Learning Objectives:
- To understand the centrality of moral virtue to understanding the ethics of Aristotle.
- To appreciate the hierarchy of goods and the difference between real and apparent goods.
- To recognize the distinctions among virtue ethics, stoicism, and hedonism.
- To increase understanding of the linkage between the moral virtues in pursuing real goods.
- To develop skills in applying moral virtues and real goods in evaluating ethical dilemmas.

Virtue Ethics
Seeking the Good

It is possible to fail in many ways . . . while to succeed is possible only in one way.

—Aristotle (384–322 B.C.)

Virtue is one of the most revered words in all language. It is associated with character, good judgment, and ethical decision making. Moral virtue can be defined as “the habit of right desire” or the disposition to make right choices.¹ The right path to follow in seeking virtue has been the source of much debate over the centuries, and the leading proponents of virtue ethics and their ideas are presented in this chapter.
Chapter 2 • Virtue Ethics

THE ROLES OF SOCRATES AND PLATO

The beginnings of virtue ethics can be traced to Aristotle’s distinguished predecessors, Socrates and Plato. Socrates (470–399 B.C.) lived in Athens and essentially wandered the streets, engaging people in conversations about the meaning of life, knowledge, and virtue. He intellectually challenged those who followed him by constantly asking questions in a way that forced them to come to conclusions on their own. Socrates is the source of the saying, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates’ method of teaching, often questioning widely held but incorrect beliefs in an exchange with his students, was known as the dialectic method. This use of questions and answers to arrive at truth was later termed the Socratic method, in honor of Socrates’ skill as a teacher. Socrates saw knowledge (wisdom) and virtue as synonymous. He believed that a person who knows what is right will act rightly. Aristotle modified this view, as is explained later in this chapter, claiming that intellectual virtue and moral virtue are distinct attributes. Socrates’ impact on both thinking about ethics and his method of teaching was enormous. It is difficult to find a later thinker who was not influenced by Socrates in some way. He remains one of the most significant of all historical figures.

Socrates did not write his thoughts on paper, but his most famous student, Plato, did. Plato (428–348 B.C.) became a student of Socrates at age 20 and was disillusioned with the corruption in Greek politics, highlighted when his mentor Socrates was put to death in 399 B.C. by the government. Plato founded the Academy in Athens, where he taught and wrote on many subjects, organizing and adding to the ideas of Socrates. His work was influential and remains so, and his book The Republic sets forth his views on ethics, describing a plan for an ideal city where few laws are needed because of the highly developed moral character of its inhabitants. Plato’s statement, “If you want justice, you must be moral,” identified what he saw as the connection between individual moral conduct and the ideal society.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) enrolled in Plato’s Academy at age 17 and was a lifelong student of Plato, later forming his own school, the Lyceum, after Plato’s death. Aristotle wrote more than 400 works while at the Lyceum on a broad array of subjects, including astronomy, biology, logic, politics, physics, and ethics. The breadth of his knowledge was remarkable. Considered by some to be the most intelligent person who ever lived, Aristotle studied, taught, and wrote about every subject that was known during his time. In the Nicomachean Ethics, he provided the first systematic study of ethics in the history of the Western world.

When Alexander the Great died in 322 B.C., his empire was challenged, and anyone who had been friendly with him was threatened. Aristotle, a close friend, was indicted for treason for his teachings. Faced with a choice between trial (and certain execution) or exile, Aristotle chose to flee. He left Athens, recalling the death of Socrates 76 years earlier, saying he was not going to give Athens a chance to “sin twice against philosophy.” Aristotle died shortly thereafter in 322 B.C. at the age of 62. The worldwide influence of his work continues today.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS OF ARISTOTLE

Virtue ethics are most closely associated with Aristotle whose approach to ethics asks, “How ought people live their lives?” His book is titled the Nicomachean Ethics, and it can be difficult reading.

The book gets its name from Nicomachus, Aristotle’s son. It is unlikely that Aristotle intended the book to appear in its present form. Most of Aristotle’s works had been lost since his time. The book was probably put together from the notes of his students, and Nicomachus...
probably didn’t want to leave anything out. (One can imagine what a modern textbook would read like if it was composed from the notes taken by the students in the class!)

