ETHICS
AND
IDENTITY

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Introduction

It's Getting Complicated

Being good used to be pretty simple. When you were seven years old, being good meant following rules. It meant sharing, telling the truth, and not hurting other people. Bad and good were as different as night and day.

As you've gotten older, it's gotten complicated. You've learned that doing the right thing sometimes means making people unhappy and maybe even getting in trouble. In fact, many of the Great Women and Great Men of history are considered "great" because they had the courage to break the rules in order to do the right thing. You may have learned that small acts of dishonesty are excusable if they prevent unnecessary hurt. For example, you might compliment the dinner prepared by a friend even if it's not to your liking. Even childhood rules

against hurting other people seem to have exceptions as you get older. Law breakers and law enforcers alike sometimes use violence to pursue their goals. You've learned that society permits exceptions to the rule "don't hurt others," as long as the goal being pursued is worthwhile. But who gets to decide which goals are worthwhile? And how much hurt is acceptable?

Rules exert a strong force over children. They are powerful simply because they are rules, and young children don't often call into question the justice of a rule or the authority of the rule makers. This changes during adolescence.

Adolescence is a time of expanding need for control over one's own life. This natural and necessary development challenges the authority of rules, which are often experienced as unwelcome limitations to the amount of control a young person has over his or her life. Consequently,

rules judged to be unfair or "pointless" cease to hold power over many adolescents. This is especially true if the author of those rules is not well respected. In adolescence, you begin to question the rules and authority figures that held power over you in childhood.

> " It is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority.
>
> — Benjamin Franklin —

Some young people equate *questioning* authority with *rejecting* authority. Questioning and rejecting are not the same thing. When you question, you seek understanding. When done respectfully, questioning authority is healthy exercise for a maturing young mind. Ironically, a person who rejects authority without question reflects the night-or-day, all-or-nothing thinking typical of the very childhood he or she is trying to reject.

Rules and authority figures tend to lose some of their authority over young adults during adolescence. The simple truths and rules of childhood certainly contain elements of profound, timeless wisdom, but the application of those truths to the lives of adolescents - to your lives - is much less simple.

From Good Kid to Moral Adult

If adolescence marks the end of your moral childhood, what can you expect in moral adulthood? Adolescence is a rich period of life valuable for its own sake in many ways. In terms of moral development, though, adolescence is a tricky transition between simple childhood morality and a fully developed adult morality. What does moral adulthood look like? In many ways, that is the question explored in detail throughout this book's twenty chapters. The descriptions below are hardly sufficient to capture the full picture of moral adulthood, but it may at least suggest some general ideas.

- She has a deeply developed moral identity. This identity gives her strength when tough decisions must be made. Society and her personal relationships have helped shape it, but her moral identity is hers alone. She has thought a lot about it and carefully pursued it. This identity is the source of her character.

- He pursues integrity by aligning his actions with his values. He accepts that perfect integrity may not be possible and understands that all of us are "works in progress."

- She knows that her understanding of the world and the people around her is incomplete. She purposefully tries to improve her understanding by putting herself in the place of others, both intellectually and emotionally.

- He recognizes that he is affected by unconscious biases that distort his understanding of others and also his perception of himself. He takes action to compensate for the impact of psychological biases on his decisions.

- She has learned how to work through difficult decisions. She recognizes when important values are at stake and is careful and skilled at making her decisions.

- He lives in society and is a member of communities of people. He does not live in isolation. He skillfully balances

the claims of his citizenship with the call of his own personal conscience.

- She recognizes the debt owed to her community and contributes to its welfare. She respects - but is not a servant to - the values and traditions she has inherited through culture.

- He explores existential questions that take him beyond himself and society. He asks whether there might be something bigger that transcends and connects all people and cultures. He may not ever answer this question, but he is open to its mystery.

Moral adulthood does not arrive at a particular age. It is a self-aware, principled way of living. It does not require that every person share the same thoughts. It does, however, require that you live thoughtfully.

Why Be Good?

Why should you care about being a good person? It's a fair question, and in some ways, only you can answer it for yourself. No book - not even this one - is likely to convince you that a life of honesty and kindness is *better* than a life of scheming and violence.

The desire to be a good person must come from within. Threats of punishment for bad behavior or rewards for acts of goodness are just two different forms of control. Such threats and rewards can produce good actions, but they do not produce good people.

For a moment, consider the footprint you wish to leave on the world. Each of us will leave behind a legacy. How do you wish to be remembered? What words do you want associated with your name? How will they speak of you when you are gone?

At this point in your lives, these questions may seem morbid. Yet, thinking about our lives backwards can bring real clarity to the present. When we can answer the question, "Who do I want to be at the end?," we can then live our lives toward that vision.

People who believe that "The Person Who Dies With The Most Toys Wins" is not likely to have his or her mind changed by a book. For those who believe winning and losing can be measured in such "toys," this book will ring hollow in places.... probably even naive. The "good life" is not rewarded with toys or power or fame. It isn't measured in dollars or in social media "likes." These things may come along the way, but they are not the goal of such a life.

The "goods of the good life" are measured in well-being, life satisfaction, and an ease of conscience. They are measured in

the depth and health of relationships and in the gathering of love and meaning.

This book will not try to brainwash you into believing there is only one kind of good person. There are many kinds of good people, and you have the power to choose what kind you will be. Goodness can be "warm" by stressing love and acceptance, or it can be "cool" by emphasizing fairness and impartiality. There is no single type of "good person."
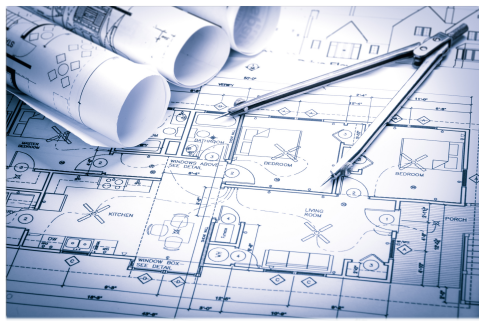
It is also time to abandon the idea that the world is full of people who are either good or bad. You have outgrown that kind of simplicity. Even our great moral heroes, like Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, reveal their all-too-human side when examined under the bright lights of historians.

