

INTRODUCTION

Moral Philosophy and Ethics

This is a book of moral philosophy and ethics; but what, the reader may ask, are these? The words “moral” and “morality” come from the Latin *moralis* and *moralitas*, which in turn have their root in *mos*, meaning “custom.” Similarly, the word “ethics” comes from the Greek *ethike*, whose root is *ethos*, again meaning “custom” or, sometimes, “character.” As these English terms have taken on standardized meanings, especially in philosophy, *morality*¹ refers to the sum total of values, good practices, principles of right behavior, etc. (as well as their opposites: disvalues, bad practices, wrongful types of behavior, etc.) recognized by individuals or cultures; and *ethics* refers to the reflective or disciplined study of morality, understood in just this way. As will be discussed below, *moral philosophy* designates a particular level and type of ethical reflection.

Of course, morality, or moralities, can be studied in a variety of ways. There are, for example, scientific studies in sociology and anthropology; these relate to factual and interpretive issues regarding cross-cultural similarities and differences in moral views. Again, psychology studies the developmental stages of moral awareness, as well as factors (internal and external) that impinge upon these stages. Disciplines such as these would not—or at least not directly—come under the heading of ethics. A study of the latter sort typically has a *normative* component—that is, it seeks to identify, and provide

a basis for, judgments about *what is* genuinely good or right behavior, *which are* authentic human values, etc.

As a discipline, ethics often is divided into two branches: *ethical theory*, or very general reflection about morality; and *applied ethics*, or the discussion of particular moral topics. Ethics will be treated this way in the present book, with our two main parts devoted to these respective branches. At this introductory stage, it will be helpful to reflect on relations between the two branches and on relations between both of them and the concrete moral judgments people make in their individual and communal lives.

We might speak here of different “levels of discourse,” with the first level consisting precisely of questions and judgments about unique, individual matters: “How should I discuss this with my boyfriend?” “Should grandpa have the surgery the doctors are recommending?” “Is it time for Nebraska (or any of a number of states that may be one’s home) to abolish the death penalty?” Etc. Beginning students of ethics are sometimes surprised to learn that judgments at this level are not included in the formal subject matter of the discipline. However, on reflection, the reason for this is relatively easy to appreciate. As is the case with all disciplines, ethics relates to matters that in some way are general or abstract; whereas the questions mentioned above are entirely particular or concrete. As such, they are—and can only be—the objects of what we shall come to call “prudent judgment.”

Of course, a consideration of the above questions may lead to others that *are* general and abstract: “Are sexual relationships appropriate outside of marriage?” “How does one judge whether a proposed medical intervention is morally required, or morally optional, or (perhaps) morally repugnant?” “Under what conditions would capital

punishment be a legitimate tool of state judicial systems?” Etc. Here, at this second level of discourse, we encounter the sorts of general moral topics that will occupy us in the second part of the book. But, we need to ask, what will constitute a “reflective” or “disciplined” study of such topics?

Nearly every reader will have engaged in discussions about the matters in question. Sometimes these discussions lead to agreement; often they do not. But whether they do or do not, the discussions typically turn on certain more general questions: “Does human sexuality—or, for that matter, any aspect of human existence—have intrinsic meaning or value?” “What are the proper aims and overall norms of medical practice?” “What is the basis for, and what are the moral limits to, state authority over individual lives?” Etc. A person given to abstract reflection will perhaps even ask: “What is, or what are, the most general values and principles that should govern human choices, practices, and institutions?” Here, clearly, we have arrived at a third level of discourse, the one associated with ethical theory.

More precisely, it should be said that questions at this third level comprise an important part or dimension of ethical theory, namely, *normative theory*. Here the theorist articulates most general moral values and/or principles and offers accounts of their interrelations and their justification. The other dimension of ethical theory is called *meta-ethics*. Depending on specific features of the theories involved, these two parts or dimensions can overlap; but in general we may distinguish and characterize them as follows.² A normative theory, whatever its sources and features, is oriented toward illuminating practical topics. Thus, for example, in seeking to articulate and justify ultimate principles of right human choice, a normative theorist ordinarily will hope to

shape people’s moral thinking about sexual behavior, bio-medical practices, law and public policy, etc. A meta-ethical theory, on the other hand, does not have this direct practical orientation. It is a purely theoretical account that takes normative discourse as such as its object. That is, a meta-ethicist will seek to develop well grounded answers to questions such as the following: “How, and to what extent, can moral principles and moral choices be justified?” “What type and degree of objectivity is achievable in ethics?” “Is it the case, as many hold, that moral views are inevitably relative—to particular individuals, cultures, societies, etc.?”

