Praise for *Ethics for Beginners*

"Peter Kreeft, one of the most thoughtful and prolific Catholic scholars living today, has done it again. *Ethics for Beginners* is an essential resource to introduce readers to some of the most important thinkers and ideas in this domain, as he makes the case that good and evil are real and knowable. This is an indispensable volume, coming at a crucial moment. Anyone seeking to pursue the good life and happiness most richly understood owes Kreeft a debt of gratitude."

—**O. Carter Snead**, University of Notre Dame Professor of Law, Director of de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture, and author of *What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*

"Peter Kreeft—prophet, sage, and winsome professor of philosophy—teaches readers how to unite the knowing, doing, and being of ethics against the backdrop of some of the most influential moral theorists in history, including Socrates, Buddha, Moses, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Hume, Kant, and Alasdair MacIntyre, to name a few. The cumulative goal is to make you a better person, a happy person—that is, an ethical person."

—**Matthew R. Petrusek**, Professor of Catholic Ethics, Word on Fire Institute, from the foreword

"Virtually anyone who has taken the time to look into academic discourse on ethics could understandably be scared off. You find so many different visions of the good, so much specialist jargon, so much argumentative complexity, and so many ideological agendas. Peter Kreeft has written a book that offers folks a chance to bypass these roadblocks by diving directly into accessible visions of the great masters of ethics. We desperately need nonspecialists to take ethics more seriously, not only as a tool for changing their own lives, but for the building of a new culture by those who have had their lives so changed. This book offers nonspecialists a chance to do precisely this."

—**Charles Camosy**, Professor of Medical Humanities, Creighton University School of Medicine

ETHICS FOR BEGINNERS

ETHICS FOR BEGINNERS

BIG IDEAS FROM 32 GREAT MINDS

PETER KREEFT

FOREWORD BY MATTHEW R. PETRUSEK

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Ministries, PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330
or email contact@wordonfire.org.

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Foreword

Matthew R. Petrusek

Contemporary secular culture tends to think about "ethics" in only two ways: (1) liability-mitigating corporate training modules that instruct you what not to say and do in the workplace, and/or (2) a "break-in-case-of-emergency" box of ideas to assist in weathering a personal moral conundrum (e.g., "I just found out my friend's boyfriend might still be using his dating app—should I say something?"). In other words, secularism has reduced the role of ethics in individual and social life to a bland mush of rule-saturated PowerPoints and disposable self-help advice columns. And we have all suffered because of it.

Peter Kreeft—prophet, sage, and winsome professor of philosophy—has come to our rescue once again. His work, based in the wisdom of both natural law and revelation (another way of saying reason and faith), shows that ethics, properly defined, is neither obscure, nor rule-obsessed, nor grounded in fear, nor diminishable to mere suggestions or life hacks. Rather, ethics is about learning to be happy—truly, wholly (holy), and eternally happy, a happiness that, by its very nature, includes the generous love of both self and neighbor (see Matt. 22:39). Thus, to study ethics is to study the art of happiness; and to excel in the art of happiness, one must move from being a student to a practitioner, from knowing, to doing, to being.

That is what *Ethics for Beginners* is about: teaching readers how to unite the knowing, doing, and being of ethics against the backdrop of some of the most influential moral theories in the history of ideas. The surveys of the minds who comprise this history—including Socrates, Buddha, Moses, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Hume, Kant, and Alasdair MacIntyre, to name a few—are not only informative (though they inform exceptionally well) and not only intellectually stimulating (though each chapter leaves you thinking); they are also teleologically edifying. The critical examination of each thinker has a cumulative goal: to make you a better person, a happy person—that is, an ethical person. This goal is not a secret agenda burrowed between the lines in the text. It is the whole point of the book. *Ethics for Beginners*, Kreeft discloses, "takes a position, it argues, it tries to teach at least one very controversial idea that is unpopular among many academics, though not among people of common sense: that ethics is real, not merely ideal; that good and evil are not unknowable, subjective, or wholly relative."

Kreeft grants that many may not be willing to take this journey through the history of ideas. To all those souls standing (and sometimes booing) on the sidelines, he says, "Goodbye. Hope to see you back some day after you've gotten As in all your courses but not life." To all those, on the other hand, who are curious, or curious-adjacent, about the meaning and purpose of life and how to live it well, no matter what slings and arrows come their way, Kreeft offers this warm invitation: "Welcome to the human race and please read on."

Some advice? Don't turn this one down.

Nine Introductions

INTRODUCTION 1

Whom This Book Is For

It's for intelligent beginners. That's why it concentrates on each thinker's "big picture," not on detailed step-by-step arguments or technical terms.

It's not for lazy, stupid beginners, and it's not for intelligent experts.

It's from 32 gurus for students; from 32 large minds for middle-sized minds; from 32 wizards for hobbits.

Since the book is for hobbits, it is not for wizards. Those who are wizards know most of the stuff in this book already, and those who think they are wizards but are not are too arrogant and self-satisfied to be good students.

Welcome, hobbits. Here are 32 ideas from 32 Gandalfs.

INTRODUCTION 2

How This Book Is Different

This is the most boring chapter in the book. The rest of the book is about life, but this chapter is only about the book. Only an idiot would prefer a book about life to life, and only an idiot would prefer a book about a book to a book about life.

Welcome, fellow idiots.

Philosophy professors are often intelligent idiots. A philosophy professor once died, and outside the gates of heaven, God showed him a bunch of red brick buildings. It was Harvard University. "Why is that here?" the philosopher asked. "That's for you," God said. "You see, in this place everyone gets what they want the most, what they love the most. So everybody who loves wisdom the most gets to enter heaven, but those who love philosophy the most get to go to Harvard instead."

The "duh!" point of the joke is that "philosophy" literally means "the love of wisdom," not "the love of philosophy" or "the love of Harvard."

This is not the usual ethics textbook, for four reasons.

First, it is not just a classroom textbook. It is that, but it is also a do-it-yourself textbook.

