
Thinking About Ethics

In Chapter 1, I tried to establish that ethics is an important topic for technical communicators to think about. I argued, first, that technical communicators frequently face ethical dilemmas because of the nature of the profession and, second, that our thinking about ethical questions is often less clear than it might be.

To think about ethics, we first need to accept the premises that ethical insights are not necessarily intuitive, that they do not derive from divine intervention, and that they require a rigorous use of logical argumentation. Thinking about ethics requires that we examine our premises, that we test the logic of our arguments, and that we use evidence effectively.

In addition to these “technical” matters, we must be willing to approach debate with an open-minded spirit of inquiry. We must accept that other people of good faith will see things differently, and that the most challenging ethical dilemmas will probably remain unresolved despite our best intentions.

In this chapter, I outline basic principles necessary for productive thinking about ethics. The remaining chapters of this book, which will focus on the content of discussions about ethics, are based on the foundation laid in this chapter.

The basic principles presented in this chapter serve as rules of the road for thinking about ethics. This chapter addresses three topics:

- General principles of ethics, including the relationship between ethics and general morality, characteristics of rational thinking, and general principles of blameworthiness.
- Arguments against thinking about ethics, including such attitudes as subjectivism and relativism. After presenting each of these arguments, I offer counterarguments.
- Arguments against thinking about ethics in an organizational setting. Because most technical communication is carried out in an organizational context, arguments against thinking about ethics in organizations—arguments such as that the capitalist system is the best insurance against unethical actions or that our system of laws is a more appropriate framework than ethics—need to be confronted if our subject is ethics for technical communicators.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES ABOUT ETHICS

What is ethics? How does it differ from morality? What is the purpose of studying ethics? These are the questions I address first in this section. Next, I argue that the principal characteristic of thinking about ethics is that it is rational. I discuss two arguments often cited in opposition to this idea: that conscience is a sufficient guide and that religious values should take precedence over rational thinking about ethics. Finally, I describe a basic approach to the subject of blameworthiness. Because the most basic purpose of ethics is to provide guidance in determining conduct, it is necessary to establish right away the two conditions under which a person can be held ethically blameworthy for a wrong action. I also discuss the several excuses and mitigating factors that are crucial in assigning blame.

What Is Ethics, and Why Should We Study It?

In popular use, *ethics* and *morality* are synonyms. They both mean the study of right and wrong. For most philosophers, however, the terms are fairly distinct.

Morality refers to a society's set of beliefs and mores about appropriate conduct. In a particular society, for example, the bulk of the population might believe in a particular religious faith, such as Buddhism; might believe that it is the family's responsibility to care for its aged parents in its home; and might believe that polygamy is wrong. A person does not formulate his or her own morality; the morality of the society or culture already exists when that person is born, and that morality does not await the individual's approval or disapproval. And although it is true that a society's moral standards can be changed by the efforts of an individual, such change is neither common nor rapid.

Ethics, however, concerns the individual's thinking and conduct about matters of right and wrong. Whether a person thinks it permissible to lie under certain circumstances, whether it is the individual's responsibility to give money to charities, whether it is permissible for a company to mislead when advertising its products—these and many related kinds of questions relate to an individual's ethics. And, of course, what a person actually does—the actions the person takes or refrains from taking or chooses not to take—is fundamental in discussing that person's ethics.

What, then, is the relationship between morality and ethics? In most cases, people's ethics are derived to a greater or lesser degree from their society's morality, as it is transmitted by their parents and the society's institutions. In a society with a strong attachment to the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, many people's individual ethical codes will be based on the teachings of that church. Many individuals in that society—perhaps even most—might believe that abortion is always wrong. If asked why they think that, they might reply that they learned that from their church, or even that God said so.

Whereas a society's set of moral standards is likely to remain unchanged for decades or even centuries, an individual's ethical views are likely to change quite dramatically over a lifetime. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) articulated three basic stages of ethical development.

- *The preconventional stage.* Children exist in this first stage. Children are aware of the words *right* and *wrong*, but they see ethics as a matter of reward and punishment. Children believe that hitting another person is wrong because their parents say so and will punish them for doing it.
- *The conventional stage.* In this second stage, a person sees ethics in terms of group norms. Murder is wrong because it is illegal, or because the church says it is wrong. According to Kohlberg, most adolescents are in the conventional stage, and many people never progress beyond this stage.
- *The postconventional stage.* In this stage, which Kohlberg also called the *autonomous* or *principled* stage, people see right and wrong in broader terms. Murder is wrong not because it is illegal but because it deprives the victim of the most basic human right. A person in the postconventional stage examines the society's morality, approving of some of its implications and disapproving of others. Most people never reach the postconventional stage.