At this point we may offer the following diagram, which recapitulates the levels and aspects of ethical discourse:

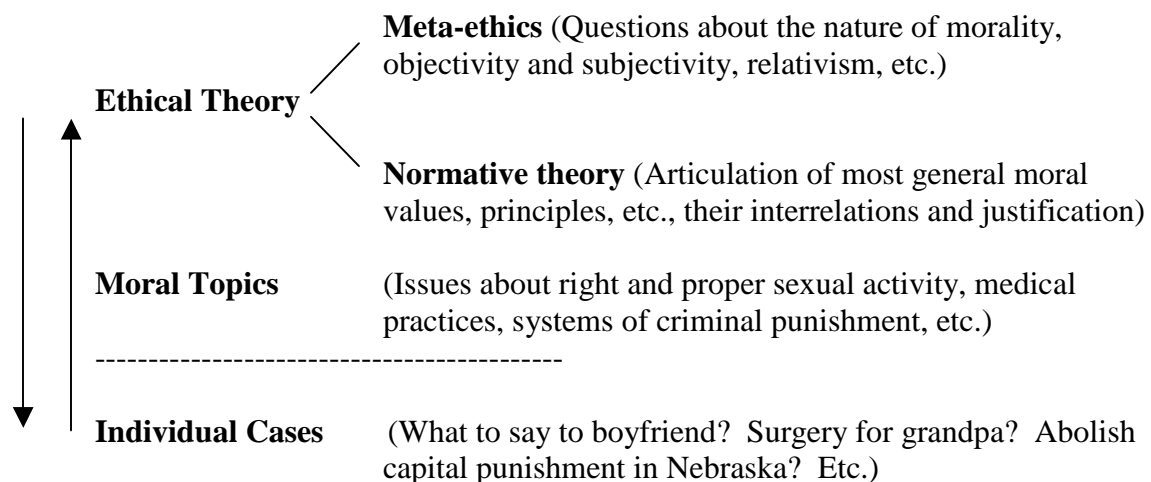


Figure 1. Levels of Ethical Discourse

Notice that the first or bottom level (“Individual Cases”) is separated from the other two by a broken line. The line indicates that questions and answers below it are not, strictly speaking, part of the discipline of ethics. As noted earlier, such judgments fall under an individual’s or society’s prudent decision-making, rather than the discipline itself. Notice as well that to the left of the three levels are arrows pointing up and down.

These indicate interrelations among the types of moral discourse. As suggested by our discussion, many people begin with concerns about individual cases, then move “up” the scale to more generalized topics, and finally arrive at questions of ethical theory. But other people—say, students of philosophy!—may begin with a study of most general values and principles, then move “down” the scale to moral topics, and finally seek to apply all of this to concrete cases of personal or societal decision-making. Whatever one’s starting point, and whichever direction the course of one’s studies, a worthy goal for the reflective person is to arrive at a coherent, consistent set of judgments—that is, a set of judgments in which one’s statements on points of ethical theory genuinely cohere with one’s positions on a range of moral topics; and in which what one holds about such moral topics genuinely affects one’s judgments about concrete cases (including, of course, cases in which one is personally involved). It should be emphasized that this is a worthy *goal*; it is not to be expected that it can easily be realized. Indeed, it may be suggested that, given the depth of the subject matter, together with the complex relationships among the three levels just outlined, ethics calls for a lifetime’s reflection.

Let us now turn to moral philosophy. We mentioned at the beginning that this discipline is best understood as a particular level and type of ethical reflection. At this point we can specify the level in question is that of ethical theory. A fully developed moral philosophy typically will contain both normative and meta-ethical elements. Moreover, aspects of what is called “speculative” thought will affect a person’s views in the moral area. This matter calls for exploration; to approach it, we need to review certain points about the general nature of philosophy.

The word “philosophy” comes from two Greek words: *philia* for “love,” and *sophia* for “wisdom.” Accordingly, *philosophy* often is said to be a love of, or a search for, wisdom. *Wisdom*, in turn, can be understood as a comprehensive understanding or vision—concerning how things ultimately are, and concerning how we humans should act (i.e., how we should organize our lives, what values and principles we should seek to honor, etc.). The ancient philosopher Aristotle—and his followers down to the present day—have distinguished two types of wisdom, and thus two general branches of philosophy: *speculative* and *practical*. The former pursues, as we have just put it, an understanding of “how things ultimately are;” the latter pursues a vision of “how we humans should act.” Clearly, moral philosophy will be a species of practical philosophy—although one’s thinking in this area will, once again, be influenced by one’s thinking about speculative matters (e.g., whether our human nature is oriented toward certain intrinsic ends or goods).³

Of course, the search for wisdom is not limited to philosophers; in particular, religious writings and traditions—from the Vedas of ancient India, to the writings of the Buddha and his followers in India and East Asia, to the Bible and later teachings of the Jewish and Christian communities, to the Koran of Muslim peoples, etc.—also have sought to articulate comprehensive views. In light of this, and significantly for present purposes, Western thinkers typically distinguish philosophical approaches to wisdom from ones that are specifically theological. The former are rooted, at least arguably and in principle, in matters of common human experience and modes of reasoning. Thus philosophical inquiry and theorizing do not depend in any formal way on religious texts or beliefs. *Theology*, on the contrary, makes full use of what the believing community

takes as *revelation* or the “word of God”—i.e., teachings held to have direct, divine authority. Another way to express this matter is to say that philosophical inquiry, by contrast with theological, is “unaided;” that is, it is not subject to direct assistance by the content of revelation—even if the philosopher himself or herself is a religious believer. Accordingly, philosophy is said to be *autonomous*, meaning that it is responsible for, and free to pursue, its own modes of inquiry.