Aristotle believed that discussion of ethics is wasted on the young. The young lack experience in actions, and they tend to follow their passions and follow action rather than knowledge in making decisions. Therefore, life experiences in taking actions and making decisions are important to learn ethics effectively. Reflections about one’s past and future actions, and the motivations for them, are central to understanding and incorporating ethics in a person’s life.

A HIERARCHY OF GOODS

Aristotle sees all human activities aimed at some good, but some goods are subordinate to others. For example, work is good, but work toward helping the sick or destitute, versus work toward making yourself rich, seems to have more value. Therefore, there is a hierarchy of goods. In attempting to define true goods, Aristotle finds that good and pleasure are often confused.

To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment.5

According to Aristotle, those living the political life seek happiness through honor, which he believes is superficial, depending more on those bestowing the happiness than the person who is receiving it. Others seek happiness through money making, but money is merely useful for the sake of something else. And money cannot buy anything that guarantees happiness. Pleasure is often selfish because it involves only you, whereas things that bring true happiness usually involve others as well.

This leads Aristotle to ask whether there are things that are good in themselves (as opposed to things that are simply useful). He finds that those things that are pursued for their own sake (rather than for something else) are good in themselves. These “real goods” include food, shelter, and health (all bodily goods); wealth (enough to live decently), pleasure, and knowledge (all goods needed for livelihood); and liberty, friends/loved ones, and civil peace (all social goods). Real goods are things we ought to desire regardless of whether we really do. According to Aristotle, real goods should be the focus of all ethical action. They are presented in Table 2.1.

There also exist apparent goods, which are pursued by many people; some are innocuous and some are noxious. Innocuous apparent goods might be love of sweets, good music, and fine wine. These remain innocuous only if they are pursued in moderation and do not interfere in the pursuit of real goods. Noxious apparent goods are those that involve treating real or apparent goods as ends in themselves and usually involve pleasure, wealth, fame, or power. Wealth is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bodily Goods</th>
<th>Goods Needed for Livelihood</th>
<th>Social Goods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Wealth (above subsistence level)</td>
<td>Liberty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>Pleasure</td>
<td>Friends/loved ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Knowledge (understanding/wisdom)</td>
<td>Civil peace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
needed only to exist decently above the subsistence level, and fame and power are not needed at all; in fact, fame and power often lead to self-indulgence and other behaviors that violate the moral virtues discussed later.

THE ULTIMATE GOOD

The ultimate good is happiness, according to Aristotle. All the other real goods we pursue are for the sake of happiness (or eudaimonia), which is the life that is most desirable (i.e., much more than contentment or joy commonly associated with the term happiness). We choose happiness not for anything other than itself. Aristotle believed further that happiness is the final good, the ultimate end of all desire achieved at the end of a complete life. Therefore, happiness cannot be experienced at a given moment; it can be achieved only through virtuous action (not thought alone).

Although virtuous action is required to achieve ethical happiness, some degree of good fortune is also required. External goods are required to achieve happiness. Being born into slavery or another oppressive condition can limit the opportunities to achieve happiness, as would friends lost by death. So both moral virtue and good fortune are operative means to happiness.

A complete life is needed to achieve happiness because many changes occur in life; there are ups and downs; “one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.” Aristotle recognized that all people face misfortune during their lives, but a happy person can never become miserable. “For the man who is truly good and wise bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command, and a good shoemaker makes the best shoes out of the hides that are given him.” So misfortune is a hindrance but not a permanent obstacle to real goods and ethical happiness.

STOICISM AND HEDONISM

There were two other approaches to virtue that emerged around this same historical period: stoicism and hedonism. Neither of these has endured in the same way that Aristotle’s ethics have, but they are important to understand.