Being a good person is not an achievement. Being a good person is about the direction of our lives and how we choose to invest our time and energy. It is not about scrubbing our character free of all mean and selfishness impulses, but about battling them whenever they appear. Because rest assured, they will appear.

Organization Of This Book

The twenty chapters of this book are grouped into four major parts. Each of these parts presents new ideas that build on the previous one. In this way, the book is like a construction project. Rather than building a home, however, this project is the design and construction of your future self.

Part 1. The Design. In the first part, the task is to imagine the adult you would like to be someday. What are the words you hope people will associate with your name? Those qualities of character - those virtues - that you hope to embody can be understood as your "moral identity." In the first part of the book, you will be tasked with finding specific language to describe it. Continuing with the construction project metaphor, this part is like drawing up a design blueprint for a house. Home building begins with careful design, and while identity development through adolescence is more complicated and messy than home design,

considering the kind of person you hope to be someday is not a waste of time. It can help bring clarity to many confusing issues that arise during these years.

Part 2. The Foundation. The moral identity you "design" in the first part of this book will be constructed on top of a complex and often mysterious psychological foundation. The process of interpreting information from the outside world is complex. A mature moral adult makes countless big and small judgements every day based on that information. Some judgments are carefully and consciously processed, while others happen quickly, sometimes even without our awareness. Slow or fast, big or small, all judgments are impacted by powerful psychological forces that operate below our level of awareness. Personality, emotion, bias, and irrationality quietly creep into our judgments. It turns out that we are not

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as objective and rational as we think we are. This is especially important to the study of ethics. Again, continuing with the construction metaphor, understanding our psychology is like understanding the foundation of the house you are building.

Part 3. The Structure.
The third part relates to the construction of the house itself. You don't build walls and floors without designing the house first and constructing a reliable foundation. Similarly, you shouldn't study ethical decision making without giving careful thought to the virtues you hope to embody, and also understanding the powerful psychological forces that affect decision making. Ethical decision making is a complex skill that occurs "above ground" (i.e., consciously) and can be learned. For thousands of years, great thinkers have developed theories to help us determine "the right thing to do." Learning to work with these ideas is an essential skill for living in a complex world among people who will not always agree with you.

Part 4. The Neighborhood. The first three parts of this book relate specifically to you as an individual: your moral identity, your psychology, your ethical decision making skills. The fourth and final part of this book deals your relationships with others. In the same way that new homes usually exist in a larger neighborhood, individuals live within complex communities of other individuals. Inevitably, conflicts will arise between individuals, and sometimes, between people and the values of the communities to which they belong. Why do good people disagree? How do we "navigate the neighborhood" and find common ground when our conclusions on tough questions are different from our neighbors'? These questions are the subject of the final part of this book.

Construction Notes. This book covers a lot of intellectual territory. As you read, you may find you've lost the thread that connects one part of the book to another. You may wonder how the ideas of one chapter connect to ideas presented earlier. You may find a reference to something discussed earlier in the book that you don't clearly recall. Where these moments have been anticipated by the author, you will find explanatory comments in a box titled, "Construction Notes."

> CONSTRUCTION NOTES
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> This box will contain brief comments to help connect one part of the book to another.
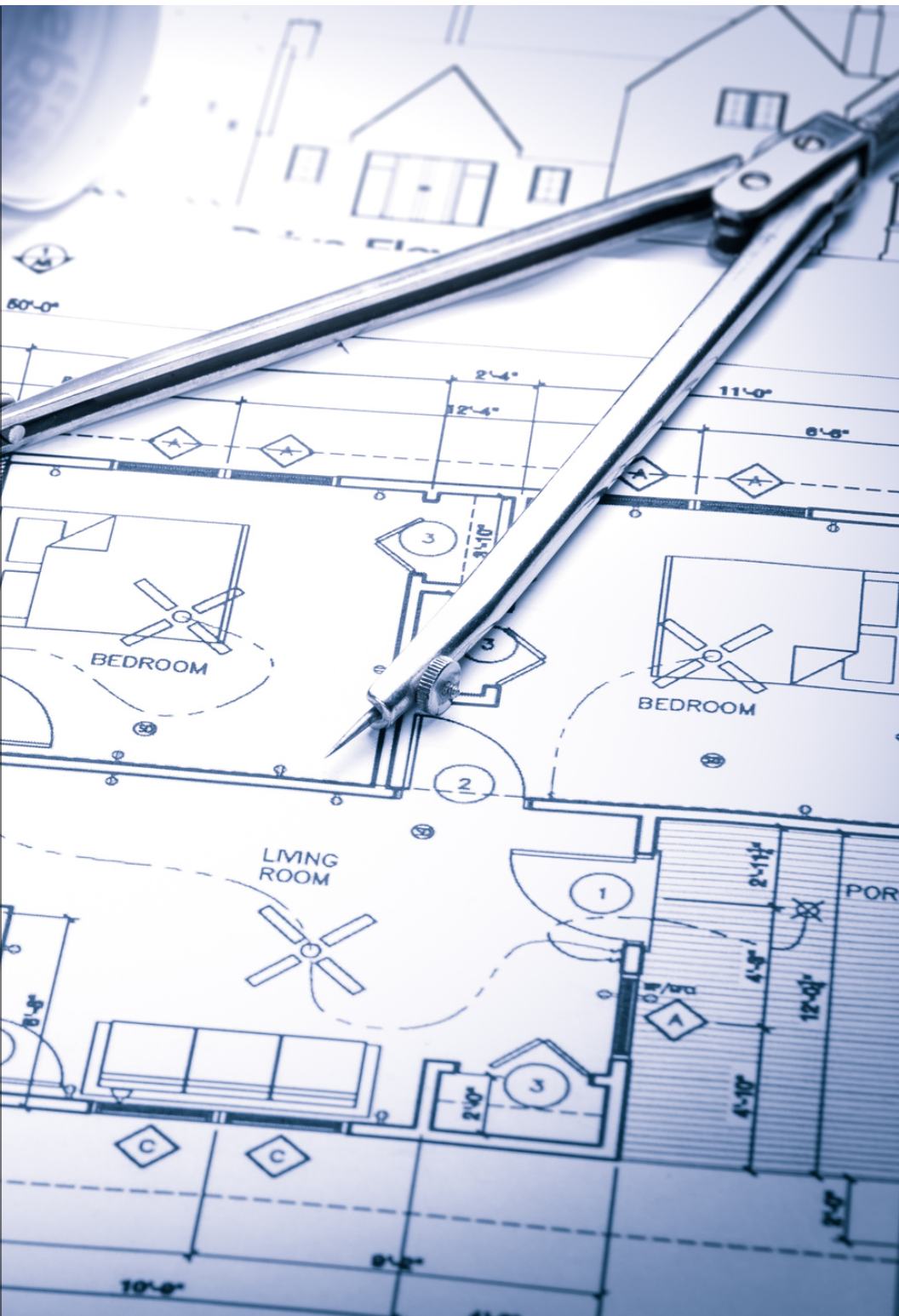
Part 1
The Design

