In Search of the Good

A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Preliminary pages + chapters 1 to 4
Printed pages: 1 to 84

Transcriber's Notes:

To make the reading of this book easier, the footnotes are numbered as they are in the print copy and they are placed in the text in parentheses.

All spelling and typing errors appearing in the print copy are reproduced.

Chronology of the Bible

The Ancestors of the Israelites
C. 1900; Abraham comes to Palestine; Isaac is born to Abraham; Jacob is born to Isaac; Jacob has 12 sons who become ancestors of the tribes of Israel; the most prominent of these sons is Joseph, who becomes adviser to the King of Egypt.

The Israelites in Egypt
C. 1700 - c. 1250: The descendants of Jacob are enslaved in Egypt
C. 1250: Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt
C. 1250 - c. 1210: The Israelites wander in the wilderness; during this time Moses receives the Law on Mount Sinai.

The Conquest and Settlement of Canaan
C. 1210: Joshua leads the first stage of the invasion of Canaan; Israel remains a loose confederation of tribes; the leaders are heroic figures known as Judges.

The United Israelite Kingdom
C. 1030 - c. 1010: Reign of Saul
C. 1010 - c. 970: Reign of David
C. 970 - c. 931: Reign of Solomon

The Two Israelite Kingdoms
Judah (southern kingdom)
Kings

Israel (northern kingdom)
Kings
931-910: Jeroboam; 910-909: Nadab; 909-886; Baasha; 886-885; Elah; 885 (7 days); Zimri; 885-874; Omri; 874-853; Ahab; 853-852; Ahaziah; 852-841; Joram; 841-814; Jehu; 814-798; Jehoahaz; 798-783; Jehoash; 783-743; Jeroboam II; 743 (1 month); Shallum; 743-738; Menahem; 738-737; Pekahiah; 737-732; Pekah; 732-723; Hoshea; 722 Fall of Samaria.

Prophets
Elijah; Elisha; Amos; Hosea; Isaiah; Micah.

Historical
Israel wanders into and out of covenant promises; fortunes of kingdom fade; Egypt invades Palestine (732); Assyrians invade Israel (c. 725); Israelites become vassals of Assyria; Nebuchadnezzar defeats Egyptians in northwestern Mesopotamia; Egyptians retreat through Palestine; Rome founded (735)

Scripture
prophets speak out against Israel's infidelity; collections of prophetic sayings started; Deuteronomy is begun; emphasis on Holiness Law; synthesis of oral traditions and writings

Chronology of the Bible

The Last Years of the Kingdom of Judah
Kings
687-642; Manasseh; 642-640; Amon; 640-609; Josiah; 609 (3 months); Joahaz; 609-598; Jehoikim; 598 (3 months); Jehoiachim; 598-587; Zedekiah; 587 or 586; Fall of Jerusalem
Prophets
Zephaniah; Nahum; Jeremiah; Habakkuk?; Ezekiel
Historical
many Israelites deported to Babylon; Babylon captivity (587); apparent end of Israel as a nation; Jeremiah predicts resurrection of "new" Israel; Cyrus unites kingdoms of East into Persian Empire; captures Babylon; Greeks begin move into Northern territory; Rome begins domination of Italian peninsula; Persian-Greek wars
Scripture
various traditions synthesized; prophetic writings added to sacred literature; many psalms added to list; Lamentations added; Deuteronomy expanded and edited; Job, Jonah and Ruth added

The Exile and the Restoration
587; The Jews are taken into exile in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem; 539; Persian rule begins; 538; Edict of Cyrus allows Jews to return; 520; Foundations of the new Temple laid; 445-443; Restoration of the walls of Jerusalem
Prophets
Haggai/Zechariah; Obadiah; Malachi/Joel?

The Time Between the Testaments
333; Alexander the Great establishes Greek rule in Palestine; 323-198; Palestine is ruled by the Ptolemies (descendants of one of Alexander's generals) who had been given the position of ruler over Egypt; 198-166; Palestine is ruled by the Selucids (descendants of one of Alexander's generals) who had acquired the rule of Syria; 166-63; Jewish revolt under Judas Maccabeus re-establishes Jewish independence; Palestine is ruled by Judas' family and descendants - the Hasmoneans; 63; The Roman general Pompey takes Jerusalem; Palestine is ruled by puppet kings appointed by Rome; 37-4; Roman puppet king, Herod the Great, rules Palestine
Historical
Alexander conquers Persia; after Alexander's death, Greek Empire divided into three parts: Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia; Greek influence in Middle East; Rome controls Palestine; Temple dominates Jewish religious life; Rome controls the "world"; Greek and Roman cultures dominate eastern Mediterranean lands
Scripture
Psalms in final form; collections of prophetic writings edited; Jewish Scriptures translated into Greek; later books added; Judith and Wisdom complete Hebrew Scriptures; Septuagint translation becomes standard for Jews in Egypt

Common Era Begins
Birth of Jesus; Ministry of John the Baptist; Baptism of Jesus; Beginning of the public ministry of Jesus; c. AD 30; Death and resurrection of Jesus; c. AD 35; Conversion of Paul (Saul of Tarsus); c. AD 41 - 65 . Ministry of Paul; c. AD 65; Final imprisonment of Paul; c. AD 70 - 100 . The four Gospels are written

Chronology of the New Testament

Important Events during New Testament Times

Christian Writings
1&2 Thessalonians (50-52); Galatians (54-55); 1&2 Corinthians (54-56); Romans (56-57); Philippians (58-60); Colossians (58-60); Philemon (58-60)
Gospel of Mark (70); James (75-100); Ephesians (75-100)
Gospel of Matthew (85-100); Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles (85-100); 1 Peter (90-95); Hebrews (90-95); Revelation (90-95); Gospel of John (90-110); Letters of John (90-110); Pastoral Epistles (100-130)
Jude (110-130); 2 Peter (130-150)

Events in the Early Church
Birth of Jesus (6-4BC?)
Preaching of John the Baptist (27-29); Ministry of Jesus (29-33); Crucifixion (30-33); Conversion of Paul (33-35); Peter Imprisoned (41-44); Execution of James son of Zebedee (44); Paul in Galatia (47-49); Paul in Corinth (50-51); Paul in Ephesus (52-54); Paul arrested in Jerusalem (56); Paul in Rome (60); Death of James (called “brother of Jesus”) (62); Paul’s Martyrdom (65?); Flight of Christians to Pella (66-67)
Martyrdom of Ignatius (117?)

Events in Jewish History
Conquest and Rule of Alexander the Great (336-323BC); Maccabean Revolt (167BC); Dead Sea Community at Qumran (105BC-66AD); Pompey captures Jerusalem (Roman Rule Begins) (63BC)
High Priest Caiphas (18-36)
Theudas’ Revolt (40?); Jew banished from Rome by Claudius (41-49)
War with Rome (66-73); Jerusalem and Temple destroyed (70)
Council of Jamnia (90?)

Note: This chronology is only approximate, since the accuracy of many dates is uncertain under present scholarship. For clarity and brevity some details are omitted.

Chronology of the New Testament

Rulers during New Testament Times

Roman Emperors
Before Christ (BC): Augustus (27 BC - AD 14)
Anno domini (AD): Tiberius (14-37); Caligula (37-41); Claudius (41-54); Nero (54-68); Galba (68-69); Otho (69); Vitellius (69); Vespasian (69-79); Titus (79-81); Domitian (81-96); Nerva (96); Trajan (98-117); Hadrian (117-138)

Herodian Rulers
Before Christ (BC): Herod the Great (37-4 BC)
Anno domini (AD): Kingdom Divided (4 BC)
Iturea/Trachonitus: Philip the Tetrarch (4 BC-AD 34); Agrippa I (37-44); Agrippa II (50-100)
Galilee/Perea: Herod Antipas (4 BC-AD 39); Agrippa I (41-44); Agrippa II (56 or 61-100)
Judea/Samaria: Archelaus (4 BC-AD 6); Roman Governors; Roman Governors

Roman Governors of Judea
Before Christ (BC):
Anno domini (AD): Coponius (6-9); Marcus Ambivius (9-12); Annius Rufus (12-15); Valerius Gratus (15-26); Pontius Pilate (26-36); Maecellus (36-37); Marullus (37-41); Cuspius Fadus (44-46); Tiberius Alexander (46-48); Cumanus (48-52); Felix (52-58); Festus (58-62); Albinus (62-64); Gessius Florus (64-68)
In Search of the Good
A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living

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In Search of the Good
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The sextant depicted on the cover is an instrument used by sailors to aid their navigation. By sighting on the horizon and the Sun or North Star at a given time of day or night, sailors can establish their location in terms of latitude. By using a sextant together with charts, compass, and timepiece, sailors can get their bearings even in the middle of the sea. The sextant symbolizes what this course is about. Life is like being out at sea: we live in times that may seem more fluid than solid, where the direction we need to travel does not always seem obvious, where storms may arise, where we must learn to navigate or be lost to the mercy of the winds and currents in which we are caught. There are solid points of reference in the moral life, just like the Sun and stars and horizon for the sailor. By learning to recognize these solid points of reference, and developing our skills in order to be able to navigate through life using these reference points, we will succeed in finding direction. In Search of the Good: A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living will help guide you as you undertake your search for the good in life.

(photo: omitted)

Part A: Ethical foundations

Unit I: Mapping the ethical experience; 5
Chapter 1; Why be ethical? 7
Chapter 2; You are what you do: 23
Chapter 3; Conscience: The self in search of the good; 41

Unit II: Guided by the light of Revelation; 61
Chapter 4; The naming of God and ethics; 63
Chapter 5; "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"; 85
Chapter 6; Church: the sacrament of God's grace; 107

Part B: Searching for the good

Unit III: Discovering the good life; 125
Chapter 7; The good life: Our search for happiness; 127
Chapter 8; Norms for moral living; 147
Chapter 9; Living in praise and thanksgiving; 163

Unit IV: Gifted with freedom; 185
Chapter 10; Free to be fully alive; 187
Chapter 11; Freedom in a political and cultural context; 209
Chapter 12; The freedom of the children of God; 227

Unit V: Proclaiming justice and mercy; 243
Chapter 13; "I the LORD love justice" (Isaiah 61.8); 245
Chapter 14; Let earth and sea and sky proclaim your glory; 265
Chapter 15; "If I sin, what do I do to you?" (Job 7.20); 283

Unit VI: Building a civilization of love; 305
Chapter 16; Marriage matters; 307
Chapter 17; The family; 331
Chapter 18; "Render unto Caesar..." The search for the good and politics; 347

End Notes; 365
Acknowledgements; 375
Index; 377
Dear Student,

This book is based on a distinction.

We tend naturally to connect the idea of being good with the idea of doing the right thing. And yet, good people sometimes do the wrong thing and bad people sometimes do the right thing. The goodness that we find in people appears to be flawed; so is the goodness I find in myself. And so, this text distinguishes between the goodness of human beings and the rightness or wrongness of their actions.

This book is based on our pursuit of happiness.

When you really think about it, trying to make myself happy doesn't work. Yet when I do the right thing for others, I experience happiness. It seems that happiness is a by-product of doing a good thing, the right thing. Great thinkers, philosophers and scholars provide this textbook with a study of the interaction between pursuing the good and finding happiness.

This book is based on the gift of faith.

The teachings of Christ and his Church help us to peer honestly into the depths of our hearts and recognize the goodness of our being. The power of the Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, offers forgiveness to heal our broken heart and courage to act justly in this world. The gift of faith enlightens our understanding about goodness, about the sin that afflicts our humanity and about our quest for happiness.

Perhaps St. Ambrose summarizes the approach of this textbook best:

Hold fast to God, the one true good
Where a man's heart is, there is his treasure also. God is not accustomed to refusing a good gift to those who ask for one. Since he is good,... let us hold fast to him with all our soul, our heart, our strength, and so enjoy his light and see his glory and possess the grace of supernatural joy. Let us reach out with our heart to possess that good, let us exist in it and live in it, let us hold fast to it, that good which is beyond all we can know or see and is marked by perpetual peace and tranquility, a peace which is beyond all we can know or understand. This is the good that permeates creation. In it we all live, on it we all depend. It has nothing above it; it is divine. No one is good but God alone... It is through God's goodness that all that is truly good is given us... (* The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. II. (NY: Catholic Book Co., 1973) p. 203)

With the authors of this textbook I pray and hope that this program of studies will help you steer a course through life that will lead you to your treasure.

Sincerely yours,
Most Rev. Richard Grecco
Auxiliary Bishop of Toronto
Part A: Ethical foundations

Unit I: Mapping the ethical experience

Infinite: boundless, endless. In mathematics, the infinite refers to something that cannot be counted. It is greater than any assignable quantity. In philosophy and theology, the good is infinite. It cannot be confined or measured by a definable quantity. Ethics aims at this infinite good.

Introduction

Ethics is for lovers. It is for people who know how to love deeply, passionately and energetically. Ethics is for people who have a passion for the good and the beautiful. And so we begin to tell our story of ethics by going to its very centre - love.

St. Augustine, in his book Confessions, asks, "What do I love when I love God?" It is an interesting question, which he later repeats in the form of a prayer, "What do I love when I love You, my God?" With this question, St. Augustine admits that he does not know the answer. What is it that I love when I love God? As we explore ethics, we join St. Augustine in his quest.

Why is love of God a good starting point for ethics? Ethics is not first of all about duties and obligations, or about rules of behaviour, or about laws. The driving force of ethics is the good. We are not talking about the small goods of life, such as a car, a house, a family, or wealth. Ethics is about the big good: the good which St. Paul described as "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (I Corinthians 2.9). It is the impossible good that Mary encountered when the angel came to her with God's announcement that she was to bear a child while she had no husband (Luke 1.34). Ethics searches for the infinite, the impossible, first of all. Then it returns to our day-to-day actions, to the obligations and responsibilities that we have for one another.

In this program we will start by exploring this search for the infinite good. Then we will look at how we translate this search into our actions. The first we call ethics. The second - translating the search for the good into the way we conduct our lives - we call morality. We can see morality at work in our rules or guidelines of behaviour and good actions. Accordingly, for example, the Ten Commandments - the ten words given to Moses - touch on morality. They identify the good by looking at its flip side: You shall not steal; you shall not murder. Or they show how the good is attained: You shall love the Lord your God. In the opening chapter, we will make the distinction between ethics and morality using examples from everyday life.

In Search of the Good: A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living consists of two parts: an introductory section of two units and a second section of four units. The introductory units ask the question: What fundamental issues are at work in a Catholic approach to ethics? We approach the question from two angles. The first angle explores a philosophical understanding of the human person as ethical (Unit I). You will be invited to reflect on the rich ethical tradition that has emerged over the centuries from Aristotle (384-322 Be) to contemporary thinkers on such questions as "What is ethics?" "What makes human actions unique?" "What guides human actions in search of the good?" "What is conscience?" In Unit I we will use what tradition has called the "Book of Nature," that is, what human reason can learn from the natural world. Human intelligence and philosophical reflection have helped us to understand this desire within us for the good. The second angle (Unit II) explores what our Judeo-Christian tradition brings to ethics and the consideration of the good. Here we will turn to sacred Scripture, which is foundational for our understanding of ourselves as ethical beings.

In the second part of In Search of the Good, Revelation and reason will be placed in dialogue with each other. We will consider the good that people search for in the various domains of their lives. Here we will enter into the treasury of reflection that has enlightened human culture over the centuries. We will sample reflections on the good of freedom, of justice, of love, of community, and of forgiveness. We will consider how these goods impact on our lives individually. We will ask "How might I think about these goods when I have to choose between more than one good?" "What about when I am confronted with evil, the opposite of the good?"
Each chapter also offers moments for reflection. These are opportunities to develop a sense of gratitude for the gift of the ethical and moral thrust in ourselves. It is this gift that allows our world to be a home for humanity; a place where it is good to be; a world for lovers.

**Chapter 1 Why be ethical?**

The happy [person] lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action.

Aristotle

Focus your learning  
Cognitive: What makes your experiences ethical or moral?  
Practical: How can the ethical theories of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas help you to understand the ethical/moral dimensions of the decisions that you are called upon to make every day of your life?  
Affective: What do you consider to be "the good life"?

Key terms in this chapter  
autonomy; beautiful; deontological ethics; desire; duty; ethics; good; morality; obligation; passion; response; responsibility; Revelation; teleological ethics

Key thinkers  
Aristotle; Immanuel Kant; Emmanuel Levinas

**The ethical experience: Four ways of locating the ethical in you**

"Be home by midnight. And please, drive carefully!" How often have your parents said something like this to you? Perhaps you associate ethics and morals with this kind of prescriptive language. Ethics and morality become a series of do's and don'ts imposed on you by an outside authority. You may often feel that these obligations are an imposition on your personal freedom and responsibility. You may resent these rules and codes as an intrusion on your freedom. Accordingly, you may well think of ethics or morality as something that others put upon you and not as something that is yours. In the following four examples the ethical is clearly a part of what it means to be human.

