Unit #1

An Introduction to Ethical Theory

Three Views on the Status of Ethical Truth

We begin by asking, what is the truth status of ethical claims. If, for example, someone tells you "It is wrong to beat a puppy to death," in what sense is that claim either true or false? We can distinguish three very different types of answer to this question: (1) non-cognitivism, (2) relativism, and (3) objectivism.

Non-Cognitivism

Some philosophers deny that ethical assertions can be either true or false and thus embrace a non-cognitivist view of ethical assertions. According to these philosophers, ethical assertions amount simply to expressing emotion (emotivism) or issuing a command (prescriptivism). On these theories, if I tell you that it is wrong to beat a puppy to death, I am either informing you of the fact that I feel sad or angry when puppies are beaten to death (emotivism) or requesting/commanding that you not beat puppies to death (prescriptivism).

A problem with these types of theories is that, although emotions and requests/commands

are closely connected to assertions such as ‘It is wrong to beat a puppy to death’ they ignore the reason why we would have emotions around this claim and why we would make a request/command that puppies not be beaten to death. If we did not think it is true that puppies should not be beaten to death, then we would not have negative emotions around the fact that they sometimes are and would not issue requests or commands that they not be beaten to death.

Put a little differently, emotivists and prescriptivists wind up putting the cart before the horse. More precisely, they do not think there is a horse to pull the cart. According to emotivists and prescriptivists, our emotions and requests/commands are not based on the ethical truth that puppies should not be beaten to death, but rather are expressions of our subjective preferences. On such theories, we are reporting not information about puppies, namely that they should not be beaten to death, but rather information about how we feel, which is to say that puppies being beaten to death causes us emotional upset. A fundamental problem for emotivists and prescriptivists is that, in making ethical assertions, we do not take ourselves simply to be reporting on our emotional state or expressing a request or command, but rather conveying an ethical truth. This is one of the main reasons that very few philosophers regard emotivism or prescriptivism as an adequate account of ethical claims.

Relativism

In contrast to emotivists and prescriptivists, relativists hold that ethical claims can be true or false. According to relativists, ethical claims can be true or false in the same sense that the rules of fashion or the rules of games can be true or false. Just as humans invent the rules of what is considered fashionable and the rules that hold in different games, so humans invent the rules of ethics. Just as the truth of what is fashionable is invented by humans and can vary from place to place and change over time, so the truth of what is ethical is invented by humans and can

vary from place to place and change over time. According to relativists, just as the rules of fashion or the rules of games are only true relative to what humans invent, so too the rules of ethics are only true relative to what humans invent. There are two general types of relativism: (1) subjectivism, and (2) cultural relativism. We will defer evaluating these views until a little later; for now, we will simply describe them.

Subjectivism is the view that ethical truth is wholly relative to the individual. What this means is that each person gets to invent their own ethical truth. What is ethically true is entirely dependent upon oneself, though it is also entirely relative to oneself. If we want to use the analogy of a game, subjectivism is like inventing a game of solitaire only played by oneself. One person might invent a certain kind of solitaire with a certain set of rules, whereas another person might invent a very different kind of solitaire with an entirely different set of rules. For example, I might invent the ethical truth that 'It is ok to set cats on fire and throw them out of high buildings' and you might invent the ethical truth that 'It is not ok to set cats on fire and throw them out of high buildings.' Each claim would be true, though it would be true only relative to the person who said it.

Cultural relativism is the view that ethical truth is relative not to the individual but to the group or culture that one is in. Just as one cannot be in fashion all by one's self, but must rather conform to what the group considers fashionable, so one cannot decide what is ethically true just by one's self, but must rather conform to whatever ethical truth has been invented by the group one is in. Just as one cannot decide by oneself what are the rules of basketball or baseball, one cannot by oneself decide what is ethically true, but must abide by the rules upon which the group has decided.