Identity

Identity and Adolescence

CHAPTER 1

1. What are the kinds of questions that our identity is able to answer?

2. What is an "identity crisis" and why is the concept especially relevant during adolescence?

3. What two tasks must we engage in order to move toward a secure identity?

4. What are the four identity statuses described by James Marcia?

5. What is moral identity?

You have probably heard the term, "Identity Crisis." If you are having such a crisis, it means you're struggling with questions like, "Who am I? What do I believe in? What is my purpose?" There's a good chance you've been asking yourself these questions for a few years now.

It is *unlikely* you were asking yourself these questions when you were seven or eight years old. Young children rarely wonder about such things. If a father tells his seven-year-old daughter that she is not allowed to have dessert, she might cry. She might not. Whether she cries or not depends on many factors like her basic temperament, her relationship with her father, what the dessert actually is, how tired she is, etc. What it is <u>not</u> likely to depend on is her answer to the question, "Am I the kind of person who cries when she doesn't get dessert?" She does not ask, "Am I *that* kid?" These are questions we ask when working through deep issues of our **identity**.

In order to contemplate these identity questions, you must be able to "get outside of yourself" and make your Self the object of your own thinking. For the most part, young children can't do this. Adults who remember the so-called simplicity of childhood are often recalling that time when they were not plagued by questions like, "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose?" Identity questions are deceptively simple, but if they are ignored into adulthood, they have a way of sabotaging well-being and undermining long-term happiness.

There may be adults in your life who would be happy to answer these questions for you. Unfortunately, answering essential identity questions is a project you must complete yourself. No one can do it for you.

This is not to say, however, that your family, friends, and community won't play a big part in this project. These core relationships are incredibly important. A healthy Self is not constructed in isolation. Building your identity does not mean you must reject the values and beliefs of your family. It means that you must freely choose those values and beliefs. They cannot be forced on you from the outside.

CONSTRUCTION NOTES

Recall the important difference between "questioning" and "rejecting" from the Introduction.

According to influential developmental psychologist **Erik Erikson**, the primary developmental task (i.e., growing-up task) of adolescence is identity formation. Erikson believed that there are several important development stages of life, and that each stage has its own primary task. The task of young people approaching early adulthood is to engage and resolve in the construction of a stable identity. The truth, of course, is that identity construction is not a once-and-done project. We ask questions of purpose and

> Life doesn't make any sense without interdependence. We need each other, and the sooner we learn that, the better for us all.
>
> — Erik Erikson —

value throughout our lifetimes, and our answers to these questions can change at any age. But it is during **adolescence** that these questions surge to the foreground and demand attention for the first time. Questions you never thought to ask three years ago can paralyze you today.

Part 2
The Foundation

Unconscious Bias

The Basement

CHAPTER 7

1. **What types of psychological forces live in "the basement" of our mind?**

2. **What is the difference between "bias" and "prejudice?"**

3. **Why is a shopping cart with a sticky wheel a useful image for understanding how unconscious bias affects our actions?**

4. **Where do our unconscious biases come from?**

5. **How can the Implicit Association Test help identify our unconscious biases?**

We all want to believe that we know our own minds. If someone suggests we are acting irrationally, most of us are offended. If someone hints that we seem strangely biased against someone, we get defensive. The possibility that we are not in full command of our minds and actions is unwelcome.

True, most of us accept that bias and irrationality are common human weaknesses. It's just that we tend to believe they are common human weaknesses of *other* people and not us. Our unwillingness - and, perhaps, inability - to recognize our own biases while easily and willingly seeing them in others has been called the "bias blind spot."

It turns out that we are not as fully in command of our thoughts and actions as we like to believe. Our thoughts are shaped by whispers that come up from beneath the floor of our conscious mind. It is as if our **conscious mind** - the seat of our claimed values, personal story, and ability to reason - exists on the main floor of a house. In **the basement** of that house, however - beneath the main floor - exist lost memories, emotional attachments, irrational loyalties, unconscious biases, and childhood sources of fear and hope.

