structure of our moral obligations.

A. People Are Embodied
People are animals. They have bodies. They are matter. They exist in time and space and are subject to physical laws. These bodies are organic processes, requiring regular sustenance internally, and suffering all manner of slings and arrows of violent change externally. They experience pain, deprivation, and danger. They are prone to periodic failure unpredictably and to ultimate failure inevitably; they are mortal.

People have needs that must be satisfied if they are to survive. They need at least food, water, and protection from the elements and natural enemies. That means that they must control the physical environment to make it the means to those ends. Failure to do so will lead quickly to pain and suffering.

The first and immediate implication for ethics is that, if we have any reason to care about human beings, then the relief of that suffering and the satisfaction of those needs should be our first concern. In philosophical terms, human need and vulnerability to harm give rise to duties of compassion (for suffering), nonmaleficence (avoiding harm), and more generally, beneficence (working to satisfy human need, maximize human happiness, optimize human interests in all respects). In general, the moral reasoning that takes help and harm to human beings as the primary determinant of the rightness of action is called "utilitarianism," following John Stuart Mill's description of that reasoning.

B. People Are Social
Social animals regularly live in large groups of their own kind (i.e., in groups containing several to many active adult males). Individuals raised apart from such groups exhibit behavior that is abnormal for the species. Whatever problems, therefore, that people have with their physical environment, they will have to solve in groups. They will soon discover that this necessity produces a new set of problems. They must cope with a social environment as well as the physical one. That social environment produces two further needs: for a social structure to coordinate social efforts and for a means of communication adequate to the complex task of such coordination. The need for communication is fulfilled by the evolution of language.

The implication for ethics is that, given that there are so many of us, we must take account of each other in all our actions. We come saddled by nature with obligations, to the group in general and to other members of the group in particular, that we cannot escape or evade. Normal people (not psychopaths) seem to know this without being told. By nature, human beings try to do good and avoid evil, in advance of knowing just what counts as good or evil. The attempt to do good, to others as to oneself, involves the adoption of "the moral
point of view,” or a stance of impartiality with regard to the distribution of benefits and burdens. Fairness, or justice, demands that we subject our actions to rule, and that the rule be the same for all who are similarly situated. What will make an act “right,” ultimately, is not just that it serves individual happiness but that it serves the whole community; people are equal and society must deal with them equally unless good reason is given for differential treatment. As John Rawls points out, the duty of justice may require us to favor just those persons who would not succeed in getting their claims recognized if personal power, or even majority benefit, were to determine the distribution.3

C. People Are Rational

Normal adult human beings are able to consider abstract concepts, use language, and think in terms of categories, classes, and rules. Rationality, of course, in our ordinary discourse, means a good deal more than the basic ability to think in terms of abstract categories. Ordinarily we use the word to distinguish calm and dispassionate decision-making from “emotional” or disorganized decision-making; we use it to distinguish people capable of making good decisions from people who are not. But for our purposes, we need go no further with the word. The creature that is rational will think, on occasion, in general terms about classes and laws extending over time, space, and possibility, while the creature that is not rational will think, if at all, only about particular (individual) objects or events.

Since people are rational, they can make rational choices. When people think about action they think in terms of classes of acts as well as individual acts. For instance, if my neighbor has a particularly attractive knife, and I desire to take it from him and am currently making plans to do so, I shall make my plans based on what I already know about all cases of people taking things from other people. And I can contemplate not only those past acts of taking and the present plan to take that knife, but all cases that will ever be of taking, especially of knives—future acts as well as past and present acts. But in that case I am thinking of action not yet taken, of action therefore undetermined, for which real alternatives exist. Since people can conceive of alternatives, they can choose among them—having thought over the circumstances and deliberated on the outcomes, they can decide what to do. Put another way: I do not have to take that knife, if I have not yet done it. People are free, as we say, or autonomous moral agents. But then people can also realize that they could have done differently—I did not have to take the knife, and given my neighbor’s understandable grief and anger at its loss, maybe I should not have. That is, I can feel guilt and remorse and assume responsibility for having chosen as I did.

