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Introduction

An Invitation to Ethical Reflection

“There is only one journey. Going inside yourself.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

Doing an Inward Turn

Wobbly Moments

Writing this book is rooted in my own wobbly moments. I’m sure you’ve had your share of wobbly moments too. We all do.

At their core, wobbly moments are those unsettling experiences in your life when you’re not sure how to react or go forward. It could be a personal relationship that veered into unexpected or painful territory, leaving you struggling to regain your emotional balance. It could be the professional ladder you’ve been assiduously climbing was knocked out from under you, its base unexpectedly upended by a change in management or a shift in office politics. Uncomfortable as they can be, there is a value in recognizing and embracing your wobbly moments.

Like most college teachers, I am at ease in my chosen field. Having studied literature, philosophy, and law, I have made my academic reputation as a specialist in ethics, exploring the moral dilemmas of the contemporary workplace. But with this achievement has come my own wobbly moments, arising from a disconcerting sense of how I am often unable to talk about what I see as most significant in our moral lives within the technical debates and language of my discipline. Too many times something essential surfaces for me only after class, as when a theory readily espoused in my lecture does little to assuage a conflict I’m having with a colleague or when I am fumbling for words as a struggling student relates a painful experience in the privacy of my office.

Seeking your Better Self: Timely Virtues for a Turbulent World, First Edition. Jeffrey Nesteruk.
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The Story I Want to Tell

The series of reflections contained in *Seeking Your Better Self* fills this gap. Hoping to engage you to take a deeper look at your own life, I focus here on everyday topics – subjects such as money, conversation, stress, and forgiveness – but do so in a way that reveals their deeper significance. Specifically, I bring into view how exploring such topics can illuminate our strivings and aspirations, our struggle, as I like to put it, to be our better selves. As we go forward, you should expect as many questions as answers.

In writing this book, I grapple with these topics through the puzzles and choices of my own life. In doing so, I reveal a fuller version of myself than my students normally see – the less secure, more fallible me that exists outside the classroom. My hope is that by providing this more intimate portrait, I can encourage a reciprocity of spirit among all those who read this book to do likewise. Following each topical reflection, there are helpful prompts designed to engage you in exploring and extending each reflection's insights. I encourage you to tap into your own wobbly moments and in this way bring the book's insights into your own life. My hope is that you, like me, are willing to acknowledge your own unfinished character and thus are ready to accept my invitation to participate in an undertaking aimed at your own moral exploration and growth. This approach aspires to make visible the personal moral engagement often missing from more academic discussions of ethics. It can reveal the stories behind the arguments.

The story I have to tell is a personal one. It's about morality, yet it is never moralistic. The topical reflections here are more associational than argumentative, designed to provide a glimpse of what is admirable and worth striving for in our day-to-day routines. By exposing the many possibilities for integrity, dignity, and well-being in ordinary life, I hope to provoke us all to think more about what it means to live well.

The undertaking of the book involves an expanding enactment of what psychologists call metacognition – an “awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes,” as one online dictionary defines it. Each new awareness or level of understanding alters your thinking, just as every choice you make helps to define the person you are becoming. The hoped-for movement is from yourself to other persons to things in your world to your larger aspirations.

It is thus a movement from the problems *in* your life to the purpose *of* your life. *Seeking Your Better Self* is designed to encourage you to adopt an evaluative stance, engaging its ideas and exercises, its aspirations and inquiries, with a critical eye. It seeks to open up questions in and for your life to see where you might take them. Along the way, I will be telling my story with the hope of you reflecting on and telling your own.

Ethics as Relationships

The structure of *Seeking Your Better Self* arises out of the basic nature of ethics. Most fundamentally, ethics is about relationships. Renewing our moral lives thus involves gaining a deeper understanding of these relationships and acquiring the skills and insights necessary for enriching them. In so doing, we can bring a vitality to our lives our material achievements cannot provide. For living morally is the key to living meaningfully.