Like all simplistic models, thinking of the human mind in this way is helpful but not entirely accurate. We are

at risk for committing the error that Einstein famously warned us against. Nevertheless, thinking of the main floor of the house as the conscious mind and the basement of the house as the **unconscious mind** is a useful way to start the discussion in this chapter.
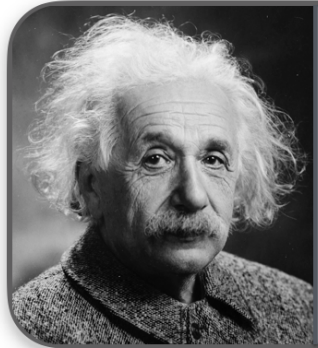
> Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.
>
> — Albert Einstein —

In this analogy, all homes have a basement, and at the risk of stretching the analogy too far, it's an unfinished basement that is mysterious and a little creepy. The basement is the seat of all that is true about you that you do not consciously control. It is home to your personality, intuitions, and irrational fears. We live on the main floor of the house, but the basement anchors the main floor and serves as its foundation.
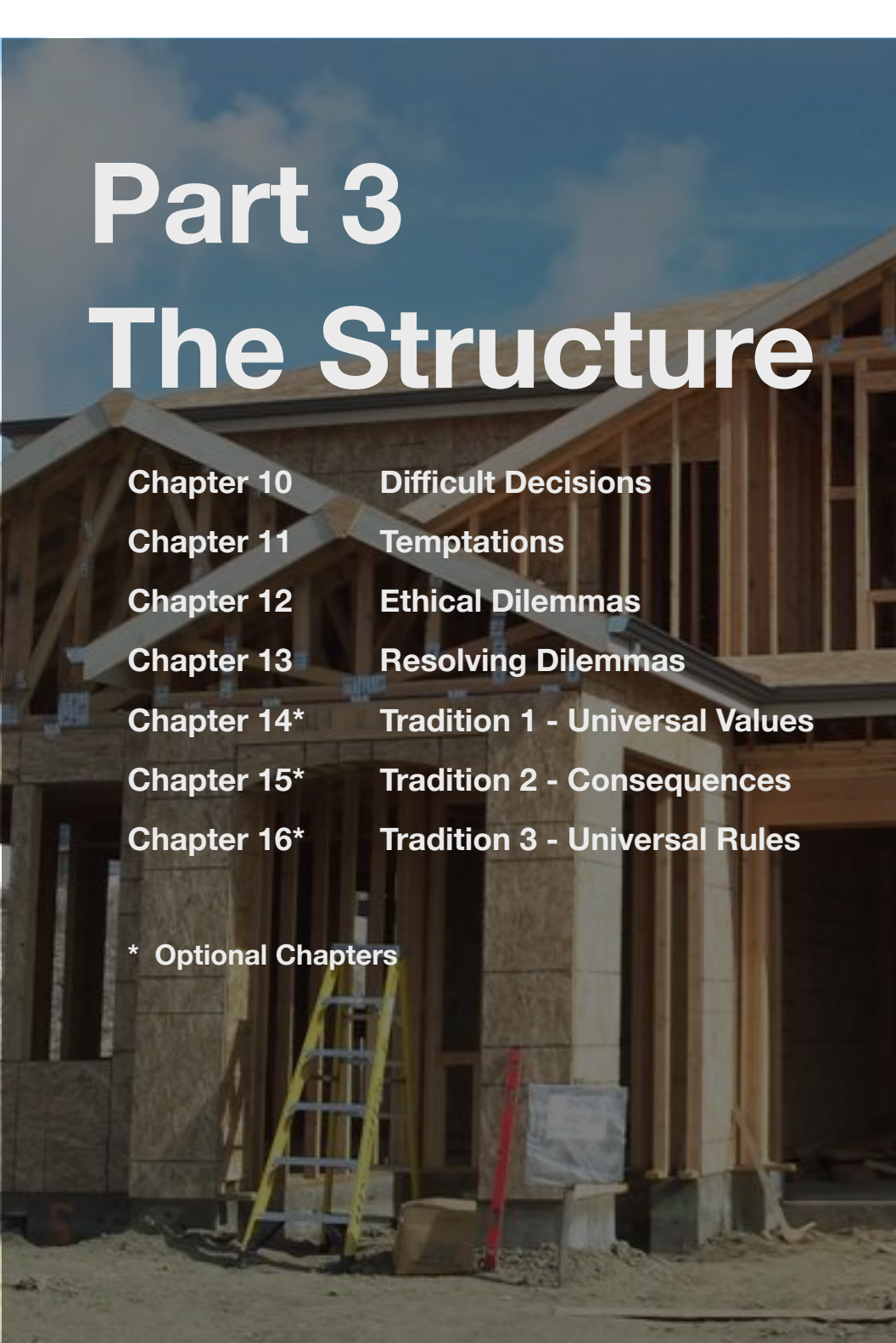
CONSTRUCTION NOTES

The previous three chapters focused on the world "out there." As you have read, we do not understand the outside world as well as we usually believe because we can only experience it subjectively. Practicing empathy and perspective taking are two strategies we can use to reduce the size of the error when interpreting the *outside* world. As you will learn in this chapter and the next, we do not understand our own *inside* world very well either!

The picture of the mind as a machine that was offered in Chapter 5 must be amended to account for the basement. The mind is not as consistent and predictable as the mind-as-machine metaphor suggests. The machinery of our conscious mind sits atop an unknown - and, to a certain extent, unknowable - foundation. The content of that basement steadily feeds input into the conscious processing of the machinery without our knowing it. In this way, biases from the basement creep into the conscious processes on the main floor.
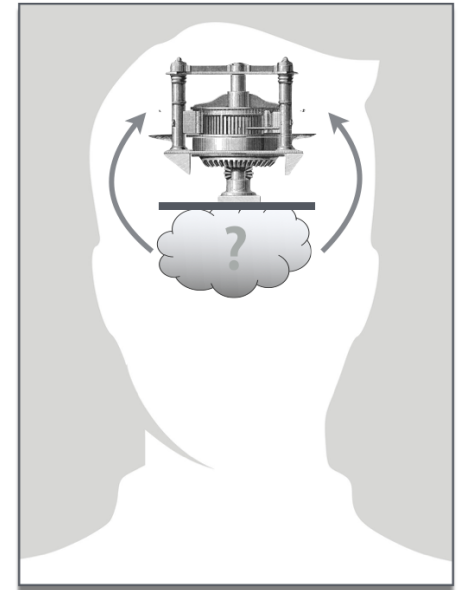
Part 3
The Structure