The scream - The experience of personal response

Ken Melchin begins his book on Christian ethics Living With Other People with the following story:

Take a moment to imagine that you are on vacation, stretched out on a vast expanse of magnificent white beach, with no one around for miles. You are finally getting that relief from the tension and anxiety of daily life that you most certainly deserve. You can feel your muscles relaxing. You can feel the stress flowing out of your body. You can feel your mind detaching from everyday concerns, releasing the grip of concentrated attention. Your mind begins to wander, to float blissfully, to be carried here, then there, from one pleasant image to another, on the breezes that blow in that familiar region of consciousness between waking and sleeping.

Suddenly a scream break through your state of bliss.

"Help!!!"

Edvard Munch, The Scream, 1893  
Copyright The Munch-Museum/The Munch-Ellingsen Group/SODART 2004  
(image: omitted)
**Ethics or morality? Which is it?**

Do ethics and morality mean the same thing? Not quite. Ethics comes from the Greek to ethika (having to do with good character). Morality comes from the Latin moralitas (having to do with the customs, habits and manners shaping human life). Ethics is interested more in the good that humans tend towards, such as happiness and freedom. Morality is interested more in the ways that humans can attain this good, such as the rules, laws or commandments which we experience as a duty or obligation to follow. The text will constantly go back and forth between ethics and morality. Some chapters will focus more on ethics; others will focus more on morality.

Ethics guides morality; it gives vision to our action. A concrete comparison might make this distinction clearer: Ethics is like understanding musical theory, knowing how to read music, and understanding technique. Morality is like actually playing music, hitting the right notes, correctly interpreting the musical phrase, performing.

Another example: Ethics is like understanding the laws of physics that govern driving a car; for instance, knowing that it takes friction between the tires and the road to have good traction, and that in a snowstorm this friction is reduced. Morality is like good driving: slowing down in a snowstorm and allowing greater distance to stop the car, knowing and applying the rules of the road, driving defensively. You can play music without understanding musical theory, and you can operate a car without understanding the laws of physics. However, you would have difficulty in making good decisions in your musical performance or driving should challenges or dramatic changes arise that require your response. That's why we need a basis for our decisions and actions. Ethics gives us this understanding of the fundamental principles underlying our activity.

Does ethics take priority over morality? Ethics has a certain priority because the search for the good is so important in our lives. But to better understand our search for the good, we must look first at how, over the centuries, people have expressed the good in laws, norms for action, rules, regulations or commandments. Laws and commandments serve to protect some good - for example, "Thou shalt not kill." This commandment promotes and protects the good of life. Yet, there is an exception to this commandment, called self-defense. Ethics searches for the higher good on which the act of self-defense is based. Ethics also explains how there can be a higher good in particular circumstances and under certain conditions. In other words, norms and duties are not the final word. The good is. Rules or norms that do not contribute to the good need to be reformulated.

See Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, tr. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 170.

Your entire being suddenly shifts into gear! You are transformed! In a single movement your body and mind rise together into a state of action, of focused attention, of total concentration. It is as different from your previous state as a hurricane from a calm summer's day. Before, you were at rest. Now you are in motion! You are energized! You are dynamized by a concern, a desire, a commitment to action. Who screamed? Are they drowning? Where are they? How to help them? Find out! Get to them! Save them! Keep them alive! (1)

How would you name this experience? The scream broke through your reverie, forcing you to awareness of your responsibility for another person. Objectively, the scream was a burst of sound. For you it was a sound that touched you more deeply than at the level of your intellect. It won't do to analyze the scream. The scream is an appeal, a call for help. It urges you not to think, but to act. It is a deeply felt, almost automatic, claim made upon you to do something. Without thinking about it, you feel an inner tension to respond. It is not a decision you make. It is an almost automatic response. This is what it means to experience an ethical response. Think about your response. It is a uniquely human experience.

The beggar - The experience of the other

A second common ethical experience comes to us from the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995). For Levinas, it all start with the human face, especially the face of someone in need. Something happens to us when we are face to face with another person, whom he refers to as an "Other." All face-to-face encounters are ethical because they remind us of our responsibility for the Other. Later in this chapter you will learn more about Levinas's ethical theory, but first consider this simple example.
Imagine that you are walking downtown in a typical Canadian city. You meet someone who asks you for some spare change. You may have noticed the person as you came up the street. You may already have begun the debate within yourself as to what you will do. When confronted with this person, you probably go through a number of emotions. "Oh, the poor guy!" "Get a job." "I have better things to spend my money on." "She will probably spend it on alcohol or drugs." "The city should take care of these people." "Oh no!" "Maybe I should cross to the other side." "Why me?" "Please, not today." Even if you refuse to give some spare change, you are not finished with the request. As you walk down the street, the other person, the needy one, is still with you. He or she is inside you while you are busy defending your decision not to give - or, your decision to give. The other person has evoked a response from you.

In Levinas's language, the Other's face has taken you hostage and made you responsible. This is an ethical experience. The Other's face is not something you can just look at neutrally. It has another sort of impact: the face is ethical.

"I have to…" - The experience of obligation

For the third ethical experience, let us go back to the parent who tells you, "Be home by midnight! And please, drive carefully!" When your parents ask you to be cautious, it affects you in a way that is connected with the experience of duty, or obligation. Yom ethical sense is turned on when someone orders you to do something.

Take the example of your parents giving you a curfew and telling you to drive carefully. As the time gets closer to midnight, you start thinking about taking your leave. As time passes, you grow increasingly aware of the time and of your need to get going. If you choose to ignore these warning signals and stay anyway, your unrest doesn't go away. You will continue debating with yourself what you will tell your parents. On reaching home after midnight, you may try to sneak to your bedroom without making any noise for fear your parents will hear you and confront you.

This experience of feeling obliged to obey a rule or a law has everything to do with your ethical side. Something in you obliges you to follow the law, or to do what is considered the right thing to do. Someone, whom you consider to have authority over you, can convince you to follow his or her reason or wishes. You cannot remain neutral toward such a person: the order or wish invades your consciousness and demands a response. Yom response has everything to do with ethics. Here again you show yourself to be an ethical being. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) worked out an ethical theory for this experience of duty, or obligation. We will have more to say about Kant's ideas later in the chapter.

This is intolerable! This isn't fair! - The experience of contrast

A fourth ethical experience occurs when you feel outraged by something blatantly unjust or unfair happening to yourself or to others. At the end of the Second World War, the Allied troops brought to light the first images of the heaps of corpses and the emaciated remnants of the Jewish people in the death camps. In 1995, United Nations Peacekeepers reported their helplessness as 7,000 men and boys were butchered in Srebrenice by the Serbian army. Other peacekeepers have wept as they gave witness about the genocide in Rwanda. In each case, the world reacted with anger and revulsion. Before massive evil the human heart recoils and is filled with incomprehension. "Never again," Pope Paul VI pleaded at the United Nations in 1971, "War, never again!"

When you feel overwhelmed by the unjust suffering of others, by the plight of workers who are let go while the bosses award themselves big bonuses, by battered women and abused children, the indignation you feel is an experience of contrast with what ought to be. "This is not right!" "This must be stopped." "This is intolerable!" "This isn't fair!" You have a healthy built-in capacity for seeing what the world ought to look like and how situations ought to be. When confronted with senseless violence and disregard of others, you quite naturally recoil from this destruction. This is again an ethical experience. One could call this an experience of contrast. You are shocked because the terrible and terrifying event contrasts so strongly with what you expect from your fellow humans. The intolerable ought not to be!

A mass grave in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp during the Second World War (photo: omitted)
Guiding questions

1. How would you describe your personal experience from the perspective of each of the scenarios?

2. What reasons or motives might you have that would cause you to respond in one way or another?

3. What makes you respond in these situations? Why?

4. Under what circumstances might you respond differently?

5. What makes these responses ethical?

Defining ethics

Consider these four types of ethical experiences: personal response (the scream), responsibility for the Other (the beggar), duty (the curfew), and contrast (the intolerable). It is one thing to experience these things, but it is quite another to understand what these experiences mean. Early philosophers noted such experiences and reflected on them. From these philosophers we have inherited different theories that seek to explain ethical experiences and to translate them into a practical wisdom of living. In other words, the ethical experiences do not lead directly to an ethical theory. What one person considers a duty or intolerable, cannot be translated into an ethical position that applies to everyone at all times. Moral philosophers, or ethicists, sort out what, according to their understanding, is an ethical approach to such experiences. They delve into the complexity of human actions and propose what is the human thing to do.

From these philosophers we have received several definitions of ethics. At a general level, ethics is about the "goodness" of human life.

Ethics seeks answers to questions like: "How and when does human life reflect what is good?" and "How do we aim at the good life?" In asking these questions, we quickly recognize that saying "the good life is the aim of ethics" raises as many questions as it answers. Who determines what is "good"? What is "the good life"? What is good and right in human living?

In answering these questions, ethicists begin to diverge into different camps. Some would have us reflect on the aim of human life (Aristotle). Others look at obligation derived from respect for the law (Kant). Still others focus on the meanings of the words we use to speak of good and evil, right and wrong. Others in the fields of comparative ethics and moral anthropology study the way particular peoples, societies and cultures answer the question "What is the good?" Others again explore our responsibility to the Other (Levinas), or to obedience to the will of God. Each of these viewpoints gives us a different perspective on the search for the good. In order to grasp just how different ethical theories can be, consider the following three ethical thinkers - Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.

Aristotle (384-322 BC): Teleological ethics

Aristotle was born in Stagira, a northern colony of Greece bordering Macedonia. His father, the court physician, was a friend of King Amyntas II of Macedonia. Aristotle became friends with the King's son, Philip, a friendship that was to influence the course of civilization in later years. In all likelihood, Aristotle's father introduced him to anatomy and the medical practices and ideas of the time. From his childhood, he would have dissected and studied various organisms. Undoubtedly this influenced his ideas about how we come to know and understand the world and our place within it. His privileged childhood could not prevent the death of his parents when he was seventeen years old. He went to Athens at that time to continue his education in Plato’s Academy. The philosopher Plato was recognized at the time as Greece’s leading thinker.
Plato recognized Aristotle's great intellectual abilities, and took him under his wing. However, the two of them approached philosophy very differently. While Plato focused on abstraction and the world of ideas, Aristotle explored the natural world and human experience. While Plato thrived on contemplation, Aristotle thrived on hands-on experience, observation and classification. Even though they saw the world differently, Aristotle had the greatest respect for his teacher and stayed with him for twenty-years. Plato died in 347 BC. Because of an upsurge in anti-Macedonian feeling, Aristotle left Athens for the Eastern Aegean. There he became political advisor to Hermias, who was eager to foster learning in his extensive power base in Asia Minor. Aristotle married Pythias, who was Hermias's niece and adopted daughter. Unhappily, Hermias offended the Persian king of the time and, as a result, was executed. Aristotle and Pythias fled for their lives.

By this time (343 BC), Aristotle's childhood friend, Philip, was King Philip of Macedonia. The king invited Aristotle to tutor his thirteen year-old son, Alexander. By all accounts, Alexander was rambunctious. However, Aristotle managed to teach him well and instilled in Alexander a respect for knowledge. We know this pupil as Alexander the Great, whose armies conquered and controlled much of Asia. Under Alexander's sponsorship, Aristotle established his own school, the Lyceum, in Athens. These were his most fruitful years. He wrote extensively on logic, metaphysics, theology, history politics, ethics, psychology anatomy, biology zoology astronomy, as well as the ancient equivalents of physics and chemistry.

In 323 BC, Alexander the Great died, and there was again a backlash against all things associated with Macedonian rule. Aristotle, by his association with King Philip, and then with Alexander, found himself in a difficult position. Charges were brought against him for not respecting the gods of the state. (The same charge had been brought against the philosopher Socrates in 399 BC. Socrates was put to death, being forced to drink poison.) Aristotle fled for his life once again, but died within a year.

Ancient historian Diogenes Laertius referred to 360 works by Aristotle. Tragically, much of his work was lost in the destruction of the great library of the Egyptian city of Alexandria. Only forty of his works survive today. The Lyceum in Athens continued - its power somewhat diminished - for another 500 years to challenge and influence much of subsequent Western thought.

teleological: having to do with the design or purpose of something. For example, a house is built to live in, a clock made to keep time. But what of the "end" to which we as human beings aspire? Try thinking of this "end" not as an end point, but as completion, as fullness.

Aristotle's teleological ethics

So how did Aristotle’s ideas become a part of Catholic ethical reflection? In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274) through Arab scholars - rediscovered Aristotle. Aquinas's teaching assured Aristotle an enduring place in the development of Catholic ethical theory.

The pursuit of happiness

At the core of Aristotle’s ethics is political intent. Aristotle's first concern is not the individual. His first concern is the polis, the Greek city-state. The isolated person, outside the polis, must be "either a beast or a god." Aristotle’s ethics state that human life is shaped to its full extent in the context of a community. It is there that the citizen will find happiness.

Aristotle does not equate happiness with pleasure. Pleasure, for Aristotle, was suitable for cattle. Pleasure is only momentary. Happiness, however, is an enduring state of someone who does well the tasks that are typical of a human being. Happiness is the condition of the good person who succeeds in living well and acting well. In the words of Aristotle

As all knowledge and moral purpose aspires to some good, what is in our view the good at which the political science aims, and what is the highest of all practical goods? As to its name there is, I may say, a general agreement. The masses and the cultured classes agree in calling it happiness, and conceive that "to live well or "to do well" is the same thing as "to be happy." But as to the nature of happiness they do not agree, nor do the masses give the same account of it as the philosophers. (2)

In other words, for Aristotle, ethics aims to discover what is good for us as human beings, what permits us to reach our potential, what is our internal compass, or what we are intended to be. For Aristotle, someone is happy "if and only if,
over some considerable period of time, [that person] frequently performs with some success the most perfect of typically human tasks." (3) For example, according to Aristotle, happiness might mean learning to be a responsible and active citizen of your community, or developing a lifestyle that fosters good health. That is why we call his ethics teleological ethics. It is because teleological ethics derives from discovering the finality (telos) of what we are intended to be.

Teleology
Here is how Aristotle expresses teleology:
Every art and every scientific inquiry, and similarly every action and purpose, may be said to aim at some good. Hence the good has been well defined as that at which all things aim. As there are various actions, arts, and sciences, it follows the ends are also various. Thus health is the end of medicine, a vessel of shipbuilding, victory [is the goal] of strategy, and wealth [is the aim] of domestic economy. If it is true that in the sphere of action there is an end which we wish for its own sake, and for the sake of which we wish everything else... it is clear that this will be the good or the supreme good. Does it not follow that the knowledge of this supreme good is of great importance for the conduct of life, and that, if we know it, we shall be like archers who have a mark at which to aim, we shall have a better chance of attaining what we want? (4)

Above all else, according to Aristotle, we are intended to be rational. Our greatest capacity as humans is our intelligence. Following our internal compass means developing this capacity, not only in matters of science, but also in practical life - in developing our individual character. Humans are rational animals, and we must base our actions, as much as possible, on reasoning. To act ethically, therefore, is to engage our capacity to reason as we develop good character. That is the highest form of happiness. The good person is one whose actions as a rule are solidly based on excellent reasoning and who spends a great amount of time thinking.

Human excellence
When people seek to become who they are intended to be, they develop habits that represent the best of what it means to be human. Aristotle calls these excellences virtues. To act virtuously, that is, excellently, is to do things well, to act successfully as a human being. It means allowing reason to guide one's actions. Aristotle held that a good person would use reason to control desire. We choose deliberately to fulfill that which is the most appropriate for us as humans. We become virtuous by choosing continually to do virtuous things, so that these actions become ingrained in us like a habit.

Moral virtue comes to us as a result of habit... The virtues we first get by exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g., (people) become builders by building... So too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.... If this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all... would be born good or bad at their craft... Thus in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. That is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the difference between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference. (5)

Assume a virtue, if you have if not... For use almost can change the stamp of nature.
Hamlet, Shakespeare

(photo: omitted)

The mean
Aristotle was very aware of the need to maintain balance in our actions. We ought to avoid excess, but not necessarily to avoid something completely. If to drink wine were a good, then it would be good to drink neither too much, nor too little. This is Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Be moderate in all things. To be courageous is to avoid some but not all dangers; to be polite is to be courteous in some but not in all situations. To be generous is to stay somewhere between extravagance and stinginess. Try to stay in the middle, but in a middle that suits you as an individual. For you, for example, the mean for drinking may mean drinking in moderation, or not at all.

