What is the point of studying ethics? This is the critical question that will drive this chapter. Many people don’t think about ethics as they make decisions in their day-to-day lives. They see problems and make decisions based upon practical criteria. Many see ethics as rather an affectation of personal taste. It is useful only when it can get you somewhere. Is this correct? Do we only act ethically when there is a win–win situation in which we can get what we want and also seem like an honorable, feeling, and caring person?

A Prudential Model of Decision-Making

In order to begin answering this question we must start by examining the way most of us make decisions. Everyone on earth initiates the decision-making process with an established worldview. A worldview is a current personal consciousness that consists of one’s understanding about the facts and values in the world. It is the most primitive term to describe our factual and normative conceptions. This worldview may be one that we have chosen or it may be one that we have passively accepted as we grow up in a particular culture. Sometimes the worldview is wildly inconsistent. Sometimes the worldview has gaping holes so that no answer can be generated. Sometimes it is only geared to perceived self-interest. And sometimes it is fanciful and can never be put into practice. Failures in one’s personal worldview model will lead to failures in decision-making.

One common worldview model in the Western world is that of celebrity fantasy. Under this worldview, being a celebrity is everything. Andy Warhol famously claimed that what Americans sought after most was 15 minutes of fame.1 Under this worldview model we should strive to become a celebrity if only for a fleeting moment. What does it mean to be a celebrity? It is one who is seen and recognized by a large number
of people. Notice that this definition does not stipulate that once recognized the object is given positive assent. That would be to take an additional step. To be seen and recognized is enough. One can be a sinner or a saint—all the same. To be recognized is to be recognized. If this is the end, then it is probably easier to take the sinner route. In this way, the passion for celebrity is at heart contrary to ethics.

Another popular worldview model is one of practical competence. Under this model the practitioner strives to consider what is in his or her best interest and applies a practical cost–benefit analysis to various situations in order to ascertain whether action x or action y will maximize the greatest amount of pleasure for the agent (often described in terms of money). Thus, if you are Bernie Madoff (a well-known financial swindler) you might think about the risks and rewards of creating an illegal Ponzi scheme as opposed to creating a legitimate investment house that operates as other investment houses do. The risk of setting off in your own direction is that you might get caught and go to prison. The rewards are that you might make much more money than you would have under the conventional investment house model. Since you think you are smarter than everyone else and won’t get caught, the prudential model would say—go for it! Madoff did get caught, but who knows how many others don’t? We couldn’t know because they haven’t been caught. But, even if you aren’t caught, is that the best worldview approach? The prudential model says yes.

Possible Ethical Additions to the Prudential Model

Some people, including this author, think that the prudential model is lacking. Something else is necessary in order have a well-functioning worldview by which we can commit purposive action (here understood to be the primary requirement of fulfilled human nature). First, we have to accept that the construction of our worldview is within our control. What I suggest is a set of practical guidelines for the construction of our worldview: “All people must develop a single comprehensive and internally coherent worldview that is good and that we strive to act out in our daily lives.” I call this the personal worldview imperative. Now one’s personal worldview is a very basic concept. One’s personal worldview contains all that we hold good, true, and beautiful about existence in the world. There are four parts to the personal worldview imperative: completeness, coherence, connection to a theory of ethics, and practicality. Let’s briefly say something about each.

First is completeness. Completeness is a formal term that refers to a theory being able to handle all cases put before it and to determine an answer based upon the system’s recommendations. In this case, I think that the notion of the good will provides completeness to everyone who develops one. There are two senses of the good will. The first is the rational good will. The rational good will means that each agent will develop an understanding about what reason requires of one as we go about our business in the world. In the various domains in which we engage this may require developing different sorts of skills. In the case of ethics it would require engaging in a rationally based philosophical ethics and abiding by what reason demands.

Another sort of good will is the affective good will. We are more than just rational machines. We have an affective nature, too. Our feelings are important, but just as was the case with reason, some guidelines are in order. For ethics we begin with sympathy.
Sympathy will be taken to be the emotional connection that one forms with other humans. This emotional connection must be one in which the parties are considered to be on a level basis. The sort of emotional connection I am talking about is open and between equals. It is not that of a superior “feeling sorry” for an inferior. It is my conjecture that those who engage in interactive human sympathy that is open and level will respond to another with care. Care is an action-guiding response that gives moral motivation to acting properly. Together sympathy, openness, and care constitute love.