In general, a higher-stage ethical sense is likely to be superior to a lower-stage one, because in moving from one stage to the next, a person is moving away from a selfish perspective to a more selfless one. In addition, a person is adopting more sophisticated, abstract thinking. However, it is not always true that a particular person's higher-stage thinking is superior

to another person's lower-stage thinking. For example, a man in stage two who identifies with a hate group's morality would be considerably less advanced than he was as a child, when he was afraid to hurt people for fear of punishment. (For an overview of Kohlberg's ideas, as well as those of his critics, see Lickona [1976].)

This book is about third-stage ethical thinking, with particular application to technical communicators. However, it is necessary to answer a fundamental question at this point: What exactly is the purpose of thinking about ethics? There is no empirical evidence that doing so makes someone a better, more ethical person. If it is true that most people will never reach Kohlberg's third stage, anyone who does think critically about ethics is going to be swimming upstream anyway. In addition, isn't there the danger that the result will be negative, that an individual's third-stage thinking might be inferior to most people's second-stage thinking? These are serious questions.

The answers to them are simple. We should think seriously about ethics because doing so can have several important effects:

- *Studying ethics can help us think more clearly and more sensitively.* Although it is true that the world would be a much better place if everyone treated other people as they would like to be treated, and if everyone refrained from lying, real-world problems usually are so complicated that the platitudes offer no clear solution. For example, on the one hand, a motorcyclist should have the freedom to ride without a helmet. After all, it's the motorcyclist's own head. On the other hand, the state often finds itself assuming the costs of treatment, rehabilitation, and long-term financial support for people with severe head injuries. Only by thinking critically about the ethics of helmet laws can we hope to derive a reasonable, sensitive position on it.
- *Studying ethics enables us to explain our views articulately to others.* People in the working world are constantly having to make decisions about challenging ethical issues involving such questions as whether to move a plant overseas, whether to monitor employees' e-mail, and whether to offer benefits to same-sex partners. Deriving a position is one challenge; explaining it effectively to the affected parties—the stakeholders—is another challenge. Studying ethics helps a person frame the argument, for ethical thinking is reasoned thinking.
- *Studying ethics enables us to advance in our ethical thinking.* If we were all to stay at the conventional stage, we would never improve the quality of our society's morality. For example, racism and sexism still exist, in society at large and in the workplace, even though both forms of prejudice have, to a large extent, been outlawed. Today, a number of corporations permit employees to receive benefits for their unmarried partners or their same-sex partners, but most corporations do not. Will we look back

on this situation in a century the way we now look back on slavery? I don't know. However, the only reasonable way to approach the issue is by discussing it, and that requires that we think about it and present arguments.

Rational and Nonrational Thinking

The central distinguishing characteristic of thinking about ethics is that it is rational. That is, effective thinking about ethics involves making claims that are supported by clear, valid reasoning and appropriate evidence.

Ethicist Manuel Velasquez (1998) sees three important aspects of effective thinking about ethics:

- *The argument must be structured logically.* That is, the structure of the argument must be correct, with true premises and valid links from premises to conclusions. The argument must be free of logical fallacies, such as *non sequiturs* or hasty generalizations.
- *The evidence used in support of the claims must be accurate, relevant to the context, and comprehensive.* In making a claim, a person must use evidence that is factually accurate and relevant to the issue being discussed. In addition, the person must present as much evidence as possible. Of course, the person making a counterclaim must also offer accurate, relevant, and comprehensive evidence.
- *The ethical principles used in the argument must be applied consistently.* In one sense, *consistency* refers to noncontradictoriness. For instance, it would be contradictory to believe, at the same time, the following two ethical principles: that it is everyone's duty to help the poor and that all people have the right to do what they wish with their own property. In a second sense, *consistency* means that ethical principles have to be applied equally to all people. Suppose, for example, that two people perform the same job with the same level of competence, but that one of the two is rich and the other is poor but has many dependents. It would be inconsistent to pay the poor person more than the rich person, because the factor that distinguishes the two people—their needs—is irrelevant in determining salary.

The idea that thinking about ethics must be rational would seem simple enough, but two objections to this idea are voiced frequently:

- *Religious value systems supersede nonreligious value systems.* The question of the relative merits of rational inquiry and religious value systems is at least as old as the ancient Greeks. In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks Euthyphro to think about whether an act is right because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is right. Plato favors the second interpre-

tation, but not everyone then or now does. Without getting into the complexities of Plato's argument, I would say at this point that because some people do not believe in God at all, and because those who do believe in God do not always agree about what God wills, relying on the revelation of God as the independent source of wisdom about human affairs offers no certainty. To which holy book are we to turn in seeking to determine God's will? To which passage?