In keeping with the above, ethical theorists can be divided into two groups: moral philosophers and moral theologians. A moral philosopher’s theorizing will be rooted strictly in what he or she takes to be, again at least in principle, common and “unaided” moral experience, as well as ways of reasoning about such experience. By contrast, a moral theologian’s theorizing will be rooted, at least in part, in what he or she takes to be revelation about the human condition and about the types of behavior that accordingly are morally appropriate.

The alert student will notice the following complexity. Although moral philosophy cannot contain what is, strictly speaking, a theological dimension, the reverse is not the case. Moral theologians can—and, in fact, the greatest of them do—use the resources of philosophy, as well as other disciplines at their disposal. The relationship between these two approaches to ethics involves other complexities as well, some of which we will take up in the succeeding pages.

Christian Faith and the Perennial Tradition

Although philosophy and theology are distinguishable, and in principle are independent of one another, philosophical reflection has encountered Christian faith from

the time of the original preaching of the Gospel. (See, for example, the account of Paul's exchanges with the philosophers of Athens in Acts of the Apostles, chap. 17.) Early Christian writers in fact developed a range of views about the relation between "faith" and "reason." Some viewed the pagan philosophies of the day as simply false and in need of replacement by religious perspectives. Others saw in the work of ancient philosophers elements which—if properly adapted—might be used in preparing people's minds and hearts to receive the word of God, as well as in developing disciplined articulations of Christian teachings. Still others regarded the themes of their religious tradition as suggesting lines of thought that might be rationally developed and shared with all interested parties, regardless of their belief or unbelief.

These various attitudes and approaches have characterized Christian reflection throughout the centuries. A very fertile period of discussion occurred in the century recently completed; one important topic was whether there ever was, or could be, such a thing as "Christian philosophy." Writing in the wake of these discussions, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et ratio*,⁴ offered a number of important suggestions. (It may be noted that the late pope, under his given name Karol Wojtyła, was himself a professor of philosophy at the University of Lublin in Poland before he assumed high ecclesiastical office.) Let us consider some of John Paul's points, especially as they bear on the subject-matter of the present book.

First of all, Christian philosophy (including moral philosophy) is to be distinguished from theology, both as to its content or object and as to its sources and methods.⁵ At least from the time of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274), most Catholic scholars have recognized this formal difference between philosophy and theology. Even

when they treat the same general type of issue, their respective modes of treatment are different. As suggested in the preceding sub-section, when it considers the ultimate meaning of human existence, theology proceeds, at least in part, in terms of what are accepted as points of revelation—e.g., for Christians, that human life finds its ultimate meaning in our being created by a loving God, and in being called to intimate relationship with God through the life, death, and risen presence of Jesus Christ. Philosophy, by contrast, proceeds in terms of experiences and understandings that are held to be available to all reflective people—e.g., the importance of pursuing justice in social relationships.

The above points confirm our earlier remarks; in fact, John Paul himself noted what he termed philosophy's "valid aspiration to become an autonomous enterprise" (*Fides et ratio*, sec. 75). Still, religious faith can play a role in the moral philosopher's work, and it can do so, according to the late pope, in two ways—"subjectively" and "objectively" (*Ibid.*, sec. 76). Regarding the former, Christian commitments can aid in the development of appropriate attitudes toward the philosophical task and toward oneself as a person undertaking it. Christian faith induces—or it should induce—the virtue of humility, and with this an appropriately modest set of goals for rational understanding. This is important because it is something of an "occupational hazard" for philosophers that they tend to become prideful people: one who regularly pursues ultimate questions about "how we should organize our lives" or "what values and principles we should seek to honor" is likely to have an elevated sense of self! Of course, as will be discussed below, a Christian philosopher's goals also should not be unduly modest; and religious forms of life include, in addition to humility, the virtues of courage

and hope—virtues that are important in facing the rigors of intellectual thought, not to mention the disappointment that often attends philosophers’ efforts to reach agreement about normative theory, as well as its application to topics such as sexual relationships and systems of criminal justice.

On the “objective” side, Christian faith can help identify philosophical concerns, or aspects of philosophical concerns, that otherwise might be overlooked. This point must be carefully understood. It does not take back what has been said about philosophy’s autonomy; that is, statements of religious doctrine or creed will not, after all, be used to support philosophical analyses and claims. But the history of philosophy itself suggests that humankind’s appreciation of, e.g., moral norms concerning justice, or the inviolable dignity of each human being, are enhanced when philosophical reflection about these themes is pursued under the inspiration of faith.