Stoicism was a philosophy of serenity, tranquility, and impassiveness to suffering. Epictetus (ca. 50–138) was the leading stoic. Similar to Socrates, he lectured rather than wrote, maintaining that inner peace is the ultimate virtue in the face of the difficulties faced in life. In his words, “Externals are not in my power, choice is.” Epictetus spoke of virtue and of courage, but in a different way than Socrates and Aristotle, emphasizing that life’s events are to be accepted through self-control, abstinence, and submission to the will of God. Christianity was born during this period, and stoicism was incorporated into Christian religious thought. Calm acceptance of events beyond one’s control had great appeal because this was seen as a way to submit to the will of God.

Hedonism views pleasure as the ultimate virtue. A leading hedonist, Epicurus (341–270 B.C.), believed prudence and tranquility were the most important pleasures because these virtues helped people avoid pleasures that might hurt them. Epicurus also stressed measured pleasures, such as friendship, peace, and contentment, rather than fleeting sensual pleasures. Egoistic hedonism, however, sees pleasure as physical gratification of the senses. This is the common image the term suggests today. According to egoistic hedonism, immediate pleasure is good in itself; acts that do not bring pleasure are immoral. This view ultimately contradicts experience,
However, because things we desire may not be healthful or may hurt others, such as rich foods or seeking wanton sexual pleasure. Like the stoics and the hedonists, Aristotle’s theory of moral virtue recognizes the importance of pleasure, courage, and temperament, but he places them in the context of all other goods and virtues and how they must be balanced for ethical conduct to result. Aristotle’s more evenhanded approach is one of the reasons why it became the most prominent theory of moral virtue.

**MORAL VIRTUE**

Moral virtue is excellence of character. It suggests more than the specific moral connotation the term has today. It refers to a quality in a person who seeks real goods in a morally correct manner. Aristotle identified two types of virtue: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtue consists of learning or all the creative activities of the intellect that help us achieve our potential. Moral virtue develops as a result of habit (by exercising them); it does not occur naturally. Aristotle uses the example of the lyre (harp) player who becomes proficient only through continuous playing and practice: “So too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” Of course, if moral virtue was innate, the discussion of ethics would be irrelevant because people would be born either good or bad, and that would be the end of it. There would be nothing gained from activity, study, practice, or habit. Because moral virtue must be learned through practice, teaching, exposure, support, and good habits are very important to ethical conduct.

Virtue ethics are sometimes seen as frustrating because Aristotle does not provide a precise formula for how to act in specific situations. Instead, he prescribes real goods to be sought and moral virtues to guide the quest, but individuals must find their own way in applying them in particular circumstances. As Aristotle observed, good conduct cannot be prescribed any more than the conduct required for good health. Avoiding defect or excess is an important guide, as are general principles, but there is no formula to track every possible ethical dilemma (or good or bad food) that might arise in the course of a lifetime.

Judging moral virtue can be difficult. Some people can be “two faced”; they may appear to engage in virtuous conduct but they are not really virtuous people. For example, a man might engage in an overt act of generosity (perhaps by giving a large charitable donation) to appear virtuous, but he really does it to impress a woman or to gain some kind of advantage. How is one to distinguish a virtuous act from a truly virtuous person? Isolated acts can be misleading unless they proceed from excellence in character, and excellence in character must be developed over time by doing virtuous acts. In the words of Aristotle, “It is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good.”

---

**ETHICS CHECKUP**

**ATM Trouble**

In a survey, people were asked what they would do if the automatic teller machine (ATM) gave them $200 too much during a transaction. Fifty percent of those responding would keep the money. Occasional news reports of faulty ATMs suggest that many more people than that take advantage of overpayments. On what principle(s) would you make your decision, if you received such an overpayment?
ACHIEVING MORAL VIRTUE

Aristotle provides specific ideas regarding the methods to achieve moral virtue. Virtue is a kind of mean, or average, that aims at the intermediate. For example, it is good to be truthful, but a person might revel in telling everyone he or she sees about each occasion in which he or she told the truth or perhaps refuse to tell a small child about the Easter Bunny because he or she believes it to be a lie. It is clear that truthfulness can be taken to an extreme. Likewise, a person might be congratulated on winning the Nobel Prize and say, “Oh, it was nothing.” Clearly, this is a gross understatement. Therefore, the intermediate, or mean, is a truthful person who is not boastful (excess) and not prone to understatement (deficiency). Moral virtue is a mean between two vices involving excess on the one hand and deficiency on the other.