Difficult Decisions

Choices

CHAPTER 10

1. What is the difference between a "free choice," a "temptation," and a "dilemma?"

2. Which of Marcia's identity types will be best able to resist temptation?

3. Why are ethical dilemmas difficult, even if with a strong moral identity?

As long as we are traveling down a wide, smooth road with no decisions to be made, we can set aside our reflections on right and wrong and simply live our lives. Inevitably, though, we will need to make decisions. When the road forks, do we turn left or right? Let's take a look at three types of decisions we encounter in our travels on any given day.

Many of the decisions we make during a day are free of ethical implications. Not every decision triggers concerns about moral values. We will call these decisions **free choices**. Choices are decisions of taste and interest and, generally speaking, the outcomes of these choices do not significantly impact others. Do I wear the blue dress or the black one? Do I eat cereal for breakfast or a bagel? Wear my hair up or down today? Mercifully, many of our decisions during any given day are morally "weightless."

However, you may find that not everyone agrees with you about which decisions are weightless. For example, at the grocery store many people struggle with the simple question, "Would you like paper or plastic?" It's presented as a free choice, but is it? People with strong environmental commitments

CONSTRUCTION NOTES

A strong, achieved moral identity will <u>not</u> make every decision easy. Even after exploring and committing and turning values into virtues, good people will struggle with tough decisions.

might argue this is not a free choice in the sense we've defined it here. Another question on which people disagree is, "Would you like toast or bacon with your breakfast?" Is this a free choice? Vegetarians and animal rights advocates might argue it is not.

It has been suggested that all decisions are moral decisions, because if we dig deeply enough, every decision we make affects others. Must we concern ourselves with the economic welfare of bagel industry workers? What are the

working conditions of the men and women who made and boxed my cereal, and for that matter, is the box made of recycled paper? These are not silly questions, but they are endless in number and paralyzing in their complexity. In the practical business of living our lives, at some point we all let go of the moral implications of some decisions. Disagreement is inevitable because some people let go sooner than others.

Those who do not eat meat for moral reasons have assumed a measure of responsibility for the fate of living animals that meat eaters have not assumed. Those who do not buy clothing made in countries with poor human rights records have assumed some responsibility toward those workers. People who ask for paper instead of plastic may, in some way, be taking a stand against

what they believe to be the environmental recklessness of the plastics industry.

Heated arguments erupt over issues like these all the time. People feel strongly about human rights, animal welfare, and our duty to act responsibly with regard to the environment. In truth, such arguments are rarely between an animal rights advocate and a radical animal *abuse* advocate. These arguments, if investigated in a calm manner, are usually a result of two people who have drawn the line of responsibility in different places.

One side in such an argument may press its position and try to convince the other person to change. What we have learned about the place of humility in moral judgments, however, should prevent such persuasion from becoming a personal attack and harsh moralistic judgment. Recall what was said about the place of self righteousness in the previous chapter.

Temptations

Temptations are the second type of decision we face on the road. Standing at the fork, we see that one path takes us toward something we want. Maybe it's a good grade on a test or a little extra money in our pocket. Taking that path, however, would require that we act against values we care about. The good grade might mean a little academic dishonesty. The extra money might mean pocketing the cash you saw a classmate drop. One path is supported by our values and takes us in the direction of the person we want to be. The other path takes us in the direction of something we want but can only get at the expense of those values.

Which path will we take? We want to believe that we have the strength to resist temptation, and that is probably true much of the time. What would it take to make it true more of the time? The answer to that depends on our level of self control and the strength of our commitment to the values of our moral identity.

Self control has been studied at length and perhaps most famously by researcher Walter Mischel. In well-known studies that took place over decades, Mischel studied self control by presenting young children with a tempting treat, most memorably a marshmallow. He would place a single marshmallow on a table in front of a child and leave the room. Before leaving, he would say, "You can eat the marshmallow while I'm gone. But if you can wait until I get back, you can have two." His findings are widely cited in research related to self control, and a number of positive future outcomes are predicted for children possessing high levels of self control.

Recall James Marcia's typology of identity statuses. Which statuses will be most successful in resisting temptation? They will be the ones with the highest level of commitment to their identity.

You do not have to have "achieved" a secure moral identity in order to have a

Don't give up what you want most for what you want now.
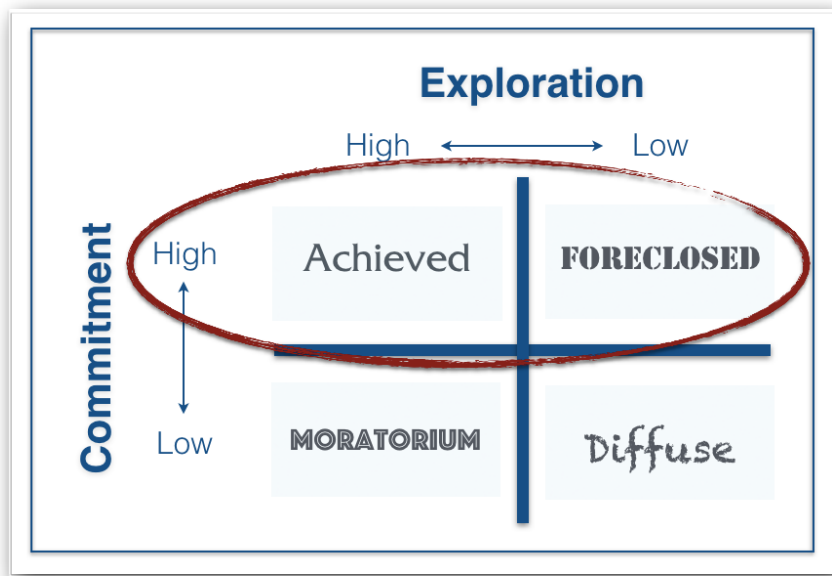
high level of commitment to your identity. A foreclosed identity may be just as effective in resisting temptation. Those with low levels of commitment (moratorium and diffuse statuses) are most vulnerable to temptation. More will be said of this in the next chapter.