- *A person's conscience is an appropriate guide in ethical dilemmas.* However, if we believe that a person's conscience is a product of genetic inheritance and environment, the same two factors that influence a person's ability to get along in society, we ought to be skeptical that most people's consciences are alike or similarly well developed. Even if we believe that our consciences are not developed by genetic inheritance and environment but rather reflect God's commandments, a quick look at the daily newspaper suggests clearly that something can go very wrong between God's commandments and some people's actions.

Using rational argumentation in thinking about ethical problems does not ensure that we will derive logical and clear insights, and it does not ensure that we will derive insights with which everyone, or even most people, would agree. The mere fact that intelligent people of good will continue to hold very different views about numerous ethical questions attests to that. In the Western world, the history of significant disagreements is now two and a half millennia old and counting. But, as James Rachels (1985) comments, "The fact that rationality has limits does not subvert the objectivity of ethics, but it does suggest a certain modesty in what can be claimed for it" (p. 30).

Still, regardless of how much we might despair of our ability to untangle difficult ethical dilemmas using the tools of rational argumentation, we have yet to find a better alternative. Perhaps the surest way to demonstrate our collective reliance on rational argumentation is to talk with someone who believes that there is some other, better approach to resolving ethical dilemmas. If that person says, for example, that individual conscience is a better guide than rational argumentation, you can simply ask "Why?" If the person offers a reason, he or she has unwittingly demonstrated a belief in the value of rational thinking. If the person says "No reason; I just think that," it's probably best to stop the conversation there anyway.

Principles of Blameworthiness

In devising the ground rules of rational argumentation about ethics, philosophers have established general principles about the circumstances under which a person should or should not be held accountable for performing a wrong action or for failing to perform a right action. These principles are referred to as the *theory of blameworthiness*. Although the

word *blameworthiness* has an unusual or even slightly comical sound, the theory is critically important in discussing ethics. If, for example, a car goes out of control on a city street, injuring a pedestrian, because the driver had a heart attack, most people would say that the driver should not be blamed. However, if the driver knew he had a heart condition, his driver's license had been revoked, and he drove anyway, most people would say that he was to blame.

Ethicists have established several general principles to help sort through particular cases in which blameworthiness needs to be established. A person is to blame for a wrong action if he or she knowingly and freely performed it or brought it about (Velasquez, 1998). (In addition, a person is to blame for knowingly and freely failing to perform or prevent an action when failing to perform it or prevent it was wrong.) The key concepts here are *knowledge* and *freedom*.

If, for instance, the manufacturers of a drug do not know that the drug can have serious side effects—that is, if they lack the necessary knowledge—they are not to blame for these side effects. Many tobacco manufacturers have tried to avoid blame by arguing that they never knew that smoking is inherently dangerous. (Some tobacco manufacturers still deny that smoking is dangerous.) Similarly, a person or organization that lacks the freedom to prevent a wrong action is not to blame for it. For instance, if a computer manufacturer made a good-faith effort in its product documentation to explain to its customers why it is a bad idea to rest a drink on top of the computer case, it is not to blame if a customer spills a drink into the computer case and thereby damages the computer. Lack of knowledge and lack of ability are referred to as *excusing conditions*, for they excuse a person or organization from any ethical responsibility.

However, there are several situations in which ignorance or inability do not excuse a person or organization from blame. Obviously, if an officer in a company tells his staff not to alert him to any dangers involved in using the products the company makes, that officer is to blame for any resulting injuries. Similarly, if the officer fails to take reasonable measures to determine whether the product is dangerous, that officer is to blame. If a worker injures other workers by not paying attention while on the job, he is not excused from ethical responsibility, because it is a condition of his job that he pay attention.

The concept of blameworthiness is not black and white, however (Velasquez, 1998). There are four *mitigating* factors that decrease a person's or organization's blameworthiness:

- *Uncertainty.* If a person is uncertain whether an action is wrong because the facts are unclear or because the question of the relationship between the facts and the relevant ethical standard is unclear, that person's blameworthiness is mitigated. For instance, if a person works for a com-

pany that is submitting a bid on a project and unintentionally learns that the chief competitor's bid will be substantially higher, that person could tell management about the competitor's bid, and management could adjust its own bid upward to increase its own profit while still undercutting the competitor. Would doing so be wrong? The person in this situation might honestly be unsure how to answer this question.