As noted earlier, there are also “apparent” goods, which are things that appear good to certain people but are not. Celebrity, popularity, and influence are common examples of apparent goods that are often desired but do not constitute real or needed goods. In addition, there are some things that are bad in themselves (such as larceny and murder) that are always wrong. There is no “intermediate” to be sought in these things because these acts are always wrong under all circumstances. Given these constraints, Aristotle recognizes, “It is no easy task to be good… to find the middle… anyone can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.” So given this broad outline of virtuous conduct, it is clear that, except in cases of acts bad in themselves, virtue seeks the mean, based on the facts of the situation. Seeking the mean is a principle found also in Eastern philosophies, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, which contend that the life of virtue and inner tranquility comes from seeking the middle, or noble, path.

Moral virtue implies that our actions are voluntary and the products of choice. If our actions were not products of free choice, people would contribute nothing; it would be as if the wind simply pushed them in one direction or another. Children and those who are mentally ill also engage in voluntary action, but not in choice, because they cannot be expected to understand the consequences of their actions. The actions of lower animals are guided by instinct rather than conscious choice, so moral virtue is a unique goal to adult humans who have the power to make choices and engage in activities that pursue real goods or apparent goods. In Aristotle’s day, for example, the penalties for crimes committed while drunk were doubled because of the underlying principle that individuals have the volition to choose whether to drink. Likewise, people are punished who violate laws because of ignorance when they should have known of the law’s existence, so ignorance is not an excuse. As Aristotle says, “We assume that it is in their power not to be ignorant.” Nevertheless, some people lead “slack” lives as a result of ignorance or self-indulgence, but that does excuse them from the moral obligation to act virtuously. The moral virtues constitute a short list. They are summarized in Table 2.2.

Aristotle described ten moral virtues: courage, temperance, prudence, justice, pride, ambition, having a good temper, being a good friend, truthfulness, and wittness. These are the ten traits that people are morally obligated to act on as they seek real goods according to virtue ethics. The moral virtues have in common their emphasis on maintaining an even disposition while adhering to firm principles, showing restraint in one’s actions, and placing the common good over individual gain.

The exercise of moral virtue is guided by the four cardinal virtues (temperance, courage, prudence, and justice), none of which is able to exist by itself. It is on these four cardinal virtues
that the remaining virtues are anchored. Recognition of the cardinal virtues can be traced to Plato, and, after Aristotle, they were later adopted by St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274) in his work *Summa Theologica*. Plato and Aquinas identified wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice as the four cardinal virtues because they focused on the ideal society. Aristotle identified the same virtues, substituting prudence (practical wisdom) for wisdom because his focus was on ideal personal conduct, and he also saw intellectual virtue as distinct from moral virtue (as noted earlier in this chapter).

Table 2.2 also shows the excess and deficiency or defect in seeking moral virtues. It is virtuous to be ambitious but not to be lazy or have blind ambition. It is virtuous to have courage but not to be rash or cowardly. Therefore, moral virtues lie at the mean between excess and defect. As Michael Josephson has summarized, a person of character must work especially hard to overcome “self-righteousness, self-delusion, and selfishness,” which are variations of some of Aristotle’s excesses and defects from the moral virtues. Self-righteousness is the character trait that leads people to overestimate how ethical they really are. It blinds people to their true moral shortcomings. Self-delusion refers to the capacity to rationalize conduct and make excuses in a vain effort to justify conduct that is morally impermissible. These rationalizations include comparisons to others (who behave worse); relying on the law to guide all moral conduct; or blaming a corrupt system to justify conduct, rather than relying on objective ethical standards. Selfishness places an individual’s personal interest above the interests of others in all circumstances, causing myopia in determining ethical behavior.