First of all, it must be observed that the nature of moral qualities is such that they are destroyed by defect and by excess. We see the same thing happen in the case of strength and of health... excess as well as deficiency of physical
exercise destroys our strength, and similarly, too much and too little food and drink destroys our health; the proportionate amount, however, produces, increases, and strengthens it.

The same applies to self-control, courage, and the other virtues: the [one] who shuns and fears everything becomes a coward, whereas [an individual] who knows no fear at all and goes to meet every danger becomes reckless. Similarly, [one] who revels in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while [the person] who avoids every pleasure like a boor becomes what might be called insensitive. Thus we see that self-control and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency and are preserved by the mean. (6)

Teleological thinking: seeking to understand the ultimate goal, purpose or end of something. (Teleology derives from the Greek root telos, meaning goal, purpose or end, and logos, meaning study.) For example, from a teleological perspective, adolescence is a stage of development on the way to mature adulthood.

Aristotelian self-realization, like happiness, is a by-product of living a well-balanced life.
Douglas J. Soccio

Guiding questions

1. Identify three key points from the ethical theory of Aristotle.

2. How would Aristotle describe "the good"?

3. In light of Aristotle's understanding of the good person, describe someone significant in your life that meets his criteria.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): Deontological ethics

Immanuel Kant
(image: omitted)

“Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe... the starry heavens above and the moral law within." (7)

Immanuel Kant was born and raised in Königsberg, a small city in east Prussia now part of northeast Germany. The fourth of eleven children, Immanuel experienced the rigours of poverty as well as a strict upbringing within a religious household. His parents were devout members of a Protestant sect know as Pietism. Pietists believed in personal devotion, Bible reading, and the universal priesthood of all the faithful. They lived severe, puritanical lives.

Immanuel spent his whole life near his home. Apparently he never ventured more than 100 kilometres from his birthplace. His life, even from the age of eight, was characterized by a routine of study and work. A popular story about his life tells how townspeople could set their docks by the walks that he took at precisely 3:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Kant studied at the local university, and upon completing his studies, made a meager living working as a private tutor. Later, he worked as a private teacher at the university, paid directly by the students. Since he was a very popular teacher, he was able to make ends meet. However, it seems that as a young man he could not afford to get married. When he was forty-six years old, he was finally hired by the university as a professor of logic and metaphysics.

Kant wrote many books - some of them are among the most difficult to comprehend. His Critique of Pure Reason (1781, 1787), by his admission, was the result of at least twelve years of reflection, and four or five months of hurried writing. (You will find some of the longest sentences ever written in that book!) Despite the difficulty of his writing, his influence on philosophy and Western thought is incalculable.

Theoretical reason
One of his primary concerns was clarifying how it is that humans come to know things. What role does experience play in our coming to know something? Can we know things that are beyond our immediate experience? What does this mean for scientific inquiry? Can we know and predict cause and effect? These types of questions pertain to the area called theoretical reason. This is the area of reasoning by which we come to know how the laws of nature, the laws of cause and effect, govern human behaviour. It is an area of life where freedom of choice is not an issue.

Practical reason

To understand how people make choices, however, we must look elsewhere. Kant proposed a category he called practical reason. Practical reason moves beyond scientific and empirical knowledge to the moral dimension guiding human behaviour. Within the realm of knowledge, humans act not only on impulse as affected by the laws of nature, but also out of conscious choice based on principles.

Using the first category of theoretical reason, we can know only what people actually do. Using the second category of practical reason, we can come to understand what we ought to do. Let's look at an example of theoretical reason: We know the effect of alcohol consumption upon the body. Or to look at it from the perspective of practical reason, we know that we ought not to drink and drive. It is this concept of moral duty that Kant contributed to our understanding of ethics.

Kant’s ethics

Like Aristotle, Kant also held that the good is the aim of a moral life. But he approached the whole question of how one attains the good in quite a different way. Kant was primarily concerned about the certainty of the principles of ethical reasoning. He recognized that in the domain of ethics we cannot arrive at the same type of certainty as we can in physics and mathematics. Ethics presents us not with rational, cognitive certainty, but with practical certainty. In this practical area of our lives, he held that there are three areas of interest: God, freedom and immortality. We may not be able to prove any of these empirically. Nonetheless, we need these practical principles—God, freedom and immortality—to be able to pursue and attain the supreme good.

1. God: Humans cannot out of their own power achieve the supreme good. There are too many circumstances beyond our control. For this reason, Kant proposes the existence of God to allow us to achieve the supreme good.

2. Freedom: If the supreme good is to be, in part, our achievement, then what we ought to do, we can do. To have the duty to do something, we must be able to do it. Therefore, Kant argues, humans are by nature free.

3. Immortality: Achieving the supreme good is an immense task. It is impossible to obtain it completely in this life. That is why there is immortality—a life beyond, in which we can achieve the supreme good.

empiricism: a theory that says that knowledge comes from experience, or from evidence that can be perceived by the senses.

The good will

To Aristotle, a "good person" seeks his or her happiness in the city-state of ancient Greece. Kant’s ethics is more individual. His ethics is to be discovered in private life, in the inner convictions and autonomy of the individual. In Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (1785), Kant proposes how individuals attain the good. He begins by saying, “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.” (8) For Kant, in all circumstances, what is to be prized above all else is a good will. It is our most precious possession, a good in itself.

What is this "good will"? For Kant it is the will to do our duty for no other reason than that it is our duty. That is why Kant’s ethical theory is known as deontological—from the Greek word deon, meaning "duty." This perspective is very different from Aristotle’s rational desire for the good. For Kant, what is central is the will. He acknowledges that it is not easy for humans to attain their purpose in life. Impulses and desires can easily draw us away from our duty. After all, our will is finite. We don't always manage to act according to our duty.

For Kant, therefore, a human action is morally good when it is done for the sake of duty. An act of kindness done to a friend may be praiseworthy, but it is not a moral act. It becomes moral when you are kind to someone when you don't
feel like being kind, when you are busy or when you are more inclined to do other things. For example, you might not want to go to your great aunts funeral, but it is your duty. You choose to go to honour the family.

Real moral worth is motivated by duty, not by inclination, however valuable this inclination may be. In other words, moral worth is measured not by the results of one's actions, but by the motive behind them. Kant's language is full of "shoulds." It is a language not of desires, but of "ought." For Kant, you are your own legislator. It is your autonomy, your decision, to act in accordance with your good will. You are not constrained by another.

subjective: relating to a person's own perception and understanding of a reality; arising from the individual's own mind, feelings, perceptions.

objective: relating to a sensible experience that is independent of any one individual's thought, and that can be perceived by others.

Kant's use of moral maxims

The use of reason is central to the moral life. For Kant, duty is determined by principles (maxims) according to which we act. Say you decide to skip school and go to the movies. In this case, you would be acting on the principle, "I will avoid unpleasant things whenever something more pleasant offers itself, and the consequences of my action will not lead to greater unpleasantness." But this subjective principle is too obviously based on personal desires. To be ethical, an action must have a more objective principle. To be a principle, it must apply to everyone. An ethical maxim is one on which every rational person would necessarily act if reason were fully in charge of his or her actions. Principles tell us how we ought to act. But reason determines how this duty is universally applicable.

In his most famous maxim Kant proposes: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law." (9) To put it another way, I should act in a way that I would want everyone else in the world to act. In other words, would we really want a world in which people felt free to skip out on school, their job, or their family whenever they felt like it in order to have some fun? Or, does it make sense that everyone has certain obligations to fulfill that come before personal desires?

The person as an end, not a means

A second moral imperative for Kant reads: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end." (10) Kant does not say that we should never treat others as a means. If that were the case, how could we ever have an economy and people working for another's benefit? A worker is a means of production, or a means of providing a service. Kant intended, rather, that people never be treated only as a means, that is, without regard to their dignity or their working conditions. It would be unethical to take advantage of workers who have little power relative to their employer, such as young people, immigrants, people with little education, or poor people. Workers must be respected. To use another example, it would be wrong for a coach to take on twelve athletes in order to get higher funding for the team, while secretly intending to play only six of them on a regular basis. In this case, the six extra players are being used simply as a means to get more money; they are not being treated as athletes in their own right.

Kant was also somewhat of a utopian dreamer. He came up with the concept of a "kingdom of ends." In this kingdom, all participants would treat each other according to his second maxim (treat another as an end, not just as a means). He encouraged all people to act as if they were members of this kingdom, always acting out of respect for the other. In this kingdom all would act out of their rational will. No one would act on any principle that could not be made universal, for personal benefit, because of how one happened to feel about something, or because of any compulsion that came from personal philosophical or religious views. Above all, Kant valued the autonomy of the good will. He challenged people not to act like children under the control of another. Become a law unto yourself. He coined the slogan of the eighteenth century: Dare to know!

Duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the (moral) law.

Kant
Guiding questions

1. Identify three key points from the ethical theory of Kant.

2. How would Kant describe "the good"?

3. In light of Kant’s understanding of the good person, describe someone significant in your life that meets his criteria.

Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995): An ethics of the face

More than most major contemporary philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas was marked by the tragedies of the twentieth century particularly the Holocaust, or the Shoah. He was born in 1905 in Kaunas, Lithuania, to pious Jewish parents. At the age of seventeen he moved to France to begin his studies in philosophy at the University of Strassbourg. In 1928 he continued his studies in Freibourg, Germany. When he came to write his doctoral thesis, Levinas had begun to experience a profound contrast between Western philosophy and his own much more deeply rooted Jewish faith.

The sameness of things

Levinas perceived the Western philosophical tradition attempting to overcome all difference and diversity by grouping everything under an all-encompassing unity, which it called "Being." Everything ultimately carried a stamp of sameness. Westerners, he said, think out of a unified totality. It thinks away difference. Difference is reduced to being accidental ("accidental" in Aristotle's philosophy meant "not essential" because it changes in every individual).

The singularity of things

The Hebrew tradition, on the other hand, he said, gloried in the singular. This singularity of things gives each thing its identity. He could find nothing that would hold all of these singularities together in some kind of unity. He contrasted the Western notion of "totality" with the Hebrew notion of "infinity."

When World War II brake out in 1939, he was mobilized into the French army. During the disastrous first month of the war in France, he was captured by the Germans. Although five years as a prisoner of war were a hardship, he escaped the dreadful fate of the rest of his family who had remained in Lithuania. His whole family died in the Holocaust. His wife and young daughter escaped deportation to the death camps, being hidden in a monastery in France until the end of the war, unable to communicate with him.

The experience of the war and the Nazi horror had heightened Levinas's awareness of his Jewish roots. At the age of forty, he searched out an extraordinary Jewish teacher, Mordachi Chouchani. Chouchani was a mysterious, brilliant man, who looked like a tramp and who always seemed to be on the move. He instructed Levinas in the ways of the Jewish Talmud. Levinas was a good student, and from 1957 onward he himself began to give regular lectures on the Talmud for young Jewish intellectuals in France.

Only at the age of fifty-five did Levinas complete his doctoral thesis, Totality and Infinity. (11) On the basis of this work he was offered a chair in philosophy at the University of Poitiers. In 1973, at the age of six-eight, he was named professor of philosophy at the most prestigious school in Paris, the Sorbonne. Only then did he obtain recognition by the philosophical world. He became a very popular writer. Only a few years after obtaining the chair in philosophy at the Sorbonne, he retired.

Levinas never forgot his Jewish roots. When once he was invited to give a lecture at the University of Louvain, they inadvertently put the lecture on the Sabbath. Although the lecture hall was filled, Levinas did not show because observing the Sabbath was of higher value. He offered no apology. He continued to write and lecture until illness prevented him. He died shortly after the feast of Chanukah in 1995.
Pope John Paul II holds great respect for Levinas. In a number of his writings, most evidently in The New Millennium, Pope John Paul II uses ideas similar to Levinas. In this letter, the Holy Father speaks of the face of Jesus as "A Face to Contemplate." On several occasions, Pope John Paul II invited Levinas to his summer home to hear from him his understanding of the major issues of our time.

The Good is infinite

Levinas's philosophy as a whole is ethical. Like Aristotle's and Kant's ethics, Levinas is in search of the good. For Levinas the good - actually, the "Good" - is the central question of all philosophy. Whereas most Western philosophies are in search of Being, Levinas went in search of the Good, which he said goes beyond Being. Being seeks to name what things have in common when you take away all the differences. For Levinas this concept of Being is dangerous because it takes away from reality what is its most fascinating quality: that each person or thing is incredibly unique. Levinas wants to maintain the uniqueness of each thought and act. The Good is interested, not in what is in common among things, but in what is absolutely unique about each person or thing.

"Your face, O Lord, I seek" (Psalm 27.8)

Pope John Paul II in The New Millennium reflects on Psalm 27.8: "Your face, O Lord, I seek." In the face of Christ, he says, "God has truly blessed us ... and has made 'his face to shine upon us’" (Psalm 67.1). "Being God and human at the same time, he reveals to us also the true face of humans, 'fully revealing humans to themselves.'" (12)

Levinas calls these unique things and persons "traces" of the Good, or God. No tangible object is ever identical to God, or the Good. Everything we encounter is finite. The trace of God in things and persons is not a faint presence of God. We do not encounter God anywhere, but only a trace of God. A trace says that God was there but is no longer there. God has gone ahead. The Infinite One is always one step ahead of us.

Take a look at the cover photo of this book. God is like the sun. We see traces of the sun in the picture; the light on the water, the bright light at the edge of the picture. But we see only a glimpse of the grandeur that is there. The sun is beyond the point of vision.

The face as witness of the Good

If the Good is Infinite and is always one step ahead of us, where do we encounter the traces that God has been there? Here Levinas goes to the experience of the human face that turns to me and looks at me. The face is the most naked part of the human body. In one of his articles Levinas lashes out against make-up. He sees it as an attempt to hide. But despite all efforts (he may not have thought of coloured contact lenses) the eyes can never be made up. The eyes penetrate every mask. In another's eyes we make immediate, direct contact.

Think of a time you had an absolute experience of another: a face-to-face experience that touched you deeply. Levinas says that such an experience calls for a "thrill of astonishment." Such an experience is the most original moment of meaning. In the eyes of the other you meet a stranger, one whom you cannot reduce to being you. She or he is "Other." And in this person's look, the Other calls you not to reduce his or her face to being the same as any other face. This person's face is a "No": a refusal to let you reduce the face or to deny the face in its uniqueness. Levinas goes so far as to translate this "No!" as "You shall not murder." You are not to take the otherness away. The face is an authority, "highness, holiness, divinity." In the Other, you see one who is not your equal, but your superior.

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (Matthew 25.34-36) (photo: omitted)

The idea of infinity... is an overflowing of... new powers to the soul... - powers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality.

Levinas

The face as ethical
But how is this ethical? The face that Levinas is referring to is not the face of an authority figure. The superiority of the face comes from elsewhere: the Other is a stranger, one who is totally defenceless, uprooted. Levinas refers to the Book of Deuteronomy (10.18), where the Israelites are told to love the stranger as themselves because the Lord watches over the stranger. The stranger is one whose very existence is threatened, one with no economic stability or security, one who is socially marginalized and without rights.

It is at this point, according to Levinas, that the face becomes ethical. Recognizing the Other’s depth of misery or humility is what makes the command or appeal of the face ethical. The face of the stranger (recall the face of the beggar in the story on page 9) demands that you recognize it and provide it hospitality. The defenceless poverty in this face cannot force you to do anything. That is why she can only ask that you assist her in her misery. The face makes the absolute demand come across as a petition, as “please.” As Levinas says, “The being that expresses itself imposes itself but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity - its hunger - without being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness.” (13) The face hardly dares to solicit your hospitality. The face is the beggar with bent head and mumbling voice. (14) This is how the face makes you responsible, by making you aware that you are not as innocent as you thought you were. The face reveals you as someone concerned mostly about yourself. This is the face that makes you responsible.

The face suggests that there is another order of existence: the order of an incredible good calling us to be responsible for the beggar with bent head and mumbling voice. Here the self-centred self is called into question. Here the Other rules. It is a humble rule, revealing itself as if it were afraid to speak. And that is how the divine speaks to us - as a humble God who refuses to use power, so humble that those who seek the face of God are left in despair. God is the goodness who never seduces. God, for Levinas, is the humble and vulnerable God who, in approaching us, immediately retreats like the burning bush that did not burn (Exodus 3.2). The face is a trace of God who has already passed by.