Dilemmas

The third type of decision we face is one that forces us to choose between two paths, where both paths are supported by important values. Like a temptation, this kind of decision is difficult, but it is difficult for a different reason. The difficulty lies in choosing between two *good* paths. In a true **ethical dilemma**, we are torn because there are important values that support both options.

For example, let's say it's about 9:00 and you have just begun to study for an important biology test. Biology is difficult. Your current grade is pretty low, but you've worked hard this week and with some good studying tonight, you believe you can do well. You told your parents, "Nothing lower than a B." Just then you get a text from your friend Michelle: "Need to talk. Michael broke up with me." A few seconds later your phone rings. It's Michelle. You answer and she says, "I'm a mess. What am I going to do?" You know this is not going to be a short conversation.

Down one path is loyalty and compassion toward your friend Michelle. Down the other is your sense of responsibility as a student and a desire to be trustworthy to your parents. You might not believe that this would be a difficult decision for you, and maybe it wouldn't be. What is important in this example is not whether it is, in fact, a difficult decision, but that it is clear that more than one decision can be supported by values. This tension makes a dilemma quite different from a temptation, where only one of the options is supported by moral values.

LOYAL COMPASSIONATE

RESPONSIBLE TRUSTWORTHY
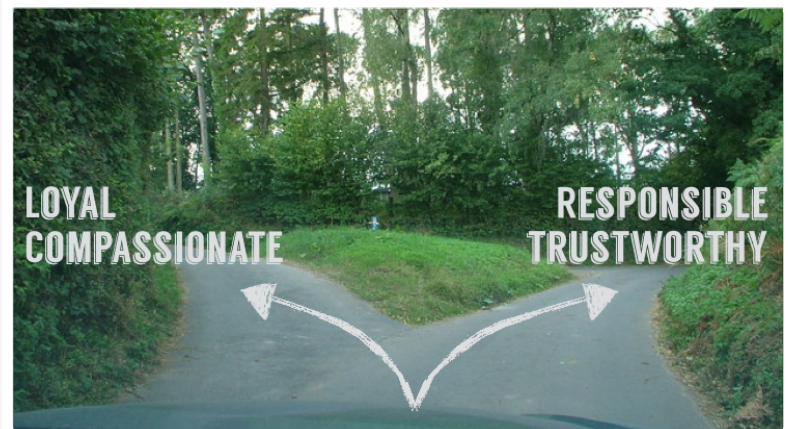
True dilemmas are difficult no matter where a person sits in Marcia's typology of identity formation. Facing down a dilemma is not a question of commitment to values. In fact, it is the commitment to conflicting values that creates the dilemma in the first place! Maturity and identity security provide strength against temptation. They do not, however, make resolving dilemmas a simple matter.

The specific vocabulary used in this chapter is not universal. (10.1) However, for the purposes of this book, we will use the terms choice, temptation, and dilemma in the specific ways defined here. It may be helpful to think of these three kinds of difficult decisions as three different kinds of forks we may encounter along the path.

CHOICES
WANTS WANTS

TEMPTATIONS
VALUES WANTS

DILEMMAS
VALUES VALUES

Three Types of Difficult Decisions

Chapter 10 Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever gotten into a disagreement with someone in which one of you believed a decision was a free choice and the other did not?

2. What are some of the most common temptations that exist at your school? What advice would you give someone who is trying to resist those temptations?

3. Walter Mischel's "Marshmallow Experiment" shows us just how hard it can be for young children to resist that particular temptation. What temptations do you find most difficult to resist?

4. When emotions are high, it can be hard to tell whether a difficult choice before you is a temptation or a dilemma. Have you ever thought in the moment that you were grappling with a tough ethical dilemma and later realized that it was a temptation?

5. What are some of the most common ethical dilemmas you confront as a student at your school?

Resolving Dilemmas

Strength Without Certainty
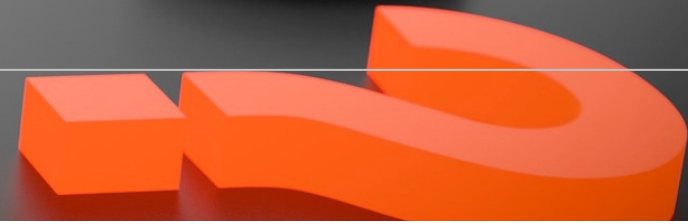
CHAPTER 13

1. **What is the difference between an ethical opinion and an ethical position?**

2. **Why is gathering and understanding the facts around an ethical dilemma the essential first step?**

3. **Why do ethical dilemmas remain difficult decisions even after all of the facts have been gathered?**

4. **What are some simple questions you can ask to help resolve an ethical dilemma?**

We will rarely resolve ethical dilemmas with the clarity and confidence of a problem in mathematics. There is an inevitable fuzziness to the edges of complex ethical decisions, and that fuzziness can cause people deep discomfort. Because ethics does not allow for certainty, some people believe that ethical thinking can only produce **opinions**.
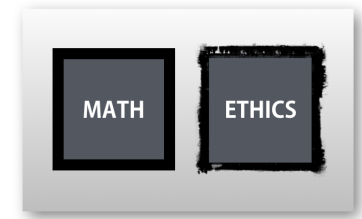
Behind this idea is the assumption that there are only two kinds of statements: factual statements and opinions. Should we accept this assumption? Surely, our position on animal rights, access to abortion, and end-of-life medical care are substantially different than our opinions about which pizza toppings are best and which scarf best compliments the color of my eyes. From a values perspective, the former issues are weighty, while the latter are frivolous. Neither set of questions can be answered with mathematical certainty, sure, but must we accept that both can produce only opinions?