As far as we know, we are alone among the animals in possession of this ability. And since people can conceive of classes of acts for which alternatives exist, they can make laws to govern acts in the future, specifying that the citizens (or whoever may be bound by the law) ought to act one way rather than another: For instance that no one ought to take things that do not belong to them, and that such takings, henceforth to be called “theft,” shall be collectively punished. General obligations can be formulated and articulated for a
whole society. Collectively (acting in their groups), people make collective choices, especially choices of rules, rather than relying on instinct, and they are then collectively responsible for those choices and individually responsible for abiding by them.

Rationality’s implication for ethics is that, since freedom of choice is the characteristic that sets humans apart from the other animals, if we have any duty to respect human beings at all, it is this choice that we must respect. Persons are categorically different from the things of the physical world. As Immanuel Kant put it, people have dignity, inherent worth, rather than mere price or dollar value; they are bearers of rights and subjects of duties rather than mere means to our ends or obstacles to our purposes. Our duty of respect for persons or respect for persons as autonomous beings requires that we allow others to be free, to make their own choices and live their own lives. We are required not to do anything to them, even for their own benefit, without their consent.

In summary: By C, above, humans have minds or, as the philosophers say, a rational nature and by A, above, humans have an apparently limitless capacity for physical and psychological suffering. Rationality and suffering are not found together anywhere else; possibly angels have the first and surely all beasts possess the second, but only human beings appear to be able to reflect upon their own suffering and contemplate the suffering of others of their kind, and that sets them apart from all creation. By virtue of rationality, human possess dignity and command respect. Ultimately, that respect entails the willingness to let other people make their own choices, develop their own moral nature, and live their lives in freedom. By virtue of that abysmal capacity for suffering, the human condition cries out for compassion and compels attention to human well-being and the relief of pain. And by B, above, this condition is shared. We are enjoined not only to serve human need and respect human rights, but to establish justice by constructing a political and legal structure that will distribute fairly the burdens and benefits of life on this earth in the society of humans. These most general concepts: human welfare, human justice, and human dignity—are the source and criteria for evaluation of every moral system authored by human beings.

The same concepts are the source of every moral dilemma. Attention to human welfare requires us to use the maximization of human happiness (for the greatest number of individuals) as our criterion of right action; attention to the needs of groups and of social living requires us to set fairness for all above benefit for some, yet duty can require that we set aside both the feelings of the groups and the happiness of the individual in the name of respect for human dignity. To protect the welfare of many it is often necessary to limit the liberty of the individual (the liberty to operate dangerous or noisy vehicles without a license, for instance). On the small scale as well as the large, to respect the liberty of persons is not always to further their best interests, when they choose against those interests (for instance, by taking addictive drugs or by spending themselves into debt). To maintain a rough equality among persons, it is often necessary to put unequal demands on the interests of some of them (by progressive taxation, for example). To preserve the community, it is
sometimes necessary to sacrifice the interests of the few—but that course seems to discount the worth of the few, and so to violate justice.

5. The Basic Imperatives

Such conflict is fundamental to ethics and is the major reason ethics is famous as the discipline that has no clear answers. The human being is a complex creature, and when we extract human values from that complexity, we find them logically independent at the least—that is, there is no logical priority among the values, and no way to derive them from each other—and often in opposition. There are, by tradition, two ways to formulate the opposition (see “Vocabulary of Ethics” in this Introduction):

1. As a conflict of values: A value is a desired state, which we try, in our dealings, to advance or enhance or promote. The concepts so far discussed can be treated as values that are difficult to pursue simultaneously—the happiest society, the fairest or most equal society, the freest society or the lifestyle incorporating the most freedom. Our most fundamental political commitments turn on opposed views of this priority: Traditionally, the political left chooses justice as its priority, the political right chooses liberty, and both claim to maximize happiness.