Made responsible by the face

For Levinas the face makes us responsible. This responsibility is our human vocation, our calling. Here the search for the Good ends. His ethics does not bend us in God’s direction, but it twists us in the direction of our neighbour God’s infinite goodness touches us without our knowledge. God’s touch will always be indirect. God touches us through the face of the Other who begs spare change of us. God refuses to appear, leaving only a trace in the face of the Other, retreating to make room for the Other. Goodness, the Infinite One, translates into responsibility for the Other. How far should this responsibility, this generosity go? Goodness sets no limit.

The sentence in which God comes to be involved in words is not “I believe in God.” ... If is the “here I am” said to the neighbor to whom I am given over, and in which I announce peace, that is, my responsibility for the other. Levinas

The relation with the other will always be offering and gift, never an approach with “empty hands.” Levinas

**Guiding questions**

1. Identify three key points from the ethical theory of Levinas.

2. How would Levinas describe “the good”?

3. In light of Levinas’s understanding of the good person, describe someone significant in your life that meets his criteria.

The human is ethical

These three philosophers, Aristotle, Kant and Levinas, will accompany us for the journey into ethics. They will be our main companions, acting as a compass pointing our way toward understanding what it means to be ethical. On the way we will pick up other thinkers as well, but these three will always be in the background.
They convince us that the ethical is indispensable for human life. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just." (15)

"Emmanuel" means 'God with us'

In the introduction St. Augustine is quoted as asking, "What do I love when I love You, my God?" When we search for the good in our lives, we will encounter many questions and uncertainties. However, there is one thing of which we can be certain: God is always present to us, as revealed beautifully in Psalm 139. The God whom we seek is always in search of us. See also Isaiah 7.10-17 and Matthew 1.22-23.

**Psalm 139**

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them - they are more than the sand; I come to the end - I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

(photograph omitted)

**Chapter review**

**Summary**

From Aristotle, Kant and Levinas we can draw the following conclusions with regard to the human as ethical:

The ethical is about our tendency to search for the good.

The ethical is a part of what it means to be human; in other words, human beings tend towards the good.

The ethical is the education of our freedom; it seeks the fulfillment or wholeness of human life by way of our actions.

The ethical presumes that we can be held responsible for what we do.

Ethical theories draw their explanations from an organizing principle:

- Happiness is the aim of the good life (Aristotle)
- Moral duty and obligation are expressions of the good will (Kant)
- The ethical impact of the face of the Other is a trace of the Good, or God (Levinas)

The role of reason - although it differs in each of the theories - is not a theoretical reason; it is a practical reason that accompanies and holds in check our inclinations or makes practical judgments in the face of our duties or responsibilities.

**Review questions**

Knowledge and understanding

1. Explain the distinction between ethics and morality.
2. Identify three key points from the ethical theories of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.

Thinking and inquiry
3. Compare and contrast the notion of "the good" as used by Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.
4. Explain how every human choice has an ethical/moral dimension.
Communication
5. Create a chart to show the similarities and differences of the ethical theories of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.
6. Write a short story that captures the essence of any one of the ethical theorists.
Application
7. Choose a story from your daily newspaper and analyze the ethical dimensions of this story from the viewpoints of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.
8. Imagine a talk show in which Aristotle, Kant and Levinas get to ask questions of a celebrity, politician, business person, etc., with whom you are familiar. Write a script of the conversation that might take place around a significant issue in which this celebrity is involved.

Glossary
autonomy: Free self-direction; responsibility.
ethics: A discipline that deals with the nature of the good, the nature of the human person, and criteria that we use for making right judgments.
morality: A system of right conduct based on fundamental beliefs and obligation to follow certain codes, norms, customs and habits of behaviour.
obligation: What one is bound by duty or contract to do.
responsibility: Being morally accountable for one's actions. Responsibility presumes knowledge, freedom, and the ability to choose and to act.
Revelation: The ways that God makes Himself known to humankind. God is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The sacred Scriptures, proclaimed within the Church, are the revealed Word of God. God also reveals Self through people and indeed through all of creation.
Chapter 2  You are what you do

To speak of the human person as a subject is to say that the person is in charge of his or her own life. That is, the person is a moral agent with a certain degree of autonomy and self-direction empowered to act according to his or her conscience, in freedom, and with knowledge.

Richard M. Gula

Focus your learning
Cognitive: What is the nature of human action?
Practical: How does what you do shape who you become?
Affective: How capable are you of making a difference?

Key terms in this chapter
agent; conceptual framework of action; determinism; free will; freedom; intention; logical positivism; motive; naturalism; predestination; providence

Key thinkers
Ludwig Wittgenstein; Paul Ricoeur; Sigmund Freud

Freedom: The amazing capacity to act

In Chapter 1 we began to explore the meaning of ethics. We looked first at the role played by our desire for the good (Aristotle’s teleological view). Then we examined an ethics of obligation and duty (Kant’s deontological view). From there we turned to the face of another person, how it makes us ethical by calling for in us the Good (Levinas's relational theory of ethics). In this chapter, we will look at what makes us capable of responding in an ethical manner.

Humans have the capacity to act. This seems obvious. Of course we can act. But what is this capacity to act? Answering this question is the challenge that we pick up in this chapter. We possess a power to do things that sets us apart from animals. The human response is not automatic or predictable. We can be spontaneous and creative. We can intervene in and give a new direction to a course of events. Despite a genetic code that seems to predispose us to act in particular ways, we have the capacity to make choices. This freedom to choose exceeds anything that may be found in the response of animals. This human capacity to be an agent is the topic of this chapter and the next. Human agency is at the heart of ethics.

agent: a person who acts freely and knowingly, who chooses to do or not do something; a person who is accountable for his or her actions or omissions.

Action theory

Remember the first time you tried to drive a car. At first, the car did not respond as you expected, especially if you were learning to drive a manual transmission. The car likely jolted and stalled the first day out. But finally you discovered the "sweet spot" in the clutch, and you felt that you were ready for the races. Driving does not come automatically. It takes effort and awareness that "I can do it." The philosophy that has given us an insight into this human capacity to do something is analytic philosophy. It examines the language we use to communicate our action, and explores what constitutes a meaningful action.

Human actions

Actions are the very fibre of what makes us human. Actions give us our identity; that is, our identity is constructed by what we think, say and do as well as by what we undergo. Human actions are the most important building blocks of who we are and who we become. That is why it is a mistake to try to understand actions
independently from the person who does them. Actions are not events standing on their own. Actions are not something "out there" that you try on when you decide to do something.

Freedom is the human potential—the capacity, the power to act. Action is the realization of that power. When you use your freedom, you make changes. You change the course of events. You change the world around you. Your actions are interventions in the world. Hence the focus in action theory and in ethics is not first of all on what is done but on who it is done by. For every action, there is an agent someone who has a capacity to effect a change in the world, to initiate things. That is why human action is at the heart of ethics. Ethics examines your capacity as an individual to make things happen in your world, in your relationships, and even within yourself.

Conceptual framework of action

You cannot directly observe your capacity to make things happen. As a result, you cannot directly describe it either. How then do you know what it is? First of all, you experience this capacity as a conviction that "I can do this," like when you knew you were able to drive a car. You can also deduce it from what others do. In order to understand human action, action theory has devised what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur has called a conceptual framework of action.

Objective: recognition and acceptance of the fact that sensory experience represents reality, facts, data that are outside the self. These exist independently from individual thought and are perceptible by all observers. For example, your house exists not because you believe it exists; other people walking down the street can see your house because it has an objective reality. In other words, your house is a reality independent of your mind. When you run, something objective takes place, since you can measure your distance or speed. Your intending to run, on the other hand, is not something that you can measure or observe; it is subjective rather than objective—that is, it exists solely within your mind.

Analytic philosophy

Analytic philosophy originated in the 1920s with a group of philosophers known as logical positivists. They held that if anything has meaning, it must have some kind of sensory experience to back it up. For them, physics was the only real science, and it set the standard for scientific inquiry in terms of its methods. Having set this standard, analytic philosophy was forced to return again and again to its premise to reduce everything to sensory experience— to the "hard facts" that you could see, smell, touch, measure, hear and so on.

The main obstacle to this premise was the human will, especially "free will." You can't see "free will." You can't hear it or touch it. Ludwig Wittgenstein raised an interesting question, "When 'I raise my arm,' my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" You figure it out!


Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1889-1951
Austrian philosopher who originated the theory of action.
(image: omitted)

Paul Ricoeur
(image: omitted)

Paul Ricoeur was born in Valence, France, in 1913 into a family of civil servants. His mother died shortly after his birth and his father was killed in 1915 in the trenches of the First World War. Orphaned so young, he was raised by his grandparents, who were socialists and were devout members of the Christian Reform Church. He studied philosophy at the University of Rennes but completed his studies in Paris where he graduated in 1935. After graduation he taught philosophy at a Lycée - the French equivalent for the Canadian high school - until he was called into military service at the outbreak of the Second World War. As a lieutenant in the French army, he was soon captured and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner. While in a prison camp, Ricoeur taught philosophy to other prisoners.

The war convinced Ricoeur to become a pacifist. When he returned to France after the war, he joined a group of Christians striving to model a Christian socialist community. He frequently wrote articles about peace, violence and
power, communism, human rights, and politics. As dean of philosophy at the University of Nanterre in Paris, he found himself in the midst of the political and social turmoil of the late 60s and early 70s. At one point, he found himself debating the structure of the university with the Marxist-Leninist student organization. When they could not out-do him with their arguments, they later dumped a garbage pail over him. He was dismayed that the university was threatening to become a place where violence prevailed over debate and language. Shortly after, he resigned his position. He took up teaching positions at the Universities of Louvain, Montreal, and Chicago. Only occasionally did he teach again in Paris.

Always a very public man, interacting with the great issues of his time, Ricoeur is best known as the prolific writer of more than 1,300 books and articles. Ricoeur's main interest has been human action. In Freedom and Nature he reflects on how humans will and make decisions. He returns to this theme in his subsequent books, exploring how actions affect the self. Ricoeur's other interest is language and its impact on human existence and action.

Paul Ricoeur lives in Paris. In 2003 he received the Pope Paul VI International Prize from Pope John Paul II. At the occasion Pope John Paul II said of Ricoeur that he was "a philosopher, who is at the same time a man of faith, committed to the defence of human and Christian values." Our reflection on human action will be guided by Paul Ricoeur's thinking.

You can explore this human capacity to make things happen by asking the following questions about an action: Who? What? Why? How? With whom or against whom? Under what circumstances? With what outcome?

Together, these questions interact to form the conceptual framework of human action. This framework allows us to understand action indirectly, by asking these questions. The meaning of an action shifts depending on the answers to the questions. In other words, an action is good only when it fulfills certain conditions. An action is not good of itself. The morality of human acts depends on: the object chosen; the end in view or the intention; the circumstances of the action. (1)

You will use the conceptual framework of human action to look at each of these questions in turn. They will help you to understand and evaluate human action.

Who? The agent

The "who" of action, the agent, is the person who makes things happen. Each person has the capacity - the energy or the power - to act. The human self is an intending self: a self that is able to intend to do things. Think of it this way: When you act, you are saying that, of all the things you could do, you will do this rather than that. For example, you decide how much effort you put into studying for an exam; you choose with whom you spend your free time, or with whom you form relationships. This is what Catholic tradition calls free choice. Free choice is both an exercise, and a measure, of freedom. You are responsible for what you do, and for what you intend to do.

Your actions have shaped you. You are who you are largely because of what you have done. Of course, none of us can undo what is done - the past is past. But you do have the capacity to influence your future by what you do in the present. You are an agent when you intend something in the present that will change your future. When you say, "I intend to go to university next year," you commit yourself. It is more than, "I want to go to university next year." Intending includes making a judgment without conditions. Intending means beginning to discern which subjects you will take and to which universities you will apply. Intending might include speaking to a guidance counsellor. You look at the cost of going to university. You get a job. You work harder at school to ensure that your marks are sufficient. By intending to go to university, you begin to reshape your whole world.

By intending to do certain things, you also reshape who you are. In other words, you begin to shape yourself by the promises, commitments and plans that you make today. For ethics it is most important to discover what are your
commitments, your beliefs about your capacities, your image of the world, your faith, your hopes, your goals, your capacity to keep your word. These things tell you who you are.

Guiding questions

1. What is a commitment or a promise?

2. Describe what sorts of things begin to take place when you say something like, “I intend to play ball this evening”?

3. How are you an agent when you make a promise or a commitment?

verb: a word used in a sentence to express an action, state of being, or occurrence. For example: Hassan ate the pizza. Mary lives in Belleville. The storm exploded with a cloudburst.

What? The action

Ethics is about more than the "who," or the agent, of an action. Ethics is also about actions themselves: what the agent does. Language expresses actions through verbs. The dictionary is full of verbs that express with rich subtlety how humans act and interact. They demonstrate the almost infinite possibility for the agent to make things happen in the world through thought, word and deed.

Your actions shape you. Shoplifting will shape you in a different way than will doing homework or arriving on time for work. Gossiping will shape you differently than composing a letter of appreciation for someone.

Ethics is about reflecting on intentional actions, that is, actions intended by an agent. Intentional actions are also called meaningful actions. Ethical theory is not concerned with unintentional actions, reflexes or involuntary bodily movements such as sneezing or sleepwalking. They are still the actions of a person, but they are not moral actions since they "happen" rather than being freely and knowingly chosen. Only actions infused with the power of intention have ethical value.

Guiding questions

1. I am what I do. Explain.

2. Can actions, taken on their own, be judged as good, bad or indifferent? Explain.

Say you are driving a car at 30 km/h over the speed limit. You lose control and the car is wrecked. Did you intend the crash to happen? No. Were your actions wrong? Yes, because you intentionally drove over the speed limit, creating the circumstances that increased the likelihood of a collision.

Why? The motive

We all have our reasons for acting the way we do. We can explain our actions by telling why we did it. We have reasons for what we intend to do. For example, you might intend to go college because you are interested in nursing, because you want to have a career, because your high school teacher ignited your passion for geology.

What is a motive? A motive is a reason for an action. As the chapter title states, “You are what you do.” Since you have a reason for what you do, who you are becoming is based on your motives. To say, “I intend to go to university” makes no sense unless you have a reason to do so. Something attracts you, leads you or moves you to further your studies. In everything you choose to do, you are motivated by something.

The reasons for doing things are almost endless. They always appear as a good - even if they are a good only to you. "I gave back the money because it did not belong to me." "I went grocery shopping with Grandma because she asked me." "I downloaded my essay from the Internet because I needed an A."
To give a reason for an action is to say why it is worth doing. Whenever you give a motive, you justify your action, you appeal to a value that makes the action right. You don't always express the motives and the values underlying your actions. You don't make a conscious value judgment each time you act. In most cases, it is only afterwards that you become aware of your motive and the value your motive promoted. But whether you are aware of it or not, there is a feeling of a good in the very intention of doing something.

Ethics enters the picture when you begin to reflect on the values that are embedded in your decisions and in your intentions. You can step back from a decision you have made and examine the motives. At such moments you pass judgment on what you have done: you say "this is good," or "this is wrong." In ethics you examine the values that make life human.

An evil action cannot be justified by reference to a good intention.
St. Thomas Aquinas

Guiding questions

1. Think of three choices that you made today.
2. List the motives for these choices.
3. What are the values underlying your motivation?

One may not do evil so that good may result from it.
*CCC#1761 (*Catechism of the Catholic Church)

 aggravated: make worse
mitigated: make less severe

Circumstances... contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts.... They can also diminish or increase the agents responsibility... (but) of themselves ... can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil.
CCC #1754

How? With what means?

How you carry out an action also affects you as the agent. For example, you can deal with a conflict by dialogue or by abusive language, by violence or by silence. Whichever means you choose will say something about you. If you speak up for someone whom you don't particularly like, you are a better person for it. If you are generous to others, you will become a generous person. If you are stingy in your actions towards others, you will become stingy as a person. If you "borrow" without permission your neighbour's snow blower to clear the laneway of your elderly and frail grandmother, the good intention to help her is clearly diminished by the potential damage the "borrowing" may cause in your relationship with your neighbour The borrowing without permission affects your goodness as the agent and the goodness of the action. "The end does not justify the means." The means qualify the action.

Under what circumstances?

The circumstances under which you do something also have an impact on your action. If you bully someone with a physical disability the circumstances aggravate your action. On the other hand, if you volunteer at the food bank despite a busy schedule, the circumstances enhance your action. Every action has its aggravating or mitigating circumstances. What you do under threat of violence, in extreme hunger, or under pressure affects the level of your intention and motive. The circumstances affect how much the action is yours. In this way, circumstances may reduce, or increase, your responsibility. Circumstances must always be accounted for in evaluating actions.