### The Habit of Moral Virtue

To summarize, virtue ethics require a person to seek real goods according to the moral virtues. People who do this habitually are morally virtuous. Moral virtue, sometimes called the habit of right desire is, according to American philosopher Mortimer Adler, the “process of conquering one’s childish tendencies toward indulgence in immediate gratification.” Although the exact course of conduct in certain situations is not specified, Aristotle’s ethics provide guidance for being a virtuous person, knowing that a virtuous person will likely choose the ethically correct path because of his or her reliance on the moral virtues to seek real goods. Morality is more than
following rules according to virtue ethics. Adler summarized it in this way: “Living as he ought by habit, the man of good character has no need of rules of conduct; moral virtue as good habit dispenses with rules.” As Aristotle concluded, “We are the masters of our actions from the beginning to the end.”

Virtue ethics is based on the idea that if a person seeks the right things (the real goods) in the proper ways (via the moral virtues), the result will be a morally virtuous person engaging in ethical conduct. Individuals should seek the good for its own sake; so a good person is one who lives well, meeting his or her potential as a human being.

There is some empirical support for the value we place on the virtues. A study of college students in the United States and Korea found consistent results in their ranking of “what is satisfying about satisfying events?” They were asked to identify what occurrences (their content and characteristics) during the previous month had made them the happiest (“most personally satisfying”). The answers given were those events that involved autonomy/independence, competence/effectiveness, relatedness/belongingness, and self-esteem/self-respect. Security/control in times of privation also was important. However, the study participants deemed pleasure/stimulation, self-actualization/meaning, popularity/influence, and physical/bodily health less important. The least important kind of event involved money or luxury. Many of these kinds of events correspond to the moral virtues (Table 2.2). According to the study’s author, past research has also shown that although Americans have been getting richer in recent decades, wealthier people are generally no happier than the less well off. This study provides evidence that the things that bring true happiness involve virtues and personal development rather than acquisition of goods.

Some psychologists have referred to character as “emotional intelligence,” although ethics has nothing to do with emotions and little to do with intelligence. Character, as used by psychologists, is the ability to motivate yourself in the face of frustration, control your impulses, delay gratification, regulate your moods, and so on. As sociologist Amitai Etzioni writes, character is “the psychological muscle that moral conduct requires” to overcome emotional barriers that prevent ethical decision making.

Aristotle’s moral virtues have been summarized in many different ways over the years and appear in codes of ethics of all kinds. The Character Counts! education programs summarize the six pillars of character as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The Boy Scouts’ oath pledges, “On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.” And, of course, there is the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” another motto that highlights several of the moral virtues.

Rushworth Kidder, president of the Institute for Global Ethics, interviewed twenty-four distinguished individuals from sixteen countries who were known for their conscientiousness and character. These people came from different religious, political, social, and cultural backgrounds, and he asked them, “If you could construct a global code of ethics for the twenty-first century, what would be in it?” Their answers centered on eight widely shared values: love, truth, freedom, fairness, unity, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for life. Aristotle would likely support all these expressions of virtue, but he would note that none of them incorporate all the moral virtues; hence, his effort to identify a comprehensive list.

Aristotle emphasizes that ethical conduct requires practice so that it becomes a habit. Therefore, ethics both causes our actions and is the result of our actions. In Aristotle’s words, “We are what we repeatedly do.” The Critical Thinking Exercises at the end of the chapter are designed to help students develop the habit of moral thinking.
TABLE 2.3  An Approach to Ethical Dilemmas

1. List the relevant facts (separating the irrelevant details from the central issues).
2. Identify the precise moral question to be answered.
3. List and think about the moral principles that might be used to support the positions that could be taken.
4. Make and explain your decision (i.e., your morally permissible course of conduct).
5. Justify your conclusions using positive reasons and ethical principles in support of your decision, anticipating and addressing contrary views.

EVALUATING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Ethical dilemmas can be difficult when a swirl of facts obfuscate the central issue to be decided. It is important to approach ethical problems systematically. Regardless of the situation or the dilemma, your approach should be the same. A recommended approach is outlined in Table 2.3.

