

# 1

## ETHICS DOING THE RIGHT THING

### Introduction to Ethics

Ethics is a discipline that answers certain kinds of questions. Unlike science, which answers questions about what is true of the world—how fast does light move? What does one atom of Beryllium weigh?—ethical questions concern right and wrong, good and bad. We begin by addressing the kinds of questions ethics asks and what makes people able—and required—to answer ethical questions. 1.1

#### What are ethical questions?

Ethics asks what action it is right (or wrong) to take, what kind of person it is right (or wrong) to be, and in what kind of a world it is right (or wrong) to live. Although we could certainly try to answer those three questions abstractly, often the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves will raise the questions for us. For example, we might consider doing an action but worry that the action is wrong (or feel that it is right, even though others disagree). We might observe that a public figure, or a family member or a friend, seems like a good (or a bad) person. We might feel, based on a particular event, that our world is good or bad. Ethical questions can arise in many different circumstances, even those that seem quite ordinary. We will examine some ordinary circumstances in which ethical questions arise later in this chapter. 1.2

- 1.3 Often people's awareness that they face an ethical question starts with a vague sense that something seems amiss. These vague senses are *intuitions*: natural sentiments that inform us about what is right or wrong, good or bad. These intuitions are also called people's *consciences*.
- 1.4 If human beings have a natural sense of what is right and wrong, good and bad, it might seem like there is not much for a course in business ethics to do. To know what is ethical in a business context, all students need to do, perhaps, is immerse themselves in the business world: once they are there, their consciences will naturally guide them toward right and good behavior.
- 1.5 Indeed, students will often rely on their internal senses of right and wrong to recognize the ethical questions that confront them. But you can improve your ethical judgment by studying ethics. By reflecting on various case studies, you will learn to recognize the most important aspects of ethical challenges. The ethical theories we will study in Chapter 4, in turn, will highlight different kinds of ethical values, making them easier to recognize in the situations you confront. After we examine our first set of case studies later in this chapter, we will consider some characteristics that generally characterize ethical questions.

#### How to answer ethical questions?

- 1.6 Recognizing that an ethical question is present is only one of the challenges associated with ethics. We also need to *answer* ethical questions. In order to figure out how to answer ethical questions, it is helpful to spend a little time thinking about what allows human beings to answer ethical questions in the first place.
- 1.7 The most important capacity that helps human beings to answer ethical questions is probably their consciences, as discussed above. A famous philosopher of ethics, Immanuel Kant, once said "Two things overwhelm the mind with constantly new and increasing admiration and awe the more frequently and intently they are reflected upon: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." For Kant, conscience was a "moral law within." Kant did not think that having a conscience was the end of ethics, however. He set out a detailed decision-making procedure to help people answer ethical questions. We will study his views about how to decide what is the right thing to do, what is the right kind of person to be, and in what kind of world it is right to live, in Chapter 4.
- 1.8 The second most important capacity is the human capacity to make choices: surveying a range of possible actions and deciding which action they will do. (This capacity might be even more important than consciences.

Whereas consciences give us a *sense* of what is right and wrong, being able to make choices is what allows us actually to *do* the right thing, not just have a sense of what it might be.) Another important capacity is the capacity to experience benefits and harms, to the extent that these capacities influence the way we answer questions about what to do, what kind of a person to be, and what kind of a world in which to live.

Of these capacities, though, it is probably people's consciences that most hold them to meet ethical standards. Even when it is inconvenient, consciences point people toward the right thing to do and will not let them rest until they have met that standard. 1.9

## Introductory Case Studies

Now that we have looked into what ethical questions are, and what makes human beings able (and required) to answer ethical questions, it is time to start making some real ethical recommendations. College students face decisions about what to do every day, including: 1.10

- May I loan my classmate substandard notes?
- If I believe that my friend is being exploited in an unpaid internship, should I encourage my friend to quit?
- May I skip cleaning up the dorm when it is my turn, forcing my roommates to pick up the slack?
- May I cheat in a course?

Some of these questions are easy to answer, others not so easy. We will consider cases involving each of these questions, in turn. Try to pay attention to *when* you see ethical questions arising and take note of *how* you recognize that they are ethical questions.

