

Chapter 4

Theories Responding to the Challenge of Cultural Relativism

Chapter Overview

Chapter 4 "Theories Responding to the Challenge of Cultural Relativism" examines some theories guiding ethical decisions in business. It considers reactions to the possibility that there are no universal definitions of right and wrong, only different customs that change from one society to another.

4.1 What Is Cultural Relativism?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define cultural relativism.
2. Show how cultural relativism defies traditional ethics.

Nietzsche and the End of Traditional Ethics

"God is dead," the declaration attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche, stands along with "I think, therefore I am" (René Descartes, 1641) as philosophy's most popularized—and parodied—phrases. The t-shirt proclaiming "Nietzsche is dead, signed, God" is funny, but it doesn't quite answer what Nietzsche was saying in the late 1800s. What Nietzsche meant to launch was not only an assault on a certain religion but also a suspicion of the idea that there's one source of final justice for all reality. Nietzsche proposed that different cultures and people each produce their own moral recommendations and prohibitions, and there's no way to indisputably prove that one set is simply and universally preferable to another. The suspicion that there's no final appeal—and therefore the values and morality practiced by a community can't be dismissed as wrong or inferior to those practiced elsewhere—is called cultural relativism.

Example: For most of us, the killing of a newborn would be among the most heinous of immoral acts; a perpetrator would need to be purely evil or completely mad. The Inuit Eskimos, however, regularly practiced female infanticide during their prehistory, and it was neither evil nor insane. Their brutal living conditions required a population imbalance tipped toward hunters (males). Without that gender selecting, the plain fact was the entire group faced starvation. At another place and time, Bernal Diaz's *The Conquest of New Spain* recounts the Spanish invasion of the Americas and includes multiple reports of newborns sacrificed in bloody ceremonies that made perfect sense to the locals, but left Spaniards astonished and appalled. The ethics of infanticide, the point is, differ from one culture and time to another. Further, these differences seem irreconcilable: it's extremely difficult to see how we could convince the Inuit of the past to adopt our morality or how they could convince us to adopt theirs. And if that's right, then maybe it no longer makes sense to talk about right and wrong in general terms as though there's a set of rules applying to everyone; instead, there are only rights and

wrongs as defined within a specific society.

Finally, if you accept the cultural relativist premise, then you're rejecting the foundation of traditional ethics. You're rejecting the idea that if we think carefully and expertly enough, we'll be able to formulate rules for action that everyone—people in all times, places, and communities—must obey if they want to consider themselves ethically responsible.

Cultural Relativism in Business Ethics

In the world of international business, *Entrepreneur* magazine introduces the pitfalls of ethical variation across cultures with this statement from Steve Veltkamp, president of Biz\$hop, an American import-export business: "Bribery is a common way of doing business in a lot of foreign places." Moira Allen, "Here Comes the Bribe," *Entrepreneur*, October 2000, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.entrepreneur.com/magazine/entrepreneur/2000/october/32636.html>.

If that's true, then US businesses trying to expand into markets abroad—and competing with local businesses already established there—are probably going to consider doing what everyone else is doing, which means getting in on the bribery action. As the *Entrepreneur* article points out, however, this leads to a problem: "While bribes are expected in many countries, the United States' 1977 Foreign Corrupt Practices Act prohibits payments made with the aim of gaining or maintaining business."

So American hands are tied. If a construction company is bidding on the contract to build an airport in a foreign nation, one where the local politicians will be expecting to get their palms greased, they're at a distinct disadvantage since they're not allowed to play by the local rules. Still there is (as there almost always is) a loophole: "Not all payments are prohibited by the act. Some payments are acceptable if they don't violate local laws. Gifts, for instance, to officers working for foreign corporations are legal."

There's no bribing, but gifting, apparently, gets a green light. There's a problem here, too, however: "It can be difficult to determine the difference between a gift and a bribe in a given situation. 'If you give a gift to someone and it leads to a business deal, is that a bribe or a gift?' asks Veltkamp. 'In some cultures, gift-giving is an entrenched part of doing business. If you look at it in a certain sense, maybe it's a bribe, since they won't talk to you until you've made that gesture.'"