First, it is important to list the relevant facts (to separate them from facts that are not germane to the ethical decision). For example, if a person is drowning, and you are deciding whether to save her or him, the status of that person as a current or former lover is not relevant to your ethical decision. Second, it is crucial to identify the precise underlying moral question to be decided by separating it from other facts of the case. Third, it is important to understand the principles on which the ethical decision might be made. By the end of Chapter 4, you will have an understanding of the three major ethical schools of thought, their central principles, and how they are applied in practice. Fourth, it is important to explain your decision (i.e., the precise course of conduct you believe necessary). Fifth, you must justify your actions based on valid and applicable ethical principles, and you should anticipate contrary views and why your decision is superior in ethical terms to alternate choices.

ETHICS IN BOOKS

Ethics is everywhere, even in the books we read, which sometimes are written without ethics specifically in mind. Here is a summary of a book that looks at actions that affect others, followed by questions that ask you to reflect on the ethical connections.

Why Can’t We Be Good?
Jacob Needleman
(Tarcher/Penguin, 2007)

Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University, who writes about a fundamental question of ethics (and also of criminal justice):

“Why do we not do what we know is good?” If we agree on major principles for behavior, taken from the Socratic, Jewish, Christian, and other major philosophical and religious traditions, why do so many of us not act consistently in accord with these principles?

A quote from the Torah is used by the author to express the simple basis for good behavior, summarizing it in one sentence: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.” In the Jewish tradition, Christianity, and other perspectives, the “golden rule” is a central, organizing
theme, and “all the rest is commentary” on this basic principle. Therefore, we might expect adherence to this principle to be more universally practiced.

According to the author, good actions are preceded by good thoughts, and he turns to the philosophy of Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus as well as classroom techniques that involve thinking and listening while taking a specific action. The objective of these efforts is to identify the secret for transforming good ideas and thoughts into good actions, “which underlies the hypocrisy that haunts our lives, enabling us to go on and on betraying our ethical ideals while at the same time believing that we are doing what is good—or, in any case, that we are doing all that we possibly can.”

Needleman uses the film Obedience as an example of how individuals justify immoral acts when told to do so by an authority figure (the film depicts the application of electric shocks for wrong answers to questions). He finds it difficult to explain the disjunction between widely held moral beliefs and the common instances we see of injustice, disrespect, and violence.

Needleman believes that the transition between thought and action “between what we are in our deepest heart and what we actually do and say” is what he calls “remorse of conscience.” That is to say, only when we see in full consciousness our capacity (weakness) in avoiding doing the good, that we are able to cross the threshold from moral thought into moral action. Needleman believes that clear awareness of our (in)capacities when crossing between the “two worlds” of thought and action is what gives us the strength to act in accord with our principles.

QUESTIONS

1. If good ideas alone are not enough to produce good actions, are there practical ways to encourage desirable actions (e.g., reporting crimes, acting as a good Samaritan)?
2. How would Aristotle evaluate the linkage between moral virtues and actions? Would he see a similar separation between moral thought and action?

ETHICS IN THE MOVIES

Movies seek to entertain and inform the audience about a story, incident, or person. Many good movies also hit upon important ethical themes in making significant decisions that affect the lives of others. Read the movie summary here (and watch the movie if you haven’t already), and answer the questions to make the ethical connections.

RETURN TO PARADISE

Joseph Ruben, Director
(1998)

Vince Vaughan (Sheriff), Joaquin Phoenix (Lewis), and David Conrad (Tony) are three friends on a five-week vacation in Malaysia who use and possess drugs for recreational use while there. Two of the friends return to the United States, and they all go their separate ways.

Two years later a young lawyer, Beth Eastern (Anne Heche), tracks down the two friends in the United States, informing them that the third (Lewis) has been jailed for the last 2 years in Malaysia and faces a possible death sentence there for drug possession. A few days after they
had left Malaysia from their vacation, police had raided their camp and found large quantities of hashish. Lewis was still residing there, so he was held responsible. He is scheduled to be put to death in 8 days, and the only way the charges can be decreased is if the two friends come back to “paradise” and take their share of the responsibility. If they do, they both will spend 3 years in prison. If only one does, he will spend 6 years behind bars.

