

## CHAPTER 1 ETHICS: WHAT IT IS, DOES AND ISN'T

Let's say that one day your teacher comes into class and schedules a major examination for the next day, thereby breaking a promise to give you two week's warning for any exam. What's your reaction? Or suppose you find out that your roommate has been "borrowing" money from your wallet without asking? Or what if someone stole a term paper you just finished and turned it in under his name?

You'd surely react to these incidents with anything from annoyance and anger to outrage. You'd accuse your teacher of being "unfair" and you'd use a few choice words to make your point. You might forgive your friend, but you'd be upset by what he or she did. And you'd probably want the paper-thief drawn and quartered in front of the administration building. Although these incidents are very different, you'd certainly dislike something in each one and wish that these people had acted differently.

On the other hand, think about your reaction if your teacher cancelled the exam because someone reminded him of his promise. Or how would you feel if a friend went out of her way to help you out of a tight spot? You'd probably say your teacher had acted properly in keeping his word and that your friend had been a good friend. No doubt you'd think these people acted in some positive way, and that these actions were better than the first set we talked about.

If you think about it, you'll notice that most of us evaluate people's actions all the time. Maybe it's something big like theft or heroism. Perhaps it's a small favor or a broken date. But as humans we naturally measure the way people around us act.

This is a short guide in which I hope to help you learn how to judge the morality of actions in a more sophisticated, rigorous and clear-headed way than you have before. Specifically, it's an essay about ethics because we're going to be looking at how we evaluate whether actions are right or wrong. When it comes down to it, that's really all that ethics is about--evaluating actions. When we do ethics, we make judgments about how right or wrong our own and other people's actions are.

We'll start off (in this chapter) with some general discussion about ethics--what it is, how it's done, and so on. We'll move on to develop what we might call an "ethical yardstick"--a basic standard we can use in evaluating actions (chapter 2, "An Ethical Yardstick"). We'll then take a careful look at a couple of ways we can use this yardstick in practice (chapters 3, "Measuring Consequences," and 4, "Measuring Actions"). Next we'll talk about why we should bother to worry about the morality of what we do (chapter 5, "Doing Right--Why Bother?"). And we'll end by applying all of this to a moral dilemma (chapter 6, "Cheating--An Ethical Dilemma").

If you're patient with the process, you'll learn a new and interesting way of measuring what people do. In fact, my goal is to introduce you to a world that's invisible and intangible and show you that if you put your mind to it, you can weigh, measure, juggle and manipulate invisible things as effectively as if they were chairs and tables.

## PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS

Let me begin with two propositions you'll probably reject: (1) ethics is something totally new to you, and (2) the ideas you currently have are really a mass of confusion.

Although ideas of right and wrong have been part of your life since infancy, almost none of you has been exposed before to philosophical ethics. Parents, teachers, preachers, friends and associates try to shape our conduct and beliefs, but most of them don't use a philosophical approach. They cajole, coddle, argue, encourage, bribe and sometimes even threaten us into accepting their ideas or toeing the line. They'll often try to reason with us, but frankly they usually don't do it very well. Doing really hard, intense and disciplined thinking about right and wrong is something new and different.

You probably don't see it that way. You have deeply held beliefs about right and wrong that you try to live by. You figure that everyone's entitled to his or her own ideas. And you probably think that's all that ethics is about. Ethics is about right and wrong, but your ideas about ethics may still be a "mass of confusion."

When it comes to ethics, this "mass of confusion" is the conglomeration of beliefs, feelings, traditions and ideas we're saddled with after all the people who oversee our childhood get through with us. Lots of our beliefs are going to be completely emotional--we believe something is wrong because we feel guilty when we do it. Others are practical--we get in trouble with the law or some other authority if we get caught. Still others depend on pleasing other people--we follow the beliefs of our parents because we want their approval or we go along with what our friends do so they'll continue to like us.

