Introduction

Ethics is for lovers. It is for people who know how to love deeply, passionately and energetically. Ethics is for people who have a passion for the good and the beautiful. And so we begin to tell our story of ethics by going to its very centre – love.

St. Augustine, in his book Confessions, asks, “What do I love when I love God?” It is an interesting question, which he later repeats in the form of a prayer, “What do I love when I love You, my God?” With this question, St. Augustine admits that he does not know the answer. What is it that I love when I love God? As we explore ethics, we join St. Augustine in his quest.

Why is love of God a good starting point for ethics? Ethics is not first of all about duties and obligations, or about rules of behaviour, or about laws. The driving force of ethics is the good. We are not talking about the small goods of life, such as a car, a house, a family, or wealth. Ethics is about the big good: the good which St. Paul described as “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2.9). It is the impossible good that Mary encountered when the angel came to her with God’s announcement that she was to bear a child while she had no husband (Luke 1.34). Ethics searches for the infinite, the impossible, first of all. Then it returns to our day-to-day actions, to the obligations and responsibilities that we have for one another.

In this program we will start by exploring this search for the infinite good. Then we will look at how we translate this search into our actions. The first we call ethics. The second – translating the search for the good into the way we conduct our lives – we call
morality. We can see morality at work in our rules or guidelines of behaviour and good actions. Accordingly, for example, the Ten Commandments – the ten words given to Moses – touch on morality. They identify the good looking at its flip side: You shall not steal; you shall not murder. Or they show how the good is attained: You shall love the Lord your God. Further in this chapter, we will make the distinction between ethics and morality using examples from everyday life.

_In Search of the Good: A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living_ consists of two parts: an introductory section of two units and a second section of four units. The introductory units ask the question: What are fundamental issues at work in a Catholic approach to ethics? We approach the answer from two angles. The first angle explores a philosophical understanding of the human person as ethical (Unit I). You will be invited to reflect on the rich ethical tradition that has emerged over the centuries from Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) to contemporary thinkers on such questions as “What is ethics?” “What makes human actions unique?” “What guides human actions in search of the good?” “What is conscience?” In Unit I we will use what tradition has called the “Book of Nature,” that is, what human reason can learn from the natural world. Human intelligence and philosophical reflection have helped us to understand this desire within us for the good. The second angle (Unit II) explores what our Judeo-Christian tradition brings to ethics and the consideration of the good. Here we will turn to sacred Scripture, which is foundational for our understanding of ourselves as ethical beings.

In the second part of _In Search of the Good_, Revelation and reason will be placed in dialogue with each other. We will consider the good that people search for in the various domains of their lives. Here we will enter into the treasury of reflection that has enlightened human culture over the centuries. We will sample reflections on the good of freedom, of justice, of love, of community, and of forgiveness. We will consider how these goods impact on our lives individually. We will ask “How might I think about these goods when I have to choose between more than one good?” “What about when I am confronted with evil, the opposite of the good?”

Each chapter also offers moments for reflection. These are opportunities to develop a sense of gratitude for the gift of the ethical and moral thrust in ourselves. It is this gift that allows our world to be a home for humanity; a place where it is good to be; a world for lovers.
The ethical experience: Four ways of locating the ethical in you

“Be home by midnight. And please, drive carefully!” How often have your parents said something like this to you? Perhaps you associate ethics and morals with this kind of prescriptive language. Ethics and morality become a series of do’s and don’ts imposed on you by an outside authority. You may often feel that these obligations are an imposition on your personal freedom and responsibility. You may resent these rules and codes as an intrusion on your freedom. Accordingly, you may well think of ethics or morality as something that others put upon you and not as something that is yours. In the following four examples the ethical is clearly a part of what it means to be human.

The scream –
The experience of personal response
Ken Melchin begins his book on Christian ethics *Living With Other People* with the following story:

Take a moment to imagine that you are on vacation, stretched out on a vast expanse of magnificent white beach, with no one around for miles. You are finally getting that relief from the tension and anxiety of daily life that you most certainly deserve. You can feel your muscles relaxing. You can feel the stress flowing out of your body. You can feel your mind detaching from everyday concerns, releasing the grip of concentrated attention. Your mind begins to wander, to float blissfully, to be carried here, then there, from one pleasant image to another, on the breezes that blow in that familiar region of consciousness between waking and sleeping.

Suddenly a scream breaks through your state of bliss.

“Help!!!”

The Screan by Edvard Munch

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The happy [person] lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action.  
Aristotle
Do ethics and morality mean the same thing? Not quite. Ethics comes from the Greek *ta ethika* (having to do with good character). Morality comes from the Latin *moralitas* (having to do with the customs, habits and manners shaping human life). Ethics is interested more in the good that humans tend towards, such as happiness and freedom. Morality is interested more in the ways that humans can attain this good, such as the rules, laws or commandments which we experience as a duty or obligation to follow.

The text will constantly go back and forth between ethics and morality. Some chapters will focus more on ethics; others will focus more on morality. Ethics guides morality; it gives vision to our action. A concrete comparison might make this distinction clearer: Ethics is like understanding musical theory, knowing how to read music, and understanding technique. Morality is like actually playing music, hitting the right notes, correctly interpreting the musical phrase, performing.

Another example: Ethics is like understanding the laws of physics that govern driving a car; for instance, knowing that it takes friction between the tires and the road to have good traction, and that in a snowstorm this friction is reduced. Morality is like good driving: slowing down in a snowstorm and allowing greater distance to stop the car, knowing and applying the rules of the road, driving defensively. You can play music without understanding musical theory, and you can operate a car without understanding the laws of physics. However, you would have difficulty in making good decisions in your musical performance or driving should challenges or dramatic changes arise that require your response. That's why we need a basis for our decisions and actions. Ethics gives us this understanding of the fundamental principles underlying our activity.

Does ethics take priority over morality? Ethics has a certain priority because the search for the good is so important in our lives. But to better understand our search for the good, we must look first at how, over the centuries, people have expressed the good in laws, norms for action, rules, regulations or commandments. Laws and commandments serve to protect some good—for example, “Thou shalt not kill.” This commandment promotes and protects the good of life. Yet, there is an exception to this commandment, called self-defense. Ethics searches for the higher good on which the act of self-defense is based. Ethics also explains how there can be a higher good in particular circumstances and under certain conditions. In other words, norms and duties are not the final word. The good is. Rules or norms that do not contribute to the good need to be reformulated.

response. Think about your response. It is a uniquely human experience.

**The beggar – The experience of the other**

A second common ethical experience comes to us from the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995). For Levinas, it all starts with the human face, especially the face of someone in need. Something happens to us when we are face to face with another person, whom he refers to as an “Other.” All face-to-face encounters are ethical because they remind us of our responsibility for the Other. Later in this chapter you will learn more about Levinas’s ethical theory, but first consider this simple example.

Imagine that you are walking downtown in a typical Canadian city. You meet someone who asks you for some spare change. You may have noticed the person as you came up the street. You may already have begun the debate within yourself as to what you will do. When confronted with this person, you probably go through a number of emotions. “Oh, the poor guy!” “Get a job.” “I have better things to spend my money on.” “She will probably spend it on alcohol or drugs.” “The city should take care of these people.” “Oh no!” “Maybe I should cross to the other side.” “Why me?” “Please, not today.” Even if you refuse to give some spare change, you are not finished with the request. As you walk down the street, the other person, the needy one, is still with you. He or she is inside you while you are busy defending your decision not to give – or, your decision to give. The other person has evoked a response from you.

In Levinas’s language, the Other’s face has taken you hostage and made you responsible. This is an ethical experience. The Other’s face is not something you can just look at neutrally. It has another sort of impact: the face is ethical.

**“I have to…” – The experience of obligation**

For the third ethical experience, let us go back to the parent who tells you, “Be home by midnight! And please, drive carefully!” When your parents ask you to be cautious, it affects you in a way that is connected with the experience of duty, or obligation. Your ethical sense is turned on when someone orders you to do something.

Take the example of your parents giving you a curfew and telling you to drive carefully. As the time gets closer to midnight, you start thinking about taking your leave. As time passes, you grow increasingly aware of the time and of your need to get going. If you choose to ignore these warning signals and stay anyway, your unrest won’t go away. You will continue debating with yourself what you will tell your parents. On reaching home after midnight, you may try to sneak to your bedroom without making any noise for fear your parents will hear you and confront you.

This experience of feeling obliged to obey a rule or a law has everything to do with your ethical side. Something in you obliges you to follow the law, or to do what is considered the right thing to do. Someone, whom you consider to have authority over you, can convince you to follow his or her reason or wishes. You cannot remain neutral toward such a person: the order or wish invades your consciousness and demands a response. Your response has everything to do with ethics. Here again you show yourself to be an ethical being. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) worked out an ethical theory for this experience of duty, or obligation. We will have more to say about Kant’s ideas later in the chapter.
Defining ethics

Consider these four types of ethical experiences: personal response (the scream), responsibility for the Other (the beggar), duty (the curfew), and contrast (the intolerable). It is one thing to experience these things, but it is quite another to understand what these experiences mean. Early philosophers noted such experiences and reflected on them. From these philosophers we have inherited different theories that seek to explain ethical experiences and to translate them into a practical wisdom of living. In other words, the ethical experiences do not lead directly to an ethical theory. What one person considers a duty, or intolerable, cannot be translated into an ethical position that applies to everyone at all times. Moral philosophers, or ethicists, sort out what, according to their understanding, is an ethical approach to such experiences. They delve into the complexity of human actions and propose what is the human thing to do.

From these philosophers we have received several definitions of ethics. At a general level, ethics is about the “goodness” of human life.

Guiding questions

1. How would you describe your personal experience from the perspective of each of the scenarios?
2. What reasons or motives might you have that would cause you to respond in one way or another?
3. What makes you respond in these situations? Why?
4. Under what circumstances might you respond differently?
5. What makes these responses ethical?

This is intolerable! This isn’t fair! – The experience of contrast

A fourth ethical experience occurs when you feel outraged by something blatantly unjust or unfair happening to yourself or to others. At the end of the Second World War, the Allied troops presented the first images of the heaps of corpses and the emaciated remnants of the Jewish people in the death camps. In 1995, United Nations Peacekeepers reported their helplessness as 7,000 men and boys were butchered in Srebrenice by the Serbian army. Other peacekeepers have wept as they gave witness about the genocide in Rwanda. In each case, the world reacted with anger and revulsion. Before massive evil the human heart recoils and is filled with incomprehension. “Never again,” Pope Paul VI pleaded at the United Nations in 1971, “War, never again!”

When you feel overwhelmed by the unjust suffering of others, by the plight of workers who are let go while the bosses award themselves big bonuses, by battered women and abused children, the indignation you feel is an experience of contrast with what ought to be. “This is not right!” “This must be stopped.” “This is intolerable!” “This isn’t fair!” You have a healthy built-in capacity for seeing what the world ought to look like and how situations ought to be. When confronted with senseless violence and disregard of others, you quite naturally recoil from this destruction. This is again an ethical experience. One could call this an experience of contrast. You are shocked because the terrible and terrifying event contrasts so strongly with what you expect from your fellow humans. The intolerable ought not to be!
Ethics seeks answers to questions like: “How and when does human life reflect what is good?” and “How do we aim at the good life?” In asking these questions, we quickly recognize that saying “the good life” is the aim of ethics raises as many questions as it answers. Who determines what is “good”? What is “the good life”? What is good and right in human living?

In answering these questions, ethicists begin to diverge into different camps. Some would have us reflect on the aim of human life (Aristotle). Others look at obligation derived from respect for the law (Kant). Still others focus on the meanings of the words we use to speak of good and evil, right and wrong. Others in the fields of comparative ethics and moral anthropology study the way particular peoples, societies and cultures answer the question “What is the good?” Others again explore our responsibility to the Other (Levinas), or to obedience to the will of God. Each of these viewpoints gives us a different perspective on the search for the good. In order to grasp how different ethical theories can be, consider the following three ethical thinkers – Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.

Aristotle (384–322 BC): Teleological ethics

Aristotle was born in Stagira, a northern colony of Greece bordering Macedonia. His father, the court physician, was a friend of King Amyntas II of Macedonia. Aristotle became friends with the King’s son, Philip, a friendship that was to influence the course of civilization in later years. In all likelihood, Aristotle’s father introduced him to anatomy and the medical practices and ideas of the time. From his childhood, he would have dissected and studied various organisms. Undoubtedly this influenced his ideas about how we come to know and understand the world and our place within it. His privileged childhood could not prevent the death of his parents when he was 17 years old. He went to Athens at that time to continue his education in Plato’s Academy. The philosopher Plato was recognized at the time as Greece’s leading thinker.

Plato recognized Aristotle’s great intellectual abilities, and took him under his wing. However, the two of them approached philosophy very differently. While Plato focused on abstraction and the world of ideas, Aristotle explored the natural world and human experience. While Plato thrived on contemplation, Aristotle thrived on hands-on experience, observation and classification. Even though they saw the world differently, Aristotle had the greatest respect for his teacher and stayed with him for twenty years. Plato died in 347 BC. Because of an upsurge in anti-Macedonian feeling, Aristotle left Athens for the Eastern Aegean. There he became political advisor to Hermeias, who was eager to foster learning in his extensive power base in Asia Minor. Aristotle married Pythias, who was Hermeias’s niece and adopted daughter. Unhappily, Hermeias offended the Persian king of the time and, as a result, was executed. Aristotle and Pythias fled for their lives.

By this time (343 BC), Aristotle’s childhood friend, Philip, was King Philip of Macedonia. The king invited Aristotle to tutor his 13-year-old son, Alexander. By all accounts, Alexander was rambunctious. However, Aristotle managed to teach him well and instilled in Alexander a respect for knowledge. We know this pupil as...
Aristotle, by his association with King Philip, and then with Alexander, found himself in a difficult position. Charges were brought against him for not respecting the gods of the state. (The same charge had been brought against the philosopher Socrates in 399 BC. Socrates was put to death, being forced to drink poison.) Aristotle fled for his life once again, but died within a year.

Ancient historian Diogenes Läertius referred to 360 works by Aristotle. Tragically, much of his work was lost in the destruction of the great library of the Egyptian city of Alexandria. Only forty of his works survive today. The Lyceum in Athens continued – its power somewhat diminished – for another 500 years to challenge and influence much of subsequent Western thought.

Aristotle’s teleological ethics
So how did Aristotle’s ideas become a part of Catholic ethical reflection? In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225–1274) – through Arab scholars – rediscovered Aristotle. Aquinas’s teaching assured Aristotle an enduring place in the development of Catholic ethical theory.

The pursuit of happiness
At the core of Aristotle’s ethics is political intent. Aristotle’s first concern is not the individual. His first concern is the polis, the Greek city-state. The isolated person, outside the polis, must be “either a beast or a god.” Aristotle’s ethics state that human life is shaped to its full extent in the context of a community. It is there that the citizen will find happiness.

Aristotle does not equate happiness with pleasure. Pleasure, for Aristotle was, suitable for cattle. Pleasure is only momentary. Happiness, however, is an enduring state of someone who does well the tasks that are typical of a human being. Happiness is the condition of the good person who succeeds in living well and acting well. In the words of Aristotle

As [all] knowledge and moral purpose aspires to some good, what is in our view the good at which the political science aims, and what is the highest of all practical goods? As to its name there is, I may say, a general agreement. The masses and the cultured classes agree in calling it happiness, and conceive that “to live well” or “to do well” is the same thing as “to be happy.” But as to the nature of happiness they do not agree, nor do the masses give the same account of it as the philosophers.  

In other words, for Aristotle, ethics aims to discover what is good for us as human beings, what permits us to reach our potential, what is our internal compass, or what we are intended to be. For Aristotle, someone is happy “if and only if, over some considerable period of time, [that person] frequently performs with some success the most perfect of typically human tasks.” For example, according to Aristotle, happiness might mean learning to be a responsible and active citizen of your community, or developing a lifestyle that fosters good health. That is why we call his ethics teleological ethics. It is because teleological ethics derives from discovering the finality (telos) of what we are intended to be.

Teleology
Here is how Aristotle expresses teleology:

Every art and every scientific inquiry, and similarly every action and purpose, may be said to aim at some good. Hence the good has been well defined as that at which all things aim.

As there are various actions, arts, and sciences, it follows the ends are also various. Thus health is the end of medicine, a vessel of shipbuilding, victory [is the goal] of strategy, and wealth [is the aim] of domestic economy.
If it is true that in the sphere of action there is an end which we wish for its own sake, and for the sake of which we wish everything else...it is clear that this will be the good or the supreme good. Does it not follow that the knowledge of this supreme good is of great importance for the conduct of life, and that, if we know it, we shall be like archers who have a mark at which to aim, we shall have a better chance of attaining what we want?4

Above all else, according to Aristotle, we are intended to be rational. Our greatest capacity as humans is our intelligence. Following our internal compass means developing this capacity, not only in matters of science, but also in practical life – in developing our individual character. Humans are rational animals, and we must base our actions, as much as possible, on reasoning. To act ethically, therefore, is to engage our capacity to reason as we develop good character. That is the highest form of happiness. The good person is one whose actions as a rule are solidly based on excellent reasoning and who spends a great amount of time thinking.