Objectivism

Like relativists, objectivists hold that ethical assertions can be true or false. Unlike relativists, they hold that ethical truths are not human inventions. For objectivists, ethical truths are more like the truths of mathematics or science which we discover, than like the rules of games or fashion which we invent. They are objective, inasmuch as their truth is not dependent upon any human individual or group. On this conception of ethical truth, a claim such as 'It is wrong to beat a puppy to death' would be true, even if no human person had come to see that it was true. Contrary to subjectivism, objectivism holds that individuals can be mistaken in their moral beliefs, and contrary to cultural relativism, objectivism holds that cultures can be mistaken in their moral beliefs. We will, however, defer examination of objectivist ethical theories until we have explored whether a relativist approach to ethical truth should be adopted.

Assessing Ethical Relativism

We have said that there are basically two kinds of ethical relativism: subjectivism, which claims that ethical truth is true only relative to the individual, and cultural relativism, which claims that ethical truth is true only relative to the culture or group. Another way of putting the difference between these two relativist theories is that, while both theories view ethical truth as relative, subjectivism sees ethical truth as an invention of the individual, whereas cultural relativism sees ethical truth as an invention of the group.

Subjectivism

If ethical truth is solely the invention of the individual, then it is impossible ever to have an ethical belief that is not true. Thus, if subjectivism is true one can never be mistaken in one's ethical beliefs, since their truth depends entirely on one's self. This might seem appealing until one realizes the consequences of ethical truth being entirely relative to the subject. For example,

I might invent the ethical truth that it would be wrong for someone to take my laptop and never return it. Someone else could invent the ethical truth that it is moral to take my laptop and never return it. Both claims will be true, but true only relative to the individual asserting them. If subjectivism is true, there is no principled way to decide in such an instance who should have the computer.

Put more generally, because subjectivism makes ethical truth entirely relative to the individual, it can give no guidance in situations where individuals come into conflict. This raises the danger that conflicts will wind up being decided by who is stronger or smarter. One would not want to say, however, that simply because a man is stronger he should be able to force a woman to have sex with him, or simply because someone is clever that he should be able to trick someone less smart out of their money. It thus seems that subjectivism does not work as an ethical theory.

Cultural Relativism

Unlike subjectivism, cultural relativism holds that individuals can be mistaken in their ethical beliefs. They can be mistaken, inasmuch as their ethical beliefs might disagree with the ethical beliefs of their culture they, that is to say their ethical beliefs might conflict with the ethical truth invented by the their culture. The saying, "When in Rome do as the Romans do" expresses the view of the cultural relativist very well. What is ethically right and wrong is determined by the culture and if one wants to be ethical one will follow the ethical beliefs of the culture one in which one finds oneself.

Two reasons that many people are attracted to cultural relativism are: (1) different cultures often seem to have very different ethical beliefs, and (2) their belief that cultural relativism provides a firm foundation for being tolerant of ethical beliefs found in cultures other

than their own. Closer inspection of these reasons reveals, however, that they do not count in favour of cultural relativism nearly so much as one might initially think.

Regarding the fact that different cultures often seem to have very different ethical beliefs, the first point that deserves mention is that disagreement about something does not mean that there is no objective truth. Some people might believe there is extraterrestrial intelligent life on other planets in the universe, others might believe there is not. The fact that they disagree does not change that it is either objectively true that such life exists or objectively true that it does not. So, the fact that people disagree about ethical claims does not automatically demonstrate that ethical claims cannot be objectively true or false.

Second, in many instances the disagreement is not over an ethical principle, but rather over a matter of fact. For example, many people who are pro-choice as regards abortion and many people who are pro-life as regards abortion agree as regards the ethical claim that killing an innocent person is wrong. Where they disagree is over whether in fact the unborn human is in fact a person. Their disagreement is not over ethical principle, but rather over a matter of fact.

Third, different cultural practices do not automatically point to different moral values. In North America people drive on the right-hand side of the road, whereas in Great Britain people drive on the left-hand side of the road. Even though the practices are different, a common value underlies them, namely the principle that traffic ought to be regulated. Men in one culture may shake hands when meeting, but in another culture may kiss each other on the cheek. What counts as politeness may differ from culture to culture, but these different practices are evidence of a shared ethical belief that it is good for individuals to be courteous. Differences in cultural behaviour are often at the level of practice, not at the level of ethical principle.

