THIRD EDITION

Digital Media Ethics

Chapter 6
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CHAPTER SIX

Digital Media Ethics: Overview, Frameworks, Resources

> Morally as well as physically, there is only one world, and we all have to live in it.
>
> (Midgley [1981] 1996, 119)

Chapter overview

This chapter provides especially those new to ethics with an overview of the most commonly used theoretical frameworks for ethical analysis and decision-making. We begin with (1) *utilitarianism* and (2) *deontology*. We then explore (3) important *meta-theoretical frameworks* of ethical *relativism*, ethical *absolutism* (monism), and ethical *pluralism*: these frameworks shape three critically different ways of interpreting what ethical *differences* may *mean* – beginning with cross-cultural differences in ethical norms and practices – and thereby how we can respond to these differences. We then turn to (4) feminist ethics and ethics of care, (5) virtue ethics, (6) Confucian ethics, and (7) African perspectives.

These theoretical and meta-theoretical frameworks constitute our "ethical toolkit" – a collection of important but diverse ways of analyzing and attempting to resolve ethical problems. Part of our work as ethicists is learning how to apply a given theoretical framework to a specific issue; and given the diversity of possible theoretical frameworks, we must also determine which frameworks are best suited for confronting and resolving specific ethical issues. The meta-theoretical frameworks of relativism, absolutism, and pluralism help clarify and guide these determinations.

A synopsis of digital media ethics

Much of the ethical reflection on digital media – most especially, on the ethical dimensions of information and communication technologies (ICTs) – arose alongside the technologies themselves. But this means that, until the last two decades or so, most of the discussion and reflection on digital media ethics took place primarily within Western countries, utilizing primarily Western ethical traditions and ways of thinking. To begin with, there is widespread agreement (Bynum 2000; Stahl, Timmermans, and Mittelstadt 2016, 3) that Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1950) stands as the first book in computer ethics. For over two decades, "computer ethics" was the concern of a very small group of professionals – principally computer scientists and a few philosophers. "Computer ethics" as its own term emerged only in the 1970s, mainly through the work of Walter Maner, but also manifest, for example, in the first professional code of computer ethics of the Association for Computing Machinery in 1973 (and subsequently revised – most recently in ACM [2018]). The introduction of the personal computer (PC) in 1982, however, began a dramatic expansion of the role of computers and computer networks into the lives of "the rest of us" – i.e., those of us who are not computer scientists or other sorts of information professionals, such as librarians (see Buchanan and Henderson 2008). Following the emergence of the internet and World Wide Web in the lives and awareness of most people in the developed world in the early 1990s, a number of savvy observers began to predict (rightly) that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, information and computing ethics (ICE) would become a global ethics – i.e., a domain of ethical issues, debate, and possible resolution, of concern to more and more people representing an increasingly global diversity of cultural norms and ethical and religious traditions (see Paterson 2007, 153). In fact, what is called "intercultural computing ethics" has been underway in ICE since the 1990s (Capurro 2005, 2008; Ess 2005; see Bielby 2015 for an overview).

Along the way, an important meta-ethical debate has emerged – and frequently arises again among those new to these now long histories. Briefly, will ICE, especially as it becomes globalized, require: (a) largely a continuation of traditional ethics, but now applied to new problems; or (b) a radical transformation of ethical thinking, as constantly evolving ICTs introduce us in turn to radically new ethical difficulties (see Bynum 2000; Tavani 2013, 9–12)? As is often the case, the eventual responses to such either/or possibilities rather constitute a "both/and": that is, *both* (a) *and* (b) are correct. On the one hand, there may well be specific instances that point toward the need for distinctively new approaches (Braidotti 2006). On the other hand, there are very many examples of how "everything old is new again" (Ess and Hård af Segerstad 2019). That is, despite often dramatic technological transformations, coupled with our ever-evolving and sometimes striking new practices, the familiar ethical frameworks and approaches continue to work quite well in many instances. For example, deontology and virtue ethics are central ethical pillars in European Union philosophy and policy developing around the emergence of AI and the Internet of Things (Burgess et al. 2018; Floridi et al. 2018). Virtue ethics and deontology, along with utilitarianism, are likewise core frameworks in the development of "ethically aligned design" by the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers), the largest professional and standards-setting organization in the world (https://ethicsinaction.ieee.org).

For us, the point is to be aware of this larger meta-ethical question and debate as we go along. Our reflections and responses to this question will affect (and be affected by) our ethical reflections regarding other digital media – including our basic conceptions of *selfhood*, as ranging from more individual through relational autonomies to largely relational, as these in turn interact with our background cultures.

Basic ethical frameworks

As we have seen in the opening chapter, "doing ethics" involves much more than a kind of "rule-book" approach – i.e., picking a set of principles, values, etc., and applying these in a largely deductive, algorithmic manner to a problem at hand. Rather, our central ethical difficulties are difficult largely because they require us first to determine *which* principles, values, frameworks, etc., best apply to a given problem – a determination that Aristotle attributed to *phronēsis* or reflective judgment. Developing such judgment requires our ongoing effort to analyze and reflect on both familiar and new experiences and problems. The good news is that our ethical judgments – at least, if we consciously seek to develop them in these ways – generally do get better over time. The daunting news is that developing such judgment is a lifetime's work, one that is never complete or final.

In point of fact, as an acculturated member of a culture and society, you already have a reasonably well-developed body of experience and practice with ethical analysis and judgments. The following will simply enhance the ethical toolkit you already have developed, by articulating some of the most central frameworks for ethical reflection, both Western and then non-Western ones.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION/WRITING EXERCISE: A STUDENT DILEMMA

It's Wednesday evening, and you're packing up some books and notes to take over to a friend's apartment. You have different majors, but you are both in the same section of a required course – and tomorrow is one of two exams given during the semester; your grade on the exam will count towards 40 percent of your final grade in the course.

For you, the course is not so hard, but your friend is really struggling. You've promised to help her study this evening;

you both need to get a good grade on the exam and in the course to keep your grade point average at the level required for your scholarships.

Just as you're walking out the door to go to your friend's apartment, a good friend calls you up and says that he and some of your buddies are at the local pizza place, having dinner and some beers. They'd really like you to come on over, in part because you owe them a round or two of drinks from the last time you got together. What do you do?

1. Utilitarianism

Most students in my experience approach this sort of problem in a consequentialist – perhaps even a utilitarian – way. That is, they will begin to figure out the costs and benefits of (1) turning down their buddies for pizza and beer, vs. the costs and benefits of (2) fulfilling the promise to help a friend study. One of the chief advantages of this approach is that we can set up a handy table to help us keep track of the positives and negatives. An initial analysis of our choices might look like the table on p. 220.

But, of course, there are additional positive and negative consequences of our choices that may seem relevant to our decision: e.g., if I help my friend, she will do better on her exam (and, most likely, so will I); if I go to have pizza and beer, I will certainly have a good time this evening but probably not do so well tomorrow in the exam. If we think further down the road, it may be that doing well in this exam will turn out to be a "make-or-break" event with regard to our success in the course: that is, should we both do well, we might subsequently end up with a better grade in the course; but, if we don't, then we might end up with less of a grade than we need in order to maintain our grade point averages for our scholarships, etc. The possible consequences even further down the road might be enormous – ranging from doing well in school more generally, moving on to a good job, etc., to (worst-case

scenario) losing needed scholarships, thereby being unable to complete school, thereby failing to be able to find a good and satisfying job, etc.

You get the point. For the consequentialist, the game of ethics is about trying to think through possible good and bad consequences of possible acts, and then weighing them against one another to determine which act will generate the more positive outcome(s).

Consequentialist analysis	**Possible actions**	
	Fulfill promise – study with friend	*Break promise – enjoy pizza and beer*
Costs (negatives)	Will miss a nice evening with friends … …	Will disappoint a friend who's counting on your help … …
Benefits (positives)	Will be able to help a friend in an important way … …	Will enjoy a nice evening with friends … …

Strengths and limits

Consequentialism is certainly a tried-and-true approach to ethics: it's at least as old as Crito's efforts in the dialogue named after him to persuade Socrates to break out of jail and thereby avoid execution by the Athenians. And especially in its utilitarian form – i.e., as developed in the modern era by Jeremy Bentham and further elaborated by John Stuart Mill, both of whom argued that we must pursue those acts that bring about the greatest positive consequences (pleasure) for the greatest number – the consequentialist approach has come to dominate ethical decision-making and is especially characteristic of especially in the United States and the United Kingdom (e.g., Stahl 2004). Certainly, there are many

cases in which consequentialism will do what we want an ethical theory to do – i.e., to help us determine which is the better choice of two (or more) possible actions.

But, as this example also suggests, consequentialist approaches face serious limitations. (We will also see this to be true of every other theory we examine: after we have reviewed all the theories under discussion here, one of our questions will be to see whether we can discern which theory – or, perhaps, which combination of theories – seems more sound, useful, justifiable, etc., than its competitors.) In my view, there are three important such limitations.

(a) How do we numerically evaluate the possible consequences of our acts?

In simple cases, this is not a problem. Either I go to get a new bus pass or I face walking to school on a cold winter day. Either I pay my phone bill or I find myself out of touch with friends and family, along with the loss of internet access more generally.

But the hard cases are hard in part as it's not always clear how we are to weigh the possible outcomes of one act against another.

Bentham famously thought that all possible consequences, as some form of pleasure or pain, could be evaluated in terms of their intensity and duration – for example, as part of a "hedonic calculus" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2015). Several nineteenth-century economists attempted to develop this calculus into a strictly quantitative one by introducing the notion of a "util" as a unit for measuring pleasure or pain (e.g., Sigot 2002). Ethical decision-making would then be a strictly arithmetic matter of adding up positive and negative utils.

But what if not everything can be measured solely in terms of pleasure or pain? What number of utils do we assign to an evening with friends, enhanced by the pleasures of food and drink? What number of utils do we assign to breaking

a promise to a friend, coupled with the knowledge that our breaking that promise may lead to further, perhaps very serious, consequences (= negative utils) for our friend?

Despite centuries of effort, however, it is very challenging indeed to establish in practice a relatively standard or quasi-objective scale of pleasure and pain – physical and/or psychological – that we can thus neatly quantify in terms of utils for such a hedonic calculus. But everything in consequentialism turns on assigning relative weights to given consequences: without some sort of agreed-upon scale or table of utils to draw on, consequentialism is paralyzed at the outset.

Moreover, as we will see shortly, deontologists argue that some aspects of human existence cannot be assigned quantitative values: some things, some of us believe, are beyond measure. And, for such elements, both consequentialist approaches in general and utilitarianism in particular (again) have no ethical legs to stand on: without a universal and consistent schema of positive and negative utils with which to make our calculations, the arithmetic at the heart of consequentialism cannot proceed. Moreover, in this case, for the deontologist, a promise is a promise; it thereby entails a (near-)absolute obligation. Breaking a promise, however much pleasure the promise-breaker might get as a result of doing so (starting with opening the door to pizza and beer), is still wrong.

(b) How far into the future must we consider?