**Human excellence**

When people seek to become who they are intended to be, they develop habits that represent the best of what it means to be human. Aristotle calls these excellences virtues. To act virtuously, that is, excellently, is to do things well, to act successfully as a human being. It means allowing reason to guide one’s actions. Aristotle held that a good person would use reason to control desire. We choose deliberately to fulfill that which is the most appropriate for us as humans. We become virtuous by choosing continually to do virtuous things, so that these actions become ingrained in us like a habit.

Moral virtue comes to us as a result of habit.... The virtues we first get by exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g., [people] become builders by building.... So too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.... If this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all... would be born good or bad at their craft.... Thus in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. That is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the difference between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.5

**The mean**

Aristotle was very aware of the need to maintain balance in our actions. We ought to avoid excess, but not necessarily to avoid something completely. If to drink wine were a good, then it would be good to drink neither too much, nor too little. This is Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean. Be moderate in all things. To be courageous is to avoid some but not all dangers; to be polite is to be courteous in some but not in all situations. To be generous is to stay somewhere...

Assume a virtue, if you have it not....

*For use almost can change the stamp of nature.*

Hamlet, Shakespeare
Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe... the starry heavens above and the moral law within.7

Immanuel Kant was born and raised in Königsberg, a small city in east Prussia now part of northeast Germany. The fourth of eleven children, Immanuel experienced the rigours of poverty, as well as a strict upbringing within a religious household. His parents were devout members of a Protestant sect known as Pietism. Pietists believed in personal devotion, Bible reading, and the universal priesthood of all the faithful. They lived severe, puritanical lives.

Immanuel spent his whole life near his home. Apparently he never ventured more than 100 kilometres from his birthplace. His life, even from the age of eight, was characterized by a routine of study and work. A popular story about his life tells how townspeople could set their clocks by the walks that he took at precisely 3:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Kant studied at the local university, and upon completing his studies, made a meager living between extravagance and stinginess. Try to stay in the middle, but in a middle that suits you as an individual. For you, for example, the mean for drinking may mean drinking in moderation, or not at all.

First of all, it must be observed that the nature of moral qualities is such that they are destroyed by defect and by excess. We see the same thing happen in the case of strength and of health... excess as well as deficiency of physical exercise destroys our strength, and similarly, too much and too little food and drink destroys our health; the proportionate amount, however, produces, increases, and strengthens it.

The same applies to self-control, courage, and the other virtues: the [one] who shuns and fears everything becomes a coward, whereas [an individual] who knows no fear at all and goes to meet every danger becomes reckless. Similarly, [one] who revels in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while [the person] who avoids every pleasure like a boor becomes what might be called insensitive. Thus we see that self-control and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency and are preserved by the mean.6

Guiding questions

1. Identify three key points from the ethical theory of Aristotle.
2. How would Aristotle describe “the good”?
3. In light of Aristotle’s understanding of the good person, describe someone significant in your life that meets his criteria.
working as a private tutor. Later, he worked as a private teacher at the university, paid directly by the students. Since he was a very popular teacher, he was able to make ends meet. However, it seems that as a young man he could not afford to get married. When he was forty-six years old, he was finally hired by the university as a professor of logic and metaphysics.

Kant wrote many books – some of them are among the most difficult to comprehend. His Critique of Pure Reason (1781, 1787), by his admission, was the result of at least twelve years of reflection, and four or five months of hurried writing. (You will find some of the longest sentences ever written in that book!) Despite the difficulty of his writing, his influence on philosophy and Western thought is incalculable.

**Theoretical reason**
One of his primary concerns was clarifying how it is that humans come to know things. What role does experience play in our coming to know something? Can we know things that are beyond our immediate experience? What does this mean for scientific inquiry? Can we know and predict cause and effect? These types of questions pertain to the area called theoretical reason. This is the area of reasoning by which we come to know how the laws of nature, the laws of cause and effect, govern human behaviour. It is an area of life where freedom of choice is not an issue.

**Practical reason**
To understand how people make choices, however, we must look elsewhere. Kant proposed a category he called practical reason. Practical reason moves beyond scientific and empirical knowledge to the moral dimension guiding human behaviour. Within the realm of knowledge, humans act not only on impulse as affected by the laws of nature, but also out of conscious choice based on principles.

Using the first category of theoretical reason, we can know only what people actually do. Using the second category of practical reason, we can come to understand what we ought to do. Let's look at an example of theoretical reason: We know the effect of alcohol consumption upon the body. Or to look at it from the perspective of practical reason, we know that we ought not to drink and drive. It is this concept of moral duty that Kant contributed to our understanding of ethics.

**Kant's ethics**
Like Aristotle, Kant also held that the good is the aim of a moral life. But he approached the whole question of how one attained the good in quite a different way. Kant was primarily concerned about the certainty of the principles of ethical reasoning. He recognized that in the domain of ethics we cannot arrive at the same type of certainty as we can in physics and mathematics. Ethics presents us not with rational, cognitive certainty, but with practical certainty. In this practical area of our lives, he held that there are three areas of interest: God, freedom and immortality. We may not be able to prove any of these empirically. Nonetheless, we need these practical principles – God, freedom and immortality – to be able to pursue and attain the supreme good.

1. **God**: Humans cannot out of their own power achieve the supreme good. There are too many circumstances beyond our control. For this reason, Kant proposes the existence of God to allow us to achieve the supreme good.
2. **Freedom**: If the supreme good is to be, in part, our achievement, then what we ought to do, we can do. To have the duty to do something, we must be able to do it. Therefore, Kant argues, humans are by nature free.
3. **Immortality**: Achieving the supreme good is an immense task. It is impossible to obtain it completely in this life. That is why there is immortality, a life beyond, in which we can achieve the supreme good.

**The good will**
To Aristotle, a “good person” seeks his or her happiness in the city-state of ancient Greece. Kant’s ethics is more individual. His ethics is to be discovered in private life, in the inner convictions and autonomy of the individual. In Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (1785),
Kant proposes how individuals attain the good. He begins by saying, "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will." For Kant, in all circumstances, what is to be prized above all else is a good will. It is our most precious possession, a good in itself.

What is this "good will?" For Kant it is the will to do our duty for no other reason than that it is our duty. That is why Kant's ethical theory is known as deontological – from the Greek word deon, meaning "duty." This perspective is very different from Aristotle’s rational desire for the good. For Kant, what is central is the will. He acknowledges that it is not easy for humans to attain their purpose in life. Impulses and desires can easily draw us away from our duty. After all, our will is finite. We don’t always manage to act according to our duty.

For Kant, therefore, a human action is morally good when it is done for the sake of duty. An act of kindness done to a friend may be praiseworthy, but it is not a moral act. It becomes moral when you are kind to someone when you don’t feel like being kind, when you are busy or when you are more inclined to do other things. For example, you might not want to go to your great aunt’s funeral, but it is your duty. You choose to go to honour the family.

Real moral worth is motivated by duty, not by inclination, however valuable this inclination may be. In other words, moral worth is measured not by the results of one’s actions, but by the motive behind them. Kant’s language is full of “shoulds.” It is a language not of desires, but of “ought.” For Kant, you are your own legislator. It is your autonomy, your decision, to act in accordance with your good will. You are not constrained by another.

**Kant’s use of moral maxims**

The use of reason is central to the moral life. For Kant, duty is determined by principles (maxims) according to which we act. Say you decide to skip school and go to the movies. In this case, you would be acting on the principle, "I will avoid unpleasant things whenever something more pleasant offers itself, and the consequences of my action will not lead to greater unpleasantness." But this subjective principle is too obviously based on personal desires. To be ethical, an action must have a more objective principle. To be a principle, it must apply to everyone. An ethical maxim is one on which every rational person would necessarily act if reason were fully in charge of his or her actions. Principles tell us how we ought to act. But reason determines how this duty is universally applicable.

In his most famous maxim Kant proposes: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” To put it another way, I should act in a way that I would want everyone else in the world to act. In other words, would we really want a world in which people felt free to skip out on school, their job, or their family whenever they felt like it in order to have some fun? Or, does it make sense that everyone has certain obligations to fulfill that come before personal desires?

**The person as an end, not a means**

A second moral imperative for Kant reads: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end." Kant does not say that we should never treat others as a means. If that were the case, how could we ever have an economy and people working for another’s benefit? A worker is a means of production, or a means of providing a
service. Kant intended, rather, that people never be treated only as a means, that is, without regard to their dignity or their working conditions. It would be unethical to take advantage of workers who have little power relative to their employer, such as young people, immigrants, people with little education, or poor people. Workers must be respected. To use another example, it would be wrong for a coach to take on twelve athletes in order to get higher funding for the team, while secretly intending to play only six of them on a regular basis. In this case, the six extra players are being used simply as a means to get more money; they are not being treated as athletes in their own right.

Kant was also somewhat of a utopian dreamer. He came up with the concept of a “kingdom of ends.” In this kingdom, all participants would treat each other according to his second maxim (treat another as an end, not just as a means). He encouraged all people to act as if they were members of this kingdom, always acting out of respect for the other. In this kingdom all would act out of their rational will. No one would act on any principle that could not be made universal, for personal benefit, because of how one happened to feel about something, or because of any compulsion that came from personal philosophical or religious views. Above all, Kant valued the autonomy of the good will. He challenged people not to act like children under the control of another. Become a law unto yourself. He coined the slogan of the eighteenth century: Dare to know!

Guiding questions

1. Identify three key points from the ethical theory of Kant.
2. How would Kant describe “the good”?
3. In light of Kant’s understanding of the good person, describe someone significant in your life that meets his criteria.

Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995):
An ethics of the face

More than most major contemporary philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas was marked by the tragedies of the twentieth century, particularly the Holocaust, or the Shoah. He was born in 1905 in Kaunas, Lithuania, to pious Jewish parents. At the age of seventeen he moved to France to begin his studies in philosophy at the University of Strassbourg. In 1928 he continued his studies in Freibourg, Germany. When he came to write his doctoral thesis, Levinas had begun to experience a profound contrast between Western philosophy and his own much more deeply rooted Jewish faith.

The sameness of things
Levinas perceived the Western philosophical tradition attempting to overcome all difference and diversity by grouping everything under an all-encompassing unity, which it called “Being.” Everything ultimately carried a stamp of sameness. Westerners, he said, think out of a unified
totality. It thinks away difference. Difference is reduced to being accidental ("accidental" in Aristotle’s philosophy meant “not essential” because it changes in every individual).

**The singularity of things**
The Hebrew tradition, on the other hand, he said, gloried in the singular. This singularity of things gave them their identity. He could find nothing that would hold all of these singularities together in some kind of unity. He contrasted the Western notion of “totality” with the Hebrew notion of “infinity.”

When World War II broke out in 1939, he was mobilized into the French army. During the disastrous first month of the war in France, he was captured by the Germans. Although five years as a prisoner of war were a hardship, he escaped the dreadful fate of the rest of his family who had remained in Lithuania. His whole family died in the Holocaust. His wife and young daughter escaped deportation to the death camps, being hidden in a monastery in France until the end of the war, unable to communicate with him.

The experience of the war and the Nazi horror had heightened Levinas’s awareness of his Jewish roots. At the age of forty, he searched out an extraordinary Jewish teacher, Mordachi Chouchani. Chouchani was a mysterious, brilliant man, who looked like a tramp and who always seemed to be on the move. He instructed Levinas in the ways of the Jewish Talmud. Levinas was a good student, and from 1957 onward he himself began to give regular lectures on the Talmud for young Jewish intellectuals in France.

Only at the age of fifty-five did Levinas complete his doctoral thesis, *Totality and Infinity.* On the basis of this work he was offered a chair in philosophy at the University of Poitiers. In 1973, at the age of sixty-eight, he was named professor of philosophy at the most prestigious school in Paris, the Sorbonne. Only then did he obtain recognition by the philosophical world. He became a very popular writer. Only a few years after obtaining the chair in philosophy at the Sorbonne, he retired.

Levinas never forgot his Jewish roots. When once he was invited to give a lecture at the University of Louvain, they inadvertently put the lecture on the Sabbath. Although the lecture hall was filled, Levinas did not show because observing the Sabbath was of higher value. He offered no apology. He continued to write and lecture until illness prevented him. He died shortly after the feast of Chanukah in 1995.

Pope John Paul II holds great respect for Levinas. In a number of his writings, most evidently in *The New Millennium,* Pope John Paul II uses ideas similar to Levinas. In this letter, the Holy Father speaks of the face of Jesus as “A Face to Contemplate.” On several occasions, Pope John Paul II invited Levinas to his summer home to hear from him his understanding of the major issues of our time.

**The Good is infinite**
Levinas’s philosophy as a whole is ethical. Like Aristotle’s and Kant’s ethics, Levinas is in search of the good. For Levinas the good – actually, the “Good” – is the central question of all philosophy. Whereas most Western philosophies are in search of Being, Levinas went in search of the Good, which he said goes beyond Being. Being seeks to name what things have in common when you take away all the differences. For Levinas this concept of Being is dangerous because it takes away from reality what is its most fascinating quality: that each person or thing is incredibly unique. Levinas wants to maintain the uniqueness of each thought and act. The Good is interested, not in what is in common among things, but in what is absolutely unique about each person or thing.

*“Your face, O Lord, I seek” (Psalm 27.8)*

Pope John Paul II in *The New Millennium* reflects on Psalm 27.8: “[Y]our face, O LORD, I seek.” In the face of Christ, he says, “God has truly blessed us … and has made his face to shine upon us” (Psalm 67.1). “Being God and human at the same time, he reveals to us also the true face of humans, fully revealing humans to themselves.”
Levinas calls these unique things and persons “traces” of the Good, or God. No tangible object is ever identical to God, or the Good. Everything we encounter is finite. The trace of God in things and persons is not a faint presence of God. We do not encounter God anywhere, but only a trace of God. A trace says that God was there but is no longer there. God has gone ahead. The Infinite One is always one step ahead of us.

Take a look at the cover photo of this book. God is like the sun. We see traces of the sun in the picture; the light on the water, the bright light at the edge of the picture. But we see only a glimpse of the grandeur that is there. The sun is beyond the point of vision.

The face as witness of the Good
If the Good is Infinite and is always one step ahead of us, where do we encounter the traces that God has been there? Here Levinas goes to the experience of the human face that turns to me and looks at me. The face is the most naked part of the human body. In one of his articles Levinas lashes out against make-up. He sees it as an attempt to hide. But despite all efforts (he may not have thought of coloured contact lenses) the eyes can never be made up. The eyes penetrate every mask. In another’s eyes we make immediate, direct contact.

Think of a time you had an absolute experience of another: a face-to-face experience that touched you deeply. Levinas says that such an experience calls forth a “thrill of astonishment.” Such an experience is the most original moment of meaning. In the eyes of the other you meet a stranger, one whom you cannot reduce to being you. She or he is “Other.” And in this person’s look, the Other calls you not to reduce his or her face to being the same as any other face. This person’s face is a “No”: a refusal to let you reduce the face or to deny the face in its uniqueness. Levinas goes so far as to translate this “No!” as “You shall not murder.” You are not to take the otherness away. The face is an authority, “highness, holiness, divinity.” In the Other, you see one who is not your equal, but your superior.

The face as ethical
But how is this ethical? The face that Levinas is referring to is not the face of an authority figure. The superiority of the face comes from elsewhere: the Other is a stranger, one who is totally defenceless, uprooted. Levinas refers to the Book of Deuteronomy (10.18), where the Israelites are told to love the stranger as themselves because the LORD watches over the stranger. The stranger is one whose very existence is threatened, one with no economic stability or security, one who is socially marginalized and without rights.

It is at this point, according to Levinas, that the face becomes ethical. Recognizing the

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

(Matthew 25.34-36)
Chapter 1: Why be ethical?

Guiding questions

1. Identify three key points from the ethical theory of Levinas.
2. How would Levinas describe "the good"?
3. In light of Levinas’s understanding of the good person, describe someone significant in your life that meets his criteria.

The human is ethical

These three philosophers, Aristotle, Kant and Levinas, will accompany us for the journey into ethics. They will be our main companions, acting as a compass pointing our way toward understanding what it means to be ethical. On the way we will pick up other thinkers as well, but these three will always be in the background. They convince us that the ethical is indispensable for human life. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just.”

The relation with the other will always be offering and gift, never an approach with “empty hands.”

Levinas

The face makes the absolute demand come across as a petition, as “please.” As Levinas says, “The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness.” The face hardly dares to solicit your hospitality. The face is the beggar with bent head and mumbling voice. This is how the face makes you responsible, by making you aware that you are not as innocent as you thought you were. The face reveals you as someone concerned mostly about yourself. This is the face that makes you responsible.

The face suggests that there is another order of existence: the order of an incredible good calling us to be responsible for the beggar with bent head and mumbling voice. Here the self-centred self is called into question. Here the Other rules. It is a humble rule, revealing itself as if it were afraid to speak. And that is how the divine speaks to us – as a humble God who refuses to use power, so humble that those who seek the face of God are left in despair. God is the goodness who never seduces. God, for Levinas, is the humble and vulnerable God who, in approaching us, immediately retreats like the burning bush that did not burn (Exodus 3.2). The face is a trace of God who has already passed by.