In this regard, a special issue arises regarding moral philosophy, by contrast with speculative philosophy. Christianity teaches (as do other religions) that the final goal of human life is not one we can grasp on our own; it also teaches that our moral insight, even regarding earthly or secular matters, is typically marred by our shared sinful condition. It may seem, therefore, that ethical reflection is inevitably impoverished unless it includes a theological component. Thus it has been suggested that moral philosophy needs to be “subordinated” to moral theology.⁶

One can understand the thinking behind this view, supposing an overall context of Christian faith. However, if the view is taken quite literally it seems to be incorrect. For, while a religious person will recognize the need to accept moral guidance from the Bible (or other holy book), as well as from authoritative religious teachers (supposing he or she

recognizes any), this does not mean that very important features of the moral life cannot be recognized by, and articulated in terms of, common human experience and reason—i.e., in the way proper to philosophy. This point is perhaps especially important for those persons—including, surely, most readers of the present book—who live in pluralistic societies. In contexts such as these, genuine ethical discussion across religious and cultural lines can be pursued *only* in terms of our common humanity.

To return to the thought of John Paul II, we should note his conviction that the philosopher who wishes his or her work to cohere with, and be supportive of, the “word of God” (i.e., for him, Judeo-Christian revelation) should see it as a *sapiential* undertaking. (See *Fides et ratio*, sec. 81.) The English word “sapiential” comes from the Latin *sapientia* meaning “wisdom”—both speculative and practical. The late pope also stressed the need for moral reflection to be rooted in understandings of reality, including the reality of the human person; only this can provide the “ultimate framework of the unity of knowledge and action.” Thus we must pursue the disciplines of “metaphysics,” which considers the most general features of being as such, and “anthropology” (i.e., the speculative discipline so named, not the social science mentioned earlier), which considers the nature and intrinsic orientations of our human reality. In connection with the former, John Paul wrote, “If I insist so strongly on the metaphysical element, it is because I am convinced that it is the path to be taken in order to move beyond the crisis pervading large sectors of philosophy at the moment, and thus to correct certain mistaken modes of behavior now widespread in our society.” (Ibid., sec. 83.) It may be noted that this passage refers to both the theoretical level (“crisis pervading large sectors of philosophy”) and the practical level (“certain mistaken modes of behavior”).

John Paul II recognized the daunting nature of the task to which, in his judgment, philosophy is called in the new millennium. But he pointed out the rich vein of resources on which contemporary moral thinkers can draw. Specifically, he wrote: “I believe that those philosophers who wish to respond today to the demands which the word of God makes on human thinking should develop their thought in organic continuity with the great tradition which, beginning with the ancients, passes through the Fathers of the Church and the masters of Scholasticism and includes the fundamental achievements of modern and contemporary thought.” (Ibid., sec. 85.) As examples of 20th Century thinkers who have undertaken philosophy in this way, the late pope mentioned Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and St. Edith Stein.

What John Paul called the “great tradition”—or at least its philosophical dimension—also has been called *perennial* thought. In fact, *Fides et ratio* itself speaks of “an enduringly valid philosophical tradition” (sec. 20), thus alluding to the same basic notion.⁷ A good, brief account of this tradition is given by one of the philosophers just mentioned, Jacques Maritain. He wrote of the perennial philosophy that, while rooted in ancient and medieval sources, it “is eternally young and always inventive, and involves the fundamental need, inherent in its very being, to grow and renew itself” in every age—whether that age be Aristotle’s 4th Century BCE Greece, St. Thomas Aquinas’s 13th Century Europe, or our own 20th and now 21st Century America.⁷

This tradition of thought, as just suggested, began with the ancient philosophers, Plato and especially Aristotle. It continued, informed by Christian faith, in certain early writers of the Church—in particular, St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430). And it came to maturity in the Christian Middle Ages, after Aristotle’s thought was re-introduced into

the West by way of Islamic and Byzantine Greek sources. For many, a high point in the development of the perennial tradition came in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. He was a priest of the Dominican order who taught at the University of Paris, counseled popes, and wrote voluminously on both philosophical and theological topics. (John Paul devoted two full sections of his 1998 document to Aquinas's achievements.)

At the heart of the perennial philosophy is a view called *critical realism*. This view may be characterized as holding that the human mind can and typically does make contact with the real, and that its judgments—about both speculative and moral topics—can and typically do have a truth-value that goes beyond the simple articulation of sensory experience and/or emotional responses to that experience. The basis for this realist view lies in the metaphysical and anthropological themes alluded to earlier. In their approach to ethics, perennial philosophers express a conviction that there is an overall or final good for human life (just as there is for other forms of existence), as well as a conviction that the human mind is oriented toward discovering salient features of this good and the human will is oriented toward intelligently pursuing and, as far as possible, achieving it. The realism in question is critical in the sense that, while philosophers of this tradition have a high regard for the deliverances of common sense, they recognize that common sense understandings—not least about moral matters—must be carefully formulated and subjected to the test of experience and critical reflection.