- *Difficulty.* If doing the right thing is difficult, because the person is under some duress, the person's blameworthiness is mitigated. For example, a person might knowingly perform a wrong action, believing that if she fails to take that action she will be fired and thereby lose her medical benefits. If she is the sole support of several dependents who rely on her medical benefits, and one of the dependents requires constant medical care that she would be unable to afford without the benefits, her blameworthiness is mitigated.

- *Involvement.* If a person is part of a team that together performs a wrong action, that person's blameworthiness is mitigated. For instance, an engineer who fails to object to a plan to carry out a wrong action is thought by many ethicists to be less blameworthy than he would have been if he were the sole agent of this same wrong action. However, some ethicists do not agree with this position. Rather, they argue that an individual with a small role in an action has as much responsibility as the sole agent would, especially if that person's job explicitly requires taking responsibility for preventing harm. For instance, an engineer who does not take every possible step to prevent the construction of a bridge that he feels is potentially unsafe is fully blameworthy because as a Professional Engineer he took a pledge to prevent precisely this sort of unsafe situation.

- *Seriousness.* If the wrong that a person commits or permits is minor, that person is less blameworthy than if the wrong is major. Taking an action that leads to injury or death obviously is more blameworthy than taking an action that leads to a minor financial loss. The problem, of course, lies in determining whether a loss is major or minor.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST EXAMINING APPROACHES TO ETHICS

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do." "Who am I to impose my standards of right and wrong on others? Don't they have a right to their own opinions?" "If everyone just looked out for their own interests, we wouldn't have to worry about ethics." "*Right* and *wrong* are merely words we use to express approval and disapproval. They have no real meanings." These and similar statements—some centuries old, others quite modern—suggest arguments that it is meaningless, wrongheaded, or futile to think about ethics. None of these statements are absurd or trivial; all of them are

serious challenges. In this section, I present four such arguments, explaining the principal reasons that most philosophers have rejected them. Figure 2.1 lists the major arguments discussed in this section.

Figure 2.1
Four Arguments against Examining Ethics

Subjectivism	The belief that all statements about ethics are simply the speaker's opinion.
Emotivism	The belief that all statements about ethics are not really statements because they cannot be verified empirically and are not definitions.
Ethical egoism	The belief that people should act only in their own self-interest.
Ethical relativism	The belief that the morality of a culture is correct in that culture.

Subjectivism

Subjectivism is the belief that all statements about ethics merely reflect the speaker's opinion. Ethics is simply a matter of opinion, much like taste in food or movies. One person thinks abortion is always wrong; another person thinks that abortion is not always wrong. One person likes vanilla ice cream; another prefers chocolate.

In fact, ethical questions are like matters of opinion in one way: neither can be resolved to everyone's resolution the way that a triangle can be proven to be or not be a right triangle. Chocolate ice cream cannot be "proven" to be better than vanilla, and the pro-choice position cannot be "proven" to be better than the pro-life position.

However, the fact that matters of taste and questions of ethics cannot be resolved objectively does not mean that the two are similarly important and that therefore we should not attempt to think about ethical matters. Statements about ethical matters—statements such as "Industrial espionage is acceptable"—are not like statements about matters of taste, because whereas it makes no difference whether one person prefers vanilla ice cream to chocolate, it can make a great deal of difference whether one person thinks industrial espionage acceptable or unacceptable. If a person thinks that industrial espionage is acceptable, he or she might carry out industrial espionage on the job or might work to influence legislation that encourages industrial espionage. Subjectivism is incorrect because ethical questions matter.

Emotivism

Emotivism is a variation on subjectivism. Whereas subjectivism holds that statements about ethics are merely matters of opinion, emotivism

holds that statements about ethics are not really statements at all. Statements about ethics are in fact imperatives in disguise. A speaker who says "Abortion is wrong" is really urging us to disapprove of abortion, as he or she does.

Although emotivism can be traced back to the 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, its chief proponent was A. J. Ayer, whose book *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) created a firestorm in the philosophical community. Ayer argued nothing less than that there is no field such as ethics, because ethical statements are literally meaningless. Ayer proposed the *verification principle*, by which a statement is to be considered meaningful under either of only two conditions: (a) The statement can be proven or disproven by means of sense data. Thus, the statement "The speed of light is 186,000 miles per hour" is a meaningful statement, as is "The speed of light is 186 miles per hour" or (b) The statement is a definition ("A bachelor is an unmarried man"). However, a statement such as "Pleasure is the only good" is literally meaningless, for it contains no information. It merely reflects the speaker's desire to experience pleasure and to urge others to do so as well.