The second reason that many people are attracted to cultural relativism is the belief that it

provides a firm basis for tolerance and protects one from being ethnocentric, namely the belief that one's culture is superior to all others. This seems a mistaken belief, however.

First, if cultural relativism is true then any valuing of tolerance will only be relative to whether the culture one's culture does in fact value tolerance. If one were to be in a society which does not value tolerance then, according to cultural relativism, one should not value tolerance. It seems, therefore, that cultural relativism does not provide a firm foundation upon which to argue for the value of tolerance. Put a little differently, if one is prepared to hold that no matter what society one is in one should value tolerance, then one seems committed to the existence of at least one value, tolerance, that is not culturally relative. If there is one such cross-cultural ethical truth there seems no good reason to deny the possibility of other such cross-cultural ethical truth.

Second, valuing tolerance presupposes that I think that the person whose viewpoint I am considering might be mistaken. I am tolerant if I think you are mistaken or might be mistaken, but I am humble enough to realize that it may be myself rather than you who is mistaken. For example, if both you and I are playing bridge and we disagree on one of the rules I may tolerate your view, even though I think you may be mistaken. If, however, I think your view is correct I can scarcely suggest that I am being tolerant. If culturally relativism is true one cannot speak of being tolerant of the values of another culture, since by definition the truth of ethical claims is only relative to one's culture. If cultural relativism is true one can observe that the ethical beliefs of another culture are different than one's own, but one cannot suggest that they may be mistaken, since their truth is entirely relative to the culture in which they occur.

Third, although the virtue of tolerance can help us to understand other cultures better and prevent us from automatically assuming that our ethical practices are superior to those of other cultures, it is far from clear that tolerance is always the correct response to the ethical practices of

other cultures. The culture of Nazi Germany practiced genocide and the culture of South Africa practiced apartheid. They were different societies than our own, but would we want to say that because they were different societies, with different ethical values, that we should therefore have tolerated such practices.

We have seen that the reasons often given in support of cultural relativism are not strong. It is time to examine some of the reasons not to accept cultural relativism. In addition to the fact that cultural relativism provides no firm basis for a proper valuing of tolerance, it provides no basis for making cross-cultural moral judgments, no way to talk of moral progress, and precludes valuing moral reformers.

According to cultural relativism, moral beliefs are true only relative to the culture in which they occur. This means that when a cultural relativist looks at another culture's moral beliefs all he or she can say is that they are different. For the cultural relativist to judge another culture's ethical beliefs to be false would be like someone who plays soccer saying that basketball players are cheating when they play basketball. All that can be said is that they are playing by a different set of rules, not that they are cheating. As a soccer player one might say that one does not particularly like the game of basketball, but one cannot say that the people who play it are cheating because they do not use the same rules as soccer. Similarly, a cultural relativist might say that he does not like what the Nazis did to the Jews, but he cannot say that they were acting immorally, since the truth or falsity of their moral views was entirely relative to their culture.

Neither can cultural relativists consistently talk of ethical progress. If the truth or falsity of ethical beliefs is entirely relative to the society in which they occur, then all one can say is that ethical beliefs change over time. One cannot say that we have a greater number of true ethical

beliefs or fewer true ethical beliefs than earlier cultures. If three hundred years ago the culture believed that women should not be allowed to vote or own property then, according to cultural relativism, it would have been morally wrong to assert that they should be allowed to vote or own property. If now the culture believes that women should be allowed to vote or own property then, according to cultural relativism, it would be morally wrong to assert that they should not be allowed to vote or own property. What the cultural relativist cannot assert is that three hundred years ago it was immoral to deny women the right to vote or own property. All that can be said by the cultural relativist is that our ethical views have changed, not that they have in any way progressed.