In the later Middle Ages, and throughout most of the Modern period, the perennial philosophy somewhat languished. Except for a few key figures, this tradition was kept alive primarily by repetition and codification, rather than—as Maritain would have suggested—by growing and renewing itself in keeping with the age. Following the

call of Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Aeterni patris* (1879), attention once again was paid to the authentic thought of the Medieval masters (in particular Aquinas) as well as to ways their thought might interact with that of modern philosophers. In the specific case of ethics, one might again mention the mid-20th Century works of Jacques Maritain, as well as those of his student Yves R. Simon, and the cross-century writings of Ralph McInerny.⁸

Up to and including the decade of Vatican Council II (1962 – 65), the perennial philosophy held pride of place in Catholic colleges and universities. With the “opening of windows” initiated by Pope John XXIII, there occurred in succeeding years (indeed, it had already begun) much ferment in Catholic thought. The result has been a good deal of diversity and uncertainty (some would say chaos) in Catholic intellectual circles—not least regarding moral topics. John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical clearly called for a revitalization of perennial moral philosophy (as well as a parallel revitalization of Catholic moral theology) at the outset of the 21st Century—one that would produce, as we might put it, “new blossoms” on the stem of the great tradition.

We ourselves hope to contribute to this revitalization, and especially to help make it available to students. However, before undertaking such an effort, we should note the presence of a variety of contrary trends in contemporary culture. These trends challenge the very possibility of the type of moral philosophy that John Paul so strongly promoted. At this point we can merely identify and sketch general features of these lines of thought; they will receive greater attention in relevant sections of part 1, to follow.

21st Century Challenges

As just indicated, much of contemporary intellectual culture is inimical to the type of moral philosophy for which the late pope called. Not surprisingly, as a former professor of philosophy himself, John Paul was well aware of this fact. Near the end of the document from which we have been quoting, he mentioned a number of the views in question. Let us describe these views—the majority of which, in terms of our earlier account of ethical theory, present challenges of a meta-ethical sort to a Christian, and indeed to any realist, moral philosophy.⁹

We may begin with two forms of what may be called “non-cognitivism”—that is, positions holding that ethical views do not represent cognitive or knowledge-claiming judgments at all. A first form is bound up with the general philosophy of knowledge called *positivism*. In general, philosophers who hold this view believe that the only statements that can be called knowledge-claims are “positive” statements of empirical fact, or the related hypotheses and theories that make up the content of the modern sciences. (For obvious reasons, such positivism also is sometimes referred to as *scientism*.) Unlike statements of the empirical sort, and others based upon them, moral judgments are said by the present group of philosophers to express people’s emotional reactions to, or attitudes toward, acts and practices, as well as their attempts to persuade others to adopt the same reactions and attitudes. Accordingly, positivists (e.g., the British philosopher A. J. Ayer and his American counterpart Charles L. Stevenson) are said to hold a meta-ethical view called *emotivism*.¹⁰

A second form of non-cognitivism derives from the philosophy of *existentialism*, especially the atheist variety made prominent by the 20th Century French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Sartre, there is no God to create a “human nature” or

“essence”; thus each person, in a radical way, must simply decide and declare for himself or herself how to understand human life and its prospects.¹¹ This second non-cognitivist approach sometimes is also referred to as radical *subjectivism*—meaning that only the individual person or “subject” can entertain and assess the worth of fundamental moral views, especially as they bear on himself or herself.

When we reflect on these positions in a preliminary way, it seems obvious that ethical issues often do elicit strong emotions. Moreover, as we shall see, the perennial tradition recognizes the importance of human choice and subjectivity. However, the non-cognitivist dimensions of both of these meta-ethical accounts clearly are incompatible with the perennial tradition; for, as noted above, this tradition is committed to a realist philosophy—i.e., one that believes it possible, at least in principle, to discover and convey genuine knowledge, including knowledge about moral matters.

Next, let us consider the view known as *ethical relativism*, or, as John Paul II also termed it, “undifferentiated pluralism.” Among contemporary American philosophers, a prominent proponent of this meta-ethics is Gilbert Harman.¹² One source of relativism is the awareness that individuals, cultures, and societies sometimes differ greatly in matters of moral judgment. A commonplace of the social sciences, this purely factual position may be called “cultural relativism,” i.e., the recognition of cultural relativity, plurality, and diversity.¹³ However, ethical relativism, properly so called, goes beyond such well-documented sociological points. It is, rather, a philosophical view holding that moral judgments differ not only in fact, but also in principle. That is, the ethical relativist holds that there is no way of establishing any fundamental moral position as true, and contrary ones as false—indeed, that there is no way of even rationally preferring one over another.