2. As a conflict of imperatives: An imperative prescribes a duty to do or to forbear. It is occasionally more useful to see ethical conflict as a conflict of injunctions or prescriptions telling us what to do in any given situation. We are told—by the law, by our religion, by our parents, by our employers, by the civil law—that we must respect the rights of others, be fair to everyone, and serve each other’s needs. Sometimes it is not possible to do everything at once.

For every clear value, there is another value, which sometimes conflicts. For every clear imperative, there is a contrary imperative, equally clear, which sometimes applies. Ethics is the discipline that derives these values and imperatives, works out the consequences of our efforts to protect them, and musters what light it can to show us the possible reconciliations and the necessary compromises that attend their application in practice.

The three concepts elucidated above—human welfare, human justice, and human dignity—correspond to three imperatives for human conduct.

1. *Do no harm, and where possible do good*: Because we must live, and because we can suffer, we must value life and happiness: safety, protection from harm, absence of pain, hunger, or suffering of any kind; enjoyment, pleasure. That is, we have an obligation to help and protect each other, to relieve suffering, to choose each action, or rule of action, according to the amount of pain it will relieve or happiness it will provide. This general duty we may call *beneficence, or concern for welfare*.

This imperative is often broken down into logically related but different prescriptions:
a. Do no harm (the duty of non-maleficence). In the pattern of duties to do good and to avoid harm, this duty is the negative, individual, and immediate part. (For instance, no matter how much fun it would be, do not blow up the bridge.)

b. Prevent harm wherever possible. This duty generalizes the one before, enjoining us to attempt to keep agencies besides ourselves from doing harm. (If the bridge is near collapse, act to shore it up and keep people off it until it is fixed.)

c. Remedy harm wherever possible. This duty is the proactive equivalent of the two before, enjoining compassion for suffering and positive efforts to relieve it. (If the bridge has collapsed, pull the people out of the water.)

d. Do good, provide benefit, wherever possible. (Build better bridges.)

In this pattern of duties, the duty of non-maleficence takes moral priority (i.e., if you can provide benefit to many people, only at the cost of doing harm to a few, there is a presumption against doing whatever would result in the benefit and harm). The second two follow from the same presumption and the last comes into play only when the others are taken care of. That presumption can, of course, be overridden, as when the state takes my property to build a road, but only on proper authority, with at least an attempt to provide compensation, and presentation of compelling reasons.

2. **Observe the requirements of justice.** Because we must live together, we must adhere to rules of equal treatment, justice, fairness, equality before the law, trust and trustworthiness, and honesty in word and deed. Then we have an obligation to acknowledge our membership in, and dependence on, the human community and the community in which we live—to contribute to its life; to obey its laws, customs, and policies; to be honest in all our dealings with our fellows; and above all to hold ourselves accountable to them for our actions, especially as they affect others. This duty we may call the duty of justice.

3. **Respect persons (as autonomous beings).** Because we aspire to the full potential of humanity, we must value freedom. We take liberty, autonomy, and rationality to be ideals and value them in others as much as we prize our own. The human enterprise is an endless quest to become better, wiser, more loving people, and we must cultivate people and institutions that will protect that quest. We have an obligation to respect the choices of others, to allow them the space to live their lives, to the end, the way they see fit. For ourselves, we have the obligation to realize our own potential, not only to discern for ourselves the moral course of action and to take responsibility for the moral choices we make, but also to extend our knowledge and the scope of our reason to become as fully as possible autonomous persons. This duty we may call the duty of respect for persons.
Clearly none of these imperatives is optional. We cannot choose to not have bodies. We cannot choose to not need each other. Although we may sometimes wish we could, we cannot choose to not choose, to not be free. And these imperatives are logically independent one from another. They can conflict.