To see the connection of relationships to ethics, try imagining an individual human being without any relationships. You might think, for instance, of a person stranded for the rest of his life on a remote, uninhabited island. Alone and cut off from any contact with the rest of human society, this modern-day Robinson Crusoe would have a very different moral life from the kind we typically experience in our more complex, contemporary lives. He would not, for example, experience the ethical dilemma so many of us struggle with of properly balancing family and career. He wouldn't experience such a dilemma because his life is devoid of the relationships that give rise to it. He has no boss at work demanding he stay late. He has no daughter at home waiting to be taken to her first Little League game.

Indeed, this isolated individual would have little need for many of the ethical values we typically require to get through the day. For, on the surface at least, his conduct wouldn't affect anyone else. He could say and do what he wants without consequence to his fellow human beings. Whether he spent his days writing a brilliant novel or drinking himself into a stupor would be, at one level at least, all morally the same. For any novel he writes will never be read, any hangover he suffers won't make him late for work.

Revealed in this simple mental exercise is the particular connection between relationships and ethics. The ethical dilemmas of our lives arise from the very relationships that give our lives richness and value. Remove a set of relationships from a person's existence – as we did with our island castaway – and we change the nature of that person's moral life, often drastically. Absent human companionship, our island prisoner experiences a dramatically diminished moral life in which so many of his choices no longer matter in a way they once did. But as his choices diminish in moral significance, so do his opportunities for a satisfying and meaningful life. Fantasies of self-indulgence aside, few of us would choose the life he now must face.

The Four Fundamental Relationships

Broadly speaking, there are four kinds of relationships with which our moral lives are inevitably intertwined. They are (1) the relationship we have with ourselves,

(2) the relationship we have with others, (3) the relationship we have with things, and (4) the relationship we have with that which is greater than ourselves – the spiritual character of life. Leading a more meaningful life entails attending more deeply to each of these relationships.

We have a relationship with ourselves because of our distinctively human capacity for self-reflection. As individuals, we have the ability to take a step back from ourselves and evaluate what we see. Our relationship with ourselves is the relationship between the self that's seeing and the self that's being seen. While this division within ourselves provides the potential for moral growth, it also presents a formidable moral challenge. The challenge here is one of developing character, becoming whole, and achieving integrity.

Along with our relationship with ourselves is our relationship with others – the kind of relationship we took from our hypothetical island castaway. When speaking of ethics, we regularly mention our relationships with others, and these relationships are clearly crucial. Yet typically we miss a significant moral dimension of such relationships. In an important sense, we create and develop ourselves through our relationships with others. Thus, a central challenge here is creating ennobling relationships, ones that, in a moral sense, make us better while we are bettering the lives of others.

There is also our relationship with things. Because they are such an intimate part of our daily routines, the things of the world – the places we inhabit, the possessions we work for, and the practices we engage in – have a greater moral significance than we generally acknowledge. As of late, this has become especially true of the increasingly pervasive technologies in our lives, from TikTok to the Metaverse to ChatGPT. Though they may appear neutral in this regard, each thing in the world has a moral tilt to it. Involving ourselves with it pushes us one way or another. The moral danger of our practical engagements – think, for instance, of an inordinate desire for money – is that they can subtly distort our values or influence our choices.

Finally, there is the relationship we have with that which is greater than ourselves – the spiritual character of life. This more expansive horizon or context is, of course, subject to a variety of interpretations. But in the end, renewing our relationships here grounds the renewal of all our other relationships. When we enter the transcendental domain of our lives, we often experience something essential yet mysterious, unavoidable yet difficult to explain. Indeed, the frequent mark of authentic spiritual experience is the struggle that ensues when we attempt to put it into words. The moral struggle here is giving voice to what we can't perfectly express, accepting how life is always larger than our conceptions of it.