This implies that moral reformers should not be admired as heroes, but rather as degenerates. Usually we think of people like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Banks as moral heroes for standing against the mistaken beliefs of their society. King and Banks thought that culturally accepted beliefs such as the belief that people of colour should sit at the back of the bus or use different drinking fountains or not be allowed to use the same entrances to restaurants as whites were ethically wrong. If cultural relativism is true, however, the rightness or wrongness of such beliefs depends upon whether they are culturally accepted. Given that such beliefs were widely accepted by the culture of that time, the cultural relativist has to say that King and Banks, far from being moral heroes, were in fact acting immorally.

Ethical Objectivism

Given the difficulties associated with non-cognitivism and ethical relativism, there seems good reason to think that ethical claims must be either objectively true or false. To make this claim is not to be guilty of ethnocentrism, since it is possible to assert the existence of objective truth without claiming that one is sure of what the objective truth is. For

example, I am sure there is an objective truth about how far away from Earth is the planet Jupiter, but I do not know what that truth is. So, it is possible to think there are objective moral truths without insisting that the ethical beliefs of one's culture cannot be mistaken. To claim that objective ethical truth exists does not entitle one simply to assume that it is identical with the ethical beliefs of one's culture. Ethical objectivism thus allows one to escape the undesirable consequences of non-cognitivism and ethical relativism, yet retain a proper respect for the value of tolerance and humility in approaching differing cultural beliefs. If one believes that ethical truth exists and is not simply an invention of either the individual or the group, then the question of how best to go about recognizing it arises. It is to this we turn as we discuss objectivist theories of ethics.

Objectivist Theories of Ethics

There exists a large number of objectivist ethical theories. For our purposes, we may usefully divide them into three general types: (1) theories which focus upon the consequences of actions, i.e. utilitarian theories, (2) theories which focus upon duty, i.e. deontological theories, and (3) theories which focus upon virtue, i.e. natural law theories.

Utilitarian Theories

Utilitarian theories of ethics are generally viewed as stemming from the thinking of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Their work in pioneering utilitarianism has played an important role in the development of modern theories of cost-benefit analysis.

Utilitarians judge the rightness or wrongness of an action based on its consequences. They endorse the Principle of Utility which states that an action is morally correct insofar as it produces the greatest good for the greatest number, good usually being understood as happiness or pleasure. Actions, therefore, are not intrinsically right or wrong, but rather right or wrong

depending on the consequences to which they lead. This is what is meant by the claim that 'the end justifies the means.' Thus, telling a lie in one situation might be right by virtue of its consequences, but telling a lie in another situation might be wrong by virtue of its consequences. Utilitarianism is described as a teleological theory of ethics because it focuses on the end or goal of one's actions, 'telos' being the Greek term for end or goal.

A distinction is often drawn between 'act utilitarianism', sometimes called direct utilitarianism, and 'rule utilitarianism', sometimes called indirect utilitarianism. The act utilitarian directly appeals to the principle of utility in deciding the rightness or wrongness of each particular action. The rule utilitarian uses the principle of utility to justify particular general rules, which then can be used to decide whether an action is correct or not. The principle of utility is still the ultimate criterion for deciding whether the action is correct, but it is appealed to only indirectly as justifying the rule which one is following. Many philosophers feel that rule utilitarianism ultimately reduces to act utilitarianism, inasmuch as the sole justification for following the rule is that doing so will produce the greatest good for the greatest number. If there are rare instances where this is not the case, then the principle of utility would seem to require that the rule should not be followed.

Utilitarianism is a very influential ethical theory and captures some of our moral intuitions. It is not without problems, however. One of these is that it is often very difficult to anticipate the consequences of an action. If one holds, as does the utilitarian, that an action is to be judged morally correct or incorrect solely on the basis of its consequences, then in many cases we cannot know whether the action we are performing is morally acceptable, since we are not in a position to know what its consequences will be.