With or against whom?

When you justify your actions by appealing to a motive, you seek the approval, or seek to prevent the disapproval, of someone. In most cases you learn to evaluate your actions by evaluating the actions of others. You assign praise or
blame for an action in relation with others. Every action is also an interaction. You act with others, for others, against others. How you act in each case will affect you differently. For example, including others in your plans, or being attentive to those who need your help, affects you positively. Conversely, making fun of someone, or cheating on exams, affects you negatively.

With what outcome?

Are you responsible for the outcome of your actions? If you drive while drunk and crash into a tree, killing your passenger, are you responsible even though you never intended to kill this person? Are you responsible for the fear in a neighborhood where you have trashed a home? Equally, can you take the credit if through your efforts a youth program is organized in the parish? The outcome of your actions - intended or not - clearly affects the self for good or for bad. (2)

Guiding questions

1. Come up with other examples under the following categories: “How?” “Under what circumstances?” “With whom or against whom?” “With what outcome?”

2. Create an example in which all seven categories of the conceptual framework of human action are at play in a positive manner.

**Human freedom**

What it means to be free

When you exercise your freedom, the action that results makes a mark or a change in the world. And in making these marks and changes, you yourself are changed in your very core. But to say that you are free means, in a way, that you are not complete, because you always have unrealized possibilities. You are free because you have possibilities. You can reach into the future by giving your word today and keeping it. Your commitments and promises orient you towards the future. (3) We will examine other ways of looking at freedom in Chapter 10

**But is there freedom?**

Not all philosophers agree on how to explain the human ability to initiate an action. Remember the question raised by Wittgenstein: “When 'I raise my arm,' my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” You might say, “Nothing! At least nothing to which I can point.” If the heart of action lies in the intention of the agent to do something, then the heart of action (intentions) is not something that you can observe. You may say, “I raise my arm.” But saying it is not the same as doing what you intend. It is only when you have done it (your arm is now raised) that whatever you intended shows itself. Traditionally, this capacity to act intentionally has been identified as a spiritual quality – sometimes called a transcendental quality. Think of the promise you might make to take someone as your spouse for life. What is this promise you make to another, this commitment to enter into a life-long relationship with someone? You cannot see, touch or smell it, and yet it is not “nothing.” It is very real.

Some philosophers would say to Wittgenstein, “Yes, there is something. My intention to lift my arm can be seen in the neural and chemical changes in my brain.” These philosophers hold that there is no such thing as freedom. We may pretend to have a free will, but there is no scientific evidence for it. Humans, they argue, are part of a physical, material universe and nothing in them reaches beyond the material into a spiritual world. Everything can be explained, or will be explained, by physical and biological processes. Everything has a physical cause. A human agent just happens to be a more complex physical cause. This is the position called naturalism.

(photo: omitted)
Freedom characterizes properly human acts. If makes the human being responsible for acts of which he [or she] is the voluntary agent.
CCC #1745

Freedom is the power to act or not to act, and so to perform deliberate acts of one's own. Freedom attains perfection in its acts when directed towards God, the sovereign Good.
CCC #1744

Naturalism

The term “naturalism” was first coined by G.E. Moore in 1903 in his book Principia Ethica. As a movement, its roots go back to David Hume, an eighteenth-century philosopher. Hume was the first to seriously challenge the principle of causality. Today naturalism is probably the most widely held philosophy. (If you would like to read further in this area, Daniel Dennett and Hilary Putnam are its best-known exponents.)

Naturalism understands the material universe as a unified system. In it, everything is shaped completely by physical, biological, psychological, social and environmental processes. As part of the evolutionary process, humans, this theory holds, are no more than a part of the material universe. Everything, including humanity, is part of one grand chain of being connected by cause and effect. In this way of understanding the world, science reigns supreme. Everything must be explained by scientific experimentation. According to naturalism, if we want to show that something is true, it must be proven using concrete evidence. All other methods of reasoning are illusory.

In our time, genetic research, and particularly the Human Genome Project, is having an enormous impact on the way we view human beings. It is widely held that, when it comes to understanding who we are, “it’s all in the genes.” For naturalists, the Genome Project provides “the blueprint of humanity.” For them, this research shows that the human self is not an “intending self” but a genetically pre-programmed organism. Neural mechanics and genetic determinism challenge the understanding of a person as a “self.” There is no human spirit or culture; humans and human activity are the result of the natural selection process. In such a world, Ted Peters maintains, “Human culture is on a leash, a short leash, held by a genetic agenda. That agenda is the self-replication of genes using the human species as its vehicle. Human culture is structured so as to encourage reproduction and, hence, the perpetuation of genes. Human religion and human morality, whether theologians know it or not, is reducible to the agenda of selfish genes.” (4)

The theory of naturalism makes a direct assault on human freedom. If DNA defines who you are, then your genes rule supreme. Your genes determine who you are and what you can be. Your promises and commitments then do not come from motives or intentions, but from a genetic predisposition. Freedom is a delusion. Your attachment to a friend is only a neural state. So are feelings of love and loyalty or feelings of altruism. If naturalism held, then you could explain your faults by painting to genetics. Your tendency to procrastinate would not be your fault; you could blame it on your genetic code!

Naturalism denies the possibility of ethics and morality. How can you be responsible for your actions if what you do is a natural physical process over which you have no control and if control is just another facet of your neural organization? What if it is no more than your genetic make-up that is at work?

Ted Peters theories that we will soon have to rethink the philosophy underlying important legal concepts "such as free will, guilt, innocence, and mitigating factors." He feels that research linking human behaviour to genetic predisposition will be increasingly important to deciding whether people are guilty of crimes. As he argues,

The focus will be on the concept of free will, because the assumption of the Western philosophy coming down to us from Augustine that underlies our understanding of law is that guilt can only be assigned to a human agent acting freely.

In the future, Peters says, this could lead to the argument that humans are compelled to behave a certain way by their genetic disposition.

And this will place us at a fork in the legal road: either we declare the person with a genetic disposition to crime innocent and set him or her free, or we declare him or her so constitutionally impaired as to justify incarceration and
isolation from the rest of society. The first fork would jeopardize the welfare of society; the second fork would violate individual rights. (5)

The Human Genome Project has clearly established that there is a relationship between a person's neural network and his or her actions. But as the philosopher John Searle says, "We have only the foggiest idea of how it all works." As he says,

By current estimate the human brain has over 100 billion neurons, and each neuron has synaptic connections with other neurons ranging in number from a few hundred to many tens of thousands. All of this enormously complex structure is massed together in a space smaller than a soccer ball. (6)

But can these neurons explain human action or consciousness? is there a causal connection? Naturalists assume this to be the case. The advantage, they claim, is that naturalism would allow us to establish a scientific basis for ethics. Ethics would become a natural science. We could then eliminate the ethical confusion that exists today. But the repercussions for ethics and morality would be devastating. Humans would not be agents.

The evidence for genetic determination is far from convincing at present. That there is some interaction between the genetic code and human behaviour can hardly be denied. You cannot act without your body. In the same way, your spirit is an embodied spirit. That is to say, your spiritual capacities, like your free will, are in some way connected with your body.

Future research will likely explain more precisely how genes and freedom go together. But there will always be resistance to saying that freedom is nothing more than our genes at work. Naturalism cannot account for human freedom or the moral drive.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Since the 1940s researchers have been attempting to create intelligent machines. The first person to have raised the possibility was Alan Turing, a British mathematician. In 1947 he gave a talk outlining this venture. But how do you go about creating an intelligent machine? And what does "intelligent" mean, anyway? In an article entitled "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (1950), Turing proposed a test to determine when a machine could be considered intelligent. It is known as the Turing Test. In the Turing test, if someone uses a keyboard to hold a conversation with a machine and with a human, and cannot tell the difference between the human and the machine, the machine would have to be considered intelligent.

In 1956 John McCarthy, a prominent computer scientist, called this project "Artificial Intelligence," AI for short. At the time, he proposed that "intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it." He now realizes that this was too strong a claim. The machine was never made. Instead he recognized that perhaps the brain's neural networks might be replicated in computer programs. Replication, however, is not necessarily the same as human intelligence. As Amanda Sharkey, a lecturer at Sheffield University has put it, "You could model an aspect of intelligence but we don't have anything that is a whole intelligent system. And my hunch is that it is in principle impossible to go further." (7)

Some researchers continue to imagine that computers will one day replicate human cognitive mental states. This idea is called "strong AI." It is a future reflected in such movies as Blade Runner, A.I., the Terminator series and the Matrix series. "Strong AI" researchers have not given up on the idea that at some point computers may be able to think at a level equal to humans. They point to the success of Deep Blue, the computer that defeated the Russian chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov in 1997.

Others ascribe to the idea of "weak AI." They believe it possible that computers can simulate some thinking-like features, but no more. Weak AI is already at work in many technologies: programs that attempt to understand natural human languages, speech-recognition software, robotics, computer games, and military applications used in real war situations such as Operation Desert Storm and the 2003 Iraq War. The story of Artificial Intelligence is just beginning to unfold.

(photo: omitted)
Naturalism and Artificial Intelligence

The philosophy underlying AI is that of naturalism. What naturalism and AI have in common is their great interest in the human brain and its neural networks. Work has already begun to decode the genes behind a variety of diseases, such as cystic fibrosis on chromosome 7, Alzheimer's disease on chromosome 21 and colon cancer on chromosome 2. These biological and physical discoveries seen in the fields of functional genomics and Artificial Intelligence deeply affect how we view ourselves as humans.

You read earlier how your personal identity is shaped by what you do. But what if you are not an agent? What if your identity is nothing more than neural connections? What if you could not call anything truly "yours"? You would be no more than "the existence of brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events" as philosopher Derek Parfit would argue. (8) Naturalism tends to look at the body and brain as objects that are separable from self. Bodies and brains can be the subject of research – in the manner that the medical science does - without any regard for the person whose body or brain it is. In fact, frequently the brain is equated with the person. But obviously a body or a brain is somebody's brain. It is my body and my brain. The idea of teleporting in science fiction raises questions about this strong identification of my brain and my body with myself.

(photo: omitted)

**The mind-brain distinction**

Before the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, little was known about how the brain works. Any distinction between the mind and the brain was vague. Early philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle had a sophisticated understanding of human intelligence. However, they did not make a connection between this intelligence and the human brain. The mathematician and philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) was perhaps the first to clearly argue the distinction.

In brief, in his search for certainty Descartes began a systematic exploration of all the things that he knew - even mathematical truths - and put them to the test. He found that he could doubt the existence of everything around him. He could be certain of the existence of nothing, not even the things he could see and touch. He realized he could be deceived by appearances. At the end of this doubting experiment the only reality that escaped his doubt and that he knew with certainty was the fact that he doubted. From this experiment came his conclusion: I think, therefore I am. Without realizing it, Descartes had created a split between thinking and the world of matter. Descartes was left with a thinking mind with no link to the body (brain).

During the nineteenth century, great progress was made in understanding the physiology of the brain and how it functions. Many scientists of this era used this research to look for the causes of human behaviour in the brain alone. Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), for example, argued that the brain was a machine like everything else in nature. The mind, he argued, was no more than a passive reflection of the brain's activity.

In our time, science has made great strides in understanding the working of the brain, and many are convinced that the mind is the brain at work - nothing else. Everything from perception, to learning, to thinking, to consciousness, to decision-making - all of this is claimed to be a matter of brain function. With all its sophistication, however, modern science has not shown a definitive connection between the mind and brain function.

It is evident that there is a connection between the brain and the mind. The mental development of children is clearly linked with the development of the brain. We can see how brain injuries can incapacitate people's mental abilities. We have also learned some of the connections between the body's chemistry and a person's mental health.

But what if we were to jump from these understandings to the conclusion that the human mind is nothing more than the brain at work? If that were the case, we would also have to absolve Hitler from his actions in World War II, and we would have to absolve current-day terrorists from their actions, because we would have to admit that their actions are only products of brain activity, and have nothing to do with human freedom to choose.

Our Catholic tradition does not deny the wonderful discoveries of science, nor does it deny the connections between the mind and the brain. It does, however, assert that the human mind is much more than physical functions. The mind provides the capacity for freedom, for choice, for action. The mind is at the heart of the human capacity to receive
God's self-revelation in faith, to understand the message and to live in hope, and to live a life of loving service. None of these actions can be accounted for by neural physiology.

Physical and spiritual reality

Catholic teaching refers to the human person as being at once physical and spiritual (CCC #362). "The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The Catechism describes the "soul" as our "innermost aspect" and "that which is of greatest value" in us. The soul, it says, signifies our "spiritual principle" (CCC #363). "The spiritual tradition of the Church also emphasizes the heart ... the depths of one's being, where the person decides for or against God" (CCC #368).

Imaginative variations of the self: Teletransporting?

Remember how characters in Star Trek "beamed aboard" the Enterprise? From the planet surface Captain Kirk sends a radio message to the crew onboard the Starship Enterprise. He says, "Beam us up, Mr. Scott." Onboard the Enterprise, Scott presses a button and activates the teletransporter. The machine essentially destroys Kirk's body, separating all his cells into individual cells, while recording their exact states. The information is sent by radio waves to a transporter terminal on the Enterprise, where another machine, a replicator, uses organic materials to make a perfect copy of his body. Kirk, who materializes on board the spaceship, seems to remember living his life up to the moment when Scotty pressed the button, and he is in every other way just like before.

If you could be teletransported, would you survive in your replica, or would the real you die? Who would be replicated? Would it be another person or the same "you"? What happened to the first "you"? The new you might look the same; it might have the same memories, the same genes, etc. Materially or physically everything would be identical. But would you be the same person before and after the teletransporting? Will "you" survive? Whose actions will they be after the teletransporting?

We can imagine such a scenario, even if it is not likely that we will be able to answer all the questions. But the very question about identity that we ask: "Whose identity is it after the teletransporting?" suggests that not only your original body or brain was destroyed, but with it your identity. The teletransporter can translate only physical matter, and it seems to leave unresolved the question of the self. Moreover, the self in this scenario seems to be identified with the brain. In many of these science fictions, personhood is localized in the brain. But with the original brain destroyed and then teletransported and reconstituted, is the self also reconstituted? Along these lines we may ask, "Does the brain make the promises and the commitments, or does the self?" These mental games with the identity of the self bring home in new ways the question of identity and human action.

Guiding questions

1. Is what we call "the self" something other than the brain and neural connectors? How so? How not? What is the distinction between the human brain and the human mind?

2. What are the repercussions for ethics if the self is reduced to the brain and its neural connectors?

3. Is there anything that attracts you about naturalism? What do you find unacceptable?

Religious determinism

The proponents of naturalism maintain that freedom is an illusion because actions are not free. Actions are nothing more than the results of brain processes. Other contemporary theories are equally deterministic. Freedom as a human capacity is under severe attack in a number of philosophies and even theologies. Determinism is an attractive philosophy. It is attractive because, as Kant pointed out long ago, it is difficult to come up with a theory to explain freedom. Kant said that freedom is not something that can be explained using science. Rather, it is a practical issue and should be explained practically. Here we will explore how even religion can be a source of determinism.
**Predestination**

Historically, some churches within Christianity have denied human freedom. They have done so based on a belief in God whose knowledge and will have predetermined not only the course of the world and its history, but also each action and deed of every individual. Today most Christians believe in what is known as providence, that is, God’s influence upon events and actions. After all, the belief that God saves can only be maintained if one believes that God can achieve the salvation of the world. If God’s plan to save some and to damn others is inevitable, then what role do humans and their freedom play? If salvation or damnation is predetermined, is there any recognition or respect for freedom? According to John Calvin, the French Protestant reformer and theologian (1509-1564), freedom and ethics have no place in the doctrine of predestination. The Catholic position disagrees with Calvin. Catholic teaching maintains that human freedom and God’s providence do not conflict.

The Puritan tradition, which is an off shoot of the Calvinist tradition, strongly believes that sin has so totally depraved humans that humans are born and live their entire lives deserving eternal damnation. Cut off from God, they can do nothing to save themselves. They do not believe that God wants all people to be saved. They hold that God loves and elect some and rejects others. A person can do nothing to change this election of God. God freely gives salvation to the elect. It is not because they had more faith or led more perfect lives. It is God’s freedom, but at the expense of human freedom. This is a harsh doctrine and certainly difficult to interpret. Puritans do not claim to understand why God chooses to save a small minority of the human race and condemn the rest. To question God on this would be sacrilegious. They say, "That's just the way it is." By contrast, the Catholic tradition has always struggled to maintain that humans are free precisely because of God’s providence. Yes, salvation is God’s initiative of love, but God’s love requires and makes possible our cooperation. The Catholic tradition has been the great defender of human freedom.