Deeply attuned to the fundamental relationships that enrich our lives, *Seeking Your Better Self* aims for ethics in a positive, welcoming voice. It is an aspirational

guide marked by humility and hope. It is for individuals who wish to understand how embedding goals such as financial security, professional achievement, or public recognition in rich moral relationships can best contribute to lives worth living. For everyone who wishes to define their own version of the good life, *Seeking Your Better Self* does more than showcase what is inspirational in our lives. It helps us to ask and understand why.

Raising Your Moral Sights

I often tell my students that I am in the human potential business. I do so because the key to getting the most out of our class time together is to obtain their commitment to raise their sights. They need to be open to the possibility that they are more than they currently think they are – better than they yet imagine.

In our common time together now, I will likewise be asking you to raise your sights, to consider the possibility that the moral potential in your life is greater than you currently realize.

The relationship-based conception of ethics provides you with the structure for your undertaking of moral exploration and growth by offering a chapter dedicated to each of the four fundamental relationships at the core of ethics. Each chapter begins by highlighting an aspiring attribute of character, the central virtue that exemplifies the ethical possibilities implicit in a specific relationship. This virtue captures the moral excellence present in the highest development of that relationship. Thus, the chapter on our relationship with others focuses on the virtue of an empathetic heart. This virtue embodies a personal aspiration to foster an imaginative and sympathetic understanding of the experiences of others.

Coupled with the description of the central virtue at stake is an overview of the relationship, outlining its core ethical challenges and opportunities. Thus, the chapter on the relationship with ourselves, for example, addresses the challenges posed by the multiple tensions each of us experiences within ourselves and the opportunities offered for creating a more coherent self, one capable and more adept at integrating the values we espouse with the lives we actually lead.

In this way, each chapter sets the stage for reflections on individual topics that follow, with each reflection focusing on an everyday occurrence or encounter that involves the basic moral relationship at stake. Arranged so as to stimulate a deeper examination of this basic moral relationship, these topical pieces expose the potential for a larger awareness of the moral meanings of everyday life. Thus, for example, the chapter on our relationship with things sets the stage for topical reflections, finding moral meanings in everything from our struggle to manage life's "details" to everyday stresses over "moving" to the awkwardness of dealing with a "chatbot" over the phone when you dearly wish to speak to a fellow human being.

Raising your moral sights brings into view telling reminders of how asking more of ourselves can lead to more meaningful lives. It can aid you in discovering the unexpected sublimity in ordinary moments. It can offer you a renewed appreciation for savoring common, human encounters.

Most of all, it will let you in on a secret hidden in plain sight: there's an ethical abundance to everyday life.

Beginning Where You Are

One thing I've learned about teaching over the years is that good teachers always begin wherever students are, but good teachers never leave students where they are. As I sometimes tell my students, "I want to give you a hard time – lovingly!"

Thus, the process I'm inviting you into here is a transformational one, starting at whatever point in your life you happen to be, but then encouraging you forward. It's my way of giving you a hard time – lovingly!

Such a process incorporates four key features:

Accessible: Unlike books that are heavily focused on theory or couched in the technical language of disciplinary specialists, this book is oriented toward engaging a broader, more diverse audience of readers. All it asks of you is that you are ethically curious.

Motivational: By grounding its model for ethics in the healthy and satisfying relationships we all desire, *Seeking Your Better Self* provides a motivational impetus for personal development. It is designed not only to help you clarify your own version of a good life but also to foster in you a stronger and more robust desire to achieve it.

Relatable: As a variety of short, topical reflections from daily life accompany this model, the book presents its insights in an easily relatable form.

Action-oriented: With stimulating prompts after each reflection aimed at helping you bring the reflection's insights into your own life, *Seeking Your Better Self* is for those who are ready to challenge themselves.

As an ethics book that is accessible, motivational, relatable, and action-oriented, it is for individuals who are amid their own wobbly moments, asking in one way or another, "And now what?"