When confronted with any novel situation one should utilize the two dimensions of the good will to generate a response. Because these two orientations act differently it is possible that they may contradict each other. When this is the case, I would allot the tiebreaker to reason. Others demur. Each reader should take a moment to think about her own response to such an occurrence.

Second is coherence. People should have coherent worldviews. This also has two varieties: deductive and inductive. Deductive coherence speaks to our not having overt contradictions in our worldview. An example of an overt contradiction in one’s worldview would be for Sasha to tell her friend Sharad that she has no prejudice against Muslims and yet, in another context, tell anti-Muslim jokes. The coherence provision of the personal worldview imperative says that you shouldn’t change who you are and what you stand for depending upon the context in which you happen to be.

Inductive coherence is different. It is about adopting life strategies that work together. When they work against each other it is inductive incoherence. In inductive logic this is called a sure loss contract. For example, if a person wanted to be a devoted husband and family man and yet also engage in extramarital affairs he would involve himself in inductive incoherence. The very traits that make him a good family man: loyalty, keeping your word, sincere interest in the well-being of others are damaging to a philanderer, who requires selfish manipulation of others for his own pleasure. The good family man will be a bad philanderer and vice versa. To try to do both well involves a sure loss contract. Such an individual will fail at both. This is what inductive incoherence means.

Third is connection to a theory of being good, that is, ethics. The personal worldview imperative enjoins that we consider and adopt an ethical theory. It does not give us direction, as such, as to which theory to choose except that the chosen theory must not violate any of the other three conditions (completeness, coherence, and practicability). What is demanded is that one connects to a theory of ethics and uses its action guiding force to control action.

The final criterion is practicability. In this case there are two senses to the command. The first sense refers to the fact that we actually carry out what we say we will do. If we did otherwise, we’d be hypocrites and also deductively incoherent. But second, it is important that the demands of ethics and social and political philosophy be doable. One cannot command another to do the impossible! The way that I have chosen to describe this is the distinction between the utopian and the aspirational. The utopian is a command that may have logically valid arguments behind it but is existentially unsound (meaning that some of the premises in the action-guiding argument are untrue by virtue of their being impractical). In a theory of global ethics if we required that everyone in a rich country gave up three-quarters of their income so that they might support the legitimate plight of the poor, this would be a utopian vision. Philosophers are very attracted to utopian visions. However, unless philosophers want to be marginalized, we must situate
our prescriptions in terms that can actually be used by policy makers. Beautiful visions that can never be should be transferred to artists and poets.

How to Construct Your Own Model

The first step in creating your own model for which you are responsible is to go through personal introspection concerning the four steps in the personal worldview imperative. The first two are global analyses in which an individual thinks about who he or she is right now in terms of consistency and completeness. These criteria are amenable to the prudential model. They are instrumental to making whatever worldview one chooses to be the most effective possible. This is a prudential standard of excellence. What constitutes the moral turn is the connection to a theory of the good: ethics.

Thus the third step is to consider the principal moral theories and make a choice as to which theory best represents your own considered position. To assist readers in this task, I provide a brief gloss here of the major theories of ethics.

Theories of ethics

There are various ways to parse theories of ethics. I will parse theories of ethics according to what they see as the ontological status of their objects. There are two principal categories: (a) the realist theories that assert that theories of ethics speak to actual realities that exist; and (b) the anti-realist, that assert that theories of ethics are merely conventional and do not speak about ontological objects.

Realist theories

Utilitarianism is a theory that suggests that an action is morally right when that action produces more total utility for the group as a consequence than any other alternative. Sometimes this has been shortened to the slogan, “The greatest good for the greatest number.” This emphasis upon calculating quantitatively the general population’s projected consequential utility among competing alternatives, appeals to many of the same principles that underlie democracy and capitalism (which is why this theory has always been very popular in the USA and other Western capitalistic democracies). Because the measurement device is natural (people’s expected pleasures as outcomes of some decision or policy), it is a realist theory. The normative connection with aggregate happiness and the good is a factual claim. Utilitarianism’s advocates point to the definite outcomes it can produce by an external and transparent mechanism. Critics cite the fact that the interests of minorities may be overridden.