Second, it concentrates only on the "big ideas," the ones that you will remember all your life and that can change your life as well as your thought. It's about the big "existential" questions, not the little "analytical" questions. And since it is about the great ideas, it uses great minds (great philosophers) and their great books. It

borrows from the greatest ethical classics. It is historical rather than systematic. It's not *about* the history of ethics, it's about *ethics*; but it treats that history as a gold mine. You mine the mine for the gold. And the gold here is not the mine (history) but the minds; these gold mines are mind mines.

Third, it takes a position, it argues, it tries to teach at least one very controversial idea that is unpopular among many academics, though not among people of common sense: that ethics is real, not merely ideal; that good and evil are not unknowable, subjective, or wholly relative. Most textbooks on ethics try to be neutral on this issue, and most of them do not succeed. Their position is concealed, but operative. Mine is equally operative but not concealed.

Fourth, it focuses especially on the three biggest of all "big ideas" in ethics. To see what these are, think of the human race as a fleet of ships and life as the sea. (The image comes from C.S. Lewis.) Ethics is the ships' sailing orders. The instructions tell the ships the three things they most need to know. First and most important of all is their mission. Why are they at sea in the first place? Are they fighting a battle, or delivering cargo, or ferrying passengers to a destination, or just taking them on a pleasure cruise? Second, how should each ship stay shipshape and afloat? Third, how are they to communicate and cooperate with each other instead of ignoring each other or getting in each other's way?

The first question corresponds to the question of the *summum bonum* or "greatest good" or "ultimate end" or "meaning of life." That is an ethical question—in fact, the single most important ethical question—because it is about the simplest and most fundamental of all ethical concepts, *goodness*, about a *good* life. You will ask this question only if you are dissatisfied with getting As in all your subjects but flunking life.

The second question corresponds to individual ethics, or virtue ethics: What kind of a person should I be? This is about virtues and vices in ethics: good and bad habits of character.

The third question corresponds to social ethics: how we should behave to others, how we should treat other people. This is about justice and charity, good and bad deeds, rights and duties, both private and public or political.

Most modern ethical philosophers have these questions upside down: they spend most of their time and effort on the third question and little or none on the first. Clearly, the three questions are interrelated in a certain order of logical priority. We won't treat others well (question 3) unless we are the right kind of person (question 2). (It's also true that we won't be the right kind of person if we don't treat others well.) But the whole point of both being the right kind of person (a shipshape ship) and treating others well (cooperating with the other ships) is to accomplish the mission of the fleet (the first question). That is the most important question, the deepest and hardest question, and the one most modern ethical philosophers (except the "Existentialists") tend to ignore.

Why? Not because they are lazy or because the question is too hard for them to think about, but because most modern philosophers do not believe that human reason is capable of answering it. Most philosophers today have a weaker and narrower and less robust notion of human reason than the ancient and medieval philosophers had. So they leave that question either to religious faith or to personal feeling.

Another reason they ignore the question is because it's a question all religions claim to answer, and typically modern minds don't want to argue religion because they fear religious warfare (of which our civilization is rightly sick and of which we have seen all too much both in the past and in the present, especially in the Middle East). But that does not prove that it is not also a question for philosophy. Religion and philosophy can deal with some of the same questions without reducing either one of these two enterprises to the other if only they use different methods. Philosophy uses human reason alone, religion uses also faith in divine revelation (in Western religions) or mystical experience (in

Eastern religions). I think this ignoring of the greatest of questions by philosophers is a disastrous error and a sin against philosophy, and this book is an attempt to make up for it. After all, one of the most important things that distinguishes mankind from all the animals is that we *think* about these three questions.

The three big questions in ethics, then, are:

1. What is a truly human life? What is "the meaning of life"—i.e., its point, purpose, goal, good, or end? What is a life good for? "Why was I born? Why am I living? What's it all about, Alfie?" (A great old song and movie, by the way.) What is "the greatest good" (the *summum bonum*)?
2. How then shall I live? What kind of a person should I be? What is "a good person"?
3. How shall I treat other people?

If you are interested in these questions, welcome to the human race and please read on. If not, goodbye. Hope to see you back some day after you've gotten As in all your courses but not life.

INTRODUCTION 3

Why Read This Book?

This chapter is meant to "sell" the book to teachers. That includes both teachers who teach others and teachers who teach themselves. (This book can be used either in school classrooms or in the classroom of the individual mind.)

Typically, there are three kinds of ethics textbooks. All three are forgettable. The point of this one is to be unforgettable. That is why it concentrates on a few "big ideas": they are the ones you will not forget but remember and use for the rest of your life, not just in an ethics class.

The most common kind of ethics textbook is an anthology of articles by mainly contemporary writers about tricky ethical issues in the modern world and modern life, or (worse) in abstract thought, like which of the four starving men on a lifeboat should the other three kill and eat? The advantage of this kind of text is that it grapples with concrete issues sometimes. But how often have you been in a lifeboat with three other people deciding which one to eat? The disadvantages are (1) that the style of contemporary philosophy articles is almost always dry and technical, and (2) that the articles are written not by great sages but by second-rate scholars, students, and teachers of philosophy like me. There *are* no great philosophers alive today. If you dispute that, please tell me their names. Who are our contemporary Platos or Aristotles? What living philosopher will be remembered one thousand years from now?

Sometimes, instead of anthologizing articles by contemporary philosophers, the author does all the work himself. But the text is still organized into *issues*, which are then analyzed and argued about logically. This is fine, and it may develop skills in technical analysis and argument (which is obviously a very good thing), but it is almost guaranteed never to change your life or even to fill your memory; ten years after reading it, nothing is big enough to remember. And this author is not a great philosopher. He may write a good book, but the great philosophers have written great books. Why prefer good books to great books?

A third kind of textbook is a history of ethics, a summary of the Great Books on ethics. This has the double advantage of being history—and therefore story, drama, narrative—and also covering the greatest philosophers. The book you hold in your hands is almost that kind of book, but not quite. For though history is a very important thing indeed, since we cannot understand our present without understanding our past, history is one thing and ethics is another. An ethics textbook should be . . . well, an ethics textbook. It may use history to teach ethics, but it should not use ethics to teach history.