Now what? Over there, cash changes hands and it's called an acceptable gift, while those watching from back here see an illegal bribe.

There are two ways of looking at this dilemma. One is to say, well, this has to be one or the other, either a gift or a bribe; *it has to be either moral or immoral*. Given that, we need to take out our traditional tools—our basic duties, the utilitarian doctrine that we should act to serve the greater good, and so on—and figure out which it is. Nietzsche went the other way, though. He said that situations like this don't show that we need to use ethics to figure out which side is right; instead, the situation shows what moral rules *really are*: just a set of opinions that a group of people share and nothing more. In the United States we believe it's wrong to grease palms, and so it is. In some other places they believe it's honorable to hand money under the table, and so it is.

If that's true, then specific convictions of right and wrong in business ethics will never be

anything but cultural fashions, beliefs some community somewhere decides to hold up for a while until they decide to believe something else. *Anything*, the reasoning goes, may be morally good or bad in the economic world; it just depends on where you happen to be, at what time, and who else is around.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Cultural relativism is the suspicion that values and morality are culture specific—they're just what the community believes and not the result of universal reason.
- For cultural relativists, because all moral guidelines originate within specific cultures, there's no way to dismiss one set of rules as wrong or inferior to those developed in another culture.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you imagine the term *cultural relativism* was chosen to mean what it does?
2. Do you believe cultures are irreconcilably different? Or is it that deep down people are people and we're really all the same? How does this distinction relate to the difference between cultural relativism and traditional theories of ethics?

4.2 Nietzsche's Eternal Return of the Same

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define Nietzsche's eternal return of the same.
2. Show how the idea of the eternal return provides guidance for professional life.
3. Consider the advantages and a drawback of the eternal return.

Responding to Cultural Relativism by Leaving Common Morality Behind

If, along with cultural relativists, you accept that rules distinguishing right from wrong shift around from place to place and time to time, it becomes difficult to keep faith in morality. It's difficult because verdicts seem flimsy and impermanent, and because this hard question seems inescapable: Why should I go out of my way to do the right thing today if what counts as the right thing might change tomorrow?

One response to the question is to give up on morality, disrespect the whole idea by labeling all the customary regulations—*don't lie, don't steal, strive for the greatest good for the greatest number*—a giant sham. Then you can live without the inhibiting limits of moral codes. You can go beyond any idea of good and evil and lead an unconstrained life exuberantly celebrating everything *you* want to do and be.

Wallace Souza: TV Reporter, Politician, and Dealer

Some careers are more vivid and alive than others. TV crime reporting is intense work, especially the action-type shows where the reporter races to the scene, interviews witnesses, and tracks down shady characters. Politics is another throbbing life; the

adrenalin of crime chasing isn't there, but you get the brimming confidence and energy that comes with power, with deciding what others can and can't do. Drug dealing excites too, in its way, with thrilling danger and the pleasures of fast money. People, finally, who want to live exuberantly, who prefer risk to caution and find it easy to say things like "you only go around once" are probably going to find something attractive in these lines of work and may opt for one or another.

Then there's Wallace Souza. He opted for all three. At the same time. The most visible of his roles—TV reporter—also yielded the most visible success. His program aired from the Brazilian state of Amazonas, a jungley place far from cosmopolitan São Paulo and touristy Rio de Janeiro. Known as a haven for cocaine cartels, and as a training ground for revolutionary militants charging into neighboring Columbia and Venezuela, it's a natural spot to bring cameras and look for dramatic action. A number of reporters were stationed in the region, but none seemed so uncannily skilled at reaching scenes first and getting video over the airwaves than Mr. Souza. In fact, on occasion, he even reached scenes before the police.

The dogged TV reporting, along with Souza's editorializing complaints about the region's jaded criminals, made him a popular hero and sealed his bid for a seat in the local congress. He didn't allow his state capital work to interfere with his TV role, however. Actually, the two jobs fit together well: one day he was reporting on the deplorable free-for-all in the jungle and the next he was in the capital meeting with high-ranking police officers, reviewing their strategies and proposing laws to fix things.