Deontology is a moral theory that emphasizes one’s duty to do a particular action just because the action, itself, is inherently right and not through any other sorts of calculations—such as the consequences of the action. Because of this nonconsequentialist bent, deontology is often contrasted with utilitarianism, which defines the right action in term of its ability to bring about the greatest aggregate utility. In contradistinction to utilitarianism, deontology will recommend an action based upon principle. “Principle” is justified through an understanding of the structure of action, the nature of reason,
and the operation of the will. Because its measures deal with the nature of human
reason or the externalist measures of the possibility of human agency, the theory is
realist. The result is a moral command to act that does not justify itself by calculating
consequences. Advocates of deontology like the emphasis upon acting on principle or
duty alone. One’s duty is usually discovered via careful rational analysis of the nature
of reason or human action. Critics cite the fact that there is too much emphasis upon
reason and not enough on emotion and our social selves situated in the world.

Swing theories (may be realist or anti-realist)

*Ethical intuitionism* can be described as a theory of justification about the immediate
grasping of self-evident ethical truths. Ethical intuitionism can operate on the level of
general principles or on the level of daily decision-making. In this latter mode many of
us have experienced a form of ethical intuitionism through the teaching of timeless
adages such as “Look before you leap,” and “Faint heart never won fair maiden.” The
truth of these sayings is justified through intuition. Many adages or maxims contradict
each other (such as the two above), so that the ability properly to apply these maxims
is also understood through intuition. When the source of the intuitions is either God
or Truth itself as independently existing, then the theory is realist, the idea being that
everyone who has a proper understanding of God or Truth will have the same revela-
tion. When the source of the intuitions is the person herself living as a biological being
in a social environment, then the theory is anti-realist because many different people
will have various intuitions and none can take precedent over another.

*Virtue ethics* is also sometimes called agent-based or character ethics. It takes the view-
point that in living your life you should try to cultivate excellence in all that you do and
all that others do. These excellences or virtues are both moral and nonmoral. Through
conscious training, for example, an athlete can achieve excellence in a sport (nonmoral
eexample). In the same way a person can achieve moral excellence, as well. The way
these habits are developed and the sort of community that nurtures them are all under
the umbrella of virtue ethics. When the source of these community values is Truth or
God, then the theory is realist. When the source is the random creation of a culture
based upon geography or other accidental features, then the theory is anti-realist.
Proponents of the theory cite the real effect that cultures have in influencing our
behavior. We are social animals and this theory often ties itself with communitari-
anism, which affirms the positive interactive role that society plays in our lives.
Detractors often point to the fact that virtue ethics does not give specific directives on
particular actions. For example, a good action is said to be one that a person of
character would make. To detractors this sounds like begging the question.

Anti-realist theories

*Ethical noncognitivism* is a theory that suggests that the descriptive analysis of language
and culture tells us all we need to know about developing an appropriate attitude in
ethical situations. Ethical propositions are neither true nor false but can be analyzed
via linguistic devices to tell us what action-guiding meanings are hidden there. We all
live in particular and diverse societies. Discerning what each society commends and
admonishes is the task for any person living in a society. We should all fit in and follow
the social program as described via our language and society. Because these impera-
tives are relative to the values of the society or social group being queried, the maxims
generated hold no natural truth value and as such are anti-realist. Advocates of this
theory point to its methodological similarity to deeply felt worldview inclinations of
linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. If one is an admirer of these disciplines as
seminal directions of thought, then ethical noncognitivism looks pretty good.
Detractors point to corrupt societies and that ethical noncognitivism cannot criticize
these from within (because the social milieu is accepted at face value).

Ethical contractarians assert that freely made personal assent gives credence to ethical
and social philosophical principles. These advocates point to the advantage of the
participants being happy or contented with a given outcome. The assumption is that
within a context of competing personal interests in a free and fair interchange of
values that those principles that are intersubjectively agreed upon are sufficient for
creating a moral “ought.” The “ought” comes from the contract and extends from two
people to a social group. Others universalize this, by thought experiments, to anyone
entering such contracts. Because the theory does not assert that the basis of the
contract is a proposition that has natural existence as such the theory is anti-realist.
Proponents of the theory tout its connection to notions of personal autonomy that
most people support. Detractors cite the fact that the theory rests upon the supposi-
tion that the keeping of contracts is a good thing, but why is this so? Doesn’t the theory
presuppose a meta-moral theory validating the primacy of contracts? If not, then the
question remains, “What about making a contract with another creates normative
value”?