This is a fourth kind of ethics text. In a single word, it gives you an *apprenticeship* to the great ethical masters—the sages, the gurus, the great minds from whom you can learn something unforgettable and life-changing. It summarizes and explains the big ideas from the big minds (and hearts), from 32 great ethical gurus at whose feet you can sit today because of that great invention of our ancestors: time travel through books.

Occasionally, instead of summarizing the guru I use his own words, because occasionally (but only occasionally) philosophers are clear and interesting writers.

The text is not long. It is just long enough to provoke original ethical thinking about the big ideas. Thus, at the end I provide an unusually "thick" set of guidelines for writing original essays on

the fairly "thin" selections. The book is not designed to produce historical scholars but original, honest, clear thinkers about ethics.

Here are some of the greatest ethical thoughts of all time, by 32 of the greatest minds of all time, on the most fundamental ethical issues of all time, explained for beginners. Why settle for anything less? Why learn ethics from me when you can learn from Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein?

This kind of text also has the advantage of concentrating on basic philosophical questions, on principles, rather than on particular current (and therefore ephemeral) problems. Understanding the big ideas, the basic principles, is the best way to study any science. (And ethics is a "science" in the old, broader meaning of the term: a subject organized by reason, even if it doesn't use the modern "scientific method.") You don't start physics with the problem of time travel or cold fusion, but with Newtonian mechanics. You don't start math with calculus but with arithmetic and algebra. If you have clear basic principles, you will be able to use them to evaluate ideas and problems; but if you approach problems without understanding principles, you will not be able to critically evaluate the proffered solutions to those problems. You will simply think what the author thinks, or you will simply think what you already think (or merely feel). Nothing will change. As a college professor, I find few things more depressing than the fact that well over 90 percent of all students think exactly the same predictable "politically correct" thoughts (whether left or right), even while they think they are being critical and original thinkers.

Each chapter or sub-chapter of this book concentrates on one "big idea" rather than many little ones, because that is what you will remember anyway. If you ever took a philosophy course, you know that that is exactly what you do in fact still remember now, years later. And you remember it because it changed you—it changed your thinking and, therefore, part of your life. We have less than one hundred years of lifetime to spend; why waste it on

small ideas, books, and thinkers when you can invest it in big ones?

The advantage of a "Great Books" approach is very obvious: we have great friends; let's use them! If you have an important job to do, whether it's something physical, like building a bridge, or something medical, like an operation, or something intellectual, like deciding what ethical principles you will believe in and practice for the rest of your life, you are a fool not to get all the help you can get: to pick as many big brains (and hearts) as you can, to get a "second opinion" and a third, to use whatever wise friends you have. And they will mightily help you to think things through yourself, to take responsibility for your own thoughts, and to open your mind to arguments on both sides of controversies.

We all have very many good friends in philosophy. The best ones are dead. But the dead can still live! Dead writers are like ghosts: you can meet their spirits, their minds, even though their bodies are dead. In their books they left the products their minds made for us to use, just as those who built our cities left the products their bodies made for us to use.

These many philosophical friends of ours often profoundly disagree with each other. So you find not just one approach but many. Sometimes you can combine two or more big ideas, and sometimes you have to choose between them. But all of them are your friends; all of them will help you, even the ones you disagree with the most passionately. Especially them, for they challenge you to respond the most. You need reasons to disagree with someone even more than you need reasons to agree.

However, I must issue a word of warning. If you study the great sages instead of the little scribblers—i.e., if you use this book rather than any of the more typical ethics textbooks—you will be stretched and challenged; you will be bewitched, bothered, and (probably) bewildered, not only in your ability to follow an argument and in your ideological choices (which are the two things that most textbooks appeal to) but much more deeply,

in your deepest values and loves, in your deepest heart (not just your feelings) as well as your mind—unless the author of this book has totally failed to be a faithful disciple of the sages that grace his pages.

Ethics is not a kind of postscript to life, like a pair of boots or an umbrella. When you were a child, your mother probably warned you not to forget your boots if it was snowing or your umbrella if it might rain. And most people today look at ethics as a kind of boot or umbrella, so that before you go out to do the really important things in life, like business or law or medicine, before you do what you do with your heart, you should briefly bother to check in with an ethicist to be sure that what you want to do is not unethical. That's ethics as a P.S. to life. (That's what most "legal ethics" or "medical ethics" or "business ethics" is composed of.) But for all the great philosophers, however radically they differ from each other on specific ethical questions, ethics is about the most fundamental, prior, and important things in life. Socrates went so far as to say that a good person does not worry much about the little things, like whether he lives or dies, but only about the one big thing: whether he is a good person or a bad one.

INTRODUCTION 4

What Is Ethics?

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Ethics is one of the main divisions of philosophy. But what is philosophy?

"The love of wisdom" is the literal meaning of the word, according to the ancient Greeks, who invented it. Inventors have naming rights over their inventions.

Most of what passes for philosophy today looks more like the cultivation of cleverness than the love of wisdom. It's neither love nor wisdom. It's not something that changes your life, and it's not something to love so much that you would die for it, as Socrates did. For him, philosophy was a kind of religion, an absolute.

What is philosophy in today's universities? It is a "department." Socrates would find that ridiculous. "The love of wisdom" is a love; is love a "department"? Does the university have a "love department"?

This book dialogues with giants, not with skittering little mouse-like minds that chatter but with big minds that think the big thoughts: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, Confucius, Buddha, Kant, Nietzsche. This book turns back the clock. "You can't turn back the clock" is not only a cliché; it's simply false, and it's stupid. Of course you can turn back the clock, and it's the most reasonable thing to do whenever the clock isn't telling you the real time.

I got that idea from G.K. Chesterton, a genius. That's what happens when you read Great Books: you get big ideas that challenge clichés.