The film centers on the agonizing decisions of Sheriff and Tony in deciding if they should go back to Malaysia in the hopes of saving their friend. Return to Paradise poses one of the ultimate ethical dilemmas: Should you sacrifice your freedom for a friend, when you have at least partial responsibility for his predicament?

In a subplot, a journalist (Jada Pinkett) gets wind of the story of the pending execution in Malaysia and wants to write a story about it, but she is begged by the lawyer not to write about it because Malaysia is very sensitive about American criticism of Malaysian justice, and a critical story might endanger the agreement to reduce Joaquin Phoenix’s death sentence. The journalist must make the decision to either sit on the story because it might affect the outcome of the case, or to print it because it is an important story.

QUESTIONS

1. Would you return to face 6 years in prison to spare a friend’s life in a similar situation? What is your ethical rationale?
2. What are the ethical considerations of the journalist in deciding whether to publish the story, and what should her conclusion be?

Discussion Question

Why is moral virtue a habitual behavior?

Critical Thinking Exercises

All ethical decisions affect others (by definition) and, as Aristotle points out, ethical decision making is achieved consistently only through practice. Given the outline of virtue ethics provided by Aristotle (i.e., seeking the real goods via the moral virtues), evaluate the moral permissibility of the conduct in question in each scenario.

Important note on method: Critical thinking requires the ability to evaluate viewpoints, facts, and behaviors objectively to assess information or methods of argumentation to establish the true worth or merit of an act or course of conduct. Please evaluate these scenarios, first analyzing pros and cons of alternate views, before you come to a conclusion. Do not draw a conclusion first, and then try to find facts to support it—this frequently leads to narrow (and incorrect) thinking.

To properly evaluate the moral permissibility of a course of action using critical thinking skills
1. Begin with an open mind (no preconceptions!),
2. Isolate and evaluate the relevant facts on both sides,
3. Identify the precise moral question to be answered, and
4. Apply ethical principles to the moral question based on an objective evaluation of the facts, only then drawing a conclusion.

2.1 A Parole Fugitive at Princeton

A Princeton University student with a satisfactory school record was discovered to be a parole fugitive from Utah for crimes of theft and fraud. This case occurred during the 1990s; the fugitive used false documentation and a false
name to obtain admission to the university, but on admission he performed well as a student. His identity was ultimately discovered by Princeton.27

• What action should the university take?
  (Hint: There are two parts here. Your answer requires an assessment of the moral permissibility of the student’s actions first, then an assessment of the university’s options under the guidelines provided by virtue ethics.)

2.2 Misrepresentation at MIT

The dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) offered her resignation after confessing to résumé fraud. Marilee Jones was highly regarded on campus for her efforts to reduce the pressure on students applying to prestigious colleges, and she had coauthored a popular book on the subject.

Questions surfaced about her résumé after she received a promotion, and she later admitted that she had never graduated from college. “I misrepresented my academic degrees when I first applied to MIT 28 years ago,” she wrote in a statement, “and did not have the courage to correct my résumé when I applied for my current job or at any time since.”28

Faked personal history appears to be a growing phenomenon: In 2001, professor Joseph J. Ellis, a Pulitzer Prize–winning historian, was suspended for a year without pay from Mt. Holyoke College after the Boston Globe discovered that he was telling students personal stories about his combat experience in his course on Vietnam, when in fact he had never served in Vietnam. In 2002, Sandra Baldwin, president of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), was forced to leave after it was discovered that she had never finished her degree.

“Holding integrity is sometimes very hard to do,” Ms. Jones of MIT wrote in her book, “because the temptation may be to cheat or cut corners.”

• What is the appropriate moral course of action for the university to take in this case?
  (Hint: One way to approach scenarios like this is to find, for example, the strongest argument in favor of the moral permissibility of MIT’s actions and the strongest argument against the moral permissibility of MIT’s action.)

2.3 Presidential Exit Ethics

There appears to be a pattern of controversial, but legal, decisions that occur as presidents leave office. As Bill Clinton left office, it was disclosed that $190,000 in last-minute gifts had been accepted. Although accepting the gifts was legal, questions of propriety were raised.