Another difficulty for many people is that it is hard to see how utilitarianism is consistent

with the concept of human rights. For example, suppose I am a healthy but relatively unaccomplished young male with a rare blood type. The prime minister of my country, a man who has done and continues to do much good in running the country, needs a liver transplant from someone with my very rare blood type. Would it be acceptable, given acceptance of the Principle of Utility, for physicians to 'harvest' my liver, without my consent, killing me in the process? I am, after all, an unaccomplished individual who will do far less to further the happiness of the many, than the prime minister. If one is prepared to say that I have an absolute right over whether it is permissible to 'harvest' my liver, it is difficult to hold also to utilitarianism.

Also noteworthy is that there is a fundamental ambiguity in the Principle of Utility. It can be stated as 'Act in such a way as to produce the greatest good for the greatest number.' Suppose by way of example, we compare two possible actions. One action would produce 120 units of happiness divided equally amongst six people. The other action would produce 140 units of happiness with one of the six people receiving 60 units of happiness, another receiving 40 units of happiness, another receiving 20 units of happiness, another receiving 15 units of happiness, another receiving 5 units of happiness, and the final person receiving 0 units of happiness. The Principle of Utility does not tell us how to decide between these two possible courses of action, inasmuch as it does not make clear which is more important, maximizing the total amount of happiness, or distributing happiness to the greatest number of individuals.

Deontological Theories

In contrast to utilitarian theories of ethics which focus on the consequences of our actions in determining their morality, deontological theories focus on intentions and the concept of duty, i.e. the motives one has in performing an action. What is most important in assessing the moral worth of an action is the intention that lay behind it, not the consequences to which it led.

One of the most influential deontological theories of ethics is that of Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher who sought to establish ethics as the outcome of logical consistency. He attempted to do this by formulating what he called the Categorical Imperative. According to one of his formulations of the Categorical Imperative, a person should always act in such a way that the maxim, i.e. the principle, guiding one's action can be universalized. Kant thought that immoral principles and the actions that would flow from them could never be universalized. Assuming this is true, the Categorical Imperative provides us with a test for determining which principles and action are moral. Immoral principles and actions cannot be universalized and will eventually lead to logical inconsistency.

Kant's idea can be made clearer by conducting a thought-experiment. Suppose I want to know if acting on the principle that I will only keep my promises when it is to my advantage is moral. I am a student running a small business as a summer job that silk-screens tee- shirts and sells them to tourists. I realize that if I were to order in larger quantities from my supplier then I would get a better price per shirt and be able to generate more profit. The only problem is that I am not sure whether my sales will continue to be on a level that will justify the larger quantity and I do not wish to be left with unsold shirts at the end of the summer. Acting on the principle that I will only keep my promises when it is to my advantage, I ask my supplier to bring me a much larger order of tee-shirts next month. Although I have promised to take the large order, my intention is only to take delivery if sales have been good. The next month comes and sales have been very good. I am looking forward to delivery of the much larger order. When, however, my supplier comes, he has no tee-shirts for me. He explains that, although he promised me the shirts, his intention was only to keep his promise if he did not get a better offer. Acting on the principle that he would only keep promises when it was to his advantage, he sold the shirts

to someone else.

Kant's view is that it is logically impossible for me to will as a universal principle that promises need only be kept when it is to one's advantage. Immoral actions reveal themselves, therefore, to be a consequence of irrationality.

Kant formulated two other versions of the Categorical Imperative. He seemed to think that all three versions were in fact equivalent, though later philosophers have found this far from evident. These other two formulations of the Categorical Imperative focus on the facts that persons should be seen as having intrinsic worth, that is to say they should not never be treated purely as a means to an end, and that they are autonomous agents, capable of self-directed rational action. We see, therefore, in Kant's ethical thought three very important themes. These are: (1) that moral principles are universalizable, (2) that persons have intrinsic worth, and (3) it is important to respect the autonomy of persons.