### Sam and the substandard notes

Sam is leaving his introduction to geology class one morning after another slack-off hour of not paying much attention and jotting down notes only haphazardly. It was actually a pretty interesting topic today, he thinks, but for some reason I just can't seem to get it together to take decent notes. 1.11

As he is passing through the door to the hallway, another student, Maria, approaches him. Sam doesn't know Maria well but they have chatted a few times before or after class. "Hi Sam," Maria says. "Hey, Maria," Sam smiles. 1.12

“Would you mind lending me your notes for last week?” she asks. “I had to go home for a few days and I missed class.”

1.13 Although Sam is happy to lend Maria his notes, he feels a bit conflicted as he knows that the notes are not very good. Should he tell her the truth? It would be embarrassing to do so. Sam figures that Maria has probably noticed his slack-off tendencies and is indifferent to them. She would rather borrow notes from someone she already knows rather than try to get better notes from someone she doesn't know as well. “Sure,” Sam answers, handing over his notebook, “Here you go.” Maria smiles happily and disappears with the notebook.

1.14 After scores are posted for the next examination, though, Maria is not so happy. She confronts Sam after class that day. “Your notes weren't very good,” she complains. “I studied really thoroughly but half of the stuff on that test didn't even appear in your notes. The rest of it was barely covered and I think that you might have actually gotten some stuff wrong when you wrote it down.” Sam, who also didn't do well on the exam, is indifferent to her concerns. “Hey, I guess you should have borrowed someone else's notes, then,” he replies. “Let the borrower beware.”

### Sidebar Exercise

What do you think: should Sam have shared his sub-standard notes with Maria? What features of the situation seem most important, from an ethical perspective, to you? For example, you might consider whether Sam did anything ethically wrong in not warning Maria that his notes were poor quality. Is he responsible for her low score on the examination? Consider what you would have done in Sam's situation and how you would feel if someone did to you what Sam did to Maria.

### Casey and the overly-demanding internship

1.15 Now, consider a case related to the second question. Casey's friend, Fred, was selected for an internship at a prestigious advertising firm in their city. Although the internship was unpaid, Fred was so excited to receive it: he felt that it was the first step toward the successful career in advertising he had always wanted.

As the internship has worn on, though, Fred's enthusiasm has waned. 1.16  
"They always ask me to do the most menial things. Getting coffee. Making coffee. Making copies. Work that is almost custodial: emptying waste paper baskets, wiping down the kitchen. I don't feel that I am learning anything about advertising at all."

Initially, Casey was not that sympathetic to Fred's complaints. Having an 1.17  
internship is an opportunity to learn all aspects of the business, she thought. Fred should be grateful for the opportunity to learn about the firm and learn about working in an office, even if he is not always doing the most glamorous things that you might see on a TV show. Over time, though, she has grown worried about the internship. Fred is working such long hours that she rarely sees him. When she does see him, he appears harried and unhappy. Casey wonders if there is someone that she should call about Fred's situation but then she realizes that she has no idea whom to call, even if she wanted to call someone.

### Sidebar Exercise

What do you think: should Casey call someone? Whom should she call? What would you have done in this situation? If you were Fred, what would you want Casey to do? What features of the situation seem most important, from an ethical perspective, to you?

### Tatiana and the fair distribution of chores

In the third case, we examine an issue between Tatiana and her roommates, 1.18  
Erin and Paul. Tatiana has been working really hard recently. She has been taking a number of advanced classes in her economics major and has been working a part-time job as a receptionist to help pay the rent. Erin, by contrast, has taken the semester off and is being supported by her parents. Paul is taking a normal course load and relies on loans, rather than a part-time job, to pay his living expenses.

Ordinarily, the three roommates split the chores evenly. Each person 1.19  
has a set of chores that they cover for one month and they switch every month. This month, Tatiana's responsibilities are cleaning the kitchen (once a week) and vacuuming (once every two weeks). Each time she plans to do one of the chores, though, something comes up and she finds herself

too busy to complete her responsibilities. Although neither Erin nor Paul has said anything to her yet, Tatiana can tell that they are annoyed. She feigns indifference to their annoyance, however: if they are really bothered by the mess, she figures that they can clean it up themselves. They have enough time, after all. She will get back to her cleaning responsibilities once her classes and work responsibilities ease up a bit.

### Sidebar Exercise

Is Tatiana's behavior ethically acceptable? What would you do in her circumstances? What would you do in Erin or Paul's circumstances?