Free will

St. Augustine (354-430) was the first great theologian who wrote extensively about the free will and its connection with grace. He did so, because in his time there were those who denied the free will (the Manichaeans) and those who gave the free will too much power (the Pelagians). One of his sayings on free will is frequently quoted: "It is certain that we will when we will; but He (God) brings it about that we act, but that without His help we neither will anything good nor do it."

St. Augustine by Sandro Botticelli
(image: omitted)

**Social determinism**

Social determinism is in many ways like naturalism. A social determinist would say that your behaviour is determined not so much by your physical state as by the influences of others upon you: your parents or culture; your psychological state, including any traumatic experiences you may have had; your history; and your social background, including such things as socio-economic status, race, gender, religion and education. According to this view, your actions can be explained by what you have undergone at the hands of others. You are not free because you are the product of what others have done to you. To a social determinist, the past, your past, determines who you are. Your behaviour is explained by social factors, not by your decisions. A social determinist might argue, “I did this because I was abused as a child.” But if your actions today are determined entirely by your past, how can you be responsible for those actions? Here is one example of this way of thinking, seen in the work of Sigmund Freud.

**Freud’s theory of the unconscious**

One of Sigmund Freud’s most important contributions to the understanding of the human person was to develop the concept of the unconscious mind. Freud demonstrated that human behaviour is often driven by unconscious impulses based on repressed memories and desires. For a variety of reasons - the memories were too painful or shameful - humans repress these memories and desires through a sort of mental censor. This censorship does not remove the memories or desires. It only represses them out of consciousness. And so these unacceptable memories and desires end up in the unconscious mind. There, the conscious mind does not have to deal with them directly.
However, your no-longer conscious memories and desires do not "go away." According to Freud, they exert a constant pressure on your conscious mind and play an indirect role in shaping your perceptions and decisions. They emerge in the almost indecipherable images and symbols of your dreams. But they also surface in odd behaviour patterns. When you act out of your unconscious, your behaviour patterns are what Freud would call "neurotic." In other words, for Freud your dreams and neurotic behaviour patterns are resurfacing memories and desires. At this level, you could call Freud's theory of the unconscious deterministic. Until you reconnect with the repression and what gave rise to the repression, your actions are not free. Therefore, you cannot be held directly responsible for your actions. Freud also recognized that people can use the emotional power of repressed memories and desires for right action by channelling this energy creatively and less neurotically. He called this sublimation.

The life and death instinct

Another aspect of Freud's theory that had an impact on morality is his theory of instinct. Instinct (such as the sexual instinct), he maintained, is something that exerts pressure on the mind causing humans to act to reduce that tension. Pleasure results when we reduce this tension. Instinct played a powerful role in Freud's psychoanalytic theory. How many instincts are there? Freud saw two determining instincts in humans. One he called the life, or love (Eros), instinct; the other he called the death (Thanatos) instinct. The life instinct is frequently identified with Freud's notion of Eros, or the sexual instinct. But it goes beyond the sexual to include life and growth and the struggle against death. The life instinct is found in the various ways that humans express their desire for life and love for the other. Freud even found a place for the commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" as an expression of the life instinct.

This desire for life conflicts with another desire, the desire for death. Freud arrived at the notion of the death instinct as a result of his experience of the First World War. Freud was struck by the aggressive-destructive tendencies manifested by this horrendous war in which people slaughtered one another by the thousands each day. He also noted aggression in the way humans deal with themselves. Freud was highly critical of morality, which he saw as self-aggression. Morality, he wrote in a letter to Einstein, consists of precepts and sanctions imposed upon people from the outside, most often against their will. Morality is built on coercion. It demands the renunciation of one's instincts. This point of view quickly found its way into literature. Listen to the narrator in Kate Chopin's A Pair of Silk Stockings, a story first published in 1890:

She was not going through any acute mental process or reasoning with herself, nor was she striving to explain to her satisfaction the motive of her action. She was not thinking at all. She seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her from responsibility. (9)

The subject of this passage is shrinking from morality, allowing herself to be guided by instinct alone. According to Freud, people take on morality from their parents from early infancy. They internalize their parents' precepts and sanctions. Internalized, these rules form what Freud called the superego.

The superego is the internal taskmaster that imposes feelings of guilt and shame if you do not follow the rules imposed upon you by parents and society. These feelings of shame are powerful enough that you will obey these precepts against your own will. To Freud, this amounted to self-aggression. In the next chapter we will examine in greater detail the notions of conscience and the superego.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Sigmund Freud was born in Moravia (now in the Czech Republic) in 1856. His family moved to Vienna when he was four. He was to remain there until he was eighty-two. In 1873 he enrolled in the medical school at the University of Vienna. Freud would have liked an appointment to teach there, but because of prejudice against Jewish people that proved impossible. So instead he worked and did his research on the human brain at Vienna's General Hospital. He was particularly interested in neurology, the study of neurotic disorders. Freud always held that physical disorders, such as bodily paralysis or visual impairment, had psychological rather than physiological causes. He became interested in the related work of one of his contemporaries, Joseph Breuer (1842-1925), who steered him in the direction of psychotherapy. Freud's name is now forever linked with the field of psychotherapy. He began studies on hypnosis and on the sexual basis for problems of the human psyche. He realized that to cure these patients, he must
explore the dark world of the human unconscious. In 1897 Freud began an intensive self-analysis. He found access to the self by the analysis of his dreams. This led to the publication of his major work, The Interpretation of Dreams.

In 1905 Freud initiated a discussion group on the topic of psychotherapy. The other participants were Alfred Adler, Carl Jung and Otto Rank. These four researchers have become known as the four pillars of depth psychology. Together they formed the Vienna Psychological Society. Their discussions were lively and, at times, heated. In the end the four parted ways and went on to develop their own theories. Freud continued to practise psychoanalysis and published broadly. When the Nazis occupied Austria in 1938, Freud fled Vienna. At the age of eighty-two he arrived in London. He died there the following year.


Guiding questions

1. What is determinism?
2. What effect does it have on human freedom? Give some examples.
3. Would society still need prisons if freedom were an illusion? Why or why not?

Who, then, is the self?

In conclusion, think back to the question, "Who am I?" or even, "What am I?" When you ask this question of yourself, it is difficult to answer. When someone else asks you this question: "Who are you?" you become more eloquent. You summon forth all sorts of things. You give a brief story of your life. You talk about your parents, your home, the street you live on, the church you belong to, the schools you attended, perhaps the cultural background you grew up in, the sports you play, the things you do in your free time, or the friends you have. Each of these items in your story forms a part of your identity. Together, they make up who you are. They tell how, from your present perspective, you look at life, in effect saying, "Here is where I am!" By telling these events in your life story you let the other person into your life, your identity. You know that your identity, your self, is more than any one of these fragments, but they are your only reference point. Your tendency may be to focus only on your past in telling the story of your identity. But there is more to your story!

You are more than what you have done. That is the amazing thing about human action. You are capable of projecting yourself into the future. You can make promises; you can make commitments; you can make choices. You can give your word - your self - and shape your future. This self is not yet made. You can tell its story only as a promise, in your present commitment. That, too, is your identity. It is an identity that is full of promise, full of possibilities, full of hope.

You cannot undo the events of the past. But this does not mean that the story of your past will never change. You can make a decision, for instance, to talk to a trusted counsellor if your past story is very painful. A counsellor can help you discover a totally different - and much more comforting - interpretation of the events that happened to you. Although you cannot undo the events of the past - only reinterpret them - you can do something about your future. You can examine what is held out to you as the promise of life. You can explore your Christian tradition, how it views life, how it names the good, how it presents the fullness of life.
High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sun lit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew -
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

(photo: omitted)

**Chapter review**

Summary
Ethics presupposes that human agents have a capacity to act.
Human actions are the most important building blocks of who we are and who we become.
The conceptual framework of action provides a series of questions that help us to understand the complexity of a human action.
Although it is presumed that human actions have a physical connection (the body and the neural connectors of the brain), the human self is more than its physical structure. While we use our brains for thinking, our minds cannot be reduced to the physical activity of the brain.
The dominant philosophical position today is naturalism. It presumes that human actions can be located within, and reduced to, their physical components.
Within Christian tradition, freedom is an essential characteristic of human nature. St. Augustine was the first to name the human will. You can make promises, commitments and choices. These actions form who you are becoming.

Review questions
Knowledge and understanding
1. Explain what it means to be a moral agent.
2. Identify the key questions to ask when using the conceptual framework of action to analyze a human action.
Thinking and inquiry
3. Explain how freedom is an essential characteristic of ethics.
4. How would ethics be compromised if naturalism were the only way to understand human behaviour?
Communication
5. Create a visual representation of your understanding of yourself as "agent."
6. Write a short story that exemplifies how you are not just a product of your past actions, but can also shape your future by the commitments that you make.
Application
7. Choose a story from your daily newspaper or an event that happened at school and analyze the actions that took place using the conceptual framework of action.
8. Keep a journal of what you do for 24 hours. Analyze how your actions are forming who you are becoming.

Glossary
agent: One who acts, who has the capacity to initiate a course of events. A person to whom we ascribe actions. One who is responsible for his or her actions.
action: Action is the realization of the power of human freedom. When we engage the capacities of our freedom, we change the world around us.

determinism: A point of view that holds that human behaviour is a product, not of free will, but of a complex array of physical, social, cultural, psychological and historical causes.

intention: That which motivates me to act - values. The reason for doing something that appears, at least to me, as a good.

freedom: The human capacity to choose and to act. I am free because I have possibilities and capacities to act on these possibilities.

predestination: The view that my behaviour is predetermined, whether by God or by other causes.

responsibility: The conviction that a person is the agent of his or her actions. This presupposes freedom, knowledge and capability. As seen through the application of the conceptual framework of action, circumstances can mitigate the degree of a person's responsibility in any given action.
Chapter 3 Conscience: The self in search of the good

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, Whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, Else it will not stay near you. Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Psalm 32.8-9, 10

Focus your learning
Cognitive: What is the role of conscience in your search for the good?
Practical: What do you need to consider when making a moral decision?
Affective: The quotation from Psalm 32 tells us not to be like a horse or a mule, lacking understanding, and needing a bit and a bridle. How does God teach you as you search for the good in your life?

Key terms in this chapter
character; commitment; conscience; identity; judgment; language; moral stance; narcissism; person; superego; Trinity

Key thinkers
Sigmund Freud; Richard Gula; Timothy O'Connell; Charles Taylor

Introduction
In this chapter we continue to lay the groundwork for ethics. In looking at the three main ethical theories in Chapter 1, we learned how something in us inclines us to ethics. The word that kept cropping up was "good." Something in our very core seeks after the good. This desire for the good accompanies everything we do. We are forever in search of the good.

In Chapter 2 we explored human action and what it means to be a moral agent.

In this chapter we continue to explore aspects of ourselves that we need to understand before we tackle specific ethical issues. Every ethics is based upon a theory of the human. A philosophical view of what it means to be human is important for ethics. This viewpoint lets us interpret how we as individuals interact with others, our community, our culture and our religion in the process of becoming moral agents. In this chapter we examine six aspects of the human person that are important for ethics:

A. The importance of others
B. The importance of having a direction in life
C. The importance of communication and language
D. The importance of character and one's body
E. The importance of conscience
F. The importance of the development of one's conscience

In the following chapters, we will expand this perspective to include the broader social dimensions. We begin, now, to explore these six aspects of our lives that make us moral agents.

A. The importance of others

"Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4.9)

Can you be a free, unique individual while bearing responsibility for the other? The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis sheds light on this question. One day, Cain, in a jealous rage, set upon and killed his brother, Abel. When the Lord asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain said, "I don't know." Then he added, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4.1-9) Cain's question has resounded throughout history. Are you responsible for your sister and brother? Why should you care for the other?
In the ethical theories of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas (Chapter 1), the "other" plays a central role. Levinas, who of the three is closest to the biblical tradition, makes the strongest argument that the human person is relational. In Chapter 2 you read how, to properly understand human action, it is important to consider "with whom or against whom" an action is undertaken. Most of your actions are in some way relational. Your actions are motivated by others; they involve others; they are done with others or against others; they affect others. Your relationship with others is a powerful incentive for what you do and how you do it. The other is central to your search for the good.

In Western society the idea that "I am my brother and sister's keeper" isn't very popular. We tend to think of others as standing in the way of personal freedom, plans and initiatives: "If only they would see things my way, I could do what I really want to do." We often see others as an obstacle to our freedom. Why is this so? Western culture views the human person as an individual. It emphasizes autonomy, independence and freedom. Westerners prize the entrepreneur, the solo mountain climber, the explorer, and the teen who becomes a rock star: all self-made individuals. These independent individuals break with traditions; they set their own rules; they are not governed by the opinions of others. For some, relationships are like an add-on that they choose to be a part of or not. They view freedom as independence from others. Others can easily become, as the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sarte maintained, "my hell." Such a person might say, "I may choose to build bridges but that is wholly my decision. I don't need others. I can be a full human being and free without them."

It is true that human beings are individuals, unique and singular with a capacity to act and be free. But that does not mean we need to see others as enemies of our autonomy. Rather, the other makes it possible for us to become our true selves, individuals in freedom. Consider this example:

Allannah grew up in a one-parent family where she was often called on to be "mom" for her younger brother. Her mother died in a car accident when she was 11 and her brother, Liam, only 7.

In Grade 9, she was told that she had a natural talent for music, both vocal and instrumental. Her teacher called her home and suggested that Allannah take lessons at the Royal Conservatory of Music. But lessons were expensive and her father could hardly make ends meet as it was. Instead, her father encouraged her to continue her music classes at school and to join the church choir where she could at least learn something about singing. Disappointed, but understanding her father's position, Allannah agreed to the compromise.

When she turned 16, Allannah got a part-time job after school, from which she was able to pay for music lessons. At last, she was going to be able to study music.

But just then, one cold winter morning, Liam was walking to school when a car hit a patch of black ice, jumped the curb and hit him, shattering his left hip. As the weeks passed, it became clear that Liam would need a lot of help from his family, and extensive long-term physiotherapy in order to walk again. After their visit to the clinic to arrange physio, Allannah found her father sitting forlornly in the family room. Allannah thought about what this might mean for the three of them. She put her arms around her father. "Don't worry, Dad. We can get through this. We're a tough family and we have each other." That night she made a resolution to help take care of her brother. She would make sure that he didn't fall behind in his studies. She would give the money she earned at her job to help pay for his expensive therapy, and together they would get through this.

An existentialist philosopher.

Now at 24, Allannah recalls her teen years, all the parties she missed and the music lessons she gave up for her brother. She remembers the hard work lifting him from his wheelchair to his bed, going over missed school work doing all the housework that Liam could have helped her with - and yet as she remembers, she smiles. Today, Liam is graduating and she will stand by her father's side where her mother would have been. She will feel the joy of his success, and later in the evening, she will enjoy performing with her band for her dad and brother and invited guests at the graduation party.

Why is it that after all the disappointments in her own life, Allannah is still able to celebrate her brother's success? What is life-giving about sacrifice for the good of the other? Compelled by love, Allannah chose to commit her freedom to the care of her father and brother. In doing so, she found her freedom and fulfillment. And her life as a musician had not ended, but only changed. She still had a talent to develop and a dream to pursue.
**In love with myself: The danger of narcissism**

The ancient Greeks tell the story of a young man, named Narcissus, who was physically very beautiful. His beauty attracted the passionate desire and longing of a young woman named Echo. Narcissus, however, lacked any feeling, and he disdained and rejected her. One day as he was hunting, he became thirsty and so came to a well. Just as he was about to drink, he noticed his reflection in the water. He fell in love with his own reflection. He became so consumed with this image and his inability to reach the object of his love that he died of thirst at the edge of the well.

This myth of Narcissus has helped clarify our understanding of how people develop a healthy self-identity. A healthy, mature personality must find a balance between self-love and love for others. A healthy individual will work on relationships with others, trusting that there will be sufficient reward for the "me." The narcissist refuses to look beyond the self to achieve this balance. Modern psychiatry classifies narcissism as a disorder marked by self-absorption to the exclusion of others. It manifests itself in feelings of rage and aggression against those who do not support the self and its needs. (1)

Echo and Narcissus (detail) by John William Waterhouse
(image: omitted)

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me.