So, what is ethics? I use "ethics" or "ethical" as synonymous with "morals" and "moral." Some philosophers, following many sociologists and psychologists, distinguish these two things, using "morals" to mean a person's lived values and "ethics" to mean the reflective, detached study and logical critique of morals. Still another distinction that I will not use here is the one in popular language today, especially in the media, that identifies "morals" or "morality" with sexual morality and ethics with the rest of morality—an example of our culture's unique obsession. Albert Camus, the keenly satirical atheist novelist, said that future generations will be able to summarize modern man in two propositions: "He fornicated and read the newspapers." Do not be surprised if this book expands that focus just a wee bit.

THE BASIC DIVISIONS OF PHILOSOPHY: WHAT ARE THE GREAT QUESTIONS?

Ethics is only part of philosophy, though it is the most obviously practical part, since it is about practice. What are the other parts?

Philosophy, as "the love of wisdom," can apply to anything that we want to be wise about. There is the philosophy of politics, law, education, history, science, mathematics, religion, literature, art, music, sports, sexuality, etc. You can philosophize (seek wisdom) about anything, even defecation.[1]

1. The philosophy of defecation? Well, consider this philosophical question: If the body and the mind are two dimensions of one and the same person, as they seem to be, is there then not a natural analogy between the way food comes in one end of our body, nourishes the body, and then goes out the other end as waste, and the way an idea comes into the mind, nourishes the mind in some way, and then in another way is also ejected by the mind insofar as it is waste? If truth is the food of the mind, can minds get constipated on truth as bowels do on food? Is there such a thing as mental diarrhea? Is that a ridiculous analogy? It may seem so, for after all, the law of noncontradiction doesn't ever begin to smell bad even after a few millennia. On the other hand, doesn't the mind critically accept only the reasonable aspects of an idea and eliminate the rest,

The five most foundational divisions of philosophy seem to be:

1. Logic and method,
2. Metaphysics,
3. Philosophical anthropology,
4. Epistemology, and
5. Ethics.

Ethics, in fact, is usually based on, or derived from, or dependent on, or at least strongly influenced by all four of these other areas of philosophy. Therefore, if you are to understand ethics, you must have at least a beginner's understanding of these other areas.

Ethics seems dependent on epistemology because what we can understand about ethics depends on what and how we can understand, and that is what epistemology is about. Epistemology, in turn, depends on anthropology because what human persons can understand depends on what human persons are, and that is what anthropology is about. We are neither apes nor angels; that is why we think differently than both apes and angels. Anthropology, in turn, depends on metaphysics because what we are, what kind of being we have, depends on what kinds of being there are; and that is what metaphysics is about. (For instance, if matter is an illusion, so are bodies, and if spirit is an illusion, so are minds or souls as distinct from brains.)

Finally, what we will discover in any field depends on what methods of discovery we use.

1. Logic and method are not really part of philosophy so much as preliminaries to it. Methods are man-made and changeable,

as the body is nourished only by the digestible aspects of food, and eliminates the rest?**
**What! First a serious footnote about the philosophy of defecation, and now a second footnote arguing with the previous footnote? You can't be serious; this has to be a joke. Answer: the distinction between the serious and the joke can't be serious. It has to be a joke.

but the laws of logic do not change with place or time but are the same everywhere and everywhen. For example, the law of noncontradiction does not change if you move to the People's Republic of Massachusetts or if the Republicans overthrow the Republic.

But though you have no choice in logic (it's like mathematics that way), you do have a choice in method, and the method you choose to use in order to think about the questions of philosophy often influences the conclusions you come to.

For instance, to see how method influences morality, consider a four-way conversation with Aristotle, Buddha, Marx, and Hume.

Aristotle believes, very commonsensically, that both the body's concrete senses and the mind's abstracting reason cooperate, like two blades of a pair of scissors, to find objective truth. And therefore his method combines sense experience and abstract understanding, and combines both inductive reasoning, from particular instances, and deductive reasoning, from general principles. And he applies this method to moral truths as well as other kinds of truth.

Buddha believes that no method of ordinary thinking can show you what really is—only the mystical experience of Nirvana can do that—and that his "noble eightfold path" is the best method for getting those "enlightened" eyes, which will then perceive the illusory nature of the needy, greedy self that is the source of bad behavior.

Marx believes that only a strictly materialistic, empirical scientific method can cut through deterministically conditioned class prejudice and tell you the truth; that reason is incorrigibly prejudiced by class ideology. Therefore, the first and overriding moral obligation is a social and political revolution.

And Hume believes that since "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact" never coincide, you never get certainty about anything real (only probability at best, and only by strictly empirical methods), and that since empirical methods discover no moral values, these values must be subjective feelings rather than objective truths.

You can easily see how different methods lead you to different conclusions.

2. This question of methodology is obviously closely connected to the questions of epistemology, or theory of knowledge, which deals with the questions of how knowledge works and how it should work. But methodology is also closely connected with, and has at least implicit assumptions in, metaphysics and anthropology. For instance, a method always, at least implicitly, assumes some answer to the mind-body problem. Take the following two disagreements among our four philosophers above. (a) Buddha believes that the impersonal mind can and must be freed from the illusions generated by the personal body, while Marx believes that the mind is only part of the body, or an effect of the body. (b) Hume believes that the mind cannot transcend the body, while Aristotle believes that the mind can find universal objective truths, as the body cannot, by abstracting the intelligible form (essential nature) from sensible matter.

   You don't have to understand all the details of these very inadequate descriptions of different philosophies to see that the questions of ethics are entwined with questions in all the other areas of philosophy. Some philosophers (e.g., Kantians, pragmatists, and many "analytic philosophers") believe that ethics can and should be dealt with not as dependent on metaphysics or anthropology but in itself, independently, avoiding the uncertainties and disagreements found in these other areas of philosophy. Others, like most classical

premodern thinkers, believe it is impossible to do that. That is one of the questions we will look at in this book.