#### Alex and the too-easy-to-cheat course

- 1.20 Finally, consider the question that Alex faced when he took a class in which it was all too easy to cheat. He decided to take the course, focusing on Sports Ethics, because he was interested in the topic. When he found out that most of his grade for the class would be determined by in-class electronic responses to the professor's questions, and he could simply give this device for making the responses to a friend, who would make the responses for him, Alex realized that he use the class time to do other things that he would like even better.
- 1.21 Alex decided to give his device to a friend, Tiffany, who was willing to enter responses for him. Everything was going well for a few weeks, until he received an email from the course professor. The email was addressed to all of the students in the class. It said:

Dear Students, I have become aware that some of you have given your electronic devices to other students, who are entering answers on your behalf. I became aware of this because I was receiving hundreds of responses even though the lecture hall was half empty. As it is impossible for me to determine who was absent, who was entering scores on behalf of absent students, and who was present but entering only their own scores, I have decided to lower everyone's grade for the course by one letter. If students come forward and confess to skipping class or entering scores for other students, I will not lower your grade further. This may, however, allow me to recognize which students were not cheating, and give them the grades they have earned.

Depressed about the lowered grade, Alex contemplates whether he should come forward. Ultimately, he decides not to. In the first place, he does not want to get Tiffany in trouble. She was only being nice to him, after all. In the second place, he does not really trust the professor. It seems unethical for the professor to lower everyone's scores when not everyone cheated. Given that behavior, Alex does not trust the professor not to take further disciplinary action against him, even though the professor said that he would not take further disciplinary action.

### Sidebar Exercise

Is Alex's decision not to come forward ethically acceptable? Is the professor's decision to punish everyone ethically acceptable? What would you do in Alex's circumstances, or the professor's circumstances? What would you do if you were one of the students in the course who did not cheat?

## Evaluating the Case Studies

Now that we have presented the cases, and started thinking about them from an ethical perspective in a general sense, let us become more precise in our ethical thinking. First, let us try to figure out when we are using ethical guidelines, and when we are using other kinds of guidelines, to think about these cases. Second, let us consider how to use ethical guidelines to evaluate the cases. Finally, we discuss some of the limitations of ethical evaluation. Being aware of these limitations will help us to do our ethical evaluating more effectively. 1.22

### Non-ethical guidelines for thinking about the cases

Return to Sam's case. In considering whether to loan his friend his shoddy notes, Sam could have consulted a variety of guidelines. Different guidelines might recommend that Sam do different things. Some of these guidelines are ethical—but not all of them. Sam could also have consulted his emotions, his community's etiquette, the law, or his religion. In order to figure out what guidance ethics can distinctively provide, then, let us separate ethics from these other kinds of guidance. 1.23

- 1.24 First, consider Sam's emotional response to the question that Maria presented to him. He felt embarrassed that his notes were poor quality and guilt when he loaned Marie the notes without telling her that they were inadequate. When Marie confronted him after the examination, though, Sam felt defensive and was inclined to rationalize Maria's poor performance as being her fault. In this sense, we can see how Sam's emotions help to guide his behavior. His embarrassment overcame his guilt, inclining him to conceal the truth from Marie; his defensiveness prevented him from accepting any responsibility for her poor performance on the test.
- 1.25 If Sam behaved unethically in loaning Maria the substandard notes, then, his emotions seem to have contributed to his unethical action. In some ways, his feeling of embarrassment is what motivated him to keep silent about his notes' inadequacy. Thus, it is clear that emotional guidance is not the same as ethical guidance (in the sense that Sam did not remain silent because he felt it was the right thing to do). This does not mean, though, that your emotions cannot help to guide you to act ethically. For example, think of Sam's feeling of guilt in lending Maria the shoddy notes. That feeling might have inspired him to act more ethically. So, we should pay attention to our emotions when trying to act ethically. We should not be *completely* guided by them, though.
- 1.26 The same is true of etiquette, or the social norms that guide behavior in whatever part of the world you happen to be acting. Such norms include relatively minor things like how much space people usually leave between themselves and another person with whom they are conversing. They also include potentially more significant things such as whether Marie can be expected to double-check that Sam's notes are complete or whether she will be inclined to trust that they are. In this case, Sam was confused about whether Marie would trust that his notes were complete or whether she would be suspicious. It can be difficult to figure out what social norms are involved in our decision making. (This problem will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, with respect to the Kantian ethical theory.) One strategy for figuring out what social norm is in place is asking yourself: what would I expect in the other person's circumstances? It can be difficult to answer this question honestly, so it is probably better to err on the side of being overly cautious. When Sam was unsure whether Marie would know that he was a poor notetaker, it would have been most honest to tell her that he had some doubts about just how useful his notes would be to her.
- 1.27 Next, consider how the law might guide Sam. It is probably not illegal to lend someone shoddy notes without first revealing that they are incomplete. If Marie were inclined to, though, she might be able to bring a civil lawsuit against Sam, alleging wrongful damages. Even as Sam and Marie

hashed it out in court, though, they would not resolve whether what Sam did was ethically wrong. The judge would decide, rather, whether Sam's actions caused Marie damages for which she was legally entitled to be compensated.