Your ideas about ethics are probably also contradictory. We may say think one thing, but do another. ("Yeah, stealing is wrong. But skipping out of a restaurant without paying the check isn't stealing. It's fun.") Perhaps we have one set of rules for ourselves and another set for others. ("It's o.k. for me to cheat on my girlfriend, but it'd be wrong if she saw some other guy.") Maybe we believe what our religion says about right and wrong and know we should feel guilty after doing something wrong. But we also know that we can feel really good after getting away with some pretty serious sinning.

At this point in your life, you probably don't really have a consistent set of values or really know why you believe as you do. You'd be hard pressed to get someone who just as sincerely disagreed with you to change her mind. And you might not even be able to explain very convincingly what you take to be the difference between right and wrong.

So my aim is to make philosophers out of all of you--people who can slog through that mush, put it in order, think about it clearly, understand why you believe what you do, and explain your beliefs to others. If you work at it, you'll get there. All it takes is patience and practice.

## ETHICS: WHAT IS IT?

The simplest way to explain what ethics does is to say that it evaluates human actions. But ethics obviously isn't the only enterprise that evaluates behavior. Law divides actions into "legal" and "illegal" and tells us that if we disobey its orders we'll land in jail, pay a fine or lose some privilege. Religions advise us what to believe and how to act if we want to please God, achieve eternal happiness or avoid the fires of Hell. Psychiatry explains the difference between behavior that's "normal," "neurotic" and "psychotic."

Medicine gives us a yardstick for deciding how "healthy" our behavior is. Business, how "profitable."

But with so many different ways of measuring human behavior, how is ethics different? What is ethics and does it have anything special to contribute that we don't find in law and religion?

### **Ethics**

Ethics (or moral philosophy) is a branch of philosophy that dates back two thousand years to Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher who spent his days walking around the Athenian marketplace making a pest of himself by challenging people to think about how they lived their lives. As Socrates explained it, he believed that his mission was to ask his fellow citizens, "Are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom and truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" Believing that "the most important thing is not life, but the good life," Socrates died rather than use unscrupulous ways to avoid being executed on trumped-up charges.

What Socrates examined was simply human behavior, and that's really all that ethics looks at. But as we can see from the original meanings of "ethical" and "moral," this includes both what people do and how they do it.

"Ethics" and "morals" come to us from two words in ancient Greek and Latin, *ethos* and *mores*; both mean "character."\* When we ask if an action is ethical, we can think of ourselves as wondering if it's the sort of thing somebody with a "good character" would do. And when we say that Alex has a good character, we don't mean just that we trust her to do the right thing--to keep her promises or be kind. We're also saying something about the way she does things. Alex keeps her word because it's the right thing to do, not ---

J\*K\*Throughout this handbook, I'm going to use "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably. Some people distinguish between them, but I don't find all that much difference. Both words refer to something connected with right and wrong. So don't get confused when you see me switching between the two of them.

because she wants to impress people. She gives to charity out of generosity, not because it's a tax dodge. You're generally unimpressed if George keeps his promise only with people bigger than he is or if Dorothy is helpful only when there's an audience around. So when we ask if someone's acting "ethically," we're asking something about both what that person is doing and how he or she is doing it.

Although evaluating what we do is the common aim of ethics, people tag actions with a host of labels in making ethical judgments. The most common are "right," "wrong," "good" and "bad." Sometimes we hear "moral" and "immoral," "ethical" and "unethical," "morally justifiable" and "morally unjustifiable." Other times people refer to particular virtues and talk about "just" and "unjust," "fair" and "unfair." Some people choose a more religious language and talk about "righteous" and "sinful," "good" and "evil," and "sacred" and "profane." Nonetheless, no matter how we refer to it, we usually just start with a basic distinction between two things--one positive, the other negative.

In some of life's arenas, we don't have much trouble figuring out the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. You can separate "legal" from "illegal" by looking at law books. In the same way, if you work for a company which allows only a certain number of sick days, all you have to do is look at the policy manual to find out how much time you can take off before you get into trouble.

But what kind of a judgment are we offering when we say that an action is acceptable or unacceptable from an ethical viewpoint?