The perfect image began to crack, though, when it was revealed that the reason Souza so frequently reached the best crime scenes first is that he was paying hit men to assassinate local drug dealers. He wasn't, it turned out, just the first to know about the crimes, he knew even before they happened. In an especially brazen move, during one of his last TV programs, he put up pictures of several notorious criminals and asked his viewers to phone in and vote on which one they'd like to see killed.

At this point, Souza seemed like an overzealous crusader: he was drawing vivid attention to the crime plague and doing something about it with his hit men. You could doubt his methods, but his dedication to his community's welfare seemed noble—until it was revealed that he was actually also a major drug dealer. And the criminals getting killed and shown on his program weren't just random outlaws; they were Souza's drug-trade competitors. Dom Phillips, "Brazil Crime Show Host 'Used Murder to Boost Ratings,'" *Times*, August 13, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article6793072.ece.

What Is the Eternal Return of the Same?

One report on Souza's exploits included the suggestion that his willingness to cross every moral line—to lie, traffic drugs, order killings, whatever—fit him for the title of the Antichrist. Danny Gallagher, "Brazilian Crime Show Host Kills for Ratings?," *TV Squad*, August 14, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.tvsquad.com/2009/08/14/brazilian-crime-show-host-kills-for-ratings>.

That title, as it turns out, was one Nietzsche enjoyed assigning to himself. It's definitely also a fit for Souza in the sense that he seemed to live without shame, fear, or regard for good and evil. What's notable about Souza's business ventures is that they *pay no heed to the very idea of morals*. It's not that they skirt some rules or follow some guidelines while

disobeying others; it's not like he's trying to get away with something—it's much more like morality doesn't exist. Now, bringing this back to Nietzsche, who shared the sentiments, the question Nietzsche asked himself was, if morality really is canceled, then what? How should we live? The answer was a thought experiment called **the eternal return of the same**.

Imagine, Nietzsche proposed, that every decision you make and everything you feel, say, and do will have to be repeated forever—that is, at the end of your life, you die and are immediately reborn right back in the same year and place where everything started the time before, and you do it all again in exactly the same way. Existence becomes an infinite loop. With that disturbing idea established, Nietzsche converted it into a proposal for life: we should always act as though the eternal return were real. Do, Nietzsche says, what you would if you had to live with the choice over and over again forever. The eternal return, finally, gives us a reason to do one thing and not another: it guides us in a world without morals.

How Does the Eternal Return Work?

Start with the eternal return as it could be applied to an altruist, to someone dedicating life to helping others. One way to do altruism would be by working for a nonprofit international organization that goes to poverty-wrecked places like Amazonas and helps coca farmers (the coca leaf is the base for cocaine) shift their farms to less socially damaging crops. This would be difficult work. You might figure on doing it though, getting through it, and feeling like you've done some good in the world. *But* would you do it infinitely? Would you be willing to suffer through that existence once and again *forever*? Remember, the world would never get better; every time you'd just go back to being born on earth just the way it was before. Obviously, people can make their own decisions, but it seems fairly likely that under the condition of the eternal return there'd be fewer people dedicating themselves—and sacrificing their own comfort and interests—to social well-being.

What about some other lines of work? Would there be fewer snowplow operators, long-haul pilots, teachers willing to work in troubled schools? What kind of professional lives, Nietzsche forces us to ask, would be too hellish, bothersome, or exhausting to be repeated forever? Those lives, whatever they are, get filtered by the eternal return; they get removed from consideration.

If certain careers and aspirations are out, then what's in? What kind of existence in the economic world does the eternal return recommend? One possibility is Wallace Souza. The question is, why would *his* career trajectory fit the eternal return?