Ethicists distinguish between short-term and long-term consequentialists. In this example, a (really) short-term consequentialist would consider only the consequences of his or her acts over the next few hours. For most of us – at least, if we're not allergic to gluten and if our religion or physiology does not forbid alcohol – pizza and beer with friends would generate more positive utils than studying for an exam (presuming, that is, that you really do not like the subject, etc.). By contrast, extending our timeframe by 24 hours might radically change our decision: whatever the positive utils of pizza and beer, they might well not outweigh the negative utils of letting down a friend and then watching as both of us do poorly in an important exam.

And so on. It's not inconceivable that, in 20 or 30 years, you and your friend might look back on this exam as a key moment in your lives – one that led (in the best of circumstances) to further academic and thereby vocational success, or (perish the thought) to academic failure and a lifetime of mediocre and unsatisfying jobs. The difficulty is: consequentialists and utilitarians do not appear to have a satisfying justification for telling us where in time to draw the line – the point after which we no longer need worry about the outcomes of our choices. But depending on where we draw this line can make all the difference in our calculations.

As this last point suggests, there's a second difficulty wrapped into the problem of how far into the future we must attempt to consider: the further into the future we seek to predict, the less reliable our predictions can be. And yet, some of those future consequences may be some of the most important for us in our lives. Worst case: the chances of realizing what may potentially be the most decisive consequences of our acts become increasingly (perhaps vanishingly) small the further into the future we seek to predict those consequences. (In my experience, much of the anguish we face in ethical decisions turns on our effort to approach them in a consequentialist fashion – only to realize that we cannot be very certain at all about some of the most important possible outcomes of our actions.)

(c) For whom are the consequences that we must consider?

The pizza and beer example takes into account only a small number of people. Bentham and Mill, by contrast, argued that consequentialism would work for whole societies. Up to a point, at least, this is plausible. In wartime, for example,

generals and political leaders think in clearly consequentialist terms. Choosing to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for instance, were relatively easy decisions for the Allied commanders. Dropping these bombs immediately cost something like 200,000 Japanese deaths – but, as hoped, it put an end to the war. A conventional land invasion was estimated to result in around 500,000 Allied soldiers' deaths (and at least as many Japanese soldiers). At a simple assignment of one positive util per life:

- to use atomic weapons: 500,000 + / 200,000 – = 300,000 + utils
- not to use atomic weapons: 200,000 + / 500,000 – = 300,000 – utils

But what about the impact of using these weapons on those who continued to live (and die) in areas contaminated by radioactive fallout? What about the impact of using these weapons on the larger ecosystem? On future generations?[1]

Attempting to take these possible consequences into account clearly makes the calculation much, much more complicated. Again, part of the problem is attempting to determine how far into the future we must predict relevant consequences. But the further problem is: where do I draw the line with regard to consequences affecting what group of persons / living beings / non-animate entities? As I hope is

1 Specifically, in the subsequent decades of the Cold War, the world has barely escaped massive nuclear annihilation – read: hundreds of millions of human lives lost immediately, not to mention even more extensive and long-term devastation of the larger environment. And this happened more than once, and sometimes only by dint of remarkable courage and the willingness to rely on one's human *judgment* rather than what early warning systems and computer analyses claimed: as in the example of the Soviet Lt. Colonel Stanislav Petrov in September, 1983 (Lewis et al. 2014, 13).

How would these possibilities, coupled with some degree of probability, figure into the hedonic calculus?

clear, where I draw that line can make an enormous difference in the possible consequences of an act – and, thereby, how I decide which of two (or more) competing choices I should pursue.

In particular, as digital media radically extend the range of the possible consequences of our actions (as dramatically illustrated in the example of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad; Debatin 2007), the question of "consequences for whom" becomes central. Unlike commanders in war, we cannot simply assume that the consequences of our actions are limited to the citizens of a given nation-state.

In the face of these sorts of difficulties and limitations, many people find that they cannot rely on consequentialism alone. They may want to retain consequentialist approaches for certain sorts of decisions – for example, when it is possible to make reasonably reliable predictions about the possible outcomes of our choices or when it is reasonably clear who will be affected, and within a specified timeframe. But, especially when this sort of insight and information are not available, they may turn to one or more of the following ethical frameworks.

2. Deontology

For deontologists, what stands out in our opening example is that you have made a promise. And promises – along with, say, notions of basic rights and duties – have a (near-)absolute quality to them: they cannot be overridden by considerations as to how much pleasure (or pain) might be gained (or avoided) by violating them.

Religiously grounded forms of deontology are perhaps most immediately familiar to contemporary Westerners. For example, if I am a Jew, Christian, or Muslim, I believe that God has given us specific commandments and laws which define right and wrong for me – no matter what the consequences. So, negatively, I am commanded not to murder, not

to lie, not to covet my neighbor's property, not to commit adultery, etc. Positively, I am commanded to love God and my neighbor – the Golden Rule that appears to be a universal, in fact. Hence, a religiously grounded deontologist would believe that it is wrong to lie – even if, by lying, he or she might be able to gain significant material reward.

As a still stronger example: religious pacifists – whether rooted in Judaism, Christianity, or some forms of Buddhism – take the sacredness of life (all life for the Buddhist, not just human life) as an absolute. Hence, for pacifists, killing other human beings (and, for many Buddhists, any living thing) is always wrong – no matter what the consequences. Such pacifists would not only reject the consequentialist thinking, for example, behind the decision to use atomic weapons in World War II; they would further reject the use of violence against others even in self-defense. For the religious pacifist, killing another is always wrong, no matter what the consequences – including the possible consequence of losing one's own life.

Non-religious consequentialist considerations can also support pacifism and/or conscientious objection more broadly. Socrates, for example, argues in Plato's *Republic* and *Crito* that doing violence or harm to another leads to an unacceptable form of literal *self*-destruction. Harming others is argued to work contrary to the central ability of reason to discern the good, and the ability (virtue) of judgment (*phronēsis*) to determine how to enact the good appropriate to specific contexts and circumstances. To work contrary to these functions of reason and judgment in turn runs the risk of degrading – perhaps ultimately paralyzing or destroying – these central abilities. And, if we degrade or destroy our ability to discern the good and judge what it means, we will thereby lose our ability to make the judgments needed to pursue a genuinely good life of contentment (*eudaimonia*) and harmony. Failure to achieve these, finally, makes our lives no longer worth living. Hence, the just or good person

will never harm another, no matter what sorts of other gains such harm might bring, because to do so risks making life no longer worth living (e.g., *Republic* 335b–335e).[2] However we understand the pacifism of Jesus and the early Christian communities, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., built on these Socratic and Christian roots (and, for Gandhi, the Buddhist virtue of *ahimsa* – nonviolence) to argue and practice nonviolent protest against unjust laws. Such nonviolence was intended not only to prevent harm to the selves or souls of its practitioners (one consequence) but also to awaken the conscience of the larger community (a second consequence), in hopes that the larger community would come to see the injustice of its behaviors, laws, etc. (consequence 3) and then replace these with more just ones (consequence 4).

But there are also rationalist deontologies – articulated most importantly in the modern era by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant is famous for the Categorical Imperative (CI). In contrast with a rule-book ethics, the CI marks out a *procedural* way of determining what actions are right. The first formulation of the Categorical Imperative states: "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle establishing universal law" (Kant [1788] 1956, 31). One of Kant's own examples from the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* ([1785] 1959) helpfully illustrates what this means. Consider the possibility of needing to borrow money – knowing full well, however, that you will not be able to repay the loan. You also know that, in order to get the loan, you have to promise to repay it (duh). Question: can you make what you know to be a false promise in order to secure the loan? For Kant, the *maxim* of this action would be: "When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know I shall never do so." But the Categorical Imperative requires that we ask: "How would it be if my maxim became a universal law?" (ibid., 40).

2 Plato references are to the Stephanus volume and page number.

This might well remind you of your parents asking you in high school: what if everyone did that? But, for Kant, what is at stake in this question is whether or not *the larger social order* that would result from everyone following the maxim of "make a false promise when it is convenient to do so" would be coherent – or logically contradictory. On Kant's analysis, attempting to universalize this maxim would become *self-contradictory*:

> For the universality of a law which says that anyone who believes himself to be in need could promise what he pleased with the intention of not fulfilling it would make the promise itself and the end to be accomplished by it impossible; no one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such assertion as vain pretense.
>
> (Ibid., 40)

Simply: if we knew that everyone would lie when convenient (the result of universalizing the maxim of our action), then we would never know when someone was telling us the truth. But a world in which we, by default, cannot trust one another to make promises in good faith – that is, to tell the truth when we promise one another, for example, to repay a loan – would be a world in which promises thus lose their meaning. Specifically, in this case, attempting to lie in order to acquire a loan I have no intention of repaying becomes *self-contradictory*: if *everyone* does it – that is, allows himself or herself to perform the same act (the result of universalizing the maxim at work here), then no one would accept my promise at the outset. But if I cannot universalize lying in this way – that is, make it a universal law acceptable for everyone – then for Kant it is wrong, even when it seems convenient or important. Again, it is always wrong, no matter what the consequences.

In our case, a Kantian analysis would ask the question: what sort of social/moral order would result if everyone were to break a promise whenever doing so would result in at least more immediate, short-term pleasure? Again, the result would be that we would never be able to trust anyone's promise – which would make promise-making self-contradictory and meaningless. Hence, breaking a promise is always wrong – no matter what the consequences.

Finally, Kantian deontology undergirds the widely shared belief that there are ethical absolutes such as human rights. The discussion and literature on rights is largely modern: so Thomas Jefferson, inspired by John Locke, insisted in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" ([1776] 1984, 19). The belief in human rights inspired the American and French revolutions – and, subsequently, many of the political transformations that define modern Western states. Most basically, if human beings are free (in Kant's language, autonomies), we must be recognized as equal and deserving of respect – that is, not slaves, not "just meat." Early Western and then more global struggles for establishing and expanding emancipation and equality, including nineteenth-century abolitionist and women's suffrage movements, turned centrally on these conceptions and arguments.

Indeed, the belief that rights are absolutes that must be recognized and protected is not simply a Western phenomenon. In 1948, the United Nations issued its Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a document that goes well beyond what some scholars call the first-generation or primarily negative set of rights articulated by Locke and Jefferson, to include second-generation or positive rights – for example, the rights to education and health care. These rights have been realized, for example, as duties of the state in Western Europe and Scandinavia, while the right to health care remains hotly disputed in the United States. In any event, a deontological notion of basic human rights has driven much of the political activism and transformation in modernity, both within and beyond the boundaries of "the

West," as Gandhi in India, and multiple other liberation movements, globally exemplify.

To be sure, these claims to univeralism have been critically challenged by feminists, and postmodernist and post-colonialist scholars (among others). These critiques must be acknowledged and evaluated: but, as with contemporary feminisms,[3] the complexities are beyond the bounds of this general introduction. At the same time, some of these critiques have become more subdued in light of subsequent developments. For example, we've seen contemporary feminists seek to preserve Kantian notions of autonomy and thereby rights – however importantly these are modified, for example in terms of *relational autonomies* – precisely for the sake of sustaining a central ground of argument for women's equality, respect, and emancipation. At the same time, recent work in cross-cultural psychology offers extensive empirical evidence for *shared* values and norms across cultures, thereby arguing again in the direction of some form of universalism (e.g., Schwartz 2015).