To my mind, this is the most basic question in ethics. And because it's so important I'm going to need some space to answer it. In fact, I'm going to need all of the next chapter. I'm also going to need the rest of this chapter to set the stage. First, I'll tell you a little about what ethics is--its connection with philosophy. But then I'm going to have to say a whole lot more about what it isn't. Then in the next chapter we'll look at what goes on when we evaluate the ethical character of an action, that is, when we make some judgment about how right or wrong it is.

### **Ethics and Philosophy**

One of the first things to keep in mind is that ethics is a part of philosophy. And like any part of philosophy, ethics uses reason, logic, concepts and philosophical explanations to analyze its problems and find its answers. Philosophical questions are abstract or conceptual, so the most important tool to use is your mind.

Philosophical problems don't arise because you lack empirical data, so they aren't going to be solved by just digging up some facts. The facts of a case certainly count in doing ethics, but assembling the empirical data is only a preliminary first step. If you want to convince someone that your teacher was "unfair" in scheduling a surprise exam, the facts aren't as important as what you mean by "fair" and "unfair" and how the facts fit your understanding of those concepts. The facts [(1) at the start of the term your teacher said he'd give you two weeks' warning; and (2) now he's giving you one day's notice] show that your teacher was "unfair" only if your notion of fairness covers something like "keeping your word."

Similarly, what laws, sacred writings or religious authorities say is not the final word in a strictly ethical investigation. Some illegal actions are quite ethical (breaking the speed limit while rushing a dying friend to the hospital) and many immoral actions are perfectly legal (misleading someone about how you feel about them just to get them into bed with you). The Pope's judgment about abortion may settle the issue for Roman Catholics, but it doesn't make it wrong for members of other religions.

So more important than facts, laws or precepts is what you do with them with your mind. Whenever you do ethics, you use your mind to analyze the actions in question and the consequences of different courses of action. You analyze the relevant ethical concepts and see how they apply to the case. And when you come to some conclusion, you use your mind to craft an explanation or argument that lays out your analysis and explains your point of view. In ethics, what counts most is making judgments. What counts most is what you think.

There are two ways to understand that last sentence: "What counts most is what you think" and "What counts most is what you think." And I want us to look closely at each one of them because they tell us a lot about what ethics isn't. (And it's easier to see what ethics is after you've seen what it isn't.)

### **WHAT ETHICS ISN'T**

Ethics and emotion--"What counts most is what you think"

The first way to take the sentence we're talking about is, "What counts most is what you think." Not what you feel, but what you think. Many people have gotten into the habit of using the two as though they mean the same thing, saying both "I feel happy" and "I feel that stealing is wrong." But there's a big difference between thinking and feeling, and it's especially important to keep this straight in what we're doing.

The simplest way to put this is that feeling-statements describe only our own internal, private, emotional or physical states: "I feel happy," "I feel angry," "I feel depressed," "I feel like I'm in love," "I feel hot," "I feel cold." Also, if you tell me that you feel unhappy or warm, I must simply accept that as your description of what it feels like from the inside. I can't debate it. It would be ridiculous for me to say, "No, you don't feel unhappy" or "You shouldn't feel unhappy." For whatever reasons, you do feel unhappy and that's all there is to it. If I care about you I might ask "Why do you feel unhappy?" Maybe there's something I can do to cheer you up or perhaps talking about your unhappiness would make you feel a little better. But I'm not asking you to justify your unhappiness to me, to defend why you're entitled to feel that way. Your feelings legitimately exist in and of themselves, and that's all that matters.

We really shouldn't use feeling-statements to express our ethical convictions, then. Strictly speaking, if I say, "I feel that capital punishment is morally wrong," I'm saying that something about capital punishment makes me uneasy, unhappy or distressed. What I should say instead is "Capital punishment makes me feel upset." But, of course, that kind of statement doesn't explain my moral evaluation of capital punishment very well. So if you and I want to say something's "wrong," we've got to talk differently. We've got to use thinking-statements.