Bringing Your Whole Self

For much of our formal education, we are oriented toward performing rather than learning. Our school systems demand it – and our own insecurities too often compel it. I have often felt in my teaching career that many students only share their most superficial selves. It is always a gratifying moment when their more

capacious selves – their stumbling alongside their soaring selves – break through. For education to work, you have to bring your whole self to the endeavor.

By drawing upon the relationship-based conception of ethics in *Seeking Your Better Self*, I hope to engage your whole self. By grounding its model for ethics in the healthy and satisfying relationships that we all want, this book's conception of ethics aims for an integration of two senses of our aspirations for a "good life" – "good" in the sense of "admirable" and "good" in the sense of "desired." In focusing on your whole self, *Seeking Your Better Self* thus envisions the potential for a virtuous life that is also one marked by happiness and personal fulfillment.

Of course, there are many times when what is ethically admirable diverges from what we might more immediately desire. Any tired parent of a newborn desperate for a few hours of sleep who hears his child crying at 2 a.m. knows what I mean!

But that's hardly the whole picture. We can have worthy desires, and they are something worth striving for. I recall when I was first married, I looked out of our window one morning and saw my wife pulling into our driveway just as a rainy downpour began. While I would normally prefer staying dry and warm inside, I ran out without thinking to give her an umbrella and help her into our home.

It's not that my rushing outside was any great moral achievement. I suspect it's something that most of us would probably do. But what was striking to me upon reflection about the experience is that I didn't for a moment feel in any way deprived or that my action involved a sacrifice of any sort. Something good – an admirable concern to help my wife – was something that, at the moment, I in fact desired.

So, bringing your whole self to your endeavor here entails being open to developing worthy desires. A flourishing life – a fully satisfying life – is one in which what is praiseworthy, what is worth striving for, is equally one that is pleasurable and ultimately gratifying.

Tapping the Life-enhancing Power of Reflection

Our Out-of-kilter Lives

A while back, I was talking with an old friend, and he suddenly stopped in the middle of the conversation and said, "Jeff, you're so reflective, I feel like I'm talking to a mirror." He chuckled a bit, and I did too at his good-natured jesting.

No doubt I have a reflective bent. At the end of the day, I can happily sit on our outdoor patio looking over the trees and letting my thoughts wander. With some frequency, my wife has had to remind me that I've forgotten to wash the dishes.

I'm sure it hasn't helped that my academic pursuits have spanned literature, philosophy, and law, all fields that prompt one to take a deeper look at things.

They all invite a curiosity that is restless with the surface of things, skeptical of received wisdom that hasn't been personally affirmed.

But I'm often struck by how my inclination toward reflection puts me out of sync with much of the hectic bustle of our contemporary world. I see it in the hurried lines at the supermarket and the rush for seats on the commuter train. I hear about it when my wife tells me the fellow driving behind her gave her the finger for obeying the speed limit. Even the gentle kidding of my old friend was a subtle reminder of how my disposition was far from widely shared.

Perhaps surprisingly, I notice it even in my interaction with many of my students, bright young people on the cusp of adulthood enjoying the leisure and rich stimulating environment of a good liberal arts college. In the past, during a break in my seminars, students would eagerly wish to continue the conversation, challenging each other or coming up to me to share an idea or pose a question. Now, during the breaks, the phones quickly come out and there is mostly silence, broken only by the tapping of emails or the beeps of text updates.

We often hear how we live in a distracted age, overloaded with information and ill-equipped to process it. The pace of our daily lives can leave us feeling out-of-kilter, struggling to keep our balance. Life for many of us has a pressured, jittery feel. We're left with an ill-defined, yet abiding sense that something is just not right.

Such a distracted age is itself a poignant call for a deeper, more authentic reflection in our lives. But it is a call that we regularly leave unheeded.

Keeping Reflection at Bay

Why do we often keep reflection at bay? There are many levels to our resistance here, some immediate and on the surface, some deeper and more profound. Many of which I've struggled with at one point or another in my life.