3. Metaphysics is that division of philosophy which goes beyond ("meta") physics in generality or universality; the part of philosophy that asks questions about all reality, not just physical reality. But it's not just about non-physical reality either, if there is such a thing. Indeed, that is one of the questions of metaphysics: Is matter the only thing that is real, or is there also spirit, or mind, or soul? If so, is there a super-human spirit, or God? Another metaphysical question is whether the cause-and-effect relationship that we use in all our explanations is objectively real or is merely the way our minds have to work. Another metaphysical question is whether universals (like justice, human nature, or twoness) are real or only mental. That obviously impacts ethics because ethical values and virtues are universals. Justice, for instance—justice itself, the essential nature of justice, the quality of justice, the "whatness" of justice—is not the same as an individual just man, or just act, or just law. Is justice objectively real, to be discovered, or is it just invented and imposed by our minds?

   Of all the questions of philosophy, the questions of metaphysics are the most abstract, the most removed from concrete, particular experience. But they are also the most important in the sense that it seems that our answers to all other questions depend (at least implicitly) on answers to the questions of metaphysics. For instance, imagine our four philosophers above—Aristotle, Marx, Buddha, and Hume—arguing about one of the most basic questions in ethics, namely, what is a good life?

   Aristotle would say that it is a life that fulfills natural purposes or ends both of body and of soul. He can say that only because he believes there are natural purposes and that we are both body and soul. Marx would deny both of these assumptions because he is a metaphysical materialist. "Good"

for him is not discovered but constructed by political and economic power. Buddha would base his ethics on the opposite metaphysics from Marx's: that matter is only a projection of mind. So he would say that the good life is one that leads to mystical mental enlightenment and bliss, or Nirvana. And Hume would say that we cannot *know* what "good" means because all we can know, as distinct from believing or opining, are our material sensations and our own emotions. So he would locate ethical goodness in our subjective feelings and emotions. The point is that these four different ethics depend on four different metaphysics, or on the skeptical denial of metaphysics (Hume).

4. Philosophical anthropology asks what human nature is. Its answers lie between those of metaphysics and those of ethics, as can easily be seen if we continue with our imaginary conversation among the four philosophers above. What are human beings? We are either (a) body and soul, as Aristotle says, or (b) body only, as Marx says, or (c) mind only, as Buddha says, or (d) unknowable, as Hume says, because reality, or being, is either (a) both material and spiritual, or (b) material only, or (c) spiritual only, or (d) unknowable. So all four answers in anthropology presuppose answers to the question of metaphysics. Our ethical good is dependent on our anthropology and our anthropology is dependent on our metaphysics.

   Or is it? Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein all deny this. Many modern philosophers are skeptical of metaphysics (and sometimes of anthropology too) but not totally skeptical of ethics. They would deny that ethics has to base itself on these other divisions of philosophy, but they would not deny that there has to be an ethics. Very few of the great philosophers have nothing important to say about ethics. (Descartes, Hegel, and Heidegger are the only three major examples I can think of. That is why they are not included in this book.) For epistemology and ethics are about the

two things that nothing else in the known universe can do: rational thinking and moral choosing.

INTRODUCTION 5

What Is Ethics Fundamentally About?

There are at least three candidates for the most important word in ethics: *good*, *right*, and *ought*. Premodern philosophers focus on good (vs. evil) as the most fundamental notion. This is a metaphysical approach. Modern philosophers often concentrate on right (vs. wrong) and rights (specified by rules or laws), or on the psychological experience of moral obligation or duty.

The word "values" can apply to all three approaches and does not presuppose either that these moral "values" are objective, metaphysical, and discovered, as most premodern cultures and philosophers believed, or that they are subjective, psychological, and created, as many modern philosophers believe.

If we begin with this word "values," we can say there are three fundamental questions in ethics: (1) what (moral) values are; (2) what their basis is (i.e., their foundation, their premises, their reasons); and (3) how they are to be applied, or their consequences. In other words, their essence, their cause, and their effect. Or, as Aristotle would say, their formal cause, their efficient cause, and their final cause.

INTRODUCTION 6

The Relation between Ethics and Everything Else

"Everything else" includes at least (1) religion, (2) science, (3) law, (4) politics, (5) psychology, (6) art, and (7) death.

1. Ethics is an essential dimension of every religion in the world. And the world's religions, although apparently very different in their theologies, are not very different in their ethics. They all have a very high and idealistic ethics and demand the overcoming of our basic egotism or selfishness.

   As a matter of historical fact, religion has always been for most people the strongest source and foundation for ethics. Yet ethics, as a division of philosophy, relies on reason, common sense, and experience, not on religious faith. Believers in different religions will argue from different faith premises; but contrary arguments in philosophical ethics should have the same premises, derived not from religious faith but from universal human experience, common sense, and logical reasoning.
2. Ethics is a "science" in the broad, ancient sense of the word: a body of knowledge based on human reason and argued through logical principles, especially cause and effect. But it is not a "science" in the modern sense of "science"; that is, ethics does not use the scientific method, controlled experiments,

or quantitative measurement, nor does it confine itself to the empirical, the sensory. But since truth, by definition, cannot contradict truth, a true ethic cannot contradict true science.

3. "Law" could mean either (a) the laws of physical nature, like gravity, evolution, or relativity; or (b) the laws of a state, a school, a club, a team, or some other humanly invented association; or (c) the moral laws all persons ought to obey in order to be morally good persons. We know (a) by science, (b) by socialization, and (c) by conscience. Almost no one doubts that the laws of nature (a) are objective and discovered rather than subjective and created, or that the laws of society (b) are subjective and created rather than objective and discovered. The fundamental controversy in modern ethics is about the laws of morality (c). Which are they like? Are they objective and discovered by reason, like the laws of physical nature, or are they subjective and created by will, like the laws of a nation? The latter is called legal "positivism" because it holds that moral laws are "posited" by man.
4. A political system invents its own laws. They are civil laws. They differ from one society to another. If, in addition to these civil laws, there are also moral laws that are universal, then these moral laws can and should judge states and the laws of states as being morally good or bad; and these judgments can be argued about. If this is so, then there can be such things as "crimes against humanity" as well as crimes against American, German, or Turkish law. If not, there cannot. And if not, then it seems logically to follow that the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi war criminals for "crimes against humanity" were not an expression of moral justice but only of the power of the winners of the war.
5. Psychology tells us how we do in fact think, feel, desire, choose, and act. Ethics tells us how we ought to. Psychology (and also scientific anthropology and sociology) tells us what human beings are like, and that is certainly part of the basis

for what they *ought* to be like. But it is not the same thing. So a good basis for ethics would be a good knowledge of human psychology (and anthropology and sociology). And that knowledge is not necessarily from textbooks or classes. It could be from life or from great literature, which often gives us deeper insights into human character than abstract psychological theories do.