Martin Niemoeller

**B. The importance of having direction in life**

"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

(Revelation 3.15-16)

The second anthropological trait of the human self is about being committed to particular values. Knowing who you are means knowing where you stand. Everyone stands somewhere. You need to know your commitments – where you stand with the great issues of life. These commitments make clear what you consider good and valuable - what you are for. Knowing where you stand is essential, not only to your self-identity but also to your moral self. When you become an active member of Students Against Drunk Driving, you make known to others that you stand for responsible action, safety and preservation of life. You speak out against those who selfishly risk the lives of others by drinking and driving. You take a stand: You are for something.

**My identity lies in my commitments**

In the first part of Sources of the Self, Taylor shows how human lives have a sense of direction. He maintains that this moral orientation of our lives forms part of our identity. This moral orientation reveals our stance in life. The following abridged selection is taken from a chapter in Taylor's book entitled, "The Self in Moral Space":

humanism: a worldview centred on human interest and values, and the individual's capacity for self-realization through reason and action. Humanists generally reject reference to the divine.

secularism: a worldview that rejects religion and religious considerations. Secularists accept only critical reason.

**Charles Taylor**

(image: omitted)

Charles Taylor was born in Montreal in 1931 to a francophone mother and an anglophone father. He has lived there except during his graduate studies as a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford - most of his life. Fluently bilingual, he is immersed
in the Anglo-French culture of the city. Comfortable with both dominant cultures in Canada, he constantly seeks to bring the two solitudes of anglophone and francophone together.

Charles Taylor has been a professor of philosophy at McGill University in Montreal since 1961. He has drawn on his political instincts to write extensively about the place and role of Quebec in Canadian society. He even ran as a member of the NDP in a federal election in 1965 against Pierre Elliot Trudeau - and lost. He tried three times more, each time unsuccessfully. In Quebec Taylor is recognized as one of the great Québécois intellectuals of the twentieth century. In 1992 the Quebec government awarded him the Prix Léon-Gérin, the highest honour given for contributions to Quebec intellectual life.

Taylor describes himself as a Catholic Quebecker. In his work he shows a great concern over the images that Western peoples have developed of themselves. When he looks back into the rich Judeo-Christian tradition, he sees a much richer vision of the self than that which is being promoted by today's secularism. In his book Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (1989), he recognizes the need for a new spirituality. He says that the current purely humanistic and secular understanding of the self is not able to sustain important values such as care for the other over a long time. He makes a case for a return to Judeo-Christian values and spirituality. Despite its decline in countries like Canada, Christianity has far from exhausted its force as a treasured vision of the human self. (2)

People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic.... Or they may define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to ... say ... a Québécois. [The attachment to this spiritual view or background... provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value... [If] they ... were ... to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they wouldn't know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them.

[When] this situation ... arises for some people, [they suffer] an "identity crisis," an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame ... within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial... This is a painful and frightening experience.

My identity emerges from the direction I take in life

Taylor argues that there is an essential link between my moral direction or stance in life and my identity. It is within the light of this moral stance that life's questions arise: What is good or bad? What is worth doing or not doing? What is meaningful and important? What is trivial? Taylor considers why there is a link between identity and moral stance:

Our identities, as defined by [the values that] give us our fundamental [direction in life], are in fact complex and many-tiered. We are all framed by what we see as universally valid commitments (being a Catholic... in my example above) and also by what we understand as particular identifications (being.... a Québécois). We often declare our identity as defined by only one of these, because this is what is [most important to us at that moment]. But in fact our identity is deeper and more many-sided than any of our possible articulations of it.

Where do I stand?

But the second facet of the question above (about our identities as Catholic or Québécois) is not historical.... The answer comes in the form of a name: "I'm Joe Smith," often accompanied by a statement of relationship: "I'm Mary's brother-in-law," or by a statement of social role: "It's the repair man," or "the man you're pointing to is the President..." To be able to answer for oneself is to know where one stands.... that is why we naturally tend to talk of our fundamental [stance] in terms of who we are. To lose this [stance], or not to have found it, is not to know who one is. And this [stance], once attained, defines where you answer from, hence your identity. (3)

Guiding questions

1. How do your commitments or moral stance give rise to your identity?

2. How can you go about determining your own identity? Fill in the following statement, "I am a..." What do you stand for?
3. Looking at the question, "Where do you stand?" think of your life as a moral space. Map your space. What are your mountain peaks and deepest valleys? In what direction do your rivers flow? What is your main produce? What do you stand for?

4. Name some key values that the culture around you stands for. What is your stance toward the orientation of our culture? Do you commit yourself to these values?

C. The importance of communication and language

"The Word became flesh and lived among us."
(John 1.4)

According to the first anthropological trait, you are a self for and through others. Secondly, you are a self because you take a stance in life. But your stance in life is not shaped by you alone. You are also part of a community that shares a common language. What you value, aspire to, plan for, dream of, hope for, work for was first made known to you as good and desirable by others in your life. Your parents, teachers and many others teach you what is right and wrong, naming it as either good or evil. Charles Taylor writes that we live in a world shaped by language. To answer the question, "Who am I?" you must recognize the community into which you were born, by whom you were raised, and whose language you speak.

There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language. We first learn our languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up. The meanings that the key words first had for me are the meanings they have for us, that is, for me and my conversation partners together… in talking about something you and I make it an object for us together…

So I can learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness, etc., are only through my and others’ experience of these being objects for us, in some common space… Later, I may innovate. I may develop an original way of understanding myself and human life, at least one which is in sharp disagreement with my family and background. But the innovation can take place only from the base in our common language. Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with certain special partner(s), who know me, or have wisdom, or with whom I have an affinity...

This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to … those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition… A self exists only within what I call "webs of [conversation]"… The full definition of someone’s identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral or spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community [Catholic/Québécois etc.). (4)

Language contains and shares with others common experiences and commitments. That is why a language can be meaningless to those who do not share that same experience. For example, when you tell an "inside joke" that draws on an experience shared only by your friends, anyone outside your circle doesn't "get it." In the same way, words like "Incarnation," "Trinity," "grace," "Eucharist" have a particular and definitive meaning for Catholics. Their meaning is not easily understood by those who do not share our faith tradition because they do not have the Catholic experience that gives these terms their meaning. Knowing the dictionary definition is not the same as understanding a term’s meaning within the Catholic tradition.

Guiding questions

1. How does language show that your stance in life grows out of conversations?

2. What do you mean when you say to someone, "I am a Catholic"?

3. Who have been your significant conversation partners? Who are they now?

4. What have you learned from them?
5. Who is your “defining community”?

6. Why is participating in the Christian community important to understanding the Scripture quotation: “The Word became flesh...”?

Understanding the weight of words

Words are really all we have to fend off the chaos. They can't make or remake reality, but they can give us a vision with which to lift ourselves out of the ordinary...

The meaning we give things depends upon the words, the symbols, with which we surround them. For example... what does it mean to “fall in love”? That you have “great chemistry” with someone? That you have found a “soulmate”? Or that you have found the person whom God, from all eternity, has destined you to meet? That last interpretation doesn't exclude “great chemistry” or finding a “soulmate,” but it adds a wonderful extra dimension, God's providence in our lives. A deeper set of words sets your finite experience against an infinite horizon and that, precisely, is the secret to faith and meaning...

Meaning and happiness are less about where we are living and what we are doing than about how we view and name where we are living and what we are doing... We need wide vision, high symbols and the right words to turn the seeming poverty of our ordinary lives into the stuff of faith and poetry.


(photo: omitted)

The Christian origin of the notion of "person"

There are two distinct meanings for the word "person" and both meanings have a religious background. They grew out of theological questions about the mystery of the Trinity. In Christian belief, God is a union of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How can three selves be one? This revelation of God required a word that would allow us to express how three persons - called Father, Son and Spirit - are one God. Ancient Greek and Latin had no words to name these distinctions in God. Both languages had a word for "person" (hypostasis and prosopon in Greek and persona in Latin). But these words referred only to what one could see from the outside about a human being. They did not touch the inner core of the human. And so theologians reshaped the word "person:" Gradually, out of the puzzling Christian revelation of “one God in three persons” came an enriched understanding of the human person.

One meaning of "person" came to be an individual who bears rights and responsibilities. To be a person is to be one of a kind, to be autonomous. No two persons are alike. To be a person is to be conscious and to act. (This is the notion of person that you read about in Chapter 2.) In an analogous sense, Father, Son and Spirit in God also are persons as singular and distinct from the other. The one is not the other.

But another meaning for person also emerged to express how, in the three distinct persons of the Trinity, there is unity. What binds the three persons of the Trinity together as one in God? The answer, theologians said, is love. God is love. Love pours itself out toward another. In God this breathing forth of love is a communion of love that is Father, Son and Spirit. This love generated the Son and breathed forth the Spirit so that there are three persons. At the same time, this love binds the three into a unity. For this reason the word "person" also came to mean this outpouring of love toward the other.

Because you are made in God's image, you are also made by and for love. This outpouring of love defines God: in God, three are one in a bond of love. To be made in the image of God is to have this outpouring of God's love inscribed in your very being. The other is implanted in You as part of your self. Human beings by their nature are social beings. Others are not an add-on. The other is not "my hell," as Sartre said. Human life is a web of relationships. You cannot do without the other. Essentially, "person" means “the self as relational.” No wonder that loneliness is so painful. (5)

(Note: The concept of Trinity will be explored again in future chapters. See especially Chapter 5 and the prologue to the gospel of John which reveals the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.)
This fifteenth century icon of the Holy Trinity was painted by Andrei Rublev (Trinity Monastery in Russia).
(image: omitted)

This version of the Trinity was painted by El Greco in the sixteenth century for the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo (Old Saint Dominic) in Spain
(image: omitted)

D. The importance of character and one's body

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God...?" (1 Corinthians 6.19)

To the previous three a fourth trait must be added. Not only do you become a self with others, not only do you need to stand somewhere and not only are you shaped by your response to others, you do so with your body. You might say that it is through your body that all of these human traits become possible. For this reason your actions too are embodied: they shape your character. This formation of character is the fourth trait of the moral self.

Building character

The word "character" refers to the way your actions, over time, tend to become fixed in your body. For example, think of how you might train for an athletic competition. By running, rowing or cycling three or four hours a day, you gradually increase your capacity to run, to row or to cycle as you develop muscle strength and endurance. Without the strain of trying to reach your potential - without the pain of reaching for the limit - your body would lose its competitive edge. However much you want to be the fastest, you must work with the constraints of your body. Your capacity to run depends on your body.

The same can be said of your choices in life. What training does to increase the body's capacity, so moral and ethical actions do to increase character. "Moral fibre" is something like muscle fibre - the more you exercise it, the stronger your character. By constantly repeating your actions, you create habits. As Ricoeur says,

A habit is possible because the living person has the admirable power of changing himself through his acts. But by learning, the person affects himself... Thus there arises, through this continued affecting of myself, a kind of human nature... What is learned is acquired (a habit), and what is acquired is contracted... Habit fixes our tastes and aptitudes and shrinks our field of availability; the range of the possible narrows down; my life has taken shape. (6)

When you repeat a certain action, over time, the action becomes fixed; it takes root in you. Others will recognize this as one of your character traits. They will identify you as kind, helpful, cheery, or stubborn, argumentative, vain. Once these character traits take root, they are not easily changed. As a child, your character can develop in many different directions. But as you grow older this space narrows. You become more set in your ways - for good or for bad.

Read the following excerpt from the novel Full Disclosure by William Safire. It illustrates how your character, habits and orientation in life dispose you towards making a decision:

The President stretched, smiled, and thought again about that wondrous, amorphous, always-capitalized mystery called The Decision-Making Process.

Scientific proportion study of the male body by Leonardo da Vinci
(image: omitted)

When had he decided to give up his presidency? Just now, as he was feeding the dog? ...

The truth about big decisions, Ericson mused, was that they never marched through logical processes, staff systems, option papers, and yellow pads to a conclusion. No dramatic bottom lines, no Thurberian captains with their voices like thin ice breaking, announcing "We're going through!" The big ones were a matter of mental sets, predispositions, tendencies - taking a lifetime to determine – followed by the battering of circumstance, the search for a feeling of what was right-never concluded at some finite moment of conclusion, but in the recollection of having "known" what the decision would be some indeterminate time before. For weeks now, Ericson knew he had known he was ready to do
what he had to do, if only... somebody could be induced to come up with a solution that the President could then put through his Decision-Making Process. That made his decision a willingness not to obstruct, rather than a decision to go ahead....

"I haven't decided yet," he cautioned the dog, who was moving the bowl around with his tongue but no longer making crunching sounds. "A decision is not a decision until it has to be made." Relieved, slightly euphoric, feeling admirably patriotic, Ericson moved to the main cabin to join the others for dinner. (7)

In this excerpt, we see the fictional President of the United States, Ericson, reflecting on a major decision that he has been called upon to make. Notice how his decision comes not from a conscious decision-making process. His decision arises from the depth of his character and life experience. In a sense, he knows what he has to do long before he has to decide.

The choices you make day after day are often the product of what you believe and value, and the habits you have formed over the years. The moral principles you learn also help to make up your character - that is to say, your character determines what you see, how you interpret what you see, and how you respond to what you see. With all of this at stake, how important is it that you pay attention to the formation of your moral character?

To be nobody-but-myself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make me everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.

e.e. cummings

Guiding questions

1. If a number of people witness the same event, how likely is it that each person would report seeing something different about the same event? Why is that?

2. Richard Gula, a contemporary Catholic moral theologian writes, "Character is what results from the values we make our own. When a value has woven its way into the fabric of our being, we delight in doing what pertains to that value..." Do you agree? Give an example that supports your view.

3. Ricoeur writes, "Habit fixes our tastes and aptitudes and shrinks our field of availability; the range of the possible narrows down; my life has taken shape." How is the "narrowing down of possibilities" in life a good thing? Why?

4. The passage from the novel describes the thinking behind a decision that the President has to make. On the one hand, he says: "The big [decisions] were a matter of mental sets, predispositions, tendencies - taking a lifetime to determine - followed by the battering of circumstance, the search for a feeling of what was right-never concluded at some finite moment of conclusion, but in the recollection of having 'known' what the decision would be some indeterminate time before." And on the other hand, he says: "A decision is not a decision until it has to be made." Describe the interplay between the person's character that predisposes him or her to make a certain decision, and that person's judgment to make a choice.

E. The importance of conscience

"For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" (Matthew 16.26)

Up to this point you have looked at several ways of understanding yourself as an ethical and moral being. You have seen how important the other person is to your identity, and at the role your commitments play in defining your character. To these we must add another anthropological trait: your conscience. Of what importance is your conscience?

Your conscience is more complex than it may at first appear. In Robert Bolt's A Man For All Seasons, Thomas More, Lord Chancellor in King Henry VIII’s court, is visited in jail by his daughter, Margaret, who tries to persuade him to swear to the Act of Succession. Thomas More has been charged with treason for standing in defiance of the King of England on moral principle. If More were to endorse the King's wishes to marry Anne Boleyn, he would save his head but he would violate his conscience regarding the sacred vow of marriage. The dialogue may help to understand the notion of conscience.
MORE: You want me to swear to the Act of Succession?

MARGARET: "God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth." Or so you've always told me.

MORE: Yes.

MAGARET: Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.

MORE: What is an oath then but words we say to God?

MAGAR: That's very neat.

MORE: Do you mean, it isn't true?

MAGARE: No, it' true.

MORE: Then it's a poor argument to call it "neat," Meg. When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. (He cups his hands) And if he opens his fingers then - he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loath to think your father one of them. (8)

The Act of Succession, 1534

On March 23, 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Succession, vesting the succession of the English Crown in the children of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. This act effectively set Princess Elizabeth first in line for the throne and declared Princess Mary a bastard. It was also proclaimed that subjects, if commanded, were to swear to an oath recognizing this Act as well as the King's supremacy. People who refused to take the oath, including Sir Thomas More, were charged with treason.

In April 1534, More refused to swear to the Act of Succession and the Oath of Supremacy, and was committed to the Tower of London on April 17. More was found guilty of treason and was beheaded on July 6, 1535. His final words on the scaffold were: "The King's good servant, but Gods first." More was beatified in 1886 and canonized by the Catholic Church as a saint by Pope Pius XI in 1935. (9)

Sir Thomas More (1478-1535)
(image: omitted)

Conscience is the place where we hold our own selves in our hands. According to More, if we lose it, we need not hope to find ourselves again. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) calls conscience a voice that calls us "to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil." This inner voice tell us "at the right moment: do this, shun that." The same document calls conscience a law inscribed in human hearts by God. It says our conscience is our most secret core and sanctuary where we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. (#16)

Conscience in the teaching of the Church

This is the full text on conscience from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) of Vatican II (a document that expresses the official teaching of the Church).