Ethical debate ordinarily employs two contrasting forms of moral reasoning, or reasoning to conclusions on the problems under discussion. The first we may call consequentialist (or utilitarian or teleological) reasoning, in which ends are identified as good and means are selected that will lead to those ends; the second is generally called nonconsequentialist (or eéontological) reasoning, in which rules are accepted as good and acts are judged according to their conformity to those rules. A third form of reasoning, complementary to the first two but not yet included in the decision processes, is called virtue-based (or ontological) reasoning, in which the type of person one is, and the type of moral community one belongs to, determines the obligations to act. In consequentialism, the rightness of an act is linked with the goodness of the state of affairs that it brings about; in non-consequentialism, rightness is linked with the act’s derivability from a rule; in virtue-based reasoning, it is linked with the character of the agent.

A. Reasoning from Rule: Deontological Reasoning

We suggested above that moral principles usually take the form of an imperative, setting a duty sufficient in itself to justify action. An imperative serves as the major premise for a line of deontological, or nonconsequentialist, reasoning. Deontological reasoning states a duty, observes that the present instance, real or hypothetical, falls under that duty, and proceeds to derive the obligation to carry out that duty in this instance. For example, presented with a particularly nice necklace left unguarded on a jewelry counter at the department store, I might be very tempted to snatch it and run. But my duty not to do that is very clear:

(major premise)  Thou shalt not steal.
(minor premise)  Taking this necklace would be stealing.
(conclusion)     Thou (in this case, I) may not take the necklace.

If I take it anyway, and am confronted at the door by the store owner asking if I paid for that necklace, and want very much to say “Yes sir, I certainly
did pay for the necklace, but I seem to have dropped the receipt,” again my duty is clear:

(major premise) Lying is wrong.
(minor premise) To say I paid for it would be lying.
(Conclusion) I may not say that I paid for it.

Connoisseurs of logical form will note a certain falling short of the strict subject-predicate form demanded by Aristotelian logic, but the point should be clear enough. In deontological reasoning (literally, reasoning from duty), we assume that we are obligated to do what is right, that moral laws correctly demarcate what is right and what is wrong, and that we can deduce the moral status of a contemplated action by finding what moral laws apply to it. (By those laws, an act may have one of three moral statuses: It may be prescribed (obligatory), proscribed (forbidden), or permitted (neither prescribed nor proscribed).

There are problems with this approach, as you may have noted. What, for instance, is the grounding of the major premises? Deontological reasoning starts with the assertion of duties, but those duties must be justified externally. In this case, we can go back to our basic principles and derive the prohibitions of stealing and lying without too much difficulty. Occasionally, however, in order to justify a premise, we are forced to fall back on consequentialist reasoning—the reason why we mustn't trade shares of stock on the basis of inside information cannot be traced directly from the original principles, but involves understanding of the stock market and, ultimately, the assertion that (a very small minority of economists dissenting) insider trading is harmful to the market and thus to the free enterprise system. (Insider trading is usually represented as a violation of “justice.” But of course it would not be “unjust” to deal as an insider if the rules permitted it. It would just be conducive to bad consequences, or so the general belief goes.)

B. Reasoning from Consequences: Teleological Reasoning

Note, however, that we could often just as easily couch the same moral argument in goal-oriented or consequentialist terms. In such an argument we treat the principles as values rather than as imperatives, and as ends to be achieved in society rather than laws governing action directly. Moral argument then becomes an exercise in evaluating the means to the end of the best possible society. The good, as opposed to the right of right action, becomes the benchmark of moral prescription. Good is generally understood as the greatest happiness of the greatest number of persons in the society in the long run. Action is right insofar as it brings about good results. The most familiar form of consequentialist reasoning is the “cost-benefit” analysis familiar from the business world: To find the right thing to do, you add up the benefits of each option, divide the benefits of each course of action by its costs, and select the option with the highest ratio of benefits to costs.
Can we deduce the same conclusions as above using consequentialist reasoning? Yes, somewhat more elaborately:

**major premise**
If everyone took objects from stores without paying for them, the economy would collapse; therefore the practice of taking objects without paying for them is contrary to the greatest good of the society.

**minor premise**
Taking this necklace without paying for it would therefore be contrary to the greatest good of the society.