Our experience as humans tells us that emotivism cannot be true. It is simply not the case that the only kind of meaningful statements are definitions and empirically verifiable statements. Certainly, a person who says "People from other countries are not as good as people from my country" may well be urging us to mistreat people from other countries, as emotivism holds. But that person is also making a claim about reality, and in doing so can be held responsible for the quality of that claim. In this case, the quality is low; that is, nothing in the speaker's statement provides good reasons for agreeing that people from other countries are not as good as people from the speaker's country. In other words, the statement is not a reasoned argument. The speaker has not provided good reasons for us to agree with the statement. This is the point at which emotivism breaks down, for by definition an emotivist cannot distinguish "good reasons" from "bad reasons," because the words *good* and *bad* have no meaning, for they are neither verifiable by sense data nor definitions.

Again, as is the case with subjectivism, an emotivist literally cannot make a rational argument that emotivism is valid. The best an emotivist can do is express the emotion "Hooray for emotivism!"

Egoism

There are two very different forms of egoism: *psychological egoism* and *ethical egoism*. When discussing ethics, people sometimes rely on psychological egoism, sometimes on ethical egoism. To understand the challenge of egoism, it is necessary to discuss each variety separately.

Psychological egoism is a descriptive theory, not a normative ethical theory. That is, psychological egoism is an attempt to describe how people act. Psychological egoism holds that people act only in what they perceive to be their own self-interest. People are just selfish. Most obviously, people spend money on their own pleasures rather than giving their money to help others. But even when a person appears to be acting altruistically—when, for example, he risks his life to save a stranger in a burning building—he is really doing an act that gives him pleasure. He was looking for publicity or a reward, or he did it because he couldn't live with himself if he hadn't taken the action. Either way, according to psychological egoism, he is doing what he wanted to do.

Even when a person does something that is not in her best interest—when, for example, she persists in smoking cigarettes when she knows doing so is dangerous—she is still acting according to psychological egoism because she is acting according to her *perceived* self-interest. She may be wrong about her real self-interest, but psychological egoism doesn't say that everyone acts wisely, just that everyone acts only in his or her own perceived self-interest.

If psychological egoism is an accurate description of how people live, the study of ethics is irrelevant, for there is no reason to offer theories of appropriate conduct if everyone is wired to act selfishly. But is psychological egoism accurate?

The clearest rejoinder to it is by James Rachels (1986). If I help others, at some cost to myself, that action is precisely the definition of unselfishness. The fact that I want to do it does not mean that the only reason I want to do it is to please myself. I also want to help others, or I would not have done it. The problem with psychological egoism is that it reduces a complex of motivations to a single motivation. The result is that any voluntary action is deemed selfish because the person willed it.

By contrast with psychological egoism, *ethical egoism* is a normative ethical theory. That is, it is a prescriptive statement: people should act only in their own self-interest. We have no obligation to act in others' interests. If doing so works to our own advantage, the act is justified; if doing so does not act to our advantage, it is not justified. Three arguments are commonly presented to justify ethical egoism:

- *Helping others is ineffective or inefficient.* Only the individual knows his or her own best interest; therefore, any attempt I might make to help you is bound to fail or at least be ineffective. The argument "Let's stop giving each other Christmas presents; we only buy the wrong things anyway" fails. While it is true that you probably don't know exactly what kind of clothing a poor family needs when winter is approaching, there are plenty of agencies to which you could contribute money that would in fact find out exactly what that family most needs.

- *Helping others is offensive.* It undermines their dignity. In some cases, yes, but in other cases, no. It would be difficult to argue that providing food relief to starving people is an affront to their dignity. What could affirm their dignity more than to help them stay alive?
- *Acting selfishly facilitates cooperative relationships in society.* Society relies on each person's acting in his or her own self-interest. The merchant who treats his customers fairly is merely an ethical egoist; his motivation is to gain the reputation for fair dealing and thereby increase his business. But ethical egoism wouldn't explain why the merchant treats *all* customers fairly. If, for example, the merchant knows that he can take advantage of a particular customer who will never realize he has been cheated, ethical egoism calls for the merchant to do so. He could become the cab driver who charges the unwitting Japanese tourist \$1,400 for the half-hour ride into Manhattan from the airport. Admittedly, there are some cab drivers who do so, but many more do not, and not merely because they are afraid they will be caught. Some people feel that you should do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay because it's the right thing to do, not because altering the time clock could get them fired.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to reject ethical egoism is that other people have the same rights that we do. While it would be unrealistic to expect that most people will heed the dictates of their religion and treat others like themselves, we *should* do so. We should advance the interests of others, not over our own interests, but *in addition* to our own interests, because others are people too. Chapter 3 in this book examines Immanuel Kant's arguments for this position.