Dignity of Moral Conscience

16. Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. (Cf. Romans 2.15-16) His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one's neighbour. (Cf. Matthew 22.37-40; Galatians 5.14) Through loyalty to conscience Christians
are joined to other men in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by the objective standards of moral conduct. Yet it often happens that conscience goes astray through ignorance, which it is unable to avoid, without thereby losing it dignity. This cannot be said of the man who takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.

The following explanations of conscience come from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, another source of the official teaching of the Church. Notice how paragraph #1776 quotes the definition of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes).

1776; "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."

1777; Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.

1778; Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.

Conscience in contrast to Freud's concept of superego

As people develop a mature conscience, they generally move from the experience of rules and laws as being imposed by someone in authority - parents, police, teachers, priests, government - to directing their actions more from within. When you were very young, others told you what to do. As you mature, it is your responsibility to do what you consider to be right. You decide for yourself what ought to be done. This distinction between being self-directed and being other-directed makes the difference between a mature and an immature conscience. As a morally mature person, you must be able to make decisions that are your own, not someone else's. You will still listen to others and allow yourself to be guided by norms and commandments, but not without your own moral judgment and acceptance.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory helps to explain the distinction between conscience and superego. It is a useful distinction because when we confess our offences to God, it is healthy to understand what comes from our conscience and what from our superego. Conscience is not a feeling that something is right or wrong. It is not a feeling of guilt, although this feeling can be a signal to alert us that something is amiss. For example, conscience has little to do with the feeling of failure we experience when we light up a cigarette after having quit smoking. Conscience is not the fear of punishment we experience if we break our curfew. The moral theologian Richard Gula explains the distinction as follows:

Psychologists of the Freudian school tell us that we have three structures to our personality: the id – the unconscious reservoir of instinctual drives largely dominated by the pleasure principle; the ego - the conscious structure which operates on the reality principle to mediate the forces of the id, the demands of society, and the reality of the physical world; and the superego - the ego of another superimposed on our own to serve as an internal censor to regulate our conduct by using guilt as its powerful weapon. The superego is like an attic in an old house. Instead of furniture, it stores all the "shoulds" and "have-tos" which we absorb in the process of growing up under the influence of authority figures, first our parents but later any other authority figures - teachers, police, boss, sisters, priests, pope, etc. Its powerful weapon of guilt springs forth automatically for simple faults as well as for more serious matter. The superego tells us we are good when we do what we are told to do, and it tells us we are bad and makes us feel guilty when we do not do what the authority over us tells us to do.

To understand the superego we need to begin with childhood. As we develop through childhood, the need to be loved and approved is the basic need and drive. We fear punishment as children not for its physical pain only, but more
because it represents a withdrawal of love. So we regulate our behaviour so as not to lose love and approval. We absorb the standards and regulations of our parents, or anyone who has authority over us, as a matter of self-protection. The authority figure takes up a place within us to become the source of commands and prohibitions...

A simplified way of thinking about the difference between superego and moral conscience is to distinguish between the "shoulds" or "have-tos" and the "wants" as the source of commands directing our behaviour. "Shoulds" and "have-tos" belong to someone else. "Wants" belong to us.... The commands of the superego which tell us what we "should" do come from the process of absorbing the regulations and restrictions of those who are the source of love and approval. We follow the commands of the superego out of the fear of losing love, or out of our need to be accepted and approved. The moral conscience, on the other hand, acts in love responding to the call to commit ourselves to value. The commands of the moral conscience come from the personal perception and appropriation of values which we discover in the stories or examples of persons we want to be like. The moral conscience is the key to responsible freedom or wanting to do what we do because we value what we are seeking. (10)

In the stages of moral development the superego plays an important role. Your moral development and conscience began with the rules and regulations of those who play important roles in your life, such as your parents or caregivers, teachers, priests and others. Without them you would be rudderless. You need their instruction. And in a way, your superego probably never outlives its usefulness. Even as your conscience matures, the superego is not abolished. It is integrated. You integrate the wisdom of your past into your actions. This wisdom becomes stored as "the way things are done" and which you are expected to obey. In time these laws, rules and regulations should move ever further from being imposed from the outside to becoming personal choices. If in our earlier years we confess many of our "shoulds" to God, this will change as we mature morally.

"Conscience is a radical experience of ourselves as moral agents." Hence, every choice that we make, every commitment, every promise is also our choice between being authentic and inauthentic. As Gula says, 'The morally mature adult is called to commit his or her freedom, not to submit it. As long as we do not direct our own activity, we are not yet free, morally mature persons;"' It is the task of conscience to direct this process.

Three senses of conscience

Here is one way that a moral theologian has analyzed the notion of conscience as it is found in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) #16, quoted earlier on page 52. Timothy O'Connell identifies three related senses of the word "conscience":

1. Conscience as a capacity to recognize right and wrong

Here conscience is a capacity of the human person. All people in all cultures have a general awareness that some things are right and others are wrong. The fact that individuals and societies may disagree about what is right only helps to show that all people have this capacity to know the good. This capacity refers to your basic orientation toward the good. Conscience as a capacity defines the essential identity of the human. The terms sociopath and psychopath refer to persons who have no conscience.

2. Conscience as a process of moral reasoning

It is not enough to have a conscience or ability to choose the right and avoid evil. You need to search out in each situation what is the right thing to do. To act according to your conscience, you must seek to learn the facts, to learn what moral values are, to reason correctly in moral matters. You must seek to be educated about moral issues. Your conscience, in other words, must also be formed and informed. This is a lifelong process of learning "correct seeing and right thinking." (12) It means relying on the community for instruction rather than relying solely on yourself. You can draw on many sources to arrive at moral wisdom: personal experience, moral theologians, the sciences, and especially sacred Scripture and Church tradition (teachings found in papal documents, social encyclicals, pastoral letters, the Catechism of the Catholic Church).
3. Conscience as a judgment

Your conscience is incomplete until you act on it. After examining all the factors, you still need to make a judgment and a decision and commitment to do what is right. This is conscience in the narrow sense of the term (particular concrete situations of daily living). This is the heart of conscience: you commit yourself to do what you believe to be right and avoid what you believe to be wrong. In the words of Gula:

I must always do what I believe to be right and avoid what I believe to be wrong. If a person truly believes in his or her heart (i.e., with one's whole person) that one line of action rather than another is God's objective call, then that line of action is no longer simply one option among many. It becomes the morally required line of action for that person to take, which is what we mean by being "bound to follow one's conscience." Conscience (as judgment) cannot be violated. It is what the Vatican Council called our "most secret core and sanctuary" where we are alone with God. (13)

Conscience as Capacity
Our capacity to know and do the good, and to avoid evil.
Our fundamental sense of value and of personal responsibility.
Our fundamental awareness that there is a right and a wrong.

Conscience as Process
Knowing how to perceive accurately and to think correctly.
This is where moral disagreements and error, blindness and insight occur.
The conscience must be formed and examined.
Formed in community, it draws upon many sources of moral wisdom in order to know what it means to be human in a truly moral way.
Seeks to know the truth, and to make it one's own.
Searches for what is right through accurate perception, and a process of reflection and analysis.

Conscience as Judgment
The concrete judgment and decision of what I must do in the situation based on my personal perception and grasp of values.
Conscience makes a moral decision "my own" and the moral action expressive of "me" by realizing and expressing my fundamental stance.
The decision is not simply about this or that object of choice, but also about being this or that sort of person.
This is the conscience that I must obey to be true to myself.
This is our "secret core and sanctuary" where we are alone with God (Gaudium et Spes #16). All persons "[are] bound to follow [their] conscience faithfully in all [their] activity so that [they] may come to God.... [No one] must... be forced to act contrary to [their] conscience" (Dignitatis humanae #3).


Reaching for the top

Steph realized that preparing for university required not only pulling down top marks in her courses, but also rounding up the finances to pay the tuition, residence fees, meal plans, and to purchase books.

Last year, a student in her school, Jason, had applied for a government scholarship that rewarded students' contributions to their community and school. Steph remembered reading a community newspaper article about Jason's scholarship, and how the article had praised Jason for his remarkable contributions to his community. She also knew that Jason's claim to having done so much was way overblown. Sure he was a great student, and yes he did do some volunteer work in the community, but it was nothing like what the newspaper reported. Jason had blown his own horn, and had tweaked the truth, and had been rewarded with a $2,500 scholarship that would be renewed for four years, as long as he maintained an 80% average or higher. The problem is, only one such scholarship was awarded per school. He had edged out several other equally, or more, deserving students.
Now Steph had the scholarship application in her hands, and she was preparing to tell the scholarship judges her story. Five other top students in her school were also applying for this scholarship. All had averages in the high 80s and 90s. Brad, the student with lowest grades of these five, had probably done more community service than all the other applicants combined. Steph figured that Brad totally deserved the scholarship money, but reasoned that she was deserving too, and had the higher marks besides. As she filled out her application and described her community and school contribution, Steph decided to stick to a true telling of her story - it was worthy in and of itself. Her integrity was not for sale.

(photo: omitted)

Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, “Something is out of tune.”
Carl Jung

The person that loses their conscience has nothing left worth keeping.
Izaak Walton

I myself would wish neither; but if it were necessary either to do wrong or to suffer it, I should choose to suffer rather than to do wrong.
Socrates

**Guiding questions**

1. Identify how conscience as Capacity, Process, and Judgment were at play in this scenario. (See chart on page 55.)

2. Choose other similar instances from the life of a Grade 12 student, and analyze the role of conscience using the chart.

3. Find all three meanings of conscience in the excerpt from Gaudium et Spes, #16 on page 52.

4. Whenever you use the word conscience, do you mean capacity, process or judgment?

F. The development of one’s conscience

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and ther are few who find it." (Matthew 7.13-14)

You might ask: "How is this ‘moral self’ formed? What must I do to be able to make the right judgments and decisions that so set the direction of my life?” This is a complex question with no simple answer. Subsequent chapters of In Search of the Good will return to this question in greater detail. There is no simple recipe for developing your conscience. Here, however, are some pointers to keep in mind for forming your conscience.

Your conscience develops as you mature. Your sense of right and wrong, which began to be formed within your family, becomes increasingly refined with time.

Your conscience develops as you take account of and follow the norms, values, virtues and commandments found in our Christian tradition as guidelines for your conscience.

Your conscience helps you deal with your moral failures and sins. Through your faults you become aware of your weakness and fragility as a human being and of your need for support from others, especially from God.
Your conscience develops as you participate in the Eucharist and prayer life of the Church.

Your conscience develops as you grow in the virtue of humility realizing that we are not the final arbiters of what is right and wrong. Our humility leads us to seek direction of the Church.

On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb (similar to the one pictured above) was dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The city was destroyed and over 70,000 were killed immediately from the effects of the blast. Three days later a second bomb destroyed Nagasaki.

(photo: omitted)

**Symptoms of a misinformed conscience:**

Rationalization: Stealing may be wrong sometimes, but large stores can afford it because they are making huge profits.

Trivialization: It’s no big deal - everybody else does it.

Misinformation: My doctor told me that all teenage girls should take the birth control pill to prevent getting pregnant.

The end justifies the immoral means: I had to steal the chocolate bar - I didn't have any money and I hadn't eaten for 12 hours. I get sick if I don't eat.

Means to an end: By dropping a nuclear bomb to end the war, we’ll end up saving lives.

Difficult to reason: Having been kicked out of his home and finding himself with no place to go, a teen acts without thinking. He breaks into an empty home to keep warm when he could have asked for help from the police.

**Summary**

From psychology we learn that moral behaviour is developmental - that it is tied to intellectual, social and spiritual growth. We can learn what is morally correct or incorrect through family and friends, through life experiences, and through the time and culture in which we live. We also get our moral bearings through formal learning within institutions whose role it is to pass on a community's norms and the values that guide moral action. All these life experiences give rise to our character and a particular worldview and understanding of what is right or wrong. All this preparation, over years of living, comes into play when we are faced with a moral decision.

Unfortunately, we sometimes lack the information we need to form right judgments or make good decisions, with painful results. Conscience can be malformed through immoral actions, faulty reasoning, faulty value structures, and misinformation received from others in our society. We can think that we are doing what is right, when in fact we are doing something evil in order to affect a desired good. Or, we can find ourselves in a situation that makes it almost impossible to reason out the right course of action.

A well-formed conscience is well informed. This means that you have a responsibility to be well informed, not only about the issues that challenge moral living, but also about the views of other moral thinkers. To whom can you go for help to inform your conscience? Are all norms and values held by your community good, or can some be destructive to the community's members? What do you do when you have to choose between two conflicting goods? (For example, lose weight or enjoy another piece of cake.) All these questions confuse moral decision-making. The following diagram can guide you as you seek a truthful response to a moral question.

Informing your conscience is not something you do only when facing a moral issue or dilemma. Becoming a morally mature and responsible person entails an ongoing effort to form and inform your conscience. Your family, church, school, the arts, sport, music and other social institutions all seek to pass on a value system that upholds what they see as life giving - as the good. Part of this process lies also with you. You need to constantly seek to understand what it means to be fully human.
There are many ways to discover our humanity. Shared human experience has much to say to us about humanity, but only you can know your own reality first-hand. To better understand human reality, you need to seek out information from others. For moral questions, the greatest authority the Catholic community can draw on is the magisterium of the Church. “For a Catholic to make a decision of conscience with indifference to, or in spite of, the magisterium would be forfeiting one’s claim to be acting as a loyal Catholic and according to a properly informed conscience” (14) Later in Chapter 6 you will come to know more about the structure of the magisterium and how the Church communicates Catholic teaching with authority.

Moral Decision-Making
(graph: omitted)

Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord

What a joy to find yourself on the right path in life. And what a joy to have committed wrong and to know that you are forgiven. Your conscience is a barometer of life, both in gladness and in sorrow. Listen carefully to the psalmist in Psalm 32; see how he describes the torment of a conscience that has gone astray and the joy of those whose conscience has been set free:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; ...
You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, a righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright of heart.

(photo: omitted)

Chapter review

Summary
Other people are central to my search for the good. They make it possible for me to become myself, an individual in freedom.
My commitments and moral stance make clear what is good and valuable for me, what I am for. My identity emerges from the direction I take in life.
We live in a world shaped by language. What I value, hope for, and work for was first made known to me as good and desirable by others.
Our moral character develops as our actions become habitual. Through habitual actions I become more set in my ways - for good or for bad. The choices that we make day after day are often the product of what we believe and value, and the habits we have formed over the years.
Conscience is a law inscribed in human hearts. It is our most secret core and sanctuary where we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths.
Conscience is our capacity to know and do the good; it is a process of moral reasoning; and it is the concrete judgment of what I should do.
Our consciences develop as we mature; as we take account of norms, values, virtues and commandments; as we deal with our moral failings and sins.
Review questions

Knowledge and understanding
1. Identify and explain the three senses of conscience.
2. Explain how a person's moral character is formed.

Thinking and inquiry
3. How do a person's character and conscience come into play in making a decision?
4. When you face a choice between two conflicting goods (e.g., Thomas More: upholding his principles vs. saving his life; or Allannah: developing her musical talent vs. helping her family), name the various factors that can come into play in your decision-making process.

Communication
5. Using the scripture quotes that introduce the six subsections of this chapter, create a presentation on the title of this chapter: "The self in search of the good." In consultation with your teacher, use whatever medium or format you think would be appropriate.
6. In an essay, story or poem, explore the good that is manifested in the values that shape us.

Application
7. Analyze a decision that you have had to make using the conscience chart on page 58.
8. In the introduction to this chapter (page 41), six aspects of the human person that are important for ethics are identified (i.e., The importance of others, etc.). Illustrate the truth of each of these with a brief story of an event from your life.

Glossary

commitment: Promise or pledge; resolve to carry something out in the future.
habit: A manner of behaving acquired by frequent repetition; prevailing disposition or character.
identity: The distinguishing character of a person. My identity is determined in large part by the moral stance that I take in life.
judgment: The concrete decision of what I must do in the situation based on my personal perception and grasp of values.
moral stance: My moral orientation or direction in life; what I "stand for."
narcissism: A disorder marked by self-absorption to the exclusion of others.
psychiatry: A branch of medicine that deals with mental, emotional and behavioural disorders.
psychology: The study of the mind, mental states, behaviour. Psychology tries to explain why people think, feel and behave as they do.
Trinity: "...the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life. God alone can make it known to us by revealing himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit." CCC #261