**conclusion**
This act is not right and I should not do it.

We don’t have to go through this procedure every time we find a necklace lying around within reach, of course. The experience of the whole human race is that respect for property, however property may be defined in different cultures, is essential for the stability of society, and therefore, on those grounds, such taking of property without payment is appropriately forbidden everywhere (as is lying on matters of commercial interest). Once the act is prohibited, the reasoning proceeds exactly as it did in the nonconsequentialist framework. Most of us find *rule utilitarianism* (consequentialism that establishes rules and then reasons from them) easier to work with on a day-to-day basis than *act utilitarianism* (consequentialism that evaluates every individual act on the basis of its consequences). But any consequentialist will insist on the point that every legitimate major premise for moral reasoning is based on consequentialist reasoning; we need no divine commands, unverifiable intuitions, or arbitrary pronouncements to give us the principles from which we derive the moral status of the act in question.

C. Reasoning from Virtue: Aretological or Ontological Reasoning
A third form of reasoning is customarily couched in the terms of *virtue* or character. In such argument we appeal to the principles as *character traits* rather than as goals or as rules, as virtues inherent in the moral agent rather than as characteristics of the act. Every time we act we simultaneously define ourselves (as the type of person who acts that way) and change ourselves (toward that type of person), whether for better or for worse. Our objective in moral action, by this reasoning, is not only to adhere to rules (a minimal prescription) and achieve good ends, but also to become a good person, especially the kind of person who performs right actions by habit and by desire. We go beyond cost/benefit and rule adherence to aim at *ideals* of conduct and personhood.

Virtue ethics does not define, initially, just what virtues are worth pursuing most and by whom. In this lack of specificity, virtue ethics is no worse than utilitarianism, which wavers among definitions of happiness (welfare objectively determined? felt pleasure? preference as expressed in the market?), or deontology, which is indifferent among several sources of rules (natural law? human law? the form of moral reasoning itself?). By tradition, humans should
seek to become temperate, courageous, wise (prudent), and just; additionally, in our religious traditions, they should try to acquire faith, hope, and charity—not to mention kindness, patience, equanimity, magnanimity, modesty, and a sense of humor. For moral action, it is essential to acquire just those virtues that will make immoral conduct impossible; for professional ethical conduct, it is essential to acquire the virtues appropriate to the profession. These virtues should differ depending on the function of the profession in the community. Presumably, the physician will seek to acquire compassion (professional beneficence) before justice, the judge will seek justice first. The businessman will value prudence (professional wisdom) most highly, the military officer will cultivate courage. The Greeks always linked virtue to function—you are the right person for what you do when you have the character traits that permit you to do it well—and that link continues to make sense.

Can we put the same examples in virtue ethics? Yes, even more easily:

(major premise) I aspire to be an honest person, I hate the idea of being a thief.

(minor premise) Taking this necklace without paying for it makes me a thief.

(conclusion) Therefore I may not take this necklace.

Whatever its theoretical merits, it is worth observing that virtue ethics is as practically effective as we are likely to get. It is close to its subject and highly motivational; most of us in fact abstain from crime because we hold ideals (images) for ourselves that are incompatible with petty crime, not to mention its punishments.

7. Levels of Reasoning: A Case to Consider

It is very rare that a person trying to puzzle through a personal moral dilemma will begin by considering the relative merits of ontological or teleological reasoning or will appeal directly to beneficence, justice, or respect for persons as a basis for a decision. It is almost as rare for a practicing professional to make such an appeal. We “do ethics” at several levels. For the sake of convenience, we may summarize them here as three, distinguished by the levels of reflection required to apply them:

A. The level of unreflective taught, or consensus, morality

B. The level of intermediate rules and principles

C. The level of first principles and fair procedure

To make these levels clear, an example may be helpful. Easy, or first level, cases might include the following:

You are the production manager of a pharmaceutical company under a lot of competitive pressure. Your boss suggests that you could double productivity if you filled half the penicillin ampules with saline solution instead
of penicillin. To be sure, the patients wouldn’t get the penicillin prescribed, but most penicillin prescriptions are unnecessary anyway, so probably it wouldn’t do anyone any harm.