All of this will lead to central questions regarding how culture shapes our ethics – questions that are ever more pressing as digital media make cross-cultural communication increasingly commonplace.

Difficulties ...

To begin with, we may agree that consequentialism becomes suspect when it leads us to violate what we may take to be (near-)absolute human rights. That is, the utilitarian mantra of "the greatest good for the greatest number" argues that the sacrifice of the few for the good of the many is justifiable. We certainly make this argument in wartime, when soldiers, by definition, are those whose lives are potential sacrifices for the good of the many. But these days, we may be less

3 See note 4, below.

sympathetic to similar arguments that could be made, for example, regarding enslavement. That is, a utilitarian can argue that, just as it would be ethically justified to sacrifice a comparatively small portion of the population (soldiers) for the sake of the greater good, so we can justify the loss of certain freedoms and rights of a few (slaves) if we can show that these costs are overridden by the greater benefits such slaves would provide for the larger society. If we wish to argue against the utilitarian at this point, we may do so by reaching for some notion of (near-)absolute human rights – e.g., rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of property. If, as modern deontologists would argue, these rights exist and are (near-) absolute, then they may never be violated – for example, by turning some portion of the population into slaves – even if to do so might lead to greater pleasure and enjoyment on the part of everyone else.

Likewise, we might admire the courage of protesters – for example, during the civil rights movement of the 1960s or in more recent political protest movements around the world – who practice the nonviolent pacifism of a Gandhi or a King, sometimes with remarkable success. If we are deontologists, we would say that they are doing the right thing – even if it costs them great personal pain, and even if they are not always successful in gaining their intended political outcomes.

But many people are not always willing to accept a Kant-like absolute not to lie, for example. Sometimes, it seems quite clear that lying would be justified, for example if it were to save a life – and many lives, even more so.

In fact, Kant developed a more nuanced position in his later works, so as to make greater ethical room for deception: while we might deceive others for less than ideal reasons, as deception allows us to hide our more negative characteristics while nonetheless developing a more virtuous character, it can help us become better persons (Myskja 2008). As Kant's own transformation suggests, whether or not deontological approaches can consistently

make room for what appear to be justified and important "exceptions to the rule" is a central question for defenders of this approach.

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION/WRITING QUESTIONS: A FIRST GO AT ETHICAL THEORY

Given this initial overview of consequentialist vs. deontological approaches, review the initial example of promise-keeping vs. enjoying pizza and beer with friends. In particular:

(A) How did you initially analyze the dilemma – i.e., more as a consequentialist and/or more as a deontologist? (As the use of the "and/or" suggests, while there are sharp differences between the two positions, it is possible for us to use both in some combination or another.)

(B) Now that you've had a chance to review and explore these two frameworks, try applying them to another ethical dilemma – ideally, one affiliated with the use of digital media. In doing so:

  (i) Describe the dilemma as fully and accurately as you can.

  (ii) Explain what your own initial response to this dilemma might be. That is, what would you decide to do, and how would you decide what to do?

  (iii) Then apply each of these frameworks to the dilemma as best you can – perhaps with the help of cohorts and/or your instructor. Make clear how each framework leads to a given outcome or decision regarding possible acts or choices.

(C) Given the dilemma you choose to analyze, does the consequentialist approach lead to the same ethical conclusion as a deontological approach or to a different one? Especially if the outcomes are different, which outcome more closely fits with your own initial response to this dilemma (i.e., your response in B.ii)?

(D) Especially if your initial response/s mesh/es well with either a consequentialist and/or a deontological response, do you see any additional reasons, insights, arguments, analytical approaches, etc., offered by consequentialism and/or deontology beyond those that you initially used in approaching this problem?

What are these, and do you think that they may prove useful in approaching other ethical dilemmas as well? (In Kantian terms: can you universalize these – or are they just useful in this particular case?)

(E) Especially if the outcomes of these two different approaches are different, what does this difference mean? That is, are we forced, for example, to choose between one or the other approach, such that one is always right and the other always wrong?

If you say "yes," can you justify (provide good reasons, argument, evidence for) your response?

If you say "no," again, can you justify (provide good reasons, argument, evidence for) your response?

3. Meta-ethical frameworks: Relativism, absolutism (monism), pluralism

Ethical relativism

These contrasts between utilitarian and deontological ethics suggest, on first glance, a meta-ethical view called ethical relativism. That is, in the face of (often radically) different ethical frameworks and claims, it is tempting to believe that these differences must mean that there are no universally valid ethical norms, values, approaches, etc. Rather, all such norms, values, and approaches are valid only relative to (i.e., within the domain of) a given culture or group of people. Such ethical relativism is even more tempting as we gain

more knowledge and experience of how people live, think, and feel in cultures different from our own – a knowledge increasingly commonplace in a world ever more interconnected by digital media.

Ethical relativism offers two chief advantages. First, it fosters *tolerance* of the views and practices of Others (those who are different from ourselves). Such toleration is itself an important ethical *value*; generally, it seems, the world could do with much more tolerance of important ethical (and cultural) difference. Second, ethical relativism offers a certain kind of relief: if values and practices are always and only legitimate in relation to a specific culture, then we need look no further for values, practices, frameworks, etc., that might claim genuinely universal validity. This latter task is indeed hard (but, we will see, not impossible) work. Ethical relativism gives us the excuse and rationale we need to dismiss this task.

In my view, ethical relativism enjoys a third advantage: in some important instances, it *appears* to be true. For example, in Switzerland and Germany, guests are expected to show respect at a party by shaking hands with not only the hosts, but also all the guests, before leaving. In the US, there is no such compunction. For their part, people in the US often hug one another when greeting or departing – including university colleagues. Doing so in a Germanic culture, by contrast, is almost never appropriate. At first glance, then, there appears to be no absolute right or wrong regarding such greeting/parting rituals. Rather, what is right in Germanic cultures often seems bizarre in the US, and what is right in the US can border on the offensive in Germanic cultures. (That said, we will see in the discussion of *ethical pluralism* that these differences in greeting/parting rituals may not be quite so absolutely relative as they first appear.)

But ethical relativism also faces two especially important difficulties. First, it is logically incoherent – and this in two ways. To begin with, the ethical relativist faces a simple, but fundamental, contradiction: on the one hand, she or he wants

to argue that there are no universally valid values, norms, practices, etc.; on the other hand, she or he concludes that we *must* thereby be *tolerant* of ethical norms and practices different from our own. (Just to be clear: we can get to this tolerance in other ways, as we will see below in the section on ethical pluralism.) But tolerance thereby appears to emerge as itself a universally valid ethical norm or value – i.e., one that the ethical relativist argues we all should agree upon and follow.

Hence, the position of ethical relativism seems caught in a fundamental contradiction: if all ethical values, norms, and practices are indeed valid or legitimate only in relation to a given culture or time, then it would seem that tolerance must likewise count as only a relative value. And so, if there are those who are rigidly intolerant on some point – for example, the white racist's intolerance for people of color – it is not at all clear how the ethical relativist can coherently insist that such a person, as a product of a given culture and time, should rather have exercised tolerance.

The second logical problem for the ethical relativist is somewhat more complex. The primary argument for ethical relativism can be put as follows:

- (Premise 1): If there are no universally valid values, practices, beliefs, etc., then we would expect to find diverse ethical values, practices, beliefs, etc., in diverse cultures and times.
- (Premise 2): We do find diverse ethical values, practices, beliefs, etc., in diverse cultures and times.
- (Conclusion): Therefore, there are no universally valid values, practices, beliefs, etc.

In logical terms, this argument commits the basic fallacy of *affirming the consequent*.

To see that this argument is a fallacy, consider another argument that uses the same form as this one:

- (Premise 1): If you like strawberry-flavored gum, then we can expect to find a red-colored packet of gum in your pocket.
- (Premise 2): We do find a red-colored packet of gum in your pocket.
- (Conclusion): Therefore, you must like strawberry-flavored gum.

While this seems sensible enough, it takes only a little reflection to see that both the first and second premises could be true, but the conclusion is not *necessarily* true: perhaps you've switched to cinnamon-flavored gum today, which also comes in a red-colored packet?

Both arguments commit the same fallacy – meaning, the conclusion does not *necessarily* follow. Back to the first argument: it is possible for us to find diverse values, beliefs, practices, etc., in diverse cultures *for other reasons* besides the one offered in the first premise (i.e., that there are no universally valid values, beliefs, practices, etc.). As we will explore more fully below, the meta-ethical position of ethical pluralism argues precisely that these diverse values, beliefs, practices, etc., are the result of diverse interpretations/applications/understandings of shared ethical norms.

The debate between ethical relativists and ethical pluralists is ongoing – one we will reflect upon further in subsequent reflection, discussion, and writing questions. But, at this juncture, the crucial point is: if there are plausible alternative reasons for our observing diverse practices, beliefs, norms, etc., other than just the one claimed by the ethical relativist (i.e., there are no universally valid norms in the first place), then the argument for relativism is simply not valid.

The second set of objections against ethical relativism center on the arguments that seek to show that ethical relativism can actually work against the sort of tolerance and mutual understanding that it seems to endorse and that makes it so attractive. Again, this involves two elements. First,

ethical relativism forbids any sort of ethical judgment about "the Other" – the person whose values, beliefs, practices, etc., are different from our own – because, it is argued, they are the product of a different culture, time, etc. But this means, for example, that those raised in the United States and the United Kingdom can neither praise the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winners, Denis Mukwege (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Nadia Murad (Iraq), as moral heroes (for their work to end sexual violence as a weapon of conflict and war), nor condemn the Holocaust as a moral monstrosity. Ethical relativism thus paralyzes moral judgment. Such a paralysis requires us to accept genocide in Rwanda, rape-rooms and rape as terror in war, the use of babies and children as carriers of explosives in suicide bombings – or systematic oppression of women within one's own country as part of the "culture" of a given religious group.