Thinking-statements are very different than feeling-statements. They communicate an opinion we hold for specific reasons, reasons that we should be willing to make public. If someone says to you, "I think it's wrong if a man hires a pretty, young girl as his secretary instead of a more experienced, but less attractive older woman," you're entitled to ask "Why?" and get an explanation.

Since I've explained that the main tools of philosophical ethics are reason, logic and arguments, you won't be surprised to hear that in ethics we're going to depend more on thinking than feeling. When you analyze an ethical problem I'll expect you to use your mind, not your heart, to be prepared to give reasons for your position, to listen to someone who disagrees with you, to consider the merits of what they say and to have an intelligent response.

Like any serious intellectual inquiry, ethics is a public enterprise. We're all expected to state publicly the reasons for what we believe so that other people can scrutinize our arguments and either be convinced by us or show us our mistakes. It's all up front. It's just like a scientist who runs an experiment. She publicly reports her findings so that her colleagues can either confirm his work or refute her. Inquiries after truth have to be public so that people can talk about the ins and outs of what's going on.

If I want to convince you that cheating on a test is morally wrong, I can't say just that it makes me upset when people cheat and leave it at that. If you hold the opposite view, there's no reason why my belief would make you change your mind. I must give you reasons that you find relevant and convincing. If both of us make our reasons public, we can scrutinize each other's evidence, and, if all goes well, come to some agreement. But even if we continue to disagree, we'll at least understand each other better and not think that our respective positions are arbitrary, self-serving or baseless-- unless that's what our explanations in fact reveal!

There are, after all, better and worse reasons for holding certain positions, and this is precisely what ethics aims to reveal by making everyone state their reasons. If I argue against cheating by pointing out that you would be gaining an unfair advantage over other students, I would be giving you an explanation worth considering. But if I say cheating is wrong because it lets too many students get high grades, I'm sure you can see that I haven't given any kind of reason for why it's wrong. And my position, then, wouldn't be worthy of your respect. But going public with our explanations is the only way we'll find out.

The biggest problem with feeling-statements is that we can't really argue with them. Feelings just have to be accepted. And if we can't argue about them, they won't get us very far in ethics. That's why I said, "What counts most is what you think."

We should also remember that people's emotions can change dramatically. On Monday we're in love with someone, on Tuesday we can't stand them, and on Wednesday we're back together. The first time we lie, we feel terribly guilty; the fifth time the guilt isn't so bad; and by the twentieth time we congratulate ourselves on how well we do it. How people feel about an action, particularly whether they feel guilty or not, doesn't really contribute much to an ethical investigation.

We should also not be misled by how sincerely people hold their beliefs. In the early years of this country, some people thought it was a good thing to burn "witches." Adolph Hitler sincerely believed that he was doing the world a favor by exterminating the Jews. More recently, terrorists who kill innocent people sincerely believe that they're doing the right thing. Sincerity is a wonderful human virtue, but it has absolutely nothing to do with being right.

Now all of this is not to say that human emotions are less important than reason or that they have no place in our lives. Feelings give color, taste and texture to our lives. And in some parts of life, like friendships and intimate relationships, we should pay more attention to our emotions than to our rational ideas.

Emotions even can be relevant to an ethical analysis. If you feel that lying is wrong, examining your feelings may show you what some of your reasons are. Your feelings may be based on specific points of objection--like your concern that the person being lied to is being manipulated. Or emotions may be important in ethics in a different way. Let's say we're weighing two murder cases. In one of them, the killer is a hit-man who calmly and professionally killed a major politician. In the other, your friend finally gets tired of being beaten by her husband and kills him in a furious rage. The difference in the emotional states of these two people is surely significant, and you may hold your friend less responsible for what she did. People's emotions affect why and how they do certain things. And this is relevant to analyzing and evaluating human behavior.

But we shouldn't put a lot of weight on how we react emotionally when deciding how morally acceptable an action is because our feelings will only cloud the issue. And we'll never get to the heart of the matter. A classic case of this is the way the abortion issue is being handled. Abortion's foes use sensationalistic films and photos of fetuses; its champions make stirring appeals to individual liberty and raise the grim specter of government regulation of our private lives. But so much emotion is stirred up that no one bothers to talk seriously about the central questions: What does it take for something to be a person? And does a fetus meet those criteria?