Most immediately, there is the pressing stuff of daily life. Navigating the automated telephone maze to make a doctor's appointment. The report you promised your boss this week. The frozen website portal you're trying to use for recalibrating your retirement investments. While the specifics may vary, we all feel these run-of-the-mill pressures, regardless of status or stage of life. They pop up regularly as alerts on your phone even as you open your eyes and then subtly stalk you throughout the day.

While the insistent demands of constant connection can be unpleasant, our information overload with its unending stimulation also has an addictive quality. With ready access to so much information, we often experience a growing sense of FOMO or, as they say, fear of missing out. As a young boy prior to cell phones, if my mother was late in picking me up from football practice, I often had nothing more interesting to do than stare at my shoes. Now, when I'm waiting in the

parking lot to pick up my daughter, I'm checking the latest on Google News while I text a colleague at work. After a while, if you're always "On," it's easy to forget what "Off" feels like.

Amid all the other obligations and opportunities of an active life, you might ask of a deeper commitment to reflection, "Is it worth the bother?" In a fast-paced, get-ahead world, it can appear to be a time-squandering trap for being left behind. It's easy to bring to mind more immediately useful ways of spending your time. I remember my grandmother could never completely accept my seemingly unproductive routine of jogging. "If you've got so much energy," she'd be saying, "Go mow the lawn!"

For many high-achieving professionals today, "busy" also has an especially seductive appeal for shoring up their sense of self-worth. It is certainly an appeal to which I am not immune. But I wonder if this skepticism about the value of pausing to reflect masks an unease about the consequences of leading a more reflective life.

This frenetic pace of life can frequently be intertwined with a deeper and more subtle form of self-deception. I remember sharing a drive home with a talented friend of mine, an Ivy League graduate who complained of a deep dissatisfaction with his job. Knowing his capabilities and the opportunities potentially available to him, I asked had he thought about leaving. With a dismissive look at me for having raised the question, he said, "I don't even have the time to think about it." I could see the conversation wasn't going any further, as he turned his eyes back to the road.

In his response, I was uncomfortably reminded of myself at earlier points in my life. Deeper, more authentic reflection has the potential to be life-probing and life-altering. It's a psychological version of skating on thin ice, not knowing in advance where the cracks might be or the depths to which you might suddenly plunge. We all have our tacit fears and unarticulated anxieties. There's an understandable wariness about what reflection might reveal about your life, what it might force you to confront or change.

The Hard Work of Reflection

And yet, even if you're inclined toward reflection, I think the kind of reflection we're after here is hard to do well. Why?

At root, the problem is so many of us have not had the opportunity to develop the dispositions and acquire the skills needed to do this deeper reflection well. Genuine reflection, in many ways, is so far from our prevalent experiences today that we may fail to recognize our deficiencies in this regard. But developing the capabilities to do reflection well is essential in any sustained undertaking of moral exploration and growth. Thus, a core aspiration of *Seeking Your Better Self*

is providing the framework and strategies that enable you to engage in deeper, more authentic reflection.

This more robust reflection I hope to bring to life here is far from anxious fretting, compulsive thinking, or considering something only long enough to provide a justification for a preconceived belief. Such disabling forms of our mental life are already far too prevalent.

The reflection I wish to bring into view here is instead a deeper, more philosophical form of reflection, a *virtue-infused* reflection. In its most developed form, a virtue-infused reflection engages the feeling of wonder, the practice of questions, the perception of insights, and ultimately the transformation of self. It is a continual exercise in self-renewal. You ineluctably become a different person as the process unfolds. It is in these transformative possibilities that the distinctive nature of ethical reflection comes to the fore.

As a virtue-infused reflection, it involves a lifelong commitment to an always unperfected practice. As is true of achieving excellence in many of life's endeavors, from finishing a marathon to flourishing in a marriage, it takes dedication – and time. Time for initial choices to develop into persistent habits that evolve into an enduring character.