For the purposes of this text, we will assume these six theories to be exhaustive of phi-
osophically based theories of ethics or morality. In subsequent chapters you should be
prepared to apply these terms to situations and compare the sorts of outcomes that
different theories would promote.

The fourth step in modifying one’s personal worldview (now including ethics) is to
go through an examination of what is possible (aspirational) as opposed to what is
impossible (utopian). This is another exercise in pragmatic reasoning that should be
based on the agent’s own abilities and situation in society given her or his place in the
scheme of things. Once this is determined, the agent is enjoined to discipline herself
to actually bring about the desired change. If the challenge is great, then she should
enlist the help of others: family, friends, community, and other support groups.

How Do Ethics Make a Difference in Decision-Making?

In order to get a handle on how the purely prudential worldview differs from the ethically
enhanced worldview, let us consider two cases and evaluate the input of ethics. First, we
will consider a general case in social and political ethics and then one from business ethics.
The reader should note how the decision-making process differs when we add the ethical
mode. In most cases in life the decisions we make have no ethical content. It doesn’t ethi-
cally matter whether we have the chocolate or vanilla ice cream cone. It doesn’t ethically
matter if we buy orchestra seats for the ballet or the nosebleed seats. It doesn’t ethically
matter if I wear a red or a blue tie today. The instances in which ethics are important form a small subset of all the decisions that we make. That is why many forego thought about ethical decision-making: it is only important in a minority of our total daily decisions. In fact, if we are insensitive to what counts as an ethical decision context, then we might believe that we are never confronted with a decision with ethical consequences.

To get at these relations let’s consider a couple of cases in which the ethical features are highly enhanced. Readers are encouraged to participate in creating reactions to these from the worldviews they now possess.

**Case 1: Social/Political Ethics**

*The Trolley Problem*

You are the engineer of the Bell Street Trolley. You are approaching Lexington Avenue Station (one of the major hub switching stations). The switchman on duty there says there is a problem. A school bus filled with 39 children has broken down on the right track (the main track). Normally, this would mean that he would switch you to the siding track, but on that track is a car filled with 4 adults that has broken down. The switchman asks you to apply your brakes immediately. You try to do so, but you find that your brakes have failed, too. There is no way that you can stop your trolley train. You will ram either the school bus or the car killing either 39 children or 4 adults. You outrank the switchman. It’s your call: what should you do?

*Secondary nuance:* What if the switchman were to tell you that from his vantage point on the overpass to the Lexington Avenue Station there is a rather obese homeless man who is staggering about. What if (says the switchman) he were to get out of his booth and push the homeless person over the bridge and onto the electric lines that are right below it? The result would be to stop all trains coming into and out of the Lexington Avenue Station. This would result in saving the lives of the occupants of the two vehicles. Of course it would mean the death of the obese homeless person. The switchman wants your OK to push the homeless man over the bridge—what do you say?

**Analysis**

This case has two sorts of interpretations: before and after the nuance addition. In the first instance, you are faced with a simple question: should you kill 4 people or 39? The major moral theories give different answers to this question. First, there is the point of view of utilitarianism. It would suggest that killing 4 causes less pain than killing 39. Thus you should tell the switchman to move you to the siding.

There is the fact that when the car was stuck on the siding, the driver probably viewed his risk as different from being stuck on the main line. Thus, by making that choice you
are altering that expectation—versus the bus driver who has to know that he is in imminent danger of death. Rule utilitarians might think that moving away from normal procedures requires a positive alternative. Killing four people may not qualify as a positive alternative (because it involves breaking a rule about willful killing of innocents). Thus, the utilitarian option may be more complicated than first envisioned.

Rule utilitarianism would also find it problematic to throw the homeless person over the bridge for the same reason, though the act utilitarian (the variety outlined above) might view the situation as killing 1 versus 4 or 39. However, there is the reality that one is committing an act of murder to save others. This would be disallowed by the rule utilitarian. If the act utilitarian were to consider the long-term social consequences in sometimes allowing murder, he would agree with the rule utilitarian. However, without the long-term time frame, the act utilitarian would be committed to throwing the homeless person over the rail.