6. The moral good and the artistically beautiful are more separated in our society than in many past societies, including our own roots in classical, medieval, and Renaissance culture. We today usually expect artists to be immoral, and moralists to be unartistic and "hokey." But the two can be allies rather than enemies: great art can be a very effective moral educator (and not just by preachy "moral lessons"), and great ethics can be the main stimulus for great art. For ethics is not just about rules; it is about being more perfectly and completely human. We have said above that ethics is not just a postscript added to other things, like business, medicine, art, education, or law, a kind of "don't forget your boots and umbrella when you go out to do the really important things." It is about the really important things, about the goal and value of all these other things, about life itself. It is about "the meaning of life"—i.e., about life's value, about your good, end, purpose, or goal. It's about your *value*, not just your *values*—i.e., about the real value of you, not just about your opinions about values.
7. And therefore ethics is also about death, which puts life itself into question. Any ethical system that is silent about and irrelevant to the mystery of death is trivial. No one ever said on their deathbed, "I regret caring too much about ethics and not enough about economics."

INTRODUCTION 7

Personal Qualifications for Understanding Ethics

Some people are skeptical of making any ethical judgments at all. They are ethical relativists, or ethical skeptics, or ethical subjectivists. They argue, "Who's to say, anyway? Who's to say what's good or bad? Who knows what's good or bad?" That is a fair and important question. But the answer to that question is very clear: the good person knows what's good or bad, and the bad person does not. Good people are wise and trustworthy, even if they are not brilliant; wicked people are not, even if they are brilliant. Everyone knows that that is true. That's one of the things we just can't not know. We all know that by experience and common sense, not clever or controversial philosophy.

So what qualifies you for ethical wisdom? It is not your ideological beliefs or scholarly expertise but your character traits.

And they come in pairs, so that it is very easy and very common to emphasize one half of each pair and forget the other half. These include:

1. adamant, committed honesty and flexible, experimental open-mindedness;
2. a hard (logical) head and a soft (loving, empathetic) heart, toughness and tenderness;

3. fair, unbiased, impersonal detachment and personal commitment and loyalty;
4. impatience (passion) and patience (maturity);
5. idealism and practicality; and
6. profound seriousness and lightness, playfulness, a sense of humor.

Nearly everyone agrees that all these qualities are desirable. The problem comes in reconciling and marrying the pairs. There is no easy gimmick.

It is like marriage between men and women that way: it's one of life's hardest tasks but also one of the most worthwhile and wonderful.

But this is a necessary task for each individual life if we are to develop wise and mature personalities. More than that, these qualities are not only necessary to have in order to become an ethically good person, but they are also necessary to have in order to *understand* ethics. You don't have to be a tree or a star to understand trees or stars, but you do have to be a good person to understand both goodness and personhood.

And it works the other way around too: the more we understand what a good person is, the more likely it is that we will become one. This means that we don't have to wait until we are saints to study ethics. We can begin by philosophizing about ethics long before we are saints. But it does mean that the saints will almost certainly understand this division of philosophy better than anyone else.

INTRODUCTION 8

The Basis for Morality: Five Essential Options

The essential content of ethics does not vary very much, no matter what era, place, race, religion, culture, or philosophy we look at. No one but Nietzsche ever seriously called for, and no one ever succeeded in creating, a wholly new moral system, a "transvaluation of values," as he called it, in which arbitrariness, self-indulgence, egotism, cruelty, injustice, force, deliberate lying, and arrogant, sneering superiority were virtues, while wisdom, self-control, altruism, kindness, justice, reason, honesty, and humility were vices. It is psychologically impossible to experience a moral obligation to live the set of vices in the first list or to experience guilt about living the set of virtues in the second.

However, the *basis* for morality, the *reason* to be moral, the criterion of morality, is not nearly as clear. That is a question philosophers seriously disagree about. There are five basic options. They need not exclude each other. Many philosophers, such as Plato and Aquinas, affirm more than one of them. But usually, one takes precedence.

Every one of them can be found both in ancient Greece, where philosophy began, and in the modern world.

First, there is *fideism*: the idea that it is religious faith, rather than reason, that justifies moral behavior. This is taught by Euthyphro, in Plato's dialogue by that name, and by Christian or

Muslim "fundamentalists" in modern times. For them, an act is good simply because God wills it. Both are examples of Western thinkers, for whom God or the gods have a moral will; but in the East, the religious answer typically takes another, mystical form in which the absolute good and end of human life is a radical transformation of consciousness that can be called "enlightenment." (Hindus call it *mukti* or *moksha*; Buddhists call it *Nirvana*, *satori*, or *kensho*.) In this system, morality is a necessary means to that end—not because God wills it (for the God of Eastern religions has no will, usually no personality, and sometimes not even existence) but because getting egotism out of your system is a necessary preliminary for enlightenment. It is like wiping the dirt off the lens of the telescope so that you can see the stars.

Second, there is simple *hedonism*: the idea that pleasure is the supreme good and reason is to be used to calculate pleasures. Epicureanism is the ancient form of this; utilitarianism is the modern form of it. Happiness is identified with pleasure, and the moral good is whatever produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. This is a "whatever" kind of moral relativism, but it is a rational and objective calculation according to the principal calculation that the end (pleasure) justifies the means.