Relativism

Perhaps the most popular objection to the study of ethics is represented by relativism. As is the case with egoism, there are two forms of relativism: *cultural relativism* and *ethical relativism*.

Cultural relativism, a descriptive theory, states that different cultures have different moral codes. In one culture, infanticide is permissible; in another, it is not. In one culture, polygamy is permitted; in another, it is not. Cultural relativism came of age in the early decades of the 20th century, when sociologists and cultural anthropologists explored indigenous cultures around the world, cataloging and describing the practices that differed so much from those of developed Western cultures.

By contrast, *ethical relativism* is a normative ethical theory. It holds that the morality of a particular culture is in fact correct in that culture. Therefore, infanticide is moral in a culture that approves of it but immoral in a culture that doesn't. The implication of ethical relativism is that there is no

such thing as ethical universalism; no practice is in fact immoral in all cases, apart from its context. According to ethical relativism, it makes no sense to say, for instance, that abortion is wrong, whereas it does make sense to say that abortion is wrong in a country in which it is outlawed.

The implications of ethical relativism for technical communicators are profound. For instance, ethical relativism would support the contention that a practice is correct in one organization because that is the way the organization operates. If the organization believes that presenting inaccurate information in product documentation is permissible under all circumstances, an employee would have no justification for questioning the practice.

Ethical relativism has far broader implications than this example suggests. Business ethicists have debated for decades the complex problems faced by multinational corporations. When an organization based, say, in Germany operates a facility in Nigeria, should the moral principles of the home nation or the host nation apply? Or should the organization follow whatever principles generate the greatest profit? Whatever principles seem to be the most ethical? Whatever principles current management wishes to follow? The issues can have far-reaching effects involving such factors as environmental pollution, worker safety, and the general living standards of workers. In addition, issues of fairness are involved, because the major reason most corporations operate facilities in host countries is to take advantage of significantly lower wages in the host country. The issue of ethical relativism and multinational corporations is large and complex; I treat it in detail in Chapter 10.

In responding to the challenge of relativism, philosophers generally accept the validity of cultural relativism but deny that cultural relativism in any way entails ethical relativism.

In accepting the validity of cultural relativism, philosophers generally point out that the wide variety of practices seen in different cultures around the world often says more about the demands of living in the particular cultures than it does about differing views about morality. The Eskimo practice of abandoning old people to death by exposure is a commonly cited example. Although the typical person from a developed Western culture recoils in horror at what seems like a cruel and immoral practice, an anthropologist would explain the practice as a rational response to the harsh conditions of Eskimo life: the Eskimos do not have enough food to support their elderly after their productive years are over. Therefore, the elderly are sacrificed so that the unproductive young can survive. From this perspective, the Eskimo practice reflects local customs that have developed in response to the particular needs of that culture; the practice does not represent disregard for the elderly. From this perspective, philosophers argue that the differences in cultures across the globe reflect differing mores rather than differing moralities. All cultures that have been documented

share a set of core values that include telling the truth and forbidding the murder of other members of the culture.

Even apart from this point about how cultural differences do not necessarily represent essential differences in morality, most philosophers reject the idea that cultural relativism entails ethical relativism. This rejection focuses on two major points:

- *It can be impossible to determine what a culture believes.* Although it might be fairly easy to list the core beliefs held by the members of a particular small tribe living in isolation in Borneo, it is considerably more difficult to make sweeping statements about large, pluralistic societies. For instance, do people in the United States approve of abortion? Well, perhaps under some conditions, if the polls are to be believed, but not under all conditions. If it is impossible to determine whether a culture approves, say, of late-term abortions when the mother's health is at risk, it would therefore be impossible to say whether such abortions are right or wrong.

- *Cultural relativism does not logically entail ethical relativism.* Even if every person in one culture thinks infanticide is right and every person in another culture thinks infanticide is wrong, there are other options than to conclude that both cultures are right: only one culture could be right, or neither culture could be right. In other words, the fact that one culture believes that infanticide is right says only that this culture believes that infanticide is right. It doesn't show that the culture's belief is reasonable.

Although ethical relativism is attractive in that it rejects ethical imperialism, it can lead to some paradoxical conclusions. For one thing, ethical relativism involves a logical inconsistency. Ethical relativism is based on the premise that a culture's beliefs are binding on only those people in that culture. But as soon as someone has a belief about what is appropriate behavior for people *outside* their own culture, ethical relativism breaks down. For example, fundamentalist Muslims believe it is unacceptable for anyone in any culture to blaspheme. Is it therefore the case that it is unacceptable for anyone in any culture to blaspheme? Or is it acceptable for an atheist in New Jersey to blaspheme, if the atheist's own culture permits blasphemy? Or is the atheist bound by the beliefs of the fundamentalist Moslem in Tunisia?