The deontologist would be constrained by a negative duty not to kill. It would be equally wrong from a moral situation to kill anyone. There is no moral reason to choose between the car and the bus. Both are impermissible. However, there is no avoidance alternative. You will kill some group of people unless the homeless person is thrown over the wall. But throwing the homeless person over the wall is murder. Murder is impermissible. Thus, the deontologist cannot allow the homeless person to be killed—even if it saved 4 or 39 lives. Because of this, the deontologist would use other normative factors—such as aesthetics—to choose whether to kill 4 or 39 (probably choosing to kill 4 on aesthetic grounds).

The virtue ethics person or the ethical intuitionist would equally reply that the engineer should act from the appropriate virtue—say justice—and do what a person with a just character would do. But this does not really answer the question. One could construct various scenarios about it being more just to run into the school bus rather than the car when the occupants of the car might be very important to society: generals, key political leaders, great physicists, etc. In the same way, the intuitionists will choose what moral maxim they wish to apply at that particular time and place. The end result will be a rather subjectivist decision-making process.

Finally, noncognitivism and contractarianism are constrained to issues like, “What does the legal manual for engineers tell them to do in situations like this?” If the manual is silent on this sort of situation, then the response is what is the recommended action for situations similar to this in some relevant way? This is much like the decision-making process in the law, stare decisis et non quieta movere ‘support the decisions and do not disturb what is not changed’. In other words, one must act based upon a cultural or legal framework that provides the only relevant context for critical decisions.

In any event, the reader can see that the way one reasons about the best outcome of a very difficult situation changes when one adds ethics to the decision-making machinery. I invite readers to go through several calculations on their own for class discussion. Pick one or more moral theory and set it out along with prudential calculations such that morality is the senior partner in the transaction. One may have to return to one’s personal worldview (critically understood—as per above) and balance it with the practical considerations and their embeddedness to make this call.
You are a midlevel accountant at Alpha-Male Sport Shoes. Your company competes with the big brands like Nike and Adidas but you offer cheaper prices and more garish fashionable colors. The brand has been doing reasonably well. Your factories are in Vietnam. Your sales are in the USA. The company also has a venture capital arm that seeks to find new avenues to diversify the company in new global markets.

Your boss, Cora, calls in sick and asks you to handle any emergencies. She gives you her computer access code. After you finish your work for the day, you make one last check on Cora’s account and in the process of following up upon a routine inquiry you discover that one of the venture capital accounts, Elysium Fields, is a totally bogus operation. This bothers you. You decide to stay late at work and subsequently discover that it is some sort of phony operation. Lots of company monies go into the venture capital arm and especially into Elysium Fields through various foreign bank accounts that offer secrecy and do not report to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). You are convinced that something terribly wrong is happening. Your company is breaking the law. Just before you leave for the day you discover a suspicious e-mail that ties Elysium Fields into the illegal drug trade from Vietnam. You print out the suspicious files and accounts transactions. Then you go home with the copies.

You are a Vietnamese citizen of the USA, Thuy Nguyen. You are a single mother with a seven-year-old daughter. You have heard over and over again about the pain that illegal drug traffic has caused in the USA. Your own brother died of a drug overdose. You feel that Alpha-Male Sport Shoes is a front company for illegal drug traffic. You have enough evidence in your briefcase to go to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and open an investigation that will probably lead to a conviction. However, this will disrupt your life. You will be put into the witness protection program, which will greatly disrupt your and your daughter’s lives. If you do nothing, more people will die via this particular drug outlet. If you shut them down, then your own family life is permanently disrupted. What should you do? Do you go to the FBI?

**Analysis**

The prudential viewpoint begins with the individual involved, Thuy Nguyen. You want to keep your job so that you can pay your bills and look after your daughter. People in the witness protection program are often more prone to psychological stress—this would
not be good for your daughter as she develops. Such possible practical consequences would suggest that you keep quiet and pretend nothing has happened.