Similarly, consider an informal law like a student code of conduct. Most student codes of conduct do not specify that students must disclose that their notes are faulty when loaning faulty notes to a classmate. If the code of conduct at Sam and Marie's school did have such a provision, though, Sam's action would be in violation of the code but not necessarily unethical.

Sam's failure to disclose the shoddy nature of his notes to Marie might violate some of his religious obligations as well. Many religions have a prohibition against lying and Sam's action could violate that provision. Like the codes of conduct discussed about, though, most religions do not go into great detail about what is required of people in particular circumstances. Studying ethics can help us to address these particular details.

### Ethical guidelines for thinking about the cases

Now that we have set out some other forms of guidance that Sam could have considered in making his decision to lend Maria inadequate notes, let us think about this decision from an ethical perspective. Above, it was suggested that there seems to be something ethically wrong about Sam's action. Let us now try to be more precise about what (if anything) was ethically wrong about what Sam did. We shall begin by considering what aspects of his decision seem ethically significant.

Some of the things that seem ethically significant could include:

- Maria experienced harm.
- Sam was (to some extent) a cause of this harm.
- Sam was (in some sense) dishonest.
- Sam and Maria's friendship was damaged.
- Sam might have failed to live up to what Maria expected from him.

### Sidebar Exercise

Is there anything else about the event that seems ethically significant? Try to say why the things that seem ethically significant to you seem ethically significant. What makes these things important, from an ethical point of view?

1.32 We can consider this problem from several different standpoints:

- Sam
- Maria
- an “impartial observer”
- all of society looking in
- an ethical hero, who always acts ethically.

In considering what, if anything, was wrong about what Sam did, we should evaluate his action from each of these standpoints. In Chapter 4, we will use this analysis of what seems ethically significant, and what standpoints seem ethically important, to decide what is the right thing to do using three different ethical theories.

### Sidebar Exercise

Carry out the ethical consideration of Sam’s actions from each of these standpoints. Do they evaluate Sam’s action in the same way? If there are differences in their evaluations, which one should have priority?

#### Limitations of ethical evaluation: the problem of controversy

1.33 As you reflected on the case studies and completed the sidebar exercises, you might have come to (tentative) conclusions about who acted rightly or wrongly and what were the most important considerations in determining who acted rightly or wrongly. You might also have a sense that your ideas are correct. In discussing your ideas with a friend or classmate, however, you might be surprised to realize that other people have different views. They might even think that different considerations are more (or less) important than you think. These kinds of *controversies* in ethical evaluations are actually some of the most important parts of ethics, and they are something with which we will have to get comfortable.

1.34 At the beginning of this chapter, we contrasted ethics with science in order to get a better grasp of what ethics is. Contrasting ethics with science can also illuminate the problem of controversy. Whereas educated people generally agree about what is scientifically true, people can reasonably disagree about many ethical matters—even when they are well informed about

the relevant issues. This is in part because of the diverse perspectives that people bring to bear on ethical questions. As noted above, people's responses to ethical questions draw upon their intuitions: internal ideas they have about right and wrong. People develop their intuitions over many years based on the different experiences they have had, the various people who have influenced them, books they have read, and so on. In short, people's intuitions can be very different from one another and it is complicated to parse out the reasons for the differences. Because intuitions inform the ethical evaluations people will reach, then controversies are an unavoidable part of ethics. We cannot expect to reach consensus on most of the ethical issues we will discuss in this book.

This should not be reason for discouragement, however. Whereas consensus is an important part of science, we can do ethics very well without needing to reach consensus. In fact, the lack of consensus can even make our ethical evaluations stronger. People's different perspectives enhance ethical deliberation in the sense there are many uncertainties in ethics. Discussing your ethical ideas with someone who has different intuitions can help you both to see where there might be a weakness in your ethical reasoning and to work to correct it. 1.35

## Reference

Kant, Immanuel. 1788. *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Philip McPherson Rudisill. <http://kantwesley.com/Kant/CritiqueOfPracticalReason.pdf>