The job of a reporter is fast and dramatic, the kind of thing many imagine themselves doing if they weren't tied down by other commitments. People with children frequently feel an obligation to get into a safe and conservative line of work, one producing a steady paycheck. Others feel a responsibility toward their aged parents and a corresponding obligation to not stray too far just in case something goes wrong. So trekking off into the Brazilian jungle in search of drug operations may well be exciting—most of us would probably concede that—but it'd be irreconcilable with many family responsibilities. One thing the eternal return does, however, is *seriously* increase the burden of those responsibilities. When you sacrifice something you want to do because of a sense of obligation, you may be able to swallow the loss once, but Nietzsche is demanding that you take it down over and over again. Family responsibilities may count, but at what

point do you say “enough”? Can anyone oblige you to sacrifice doing what you really want forever?

Taking the next step into Souza’s amoral but dramatic career, assuming you do decide to become a crime reporter, and you’re inside the eternal return where everything will recur infinitely, then aren’t you going to go about making your reporting work as exciting and successful as possible? Probably, yes. So why not hire some hit men to fire things up a bit? Normally, of course, our moral compass tells us that killing others to get ahead isn’t really an option. But with all morality canceled, it becomes an option, one just like any other. Be a banker, be a reporter, be a killer, there’s no real difference. Just choose the one you’d most like to do repeatedly without end.

Souza also chose to be a drug dealer. Again, this is one of those jobs many would find exciting and satisfying. Thrills and easy money are attractive; that’s part of the reason Hollywood produces so many films about traffickers and their lives. Most of us wouldn’t actually *do* something like that, though, at least partially because dealing drugs feels morally wrong. But inside the eternal return, that shame factor falls away; when it does, the number of people entering this field of work might well increase.

It’s critical to note that Nietzsche’s eternal return is *not* the idea that you should go off and be a crime-reporting, hit man-hiring drug dealer. Instead, Souza’s life just exemplifies one thing that *could* happen in the world of your career if you accept Nietzsche’s proposal of living beyond any traditional moral limit. Regardless, what the eternal return definitely does do is force you to make decisions about your professional life in very different terms than those presented by traditional ethical theories. There’s no consideration of sweeping duties; there’s just you and a simple decision: the life you choose now will be repeated forever, so which will yours be?

What’s the Reward of Morality?

One of the strengths of Nietzsche’s idea is that it forces a very important question: *Why* should I want to be morally responsible? Why should a salesman be honest when lying could win her a healthy commission? Why should a factory owner worry about pollution spewing from his plant when he lives in a city five hundred miles away? Now, a full elaboration of this question would be handled in an airy philosophy class, not an applied course in business ethics. Nietzsche, however, allows a taste of the discussion by puncturing one of the basic motivations many feel for being virtuous: the conviction that *there’ll be a reward later for doing the right thing today.*

The certainty of this reward is a critical element of many religious beliefs: when you die, there’ll be a final judgment and you’ll enjoy heaven or suffer punishment at the other extreme, depending on how you behaved on earth. A similar logic underwrites Hinduism’s concept of reincarnation: the life you are born into next will be determined by the way you live now. This discussion could be drawn out in more directions, but no matter what, Nietzsche spoils the idea that you take the moral high road because you’ll be repaid for it later. Within the eternal return, there is no later; all that ever happens is exactly the same thing again.

Advantages and a Drawback of the Eternal Return

One advantage of the eternal return is that it adds gravity to life. Forcing you to accept every decision you make as one you’ll repeat forever is compelling you to take those

decisions seriously, to think them through. Another connected advantage of the eternal return is that it forces *you* to make your own decisions. By getting rid of all guidelines proposed by ethics, and by making your reality the one that will repeat forever, Nietzsche forces you to be who you are.

The disadvantage of the eternal return is Wallace Souza. If everyone is just out there being themselves, how are we going to live together? How can we make peaceful and harmonious societies when all anyone ever thinks about is what's best for themselves forever?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The eternal return is a thought experiment in which you imagine that the life you choose will repeat forever.
- According to the eternal return, when faced with a dilemma in the business world—what career should I choose, should I kill (or maybe just lie or cheat) to get ahead?—you should imagine living the decision over and over again forever.
- The eternal return maximizes individuality but does little to help individuals live together in a community.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, what is the eternal return?
2. Why might the eternal return be considered a reasonable response to cultural relativism?
3. Write down some factors leading to a significant decision you've made. It could be about choosing a field of study or a career path. Now, can you walk through each of the factors within the eternal return? Are there any decisions you made that you'd take back and change?
4. If you knew the eternal return was true, could you still make the reasonable decision to choose an altruistic profession? Why or why not?