Made responsible by the face

For Levinas the face makes us responsible. This responsibility is our human vocation, our calling. Here the search for the Good ends. His ethics does not bend us in God’s direction, but it twists us in the direction of our neighbour. God’s infinite goodness touches us without our knowledge. God’s touch will always be indirect. God touches us through the face of the Other who begs spare change of us. God refuses to appear, leaving only a trace in the face of the Other, retreating to make room for the Other. Goodness, the Infinite One, translates into responsibility for the Other. How far should this responsibility, this generosity go? Goodness sets no limit.
Psalm 139

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.
Chapter review

Summary
From Aristotle, Kant and Levinas we can draw the following conclusions with regard to the human as ethical:

- The ethical is about our tendency to search for the good.
- The ethical is a part of what it means to be human; in other words, human beings tend towards the good.
- The ethical is the education of our freedom; it seeks the fulfillment or wholeness of human life by way of our actions.
- The ethical presumes that we can be held responsible for what we do.
- Ethical theories draw their explanations from an organizing principle:
  - Happiness is the aim of the good life (Aristotle)
  - Moral duty and obligation is an expression of the good will (Kant)
  - The ethical impact of the face of the other is a trace of the Good, or God (Levinas)
- The role of reason – although it differs in each of the theories – is not a theoretical reason; it is a practical reason that accompanies and holds in check our inclinations or makes practical judgments in the face of our duties or responsibilities.

Review questions
Knowledge and understanding
1. Explain the distinction between ethics and morality.
2. Identify three key points from the ethical theories of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.

Thinking and inquiry
3. Compare and contrast the notion of “the good” as used by Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.
4. Explain how every human choice has an ethical/moral dimension.

Communication
5. Create a chart to show the similarities and differences of the ethical theories of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.
6. Write a short story that captures the essence of any one of the ethical theorists.

Application
7. Choose a story from your daily newspaper and analyze the ethical dimensions of this story from the viewpoints of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas.
8. Imagine a talk show in which Aristotle, Kant and Levinas get to ask questions of a celebrity, politician, business person, etc., with whom you are familiar. Write a script of the conversation that might take place around a significant issue in which this celebrity is involved.

Glossary
autonomy: Free self-direction; responsibility.
ethics: A discipline that deals with the nature of the good, the nature of the human person, and criteria that we use for making right judgments.
morality: A system of right conduct based on fundamental beliefs and obligation to follow certain codes, norms, customs and habits of behaviour.
obligation: What one is bound by duty or contract to do.
responsibility: Being morally accountable for one’s actions. Responsibility presumes knowledge, freedom, and the ability to choose and to act.
Revelation: The ways that God makes Himself known to humankind. God is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The sacred Scriptures, proclaimed within the Church, are the revealed Word of God. God also reveals Self through people and indeed through all of creation.
Conscience: The self in search of the good

Introduction

In this chapter we continue to lay the groundwork for ethics. In looking at the three main ethical theories in Chapter 1, we learned how something in us inclines us to ethics. The word that kept cropping up was "good." Something in our very core seeks after the good. This desire for the good accompanies everything we do. We are forever in search of the good.

In Chapter 2 we explored human action and what it means to be a moral agent.

In this chapter we continue to explore aspects of ourselves that we need to understand before we tackle specific ethical issues. Every ethics is based upon a theory of the human. A philosophical view of what it means to be human is important for ethics. This viewpoint lets us interpret how we as individuals interact with others, our community, our culture and our religion in the process of becoming moral agents. In this chapter we examine six aspects of the human person that are important for ethics:

A. The importance of others
B. The importance of having a direction in life
C. The importance of communication and language
D. The importance of character and one's body
E. The importance of conscience
F. The importance of the development of one's conscience

In the following chapters, we will expand this perspective to include the broader social dimensions. We begin, now, to explore these six aspects of our lives that make us moral agents.

A. The importance of others

"Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4.9)

Can you be a free, unique individual while bearing responsibility for the other? The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis sheds light on this question. One day, Cain, in a jealous rage, set upon and killed his brother, Abel. When the Lord asked Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain said, “I don’t know.” Then he added, "Am I my

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, Whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, Else it will not stay near you. Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

Psalm 32.8-9, 10
brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4.1–9) Cain’s question has resounded throughout history. Are you responsible for your sister and brother? Why should you care for the other?

In the ethical theories of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas (Chapter 1), the “other” plays a central role. Levinas, who of the three is closest to the biblical tradition, makes the strongest argument that the human person is relational. In Chapter 2 you read how, to properly understand human action, it is important to consider “with whom or against whom” an action is undertaken. Most of your actions are in some way relational. Your actions are motivated by others; they involve others; they are done with others or against others; they affect others. Your relationship with others is a powerful incentive for what you do and how you do it. The other is central to your search for the good.

In Western society, the idea that “I am my brother and sister’s keeper” isn’t very popular. We tend to think of others as standing in the way of personal freedom, plans and initiatives: “If only they would see things my way, I could do what I really want to do.” We often see others as an obstacle to our freedom. Why is this so? Western culture views the human person as an individual. It emphasizes autonomy, independence and freedom. Westerners prize the entrepreneur, the solo mountain climber, the explorer, and the teen who becomes a rock star: all self-made individuals. These independent individuals break with traditions; they set their own rules; they are not governed by the opinions of others. For some, relationships are like an add-on that they choose to be a part of or not. They view freedom as independence from others. Others can easily become, as the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre maintained, “my hell.” Such a person might say, “I may choose to build bridges but that is wholly my decision. I don’t need others. I can be a full human being and free without them.”

It is true that human beings are individuals, unique and singular with a capacity to act and be free. But that does not mean we need to see others as enemies of our autonomy. Rather, the other makes it possible for us to become our true selves, individuals in freedom. Consider this example:

Allannah grew up in a one-parent family where she was often called on to be “mom” for her younger brother. Her mother died in a car accident when she was 11 and her brother, Liam, only 7.

In Grade 9, she was told that she had a natural talent for music, both vocal and instrumental. Her teacher called her home and suggested that Allannah take lessons at the Royal Conservatory of Music. But lessons were expensive and her father could hardly make ends meet as it was. Instead, her father encouraged her to continue her music classes at school and to join the church choir where she could at least learn something about singing. Disappointed, but understanding her father’s position, Allannah agreed to the compromise.

When she turned 16, Allannah got a part-time job after school, from which she was able to pay for music lessons. At last, she was going to be able to study music.

But just then, one cold winter morning, Liam was walking to school when a car hit a patch of black ice, jumped the curb and hit him, shattering his left hip. As the weeks passed, it became clear that Liam would need a lot of help from his family, and extensive long-term physiotherapy in order to walk again. After their visit to the clinic to arrange physiotherapy, Allannah found her father sitting forlornly in the family room. Allannah thought about what this might mean for the three of them. She put her arms around her father. “Don’t worry, Dad. We can get through this. We’re a tough family and we have each other.” That night she made a resolution to help take care of her brother. She would make sure that he didn’t fall behind in his studies. She would give the money she earned at her job to help pay for his expensive therapy, and together they would get through this.
Now at 24, Allannah recalls her teen years, all the parties she missed and the music lessons she gave up for her brother. She remembers the hard work lifting him from his wheelchair to his bed, going over missed school work, doing all the housework that Liam could have helped her with – and yet as she remembers, she smiles. Today, Liam is graduating and she will stand by her father’s side where her mother would have been. She will feel the joy of his success, and later in the evening, she will enjoy performing with her band for her dad and brother and invited guests at the graduation party.

Why is it that after all the disappointments in her own life, Allannah is still able to celebrate her brother’s success? What is life-giving about sacrifice for the good of the other? Compelled by love, Allannah chose to commit her freedom to the care of her father and brother. In doing so, she found her freedom and fulfillment. And her life as a musician had not ended, but only changed. She still had a talent to develop and a dream to pursue.

In love with myself: The danger of narcissism

The ancient Greeks tell the story of a young man, named Narcissus, who was physically very beautiful. His beauty attracted the passionate desire and longing of a young woman named Echo. Narcissus, however, lacked any feeling, and he disdained and rejected her. One day as he was hunting, he became thirsty and so came to a well. Just as he was about to drink, he noticed his reflection in the water. He fell in love with his own reflection. He became so consumed with this image and his inability to reach the object of his love that he died of thirst at the edge of the well.

This myth of Narcissus has helped clarify our understanding of how people develop a healthy self-identity. A healthy, mature personality must find a balance between self-love and love for others. A healthy individual will work on relationships with others, trusting that there will be sufficient reward for the “me.” The narcissist refuses to look beyond the self to achieve this balance. Modern psychiatry classifies narcissism as a disorder marked by self-absorption to the exclusion of others. It manifests itself in feelings of rage and aggression against those who do not support the self and its needs.

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me.

Martin Niemoeller
B. The importance of having direction in life

“...you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”  
(Revelation 3.15-16)

The second anthropological trait of the human self is about being committed to particular values. Knowing who you are means knowing where you stand. Everyone stands somewhere. You need to know your commitments - where you stand with the great issues of life. These commitments make clear what you consider good and valuable - what you are for. Knowing where you stand is essential, not only to your self-identity, but also to your moral self. When you become an active member of Students Against Drunk Driving, you make known to others that you stand for responsible action, safety and preservation of life. You speak out against those who selfishly risk the lives of others by drinking and driving. You take a stand: You are for something.

Charles Taylor (b. 1931)

Charles Taylor was born in Montreal in 1931 to a francophone mother and an anglophone father. He has lived there – except during his graduate studies as a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford – most of his life. Fluently bilingual, he is immersed in the Anglo-French culture of the city. Comfortable with both dominant cultures in Canada, he constantly seeks to bring the two solitudes of anglophone and francophone together.

Charles Taylor has been a professor of philosophy at McGill University in Montreal since 1961. He has drawn on his political instincts to write extensively about the place and role of Québec in Canadian society. He even ran as a member of the NDP in a federal election in 1965 against Pierre Elliot Trudeau – and lost. He tried three times more, each time unsuccessfully. In Québec Taylor is recognized as one of the great Québécois intellectuals of the 20th century. In 1992 the Québec government awarded him the Prix Léon-Gérin, the highest honour given for contributions to Québec intellectual life.

Taylor describes himself as a Catholic Quebecker. In his work he shows a great concern over the images that Western peoples have developed of themselves. When he looks back into the rich Judeo-Christian tradition, he sees a much richer vision of the self than that which is being promoted by today’s secularism. In his book Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (1989), he recognizes the need for a new spirituality. He says that the current purely humanistic and secular understanding of the self is not able to sustain important values such as care for the other over a long time. He makes a case for a return to Judeo-Christian values and spirituality. Despite its decline in countries like Canada, Christianity has far from exhausted its force as a treasured vision of the human self.

My identity lies in my commitments

In the first part of Sources of the Self, Taylor shows how human lives have a sense of direction. He maintains that this moral orientation of our lives forms part of our identity. This moral orientation reveals our stance in life. The following abridged selection is taken from a chapter in Taylor’s book entitled, “The Self in Moral Space”:
People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic…. Or they may define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to … say … a Québécois. [The attachment] to this spiritual view or background…provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value…. [If] they … were … to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they wouldn’t know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them.

[When] this situation … arises for some people, [they suffer] an ‘identity crisis’, an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame … within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial…. This is a painful and frightening experience.

My identity emerges from the direction I take in life
Taylor argues that there is an essential link between my moral direction or stance in life and my identity. It is within the light of this moral stance that life’s questions arise: What is good or bad? What is worth doing or not doing? What is meaningful and important? What is trivial? Taylor considers why there is a link between identity and moral stance:

Our identities, as defined by [the values that] give us our fundamental [direction in life], are in fact complex and many-tiered. We are all framed by what we see as universally valid commitments (being a Catholic… in my example above) and also by what we understand as particular identifications (being…. a Québécois). We often declare our identity as defined by only one of these, because this is what is [most important to us at that moment]. But in fact our identity is deeper and more many-sided than any of our possible articulations of it.

Where do I stand?
But the second facet of the question above (about our identities as Catholic or Québécois) is not historical. … The answer comes in the form of a name: ‘I’m Joe Smith’, often accompanied by a statement of relationship: ‘I’m Mary’s brother-in-law’, or by a statement of social role: ‘It’s the repair man’, or ‘the man you’re pointing to is the President’ … To be able to answer for oneself is to know where one stands…. that is why we naturally tend to talk of our fundamental [stance] in terms of who we are. To lose this [stance], or not to have found it, is not to know who one is. And this [stance], once attained, defines where you answer from, hence your identity.

Guiding questions

1. How do your commitments or moral stance give rise to your identity?
2. How can you go about determining your own identity? Fill in the following statement, “I am a …”
   What do you stand for?
3. Looking at the question, “Where do you stand?” think of your life as a moral space. Map your space. What are your mountain peaks and deepest valleys? In what direction do your rivers flow? What is your main produce? What do you stand for?
4. Name some key values that the culture around you stands for. What is your stance toward the orientation of our culture? Do you commit yourself to these values?
C. The importance of communication and language

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

(John 1.14)

According to the first anthropological trait, you are a self for and through others. Secondly, you are a self because you take a stance in life. But your stance in life is not shaped by you alone. You are also part of a community that shares a common language. What you value, aspire to, plan for, dream of, hope for, work for was first made known to you as good and desirable by others in your life. Your parents, teachers and many others teach you what is right and wrong, naming it as either good or evil. Charles Taylor writes that we live in a world shaped by language. To answer the question, “Who am I?” you must recognize the community into which you were born, by whom you were raised, and whose language you speak.

There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language. We first learn our languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up. The meanings that the key words first had for me are the meanings they have for us, that is, for me and my conversation partners together. …in talking about something you and I make it an object for us together…

So I can learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness, etc., are only through my and others’ experience of these being objects for us, in some common space. … Later, I may innovate. I may develop an original way of understanding myself and human life, at least one which is in sharp disagreement with my family and background. But the innovation can take place only from the base in our common language. Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with certain special partner(s), who know me, or have wisdom, or with whom I have an affinity…

This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to … those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition… A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of [conversation]’… The full definition of someone’s identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral or spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community (Catholic/Québécois etc.).

Language contains and shares with others common experiences and commitments. That is why a language can be meaningless to those who do not share that same experience. For example, when you tell an “inside joke” that draws on an experience shared only by your friends, anyone outside your circle doesn’t “get it.” In the same way, words like “Incarnation,” “Trinity,” “grace,” “Eucharist” have a particular and definitive meaning for Catholics. Their
meaning is not easily understood by those who do not share our faith tradition because they do not have the Catholic experience that gives these terms their meaning. Knowing the dictionary definition is not the same as understanding a term’s meaning within the Catholic tradition.

Guiding questions

1. How does language show that your stance in life grows out of conversations?
2. What do you mean when you say to someone, “I am a Catholic”?
3. Who have been your significant conversation partners? Who are they now?
4. What have you learned from them?
5. Who is your “defining community”?
6. Why is participating in the Christian community important to understanding the Scripture quotation: “The Word became flesh...”?

Understanding the weight of words

Words are really all we have to fend off the chaos. They can’t make or remake reality, but they can give us a vision with which to lift ourselves out of the ordinary...

The meaning we give things depends upon the words, the symbols, with which we surround them. For example…what does it mean to “fall in love”? That you have “great chemistry” with someone? That you have found a “soulmate”? Or that you have found the person whom God, from all eternity, has destined you to meet? That last interpretation doesn’t exclude “great chemistry” or finding a “soulmate,” but it adds a wonderful extra dimension, God’s providence in our lives. A deeper set of words sets your finite experience against an infinite horizon and that, precisely, is the secret to faith and meaning...

Meaning and happiness are less about where we are living and what we are doing than about how we view and name where we are living and what we are doing….We need wide vision, high symbols and the right words to turn the seeming poverty of our ordinary lives into the stuff of faith and poetry.

The Christian origin of the notion of “person”

There are two distinct meanings for the word “person” and both meanings have a religious background. They grew out of theological questions about the mystery of the Trinity. In Christian belief, God is a union of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How can three selves be one? This revelation of God required a word that would allow us to express how three persons – called Father, Son and Spirit – are one God. Ancient Greek and Latin had no words to name these distinctions in God. Both languages had a word for “person” (hypostasis and prosopon in Greek and persona in Latin). But these words referred only to what one could see from the outside about a human being. They did not touch the inner core of the human. And so theologians reshaped the word “person.” Gradually, out of the puzzling Christian revelation of “one God in three persons” came an enriched understanding of the human person.

One meaning of “person” came to be an individual who bears rights and responsibilities. To be a person is to be one of a kind, to be autonomous. No two persons are alike. To be a person is to be conscious and to act. (This is the notion of person that you read about in Chapter 2.) In an analogous sense, Father, Son and Spirit in God also are persons as singular and distinct from the other. The one is not the other.

But another meaning for person also emerged to express how, in the three distinct persons of the Trinity, there is unity.

What binds the three persons of the Trinity together as one in God? The answer, theologians said, is love. God is love. Love pours itself out toward another. In God this breathing forth of love is a communion of love that is Father, Son and Spirit. This love generated the Son and breathed forth the Spirit so that there are three persons. At the same time, this love binds the three into a unity. For this reason the word “person” also came to mean this outpouring of love toward the other.

Because you are made in God’s image, you are also made by and for love. This outpouring of love defines God: in God, three are one in a bond of love. To be made in the image of God is to have this outpouring of God’s love inscribed in your very being. The other is implanted in you as part of your self. Human beings by their nature are social beings. Others are not an add-on. The other is not “my hell,” as Sartre said. Human life is a web of relationships. You cannot do without the other. Essentially, “person” means “the self as relational.” No wonder that loneliness is so painful.