Harder, or second level, cases along the same line might include:

In the same situation as above, your boss suggests only that you speed up the penicillin production process from culture to filling the ampules, raising a 2 percent probability that the drug dispensed will not be up to the company’s standard strength (although still as good as some other products on the market). The quality control manager has just retired, and the company is “searching” for another, so you have a probable three-week window during which you can get the infinitesimally-below-standard drug on the market.

And the cases get still harder, into the third level:

As above, but the company will have to close the plant, cutting 10,000 jobs, unless productivity takes a marked turn for the better in the next quarter.

In practice, the first case would probably not go beyond level A, the level of commonly accepted “taught” morality—the morality of absolute rules. One does not deliberately adulterate product runs or market trash under a product’s label. If one is asked for reasons, the simple A-level reasons will suffice: basically, “That simply is not acceptable”; personally, “I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror if I did anything like that”; spiritually, “My religion forbids me even to consider anything like that”; or ominously, “I don’t look good in orange jumpsuits and neither do you.” Note that the conclusion reached is very much in accord with accepted rules and principles and with the ultimate principles that ground them (in this case, non-maleficence, “do no harm”).

Principles and reasoning based entirely on consensus morality are not always sound. Recall the Third Reich and the fact that in Germany in Adolf Hitler’s time, it was accepted practice, in accord with the religious intuitions of the leaders of the country, and definitely in accordance with law, to kill Jews wherever you found them. That is why we have to know ethics; to know when the principles and reasoning that we ordinarily use need to be reexamined, criticized, and maybe changed.

By the time we get to level B, the need for higher-level reasoning is evident. The harm caused by the acceleration of the manufacturing process is not at all certain—even if penicillin was never prescribed unless it was needed, the mix of batches would ensure that no patient actually got perceptibly less than the proper dose. Here an appeal to a middle-level principle is necessary. The manager must ask himself not, what are the consequences of this action but what would happen if everyone did this? What would be the general consequences of a rule that permitted or required this action? The Golden Rule, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is a similar principle.
At level C we have fundamental principles definitely in conflict. Product quality considerations appear in a different light when the fate of the enterprise is at stake. The solution is not immediately clear, and intermediate principles do not really solve the problem (try applying the Golden Rule to this level of the case, letting first the workers and then the customers fill the role of "others"). Here the balance must be struck between the obligation to continue the business enterprise for the sake of shareholders, workers, the local community, and others, and obligations to customers, reputation, society at large, and others with a stake in the integrity of the procedures. The principles of concern for the welfare of those affected by a decision—primarily the employees, in this case—and of justice in following the rules applicable to all no matter what the consequences are logically independent, and there is no safe formula for deciding which shall take priority in a given case. This is the type of case where the articulation of a just or fair process for decision is extremely important.

In general, in making moral judgments, we operate by rules of thumb. Depending on the activity in question, we first apply intermediate-level rules derived from the duty of beneficence (what will do the patient the most good? what will maximize profit? what will best serve the client's interests?) or from the duty of respect for persons (what does the client want to do? what career choice does the student feel is best? what do the voters in my district prefer?), then modify those conclusions with each other and with considerations of justice (should states that had no part in generating the savings and loan crisis be taxed to clean up its results? could the money we are allocating to organ transplants be better spent on primary and prenatal care in poorer neighborhoods?). When first principles do enter the discussion, it is often to show how middle-level questions can be answered by supplements from elsewhere in the principle. The rule allowing the student to choose his own courses, for instance, can operate to satisfy the further demand that the student take courses that will benefit him in his future career, by the provision of thoroughly counseling for the student. The perceived injustice of assessing nonoffending states for the misdoings of the operators of the defunct thrift institutions can be ameliorated, and justice and the interests of the country served besides, by particularly vigorous prosecutorial efforts to bring the criminals among those operators to justice and use their gains to supplement the funds available for paying off the creditors.