Ethical relativism is also vulnerable to two other logical paradoxes. First, the same practice could be right in one context and wrong in another. For instance, an ethical relativist would have to admit that slavery was ethical in, say, Mississippi in 1859 but unethical in Mississippi today. But why would slavery today be any more abhorrent than it was then? Second, the ethical relativist would have to admit that he should not try to change other people's beliefs about a practice—either people in another culture or peo-

ple in his own culture—because whatever a culture believes is by definition right. There could be no evolution in a culture's thinking because whatever is right. But, obviously, ethical positions do change. If ethical relativism is valid, the only explanation for this change would be spontaneous ethical mutation.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST EXAMINING ETHICS IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS

Several of the arguments against examining ethics in organizations are clearly derived from the more general arguments against examining ethics in any context, those arguments presented in the previous section. For instance, the argument that business is a game that is played according to its own rules is really a specific instance of ethical relativism. Other arguments presented in this section relate more to the specific context of business itself, and how that context relates to human nature. For instance, the argument that ethics is best served by pure capitalism derives from the utilitarian argument that people are the best judges of what they like, and capitalism is the best system for satisfying those desires.

Regardless of the pedigree of the four ideas discussed here, it is necessary to confront them directly before beginning a more detailed look at individual approaches to ethics.

“Ethical” Really Means “Legal”

One argument against studying ethics in organizational life is that the legal system is a better framework for codifying matters of conduct. If a practice is legal, it's ethical. This position is attractive in that the law is rooted in the real world and ensures a level playing field: your company and my company both have to abide by the same laws, despite any differences we might have in our views of ethics. Indeed, in most cultures, law and morality are closely related; the law reflects, to a greater or lesser degree, that culture's morality. The law spells out what practices are permitted and not permitted, and what penalties are to be imposed on a person who violates the law.

However, there are three major problems with this approach:

- *The law is not the same thing as morality, and some laws are immoral.* In addition to such obvious examples from the past as laws permitting slavery or discrimination against people of certain ethnicity or religious beliefs, the case could be made that some current practices are legal but immoral. For example, many thoughtful people feel that “employment at will”—the practice that enables employers to fire workers at will, without having to show cause—is wrong. It is also perfectly legal to sell an

expensive life-insurance policy to an elderly person who has no dependents, but most people would consider the practice unethical.

- *Latent conflict from place to place.* Given the size and growth rate of the global economy, it would seem logical to ask, “Whose law?”
- *The law is very slow.* Many aspects of intellectual-property law, for example, do not reflect the complexity of current technologies, especially regarding digital information on the Internet. Years or perhaps decades will pass before law catches up with our culture’s evolving ideas about the ethics of using and distributing digital information.

For these reasons, most ethicists believe it is not satisfactory to use law as a substitute for ethics in organizational settings.

Ethics Is Best Served by Pure Capitalism

This argument is a form of ethical egoism that dates back to Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776): capitalism is the best system for bringing about an ethical society because it ensures that companies produce what the public wants, and do so in the most efficient manner possible. To the extent that companies strive for profits without the distraction of ethical questions, then, the greater will be the benefit to society. Smith’s famous phrase for this effect is “the invisible hand” of capitalism.

Some of the problems associated with this viewpoint are spelled out by Velasquez (1998):

- It assumes that markets are perfectly competitive, but this is never the case. Is the business software market perfectly competitive, or does one company pursue monopolistic practices?
- It assumes that all efficiencies benefit the public, but such practices as deceptive advertising, bribery, and price fixing do not.
- It assumes that all people are members of the buying public, but this not the case. Many people do not participate in the market economy.
- It assumes an underlying premise—that people should work to benefit those people who participate in markets—without proving it. A different premise—that people should work to benefit all people—might be more ethical.

An Employee Is Merely an Agent of the Principal

This viewpoint holds that it is the role of an employee to set aside his or her private ethical beliefs and serve the interests of the employer. The most famous statement of this viewpoint is Milton Friedman’s 1970 essay, “The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits” (1996).

Friedman argues that the employee is an agent of the employer and therefore is obliged to work toward fulfilling the employer’s aims, restricted only by the dictates of law and general ethical custom. If the agent works to advance his or her own aims, such as by offering higher wages than the market requires or by reducing pollution more than the law requires, he or she is in effect imposing an unfair tax on the organization’s owners and employees, as well as on the consumers of the organization’s products or services. Only elected civil servants have this taxation privilege. A person who wishes to run his or her own business of course has the right to pursue any business strategy, including one that allows for “social responsibility,” as do people who work in such not-for-profit institutions as hospitals or schools. However, the business of a business is to make money for its owners.