(Note: The concept of Trinity will be explored again in future chapters. See especially Chapter 5 and the Prologue to the Gospel of John which reveals the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.)
D. The importance of character and one’s body

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God…?” (1 Corinthians 6.19)

To the previous three a fourth trait must be added. Not only do you become a self with others, not only do you need to stand somewhere and not only are you shaped by your response to others, you do so with your body. You might say that it is through your body that all of these human traits become possible. For this reason your actions too are embodied: they shape our character. This formation of character is the fourth trait of the moral self.

Building character

The word “character” refers to the way your actions, over time, tend to become fixed in your body. For example, think of how you might train for an athletic competition. By running, rowing or cycling three or four hours a day, you gradually increase your capacity to run, to row or to cycle as you develop muscle strength and endurance. Without the strain of trying to reach your potential – without the pain of reaching for the limit – your body would lose its competitive edge. However much you want to be the fastest, you must work with the constraints of your body. Your capacity to run depends on your body.

The same can be said of your choices in life. What training does to increase the body’s capacity, so moral and ethical actions do to increase character. “Moral fibre” is something like muscle fibre – the more you exercise it, the stronger your character. By constantly repeating your actions, you create habits. As Ricoeur says,

A habit is possible because the living person has the admirable power of changing himself through his acts. But by learning, the person affects himself... Thus there arises, through this continued affecting of myself, a kind of human nature... What is learned is acquired (a habit), and what is acquired is contracted... Habit fixes our tastes and aptitudes and shrinks our field of availability; the range of the possible narrows down; my life has taken shape. 5

When you repeat a certain action, over time, the action becomes fixed; it takes root in you. Others will recognize this as one of your character traits. They will identify you as kind, helpful, cheery, or stubborn, argumentative, vain. Once these character traits take root, they are not easily changed. As a child, your character can develop in many different directions. But as you grow older this space narrows. You become more set in your ways – for good or for bad.

Read the following excerpt from the novel Full Disclosure by William Safire. It illustrates how your character, habits and orientation in life dispose you towards making a decision:

The President stretched, smiled, and thought again about that wondrous, amorphous, always-capitalized mystery called The Decision-Making Process.
When had he decided to give up his presidency? Just now, as he was feeding the dog? …

The truth about big decisions, Ericson mused, was that they never marched through logical processes, staff systems, option papers, and yellow pads to a conclusion. No dramatic bottom lines, no Thurberian captains with their voices like thin ice breaking, announcing “We’re going through!” The big ones were a matter of mental sets, predispositions, tendencies—taking a lifetime to determine—followed by the battering of circumstance, the search for a feeling of what was right—never concluded at some finite moment of conclusion, but in the recollection of having “known” what the decision would be some indeterminate time before. For weeks now, Ericson knew he had known he was ready to do what he had to do, if only…somebody could be induced to come up with a solution that the President could then put through his Decision-Making Process. That made his decision a willingness not to obstruct, rather than a decision to go ahead. …

“I haven’t decided yet,” he cautioned the dog, who was moving the bowl around with his tongue but no longer making crunching sounds. “A decision is not a decision until it has to be made.” Relieved, slightly euphoric, feeling admirably patriotic, Ericson moved to the main cabin to join the others for dinner. ⁶

In this excerpt, we see the fictional President of the United States, Ericson, reflecting on a major decision that he has been called upon to make. Notice how his decision comes not from a conscious decision-making process. His decision arises from the depth of his character and life experience. In a sense, he knows what he has to do long before he has to decide.

The choices you make day after day are often the product of what you believe and value, and the habits you have formed over the years. The moral principles you learn also help to make up your character – that is to say, your character determines what you see, how you interpret what you see, and how you respond to what you see. With all of this at stake, how important is it that you pay attention to the formation of your moral character?

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**Guiding questions**

1. If a number of people witness the same event, how likely is it that each person would report seeing something different about the same event? Why is that?
2. Richard Gula, a contemporary Catholic moral theologian writes, “Character is what results from the values we make our own. When a value has woven its way into the fabric of our being, we delight in doing what pertains to that value….” Do you agree? Give an example that supports your view.
3. Ricoeur writes, “Habit fixes our tastes and aptitudes and shrinks our field of availability; the range of the possible narrows down; my life has taken shape.” How is the narrowing down of possibilities in life a good thing? Why?
4. The passage from the novel describes the thinking behind a decision that the President has to make. On the one hand, he says: “The big [decisions] were a matter of mental sets, predispositions, tendencies—taking a lifetime to determine—followed by the battering of circumstance, the search for a feeling of what was right—never concluded at some finite moment of conclusion, but in the recollection of having ‘known’ what the decision would be some indeterminate time before.” And on the other hand, he says: “A decision is not a decision until it has to be made.” Describe the interplay between the person’s character that predisposes him or her to make a certain decision, and that person’s judgment to make a choice.
E. The importance of conscience

“For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” Matthew 16:26

Up to this point you have looked at several ways of understanding yourself as an ethical and moral being. You have seen how important the other person is to your identity, and at the role your commitments play in defining your character. To these we must add another anthropological trait: your conscience. Of what importance is your conscience?

Your conscience is more complex than it may at first appear. In Robert Bolt’s A Man For All Seasons, Thomas More, Lord Chancellor in King Henry VIII’s court, is visited in jail by his daughter, Margaret, who tries to persuade him to swear to the Act of Succession. Thomas More has been charged with treason for standing in defiance of the King of England on moral principle. If More were to endorse the King’s wishes to marry Anne Boleyn, he would save his head but he would violate his conscience regarding the sacred vow of marriage. The dialogue may help to understand the notion of conscience.

MORE: You want me to swear to the Act of Succession?
MARGARET: “God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth.” Or so you’ve always told me.
MORE: Yes.
MARGARET: Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.
MORE: What is an oath then but words we say to God?
MARGARET: That’s very neat.
MORE: Do you mean, it isn’t true?
MARGARET: No, it’s true.
MORE: Then it’s a poor argument to call it “neat,” Meg. When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. (He cups his hands) And if he opens his fingers then – he needn’t hope to find himself again. Some men aren’t capable of this, but I’d be loath to think your father one of them.

The Act of Succession, 1534

On March 23, 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Succession, vesting the succession of the English Crown in the children of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. This act effectively set Princess Elizabeth first in line for the throne and declared Princess Mary a bastard. It was also proclaimed that subjects, if commanded, were to swear to an oath recognizing this Act as well as the King’s supremacy. People who refused to take the oath, including Sir Thomas More, were charged with treason.

In April 1534, More refused to swear to the Act of Succession and the Oath of Supremacy, and was committed to the Tower of London on April 17. More was found guilty of treason and was beheaded on July 6, 1535. His final words on the scaffold were: “The King’s good servant, but God’s First.” More was beatified in 1886 and canonized by the Catholic Church as a saint by Pope Pius XI in 1935.
Conscience is the place where we hold our own selves in our hands. According to More, if we lose it, we need not hope to find ourselves again. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) calls conscience a voice that calls us "to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil." This inner voice tell us "at the right moment: do this, shun that." The same document calls conscience a law inscribed in human hearts by God. It says our conscience is our most secret core and sanctuary where we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. (#16)

The following explanations of conscience come from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, another source of the official teaching of the Church. Notice how paragraph #1776 quotes the definition of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes).

1776 “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment… For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God…. His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.”

1777 Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.

1778 Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.
As people develop a mature conscience, they generally move from the experience of rules and laws as being imposed by someone in authority – parents, police, teachers, priests, government – to directing their actions more from within. When you were very young, others told you what to do. As you mature, it is your responsibility to do what you consider to be right. You decide for yourself what ought to be done. This distinction between being self-directed and being other-directed makes the difference between a mature and an immature conscience. As a morally mature person, you must be able to make decisions that are your own, not someone else’s. You will still listen to others and allow yourself to be guided by norms and commandments, but not without your own moral judgment and acceptance.

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory helps to explain the distinction between conscience and superego. It is a useful distinction because when we confess our offences to God, it is healthy to understand what comes from our conscience and what from our superego. Conscience is not a feeling that something is right or wrong. It is not a feeling of guilt, although this feeling can be a signal to alert us that something is amiss. For example, conscience has little to do with the feeling of failure we experience when we light up a cigarette after having quit smoking. Conscience is not the fear of punishment we experience if we break our curfew. The moral theologian Richard Gula explains the distinction as follows:

Psychologists of the Freudian school tell us that we have three structures to our personality: the id – the unconscious reservoir of instinctual drives largely dominated by the pleasure principle; the ego – the conscious structure which operates on the reality principle to mediate the forces of the id, the demands of society, and the reality of the physical world; and the superego – the ego of another superimposed on our own to serve as an internal censor to regulate our conduct by using guilt as its powerful weapon. The superego is like an attic in an old house. Instead of furniture, it stores all the “shoulds” and “have-tos” which we absorb in the process of growing up under the influence of authority figures, first our parents but later any other authority figures – teachers, police, boss, sisters, priests, pope, etc. Its powerful weapon of guilt springs forth automatically for simple faults as well as for more serious matter. The superego tells us we are good when we do what we are told to do, and it tells us we are bad and makes us feel guilty when we do not do what the authority over us tells us to do.

To understand the superego we need to begin with childhood. As we develop through childhood, the need to be loved and approved is the basic need and drive. We fear punishment as children not for its physical pain only, but more because it represents a withdrawal of love. So we regulate our behaviour so as not to lose love and approval. We absorb the standards and regulations of our parents, or anyone who has authority over us, as a matter of self-protection. The authority figure takes up a place within us to become the source of commands and prohibitions.

A simplified way of thinking about the difference between superego and moral conscience is to distinguish between the “shoulds” or “have-tos” and the “wants” as the source of commands directing our behaviour. “Shoulds” and “have-tos” belong to someone else. “Wants” belong to us…. The commands of the superego which tell us what we “should” do come from the process of absorbing the regulations and restrictions of those who are the source of love and approval. We follow the commands of the superego out of the fear of losing love, or out of our need to be accepted and approved. The moral conscience, on the other hand, acts in love responding to the call to commit ourselves to value. The commands of the moral conscience come from the personal perception and appropriation of values which we discover in the stories or examples of persons we want to be like. The moral conscience is the key to responsible freedom or wanting to do what we do because we value what we are seeking.
In the stages of moral development the superego plays an important role. Your moral development and conscience began with the rules and regulations of those who play important roles in your life, such as your parents or caregivers, teachers, priests and others. Without them you would be rudderless. You need their instruction. And in a way, your superego probably never outlives its usefulness. Even as your conscience matures, the superego is not abolished. It is integrated. You integrate the wisdom of your past into your actions. This wisdom becomes stored as “the way things are done” and which you are expected to obey. In time these laws, rules and regulations should move ever further from being imposed from the outside to becoming personal choices. If in our earlier years we confess many of our “shoulds” to God, this will change as we mature morally.

“Conscience is a radical experience of ourselves as moral agents.” Hence, every choice that we make, every commitment, every promise is also our choice between being authentic and inauthentic. As Gula says, “The morally mature adult is called to commit his or her freedom, not to submit it. As long as we do not direct our own activity, we are not yet free, morally mature persons.” (p.124) It is the task of conscience to direct this process.

**Three senses of conscience**

Here is one way that a moral theologian has analyzed the notion of conscience as it is found in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* #16, quoted earlier on page 52. Timothy O’Connell identifies three related senses of the word “conscience”:

1. **Conscience as a capacity to recognize right and wrong**
   Here conscience is a capacity of the human person. All people in all cultures have a general awareness that some things are right and others are wrong. The fact that individuals and societies may disagree about what is right only helps to show that all people have this capacity to know the good. This capacity refers to your basic orientation toward the good. Conscience as a capacity defines the essential identity of the human. The terms sociopath and psychopath refer to persons who have no conscience.

2. **Conscience as a process of moral reasoning**
   It is not enough to have a conscience or ability to choose the right and avoid evil. You need to search out in each situation what is the right thing to do. To act according to your conscience, you must seek to learn the facts, to learn what moral values are, to reason correctly in moral matters. You must seek to be educated about moral issues. Your conscience, in other words, must also be formed and informed. This is a lifelong process of learning “correct seeing and right thinking.” It means relying on the community for instruction rather than relying solely on yourself. You can draw on many sources to arrive at moral wisdom: personal experience, moral theologians, the sciences, and especially sacred Scripture and Church tradition (teachings found in papal documents, social encyclicals, pastoral letters, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

3. **Conscience as a judgment**
   Your conscience is incomplete until you act on it. After examining all the factors, you still need to make a judgment and a decision and commitment to do what is right. This is conscience in the narrow sense of the term (particular concrete situations of daily living). This is the heart of conscience: you commit yourself to do
what you believe to be right and avoid what you believe to be wrong. In the words of Gula:

I must always do what I believe to be right and avoid what I believe to be wrong. If a person truly believes in his or her heart (i.e., with one’s whole person) that one line of action rather than another is God’s objective call, then that line of action is no longer simply one option among many. It becomes the morally required line of action for that person to take, which is what we mean by being “bound to follow one’s conscience.” Conscience [as judgment] cannot be violated. It is what the Vatican Council called our “most secret core and sanctuary” where we are alone with God. 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conscience as Capacity</th>
<th>Conscience as Process</th>
<th>Conscience as Judgment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our capacity to know and do the good, and to avoid evil.</td>
<td>Knowing how to perceive accurately and to think correctly.</td>
<td>The concrete judgment and decision of what I must do in the situation based on my personal perception and grasp of values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our fundamental sense of value and of personal responsibility.</td>
<td>This is where moral disagreements and error, blindness and insight occur.</td>
<td>Conscience makes a moral decision “my own” and the moral action expressive of “me” by realizing and expressing my fundamental stance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our fundamental awareness that there is a right and a wrong.</td>
<td>The conscience must be formed and examined.</td>
<td>The decision is not simply about this or that object of choice, but also about being this or that sort of person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formed in community, it draws upon many sources of moral wisdom in order to know what it means to be human in a truly moral way.</td>
<td>This is the conscience that I must obey to be true to myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeks to know the truth, and to make it one’s own.</td>
<td>This is our “secret core and sanctuary” where we are alone with God (G.S. #16). All persons “[are] bound to follow [their] conscience faithfully in all [their] activity so that [they] may come to God.…. [No one] must…be forced to act contrary to [their] conscience” (D.H. #3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Searches for what is right through accurate perception, and a process of reflection and analysis.</td>
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**Reaching for the top**

Steph realized that preparing for university required not only pulling down top marks in her courses, but also rounding up the finances to pay the tuition, residence fees, meal plans, and purchase books.

Last year, a student in her school, Jason, had applied for a government scholarship that rewarded students’ contributions to their community and school. Steph remembered reading a community newspaper article about Jason’s scholarship, and how the article had praised Jason for his remarkable contributions to his community. She also knew that Jason’s claim to having done so much was way overblown. Sure he was a great student, and yes he did do some volunteer work in the community, but it was nothing like what the newspaper reported. Jason had blown his own horn, and had
tweaked the truth, and had been rewarded with a $2,500 scholarship that would be renewed for four years, as long as he maintained an 80% average or higher. The problem is, only one such scholarship was awarded per school. He had edged out several other equally, or more, deserving students.

Now Steph had the scholarship application in her hands, and she was preparing to tell the scholarship judges her story. Five other top students in her school were also applying for this scholarship. All had averages in the high 80s and 90s. Brad, the student with lowest grades of these five, had probably done more community service than all the other applicants combined. Steph figured that Brad totally deserved the scholarship money, but reasoned that she was deserving too, and had the higher marks besides. As she filled out her application and described her community and school contribution, Steph decided to stick to a true telling of her story – it was worthy in and of itself. Her integrity was not for sale.

Guiding questions

1. Identify how conscience as Capacity, Process, and Judgment were at play in this scenario. (See chart on page 55.)
2. Choose other similar instances from the life of a Grade 12 student, and analyze the role of conscience using the chart.
3. Find all three meanings of conscience in the excerpt from Gaudium et Spes, #16 on page 52.
4. Whenever you use the word conscience, do you mean capacity, process or judgment?

F. The development of one’s conscience

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7.13-14)

You might ask: “How is this ‘moral self’ formed? What must I do to be able to make the right judgments and decisions that set the direction of my life?” This is a complex question with no simple answer. Subsequent chapters of In Search of the Good will return to this question in greater detail. There is no simple recipe for developing your conscience. Here, however, are some pointers to keep in mind for forming your conscience.

- Your conscience develops as you mature. Your sense of right and wrong, which began to be formed within your family, becomes increasingly refined with time.
- Your conscience develops as you take account of and follow the norms, values, virtues and commandments found in our Christian tradition as guidelines for your conscience.
- Your conscience helps you deal with your moral failures and sins. Through your faults you become aware of your weakness and fragility as a human being and of your need for support from others, especially from God.
• Your conscience develops as you participate in the Eucharist and prayer life of the Church.
• Your conscience develops as you grow in the virtue of humility, realizing that we are not the final arbiters of what is right and wrong. Our humility leads us to seek direction of the Church.

Summary
From psychology we learn that moral behaviour is developmental – that it is tied to intellectual, social and spiritual growth. We can learn what is morally correct or incorrect through family and friends, through life experiences, and through the time and culture in which we live. We also get our moral bearings through formal learning within institutions whose role it is to pass on a community’s norms and the values that guide moral action. All these life experiences give rise to our character and a particular world view and understanding of what is right or wrong. All this preparation, over years of living, comes into play when we are faced with a moral decision.