Moreover, Mary Midgley ([1981] 1996) has argued that ethical relativism further leads to what she calls moral isolationism. This view presumes that there is an absolute boundary between specific cultures. This boundary not only prevents us from making ethical judgments about the values, beliefs, practices, etc., of "the Other," but thereby suggests that the members of one culture can never learn or gain anything of value (ethical or otherwise) from the members of another culture. But the history of how diverse cultures have emerged over time – that is, precisely through processes of intermixing and hybridization with others – shows this to be false:

> If there were really an isolating barrier, of course, our own culture could never have been formed. It is no sealed box, but a fertile jungle of different influences – Greek, Jewish, Roman, Norse, Celtic and so forth, into which further influences are still pouring – American, Indian, Japanese, Jamaican, you name it. The moral isolationist's picture of separate, unmixable cultures is quite unreal. ... Except for the very smallest and most remote, all cultures are formed out of many streams. All have the problem of digesting and

> assimilating things which, at the start, they do not understand. All have the choice of learning something from this challenge, or, alternatively, of refusing to learn, and fighting it mindlessly instead.
>
> (Ibid., 119)

Especially as digital media dramatically accelerate these processes of encountering other cultures, we can indeed see rapid cultural change in our own day, described in part in terms of cultural hybridization and the development of "third cultures." Digital media thereby confront us with a seemingly overwhelming range of cultural diversity – thus dramatically heightening the temptation toward ethical relativism. At the same time, however, a world increasingly interwoven precisely by digital media and computer networks only amplifies the force of Midgley's insistence – "Morally as well as physically, there is only one world, and we all have to live in it" ([1981] 1996, 119). Insofar as ethical relativism leads to moral isolationism and a perhaps fatal paralysis of moral judgment, these logical outcomes fly in the face of what we actually do in the contemporary world: we evaluate and make judgments about those elements of cultural practices, beliefs, norms, etc., different from our own that we will accept or reject.

Ethical absolutism (monism)

Opposite to ethical relativism is a position often called ethical absolutism or ethical monism. Briefly, this view insists on the following:

> There are universally valid norms, beliefs, practices, etc. – that is, such norms, beliefs, practices, etc., define what is right and good for all people at all times and in all places.

What is often tacit or unstated for the ethical absolutist is the additional claim:

> I/we know what those norms, beliefs, practices, etc., are – completely, clearly, unequivocally.

This may seem like an odd claim to spell out, but, as we will see, this is an especially crucial element of the ethical absolutist's position. Finally, the ethical absolutist will thereby have to argue:

> Those norms, beliefs, practices, etc., that are different from the ones we know to be universally valid must therefore be wrong (evil, invalid, etc.).

In this way, the ethical absolutist is in the position both to applaud those beliefs and behaviors that agree with his or her own view of what is universally valid, and to condemn those beliefs and behaviors that differ from his or her own.

Given this meta-ethical framework, the ethical absolutist enjoys at least one advantage over the ethical relativist: the ethical absolutist can coherently and forthrightly applaud or condemn the values, beliefs, practices, etc., of others – for example, she or he could applaud a Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad, and condemn the Holocaust. At the same time, however, this leads, obviously, to the intolerance of diversity that the ethical relativist finds so distasteful and destructive (and rightly, at least up to a point).

The contrasts between the ethical relativist and the ethical absolutist usually work around first-order ethical norms, values, practices, etc. – for example, abortion and euthanasia, war and peace, sexual identity/identities and relationships, freedom of expression, our treatment of animals and the environment at large, the role of the law vs. individual conscience, etc. For example, one could take an absolutist position either for or against abortion. An ethical absolutist might hold that all life is sacred – and that the baby/fetus in the mother's womb is a sacred life that must be protected at all costs, including, unfortunately, the cost of the life of the mother in certain circumstances. And, hence, abortion is never justified, even to save the life

of the mother. Another ethical absolutist might agree that all life is sacred – including that of the mother; and so, if, say, a monstrously deformed baby/ fetus thereby directly threatens the life of the mother, it is morally permissible – indeed, morally required – to remove and destroy the baby/ fetus for the sake of saving the mother's life. While the two absolutists will thus profoundly disagree with each other, an ethical relativist will say, in effect, to each his or her own; neither position is ultimately "right," but we should learn to tolerate important ethical differences such as these and go on.

Suffice it to say that the ethical relativist's response here will satisfy neither of our ethical absolutists. But the primary point here is to move to the second-order or meta-ethical level of discussion – i.e., to apply these meta-ethical positions to the ethical frameworks of utilitarianism and deontology. Hence, we can ask: how would these two positions have us respond to the differences between utilitarian and deontological approaches?

Roughly, it would appear that the ethical absolutist would require us to accept one of these approaches – and thereby reject the other. The ethical relativist, by contrast, would likely say: it doesn't matter – neither view can claim universal validity. Indeed, it's a waste of time to wrestle with this question, since there is no ultimate right or wrong in any event – it's all a matter of culture, individual preference, etc.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION/WRITING QUESTIONS: RELATIVISM AND ABSOLUTISM

1. Given the accounts of ethical relativism and ethical absolutism, which of these positions better describes your own with regard to the following (first-order) ethical claims and issues?

   (A) The destruction of human life – and most especially innocent human life – is always wrong; hence, abortion is never justified.
   (B) Our right to determine what happens to our own bodies is the most fundamental of human rights. Hence, a woman has an absolute right to determine what happens to her body – and this includes the right to abortion, especially if her own life is imperiled by a pregnancy.
   (C) Killing is always wrong – even in self-defense.
   (D) Killing is sometimes justified – beginning with self-defense.
   (E) You should always keep a promise.
   (F) Sex before marriage is morally acceptable.
   (G) (Suggest additional "hot-button" moral issues for discussion and reflection.)

2. In response to these – and/or other – issues, it is probable that you will find that you are an ethical relativist with regard to some and an ethical absolutist with regard to others. Insofar as this is the case, can you begin to sort out and articulate what arguments, evidence, and/or other sorts of reasons you might have for supporting your position (i.e., as either an absolutist or a relativist) vis-à-vis a given issue?

Beyond relativism and absolutism: Ethical pluralism

I hope it is beginning to be clear that, whatever the strengths and advantages of both ethical absolutism and ethical relativism, neither position is fully satisfactory. To begin with, if the previous reflection, discussion, and writing exercise has been successful, you will have discovered that – like most people in my experience – there are ethical issues about which you may be profoundly absolutist and others that seem to be best left to a sort of relativist tolerance.

But this is not especially coherent: ethical absolutism and ethical relativism make mutually exclusive claims – there are / are not universally valid norms, values, practices, etc. How can we coherently hold both of these claims together?

As you've likely guessed, there is a third position – *ethical pluralism* – that seeks to resolve some of the problems faced by relativism and absolutism.

Ethical pluralism basically argues that the ethical absolutist may be right – with regard to his or her opening premise: there *are* values, norms, practices, etc., that are valid for all human beings at all times and in all places. Unlike the absolutist, however – who insists that these values, norms, practices, etc., apply *in exactly the same way at all times and in all places* – the pluralist argues that it is possible (indeed, inevitable and desirable) to *interpret/understand/apply* these norms in diverse ways in diverse contexts. In this way, the ethical pluralist is able to agree at least partially with the empirical observation highlighted by the ethical relativist. Obviously, there *are* different practices in diverse times and cultures. But, rather than claiming (as the relativist's argument does – invalidly, we have seen) that these different practices demonstrate the absence of universally valid norms and values, the ethical pluralist argues that these diverse practices are the result of how different contexts will require us to interpret and apply the same norm in sometimes strikingly different ways.

For example, it is easy to observe that people with kidney disease are treated differently in different cultures and places. In the United States – at least for those who can afford good health insurance – kidney dialysis, despite its enormous expense, is available more or less without regard for the patient's age. By contrast, in the 1990s, policies aimed at limiting costs on the part of the UK National Health Service (NHS) resulted in no one over the age of 75 receiving kidney dialysis, despite their diagnosed need (Musgrave 2006, 9). (Happily, these policies have changed considerably – but let's ignore that for the moment, for the sake of the example.)

Lastly, at least early in the twentieth century, in the harsh environment of the Canadian arctic, an elderly member of the Kabloona community who was no longer able to contribute to the well-being of the community might voluntarily commit a form of suicide (Boss 2013, 9f.; see Ess 2007).

Again, the ethical relativist argues that these three different practices show that there are no values or norms shared universally across cultures. For the ethical pluralist, however, these three practices stand as three diverse interpretations, applications, and/or judgments as to how to apply a single norm – namely, the health and well-being of the community – in three very different environments and cultures. So, at least the relatively affluent in the US can afford the health insurance that will provide kidney dialysis without age limit; but, even in a relatively wealthy nation such as the UK, failure to set limits on subsidized treatments would (at the time) have bankrupted the National Health Service. Finally, in the unforgiving environments of the Kabloona, the well-being of the community would be jeopardized if scarce resources were diverted to caring for those who no longer could contribute to the community. Hence, such care is literally not affordable by the community – nor, apparently, is it expected by the individual. The practices of each of these communities clearly differ. But, for the ethical pluralist, these different practices rest upon a basic agreement on the well-being of the community as a shared norm or value. Each practice, simply, represents a distinctive interpretation of that norm; the diverse contexts of these communities require each of them to interpret and apply that norm differently.

The ethical pluralist can hence agree with the ethical relativist that (a) we *do* observe diverse practices as we move through different cultures and times, and that (b) we should *tolerate* these differences – rather than condemn them straight out, as the ethical absolutist is forced to do – at least insofar as we can understand them to be different interpretations of a *shared norm* or *value*. But the ethical pluralist, unlike the ethical relativist, does not thereby tolerate any and all practices. (Recall: such

tolerance entails for the ethical relativist a serious logical contradiction.) Rather, if a practice – for example, genocide – clearly violates a basic norm or value (in this case, the well-being of the community, at least as understood as an inclusive human community rather than an exclusive tribal community), then the ethical pluralist can condemn such a practice as immoral.

And so the ethical pluralist can overcome some of the chief difficulties of ethical relativism, including its logical incoherence and its inability to distinguish between Nobel Peace Prize-winners and the Holocaust. At the same time, however, the ethical pluralist shies away from the sort of intolerance for difference that often follows from ethical absolutism. To recall: the ethical absolutist seems restricted to one and only one set of values and norms that must be interpreted, applied, and practiced the same way by all people in all places and at all times – and so any variation from this one set of norms and practices must be rejected as morally wrong. (In the example of kidney dialysis, a moral absolutist located, say, in the US might then well condemn the practices of the Kabloona as immoral.) By contrast, the ethical pluralist can tolerate – indeed, endorse – these differences in practice, insofar as they can be shown to reflect diverse interpretations and applications of a shared norm or value. In these ways, ethical pluralism seeks to take up at least a limited version of the tolerance for difference enjoined by the ethical relativist, while avoiding a tolerance so complete as to paralyze ethical judgment entirely. An ethical pluralist does so while at the same time taking up at least a limited affirmation of universally valid values, norms, and practices as endorsed by an ethical absolutist, yet avoiding the ethical monism and intolerance of difference that such absolutism easily falls into.

Strengths and limits of ethical pluralism

Ethical pluralism thus provides us with an important way of understanding and responding to the sometimes radical differences that we encounter, especially at a global level.

Negatively: if we can choose only between ethical relativism and ethical monism, then any effort to undertake a digital media ethics that might "work" cross-culturally is doomed to two equally unattractive choices: either we follow the relativist and tolerate any and all practices (saving us, admittedly, the difficult work of having to think about any of this at all ...), or we adopt an absolutism that would result in a kind of ethical colonialism – i.e., the imposition of a single set of practices upon all peoples, because any difference from the right set of values and practices must be wrong.