It may be noted, incidentally, that relativism also receives support from the non-cognitivist theories mentioned above: if moral judgments are mere expressions of emotion, or simply articulate subjective choices, how could they claim to have universal and rational significance?

Another source of relativism is the philosophical view, originating in Europe but also prominent in this country, called *postmodernism*. As its very name suggests, postmodernism is a movement of thought that rejects aspects of “modern” philosophy—i.e., philosophy from the time of Descartes (1596 – 1650) to the early 20th Century. In particular, postmodernists reject this period’s tendency toward rationalism and the pursuit of certainty in all matters, including matters of ethics.¹⁴ Now, as we shall see in part 1 of our book, the “great tradition” endorsed by Pope John Paul II does *not*, strictly speaking, involve a rationalist approach. Indeed, the late pope himself suggested that at least some of postmodernism’s currents “merit appropriate attention.” (Ibid., sec. 91.) Still, since perennial thinkers adopt a type of realism toward ethics, various forms of postmodernism indeed are inhospitable. Examples would be the views developed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and the American philosopher Richard Rorty.¹⁵ These thinkers have held that human meaning and human judgments inevitably are embedded in particular cultural modes of understanding, and accordingly that there is no “privileged” point from which one can presume to assess the judgments of those who do not share one’s cultural presuppositions.

Whatever its source or sources, ethical relativism clearly is a major challenge to the realist morality promoted by perennial philosophy, as well as by most versions of Christian faith. Indeed, just before his election as pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who

was to become Pope Benedict XVI) warned his fellow cardinals of the Catholic Church about what he called a “dictatorship of relativism” now present in Western culture.

A somewhat different set of challenges to a Christian and realist moral philosophy come from the movements of thought termed *historicism* or *progressivism*, and *secularism*.¹⁶ The former hold that ideas (including moral and philosophical ideas) appearing later in human history will be better than those occurring earlier; or that human thought (including moral and philosophical thought) inevitably makes progress. In certain cases, progressivism is bound up with a conviction that—the non-cognitivism mentioned earlier notwithstanding—the natural and/or social sciences themselves can give rise to well-grounded normative statements. Indeed, in their normative views, progressivists often will support an ungoverned recourse to technology to resolve personal and social ills—thus prompting John Paul II to write of such thinkers (*Fides et ratio*, sec. 88) that they “think that if something is technically possible it is therefore morally admissible;” and again that, god-like, they tend to regard what is natural as mere starting points for whatever effects they seek to produce.

The word “secularism” comes from the Latin *saecula*, meaning “the ages;” secularists hold that the only genuine issues (or the only issues about which humans should be concerned) relate to matters of this temporal world.¹⁷ It should be noted in this regard that *secularism* is to be distinguished from *secularity*. The latter involves recognizing the autonomous significance of temporal values, even if these in some way depend on things that are “higher”—e.g., because they are given by the “Author of Nature” or God. (It may be noted that the founding documents of the American republic—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States—

adopted a principle of secularity, although in general the “Founding Fathers” were religious men who were very far from being secularists.)

Regarding these various challenges, we have seen that perennial philosophers such as Maritain promote genuine progress, including, certainly, in moral thought. Moreover, as will become apparent from discussions in part 1, our own approach certainly recognizes the need for a philosophically based account (in addition to, if not instead of, a religiously based account) of life in political communities. But progressivism and historicism overlook core elements of continuity and commonality in people’s moral experience across time-periods—e.g., the perceived need for a steady pursuit of justice and for the preservation of the goods of community life. Moreover, as we shall see, the perennial tradition itself pursues in a philosophical manner the recognition of God or the “Author of Nature.” Thus our ethical theory will seek to develop political applications that accord with the beliefs of the American Founding Fathers, rather than with the secularism which, in recent times, has come to challenge those beliefs.

In the view of John Paul II, the various “-isms” mentioned above, taken together, ultimately lead to a position called *nihilism*. This term, deriving from the Latin *nihil* (meaning, literally, “nothing”) represents the idea that human life, and indeed the entire universe, is totally without intrinsic significance. The consequences of accepting this position, according to the late pope, are grave. As he expressed the point in *Fides et ratio*, sec. 90, nihilism prevents us from recognizing “the very ground of human dignity;” thus we are led “little by little either to a destructive will to power or to a solitude without hope.”¹⁸ As even a little acquaintance with the events of the 20th and now 21st Centuries

makes clear, both these attitudes have profoundly affected world events. The question for students of the perennial tradition is whether these “nihilistic” attitudes can be addressed, and effectively countered, by philosophical thought—especially when the dominant philosophies of the day tend to be non-cognitivism, postmodernism and secularism.