Unfortunately, we sometimes lack the information we need to form right judgments or make good decisions, with painful results. Conscience can be malfomed through immoral actions, faulty reasoning, faulty value structures, and misinformation received from others in our society. We can think that we are doing what is right, when in fact we are doing something evil in order to affect a desired good. Or, we can find ourselves in a situation that makes it almost impossible to reason out the right course of action.

A well-formed conscience is well informed. This means that you have a responsibility to be well informed, not only about the issues that challenge moral living but also about the views of other moral thinkers. To whom can you go for help to inform your conscience? Are all norms and values held by your community good, or can some be destructive to the community’s members? What do you do when you have to choose between two conflicting goods? (For example, lose weight or enjoy another

Symptoms of a misinformed conscience:

- **Rationalization**: Stealing may be wrong sometimes, but large stores can afford it because they are making huge profits.
- **Trivialization**: It’s no big deal – everybody else does it.
- **Misinformation**: My doctor told me that all teenage girls should take the birth control pill to prevent getting pregnant.
- **The end justifies the immoral means**: I had to steal the chocolate bar – I didn’t have any money and I hadn’t eaten for 12 hours. I get sick if I don’t eat.
- **Means to an end**: By dropping a nuclear bomb to end the war, we’ll end up saving lives.
- **Difficult to reason**: Having been kicked out of his home and finding himself with no place to go, a teen acts without thinking. He breaks into an empty home to keep warm when he could have asked for help from the police.
piece of cake.) All these questions confuse moral decision-making. The following diagram can guide you as you seek a truthful response to a moral question.

Informing your conscience is not something you do only when facing a moral issue or dilemma. Becoming a morally mature and responsible person entails an ongoing effort to form and inform your conscience. Your family, church, school, the arts, sports, music and other social institutions all seek to pass on a value system that upholds what they see as life giving – as the good. Part of this process lies also with you. You need to constantly seek to understand what it means to be fully human.

There are many ways to discover our humanity. Shared human experience has much to say to us about humanity, but only you can know your own reality first-hand. To better understand human reality, you need to seek out information from others. For moral questions, the greatest authority the Catholic community can draw on is the magisterium of the Church. “For a Catholic to make a decision of conscience with indifference to, or in spite of, the magisterium would be forfeiting one’s claim to be acting as a loyal Catholic and according to a properly informed conscience.” Later in Chapter 6 you will come to know more about the structure of the magisterium and how the Church communicates Catholic teaching with authority.
Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord

What a joy to find yourself on the right path in life. And what a joy to have committed wrong and to know that you are forgiven. Your conscience is a barometer of life, both in gladness and in sorrow. Listen carefully to the psalmist in Psalm 32; see how he describes the torment of a conscience that has gone astray and the joy of those whose conscience has been set free:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; …
You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright of heart.
Summary

- Other people are central to my search for the good. They make it possible for me to become myself, an individual in freedom.
- My commitments and moral stance make clear what is good and valuable for me, what I am for. My identity emerges from the direction I take in life.
- We live in a world shaped by language. What I value, hope for, and work for was first made known to me as good and desirable by others.
- Our moral character develops as our actions become habitual. Through habitual actions I become more set in my ways — for good or for bad. The choices that we make day after day are often the product of what we believe and value, and the habits we have formed over the years.
- Conscience is a law inscribed in human hearts. It is our most secret core and sanctuary where we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths.
- Conscience is our capacity to know and do the good; it is a process of moral reasoning; and it is the concrete judgment of what I should do.
- Our consciences develop as we mature; as we take account of norms, values, virtues and commandments; as we deal with our moral failings and sins.

Review questions

Knowledge and understanding
1. Identify and explain the three senses of conscience.
2. Explain how a person’s moral character is formed.

Thinking and inquiry
3. How do a person’s character and conscience come into play in making a decision?
4. When you face a choice between two conflicting goods (e.g., Thomas More: upholding his principles vs. saving his life; or Allannah: developing her musical talent vs. helping her family), name the various factors that can come into play in your decision-making process.

Communication
5. Using the scripture quotes that introduce the six subsections of this chapter, create a presentation on the title of this chapter: “The self in search of the good.” In consultation with your teacher, use whatever medium or format you think would be appropriate.
6. In an essay, story or poem, explore the good that is manifested in the values that shape us.

Application
7. Analyze a decision that you have had to make using the conscience chart on page 55.
8. In the introduction to this chapter (page 41), six aspects of the human person that are important for ethics are identified (i.e., The importance of others, etc.). Illustrate the truth of each of these with a brief story of an event from your life.

Glossary

commitment: Promise or pledge; resolve to carry something out in the future.
habit: A manner of behaving acquired by frequent repetition; prevailing disposition or character.
identity: The distinguishing character of a person. My identity is determined in large part by the moral stance that I take in life.
judgment: The concrete decision of what I must do in the situation based on my personal perception and grasp of values.
moral stance: My moral orientation or direction in life; what I “stand for.”
narcissism: A disorder marked by self-absorption to the exclusion of others.
psychiatry: A branch of medicine that deals with mental, emotional and behavioural disorders.
psychology: The study of the mind, mental states, behaviour. Psychology tries to explain why people think, feel and behave as they do.
Trinity: “…the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life. God alone can make it known to us by revealing himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” CCC #261
Guided by the light of Revelation

UNIT II

Introduction

In the first unit we approached ethics from a general perspective, referring to theories and explaining the aim of ethics as you might find in ethics texts with or without a religious context. In this unit we turn to the ethical perspective we have inherited from our faith. What impact does faith in God have upon ethics?

For some people the link connecting ethics and religion is the Ten Commandments. Their understanding is that God dictated ten rules that we are compelled to obey or be severely punished. But this punitive understanding of religion and ethics is simplistic and inadequate for several reasons. First, it makes fear of punishment the motive for keeping the Ten Commandments. That is hardly worthy of God. A religion based on fear is dehumanizing and wrong. Second, this kind of a link between religion and ethics presents God in a way that is contrary to the way the Hebrew people and the followers of Jesus came to know and love God. God is not a distant lawgiver or a law enforcement officer or a merciless judge. So, what is an adequate and accurate understanding of the link between the Ten Commandments and ethics? This unit will present how ethics, especially the Ten Commandments, is understood in the Bible. What happens when God enters into the ethical debate?

Each of the three chapters in this unit will explore texts from the Bible that reveal God. As you read these Scripture texts, you will see that their primary purpose was not to dictate rules, but to reveal God. These texts answer in part the question of St. Augustine, “What do I love when I love You, my God?” They give no lengthy descriptions or theories about God. Rather, the books of the Bible tell stories about God and
people. They tell us that God is not easily named. And even when a name is given, you will see how, in a sense, it is “not given.” We are warned never to use the name in vain. God is not a reality that we can easily understand. That is why God’s Name is perhaps best understood through human actions rather than words. Here is the connection with ethics. The ethics of the Bible – both in the covenant with Moses as well as in the new covenant with Jesus – reveals a God passionately in love with human beings. We are talking about an ethics based on a relationship. The things we are prohibited from doing, such as stealing, murdering and giving false witness, reveal what God is concerned about in this relationship: an exclusive attachment to this God and a deep concern for our neighbour. Any action against our neighbour is at the same time an action against God. In our religious tradition, the ways in which we treat one another – with justice, kindness, mercy and love – reflect and give witness to the power of God’s Name. It is God’s Name and its power to change lives that frames our search for the good, and that we explore in greater detail in this unit.
The naming of God and ethics

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.
Deuteronomy 6.5

Love with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might

In the first three chapters you explored the philosophical foundations of ethics. In this chapter you will get your ethical footing on the bedrock of the Catholic understanding of moral living. This understanding is simple yet profound: God loves you with a passion. This is revealed in the Bible, in God’s covenant with Moses and in the New Covenant with Jesus – God loves human beings passionately. Christian ethics is an ethics based on this relationship. In this chapter you will read stories that are probably familiar to you: stories of Moses and stories of the prophets. Hear again what God is revealing to you through these stories. Now that you know what people like Aristotle, Kant and Levinas say about ethics and the human search for the good, listen again to the story of Moses, asking what this adds to what you have been learning from the philosophical tradition.

A word about revelation

Has God spoken to you lately? God is breaking in and speaking to you every day of your life. In Mark 4.9, Jesus says, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” God wants to be known, and reveals Himself in ways too innumerable to count. Do you have ears to hear? Do you have eyes to see? Do you have the heart and mind to understand?

The spiritual life is a life in which you gradually learn to listen to a voice … that says, “You are the beloved and on you my favour rests.” … It is not a very loud voice because it is an intimate voice. It comes from a very deep place. It is soft and gentle. I want you to gradually hear that voice. We both have to hear that voice and to claim for ourselves that that voice speaks the truth, our truth. It tells us who we are. That is where the spiritual life starts – by claiming the voice that calls us the beloved.

Henri J. M. Nouwen

God’s voice does not come to us surrounded by thunder and lightning, or in shafts of light. God speaks to us
in the midst of everyday life. C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), the author of The Chronicles of Narnia, a popular children’s classic, has left us an account of such an experience in his life.

It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; … “enormous bliss” … comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? …before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.1

One might expect a 58-year-old professor to be able to tell in greater detail of what happened to him. He can recount the precise place and time of his experience. But when he tries to write about what God has done to him, he comes up short. Later in the book, Surprised by Joy, C.S. Lewis returns to this “odd thing” that happened to him:

The odd thing was that before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice. …I was going up Headington Hill on top of a bus. Without words and (I think) almost without images, a fact about myself was somehow present to me. I became aware that I was holding some-thing at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I know that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say “I chose,” yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think that this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most that I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say “I am what I do.”

Then came the repercussion on the imaginative level. I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. The melting was starting in my back – drip-drip and presently trickle-trickle. I rather disliked the feeling.2

C.S. Lewis does not say much about the God who is closing in on him. He can describe only what has happened to him: he comes “unstuck.” He can express it no better than with images of stiffness and of closed doors, of being enclosed in body-armour or of being a snow-man, all of which this experience of God loosens, opens up, unbuckles and melts. These are powerful images of what has been held open to him: perfect freedom. The “I” who was hemmed in on all sides is released. The revelation of God brings with it the gift of a new “I.” The brief moment in which his new self experiences its promise, its fulfillment, its mystery, is at the same time an experience of the hidden
God. Even though he cannot but respond with joy to this promise held out to the self, he is nonetheless perfectly free. He makes a momentous discovery: “I am what I do.” Such moments are the times when we are most ourselves.

God encounters us in a privileged way through the sacred Scriptures. To hear what God is saying to us through the sacred Scriptures, we need to resist our culture’s tendency to be sceptical and take the time to really listen. We must open ourselves to an encounter with a reality that is not of our own making. The biblical world is different from our own and its perspective on life comes from a different culture. We call the Bible the Word of God because through its words God enters into our hearing and experience. With this in mind we turn to the unique experience of Moses and the importance of his story for our faith and ethical life.

Guiding questions

1. What happened to C.S. Lewis in this experience?
2. Why do you think that C.S. Lewis has such a hard time putting the experience into words?
3. How did this encounter with God begin to change Lewis?
4. Henri Nouwen speaks of the spiritual life as a life in which you gradually learn to listen to a voice. How do you see this beginning to happen in C.S. Lewis’s account?

The Word of God

“\nIn the Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, ‘but as what it really is, the word of God.’ ‘In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them.’

“Still, the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book.’ Christianity is the religion of the ‘Word’ of God, a word which is ‘not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living.’ If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, ‘open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures.’”

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #104, 108

Moses

Moses is honoured as no other in the Jewish tradition. He is the leader, the founding father of the Israelites, the prophet, the lawgiver. As the Book of Deuteronomy says of him: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.” (34.10)

It is impossible to give historical dates for Moses. All that we know of him comes to us from the Bible. He was born in Egypt to unnamed parents from the priestly tribe of Levi. His mother’s quick thinking saved his life. Defying the decree of the Egyptian Pharaoh to kill all boys by drowning them in the Nile, she first hid him and then tried to save him by placing him in a watertight container in the Nile River in a place where she must have known that the Pharaoh’s daughter bathed. There Pharaoh’s daughter found him: hence his name, which means “because I drew him out of water” – although Moses in Egyptian means “is born.”
We are told of two siblings: Aaron, Moses’ older brother; and Miriam, his sister. We are told nothing, however, about this early life. The story presumes that Moses’ mother nursed him and that he grew up in the abundance and luxury of the Pharaoh’s house. And so it was that the future liberator of the Israelites grew up in the very house that he would later confront.

Although Moses grew up in Pharaoh’s household, he obviously did not forget his ancestry. He so identified with his enslaved people— the story calls them his brothers—that one day in anger, trying to protect a fellow Hebrew from certain death, he kills an Egyptian overseer. His position offers him no protection, and he is forced to flee. He ends up in Midian where, because of his gallantry helping some women to water their herd, he is welcomed into the household of Jethro, a Midian priest. He marries one of Jethro’s daughters, Zipporah, and with her he has two children, Gershom and Eliezer.

The revelation of the Name of God: The call of Moses
As Chapter 3 of the Book of Exodus tells it, Moses encounters God while he is keeping sheep for his father-in-law, Jethro:

He led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey…. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what
Moses was given a new name for God. In Hebrew the name reads ‘ehyeh ‘asher ‘ehjeh. Translated it can be read as: “I am who am,” “I am who is,” “I am who I shall be,” or “I shall be who I am.” Much has been read into this name. Some have taken this as a refusal to give a name in the very giving of a name. God seems to refuse to entrust Self into the hands of people and yet at the same time does. Others have understood the name as a promise: I will show you who I am in my being with you, or I will be with you tomorrow as I have been up to now.3

Moses’ mission

Moses’ mission is to speak. God calls Moses to be a prophet, an intermediary between God and people. In the Bible he is the first to receive this mission to speak. As other prophets would do afterwards, Moses tries to convince God that he is the wrong person:

“O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the LORD said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him.” (Exodus 4.10-16)

Moses is to serve as the mouth of God to Aaron and to the people. He is to tell them that he has been sent to them by the God of their ancestors to bring them to the mountain of the Lord in the power of the holy Name of YHWH.

Bringing the people to the holy mountain would become a test of power between the Pharaoh and God. To go to the mountain would signify a shift of service for the people: from slavery under Pharaoh to the service of YHWH, the God who set them free. Moses and Aaron first go to the people to try to convince them that God has sent them. They are successful; the people believe them, at first. But later, when the Egyptians — in response to the demands of Moses and Aaron — increase the workload of the Hebrews, they begin to doubt that God will be able to liberate them from the powerful Egyptians. At first Moses and Aaron cannot convince the Pharaoh to let the people go, forcing God to use a heavy hand. The story of this contest of wills is detailed in the Book of Exodus (5–12). At long last, the night comes
when Israel can eat the Passover meal and leave the land of their oppression. Even though the Egyptians try once more to force them back to work, the Israelites make a miraculous escape through the sea and finally arrive at the mountain of the Lord.

Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19)

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possessions out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.”

When Moses had told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.”

So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, “Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast...
of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look; otherwise many of them will perish. Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them.

Moses said to the Lord, “The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.’” The Lord said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord; otherwise he will break out against them.” So Moses went down to the people and told them.

The Decalogue (Exodus 20)

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us or we will die.” Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Chapter 4: The naming of God and ethics • 69
The Decalogue (literally translated as Ten Words, and known within our tradition as the Ten Commandments) comes to us in two versions. You have already read Exodus 20, which contains the longer version. In the Book of Deuteronomy (5.6-21) we find a shorter version. The Ten Commandments have been adapted – interpreted – again in the formula traditionally found in catechetical texts. We say interpreted because today Christians interpret them in light of their faith in Jesus Christ. So, for instance, “Keeping holy the Lord’s day” in the Christian context refers not to the Sabbath but to the first day of the week: Sunday, the day of the Resurrection. See these three versions side-by-side below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Ten Commandments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 20.2-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You shall not kill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You shall not commit adultery.</td>
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<td>You shall not steal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour’s.</td>
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To understand how covenants work, we need to look at their origins. The ancient Hittites were a powerful people who lived in Asia Minor between 2000 and 1200 BC. Covenants were treaties between a sovereign nation and a vassal nation. They exhibited five traits:

1. **The preamble**
The treaty begins with the name, the titles and attributes of the Great Hittite King and his genealogy.

2. **The historical prologue**
The Great King then gives a historical overview that describes the previous relations between the two contractors. It recounts the many benefits the sovereign has bestowed upon the vassal. The prologue forms an essential part of the covenant. There can be many variations depending on the circumstances at the time of entry into the treaty. For example, the sovereign might point out how he has come to the vassal’s aid when he was threatened by an enemy attack.

3. **The submission**
The submission states what the Great King expects from the vassal. This submission often includes a fundamental declaration on the future relations of the partners. It consists in a request of loyalty. This aspect of covenant: Its origins

The Ten Commandments state what God expects of the people bound by the covenant (see the box “Covenant: Its origins” and the section beginning on page 74, “Life as a covenant with YHWH”). In the Gospel of Matthew (19.16-22) a young person asks Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus begins by pointing out the primary good that encompasses all. He tells the young man “There is only one who is good,” referring, of course, to God. The Good to be sought above all is God. He then tells him: “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” When, at another time, Jesus is asked “Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?” he answers: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22.37-44) Jesus’ summary corresponds to the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, as Exodus 31.18 insists, “with the finger of God.” The first three contain the words how to honour and love God; the last seven concern the human community. Jesus says that the first – to love God – is like the second – to love your neighbour.