An essential feature of the process of learning how to do this ethical reflection is the way it dissolves many of the obstacles we identified that inhibit a more examined life. The process will help loosen the grip of the pressure of your daily to-do lists, free you from the addictive dynamics of information overload, and uncover the subtle forms of self-deception that impede the development of your better self.

This book will thus work best not as a “fast read,” but rather as a “slow read” with much for you to ponder along the way. For it to work, you need to give it the time that you and the endeavor deserve.

Facebook's “Move Fast and Break Things” may have served it well at first. But as a larger life philosophy, it has its limits. If all we can do is move quickly, we might find that the unacknowledged consequence of Facebook's early dictum is that the things we break are the most valuable parts of ourselves.

Starting with the Virtues

A Preview of the Four Virtues

Virtue-infused reflection is not mere calculation or a form of strategic problem-solving. This is because it is not simply about what you will do but, more fundamentally, about who you are. Thus, this deeper, more philosophical reflection must tap into your underlying values and draw upon your ethical core.

As it draws upon your basic ethical identity, this distinctive form of reflection entails developing the four virtues that are the mark of excellence in the four

relationships at the core of ethics. It is these four virtues that ground and guide the reflection we are after.

In capsule form, the four virtues are:

1. **A Holistic Mind:** Reflection here aims for a clarity of thinking that fosters a coherent self. When your aims are scattered, when the pushes and pulls of your life are in tension, and when the varied pieces of yourself don't fit together, you lack the personal integrity that the practice of reflection requires.
2. **An Empathetic Heart:** Reflection here requires a deepening of emotion that enables an imaginative and sympathetic understanding of the experience of others. For only a blinkered version of reflection is possible within a self-centered framework. Without an emotional awareness that others have as rich of an interior life as you do, reflection can never reach its higher aspirations.
3. **An Attentive Eye:** Reflection here aims at an expansion of perception to cultivate a greater awareness of things in your world. For reflection to probe beneath the surface, it must have a developed appreciation of the difference such a rich intellectual and sensory perception of your environment can make.
4. **An Open Spirit:** Reflection here adopts a skepticism of received wisdom that hasn't been personally affirmed. It thus must nurture an open disposition. It allows doubts alongside beliefs and questions accompanying answers in the process of discerning one's purpose. Alive to the ever-present possibility of change, it entails an intrinsic affirmation of hope.

As thus understood, virtue-infused reflection aspires to a clarity of thought, a deepening of emotion, an expansion of perception, and an affirmation of hope. Let's look at each in turn.

Clarity of Thought

Clarity of thought is hard for all of us. Yet paradoxically, it is something that we often take for granted in ourselves.

Like many professors, I see this most immediately in my students' writing. This is because of the way their writing concretizes their thoughts, giving them a more definite or specific shape. In doing so, it readily brings to the fore any lack of clarity in their expression.

In going over a student's answer from an in-class essay exam, I often have students read their answers out loud to me. Often, something they thought they had written simply wasn't there or was only there in a confused form. This occurs because in the act of writing, students were aware of both their own hazy stream of consciousness at that moment and what they actually committed to the page. But when they later read out loud their essay, all they see is what they have explicitly articulated in their exam book, something that frequently falls short of saying clearly everything they meant to express.

So much of teaching involves bringing to students' awareness unrealized contradictions in their own thinking. It certainly can make them uncomfortable and thus needs to be done carefully and with an appropriate sensitivity. As Leon Festinger noted, cognitive dissidence – when your beliefs or behaviors exhibit inconsistency – is a psychologically uncomfortable state for us. But its hidden virtue is that this very uncomfortableness serves as a spur to clarify our thinking and thus offers the opportunity to see things anew.

In aspiring to think more clearly, we face our share of psychological challenges, first and foremost, the well-documented phenomenon of “self-serving bias.” As David G. Myers puts it, “We perceive ourselves as better than most and explain events in self-enhancing ways.” One finding that particularly struck home for me revealed that more than 90% of college professors believed their teaching was better than average. This study brought about more personal wobbly moments than I care to admit, as I would regularly second-guess myself after thinking a class went well.