As in the case of utilitarianism, Kant's ethical thinking captures moral intuitions. Neither is it without problems, however. One problem is that Kant's emphasis on universalizability seems to tell us that we should treat similar cases in a similar manner, but it does not tell us which similarities we should consider in universalizing our actions. Suppose I decide that I will treat all women in the class in a similar manner by giving them an A and all men in the class in a similar manner by giving them a C. I have universalized my actions, but they are scarcely moral since I have picked out the wrong similarity upon which to focus. Kant's formal principle of universalizability needs to be supplemented by material content, that is to say we need to know which are the important similarities upon which to focus in universalizing our treatment of others. Kant's principle of universalizability does not, by itself, provide this content.

Another problem is that, for Kant, the rightness or wrongness of our actions seems to have nothing to do with their consequences. For example, Kant held that it is always wrong to tell a lie, regardless of what might be the consequences of telling the truth. In response, one might ask whether if one were a Jew in Nazi Germany and one were asked by a Gestapo officer whether one was Jewish, would it be wrong to lie.

Natural Law

The natural law tradition stems from the philosophy of Aristotle. Like utilitarian theories, Aristotle's ethical theory is teleological in nature. The telos at which his theory aims, however, is not simply pleasure, but rather the richer concept of *eudaemonia*, sometimes translated 'well-being' or 'happiness' which is accomplished in the exercise of moral virtues such as courage and generosity. Pleasure will accompany the exercise of virtue, but the exercise of virtue is not done as a means of achieving pleasure. Rather, the goal of life is to achieve happiness which lies in the exercise of virtue. Put differently, happiness and the exercise of virtue are not two different things, but rather one and the same thing. To be happy is to be living the virtuous life.

This raises the question of what Aristotle means by the term 'virtue.' Virtues are best seen as tendencies or character traits that are acquired over time by making right choices. Thus, for example, courage is a character trait that is acquired over time when, in repeatedly facing dangerous situations, one chooses to be neither foolhardy, which is to say overly bold and confident, nor cowardly, which is to say overly timid and fearful. When making the choice to be neither foolhardy nor cowardly in such situations becomes habitual one has acquired the virtue of courage. Virtues are the capacity of a person to choose wisely, that is to say rightly, on an ongoing basis. Aristotle thought that virtues typically involved finding a middle ground between excess and deficiency. Thus, for example the courageous person does not fear too much

or too little, but rather in a degree appropriate to right action in the situation being faced.

For Aristotle, what is of primary importance in the making of an ethical decision is not a method of calculating consequences, nor a rule which can be shown to be universally applicable, but rather the character of the person making the decision. This is not to say that the virtuous person does not seek to anticipate the consequences of action or the importance of applying ethical principles in a nonarbitrary way. It is to say that, in Aristotle's view, the moral life is essentially about the type of person one chooses to be.

As in the case of deontological and utilitarian theories of ethics, concerns can be raised regarding natural law theories. We will briefly examine two.

First, natural law ethics emerges from a view of reality which hold that things have essential natures and proper functions. For a thing to be good is to act in accordance with its essential nature and thus fulfill its proper function. The essential nature of a knife is to cut well and thus a good knife will be one which fulfills that function. If we ask what it is for a human person to be good, the answer will be that the good consists in acting according to human nature. This appeal to an essential human nature allows the natural law theorist to avoid relativism, but it may be asked whether there is such a thing as human nature and if there is how do we distinguish what is natural from what is only conventional. This is an important issue, since social conventions can serve to perpetuate immoral practices, while seeming entirely 'natural' to those employing them.

Second, allowing that we can defend the concept of human nature and distinguish what is natural from what is simply conventional, there emerges a problem when fulfilling one aspect of human nature thwarts fulfilling another aspect of human nature. For example, it is natural and thus good for humans to socialize and to seek knowledge. If there is a situation in which it is

impossible to do both, as perhaps in the case of deciding whether to pursue a very rigorous university degree, what should one do? It is not clear that appealing to human nature provides adequate guidance in such situations.

Some Further Considerations

We will conclude this lecture with some brief comments about the concept of rights and a short discussion of the relation of ethical theory to practical issues.