The Ten Commandments make sense only in the context of the covenant. They are not just rules and commandments on their own. They state the type of relationship to which Israel is privileged. At times this covenant is described using the language of adoption. So we read in Psalm 2, “You are my son.” Israel is the Lord’s adopted son. That is why the first commandment directs Israel to remember who it is with whom they have entered into a covenant: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” It is none other than your liberator God, the one that brought you “out of the house of slavery.” The second tablet of the Decalogue describes this relationship with God in our relation to the other. Our relation to others is part of our worship of God. The covenant with God is at the same time a covenant with our neighbour. Our turning to the Lord our God is expressed as a responsibility to our neighbour.

The covenant presents Israel as a free people, set free by God’s liberating action. Why did God choose them? Because in their misery in Egypt, they called on God. Their only claim was the Lord’s promise to Abraham and Sarah. It is this covenant that Israel entered freely: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exodus 24.7).
the submission is expressed frequently by the formula: “With my friend, be a friend! With my enemy, be an enemy!” Often at this point the submission details certain conditions that must be met, for example, taxes to be paid, prisoners to be released, etc.

4. The witnesses
Every legal document requires witnesses. This is also the case with treaties. In this case, the witnesses are the gods of the two partners, but also the deified elements of nature: the mountains, the rivers, the sea, the heavens and the earth.

5. The blessings and curses
The treaty tells what will happen if the vassal remains faithful or is unfaithful to the demands of the treaty.

The covenant at Sinai in Chapter 19 (3-8) of the Book of Exodus displays these traits clearly. It gives a prologue that recalls the Israelite’s liberation from Egypt: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians…” This is followed by the submission: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant…” It ends with a blessing contingent on the conditions set in the submission: “You shall be my treasured possession … you shall be for me a priestly people…” Even the traditional formula “With my friend be a friend, with my enemy an enemy” is found in Exodus 23.22: “I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.”

While the covenant on Sinai displays similarities with the other covenants found among contemporary cultures, it is also far greater than these contractual agreements. God’s covenant is a bond of love, calling us in our freedom to respond in love. God’s commitment to us is founded in love, and God’s commitment is forever.

What’s in a name?

When someone asks, “Who are you?” you usually give your name. In a way, you are your name, your identity inextricably linked to the name your parents gave you at birth.

As we saw in the burning bush story, Moses is given a new name for God: YHWH: I shall be (for you) who I am; I am there, beside you, and I shall be there as the God who helps and saves. The Name reveals God in what God will do for others. As we explore the Book of Exodus, we will begin to understand the power of this Name.

First, the Name has consequences for Moses. His encounter with the Name changes his life radically. God gives the Name as part of the mission of Moses, as the One on whose behalf Moses is being sent to the Israelites and the Pharaoh. God’s Name is not merely a neutral piece of information; the Name has the power to liberate Moses and his people. When the Lord calls out of the bush: “Moses, Moses!” Moses responds with “Here I am.” The emphasis of the response “Here I am” does not lie upon the “here” but upon the “I.” Moses is in effect saying: “I am at your service. I am yours.” In this exchange with God, Moses is totally claimed. The Holy One, the “I AM,” is echoed in Moses’ response to his call: “Here I am.” Moses’ vocation, his call, now defines who he has become—a prophet. As a prophet, his new identity gives witness to, or reveals, the meaning of the Name. The Name gives us information about God, because we can see what Moses does in response to the Name.

Second, YHWH is a Name with power. The Name changes history. After all, despite the Pharaoh’s refusal, Israel comes to the mountain. A slave people become a nation by the power of the Name. And, like Moses, the nation of Israel is given a vocation. At Sinai, the people respond “Here I am.” Like Moses, the people of Israel in their subsequent history are forever bound to reveal the Name. There can be no Israel without YHWH. The Name of God is revealed in what happens to this people.
Third, the Name results in a new way of living. The revelation of the Name is an ethical event. One of the principal results of the encounter between Moses and God is the gift of the Ten Words. The reason for keeping these commandments is straightforward: “For I am YHWH, your God.” The covenant between God and the people is an ethical bond that says, in effect: You must do this “for I am YHWH, your God.” The Ten Words are for this reason a legal and ethical commentary on the divine Name. The Name is not something we can understand through knowledge. It is, however, something that approaches our understanding when we act ethically toward the Other. Recalling Levinas’s theory of ethics (recall Chapter 1), one could say that the Good engenders in us the desire to be responsible for the Other. It is in obeying these Ten Words that we give witness to God. God is so much more than what we can think and do. All we can do is to be agents of God’s nearness by acting out of responsibility for the Other. In this way we respond to the covenant.

Fourth, the Name is a source of judgment. The revelation of the Name provokes a decision from those who hear it. The Name is not only a blessing; it can also be a curse. For Egypt the Name became a curse, as it was at times for Israel when it failed to abide by this covenant. The prophets who acted as spokespersons for God later in Israel’s history made the people aware of the repercussions for breaching the covenant and neglecting their identity as God’s people. Later in this chapter you will read more about what happens when we break the covenant.

Life as a covenant with YHWH

The Book of Exodus tells the story of how the people of Israel come to understand themselves as God’s people, as God’s adopted sons and daughters. Their story becomes our story, too. We too understand ourselves as people of the covenant in continuity with the Jewish people. When God chooses them, God’s choice – mirrored in Israel’s choice – is addressed to all nations. Today the Ten Commandments still describe this covenant with God, making us responsible for others.

There are other stories in the Bible that have this same universal significance, such as the stories of Creation, of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel’s faith: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob (who becomes Israel) and Leah and Rachel, and the stories of Israel’s time in the desert under Moses’ leadership. When the Church wants to tell the origin of our story, as it does each year in its most solemn feast of Easter, it recalls these stories, each of which takes place because of God’s initiative: the story of Creation (Genesis 1 – 2.4), the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22.1-18) and the story of Israel’s liberation from Egypt (Exodus 14.15-31, 15.20). They are our stories because they tell us who we are.
These stories testify that for each one of us, as for Israel, life at its very core is about a relationship with God. We are not meant to be alone or isolated in a shell. In our very being we are oriented towards another. As the second creation story states: “It is not good that Adamah – the man – should be alone.” (Genesis 2.18) This desire for the other is inextricably connected with our relation to God. The story of Abraham and Sarah tells it well. Abraham was to begin a new chapter in the story of humanity: in him all nations were to be blessed. It is a story of faith and trust in God. Abraham leaves his homeland in blind faith based on God’s promise of a new land and offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven. He trusts God. Even when in old age he and Sarah still do not have a son, even when the word of God directs him to sacrifice his only son, he trusts that God will provide. This steadfast relationship between God and Abraham receives the name “covenant.” To the people of the ancient Near-East, this word “covenant” expresses the most solemn and unbreakable of bonds.

Guiding questions

1. “Life at its very core is a relationship with God.” What does this statement mean to you? Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
2. How is the story of Israel as told in these passages also our story?

The covenant with Moses

When Moses encounters God in the burning bush, God recalls the covenant made with Abraham. “I am the God of Abraham,” the Voice says. Because of the promise to Abraham, God has a special care for Abraham’s descendants. The enslavement of the Hebrews in Egypt touches God. “I have heard their cry … I know their sufferings … I have come down to deliver them.” (Exodus 3.7-8) There is a bond of love and compassion between God and these descendants of Abraham. God cannot but be moved by their plight. And so YHWH, in remembering Abraham, makes another covenant – this time on Mount Sinai with the people of Israel. It is not Israel who searches out God; it is God who searches for Israel’s heart. From this point, Israel understands itself in terms of this bond between God and itself: the covenant becomes Israel’s identity. When Israel forgets or ignores this covenant, Israel is lost. As Christians we have inherited this self-understanding as a people of the covenant. For us, this covenant is renewed even more powerfully in Jesus. Our identity is rooted in God through our relationship – a covenant – in Jesus Christ.

Guiding questions

1. How did God approach Moses?
2. What did God reveal to Moses?
3. What mission did Moses receive?
4. How did Moses respond?
5. How did this revelation of God change Moses’ life?
6. How did this revelation of God change the lives of the people that Moses touched?
Moses is not the only person called by God to perform a specific mission. Israel’s history is filled with prophets – messengers, or spokespersons, for God. When God calls them, they all receive new identities. The summons transforms them. From the moment of his call Moses becomes a prophet. His call from God defines his vocation, and he is thereafter identified with this vocation. Like Moses, you also have a vocation, and your vocation identifies who you are. Your vocation touches you at the point where you are most yourself. For example, perhaps you can think of a teacher who is a teacher to the bone. For this person, teaching is not just a means of bringing home a paycheque, it is a vocation. This person’s identity is expressed through teaching. She or he is a teacher.

For the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea, the experience of God’s call shaped their lives. As you read their stories, you will come to see what intense turmoil this call caused in their lives. Each of them is shaped by their experience of God in the call. The times in which they lived were times of crisis: for Moses it was the crisis of captivity in Egypt; for Isaiah it was the crisis of the threatening destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; for Second Isaiah it was the crisis of faith in the time of the exile; for Ezekiel it was the cultural crisis arising from the loss of the land, the temple, kings, true prophets and language during the exile. These prophets were spokespersons and mediators between God and the people when everything seemed to be at stake. You will explore now the stories of God’s calling of three prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The structure of a call story

The call stories of Gideon (Judges 6.11-17), Moses (Exodus 3.1-12), Jeremiah (1.4-10), Isaiah (Isaiah 6.1-13), Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40.1-11) and Ezekiel (1.1–3.15) all follow a similar pattern of six episodes:

1. Confrontation with God
It begins with an encounter with God. Each encounter is different. For Moses it takes place in the burning bush. For Isaiah it is a dramatic vision of God in the temple. For Ezekiel it is a vision of the “chariot” of YHWH and the scroll that he is told to eat. In each case, we see the immense disproportion between God and the one being called. It is the All-Holy that sends them on their mission, calling them away from their homes and ordinary preoccupations. The call totally uproots their lives. Amos is taken from his flock, as is Moses, who “was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro.”

2. Introductory speech
It is God who speaks first. Before the call, God’s makes a self-announcement.

- “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” God says to Moses (Exodus 3.6).
- “The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior,” the angel of the Lord says to Gideon (Judges 6.12).
• “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations,” the word of the Lord says to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1.5).

At the heart of each call is an assurance from the Lord – a promise of “God with you.” As we hear in Ezekiel, “And the hand of the Lord was on him there.” (1.3)

3. Imparting of a mission
The prominent phrase in these call stories is, “I send you…” Moses is told, “I will send you to Pharaoh…” (Exodus 3.10). In Isaiah the mission is preceded by a request: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, ‘Here am I; send me.’ And he said, “Go and say to this people” (Isaiah 6.8-9). When Isaiah says, “Here am I” he puts his whole identity on the line. “Here am I, at your service!” Isaiah takes on the identity and mission of “prophet.”

4. Objection by the prophet-to-be
“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” asks Moses even though earlier he had said, “Here I am.” When he is told that he is to be a messenger and a spokesperson, he objects again: “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Exodus 4.10) Jeremiah offers a similar objection: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” (Jeremiah 1.6) Isaiah too – despite his earlier exuberant “Here am I, send me!”—soon realizes the burden of unhappiness and condemnation that he had taken upon himself, and mutters, “How long, O Lord?” Ezekiel does not object. He is overwhelmed. His objection is expressed in a resentful silence: “The spirit lifted me up and bore me away: I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me.” (3.14) The prophets are strongly aware that their mission to the people will set them apart from the people. That is their burden.

5. Reassurance by God
God reassures the prophets as they receive their mission. To Jeremiah the Lord says, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth.” (Jeremiah 1.7-9) “I will be with you,” “Go, I am with you”; “I will open your mouth.” The word that the prophets are to speak is God’s word. The prophet’s word is taken over by the Lord’s word.

6. The sign
The sign is not always clear. Moses is given a sign: “And this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” (Exodus 3.12) The sign that Isaiah is given is devastating: “Until the cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land” (Isaiah 6.11). Isaiah’s sign is the destruction of the land and the people.5

The call of Isaiah (Isaiah 6.1-13)
In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” And he said, “Go and say to this people:
‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.”

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:

“Until cities lie waste with inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.”

The holy seed is its stump.

The call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1.4-10)
Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

The call of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1.1 – 3.15)
In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiled by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month, the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was on him there.

As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form. Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and face of an eagle; such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. Each moved straight ahead; wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures;
the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire. The living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of lightning.

As I look at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl; and the four had the same form, their construction being something like a wheel within a wheel. When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. Their rims were tall and awesome, for the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. When the living creatures moved, the wheels moved beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When they moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings. And there came a voice from above the dome over their heads; and when they stopped they let down their wings.

Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads. Under the dome their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another; and each of the creatures had two wings covering its body. When they moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings. And there came a voice from above the dome over their heads; and when they stopped they let down their wings.

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire, and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendour all around. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking. He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not
be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.

But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.

He said to me: Mortal, go to the house of Israel, and speak my very words to them. For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel – not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to them, they would listen to you. But the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. See, I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like the hardest stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not fear them or be dismayed by their looks, for they are a rebellious house. He said to me: Mortal, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears; then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, “Thus says the Lord God”; whether they hear or refuse to hear.

Then the spirit lifted me up, and as the glory of the Lord rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud rumbling; it was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, that sounded like a loud rumbling. The spirit lifted me up and bore me away; I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. I came to the exiles at Tel-abib. And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days.

Prophets of judgment

The prophetic call stories are poignant and gripping, leaving us, like Ezekiel, stunned. Their mission is a devastating mission. To be told, as was Jeremiah, “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” is to truly set one apart, to prepare one to become the pariah of a people. To be given the mission to tell them that their cities will be laid waste without inhabitants, that their houses will be without people, and that the land will be utterly desolate, as was Isaiah, is to be given a bitter mission. No wonder Isaiah asks, “How long, O Lord?” We can empathize with Jeremiah when he turns to God one day and says, “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’ For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.” (Jeremiah 20.7-8)

Why are they called to bring YHWH’s judgment to the people of Israel? Why has the word of salvation and liberation, so prominent before, turned into a word of condemnation and destruction? Why have these ordinary
people, enticed by the word of God, become prophets of doom? Was this the only way to interpret the crisis being experienced by Israel? What kept Israel together was its covenant. These prophets were expressing God’s action to keep the covenant from totally unravelling. The disasters that came upon Israel throughout its long history needed to be understood in terms of the covenant. The prophets were not saying that the covenant had ended and that the people were left to their own devices. No, the covenant was embraced more than ever. How, then, can we explain these terrible events within the covenant? At the time of Moses, had not God declared how moved the LORD was by the cries of the misery of Israel in Egypt? Where was this God now? At the moment, God seemed absent. It is only later that Israel will realize that all this time God’s instruction and guidance had not ended. Through the prophets God was teaching Israel that the road to its freedom involved recognizing its fault, its sinfulness, its separation from God. The experience of exile became part of Israel’s formation. These prophets were called to interpret these events. It is held today that, if it had not been for the prophets, Israel might not have survived the crisis caused by the exile.

Guiding questions

1. What does “revelation” mean in the context of sacred Scripture?
2. Using the experience of one of the prophets that you have studied, describe the dynamics of revelation.
3. Why does the revelation of God always call us to respond in some way?

Sin and transgression

The prophets used the word “sin” – a word probably borrowed from the Babylonians in the time of the exile. Sin referred to transgressions. Israel had transgressed, the prophets said. These events are a judgment of God. The suffering of Israel was not an innocent suffering. Listen to the prophet Amos:

Thus says the LORD:
For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
you who trample the head of the poor
into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.
(Amos 2.6-8)

The prophets cry out; they threaten, order, accuse and warn the people: “The day of YHWH will be darkness and not light,” Amos says (5.18). Their indignation and accusation touch Israel in a new way, reminding them that in the covenant they stand before the infinitely

Prophets are driven by the Spirit. During her life, Mother Teresa reached out to the poorest and most powerless members of society, proclaiming the presence and love of God, even in the most abysmal circumstances.
Holy One. They discover with Isaiah in the temple that this holiness translates into a feeling of infinite distance. In this distance, Isaiah feels that he is a sinner, belonging to a people of unclean lips and unclean hearts. He is standing before God who demands that we be holy as God is holy. He is made aware of his inadequacy. Through the words of the prophets, the people of Israel recognized that they were far from God—not in who they were—but in what they had done. They recognized their sin. Sin, for Israel (and for us), means realizing, when standing before God—the Holy One—that our actions do not measure up. No one can be holy as the Lord God is holy. The prophets let the people know in no uncertain terms that breaking the commandments affected their relationship with God and with one another, and also affected who they were. Breaking the commandments is sinful because this breaks their covenant with God. By sinning, they deliberately choose to distance themselves from God. But the prophets also helped the people to understand how to live in accordance with the Holy One, even though what they did was not equal to God's holiness. For instance, Jeremiah was told to stand at the gate of the temple one day to warn people that just having a temple did not guarantee that the Lord would dwell among them. "For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever." (Jeremiah 7.5-7) How then, are we to stand before God? Act justly with one another! The prophets break down this relationship with God into things we can do for one another. The goodness of God is revealed and given an outlet in our lives by acting justly in the human community.