Positively: ethical pluralism allows us to see – in some important cases, at least – how people in diverse cultures may share important norms and values; but, at the same time, we are able to interpret and apply these norms and values in sometimes very different sorts of practices – ones that reflect diverse cultural contexts and traditions. Ethical pluralism thus allows us to have a global digital media ethics – one that provides a shared set of guidelines for how we may behave ethically in relationship with one another. But these shared norms and values are interpreted through the lenses of different traditions and applied in different cultural contexts. These different interpretations or applications thereby allow us to preserve the practices and characteristics that make each culture distinctive and unique. In this way, ethical pluralism is a crucial element of the "ethical toolkit" we need if we are to develop a global ethics that respects and preserves diverse cultural traditions and identities.

Ethical pluralism enjoys two additional strengths. First, it is a way of approaching ethical matters that is found not only within Western traditions (beginning, at least, with Plato and Aristotle, but extending into contemporary ethical frameworks such as feminism [see Warren 1990]) but also throughout diverse religious and philosophical traditions such as Islam (Eickelman 2003), Confucian thought (Chan 2003), and others. Ethical pluralism thus appears to be a widely shared and recognized way of approaching ethical

differences – not simply a provincially Western way. In particular, Shannon Vallor's extensive synthesis of global traditions of virtue ethics, as then reformulated specifically to help us come to grips with the multiple ethical challenges of contemporary technologies, explicitly includes this pluralistic approach in turn (2016, 54f., 64).

Second, ethical pluralism appears in fact to "work" in contemporary practices. Perhaps the most important example here is the issue of privacy (Ess 2006; Hongladarom 2007). As we have seen in chapter 2, expectations of privacy and correlative data privacy protection laws vary from country to country – in part as they rest on dramatically different, if not contradictory, understandings of human beings. But it is arguable that there has been an increasing recognition of a shared notion of privacy that holds for both Western and non-Western countries and cultures. This shared notion is interpreted and applied in different ways, reflecting first of all the differences between cultures in terms of the importance they place on the individual vis-à-vis the community. The diverse practices of data privacy protection thereby reflect – and, more importantly, preserve – some of the fundamental values and traditions of each culture. In this way, ethical pluralism seems to "work" as an important component of a global information and computing ethics. And so we might expect that, in other issues of digital media ethics, pluralism will likewise emerge as an important strategy for preserving cultural differences while developing a shared, genuinely global ethics.

Hongladarom has further shown how ethical pluralism works in *praxis* regarding the deep differences between Confucian and Buddhist understandings of selfhood vis-à-vis a shared right of *respect* for the person online (Hongladarom 2017). At the same time, however, ethical pluralism will not resolve all the differences we encounter as different cultures and traditions approach the ethical issues of digital media. To use the example of the Muhammad cartoons (Debatin

2007), for at least many (though by no means all) religious believers, cartoons that can only be seen as blasphemy must not be published. For the editors of the Danish newpaper *Jyllands-Posten*, however, essential ethical and political values were at stake in commissioning and publishing the cartoons – namely, freedom of expression and freedom of the press (Warburton 2009, 18–21, 52). Add to this the cultural observation that, for most Danes, anything – even the queen – is an appropriate occasion for humor (at least, up to a point). It is by no means clear how the conflict here can be resolved in a pluralist fashion. Such an analysis would have to show that these two views are in fact not as contradictory as they appear – that they are, rather, simply diverse interpretations of a shared ethical norm (which one[s]?). (For additional critiques, see Capurro 2008.)

Hence, in the face of diverse cultural norms, beliefs, and practices, we will not always be able to resolve these sometimes deep and irreducible differences by way of an ethical pluralism. More broadly, then, in the face of such differences, we are obliged to discern whether we most justifiably understand and respond to these differences as an ethical relativist, an ethical absolutist, and/or an ethical pluralist.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION/WRITING QUESTIONS: META-ETHICS – A FIRST RUN

As many of the examples we've explored in this book should make clear, the culture(s) which surround us, whether during our upbringing and/or in our work and leisure as mature people, play a central role in shaping our ethical thinking. (At the same time, readers should keep in mind here the important caveats and difficulties of using cultural generalizations: see chapter 2, "Interlude," pp. 49–53.)

In particular, the comparative ethicist Bernd Carsten Stahl notes that, since the twentieth century, at least within

the English-speaking world, utilitarian approaches have dominated over alternatives. By contrast, deontological approaches – especially as rooted in Kant and then the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas – have been favored in the Germanic countries, including much of Scandinavia. These in turn contrast with what Stahl characterizes as French moralism in Montaigne and Ricoeur. On Stahl's analysis, this approach to ethics is teleological – i.e., oriented toward the goal or telos of discerning and doing what is necessary for the sake of an ethical and social order that makes both individual and community life more fulfilling, productive, etc., through "the propagation of peace and avoidance of violence" (Stahl 2004, 17).

As we will see more fully below, these views further contrast with non-Western traditions. Broadly, modern Western traditions have emphasized the individual as the primary agent of ethical reflection and action, especially as reinforced by Western notions of individual rights. Certainly, these traditions further recognize that individuals' actions are made within and affect a larger community; and, as we have seen in the examples of Scandinavian notions of *allemannsretten* ("all people's rights": chapter 3, pp. 115–16) and feminist notions of *relational autonomy* (chapter 2, pp. 77–8), there are ethical traditions in the modern West that indeed emphasize greater attention to community, not simply individual, actions and goods. But, at least in comparison with modern Western traditions, non-Western traditions – including various forms of Buddhism, Confucian thought, and indigenous traditions in Africa, Australia, and the Americas – lay greater emphasis on the community and community well-being as the primary focus for ethical reflection and choice.

This ethical map becomes even more complicated, first of all, as we recognize that these generalizations will only go so far: again, each cultural generalization immediately implies counterexamples, additional layers and influences, etc. The complexity grows further as we add both:

(a) premodern and contemporary ethical traditions – as we are about to see, the virtue ethics expressed by Socrates and Aristotle and its contemporary expressions; and
(b) contemporary ethical frameworks such as feminism, and especially the ethics of care, along with environmental ethics.

While overwhelming at first, exploring these diverse ethical approaches is both: (a) unavoidable, especially as digital media allow more and more people around the globe to communicate and interact with one another; and (b) necessary – first of all in order to overcome our own ethnocentrism and its attendant dangers. Such exploration should further help us to make better-informed choices regarding our own ethical frameworks and norms – and, ideally, assist us in moving toward a more inclusive, genuinely global digital media ethics that recognizes and fosters our ethical differences alongside our shared norms and values.

At this stage, however, it may be helpful to take a first run at learning how to apply the meta-theoretical positions of ethical relativism, monism, and pluralism.

1. Presuming your own prevailing cultural context(s) and/or culture(s) of origin are primarily Western, review Stahl's characterization of various national cultures as principally utilitarian, deontological, and teleological.

   (A) Which, if any, of these frameworks seems closest to what you observe in your culture to be a prevailing way of making ethical decisions? Illustrate your response with an example or two – ideally, one drawn from an ethical issue evoked by the use of digital media.
   (B) Which, if any, of these frameworks seems furthest away from what you observe in your culture to be a prevailing way of making ethical decisions? You

can illustrate and support your response here by applying this framework to the example(s) you describe in 1.A.

(C) What are the results? That is, do the two frameworks that you identify and apply in 1.A and 1.B issue in conflicting ethical conclusions (e.g., undertaking otherwise illegal music downloading because the benefits of doing so seem to outweigh the costs – i.e., a utilitarian analysis – vis-à-vis rejecting such an activity because it violates what may be argued to be a just law – i.e., a deontological analysis)?

And/or: do these two frameworks end up endorsing the same, or at least coherent and complementary, ethical conclusions or claims? (For example, we saw in chapter 2 how both deontological and utilitarian approaches to privacy in the West endorse individual privacy rights as essential – though for characteristically different reasons.)

And/or: do these two frameworks issue in (at least, seemingly) *contradictory* results?

(D) Especially if these two frameworks issue in different, perhaps contradictory, results, how do you respond? That is: do you interpret or understand these differences primarily as

(i) an ethical relativist?
(ii) an ethical monist?
(iii) an ethical pluralist?

However you respond to these differences, do your best to support and justify your answer with one or more arguments, elements of evidence, etc.

2. The same set of questions – but now encompassing a global range of ethical frameworks – may be asked. In particular: if your cultural context(s) and/or culture(s) of origin are non-Western, so that you already have a strong familiarity with especially non-Western ethical frameworks, now might be a good time to undertake the more global version of these questions. (And/or: you and/or your instructor may decide it's better to wait on these until the further review of the discussion of these frameworks that is about to follow.)

Either way, this exercise should begin by asking you to take up two frameworks – one characteristically Western (e.g., utilitarianism) and one characteristically non-Western (e.g., Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, African, etc.). With these two frameworks as your starting point, the questions in (1) can then be pursued.

4. Feminist ethics

As the discussion so far demonstrates, virtually all of the philosophers who have developed important ethical frameworks in Western (and, as we will see, Eastern) traditions are men. Especially for the second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, this observation naturally leads to an important question: is it possible that the conceptions, approaches, values, etc., that make up prevailing ethical (and other philosophical) frameworks reflect characteristically "male" or "masculinist" ways of knowing and thinking? Or, to state it negatively: is it possible that these prevailing ethical frameworks thus tend to ignore or exclude what are characteristically women's ways of knowing and reflecting on ethical issues?

In the domain of ethics – specifically, in the area of developmental psychology concerned with how people reflect on and seek to resolve ethical difficulties – these questions were given particular force through the work of Carol Gilligan. Gilligan's landmark book *In a Different Voice* (1982) documented both important parallels and distinctive differences between the ways in which men and women characteristically approached central ethical dilemmas. Briefly put, Gilligan's interviews with women facing difficult ethical choices (including the possibility of abortion) challenged the then-prevailing schema of

ethical development established through the work of Lawrence Kohlberg – work that, in fact, built on observations of and interviews with men exclusively. On the one hand, for both Gilligan and Kohlberg, the evidence of their interviews and observations suggested that individuals develop their abilities to recognize and come to grips with ethical issues over time and in ways that can be described by a three-stage schema (with each stage in turn involving two sub-stages). Preconventional morality, describing how pre-adolescents grapple with ethical matters, works on a simple reward–punishment schema: one is "good" because good acts are rewarded, and one (usually) avoids being "bad" because bad acts are punished. Conventional morality, characteristically the moral stage of young adolescents and adults, reflects the values, practices, and expectations prevailing in the larger society, with an emphasis on justice and correlative notions of recognizing and preserving basic individual rights – at least as these contribute to the maintenance of the status quo. Postconventional morality, by contrast, represents a move into significant sorts of ethical autonomy (in Kant's term), as individuals take conscious responsibility for their ethical principles and reflections in new ways, so as perhaps to radically critique and re-evaluate prevailing social claims regarding rights and justice. As is often the case, such reflections can lead individuals to draw new ethical conclusions regarding right and wrong that run against the prevailing morality of their larger society. Historically, such postconventional moralists have been important for what we think of as ethical and social progress: their postconventional morality has led them to challenge prevailing social practices and values and, in the view of subsequent generations, helped to lead society more broadly to a set of values and practices that are seen as ethically preferable over earlier ones. (To be sure, as the experience of these exemplary thinkers makes clear, moving to a postconventional stage is difficult – indeed, Kohlberg claimed that most people never move beyond the conventional stage.)