The Language of Rights

A great deal of contemporary ethical discourse uses the language of 'rights' in place of terms such as 'duty' and 'obligation'. To have a right is to have an entitlement of some sort. This can take different forms. The most direct form is what is known as a 'claim-right', which is an enforceable claim to someone else's action, or non-action. Claim-rights are the converse side of duties. If I have a claim-right, then there exists a corresponding duty by others to respect that claim-right. Further, if I have a claim-right, I also have some duty that corresponds to my claim-right. Thus, if I have the claim-right not to be assaulted, I also have a duty not to assault others.

We may distinguish claim-rights from privileges. Having a privilege amounts to being free from a duty I would otherwise have. For example, in acting as a student advisor, I am granted access to students' records that I would otherwise be under a duty not to access and which the general public as no right to view. Privilege rights are especially prominent in therapeutic relationships.

A third category of rights is what is term 'powers'. A person may appoint another person to act as their agent and to make decisions on their behalf. In areas other than health ethics, this may be done because someone lacks the time or expertise to make the decision. In health ethics, it is done because a person may be incapacitated and not in a position to make the decision. Thus

a surrogate might be appointed to act on behalf of a patient when the patient is not, or while not be, in a position to make the decision. The surrogate, of course, is duty bound to act on behalf of the patient, rather than on his or her own behalf.

It is important, if we are to use the language of rights, to be clear regarding what types of rights we are talking about and the extent of those rights. It is also important to realize that, in many cases, there are alternatives to framing a moral issue in terms of rights. Further, we do well to remember that, in the case of claim-rights, any claim of entitlement that one makes implies that one also has a correlated duty that one is under obligation to fulfill.

Theory and Practice

The three objectivist theories we have briefly discussed provide important guidelines for making ethical decisions. They do not, however, yield easy answers to the many complex ethical issues we routinely meet. In speaking of ethics, Aristotle observed that "one should not expect more precision than the subject matter allows." By this, he meant that there is no purely mechanical process, such as exists in mathematics, by which to determine the right course of action in all circumstances. It is important, however, not to misunderstand Aristotle's observation. His claim that "one should not expect more precision than the subject matter allows" does not mean that anything goes in ethics. As another philosopher has remarked, "the fact that there is twilight should not persuade us there is not night and day." Although there may exist instances in which people disagree on what is ethically correct the extent of this disagreement should not be exaggerated. The fact that there may be gray areas where it is difficult to come to a firm conclusion on what is ethically required should not persuade us that this is usually the case. Making good decisions requires, however, that we take into account how personal mindsets and social structures hamper our abilities to think and act ethically. In this

respect, feminists have been very helpful in demonstrating how power imbalances at personal, social, and political levels, negatively influence how ethical issues are understood and addressed. Our ability to rationalize as ethical decisions which are essentially self-serving or expedient should not be underestimated.

Knowing and Doing

The impression often given in a course such as this is that the primary obstacle to acting ethically is trying to discern what constitutes right action. Although it is important to reflect on what constitutes right action, and to try to find ways forward in ethically perplexing situations, this is a false impression. The majority of the moral life consists not in trying to decide what is the right thing to do, but in developing the integrity and courage necessary to act ethically. Many times, doing what we know to be right exacts a cost we do not wish to pay. I may know that I should spend time with my daughter who is asking me to take her fishing, but I am tired and it means missing the television show I planned to watch. I may know that I should leave that last piece of cheese-cake for my wife who has not yet had any, but I am hungry and I like cheese-cake so much that the two pieces I just ate do not seem like enough. If we find it difficult to act ethically in such small instances, how much more so does it become difficult to do the right thing when the stakes are much higher. As a subordinate, I might know that I should report my supervisor if he has not been following regulations but working up the courage to do so when such an action might have serious repercussions for my career is quite a different matter. A course such as this is helpful if one has a desire to know how to try and find the right thing to do in situations where the right course of action is not clear, but it is no substitute for developing the character necessary for acting ethically in situations where there are substantial personal costs in doing the right thing.