If we extend the prudential viewpoint, then certain assumptions must be made about the case. Will the prosecution be successful? Will your life be in danger? Even though there may be good to others prudentially, it would be overridden by the possible negative effects to you. Again, the prudential viewpoint seems clearly against taking any action: mum’s the word.

If we begin the ethical analysis with noncognitivism, then we must specify which culture we are talking about when we analyze the language of morals. Is the language that of the Vietnamese organized crime families? If so, then there is probably a code of looking the other way so that the profits might be made. Is the language that of recent naturalized Vietnamese citizens? How about naturalized citizens, in general? US citizens? It might make a difference which community is chosen as being operative in this particular situation. Once a choice is made, the analysis of the normative discourse within that sociological group will be rather straightforward. Thus, it is possible to get a range of recommendations under this approach (including some that are contradictory).

The same sort of dynamic might apply to contractarianism, intuitionism, or virtue ethics if one were to understand the contract, ethical adages, or community values to be relative to the sociological group chosen. In each case these anti-realist approaches will invoke a moral relativism such that one would have to decide which community is primary and hang her hat there.

The realist theories would operate differently. Utilitarianism would suggest an analysis of how much harm illegal drugs cause people in that and other communities. We are probably talking about tens of thousands of people who become addicts and have their lives torn apart. Thus we have a very large amount of pain multiplied by tens of thousands (including your own brother). That is a pretty strong argument against continuing where you are. You and your daughter count as two against many thousands. You are deciding about taking on risk to save lives. It would seem that utilitarianism would vote for your contacting the FBI.

Deontology would examine the relevant duties involved under some proper description of the action. Some of the duties might include: Thuy has a duty to her daughter to raise her with the basic goods of agency (such as she can), love, and moral training. The first two are compatible with either choice, but the latter suggests contacting the FBI. Thuy also has a duty to her profession: accounting. She must report accurately and not distort reality for internal, selfish purposes. The goal is a transparent rendering of operations. Her professional duty is to go to the FBI. Then there is her general duty as a citizen of the USA. This is a duty to report violations of the law so that the purpose of the law might be upheld: the conviction of the guilty and the acquittal of the innocent. This duty also suggests reporting the company’s activity to the FBI.

Both realist theories require Thuy to report what she has discovered as an accountant to the FBI. (We are assuming that the option of Thuy going to her bosses to tell them what she has discovered in order to get them to change would be rejected on prudential grounds.)

Readers are encouraged to try to take one of the moral theories and set out a decision-making scenario that involves both ethical and prudential criteria.
Conclusion

This chapter began by asking the rhetorical question, “What is the point in studying ethics?” The examination of the question took us various places. First it took us to prudential decision-making and possible problems many decision models face because of unreflective worldviews. Next, some suggestions were made to remedy this problem including the personal worldview imperative. Finally, the chapter worked through two case studies in which difficult decisions were presented. In this context, the prudential models were supplemented with an overlay of some ethical theories that might offer more coherent direction in decision-making. The slant of this author was toward the realist ethical theories and the swing theories interpreted realistically. However, each side was presented in order that the reader might make up her own mind on how she intends to adopt the overlay of ethics into her worldview and into her decision-making model. This is an important, ongoing task. I exhort each reader to take this quest seriously. It may be just the best investment of time you’ve ever made!

Notes

1 Cited in The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975). At an art exhibition in Stockholm, Sweden he is reported to have said, “In the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.” Since that time, the quotation has morphed into several different formulations.

2 This is particularly true of some feminist ethicists. See Rosemarie Tong, “A Feminist Personal Worldview Imperative” in Morality and Justice: Reading Boylan’s A Just Society, ed. John-Stewart Gordon (Lanham, MD and Oxford: Lexington/Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); 29–38.

3 Another popular distinction is natural versus non-natural. This is a subcategory of realism. For example, the philosopher G.E. Moore was a realist about the existence of “good” but he felt that “good” was an non-natural property. Thus realists can be naturalists and non-naturalists. Anti-realists are neither natural nor unnatural—they don’t think that the good (for example) actually exists at all: in or out of nature.

4 For the purposes of this book the words “ethics” and “morality” will be taken to be exact synonyms.

5 I have argued for this in more detail in “Duties to Children,” in The Ethics and Global Justice Reader, ed. Michael Boylan (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2011); 385–403.