Sin also points to another part of the human heart—a heart filled with pride and with the refusal to regard the other. The prophets realized how far this sin had entered into Israel's heart. Sin was so deeply rooted that Israel was hardly alive any more. Its heart had become a heart of stone. The prophets confronted this hardness of heart by identifying the people's transgressions. Listen to the harsh words of Amos speaking to the women of Samaria: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!" (Amos 4.1)

Sin shows itself when the moral commandments are broken. As the prophet Hosea says to the people: "There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows upon bloodshed" (4.1-2). Israel began to see how sins were turning them away from God. While sin, as a disposition of the heart, may be one, the prophets broke down the people's sin into the multitude of infractions. You cannot be a sinner in general. You are a sinner by stealing, by being disrespectful, by polluting the environment. In a negative way sin reveals the holiness of God.  

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Prayer of one called by God

God calls you every day of your life. God is committed to you. How does being touched by God change the way you understand yourself? How does God’s passionate love for you influence how you choose to live? Psalm 119 is a prayer of a person who has thought about these questions.

Psalm 119.1-7

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.

Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!

Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances.
Chapter 4: The naming of God and ethics

Summary

• The sacred Scriptures are the inspired Word of God.
• God’s self-revelation to Moses and the prophets was a summons to them, and through them the people of Israel, to a way of living with God.
• An encounter with God is never neutral – it is a call and a summons. The one called receives a new identity. God’s self-revelation always includes a mission or vocation: “Go and say...,” or “Go and do...,” or “Go and be...,” etc.
• Life at its core is a relationship with God. Furthermore, humans are not isolated beings – they are by nature oriented towards another. This desire for the other is linked with our covenant with God.
• In the covenant with Moses, God renews his bond with Israel. The “Ten Words” describe our relationship to God in our relationship to the other.
• When the people of Israel strayed from keeping their part of the covenant agreement, God sent the prophets to call them back. They pointed out how they had transgressed the covenant. They named their transgressions “sin.”

Review questions

Knowledge and understanding
1. Explain how sacred Scripture is the Word of God.
2. Describe the structure of a covenant, and use God’s covenant with Moses as an example.

Thinking and inquiry
3. Explain the function of the “Ten Words” in the Mosaic covenant.
4. How is the Christian moral stance related to the Ten Words given to Moses?

Communication
5. Create a chart that shows the parallels between the call stories of the prophets.
6. Write a short story or poem about one of the prophet’s encounters with God, or about an encounter that you have had with God. Or, communicate the main points about this encounter visually or musically.

Application
7. Identify and analyze two forms of covenant that can be found in our society.
8. If you were called to be a prophet today, how would you call people back to God? Use the Ten Words to help people identify how they must reform their ways so that they live in right relationship with God and with one another.

Glossary

call story: The Bible contains a number of stories of God calling people and imparting to them a mission. They follow the pattern of encounter with God, God speaks. God gives a mission, the person being called objects, they are reassured by God, and God gives a sign that God is with them in their mission. When God calls us, God does not leave us alone.

covenant: A binding agreement between two parties that spells out the conditions and obligations of each party. The biblical notion of covenant arose from this contractual notion, but it is far more. God’s covenant is a bond of love that calls to us in our freedom to respond in love. God’s commitment to us is forever. God’s commitment is founded in love.

revelation: People have the ability to come to know God through God’s works. But there is a higher order of knowledge which comes not from human reason, but from divine revelation. God makes Himself known fully by sending his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The sacred Scriptures reveal the loving actions of God in human history.

vocation: Vocation is a call from God. Jesus calls all people into the family of God. God also calls each one of us personally to a way of life that is founded on the love of God and the love of neighbour. For some this way of life leads to priesthood; for others, consecrated religious life; for others, service in the context of family life or the broader community.
Imagine, if you can, a world without rules or laws. It would be even more chaotic than Hockey Night in Canada where the referees showed up without whistles. A well-refereed game in which the players are free to use their hockey skills within the well-understood parameters of the game, is a joy to watch. Driving in traffic that is orderly and predictable, and that is moving within the commonly recognized boundaries of the law, is a pleasure. A banking system with its strict rules and guidelines is what allows you the freedom to use your bank card to purchase goods and services. The countless rules and regulations that place boundaries around life’s activities here in Canada, for the most part, free you to enjoy life with a minimum of worries.

The author of Psalm 119 asks the LORD to instruct him in the ways of life. For him the law given to Israel on Mount Sinai is not some burden. He does not see it as a limitation on his freedom or as an imposition by some supreme lawgiver. It is an instruction, a teaching that leads to freedom and order, and ultimately to the well-being of all. This chapter explores how norms and laws function in life.

Recall the distinction between ethics and morality (see Chapter 1, page 00). This distinction is also the difference between the approach to Chapter 7, and this chapter. Chapter 7 drew on the ethical tradition. In it, you looked at the aim of the good life: happiness. You saw how this good life is to be found with and for others in just institutions. The ethical tradition sees human action from the perspective of the end, as you learned from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. According to this approach, when you are faced with a practical moral question, your first question is, “What is my goal?” The ethical tradition does not tell you how to make a particular moral decision or what you should do in a specific situation. It does not account for competing claims made, for instance, in biomedical stem cell research.

**Focus your learning**

**Cognitive**
- What are norms, laws and rules?

**Practical**
- How do norms function in promoting and protecting the good life?

**Affective**
- The psalmist writes, “Lead me in the path of your commandments for I delight in it…”
- How can rules and laws be the source of delight?

**Key terms**
- common good
- inclination
- law
- maxim
- moral principle
- natural law
- norm
- obligation
- passion
- proverb
- rule

**Key thinkers**
- Plato
- Richard Gula
- Immanuel Kant
- Thomas Aquinas
between the dignity of human life and the cure of diseases. For that, you need to look at the moral tradition.

The moral tradition is about obligation and duty. You have already encountered Kant (see Chapter 1, page 00), the thinker who has become identified with this approach. His deontological approach has informed the thinking of a number of Catholic moral theologians. These thinkers approach the moral life by examining the role of norms. Norms are rules, laws and maxims in life. They are the focus of this chapter.

**Norms and obligation**

Why do we need rules and laws to be able to talk about morality? Is it not enough to present the goals and aims of human life, as we did in the previous chapter, and leave it to people to make up their own mind on how to live? Why does every society and institution seem to think it is necessary to create laws and rules besides? Why is the road to freedom paved with obligation?

In the previous chapter, we explored the human attraction to do the good just because it is good. Doing the good makes sense because it fits with what is best within ourselves. We do the good knowing that it is a source of happiness. We are motivated to do good because we are attracted to it; we desire it in our lives. Essentially, the motivation for doing good is that it is good. Then why do we need rules and laws? Societies set up governing institutions and delegate lawmakers to make and enforce laws and rules to protect those things that the people of that society consider to be important for the common good. In other words, laws define the way people ought to act in a society for the common good. They set norms for action, rules to follow, laws to be obeyed. And with norms come obligation and duty. Laws do not “invite” us to seek the common good; they “command” us. They use imperative language: “You shall not...,” or, “You shall...”

**What are norms?**

“Moral norms are criteria of judgment about the sort of persons we ought to be and the sorts of actions we ought to perform.” Criteria are standards that serve as guides for action. We see them in many forms: laws, rules, principles, commandments, and maxims. They carry varying degrees of obligation. For example, the divine law, “You shall not murder,” obliges us more than the traffic law telling us not to exceed a certain speed limit. The law to pay a minimum wage to workers carries a higher obligation than the rule of etiquette to eat with your mouth closed. Even though these examples differ in their degree of obligation, what they have in common is that they all obligate us in some way. Where does this duty, or obligation, come from? Why do we say that we ought to or must do something? Here are some possible answers:

**Norms are declared by an authority**

Some norms come from God, some from humans. Thus, for instance, the norms found in the Ten Commandments are proclaimed with God’s Name and authority behind them. In the case of the Church (ecclesiastical law) we recognize the authority of the pope, bishops, priests and our parents. In the case of civil law, we recognize the authority of the prime minister,
members of parliament, judges, doctors, teachers, police and, once again, our parents. Our obligation to these authorities is derived from the power that has been given to them through election, delegation, ordination, and so on. Positions of leadership empower these persons to make laws, set rules, and prescribe behaviour.

**Norms must be reasonable**

For norms to become obligatory, they must be reasonable. If norms are to be a guide towards the common good, they cannot be arbitrary. If a rule is reasonable and is explained rationally, it creates a sense of obligation to obey it. Whether you accept a norm as obligatory, then, does not come from the outside (an authority) but from within (your reason). If an appropriate rule is explained and justified, you feel impelled from within to follow it. Duty and obligation are rational. For Kant (see “On duty and obligation,” page 00) reason was the prime source of obligation.

**Norms involve our freedom**

A norm obliges us, in our freedom, to act in a certain way, addressing our sense of responsibility. Because moral norms promote and protect values they guide us and they seek our assent. It is true that societies build in deterrents for those who refuse to accept either the law or the authority of the ones who declared the law. Penal codes allow the properly delegated authorities within society to impose punishments (fines, prison terms, etc.) on those who break the laws. But norms are not first of all about penalties. In fact, they are about freedom. Here are five ways in which moral norms function to assist our freedom:

- First, norms impart wisdom. By transmitting the moral wisdom of the past, they put us in touch with the experience of those who have gone before us. This can protect us from a lot of error and hurt.
- Second, norms afford us a measure of security. Because we are a nurtured species, we rely on easily learned rules to give us some measure of comfort when we do things for the first time as we mature.
- Third, norms help us to make decisions with speed and accuracy. Often we are too busy to sit down and think about the right thing to do. If moral norms are known and appreciated, we waste less time and get the right thing done by following the norm. For example, the norm *caveat emptor* which means “buyer beware” tells us to think twice, as does the maxim, “You don’t get something for nothing.”
- Fourth, moral norms are helpful in examining our conscience. We all know at a general level that we are not perfect. But to examine our hearts honestly, we need some criteria to judge our actions.
- Fifth, norms function to unify a people. A sense of purpose and common goals are main ingredients of community. Norms, in other words, promote and protect values that unify a people by enabling them to live in harmony. Norms assist freedom in at least these five ways.²

**Norms direct our inclinations and desires**

Norms are guides that help us steer through the maze of human inclinations and desires. They can be compared to signposts guiding us through a tricky terrain. The “ought” of norms curbs our many inclinations. All moral theories pay attention to our desires, passions and inclinations (see “Passions and inclinations” below).

### Guiding questions

1. What is meant by the term moral norm?
2. Why do you feel obliged to act when your parents or other authorities in your life tell you to do something?
3. Give some examples of norms that you think enhanced your freedom to make a decision. Did they give you a sense of duty in making the decision?
On duty and obligation

Thomas Aquinas writes that the root of the word “law” comes from the Latin *ligando*, meaning “to bind,” or “what must be done.” He argues that the obligation to follow a law exists because law comes from reason, and because law is tied to the common good. He defined law as “a reasonable decision promulgated by a competent authority for the common good.” For Aquinas, law to be reasonable had to be morally right and not arbitrary or capricious. To be reasonable, law had to be just, treating all people alike, otherwise it was not written for the common good. To be reasonable, law had to be possible to keep, otherwise it is unreasonably difficult. Finally, to be reasonable law had to be useful, because useless law is worse than useless. It is harmful.

To Aquinas, you obeyed a law because it was reasonable and because it preserved the common good. In his time, finding a reason to obey a law was not an issue. It became an issue in modern times with Immanuel Kant. Kant argued for a rational ethics, independent from any outside authority, fearing that morality would take a nosedive in his time if it were not based on reason alone. He articulated the spirit of his time (the beginning of the nineteenth century) in the slogan, “Dare to know!” People were less and less willing to let others, including God, determine what they were to do. He encouraged his contemporaries: “Be your own authority! Don’t let others oblige you. Set your own duty or obligation.” Kant realized that this was not easy. You must want to be autonomous (which means literally, “to be a law unto oneself”); you must want to be reasonable; and most of all, you must have a good will. That is why for Kant a good will was the highest good. Kant would never have accepted a morality based on “doing my own thing as long as I don’t harm anyone.” He stood for a morality where people act out of duty and obligation that they set for themselves.

Kant’s famous maxim has endured: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” The person is always to be treated as an end, never as a means. As Christians we find a resonance of this maxim in the golden rule of Jesus: “Treat others as you would like them to treat you.” (Luke 6.31)

Guiding questions

1. Kant wanted people to be free and autonomous. What does it mean to be autonomous? Why is it not equivalent to doing whatever you want?
2. How important do you think it is that people are obliged to do certain things? Do you ever experience obligation? Describe a situation.
3. When would you say you are acting with a “good will?”
Passions and inclinations

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines passions as “emotions or movements of the sensitive appetite that incline us to act or not to act in regard to something felt or imagined to be good and evil.” (#1764) In other words, passions are feelings, desires or emotions, such as love, hatred, sadness, fear and anger. The Catechism calls love the “most fundamental passion.” Love evokes in us a desire for something which we feel to be good. It also generates a hope in us to obtain the good. Once we have obtained the good, love is transformed into pleasure and joy. (#1765) Passions are sensual, that is, they are related to our senses and to our body.

Passions are a gift of God. They are not evil or something you need to try to stamp out. In fact, they are an important part of your search for the good because they engage your senses, allowing your attraction to the good also to be a physical attraction. Morally speaking, however, your “passions are neither good nor evil.” (#1767) They become morally good or evil when you govern them with reason. Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Kant all maintained that people ought not to be ruled by their passions and sensual inclinations. Rather, their reason should regulate these passions and inclinations. Hence “[p]assions are morally good when they contribute to a good action, evil in the opposite case.” (#1768) Your passions are an important part of who you are. To become the person you were meant to be, your passions must be integrated into your whole person. As the Catechism says, this is the work of the Holy Spirit in you. This work is complete when you love God with your whole being, that is, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22.37)

Guiding questions

1. What are passions?
2. What do the philosophers mentioned above propose that you do with your inclinations and passions?
3. Discuss the statement: “Your passions must become integrated into your whole person.” Is this possible without self-control? Why?

Laws

The law is the highest expression of a norm for action. Law is commonly understood as a guide or directive for human action. However, the word “law” has a very specific meaning. As we use it here, law refers to the judgment of a lawmaker about the means necessary for the common good. According to this definition a law requires:

1. a lawmaker
2. a specific directive of action
3. a consideration of the common good
4. a specific group of people for whom the law is intended
5. obligation
For this reason we are not talking here about laws of nature or physics. They do not fulfill all five conditions of law. In order to see how law is part of moral life, let us look briefly at these five conditions.

1. **Lawmakers**

   Who are the lawmakers? We identify two kinds of law: God’s law and human law.

   a. God’s law is also called eternal law. We find it expressed in two ways. First, we find it revealed in the Bible and other sacred texts. It is in this first sense that we spoke of God’s law of the covenant at the heart of which are the Ten Commandments (Chapter 4). These laws were written down by human hand, and so they require human interpretation. In order to understand them properly, we turn to the Church as an authentic interpreter of God’s law. For this reason, the Catholic Church has its own law found in the *Code of Canon Law* (last promulgated in 1983). But God also reveals this law in a second way. Since we are in the image of God and created by God, God’s law is also written in our capacity to reason, in our inclinations and passions, in our actions and relationships. We call this natural law. (Read more on natural law below in “Moral principles and natural law” on page 00.)

   b. Human law has its own legislators. In Canada these legislators are first of all elected members of federal parliament and provincial legislatures. Municipal governments also have the right to pass laws, called municipal by-laws. Through the democratic process of voting for their representatives, and more directly through referenda, citizens are also legislators. Also, over time societies create what are known as laws of custom that are then recognized by the courts.

2. **The law itself — a specific directive**

   Laws tend to be very specific, spelling out exactly how the subjects of the law are to act. That is why we have laws covering every area of human life: property, housing, food safety, economic life, criminal justice, traffic, transportation, and so on. Similarly, the Church’s *Code of Canon Law* covers all the aspects of the life of the Church (such as the laws, customs and decrees of the Church, the celebration of the sacraments, the administration of material goods, and sanctions) in order to allow the Church to function as a community.

3. **The common good**

   Who comes first, the individual or society? Catholic social teaching — without denying the rights of individuals — holds that laws are primarily intended to give shape to the common good. What is this common good? It is not the sum total of all material goods of a society. The common good refers to the general well-being of all in a society. It includes such things as peace, security, protection of the law, and good order. It is a dynamic process in which a society, by means of its laws, seeks to meet the needs of all and to protect the freedom of all. Catholic social ethics gives priority to the common good over private good. This is consistent with the recognition of persons as relational beings. (Chapter 11 will explore this in greater depth.)
4. A specific group of people
Laws function within an institutional framework. They address the people who participate in these institutions of society and the Church. Institutions, as the contexts in which we live the good life (Chapter 7), are guided by laws to help them realize the good life, or the common good. One way in which the Catholic Church seeks to use laws to promote the common good can be seen in what it calls the “preferential option for the poor.” Aware of the impact that sin and disorder have on the dignity of persons, the Church proposes that preference be given to the poor. That is, it urges that laws governing institutions be attentive to the well-being of those on the margins of the institutions (the poor, the homeless, the sick, the disabled, and so on).