4.3 Cultural Ethics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define cultural ethics.
2. Consider how cultural ethics works in the business world.
3. Examine the truth of cultural ethics.
4. Consider advantages and drawbacks of a culturalist ethics.

What Is Cultural Ethics?

Culturalists embrace the idea that moral doctrines are just the rules a community believes, and they accept that there's no way to *prove* one society's values better than another. Culturalists don't, however, follow Nietzsche in taking that as a reason to turn away from all traditional moral regulation; instead, it's a reason to accept and endorse whichever guidelines are currently in effect wherever you happen to be. The old adage, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do," isn't too far from where we're at here.

Gift or Bribe or Both?

The *Entrepreneur* magazine article posed a problem for Americans going overseas to do business. In some places, passing money under the table is necessary to spark negotiations and win contracts. However, bribery is illegal in the United States, and US law makes it illegal for Americans to do that kind of thing abroad. Gifts, on the other hand, are allowed. But, according to the *Entrepreneur* article, it can be difficult to determine the difference between a gift and a bribe. In some cultures, a gesture may be seen as a gift, and in others it looks like a bribe.

Looking at this uncertainty, what a culturalist sees is *not* ambiguity about whether handing the money over to a potential client is a legal gift or an illegal bribe. That's not it at all. A culturalist sees it as *both* a gift and a bribe. In one culture—a nation overseas where the payment is occurring and where similar payments always occur when business is getting done—there are no moral qualms. It's right to give a cash gift because that's the rule of the country; it's the way things are commonly and properly done there. By contrast, from the perspective of American business culture, the conclusion that's drawn with equal force is that it's an immoral bribe because that's what US customs and normal practices tell us.

Cultural Ethics and International Bribery

Culturalists see moral rules as fixed onto specific societies, but that doesn't help anyone know what to do when confronted with an unfamiliar set of beliefs. How, the really important question is, does a culturalist *act* when forced to make decisions in a place and among people whose beliefs are different and unfamiliar? The *Entrepreneur* interview with Steve Veltkamp provides one answer.

What can you do if your overseas associate demands a bribe? Veltkamp doesn't recommend asking embassies or consulates for assistance, as "they have to stick to the official line." Instead, he believes "the best resource in almost every country of the world is the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, where you can find Americans who live in the country and understand how things are done." Moira Allen, "Here Comes the Bribe," *Entrepreneur*, October 2000, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.entrepreneur.com/magazine/entrepreneur/2000/october/32636.html>.

Immediately you can see how different the culturalist approach is to moral dilemmas. The message is: get in touch with the locals and try to do as they would in the same situation.

Most traditional ethical theories go in exactly the opposite direction. They say that it doesn't necessarily matter what people are actually doing. Stronger, the entire point of studying ethics has normally been to *escape* conventional wisdom and ingrained habits; the idea of doing what we ought to do requires a step away from those things and a cold, rational look at the situation. So, a morality based on duties sets up guidelines including *don't lie*, *don't steal* and appeals to men and women in business to follow them. Acting in an ethically responsible way in the world means obeying the dictates and refusing to be swayed by what the guy in the next cubicle is up to. Handing someone money under the table, consequently, while publicly insisting that everything's on the up and up can't be condoned no matter what anyone else does; it can't be right because it entails at least implicit lying.

More specifically for the culturalist, *Entrepreneur* advises overseas business people to

avoid seeking guidance from embassies or consulates because those people have to stick to “the official line.” What’s the official line? Presumably, it’s the set of practices delineated and approved by the State Department back in Washington, DC. The strength of these practices is that they’re formed to be universal, to work at every embassy everywhere in the world. A culturalist, however, looks at that and says it’s silly. There are no practices that work everywhere in the world. The advice government bureaucrats give is worthless; it’s less than worthless because it departs from the error of conceiving ethics as a set of rules fitting a transnational reality. What people in business should actually do is get in contact with people who really know something about ethics, and that requires turning to the locals, including the chamber of commerce, because they’re on the scene.