Third, ethical *emotivism* holds that ethics is a matter of subjective feeling. We just "feel yucky" when we see something that displeases us, like a murder, and we unconsciously project that subjective feeling out onto the deed or its doer, calling them "bad." But in fact the only thing that is really bad is how we feel. David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and A.J. Ayer teach this in modern times. This could be regarded as another version of hedonism; but utilitarian hedonism emphasizes *rational calculation* of pleasurable consequences, while emotivism emphasizes the immediate *feeling*. Pop psychology's imperative to "feel good about yourself" could be seen as a popularization of this philosophy.

Fourth, an ethics of *duty* centers on the obligation of practicing rational virtue, especially the Golden Rule (do unto others what you want done to you), simply because it is the right thing to do; and it is right because it is rational. This is the heart of Stoicism in the ancient world and Kantianism in the modern.

Fifth, the most popular position of all in most premodern cultures is an ethic of *teleology*—from *telos*, the Greek word for "end" or "purpose," and *logos*, the Greek word for "reason." Thus ethics is the study of ends. ("Ends" means objectively real good here, not just subjective desires; needs, not just wants). Thus, "the good" is our ultimate purpose or end, and "the greatest good" is the reason for lesser goods. This implies that a "natural moral law," in which human nature and its inherent laws, as known by rational wisdom (not just either feeling or calculation), is the basis of morality. The "four cardinal virtues" of wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice perfect human nature and make for both subjective happiness and objective goodness. (We might call the combination of both "blessedness.") This is taught by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the ancient world, and by Aquinas in the Middle Ages, who added a religious dimension to it (that the natural law is a participation in the eternal law of God). Our modern Western civilization is the first in history in which some form of this "natural law ethic" is no longer believed by most of the mind-molders in formal (university) and informal (media) education.

INTRODUCTION 9

For Teachers

A practical note here for teachers: there are at least three different ways to use this text in a typical thirteen- or fourteen-week course in ethics.

1. If there is too much here, just select the thinkers you deem the most important and omit or extra-credit the rest.
2. If there is too little here, supplement it with some readings in the works of the great ethical philosophers—e.g., Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* (a great three-way contrast).
3. If there is just the right amount here, cover all 32 thinkers, one, two, or three each class day, in a two- or three-day-a-week, thirteen- or fourteen-week course. If possible, take a whole day each on Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant, and perhaps also Nietzsche and Sartre.

Each big idea will typically have seven parts to its treatment:

1. The *question* it answers. (Nothing is duller or more meaningless than an answer to a question you don't understand or care about.)
2. The *answer*, the point, the fundamental thesis, the "big idea" itself.

3. The *explanation* of it, in the philosopher's own words or in my summary.
4. The *arguments* for it.
5. The *presuppositions* or arguable assumptions behind it.
6. The *corollaries* or consequences, both in thought and in life.
7. The *objections* to it.

The student is invited to supply an eighth and last step: an imagined dialogue between its defenders and its critics or a comparison and logical analysis of the reasons for and against the idea. Suggestions for such essays are given in Appendix I; methods for organizing them are given in Appendix II.

One obvious format for each such essay is the following five-step analysis: (1) What is the question, issue, or problem, in your own words? (2) What is the philosopher's answer to it? (3) What is his basic reason for his answer? (4) Do you agree or disagree with his answer? (Or do you do both, by making a distinction somewhere?) (5) What are your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with his answer and with his premises or arguments? Remember that there are only three ways to disagree with an argument's conclusion: by finding (1) a term used ambiguously, (2) a false premise (either stated or implied but needed for the argument), or (3) a logical fallacy such that the conclusion does not necessarily follow even if all the premises are true.

Students need to remember these logical structures and principles while actually writing their essays. That point may seem obvious, but I find that even intelligent students find it difficult to resist the temptation to forget them in practice and to "go off on tangents" that they find interesting, or to merely "express their feelings" instead of giving reasons.

1

The Oldest Ethical Teacher

How do we begin? I think we should begin a book about ethics by looking at how we all did in fact begin to think ethically, both individually and collectively as a human race. Who taught us? It was not a human person, but it was the most important teacher of all. If this teacher did not exist, none of the other teachers could teach a single ethical truth.

Religious believers will identify this teacher as God, non-believers will not. But both will have to agree that this teacher is real, because if it is not, then ethics is not possible any more than mathematics is possible if there is no such thing as a calculable number; no more than physics is possible if there is no such thing as the universe (i.e., intelligibility in matter); no more than music is possible if there is no such reality as harmony in sound; no more than art is possible if there is no such reality as beauty.

All cultures in the history of the world, except one, have believed in the reality of this ethical teacher. Our present culture, modern Western civilization, is the first culture in history whose mind-molders, for the most part, no longer believe in its existence.

Different past and present cultures have different names for this ethical teacher, different philosophical explanations for it, and different religious or nonreligious accounts of it. For instance, for some (Western religions) it is the personal character and will of the Creator God. For others (Eastern religions) it is the impersonal law of *Karma*, the moral law of cause and effect or cosmic justice

(Hinduism, Buddhism). It assumes that objective reality is more than what our senses can see and our calculating minds can calculate, even when those senses and minds are vastly expanded by scientific instruments. It means that there is a moral law that is just as objectively real as physical laws. This law is called *Karma* (justice as fate) and *Ṛta* (cosmic order) and *Tao* (the way of nature, the nature of things) in the East, *Dīkē* (justice as order) and *Logos* (truth, wisdom, reason, word) in the West. It means that just as the physical universe has walls in it, so that when you throw a ball straight at a wall it bounces back to you straight, and when you throw a ball at an angle at a wall it bounces back at an angle, so the moral universe has a kind of moral wall in it, so that when you throw a good deed at it, it comes back to reward you with good, and when you throw an evil deed at it, it comes back to punish you with harm. There is no free lunch. No one ever really gets away with anything. "You reap whatever you sow" (Gal. 6:7).