So remember. In ethics, what counts most is what you think.

Ethics and authority--"What counts most is what you think"

Now let's talk about the other way that sentence can be read.

One of the most important characteristics of philosophy is that it grants total authority to us as rational individuals. In a philosophical discussion--one based on reason, logic and argument--no special authority is granted to anyone or anything. A point is legitimate only if we agree that it is.

Let's imagine that I remark to a friend that it's o.k. to discriminate against illegal aliens--to pay them poor wages and work them long hours under bad conditions. It doesn't matter if Socrates himself miraculously appears and tells me that what I'm advocating is wrong. We should not grant his point

unless he convinces us with a decent explanation . . . but then Socrates would be the first to know this. He would give us his reasons, solicit our objections, consider and answer them. And this process would go on until we came to some agreement. The whole process works on discussion, disagreement, debate and the free assent of individuals. As I said, what counts most is what you think, not what some authority tells you to think.

Obviously, not all discussions are conducted with this kind of openness to disagreement and dissent. When some people are faced with a dilemma about how they themselves or someone close to them should act, they decide on the basis of how things have always been done. They appeal to the authority of tradition ("We've done it this way in my family for generations, and we're going to continue to."). Other people, notably parents, will sometimes simply appropriate a personal authority ("I'm your father and as long as you live under my roof, my word is law."). Still others will cite religious teachings ("The Bible teaches that adultery is a serious sin.").

What is common to all of these situations is that people are asking you to accept some authority as the final word on the matter. They are not trying to convince you or elicit your free consent that their position is correct. Appeals to authority are often accompanied by promises of rewards if you go along (your friends' approval, your parents' continued love) or threats of punishment if you disobey (ranging from being thrown out of the house to spending eternity being flame broiled). And as far as the authority is concerned, that's all there is to it. There's simply no talking about things.

I'm not going to argue that traditions, parental authority or religions are foolish and meaningless. However, if we don't reason with each other and instead try to manipulate one another by holding out rewards or threatening retaliation, we hardly treat one another with the respect we all deserve. Also, when you put together two groups of people who are absolutely sure they're right but hold opposite positions, you have a tinderbox. Both groups will have a low frustration threshold, and this makes for an explosive, potentially violent situation. As we read time and again in the pages of human history, when people get tired of using words against each other, and yet are still convinced they're right, they don't leave each other alone. They reach for weapons instead.

In any event, appeals to authority, threats or coercion have no place in philosophical ethics. As much as we might want to, there is never a time in an ethical disagreement with someone when we can throw up our hands in disgust yelling that further talk is useless and stomp away cursing that anyone who disagrees with us is just going to have to give in--or else! One of the great strengths of philosophical ethics is that there are always good reasons to keep talking. You might think of a new argument that will finally convince your adversary. You could be persuaded by her that you've been wrong all along. Or you may find some new common ground.

### **Ethics and the Individual**

Now having said all of that about "What counts most is what you think," I want to offer a caveat so that you don't take the idea too far. I'm not saying that everyone is his or her own sole and ultimate authority on ethical questions. Philosophical ethics doesn't amount to the attitude that: "All morality is subjective and relative to the individual. If I think something is right for me, that makes it right." The authority of the individual goes only so far here.

The biggest problem if you think like this is that it violates obvious ideas of equality. It elevates you above all the people around you. It lets you say that if something is good for you, then nobody else's interests count. And such a presumption of personal superiority and authority doesn't fit with a rational, philosophical approach. What happens to discussion, debate and mutual agreement with this attitude?

**The other problem with this approach is that it simply isn't rationally**

defensible. As soon as you place sole moral authority with the individual, you open the door for some terrible things to be done. If you say, "What's right depends on what the individual believes is right," you have absolutely no basis on which to condemn the actions of someone like Hitler. If a terrorist really believes that killing innocent people is right, how can you say that he's doing something wrong? If it all depends on the individual, why should your opinion count for more than his? Obviously, any system of ethics that can't condemn Hitler or terrorism leaves an enormous amount to be desired.