While her findings support the outlines of this large framework, Gilligan found that, as they moved through these stages, women's moral experiences demonstrated important differences. For our purposes, the most important differences are as follows. For Kohlberg (and, to be fair, for most ethicists in the modern West), the key to moving beyond conventional morality is the critical use of reason – where reason is understood to focus especially on general principles, including rules of social justice and individual rights. So a Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, can argue that segregation laws are unjust because they violate the basic principle of justice in a democracy and the modern liberal state; only those laws that rest on the consent of the governed are just. But segregation laws were passed by a white population, in states where the people of color also affected by these laws had no vote – and hence no possibility of exercising consent. Hence such laws are unjust. On the basis of such arguments, King can then justify disobeying the law of the land – in developmental terms, going beyond conventional morality to a postconventional morality based on clear principles of justice and rights (King [1963] 1964).

To be sure, Gilligan found that women certainly employ reason – minimally, the capacity for inference and the recognition of important general principles – in confronting their ethical quandaries. But, in addition to reflection on general principles, she found that women as a group tended to make three distinctive maneuvers. To begin with, as Piaget had already observed, little girls may be less concerned than their male counterparts with making sure, for example, that all the rules of a game are followed (justice), while they may be more concerned that everyone within a given group has the feeling of being treated fairly, of being included, etc., even if this sometimes means breaking the rules (Gilligan 1982, 32–8). But this means, second, that women as a group tend to focus on the *emotive* dimensions of an ethical problem. Third, a problem is seen to be ethical especially as it involves

a web of interpersonal *relationships*, not simply individuals as "nodes" in those relationships marked only by defined sets of rights, etc.

So, for example, Kohlberg asked his (male) interviewees to respond to the "Heinz dilemma." In this scenario, a husband (Heinz) needs to obtain life-saving medicine for his wife; but he cannot afford to do so, and so his pharmacist refuses to provide him with the medicine. In Kohlberg's analysis, men as a group tended to analyze this dilemma in terms of the rights and principles involved – e.g., the right of the pharmacist to protect his property (and sources of profit and livelihood) vs. the wife's ostensible right to life. But, as young women were presented with this dilemma, as a group they tended to want more information – first of all, about the *relationships* between the three protagonists. For example: would Heinz's wife really want him to risk going to jail for her sake? Is it possible that they could talk with the pharmacist and work out a way to pay for the drug over time (ibid., 25–32)?

In these ways, the women's questions often teased out specific details about the possibilities and relationships in play that might otherwise be ignored through an exclusive focus on general principles of justice and abstract rights. In doing so, the women's questions may suggest alternatives to the simple, either/or dilemma presented at the outset – i.e., either respect the law (and lose your wife) or disobey the law (but save your wife). So, as some of my own students have suggested: if the pharmacist is a friend who knows and trusts Heinz and his wife, why couldn't he arrange for Heinz to pay for the needed drug over time, rather than insisting on an all-or-nothing payment?

For Gilligan, women's ethical development could thus be characterized as an *ethics of care* and responsibility for both others and oneself (the latter, at least, in the post-conventional stage), in contrast with (but not in opposition to) the ethics of principles, rules, and justice that characterized the ethical focus of many (but by no means all) men. Finally, Gilligan

emphasized that these two patterns of ethical development, while clearly different, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, both patterns are essential – and, ideally, conjoined in a synthesis that holds both together. (For a more careful discussion, see Tong and Williams 2018.)

Of course, there are any number of controversial and highly contested assumptions and claims at work here, as the subsequent development and debates regarding feminist ethics bring to the forefront. For example, does Gilligan's schema run the risk of essentialism – of assuming or arguing that there is something (an "essence") about being biologically female that strongly directs (or simply determines) that all women must follow the lines of ethical development it articulates? Feminists insist that such essentialism is disastrous as it reinforces gender stereotypes used throughout the history of patriarchy to justify women's subordination to men. And Gilligan would deny that she is making such an essentialist assumption.

Despite these and related difficulties, however, Gilligan's work inaugurated important new developments in ethical theory, beginning with greater respect for the positive role of emotions – specifically, care – as developed more extensively by Sara Ruddick (1989) explicitly in terms of an ethics of care. Another foundational figure, Nel Noddings, also highlighted the *relational* aspects of care ethics: "It is my committed practice of caring for others that sustains and enriches this ethical self" (Noddings 1984, 14, in Vallor 2016b, 225).

To be sure, one does not have to be a feminist to take up an ethics of care: early on in the modern West, David Hume famously argued that ethical reflection is fully reducible to emotions; but, for some of us, this goes too far, especially as it runs the risk of thereby reducing all ethical claims to purely relative ones.

Despite this risk, as we will see again in the context of virtue ethics (section 5, below), there is a growing recognition from a variety of sources – feminist ethics, virtue

ethics, neurobiology, and comparative philosophy more broadly – of the central roles played by emotions in ethical decision-making. For example, Joshua D. Greene (2014) notes that "Patients with frontotemporal dementia, which typically involves emotional blunting, are about three times as likely as control subjects to give consequentialist responses" (Mendez, Anderson, and Shapira 2005, cited in Greene 2014, 701f.). By contrast, "People who are more empathetic, or induced to be more empathetic, give more deontological responses" (Conway and Gawronski 2013, cited in Greene 2014, 703).

These turns toward the integral role played by emotions in our decision-making process are further accompanied by feminist attention to what our *embodiment* means for our thinking/feeling about the world – how we know and navigate it, starting within our relationships. To begin with, *embodiment* entails a non-dual understanding of the relationship between self and body, as we saw explored especially by Sara Ruddick in her account of complete sex (1975, 89; see chapter 5, pp. 186–8). In addition to emotions alongside reason, embodiment further highlights the role of *tacit knowledge*, knowledge that is learned through experience and encoded in our bodies. By definition, tacit knowledge deeply resists our efforts to make it explicit and articulate – say, for the purposes of invoking it in our ethical reflections. But its central role is apparent in our phrases "my gut feeling" (equivalent to the Danish and Norwegian *magenfølelse*) and "following my heart." (As with the role of emotions, contemporary neurobiology and cognitive science confirm and helpfully refine these sensibilities – perhaps most strikingly with contemporary theories of "the embodied mind" and "embodied cognition" (Wilson and Foglia 2017).)

These non-dual understandings of body–mind (*Leib*/*Subjekt*) and thinking/feeling are further important as they resonate with: (a) premodern Western understandings of our ethical life as involving both thought *and* feeling (e.g., in the Socratic and Aristotelian conception of *phronēsis*, a practical ethical judgment that is felt as much as thought); and (b) non-Western understandings, for example the Confucian view of the human being as incorporating *xin*, what Ames and Rosemont translate as "heart-and-mind," to make the point that "there are no altogether disembodied thoughts for Confucius, nor any raw feelings altogether lacking (what in English would be called) 'cognitive content'" (1998, 56). The role of emotions in ethics is thus a shared understanding across a literally global scale; as feminist ethics brings this role to the foreground, it thereby points toward what may be a "bridge" concept, a shared understanding between both Western and Eastern views that will play an important role in any global digital media ethics.

Moreover, in emphasizing the importance of webs of interdependent relationships, in contrast with a prevailing emphasis on individual rights, feminist ethics thereby supported and developed alongside (then) new forms of environmental or ecological ethics. Briefly, such ethics extends the modern Western focus on the rational individual human being as the primary moral agent who deserves moral status, so as to argue that non-human entities, including not only living beings but the larger ecological systems they constitute in relationship with the natural order, also deserve and require moral status and respect in our ethical reflections.

In these ways, feminist ethics helps us move to a more inclusive and comprehensive account of how we may come to grips with the ethical challenges we face.[4]

4 A further and very great complication in these debates results from the complex ways in which feminism has unfolded over the past four decades or so – i.e., from the "second wave" feminism of the 1960s and 1970s through third-wave and then post-feminism, and/or a "'fourth wave' social media-based feminist activism" or perhaps a "post-post-feminism" (Gill 2016, 613). Broadly, these developments have involved dramatic shifts from strong opposition to pornography* (as objectifying women and contributing to their subjugation) to an embrace of both production and consumption of pornography* as part of women's choice, celebration of their bodies,

Applications to digital media ethics

Arguably, an ethics of care is already at work in a number of choices and behaviors associated with digital media. As we've seen, for those who enjoy using digital media to copy and distribute songs, videos, etc., that they enjoy, "sharing is caring." That is, it would appear that a primary motive in such sharing is our pleasure in giving to friends and loved ones the chance to enjoy the same music and videos that we have enjoyed. In particular, insofar as a sense of self as a *relational autonomy* likewise entails an emphasis on care and caring relationships (Christman 2003, 143), such care is consistent with the *inclusive* sense of property rights we saw at work in such sharing (chapter 3, pp. 114–15).

More specifically, care ethics is explicitly invoked in the design of so-called carebots – that is, robots intended to take over various chores of health care (van Wynsberghe 2016).

At the same time, it's important keep in mind an important limitation to an ethics of care. Insofar as care ethics stresses the role of our emotional bonds with one another, it thereby runs the risk of restricting our ethical focus too narrowly – that is, upon a relatively small circle of family, friends, and loved ones. Taken to its extreme, an ethics of care could thus justify our ignoring whole populations around the globe because, simply, we do not experience a relationship of

and taking control of their own sexualities – and then to further critique of sexism and patriarchy. In particular, the "#freethenipple" campaign appropriates the tropes of pornography in order to protest against patriarchy (Rúdólfsdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir 2018). At the same time, other feminists object that doing so only reinforces patriarchal gender stereotypes and does little for furthering women's emancipation and equality (Matich, Ashman, and Parsons 2018). For the sake of relative simplicity in this introduction, I can only point to these developments and complications as frameworks and issues for further research and reflection.

(My very great thanks to Professor Amanda Karlsson, Aarhus University, for her invaluable help here, including the reference to Gill [2016].)

care with such populations. But in a world ever more interwoven via digital media – unless these media help us learn how to care for others beyond our immediate circles – the ethics of care runs the risk of an increasingly inappropriate provincialism.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION/WRITING QUESTIONS: FEMINIST ETHICS AND DIGITAL MEDIA

In my view, one of the most important contributions of feminist ethics and an ethics of care is not only that they require us to acknowledge the significance of emotions, including feelings of care, but also that they help us learn to think beyond more dualistic, either/or approaches that have been emphasized in modern Western reflection and teaching about ethics. An especially prominent example here is just the notion of the self as a *relational autonomy* – that is, a sense of self that overcomes the apparent polarity between individuality and relationality by conjoining elements of both. By moving toward a "both/and" logic (or logic of complementarity), in particular, we are sometimes able to see a third alternative or possibility (or more) – overlooked by more dualistic ways of thinking – that thereby may help us resolve what otherwise seem to be intractable dilemmas of the sort faced by Heinz.