5. Obligation
So important is the common good, that we are morally obliged to choose the means necessary to achieve it. Therefore, if a law contributes to the common good, we are obligated to follow it. For example, if I want order and security for myself and for others, I must support police protection and a system of justice. If I want safety on the roads, I must follow the speed limit and refrain from driving while under the influence of alcohol and drugs. If I want social services, education and health care, I consent to pay taxes. Since our obligation to follow a law is derived from our moral obligation to the common good, a law that does not promote the common good or that clearly infringes on the dignity of persons (such as laws that would allow human cloning, certain types of stem cell research, abortions, slavery) loses its right to obligation. Instead, it becomes obligatory to oppose and seek to abolish such laws. Unjust laws do not oblige.

Guiding questions
1. What is the importance of laws in society?
2. How do laws promote rather than limit personal freedom?
3. What sort of “goods” do you think are necessary for the common good of Canada or the world? Give your reasons.

Rules
With rules we enter into a different class of norms. Rules are not strictly legislated but are nevertheless obligatory guidelines for action. Rules indicate how we ought to behave in certain situations. Rules can be absolute, generally binding, or relative.

Absolute rules
Absolute rules are rules that generally apply under all circumstances. Here are some examples of absolute rules: “You shall not murder.” Always be just. Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. The golden rule: “Whatever you wish others to do to you, do so to them” (Matthew 7.12; Luke 6.31). Do good and avoid evil. Be honest. Be chaste. Be grateful. Be humble. Be prudent. Be reasonable.” These rules are more like guides to action. They do not enter into detail as to what you must do in a particular situation.

Generally binding rules
Generally binding rules apply in all circumstances unless there is another compelling rule in conflict with this rule. The rule “Do not lie,” or “Be truthful,” is one such generally binding rule. A lie occurs if you intentionally deceive or tell an untruth to someone who has the right to
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the truth. But the rule “Do not lie” depends very much on what you understand to be a lie. For example, you would not have to tell a thief the truth about the whereabouts of valuables. In the same way, “Do not kill” is generally binding, but in a legitimate war or in self-defence, this rule is superseded by other values. So if telling the truth betrays what has been said in confidentiality or places another person in danger of death, you are not bound by the rule to “be truthful.”

Sometimes when there is a conflict between rules it is quite easy to see which must be followed. But in many cases it is difficult to make such a judgment, as in situations of war and medical practice. When, for instance, is it permissible for soldiers to fire upon a civilian vehicle that is speeding toward them? When is it permissible to remove a ventilator from a comatose patient? When does the administration of medication to ease pain become euthanasia?

Maxims and proverbs
You have probably heard nuggets of wisdom like these: “People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.” Or “A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.” Maxims, proverbs or rules of thumb offer guidelines or advice. They come from customs of the past, from culture, and from communities or institutions like a school or a parish.

In the Scriptures we find a number of books that provide us with words from the wise. Because they are from the Scriptures, they are normative. They are known as the Books of Wisdom (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach and Job). Some of these books, particularly Wisdom, are attributed to King Solomon, the wisest of Israel’s kings. Here are some examples from the Book of Proverbs:

“Speak for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”
– Proverbs 31.8-9

“For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer (of gossip), quarreling ceases.”
– Proverbs 26.20

“Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads, or you may learn their ways and entangle yourself in a snare.”
– Proverbs 22.24-25

“Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who is able to stand before jealousy?”
– Proverbs 27.4

“Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips.”
– Proverbs 24.28

“Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist.”
– Proverbs 23.4

“In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.”
– Proverbs 14.23

Guiding questions

1. What is the difference between laws and rules?
2. What norms govern the behaviour in your school? What type of norms would most effectively promote the common good in your school? Give examples.
Moral principles and natural law

Moral principles are basic truths we use to determine rules of conduct. In moral reasoning, principles enable us to measure our moral obligation or to figure out how we ought to act in particular situations. They touch on every aspect of our lives where ethics and morality are at stake.

When Catholics seek to determine whether a certain action is right or wrong they often refer to “natural law.” The word law is used here in a different sense than we used it earlier. Natural law is not found in any book of laws. If it is “written” anywhere, it is, as Pope Leo XIII said, “written and engraved in the soul” (CCC, #1954). It is a “law” written within us in our capacity to reason. The Catholic tradition, therefore, turns not only to the Bible to find norms and principles for human moral action. It also turns to human nature and what we may learn about human nature through reason. As the Catechism says, “The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables [us] to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie” (CCC, #1954).

Natural law, as a principle for moral action, affirms that we have the capacity to figure out what is good. We can trust our genuine search for the truth. The natural law is available to anyone who is willing to think about our living together in the human community. Anyone who seeks to know what it means to be human is engaged in understanding natural law. As Thomas Aquinas says, “The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid” (as quoted in CCC #1955).

Thomas Aquinas mentions as the first principle of natural law: “Do good and avoid evil.” He also says that our inclination to preserve and protect life, to procreate and educate, our tendency toward truth and our inclination to cooperate with one another, are all derived from natural law. Whatever relates to right reasoning belongs to the natural law.¹⁰

Guiding questions

1. What is the meaning of “natural law”?
2. How can you determine whether you are acting in accordance with natural law?

“Jacques Maritain on Natural Law

“Natural Law is natural not only in so far as it is the normality of functioning of human nature, but also in so far as it is naturally known: that is to say, known through inclination, by way of congeniality or connaturality, not through conceptual knowledge and by way of reasoning…. Natural Law is made manifest to practical reason in certain judgments, but these very judgments do not proceed from any conceptual, discursive, rational exercise of reason. They proceed from…inclination.”

“Thomas Aquinas on Natural Law and reason

“Since all things are ruled and measured by the Eternal Law [God’s Law], we must conclude that they participate in this Law insofar as they derive from it the inclinations through which they tend naturally toward their proper operations and ends…. Thus the rational creature by its very rationality participates in the eternal reason, and because of this participation has a natural inclination to the actions ‘rooted in reason.’ It is this participation in the Eternal Law enjoyed by the rational creature which is called the Natural Law.” (Summa, I-II, 93,1)

“Thomas Aquinas on Natural Law and human law

As Augustine says, “that which is not just seems to be no law at all”: wherefore the force of a law depends on the extent of its justice. Now in human affairs a thing is said to be just, from being right, according to the rule of reason. But the first rule of reason is the law of nature, as is clear from what has been stated above. Consequently every human law has just so much of the nature of law, as it is derived from the law of nature. But if in any point it deflects from the law of nature, it is no longer a law but a perversion of law. (Summa, I-II, 95,2)
Case study 1: Assisted human reproduction
Ilya and Franka have been married six years. Franka had always dreamed of having a large family like her parents, but she has not succeeded in becoming pregnant. In exploring other avenues with her doctor, she is told that she stands a good chance to become pregnant through in vitro fertilization using her husband’s sperm. What moral principles come into play?

In October, 2003, the House of Commons passed Bill C-13 entitled An Act Respecting Assisted Human Reproduction. The Bill touches on many issues of assisted human reproduction. For example, it talks about in vitro fertilization, embryo and stem cell research, cloning, trans- fers of gametes, embryos or fetuses between animals and humans, sex selection, surrogacy, marketing of gametes and embryos or the commercialization of embryos, and the patenting of humans. The government of Canada has worked to provide an ethical framework to the Bill, inviting interested parties to present their ethical views to improve the Bill. Among the respondents were the Canadian bishops and the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF). In their briefs they spoke about a number of moral principles derived from the Catholic tradition. Here are some of these principles:

- Respect for human life and human dignity
  The briefs quote the Canadian Physicians for Life in their discussion on human stem cell research: “It is an objective scientific fact that human life begins at conception/fertilization. This is not a ‘faith’ position or a ‘belief’! We are human beings even at the one cell stage. A human embryo is not a ‘potential human being’. It is a human being.” An embryo is known and loved by God.11 The principle used in the response by the bishops was that “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception.”12 We cannot, therefore, reduce an embryo from being a human person by saying it is just a source of organic material for therapeutic cloning or stem cell research. Because of the dignity of human life, killing an embryo for the purpose of finding cures for diseases such as Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s – however desirable such a cure would be – is not acceptable. Human life cannot be destroyed for the potential benefit of others.

- A child is a gift
  Even though the desire for a child by infertile couples is deeply personal and powerful, fulfilling this desire must first of all benefit the child, not the couple. The moral principle is that a child can never become an object or a thing. A child may not be exploited merely to fulfill the desire of the infertile couple. “The child is a gift, the most precious gift of the relationship, the most gracious gift of all.”13 A child is never a possession.

- The integrity of procreation
  This principle touches on assisted conception such as in vitro fertilization. The Catholic Church honours and respects the act of human procreation between a husband and wife as God’s design. In vitro fertilization is considered unacceptable for two reasons: First, it separates procreation from the physically intimate expression of the love of husband and wife. Second, it can lead to the destruction of embryos that remain after the treatment. This would undermine the principle of respect for human life and dignity.
• **Concern for the most vulnerable**
This principle – often called the “preferential option for the poor” – is emphasized by the Catholic Church because the poor and weak need special protection. The Church seeks to be a voice for the infertile couples, for the children conceived through assisted reproduction, and for children with disabilities. Also, the embryo itself – human life at its most vulnerable – needs protection.

• **The common good**
The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1906), as we saw above, describes the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily.” Humans are created within a family not only as individuals, but also as part of a society. We are social beings, part of a larger community. In what we do we also accept responsibility for the good of all and of each individual. In Catholic moral teaching the common good of individuals and of the people of a nation such as Canada as a whole is always a factor. In evaluating the common good, the health and interests of women who are most affected by these new technologies must be given an especially attentive hearing. Essential to the common good is universal respect for the inalienable right to life of every human being at every stage, from embryo to natural death.

### Guiding questions

1. What “goods” are at stake for Ilya and Franka?
2. When the goods that Ilya and Franka desire come into conflict, what process should they follow to guide their decision?
3. Describe how their moral reasoning might unfold.

### Case study 2: Euthanasia and assisted suicide
Lynn is suffering from ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. The disease has progressed to the point that it has begun to affect her respiratory muscles. She is afraid of the certain death that awaits her. She asks her doctor to help her to die before she loses all power to breathe. What moral principles come into play?

In 1994, the Canadian bishops sent a brief to the Senate Committee on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide. The issue of euthanasia and assisted suicide has become a national issue because of highly publicized and emotional cases of two Canadians, Tracy Latimer and Susan Rodriguez. In their brief the bishops cited three principles:

• **Human life is relational**
Human life is a good that is essentially different from all other goods. It is not a good we possess, but a good of which we are stewards. We do not own life, even our own lives. Life is always a most precious gift – a gift which we...
have received from others and which we are called to make fruitful and to preserve. This means that protecting human life and its fruitfulness is not only a matter of self-preservation, but also of sustaining the common good of society. We are a part of a web of human relationships.

**We are mutually responsible for life**

From the first principle follows that human life is interdependent. We are in this together. We need to be wary of such language as, “I must be able to have control over whether I live or die.”

Our supposed mastery over life is shown by the reality of death to be an illusion. After all, how much power and control do we have over life if we cannot control death? Isn’t all life dependent on the support of others? That is why suicide is always such a painful experience for those left behind. It is experienced as a failure to protect the life of another. We are responsible for the other.

- **Our care for the other must be governed by compassion, not pity**

How, then, do we respond to the person who is suffering? How do we maintain his or her dignity? We ought to respond out of compassion, not pity. Suffering and pain, the bishops say, challenge us at the very core of human life. They reveal our weakness and vulnerability. Suffering is not what God intends for us – even though Jesus showed that suffering can also be powerfully healing for others. But that does not make suffering a good to be sought. We must always seek to reduce it. Compassion opens us to sharing and entering into the suffering of another, whereas pity leaves the sufferer isolated to fend for him or herself. That is why the Catholic tradition strongly supports palliative care of terminally ill people and appropriate medication to ease pain, even when such medication may hasten death.15

- **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

#2276: Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible.

#2277: Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists of putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable.

#2280: Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honour and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.

#2282: Voluntary co-operation in suicide is contrary to the moral law.

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**Guiding questions**

1. In Lynn’s case, who are the moral agents, and how should they be involved in the case?
2. What goods are at stake?
3. What principles take priority in a case such as this? Explain.
In possession of Gyges’ ring: If you could get away with it, would you?

In Plato’s book, *The Republic*, an exchange takes place between the philosopher Socrates and his student, Glaucon. Glaucon wants to prove to Socrates that “…no [one] is just of his [or her] own free will, but only under compulsion.” If both the just and the unjust were given the freedom to do whatever they liked to do, he argues, the just would “travel the same road as the unjust.” He uses the story of Gyges to make his point:

Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. During a violent rainstorm and earthquake, the ground broke open where he was tending the king’s sheep, creating a chasm. Seeing this and marveling, he went down into it. There he saw, besides many other wonders, a hollow bronze horse. The horse had window-like openings. Gyges climbed through one of these openings and found a corpse wearing nothing but a gold ring. The shepherd took this ring, put it on his own hand and came out. He arrived at the usual monthly meeting to report to the king on the state of the flocks, wearing the ring. As he sat among the others waiting to give his report, he happened to twist the ring towards himself, and as he did this he became invisible. The others at the meeting went on talking as if he had gone. He marveled at this and, fingering the ring, he turned the hoop outward again and became visible. When he realized the ring’s magical power, he at once arranged to become a messenger to the king. With the ring’s power, he seduced the king’s wife, killed the king with her help, and took over the kingdom.

If there were two such rings, argued Glaucon, one worn by a just person and the other by the unjust, they both, in the end, would act in the same manner. If they could both do as they pleased without the possibility of being discovered, they would no longer have any reason to behave in a just manner. There would be no social compulsion to do the right thing. The one wearing the ring would step beyond society’s rules and do as he or she pleases.16

Guiding questions

1. According to Glaucon, why do people behave justly in society?
2. Imagine that you have come to possess Gyges’ ring. How would you be inclined to act? Why?
3. What if everyone in your class had one of these magical rings? Would your answers or reasons given to question 2 change or remain the same?
4. How does acting according to moral principles hinge on something greater than “being able to get away with it”?
The prudent person

There is clearly a lot that goes into moral decision-making. There are norms, laws, rules and principles to consider. It is not just about following your inclinations, or doing what “feels” right. If to be human is to be moral and ethical, if the ethical and moral sets us apart and is an indispensable part of our identity, it is important – even obligatory – that we attend to this aspect of human actions. Persons in all the different professions – teachers, doctors, bishops and priests, business people, lawyers, nurses, members of parliament, engineers, builders – have created professional and ethical codes of conduct. For the common good of society, we expect that these codes be followed. We expect people to be ethical and moral in their dealings with others. The penalties for failing to do so are often high. People are removed from positions; they are charged by the legal system; they lose their good name; they are fined; they are imprisoned. We are not moral, as has been stressed, if we act out of fear of these penalties. Human morality originates in a moral person who acts according to the good. To act according to the good with all of these norms, laws, rules and principles to consider, also requires prudence.

Christianity has considered prudence the foremost of the virtues. Prudence is not timidity. In the true sense of the word, the prudent person is one who is unlikely to be found in an embarrassing situation or in a conflict. The prudent person is clever and circumspect. In Christian ethics prudence goes together with the search for goodness. The prudent person is the one who has the ability to make good choices, who has an almost instinctive inclination toward goodness. We need prudence in order to harness impulses, inclinations and instincts. The virtue of prudence is what makes us moral people. Prudence seeks out right reason. It evaluates motives for action. It makes moral decisions that follow sound reason. It judges how to make justice and love of God real in day-to-day activities. The prudent person is the wise person who has the ability to do good and avoid evil. At heart, every moral and ethical person has a healthy dose of prudence in his or her heart and judgment.

Guiding questions

1. Who would you consider to be a prudent person?
2. How do you become prudent?
3. Why is prudence important for moral life?
Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.
Summary

- “Moral norms are the criteria of judgment about the sorts of persons we ought to be and the sorts of actions we ought to perform.” Norms promote and protect values. They come in different forms – laws, rules, principles, commandments, and maxims – and carry varying degrees of obligation.

- Kant’s maxim: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” The person is always to be treated as an end, never as a means. As Christians we find a resonance of this maxim in the golden rule of Jesus: “Treat others as you would like them to treat you.” (Luke 6.31)

- Law is commonly understood as a guide for human action. As we use it here, law refers to the judgment of a lawmaker about the means necessary for the common good.

- Rules are not strictly legislated but are nevertheless obligatory guidelines for action. Rules indicate how we ought to behave in certain situations, and can be absolute, generally binding, or relative.

- Moral principles are basic truths we use to set rules of conduct. In moral reasoning, we use principles to measure moral obligation or to determine how to act in particular situations.

- Natural law affirms that human beings have the capacity, through reason, to discover the good. As Thomas Aquinas says, “The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid.”

- To do what is good while considering all these norms, laws, rules and principles also requires prudence. The prudent person is the wise person who has the ability to do good and avoid evil.

Review questions

Knowledge and Understanding
1. Explain the distinctions between norms, laws and rules.
2. Describe the relationship between passions and inclinations on the one hand, and norms, laws and rules on the other.

Thinking and Inquiry
3. How is “natural law” a moral principle, and not a law like other laws?
4. Write a brief essay on why the moral principle of “concern for the most vulnerable members of society” is a key part of Christian moral teaching.

Communication
5. Using your daily news media (newspapers, TV, radio, Internet), develop a creative presentation on how rules and laws are needed to protect and promote the common good of your community.
6. Drawing on the Book of Proverbs and on conventional wisdom, develop a creative presentation of moral maxims for young people today.

Application
7. Explore how your school rules contribute to the common good of your school community. What improvements would you recommend, and why?