Beyond the pervasiveness of self-serving bias, there is the challenge posed by “motivated reasoning.” This psychological dynamic causes us to reason about something only long enough to have a ready justification for what we already believed prior to doing any reflection. We don't proceed to the next step to challenge this preconceived belief. So, the ever-present danger is cutting short an ongoing process.

We are complicated creatures. Walt Whitman famously said, “I contain multitudes.” That is both a marvelous thing – we are richer than we imagine – and something that should inspire us to clarify our thinking in reflecting more fully and carefully.

Deepening of Emotion

While it's common to think of reflection as simply an intellectual activity, this significantly diminishes reflection's power. We can learn as much from our feelings – indeed, often more – as we learn from our thinking. In fact, our feelings often, in a tacit or inchoate way, hint at things that we are not yet ready to put in a discursive fashion. Emotions are the thoughts we can't yet express.

Jonathan Haidt offers a wonderful visual metaphor here. It is that of the tiny Rider upon an enormous Elephant. The Rider represents the rational, analytical side of ourselves and the Elephant captures the emotional, impulsive side of ourselves. While the smaller Rider may hold the reins and see where he wants to go, it is the irrational yet much larger Elephant who provides the motivation and thus ultimately bears most heavily upon our choices and direction.

Thus, it is important for full-fledged reflection, not only to think things through but to *feel* things through. Feeling things through often involves bracketing your

intellectual side, holding your thinking at bay. With our motivating reasoning and other psychological defenses, we frequently attempt to literally *rationalize* things. That is, we attempt to understand in rational terms, aspects of our interior experience that are far from rational. It doesn't mean such experiences lack a logic of their own. It simply means they make sense in ways other than the linear way our rational side prefers.

Benjamin Franklin was wise to urge a bit of caution in relying solely on our rational capacities in reflecting upon our lives. "So convenient a thing it is to be a *rational* creature," he said with his characteristic wit, "since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do." We all fall prey to this at one time or another.

While achieving clarity of thought involves disciplining our thoughts – trying to get the small Rider to hold the reins more tightly – feeling things through can involve letting our thoughts wander, not subjecting them to any conscious control, something we'll explore in coming chapters.

But for now, I simply wish to note that if reflection is to be fully life-enhancing, our thinking needs our emotions as an ever-present participant in the process, sometimes willing to defer, but never shy and always available. Only then can we learn to ride the Elephant well.

Expansion of Perception

Often overlooked in acquiring the skills and habits for deeper, more life-enhancing reflection is the environment in which you are mulling things over. The unfolding character of your reflection involves more than a detached thinking and feeling things through, even when you are alone. It is intimately bound up in your perceptions, your intellectual and sensory experience of the settings in which you find yourself.

There's a reason for everything from religious cathedrals to beautiful college campuses to the quiet, secluded paths of public parks. The cathedrals inspire awe in their congregations, the aesthetic appeal of campuses encourages the educational aspirations of students, and quiet, secluded paths sooth and calm us in our walks. While reflection often requires keeping the hustle and bustle of daily life momentarily at bay, whatever new environment you enter into for your quiet moments is more than an escape. It has a potentially positive contribution to make through the ways it expands your perceptions as you take in its subtleties and uncover its layered meanings.

Angela Duckworth and her colleagues have stressed the importance of "situational self-control strategies" as a way of avoiding temptations, such as an over-indulgence in junk foods. It helps not to have unhealthy foods within arm's reach in your kitchen. With our many excellent local ice cream shops, I love going out

for ice cream. (Truth be told, I enjoy ice cream just about any time or place.) But one advantage to having to go out for these creamy treats, rather than simply grabbing them from my refrigerator, is to encourage some limit to my frequent self-indulgence here. Going out for ice cream may cost more, but because it cuts down on the frequency of my partaking, it helps to make the scale readings at my doctor's appointments a more pleasant experience.