These (for the modern West, new) ways of thinking, moreover, are valuable not only as they help sustain a much needed environmental ethics but, further, as such relational thinking may closely resonate with: (i) contemporary non-Western ethical frameworks (explored more fully below); and (ii) especially the networked or distributed character of ICTs and other digital media linked together through the internet and the Web.

(A) Given what you are able to understand about these two different logics – a logic of dualism as based on the

exclusive either/or and a logic of complementarity or "both/and" (discussed in chapter 1, pp. 26–8) – as you observe the larger culture around you, which of these two logics appears to be at work more predominantly than the other? Be sure to provide an example or two to help illustrate your point.

(B) Identify a central issue in digital media ethics that you have already analyzed and responded to with some care in the course of your working through this volume. Review your response: do you seem to rely on one of these logics more than the other in your analyses and resolution(s) of this issue? Be sure to explain carefully how the logic you identify is apparent in your analysis/resolution.

(C) After reviewing your analyses and resolution(s), insofar as they seem to rest on using one logic more than another, would they be any different in any significant ways if you were to attempt to make them using the other logic instead? If so, how? Be sure to explain carefully how this is so.

[See also the Reflection/Discussion/Writing Question following the next section, as it takes up both care ethics and virtue ethics.]

5. Virtue ethics

Virtue ethics is both ancient in the West (associated with especially Socrates and Aristotle) and global, in the sense that we find versions of virtue ethics in diverse philosophical and religious traditions around the world (including, as we will see in the next section, in Confucian and Buddhist thought). In this way, virtue ethics is an important common ground for ethicists from diverse traditions – one that has clear potential to serve as a significant component of a shared global ethics. Indeed, virtue ethics has enjoyed something of

a renaissance in recent decades among Western philosophers for a number of important reasons – including precisely its potential for providing a common ethical ground for global ethics. In particular, as we explored in chapter 4, virtue ethics emphasizes the central importance of our relationships with others, beginning with friendship: it is hence an especially appropriate framework in an age of social media, as (a) our sense of selfhood appears to emphasize relationality more and more, in part as (b) our relationships – beginning with our "friends" on social networking sites – are precisely what such venues are designed to facilitate and foster. More comprehensively, Shannon Vallor (2016b) has extensively plumbed these diverse global traditions to develop a list of 12 "techno-moral virtues" that are specifically tuned to the ethical challenges of a technological era. Her list includes *care* – along with: honesty, self-control, humility, justice, courage, empathy, civility, flexibility, perspective, magnanimity, and "technomoral wisdom," i.e., the keystone virtue of *phronēsis* (ibid., 118–55).

Virtue ethics begins with the sensibility that what we ought to do as human beings is, first of all, become excellent human beings. Becoming an excellent human being, more precisely, means to develop and fulfil our most important capacities as human beings. Clearly, as individuals, we may have a distinctive set of potential abilities, such as athletic or musical abilities. But, for Socrates and Aristotle, our most important abilities as human beings as such, not simply as individuals, are our capacities to reason – and this in two ways. What Aristotle (and later Kant) identified as the "theoretical" function of reason centers on what we now think of as a scientific understanding of the laws and principles that guide the workings of the physical world. For the ancient and medieval thinkers in the West, this capacity to understand reality was important on a number of grounds. In particular, by understanding reality properly, we as human beings can then "attune" ourselves to that reality – that is, we can know

better both what to expect of it and how to behave within and in relationship with it, in order to achieve what the Greeks called *eudaimonia* – often translated as "happiness" but better understood as a kind of fundamental sense of well-being and contentment.

But, if our goal as human beings is to achieve such contentment or *eudaimonia*, then it is equally important that we develop what Aristotle (and, subsequently, Kant) identified as practical reason. Such practical reason involves first of all our ability – given our best knowledge of reality and thus of our possible choices and actions – to make the sorts of analyses and ethical judgments required for us to do "the right thing," both for ourselves as individuals (the ethical for Aristotle) and for our larger communities (for Aristotle, the political). As we have seen, these sorts of ethical decision-making further require what Socrates and Aristotle term *phronēsis* – a practical judgment that is able to discern the right choice (or, sometimes, choices) among the possibilities before us.

This capacity for judgment, we can notice, is one that is capable of learning from its mistakes. So Socrates (as related by Plato) uses the ship's pilot and the physician in the *Republic* as primary exemplars of people who exercise such judgment, and notes:

> a first-rate pilot [*cybernetes*] or physician for example, feels [*diaisthanetai*] the difference between the impossibilities and possibilities in his art and attempts the one and lets the others go; and then, too, if he does happen to trip, he is equal to correcting his error.
>
> (*Republic*, 360e–361a [Plato 1991]; emphasis added; cf. *Republic* I, 332c–e; VI, 489c; X, 618b–619a/301)

And learning from mistakes means, as Aristotle emphasized, that our developing these capacities of ethical judgment and analysis, and of reason more broadly, is an ongoing task: just as the athlete or physician must constantly practice if she or he is to maintain, much less improve, his or her abilities, so we as human beings must likewise cultivate in a conscious and ongoing way our rational abilities, including our use of *phronēsis*.

(Many readers will further recognize the term *cybernetes* as reminiscent of "cybernetics" – namely, the science of self-correcting information systems founded by Norbert Wiener. "Cybernetics" is at the same time in the title of the first computer ethics book, as we saw above [Wiener 1950]. This means precisely that virtue ethics is "baked into" the very beginnings of information and computing ethics, as we will further explore below.)

To put it somewhat differently: being a human being is not something that is simply given or taken for granted. Rather, *becoming* a human being – meaning, a being capable of (among other things) making the ethical and political judgments required for living a good ("happy") life in a community thereby marked by harmony and well-being – is an ongoing task.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that, while developing our other capacities – e.g., as athletes, musicians, lovers, friends, parents, game-players, etc. – is important, for Socrates and Aristotle it is very clear that there is nothing more important than the task of cultivating and practicing excellence as a human being – meaning, as a human being engaged with making ethical and political *judgments* and choices. In particular, if we subordinate our cultivation of excellence as ethical and political beings to any other activity – e.g., the pursuit of wealth or power – we thereby put our capacity for reason and ethical judgment at risk. Indeed, Socrates and Aristotle argue that, if we allow our interests in wealth and power to persuade us to judge and act against our reason and better judgment, we thereby harm these capacities (just as we would harm a race-horse, to use Socrates' analogy, by using it as a plow-horse instead). But, if we harm and hence diminish these capacities, we thereby

undermine the capacities most central to our discerning what is genuinely good, pursuing it, and thereby achieving *eudaimonia* or well-being.

This is not to say, as some later moralists argued, that we can achieve *eudaimonia* only by abstaining from the pursuit of, say, wealth and power. Rather, Socrates and Aristotle are optimistic that both *eudaimonia*, as resulting from pursuing our excellence as ethical and political beings, and (at least a moderate amount of) wealth and power can be had together. (Indeed, for Aristotle, a moderate amount of wealth and power is a necessary condition of cultivating theoretical and practical reason, and thereby of achieving *eudaimonia*.) But the constant danger is to let our interests in wealth and power overshadow our pursuit of excellence as ethical and political beings – and thereby, to paraphrase Jesus four centuries later, to gain the whole world but lose our souls.

So Socrates (again as related by Plato) says, in *The Apology*:

> It is God's bidding, you must understand that; and I myself believe no greater blessing has ever come to you or to your city than this service of mine to God. I have gone about doing one thing and one thing only, – exhorting all of you, young and old, not to care for your bodies or for money *above* or *beyond* your souls and their welfare, telling you that virtue does *not* come from wealth, but wealth from virtue, even as all other goods, public or private, that man can need.
>
> (*The Apology*, 29e–30b [Plato 1892]; emphasis added)

In this way, Socrates argues for the absolute priority of human excellence over all other interests if we are to achieve *eudaimonia* or well-being, but insists thereby that our pursuit of excellence will also lead to the other human goods that we desire and need.

While deontology and consequentialism dominated much of the ethical discussion among Western philosophers in the twentieth century, within the last four decades virtue ethics has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance. Rosalind Hursthouse

nicely summarizes why: for all of their strengths, neither deontology nor consequentialism seems to address a number of topics required for a complete moral philosophy, including "moral wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relationships, a deep concept of happiness, the role of the emotions in our moral life, and the questions of what sort of person I should be" (1999, 3).

All of these elements are important – beginning with moral wisdom or discernment, i.e., *phronēsis*. As well, as with feminist ethics (above, pp. 251–5), virtue ethics restores our ethical attention to the importance of *emotions*. As we saw in Confucian thought, in contrast with the Cartesian mind–body split, Ames and Rosemont (1998, 56) translate *xin* as "heart-and-mind," in order to emphasize that thought and feeling always accompany each other. As in the case of feminist ethics, when virtue ethics brings to the foreground the importance of emotions in our ethical lives, it thereby points to a post-Cartesian view – one that brings Western ethics closer to at least some of its non-Western counterparts. Doing so may be an essential step in the development of a more global digital media ethics – that is, one that "works" in both Western and non-Western cultures and traditions.

Moreover, virtue ethics, as including a focus on the development of moral *judgment* (*phronēsis*), thereby highlights a critical element of learning how to be human – both alone and with others: most importantly, as it is only through developing and exercising such judgment that we can claim to be (relationally) autonomous and (self-)responsible human beings. Without such judgment, simply, we are likely only to follow the dictates of others. In these directions, virtue ethics is deeply interwoven with especially Western traditions of *conscientious objection*. The figure of Antigone, in Sophocles' play of the same name, is foundational here. Her brother Polyneices fought on the losing side of the Theban civil war: the victorious King Creon declares that his body (along with those of all others who fought against the king's forces)

must remain unburied – a profound dishonor as well as a stark violation of religious dictates and customs. Antigone is caught squarely between a superior order (as later theory would put it) and what her senses of religious propriety and familial obligation to her brother require. As Socrates – and many others – would subsequently, Antigone ultimately chooses to *disobey* Creon's order, even though it means her own death. Much of the language in the play circles around *phronēsis* and the quest for what moral wisdom would discern in the face of such a dilemma. As Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, Antigone thus roots a central feature of *phronēsis* as "the idea that the value of certain constituents of the good human life is inseparable from the risk of opposition, therefore of conflict" (Nussbaum [1986] 2001, 353, in Wall 2003, 323). More broadly, this capacity of phronetic judgment is central to modern understandings of law in constitutional democracies – namely, their hallmarks of "Self-rule, disobedience and contestability" (Hildebrandt 2015, 10).

Finally, we have seen that some modern Western ethical frameworks contrast starkly with their non-Western counterparts. Aristotle's virtue ethics, however, resonates with similar emphases on becoming an excellent or exemplary human being as a focus of one's life that are found in a number of philosophical and religious traditions around the world, including Buddhism and Confucian thought (cf. Vallor 2016b, 41). We will explore this more fully below.