For all practical purposes, making the individual the ultimate moral authority reduces ethical disagreements to something akin to disputes about taste, likes or dislikes. You may have heard the Latin expression, "De gustibus non est disputandum"--"There's no arguing about taste." If someone's taste is different than yours, you simply have to accept it. Arguing won't change it because taste isn't a rational, intellectual matter.

There are major problems, then, in giving the individual this much authority in ethics.

### **Ethics and the Law**

A different authority that some people appeal to in discussions about ethics is the law. Many people think that something is "wrong" only if the law prohibits it; conversely, if the law allows it, it's o.k. However, this is an attitude that we also have to reject because the "legal" and the "moral" are two different things.

One of the best illustrations I know of the difference between "legal" and "moral" is in the classic western movie *The Magnificent Seven*. The story revolves around the plight of a small Mexican village being terrorized by a bandit. He and his gang regularly steal their crops and kill anyone who resists them. To protect themselves, the villagers hire (not surprisingly) seven gunfighters to come and help them. After the first gun battle, however, one of the seven (Vin) wonders whether they've taken on more than they can handle, and another suggests that they leave, abandoning the villagers to the bandit. The group's leader (Chris) reminds them all that they made an agreement with the villagers. Vin points out that it's not a contract that a court of law would enforce. But Chris replies that doesn't matter--they still have to stick by their word. The responsibility Chris feels is clearly "moral" not "legal."

There's good reason why people confuse the legal and the moral. Law gives us a yardstick to measure our actions against and it punishes people whose behavior falls short. And law does punish many actions that are morally wrong: murder, rape, theft, blackmail and the like.

But there are problems with making the law an ultimate standard of right and wrong. The law allows many actions that are morally offensive (manipulating people or lying to your friends). It prohibits things that might be morally neutral or even positively good (certain sexual practices). And it is changeable and contradictory.

For nearly two centuries the laws of this country allowed terrible things to be done to Black Americans. The laws first let them be owned, used and abused as property. Even after these people were emancipated the laws still allowed them to be discriminated against. The South African system of apartheid is built on legal foundations. And the ritual denial of fundamental human freedoms to the citizens of the Soviet Union is performed in accordance with its law codes.

Furthermore, when laws change, what was permitted on Monday can be punishable on Tuesday. Abortion used to be illegal; now it's allowed. If its opponents have their way, it will be proscribed again. It may make sense in terms of our system of government that abortion was "illegal" in 1972 and

"legal" in 1973, but it's nonsense to say that the same action done by the same people in the same way for the same reasons is "morally right" one year and "morally wrong" the next.

The coercive power of the law or of majority opinion may be able to tell us what we can or can't do with impunity. But it cannot serve as a reliable guide to morality.

### **Ethics and the Religion**

As long as we're talking about authority and personal feelings, there's one other issue I want to bring up before getting into the main material we're going to study. And that's religion.

Most people in this country probably associate ideas of right and wrong with religions more than anything else. This is understandable since one of the main functions of religion is to advise people how to live.

Having been religious in a conventional way earlier in my life and now being religious in an unconventional way, I can appreciate how important religions are to people who believe in them. They comfort and protect us in a way that no government, school, business or other earthly institution can match. In the face of human hatreds, the threat of nuclear destruction, a universe exploding headlong into infinity, and our own storm tossed days, religions give us a sense that life isn't quite as bleak as it seems. The world becomes ordered and purposeful, and we have our own special, protected niche. The winds aren't quite so biting, the bumps less jarring.

However, for the sake of learning the skills associated with a philosophical analysis of ethical problems, I'm going to exclude considering what a religious approach to ethics looks like.