Another pair of challenges to the type of moral theorizing called for by John Paul II should be mentioned; these arise, not from features of modern intellectual culture, but from a particular understanding of religious faith itself. These challenges often are termed *fideism* and *fundamentalism*. The word “fideism” comes from the Latin word for “faith” (*fides*); a Christian who holds the view in question believes that all answers to moral questions, theoretical and practical, already are contained in the Bible—or they can be derived from the Bible by its religious adherents. Somewhat similarly, a Christian fundamentalist holds that the teachings of the Bible are literally true in all their parts; and that they provide, in themselves, a secure and self-sufficient foundation for moral thought and action.¹⁹ Persons holding these views are likely to regard moral philosophy as at best unnecessary, and at worst subversive of the faith and practice of those who undertake it. (Incidentally, it should be obvious that fideism and fundamentalism are not restricted to Christianity: other religious traditions, e.g., Islam, can be and sometimes are presented in such a way as to discourage rational reflection.)

In addition to the above meta-ethical issues, which must be addressed by *any* positive philosophical approach to ethics, other challenges to perennial thought arise from opposed normative views. For example, the influential modern theories called “deontology” and “utilitarianism” offer accounts of moral goodness and moral rightness

which are, in important respects, incompatible with those of Aristotle and St. Thomas. Utilitarianism proposes that all considerations relevant to moral decision-making can be reduced to the consequences of acts; strict deontology, by sharpest contrast, proposes that adherence to duty, values, or moral principles—rather than the consequences of acts—uniquely determines moral quality. (These and other competing normative views will be discussed in greater detail in section 1.3.) Further, the theories collectively called “political liberalism” typically understand the value of personal freedom and its relation to truth (including truth about the human person) quite differently from John Paul’s “great tradition.” (Liberalism—both sound and unsound versions—will be taken up in section 1.7.) Moreover, it seems obvious that such differences at the theoretical level at least in part account for the highly contested nature of the various topics in applied ethics (norms of sexual behavior, end of life medical decision-making, acceptable means of pursuing justice, etc.).

Let us conclude this Introduction by re-emphasizing two points made earlier. First, given the difficulty of and the complex relationships among the various levels of questions in ethics, we should recognize that such questions literally call for a lifetime’s reflection. During this course, however, students should be able to make a good start on this reflection. Secondly, although the moral theories and conclusions articulated in the following pages have taken shape under the inspiration of Christian faith, there is nothing specifically religious about them. In a few places—which will be clearly marked—we shall pursue points of moral theology; for the rest, our presentation will be entirely philosophical. Indeed, it will constitute an important objection to our arguments,

precisely as philosophical, if it appears that they depend in whole or in part on propositions that must be accepted as matters of religious faith.

With these discussions as background, we now are in position to study moral philosophy and ethics in the perennial tradition. As we have indicated, the former will be our subject-matter in part 1; there follow, in part 2, investigations of a range of topics in applied ethics.

Summary

- Ethics as a discipline is distinguishable from other general studies of morality (e.g., sociological or psychological) because it typically contains a normative element; that is, ethics articulates views about what constitute proper behaviors, genuine human values, etc.
- We can distinguish three levels of discourse related to ethics. The first—not a formal part of the discipline itself—concerns unique, individual matters of choice and action; the others concern, respectively, more general normative statements (e.g., about the morality of particular types of practice), and the articulation and if possible the justification of overall moral perspectives.
- Moral philosophy consists in general theorizing, both normative and meta-ethical, that is rooted in common human experience and modes of reasoning; in this it contrasts with moral theology, which draws on statements accepted as matters of religious faith.
- The “perennial tradition” upholds a realism regarding ethics; this

tradition originated with the ancient Greek philosophers (especially Aristotle); it continued in the Medieval period with prominent thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas; and it is in the process of revitalization by writers of the 20th and now 21st Centuries.

- A number of challenges confront the perennial approach to ethics today. Some of these come from opposed meta-ethical views (e.g., relativism and non-cognitivism, as well as religious fideism); others come from conflicting judgments about general normative questions (e.g., those made by utilitarians and certain types of liberals).

Questions for Reflection

1. Explain our diagram (Figure 1), including its vertical arrows, as a representation of the discipline of ethics. Take a specific moral topic and indicate what you take to be the most relevant questions that arise concerning it from the standpoints of both normative theory and meta-ethics.
2. Explain, by way of examples, why judgments about concrete, individual matters are not considered part of the discipline of ethics. Continuing with your examples, discuss how answers to questions of normative theory might nonetheless aid an individual or society in making such concrete moral choices.
3. Explain Maritain's account of "perennial philosophy." How, in the view of John Paul II, is it possible for this tradition of thought to be genuinely philosophical, rather than theological, even though the thinker himself or herself may operate under the

influence of Christian faith? Does this view of the late pope's view seem to be correct? Why or why not?

4. Why, according to John Paul, are metaphysics and philosophical anthropology especially important for ethics? Does it seem reasonable to hope that correct philosophical theorizing can, in the late pope's words, help "correct certain mistaken modes of behavior now widespread in our society"? Explain.