In the study of ethics, we recognize a category of statements that exists in the space between facts and opinions. We call these statements **ethical positions**. Ethical positions include a careful study of the relevant facts, combined with a resolution of the underlying value conflicts. It is the resolution of the dilemma that usually includes the subjective evaluation that prevents ethics from becoming a fact-based discipline.

Opinions can be stated without evidence and do not need to be defended. They are expressions of personal preference. "Pepperoni and green olives are the best pizza toppings ever." While voiced as a fact, this statement is clearly an opinion. I could try to gather "facts" to defend that opinion, but in the end, it is merely an expression of personal taste. If you claimed that mushrooms were better, we'd be at a stalemate.


On the other hand, I could claim, "Patients nearing the end of a terminal illness should be allowed to end their lives on their own terms." If you were to claim otherwise, we would have more than a difference of opinion on our hands. Beneath these two conflicting ethical positions lies a body of factual evidence to support them. Facts about financial cost, emotional cost, and the quality of life in the weeks leading to death are relevant. Facts

about the sustainability of our spending habits as a country to support terminal patients are important. We can ask about the needs arising from religious faith and the obligations that faith may

trigger for health care providers. We can plumb the depths of the values conflict - one that appears to pit "hope" against "respect." Recognizing our difference of opinion on end-of-life rights does not begin to exhaust the discussion. In fact, that recognition is only the starting point.
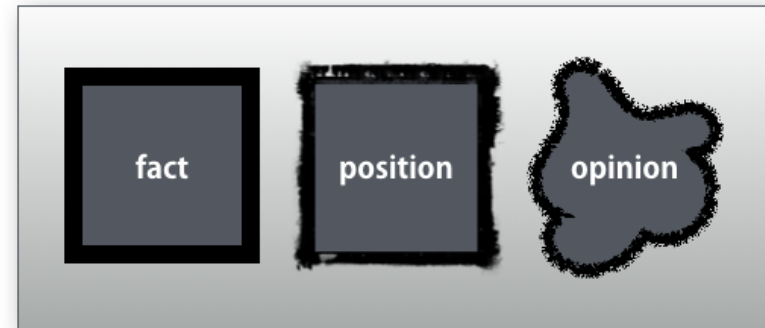

When people make statements about issues involving important values, they are taking ethical positions. Those positions should be supported by factual evidence, a careful analysis of underlying value conflicts, and a resolution of that conflict one way or another. An ethical statement that does not rise to this standard is merely an expression of personal opinion. A well defended ethical position carries weight and authority. It might not pack the objective punch of an mathematical fact, but it can come close.

Part 4
# The Neighborhood
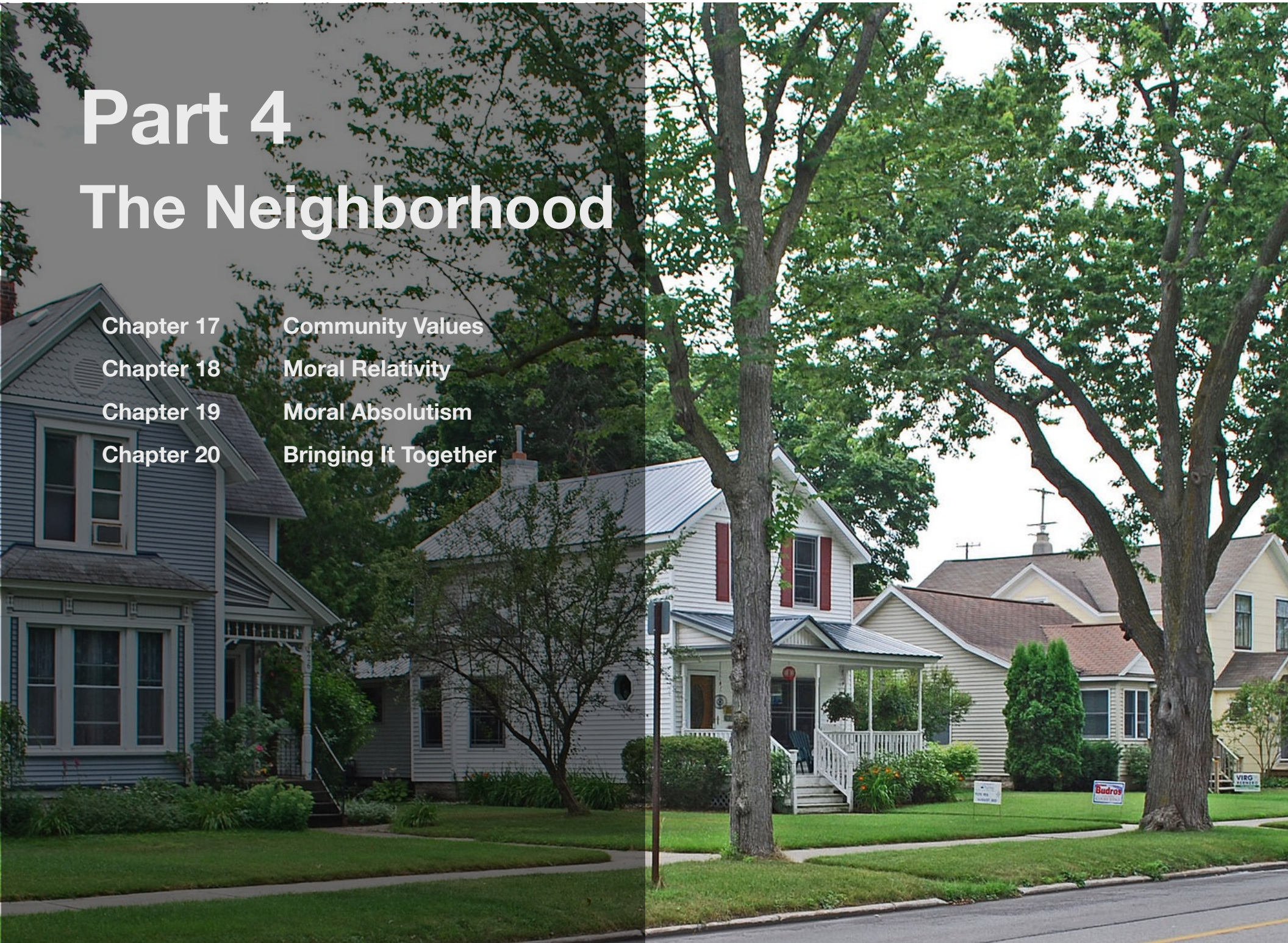
Bringing It Together