But such a favorable outcome arises out of framing environmental influences in a negative manner. It focuses on what they can help you avoid rather than what your environment might contribute to you in more affirmative ways.

Drawing upon the affirmative dimensions of your settings for reflection requires, first of all, paying a renewed attention to the contemplative spaces you have chosen, whether for a focused deliberation or a leisurely pace of daydreaming. It's only if you look up in the cathedral, appreciate the beauty of a campus, or allow the quiet of a secluded path to infuse your awareness that the affirmative possibilities of your settings emerge.

Paying more perceptive attention to your surroundings may sound simple, but it runs into a well-recognized psychological obstacle. Our attention is overwhelmingly selective. Numerous experiments by psychologists confirm that when participants' attention is directed elsewhere, they miss such obvious occurrences as a person in a gorilla suit or a clown on a unicycle wandering through their vision.

So, developing ways to foster an expansion of your perceptions entails more consciously choosing how you direct your attention. I recall hearing of a monk that when asked what he had done over the years, pointed outside his window and simply said, "I watched that flower grow." While our undertaking here hardly aims for us all to become monks, I will in the upcoming pages ask you to ponder that monk's comment, and to consider what it would mean to your life to improve the richness of your daily perceptions.

Affirmation of Hope

A final quality of any authentic reflection – evident in an open spirit – is that it is implicitly an affirmation of hope. This is because reflection, by its very nature, involves taking another look at things. By virtue of this act of reconsideration, reflection opens up the possibility that any current understanding you hold may not be the last word. Any stepping back to consider your present struggles or dilemmas anew is by itself alive to the potential for positive change.

This is certainly not to say that it is easy. As psychological research shows, belief perseverance is a powerful force in our lives. Getting stuck is an all-too-common experience in everything from our ideas to our jobs to our relationships. Remember my talented friend who, when I asked about leaving a job that frustrated him, replied, "I don't even have the time to think about it."

Getting stuck in this existential way occurs whenever you treat yourself as an object, that is, something predetermined or settled now once and for all. But whatever efforts you may expend in this direction, they never exhaustively work.

This is because we are, by our very nature, not objects but active subjects.

Try a little experiment. Focus your attention on yourself. In your mind's eye, make your perception of yourself fully explicit, rendering as transparent as possible all your features and subtleties. What is missing from this mental picture of yourself? The part of you that *perceives* this picture. Now, focus on the part of yourself doing the perceiving. What occurs? You are able to bring into focus the perceiving part of yourself. But now: What about the part of yourself that perceives this perceiving self? The part of yourself perceiving your perceiving escapes your self-conception. This can go on indefinitely. Your consciousness, by its very nature, is self-transcending.

Our self-transcending nature is the mark of our status as active subjects, our ever-present capacity to see ourselves and our unfolding lives anew. As you shall see as we go on, that means you are never as stuck as it may first seem and that your world is always larger than it initially appears.

Looked at in this way, virtue-infused reflection is not an esoteric activity, one requiring technical expertise or open only to a gifted few. It is an everyday practice available to us all and best engaged in on a regular basis.

There is much in our lives that we can't control. We can't control the innate talents we possess, the physical looks we are born with, and many of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

But we can control the persons we wish to become – and this is where ethics comes in. It is the foundational way we claim our dignity and announce our value.

Every ethical choice we make not only helps to determine who we are to become but, at the same time, transcends ourselves, leaving a mark that remains even after we have moved on. For every such choice we make is an abiding testimony to life's higher possibilities, available to others to reflect upon and extend.

If you're willing to accept an invitation to engage in this distinctive kind of ethical reflection, you can never be sure about the details of where it will lead. In my own experience, there have been my share of detours, wrong turns, and simple pauses in confusion. But while you can't predict with certainty the specifics ahead, you can be sure you'll end up closer to where you need to be.

It's worth the effort. Remember, I intend to argue, an ethical life is an extraordinary life. So, let's begin.