I'm doing this for three reasons. First, religious ethics and philosophical ethics are two different enterprises. The one is spiritual, the other intellectual. Second, when religions make moral pronouncements, they often speak the language of authority or feeling. And this puts us outside the realm of public discussion and philosophical ethics. And third, some people in this country believe that you can't be ethical unless you're religious. I aim to show that this isn't true. Using a philosophical approach to ethics gives you insight into the moral character of actions, reasons for being ethical, and the ability to find some common ground on which to argue intelligently with anyone about controversial issues in morality. After all, while an atheist won't be convinced by the teachings of a spiritual leader or the Bible, he or she will generally listen to secular points and intellectual arguments.

The main problem, however, is that the contributions of particular religions to discussions of right and wrong remain within the flock. Religions are built on faith, and if you don't accept certain fundamental teachings, you won't get much out of the ethical judgments offered by religious figures. Roman Catholic tradition gives considerable moral authority to the Pope, but if you're Lutheran, Jewish or Buddhist, the Pope's teaching probably isn't going to mean very much to you.

Most religious pronouncements about right and wrong, then, are founded on some idea other than that "What counts most is what you think." And for that reason, they're outside the province of philosophical ethics. Philosophical ethics is a decidedly secular enterprise.

When I say this, however, I don't mean that religious teachings have nothing to offer to a philosophical discussion. Examining a religion's teachings about sexual morality, for example, may reveal some points that are actually rational and secular. And these are certainly relevant to a philosophical discussion of an ethical dilemma. After all, every reason a spiritual leader gives isn't necessarily strictly religious or spiritual. In

fact, when I talk in chapter 5 about why any of us should bother worrying about the morality of what we do, I'm going to include something from one of the great teachers of the Christian church, Saint Augustine. Augustine isn't just a saint; he's an incredibly perceptive student of the human personality.

However, as a rule, religion and philosophical ethics don't have a lot to do with each other.

### CONCLUSION

At this point you may think you know more about what ethics isn't than what it is. But that's because so far I've just been trying to get you to unload some mistaken ideas you may have had about ethics. To review quickly, we've seen that:

--ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with evaluating how right or wrong human actions are;

--it does its work through making intellectual judgments on the basis of rational explanation and public discussion;

--the aim of an ethical argument is to get someone else to freely agree with you for good reasons;

--neither your own private emotions nor the authority of individual opinion, the laws, religious teachings or another person counts as much in philosophical ethics as what you think.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe the similarities and differences among the following statements:

- a. "You can't just punch out someone who insults you. It's against the law."
- b. "Honor thy father and thy mother."
- c. "We can't price that product at \$6. It'll put us in the red."
- d. I can't go to bed with you. I'll feel too guilty tomorrow."
- e. You shouldn't just take money from your roommate's wallet without asking first. That's wrong."

2. Think of something you believe is a clear case of something wrong. Come up with a completely rational and secular argument to explain why you think as you do.

3. Consider how effectively you could argue with the following people. What would you say to them to get them to change their minds? Would they change yours? What would your conversations be like? How would you feel in these situations?

a. A friend who says, "I know I said I'd help you with your paper Saturday, but I've got a really hot date. Look, I'd expect you to do the same if you were in my shoes."

b. A fellow student who says, "Sure I stole that textbook from the bookstore. But tuition's so high at this school, I figured they owed it to me."

c. Someone who is passionately committed to a particular cause who says, "The only way my people are going to be free is if the world knows we're serious. And they'll know that when we kill some innocent people to make our point. But this is war. And some innocent people always die in a war."

d. A devoutly religious person who believes in the Bible who claims, "God's law is explicit. `Thou shalt not commit adultery.' It's clearly wrong. I think that we should make adultery illegal and punish any offenders severely. If we clamp really down on adultery we'll be saving the souls of some people who would otherwise commit this terrible sin."

4. Are any of the following people doing anything morally wrong?

a. Luis is sitting at a red traffic light at 2 A.M. There's no traffic around and he can see that no cars are coming from any direction. Luis drives through the red light.

b. Ann's parents say that she may not date a particular guy. She disobeys them and sees him anyway.

c. Bill's religion teaches that killing is wrong. He comes upon someone trying to rape his girlfriend. In a furious rage, he kills the attacker.