Does an agent retain no ethical rights? If an employer demands that an agent perform an action that is legal but that the agent thinks is unethical, is the agent ethically obliged to do so? This question is not easy to answer. There simply is no rule that states what may be demanded of an employee, just as there is no rule outlining the options of an employee who is forced to carry out an action that he or she considers unethical. The courts frequently hear cases in which an employer demands that a worker carry out an act but the worker refuses; the employer argues that the organization is fully justified in making the demand, and the worker argues that the demand is unreasonable. The fact that such cases are not resolved within the organization, and that sometimes the organization wins the court case and sometimes the worker wins, suggests that there is no general answer to the question about precisely which rights a worker retains when employed as an agent.

One common rejoinder to Friedman’s perspective on agency is the stakeholder theory, articulated by Evan and Freeman (1993). Corporations do not exist solely to benefit the owners, they argue. Rather, corporations have six stakeholders: owners, management, employees, suppliers, customers, and the local community. Each stakeholder bears certain responsibilities and enjoys certain rights. The purpose of the corporation is to benefit all the stakeholders, not just the owners. Evan and Freeman call their approach Kantian, in that an employee is not merely an agent of the employer, but rather a stakeholder who retains all rights of autonomy by virtue of being human. This principle is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 in this book.

Business Is a Game with Its Own Rules

Finally, some argue that business is a game with its own rules, and that so long as all participants understand and abide by those rules, nobody is

victimized. This viewpoint is articulated most forcefully by Albert Carr, in his 1968 essay, "Is Business Bluffing Ethical?" (1993).

Carr's (1993) argument is that business is more like poker than it is like religion. In poker, we don't expect players to tell the truth; we expect them to bluff and mislead. That is how the game is played. Therefore, the main argument that business bluffing is unethical—that it is unethical because it deprives people of accurate information on which to make informed choices—is irrelevant. When you go to buy a used car from a dealer, you expect him to try to mislead you about the condition of the car. Although some forms of deception, such as turning back the odometer, are illegal, many others are permitted. And since you know that the dealer will try to mislead you by bluffing, you bluff, too. The one who bluffs better wins in the transaction.

That business bluffing is common is not contested, and Cramton and Dees (1996) are probably correct in remarking that even the most compelling argument that honesty and trust are superior to dishonesty and distrust in business practices is unlikely to be effective. Business bluffing is of course common, but to argue from that fact that business bluffing is ethical because everyone knows that it occurs is simply a *non sequitur*. If people were able to choose whether to be treated honestly or dishonestly when they entered into a business negotiation of some sort, few would choose to be treated dishonestly. This fact is just one obvious rationale for concluding that business bluffing is unethical. Other points—such as that bluffing raises the costs of business transactions, that it hurts the most vulnerable people, and that it drives some people out of the market altogether—also support the same conclusion.

Therefore, it makes sense to work toward practical measures to reduce the prevalence of business bluffing, as Cramton and Dees (1996) argue in their essay on negotiating, rather than argue that the prevalence of business bluffing justifies the practice.

The following chapters in Part I discuss some of the major approaches to ethics that have dominated Western thought. Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of rights, as articulated by perhaps the most influential ethicist in the Western tradition, Immanuel Kant. Although Kant's ideas on rights have been criticized and amended frequently over the last two centuries, they form a permanent contribution to the field.

3

Rights

In the essay "On the Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) presents the hypothetical Case of the Inquiring Murderer: you are approached by a man who claims that a murderer is looking for him. The man runs away; you see him go into his house. A few moments later, the murderer comes up to you and inquires whether you have seen the man. Should you tell the murderer where the man went? Kant argues that you should, because you should never tell a lie. Perhaps the intended victim has slipped out of his house, Kant argues, and the murderer will not find him. Or perhaps the murderer will be apprehended by neighbors and thus be prevented from killing the man. But if you were to lie and say that the man is not at home, the murderer might come upon him somewhere outside his house and kill him. Therefore, it is your duty to tell the truth, regardless of the circumstances.

It is hard to accept that the author of "On the Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives" is arguably the most influential thinker in the tradition of Western ethics, despite his atrocious reasoning about the absolute duty to tell the truth under all circumstances. In his major work on ethics, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant codified a basic principle of ethics: that ethical laws are universalizable; that is, they apply to everyone, including oneself. In addition, he systematized the ancient commonsense