Virtue ethics: sample applications to digital media

An initial way of applying a virtue ethics to digital media, as noted in the previous chapter, is to ask the question: what sort of person do I want/need to become to be content – not simply in the immediate present, but across the course of my entire (I hope, long) life? Along these lines: what sorts of habits should I cultivate in my behaviors that will lead

to fostering my reason (both theoretical and practical) and thereby lead to greater harmony in myself and with others, including the larger natural (and, for religious folk, supernatural) orders?

As part of its resurgence in the contemporary West, virtue ethics has found wide application, beginning with such increasingly urgent topics as designing ethics for robots (e.g., Coleman 2001; see discussion of carebots, below). Most broadly, Julie Cohen (2012) draws on the work of virtue ethicist Martha Nussbaum and communitarian political philosopher Amartya Sen vis-à-vis a range of issues facing contemporary users of digital media, including copyright (ch. 3) and privacy (chs. 5, 6). Most remarkably, virtue ethics, coupled with deontology, has become central in ICT *design* broadly. Examples here include James Hughes's Buddhist approach to "Compassionate AI and Selfless Robots" (2012) and Sarah Spiekermann's foundational textbook for "eudaimonic" ICT design (2016). More specifically, within the European Union, central philosophical and policy-related documents take up the language of flourishing and well-being (*eudaimonia*). So Floridi et al. (2018) appeal to human dignity (as resting on explicitly Kantian notions of autonomy) and flourishing as the key ethical pillars of their ethical roadmap for moving toward "a Good AI Society" (2–3). In particular, "self-realisation" is a primary capacity to be preserved and enhanced by AI: their definition is instantly recognizable from virtue ethics – namely, "the ability for people to flourish in terms of their own characteristics, interests, potential abilities or skills, aspirations, and life projects" (ibid., 4; cf. Burgess et al. 2018).

While the authors do not make the linkage explicit, this focus on self-realization and virtue ethics more broadly is inaugurated, as we noted above, in Norbert Wiener's foundational text for computer ethics ([1950] 1954: above, pp. 262–3). It is hence especially fitting that the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers' work to develop global standards

for new Artificial and Independent Systems focuses on "ethically aligned design": the ethics in play here are precisely deontology and virtue ethics – beginning with Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* (IEEE 2019, 2).

In this volume, I have applied virtue ethics especially to the topic of friendship online (chapter 4) and to pornography* and sex and violence vis-à-vis robots and computer games in chapter 5.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION/WRITING QUESTIONS: THE VIRTUES OF CARING, COURAGE, AND HONESTY VIS-À-VIS CAREBOTS

As noted above, Shannon Vallor has carefully developed a set of "Technomoral virtues" that she argues are central to good lives of flourishing in an era deeply shaped by rapidly evolving technologies. These are: honesty, self-control, humility, justice, courage, empathy, care, civility, flexibility, perspective, magnanimity, and technomoral wisdom – the last of which incorporates *phronēsis* (Vallor 2016b, 120).

One of Vallor's primary explorations and applications of these virtues takes up care and the *practices* (virtues must always be practiced) of *care-giving*. The specific example is of caring for elderly parents vis-à-vis "offloading" the chores and obligations of such caring to carebots. (For examples of such carebots, see Vallor 2016b, 219.) Caring further requires the virtue of *courage*:

> Caring requires courage because care will likely bring *precisely* those pains and losses the carer fears most – grief, longing, anger, exhaustion. But when these pains are incorporated into lives sustained by loving and reciprocal relations of selfless service and empathic concern, our character is open to being shaped not only by fear and anxiety, but also by gratitude, love, hope, trust, humor, compassion, and mercy.
>
> (Ibid., 226)

Lastly, caring and courage are required for confronting our *existential* situation with open eyes:

> Caring practices also foster fuller and more honest moral perspectives on the meaning and value of life itself, perspectives that acknowledge the finitude and fragility of our existence rather than hide it.
>
> (Ibid.)

That is, for Vallor, the large project of developing such virtues is driven not only by their particular fit and usefulness in a technology-driven world: still more fundamentally, she invokes the philosopher José Ortega y Gassett, who foregrounds the central *existentialist* project of acknowledging our mortality as an essential step toward discerning and creating meaning in our lives. Ortega y Gassett is particularly fitting here as he foregrounds the role of technology in the "project" of becoming ourselves: "the mission of technology consists in releasing man [*sic*] for the task of being himself" (Ortega y Gasset 2002, 118, in Vallor 2016b, 247). This understanding of technology as emancipatory – as freeing us *to* become more fully our best selves – is a theme announced by Norbert Wiener at the beginning of information and computing ethics ([1950] 1954, 106). At the same time, Vallor thus stands among a growing number of contemporary scholars and researchers who are rediscovering and/or applying existentialist philosophy in new ways, precisely with a focus on digital media (Lagerkvist 2016; Ess 2018a).

As we saw in chapter 5 in connection with sexbots (pp. 194–5), Vallor argues that a primary ethical issue evoked by contemporary technologies is the problem of "deskilling." Again, caring is a virtue or a skill: "It is difficult to know how to care for people well – emotionally, physically, financially, and otherwise, in the right ways, at the right times, and for the right persons" (Vallor 2016b, 221). As with (more or less) all other technologies, carebots are designed to make our lives easier – in this case, to help "offload" or transfer

the less pleasant and more difficult dimensions of caring, for example, for the elderly. While much of this would seem to be most welcome – first of all, for the primary care-givers – Vallor points out that such offloading thereby reduces our opportunities and requirements to cultivate and improve on our capacities to care. As we saw in the example of sexbots, then, the risk of relying more and more on technologies that demand less and less of us (cf. Turkle 2011) is that we ourselves become *less capable* of exercising the virtues requisite for good lives of flourishing – including caring, loving itself, as well as courage, and patience, perseverance, and empathy as essential to human communication, deep friendship, long-term intimate relationships, and so on. To state this more bluntly: such ethical deskilling, in the worst-case scenario, renders us more and more like the robots and machines we interact with (ibid.; Hildebrandt 2015, 71f.).

A. Review the list of virtues affiliated with care: along with care itself, which of these virtues do you think/feel are indeed central to a good life of flourishing as you best understand it?
B. Identify either a real-world or imagined example of a carebot – or, perhaps, choose examples of "virtual assistants," such as Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, Google Voice, etc. – and/or the holographic robot now available from Gatebox (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkcKaNqfykg).

   As you imagine and/or actually interact with one or more of these devices –

   (i) which of the important virtues you have listed come into play and thus are practiced and perhaps improved upon?
   (ii) which of these virtues are *not* reinforced – and/or may be countered by other forms of practice that interaction with such assistants require?

   (iii) Given your responses to the above – is Vallor (along with Turkle, Hildebrandt, and now many others in the "tech world") onto something with the concern about ethical deskilling? Why – and/or why not?

6. Confucian ethics

Confucian thought begins with a very different understanding of the human being than that held in modern Western theories.

Modern Western thought tends strongly to assume that human beings are "atomic" individuals – that is, that the human being as an individual is the most basic element or component of society, one that begins and can remain in complete solitude from others. (This atomism is traceable to the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the French philosopher René Descartes, but that story is too long to develop here.) Henry Rosemont (2006) has characterized this as the "peach-pit" view of human beings. That is, a peach presents us with a surface – one that grows, changes, and finally dies over time. But, underneath these surface changes, is the peach-pit – a stony, hard core that remains (relatively) unchanged over time. The peach-pit is thus closely analogous to traditional Christian and Islamic conceptions of the soul and modern conceptions of the atomistic self. That is, underlying a surface body that grows, changes, and ultimately dies with time there is thought to be the "real" self, the identity that remains the same through time, "underneath" the outward and surface appearances of the mortal body. To be sure, this conception of the self resolves some important philosophical and ethical problems concerning identity – for example, if there is no substantive, real self underneath the constant changes of a body, then who or what is responsible for that body's actions? That is, if the body associated with "you" committed a terrible crime five years ago, is it reasonable to say something like "that wasn't really me – I

[meaning, my body] have changed and can no longer be held responsible for what I [my body] did five years ago?" Generally, in the modern West, we do think that individuals remain responsible for their acts through time; thinking this way makes sense on the assumption of a "peach-pit" or atomistic self/identity that remains more or less the same over the life-course.

Such a conception of the self, however, can be understood as the result of a long development in Western societies. As we have seen, Foucault as well as Medium Theory affiliate this conception with writing as a "technology of the self" (1987, 1988). This conception is amplified and "democratized" – that is, made accessible to ever-expanding numbers of people – with the development of the printing press as the (then) new media technology that helped fuel the Protestant Reformation and the Protestant emphasis on the individual soul and salvation. These conceptions are then philosophically refined and secularized in figures such as Descartes. Making real such a conception of the self further appears to depend on the wealth generated through industrialization. (As we have seen in the discussion of privacy, such a conception of the self, while initially alien to such Eastern societies as China, Japan, and Thailand, is becoming increasingly apparent there – in part, as these societies develop the wealth that make individual privacy realizable, e.g., through the luxury of private rooms for children, etc.)

By contrast, in classical Confucian thought (and elsewhere, as we have seen), human beings are understood first of all as *relational* beings: we are who we are always and only as we are taken up in specific *relationships* with others. For me, this means that I am always – and *only* – someone's son, brother, spouse, father, uncle, friend, employee, boss, beneficiary, etc.; and how I am – i.e., my choices, attitudes, behaviors, etc. – is always shaped in specific ways by each specific relationship. And so, how I am in relationship with my parents is different from how I am in relationship with my spouse, my siblings, my own children, my students, etc. To continue with Henry Rosemont's (2006) organic metaphors, in classical Chinese thought, human beings are like onions, not peaches: each of our distinctive relationships with others – including the larger social and political communities and, finally, the natural order at large (*Tian*) – constitutes one of the multiple layers that in turn make up who we are as human beings. In contrast with the peach-pit model, however, if we remove the layers of relationship from the onion, there's nothing left.

In ways closely analogous to the virtue ethics in the West, this understanding of the human being as a relational being means that ethics is primarily about becoming a (more) complete human being – first of all, by cultivating the behaviors and attitudes required for establishing harmony both among members of the human community (beginning with the family) and with the larger order (*Tian*) as such. In classical Confucian thought, this begins with learning and practicing fi*lial piety*, respect and care for one's parents, and ritual propriety. But the ultimate aim is to become an exemplary person (*junzi*) – someone who has cultivated and practiced appropriate attention to and care for others to such a degree that this exemplary behavior is who that person is. So Confucius describes the exemplary person as follows:

> The Master said, "Having a sense of appropriate conduct (*yi*) as one's basic disposition (*zhi*), developing it in observing ritual propriety (*li*), expressing it with modesty, and consummating it in making good on one's word (*xin*): this then is an exemplary person (*junzi*)."
>
> (15.18; Ames and Rosemont 1998, 188)

The exemplary person, in short, is one who has shaped his or her basic character or disposition through the practice of appropriate conduct and ritual propriety. The primary markers of such a character are modesty and integrity.