5. Of the various challenges to the perennial tradition of ethics outlined above, which strike you as the most important and/or most difficult to address? Why?

Notes

¹ Throughout this text, English words and phrases introduced in *italics* receive entries in the Glossary. Those entries themselves are largely based on accounts given in the surrounding sentences. (Regarding the present words, it should be noted that "moral" and "morality" have a second meaning as well, one that conveys approval of an act or practice; see section 1.5 below on the "determinants or sources of morality.")

² For a fuller account of the normative and meta-ethical branches of ethical theory, see, e.g., William Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973); and Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

³ For a companion volume that focuses on the latter types of issues, see the author's *Understanding Our Being: Introduction to Speculative Philosophy in the Perennial Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

⁴ John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* [On the Relation Between Faith and Reason], Vatican Translation (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998).

⁵ As noted in *Fides et ratio*, sec. 9, this distinction was formally articulated by the First Vatican Council in the document *Dei Filius*, IV.

⁶ The 20th C. Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain seems to have held this view; he said that the principles of what ultimately constitutes the moral life must be borrowed by the philosopher from theology. See *Science and Wisdom*, trans. by Bernard Wall (New York: Scribner's, 1940). For a critique of this view by a more recent Catholic philosopher, see Ralph McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993). A related point also should be noted: Many writers, especially within Protestant Christianity, speak of "Christian ethics." This phrase will not be much used in the present book, due to its extreme ambiguity. On one hand, "Christian ethics" can refer to what we have identified as moral theology: it has been so used by scholars such as the late Paul Ramsey and current Duke University professor Stanley Hauerwas. On the other hand, this phrase can designate what we have identified as moral philosophy undertaken under the inspiration of Christian faith. The aforementioned Ralph McInerny, as well as the late Yves R. Simon (see n. 8, below) and Karol Wojtyła (in his days as a philosophy professor), would be "Christian ethicists" in this latter sense.

⁷ Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945), 2.

It is noteworthy that John Paul heads his own treatment of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas with the Latin phrase *Perennis Sancti Thomae Aquinatis sententiarum novitas*

—with the Latin *perennis* expressing the enduring validity of this tradition, and *novitas* expressing its originality. (*Fides et Ratio*, heading for secs. 43 - 44.)

⁸ See Maritain's *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, 1990 [French original 1950]); and *Moral Philosophy: A Historical and Critical Survey of the Great Systems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964 [French original 1960]). See Simon's *Practical Knowledge*, ed. by Robert J. Mulvaney (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990); *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, ed. by Vucan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986); and *The Tradition of Natural Law*, ed. by Vukan Kuic, with an Introduction by Russell Hittinger (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992). And see McInerny's *The Question of Christian Ethics and Ethica Thomistica*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993 and 1997).

⁹ The various "isms" mentioned in these pages should be regarded as general types; it is not necessarily the case that thinkers associated with them hold exactly the views presented. However, as general types these forms of thought exercise wide influence in contemporary Western culture.

¹⁰ See Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Dover Publications, 1952); and Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964).

¹¹ See Sartre's widely-read essay "Existentialism Is a Humanism," reprinted in Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie, eds., *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹² See Harman's article "Moral Relativism Defended," in *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975), reprinted in Louis J. Pojman, ed., *Ethical Theory*, 4th ed. (Belmont, Ca.:

Wadsworth/Thomson, 2002). See also Harman's book *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹³ An early and very influential writer who documented facts about cultural pluralism and diversity was the anthropologist Ruth Fulton Benedict. See, for example, her book *Patterns of Culture*, recently republished with the sub-title "an enduring classic" (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006).

¹⁴ The 17th Century philosopher Baruch Spinoza famously held that ethics could proceed in the manner of geometry (Latin *more geometrico*). See his *Ethics*, reprinted in *Ethics and the Improvement of the Understanding*, trans. by R. H. M. Elwes, intro. by Heidi Ravven (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005).

¹⁵ See Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); and *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). And see Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); and *Truth and Process* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁶ A prominent American progressivist was John Dewey; the normative dimensions of his ideas, suggested below, will be discussed in section 1.3.

¹⁷ Among a vast array of contemporary secularists, one might mention John R. Searle; see his *Mind, Language, and Society: Doing Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

¹⁸ According to many scholars, a precursor of modern nihilism was the late-19th Century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. And, in fact, he seems to have coined the expression "will to power" used in this papal passage. See his *The Will to Power*, ed. and

trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1968). (It should be noted that this book was not prepared for publication by Nietzsche himself. He had intended to do so, but he abandoned the project. Thus the texts gathered under this title are selected by editors from Nietzsche's notebooks, and in some places are amended for the sake of continuity.) For another discussion by Nietzsche of the "will to power," see his *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), esp. nos. 43 – 44.

¹⁹ Fideism and fundamentalism are most often associated with Protestant thinkers such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. See, for example, the latter's *The Divine Imperative* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1979).