This basic notion transcends the differences among religions, and even transcends the difference between religion and irreligion. For some, it is the personal *will* of God (e.g., Al-Ashʿari and mainline Islam). For some, it is the unchangeable *character* or *nature* of God (e.g., the mainline Christian, especially Catholic, "natural law" tradition). For some, it is a kind of divine nature without a divine face or name (e.g., Stoicism, Platonism). For some, it is just the inner structure of "practical (moral) reason" (Kant). And for some, it is just objective and unchangeable moral truth without a God as its foundation (atheists and agnostics like Albert Camus, Kai Nielsen, and Antony Flew before his conversion).

The ancient Greeks called this the Logos, the law of nature. The ancient Hindus called it the Ṛta. The ancient Chinese called it the Tao, "the Way."

Even though most of the philosophers of our modern Western culture are skeptical or relativistic or subjectivistic about this Logos-Ṛta-Tao, everyone without exception in all cultures, including our own—even those who deny its reality in their

philosophy—appeals to it in their use of moral language, in moral arguing. We do not merely fight like animals; we argue, we claim that we are ethically or morally right or wrong. We say things like, "Hey, get to the back of the line; I was here first," or, "How would you like it if someone called you that insulting name?" or, "That's not your suitcase; put it back!" We praise and blame, reward and punish, warn and counsel, admire and despise. And we do not act as if we thought this was mere personal feeling or private preference. We distinguish between two distinctions: the distinction between right and wrong and the distinction between convenient and inconvenient, or pleasure and pain. We do not argue about the latter, only the former. That's true of all of us, even those who are moral skeptics, relativists, or subjectivists who believe, in their philosophy, that ethics is just the rules of a game we invented, like baseball. No one feels *guilty* about changing the rules so both teams can go home after five innings instead of nine if they want to. But we do feel guilty when we cheat, rob, rape, or murder. Ethics is in fact a universal dimension of human life as life is actually lived, even when it is doubted or denied in philosophical thought. And it is a dimension that nearly everyone takes very seriously, as one of the most important dimensions of human life—in fact, usually even *the* most important one. Even if the robber feels no moral guilt in robbing, he feels a moral outrage in being robbed.

Why did I take so much time to make this simple point? Because that point, that fact, is what justifies my writing the rest of this book and your reading it.

Typically, modern philosophy (Hume, Kant, and most post-Kantian ethics) is skeptical of metaphysics and therefore grounds ethics in something else: desire (Hobbes), feeling (Rousseau), choice (Sartre), rational consistency (Kant), practicality (pragmatism), politics (Marx), or utility (Mill). Yet most of us still treat moral conscience as authoritative, even without any metaphysical foundation (God, Logos, Tao).

From a historical point of view, that is the single most momentous and important issue in ethics; and the most distinctive and unique feature of our contemporary civilization is that it no longer rests the house of ethics on that foundation.

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Four Teachers from the East

2

The Hindu Tradition: The Four Wants of Man

The oldest philosophical formulation of what is taught by this universal ethical teacher is probably Hinduism, whose roots likely go back at least five thousand years.

Hinduism is the only religion not identified with one founder. It is amazingly diverse; its four major "yogas" or "sacred tasks" (*jnana*, *bhakti*, *karma*, and *raja*) amount to four quite different religions. And so Hinduism has four ethical philosophies. But the common basis for them all is a psychology based on "the four wants of man."

For thousands of years, India has explored and mapped the details of the inner, spiritual world of the human psyche as doggedly as the West has explored the outer, material world of our planet and our universe. And India has concluded that universal human nature has four wants, or natural desires, which can be mapped in a series of concentric circles.

1. Most external and obvious is the desire for pleasure. (Freud never got further than this "pleasure principle.")
2. Then comes power (which is deeper because it includes the power over pleasure).

3. Then comes the desire to find fulfillment in more than one's own individual ego, resulting in altruism, duty, and social service.

   Yet even altruism is insufficient, for it amounts to the blind leading the blind. Giving away the mere toys of pleasure and power that we have renounced does not constitute true altruism. It lacks the wisdom that knows our true ultimate good. Until we find the real meaning of life, we cannot share it with others.
4. Finally, at the heart of the human heart, if we search honestly and passionately enough, we find the (usually unconscious) desire for *mukti* or *moksha*, which means "liberation" from limitations on the three things we want most deeply: *sat*, *chit*, and *ananda*, or unlimited life, understanding, and joy; being, wisdom, and bliss. We taste these three foods of the soul in tiny, finite amounts, like appetizers, and our hearts are restless until they rest in the main course.

But these are the attributes of *Brahman*, the supreme and infinitely perfect God. What we really want is to shed our finite egos and become God, or one with God, or to realize that we always were God, since God is not subject to time and change. We can become ourselves only when we cease to be merely ourselves and become what infinitely transcends us. We have to shed our very selves.

How can the self escape itself? What can be done about this impossible catch-22? What is the way? The way is experience. The way is to live all ways and to learn from them all.

Unlike Western ethics, Hindu ethics does not forbid indulgence in the lesser wants, either egotistic (the first two) or altruistic (the third). In fact, it encourages this, hoping that eventually (perhaps after many reincarnations—belief in reincarnation is at the root of Hindu patience) one will learn by experience that nothing less than *mukti* will satisfy.

And then comes the supreme realization or "enlightenment": that we all already have *sat*, *chit*, and *ananda*. In fact, in the depths of our *Atman* or common soul (which is like a single undersea continent manifesting itself as separate islands to our surface consciousness), we are already *Brahman*: *tat tvam asi*, "thou art that"; *Atman* is *Brahman*. So we already have what we most deeply want: the supreme good. Really, there *is* nothing but *Brahman*, nothing in addition to *Brahman*; *Brahman* is "the one without a second." We are "inside" of *Brahman*, not outside; we are not *Brahman*'s created children, but *Brahman*'s concepts or dreams; we are not spectators of the divine play, but actors *in* it.

This mystical theology is at the basis of Hinduism's ethics. For all of Hinduism—from the caste system to the four yogas, and from ritual to philosophy—is designed to purify our desires and thoughts and thus bring us to that point of enlightenment. That realization of "the beyond within" is the greatest good, the meaning of life, the whole point of human existence.

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