Dealing With Ethical Differences

CHAPTER 20

1. **How do you engage with someone who disagrees with you on an important ethical issue?**

2. **Why is it important to learn to be comfortable with ambiguity?**

3. **What are the three levels of the One Big Project?**

Good people will disagree on ethical issues. No matter how clear your thinking or strong your factual evidence, someone else who is equally committed to doing the right thing will come to a different conclusion. This is unavoidable. It is also usually uncomfortable. Our commitments to ethical issues are often deep and personal. Ethical disagreements can get heated, and that heat *never* helps clarify the source of the disagreement. How do you approach situations where disagreement on an ethical issue is apparent and dealing with that disagreement cannot or should not be avoided?

Know thyself. Self knowledge and a strong identity are crucial to a productive discussion. They provide a firm psychological foundation from which to engage. They allow you to enter the discussion without being defensive. We get defensive when we are threatened. An ethical disagreement is much less threatening to someone with deep self knowledge and a strong moral identity.
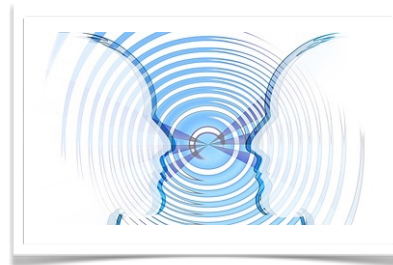
Suspend judgment. Open your mind. Resist the urge to begin the discussion convinced that you are right. Remember that our knowledge of a situation is only ever partial. Part 2 of this book gave us many good reasons to be humble when approaching ethical disagreements.

Know the facts. If you intend to take a *position* in the discussion and not merely argue your *opinion*, you must gather and understand the facts related to the issue. In a debate over carefully balanced ethical values, it might be new factual information that swings the decision one way or another.
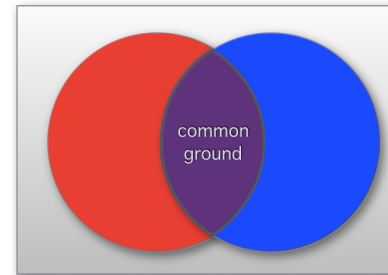
Ask questions. Try to take the perspective of the other person by asking questions and watching for emotional clues. In a rush to be understood ourselves, we often fail to understand the other. Trying to understand a different position is not a sign of insecurity. It is the key to successfully resolving that disagreement and finding common ground.

Know your biases. None of us is without bias. Know your biases, and be aware of how they may be triggered during the discussion. Recall the shopping cart from Chapter 7. Our actions drift from center, even when we believe we are being impartial and pushing the cart straight.

Be patient. It might take some time before you get to the productive portion of the conversation. Many of us carry around bottled up feelings associated with ethical issues. You may find you need give the other person a chance to let these feelings out. Listen with empathy and compassion. You might learn something important.

Point out common ground. Assume you both have good intentions and, when possible, name the common ground. It might be a shared commitment to respect, or a common commitment to helping children. Common ground is a bridge between people who might otherwise believe they are opponents.

Focus on issues, not people. Resist being drawn into a discussion of personal character, and be sure not to start such a conversation. Remember our inclination to attribute the behavior of other people to their character. Avoid making the fundamental attribution error (Chapter 8) by focusing on issues.

Agree to disagree? Not all ethical debates must end with one convincing the other to change. Know the stakes. Agreeing to disagree might be a fine resolution if they are low, and remember that good people can take different positions when resolving an ethical dilemma. Be on guard, however. It is tempting take this option simply to avoid an uncomfortable discussion.

Know when to elevate. When the stakes are high and "agreeing to disagree" is not a responsible option, know where to turn. There is often a third party to whom you can appeal. Turn to that higher authority if your discussion comes up empty.

Accept that someone might leave the discussion unsatisfied. There is no promise that polite, sincere attempts to resolve ethical differences will satisfy everyone. Someone might leave the discussion unhappy, and that someone might be you.

It can be hard to accept that good people with the best intentions could fail to agree on important ethical questions. Our thoughts can seem so clear and our feelings run so deeply that considering an alternative position is virtually impossible.

Each of us is complicated beyond measure. We might fly to "isms" in order to reduce that complexity. We might try to turn those who disagree with us into villains. A worldview that imagines forces of good in an epic battle against forces of evil has long been a tempting way to reduce our complexity. Such a simple split is comforting in its certainty.

Given all we have learned from philosophy and all we have learned about human psychology, we can only conclude that certainty is an illusion. Our dual natures as both individuals and social members (i.e., dilemmas of "me and we") produce tension that will never go away. Similarly, our dual natures as objective entities and subjective evaluators (i.e., dilemmas of "outsides and insides") produce another dimension of unresolvable tension. There is no clear solution to the problems generated by these dualities. As we live our daily lives, we are surrounded by ambiguity and uncertainty. One measure of wisdom is the degree to which we are able to get comfortable with this inescapable ambiguity.