In the last month of George H. W. Bush’s presidency, he pardoned Caspar Weinberger, former defense secretary, and several other former White House officials who had been indicted for allegedly lying and withholding information from Congress and federal investigators in an investigation of secret U.S. arms sales to Iran and aid to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels. Although they were legal, these pardons thwarted an ongoing investigation.

As Ronald Reagan left office, he had a multimillion-dollar house financed by a “friend.” This raised questions regarding the source of the funds and whether it represented repayment for past or future favors.29

• Assess the moral permissibility of these decisions.

2.4 A Large Contribution

Stanley Ho is an 85-year-old millionaire known as the “King of Gambling” in Macau (a Chinese territory). He is a major casino developer, and father of seventeen children, who has been scrutinized and investigated for links to organized crime. He has said that “these reports only say I know some Triad members. Well, maybe you have come across some. To be associated with or to know someone is completely different.”30 Ho has never been charged with a crime.

Ho made a gift to Oxford University in the amount of $5 million, which will be used to pay for university initiatives in Chinese studies. He was approved by Oxford’s ethics committee to make the gift, one of the largest individual donations ever made to the university.

• Should Oxford accept the gift from a person whose background has been questioned?
• Are there any circumstances under which a university should not accept a monetary gift from an individual or organization?

2.5 The Ethics of Brain-Booster Drugs

There’s a growing debate both in scientific circles and among the general populace: Should adults be using so-called “brain-boosting” drugs—normally intended to treat serious medical conditions—to improve concentration and performance? Some college students, of course, have been using stimulants for years: They take such things as modafinil, Adderall, and Ritalin (euphemistically known on campuses as “vitamin R”) to enhance their memories for exams or to stay up all night and press out a term paper. By one estimate, at least 10 percent of American college students use prescription drugs as study aids.
Now the general adult population is turning to the pills, too—often illegally—to boost productivity and enhance their mental prowess on the job. Some experts laud the development: They think it’s time to consider making the stimulants legal for brain-boosting functions.

But critics worry it will accelerate a slide toward a drugged society. In an era when people take everything from Viagra to enhance their romance to steroids to enhance their baseball statistics, they argue that the addition of so-called “cognitive enhancement” drugs will only make us more dependent on the pill bottle.

In an online poll in the British science journal Nature, answered by 1,400 people in sixty countries, one in five said they had used drugs for nonmedical reasons “to stimulate their focus, concentration, or memory.” Only about half had a prescription for the drug they were using. A third had bought the drugs over the Internet. And even though about half reported unpleasant side effects, four out of five “thought that healthy adults should be able to take the drugs if they want to,” Nature reported. Critics argue that more time is needed with the petri dishes and field testing before the drugs are used as mind enhancers.

“The reality [is] that there is very little research to document whether [these drugs] are universally beneficial, whether they could be detrimental, what are the long-term outcomes, what are the side effects,” says Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, a U.S. government agency. “There’s really very, very limited knowledge.”

Nearly everyone talking about brain-boosting drugs agrees that they ought to be both safe and effective before being widely used. But some worry about other problems they present. Would workers, for example, feel coerced to use enhancement drugs in order to win promotions or even simply to keep their jobs?

Advocates point out that humans already “enhance” their thinking in a variety of ways, from drinking beverages with caffeine (a known stimulant), to exercising to brighten their mood, to relying on a computer to increase knowledge, and to simply getting a good night’s sleep before a big test. But for some, a caution light goes on when we’re changing the way the brain works, particularly when so little is known about it.

- Evaluate the moral permissibility of taking “brain-boosting” drugs to enhance your performance (at work or play).

### Key Concepts

- Moral virtue 11
- Hierarchy of goods 13
- Real goods 13
- Apparent goods 13
- Stoicism 14
- Egoistic hedonism 14
- Cardinal virtues 16

### Notes

2. For an account of Socrates’ trial and death, see Plato, *Last Days of Socrates, The Euthyphro; The Apology; Crito; Phaedo* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993).
Chapter 2 • Virtue Ethics