Conclusion. The culturalist deals with the question about whether a bribe is ethically respectable by ignoring all dictates received from other places and obeying the customs and standard practices of those who live and work where the decision is being made.

Cultural Ethics and the News Reporting of Wallace Souza

Another example of how culturalist ethics works comes from the flamboyant TV reporter Wallace Souza. Like many action crime reporters the world over, he raced to violent scenes hoping to get the first and best video. What counts, however, as good video in Brazil is different from what typically gets shown in the United States. Here’s a description of what Souza sent over the airwaves: “In one of Mr. Souza’s shows on his Canal Livre programme, a reporter approached a still-smouldering body in a forest. ‘It smells like a barbecue,’ he says. ‘It is a man. It has the smell of burning meat. The impression is that it was in the early hours...it was an execution.’” Dom Phillips, “Brazil Crime Show Host ‘Used Murder to Boost Ratings,’” *Times*, August 13, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011,

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article6793072.ece.

This is not the kind of report we see in the US media, and one of the differences is the ethics. Typically in the United States, a certain respect is accorded to the deceased, even if they’re criminals. It’s considered an exploitation to directly *show* dead bodies, especially smoldering ones. There’s quite a bit of cultural analysis that would go into this prohibition, but simplifying, it’s not just that reporters hold an ethical responsibility to others to not exploit their deaths graphically; they also have a responsibility to viewers to not show images that may be (or probably would be) disturbing. By contrast, and as the Souza report shows, in Brazil the rules are different and this kind of visual makes it over the airwaves without raising eyebrows or triggering moral objections.

More generally, the question about what you’re allowed to show on TV to boost the ratings and so make more money is an extremely rich area of examples for **cultural ethics**. How graphic is the violence allowed to be on *CSI Miami*? How far is the wardrobe malfunction allowed to go on the *Real Housewives of Orange County*? These kinds of basic questions about decency and ratings (which means advertising revenue) seem tailor made for those who believe the answers don’t depend on anything more than what people in a certain culture will accept. They seem cut out for those believing that the value we call decency is nothing more (or less) than the line drawn between the number of people who will watch and the number who turn the TV off in disgust.

Is Culturalist Ethics True?

If it's true that there's no ethics but the kind a culturalist proposes, then this book loses a good deal of its usefulness. It's lost because the main object is to help readers form and justify rules to guide their professional lives. Conceding that the culturalists are right, however, is also admitting that there's no reason to carefully analyze problems: you're far better served just checking around to see what most other people are doing in similar situations. Ethics isn't a test of your ability to think reasonably and independently; it's more a responsibility to follow the crowd.

Culturalism isn't true, however, at least not necessarily. You can see that in the reasoning underneath the cultural approach. The reasoning starts with an observation:

In certain societies, handing money under the table is commonly considered an appropriate, ethically respectable part of business activity, and in others it's considered both illegal and unethical.

And moves quickly to a conclusion:

Right and wrong in the business world is nothing more than what's commonly considered right and wrong in a specific community.

On the surface, this argument looks all right, but thinking it through carefully leads to the conclusion that it's not valid. A **valid argument** is one where the conclusion *necessarily* follows from the premises. For example, if you start from the definition that *all unmarried men are bachelors*, and then you observe that your friend John is an unmarried man, you can, in fact, conclude that he's a bachelor. You must conclude that. But that's not the situation with the culturalist argument because the conclusion *doesn't* necessarily follow from the premise. Just because no broad international agreement has been reached about what counts as bribery doesn't mean no agreement will ever be reached. Or making the same point more generally, just because no transcultural theory based on universal reason *has yet* to conquer all local beliefs and habits everywhere on the globe doesn't mean no such theory *will ever* accomplish that goal.

Taking the same situation in the less ambiguous world of the physical sciences, there was a time when some believed the earth centered the sun and planets, while others believed the sun was at the center, but that didn't mean the dispute would linger forever. Eventually, tools were found to convince everyone that one side was right. So too in business ethics: one day an enterprising ethicist may find a way to indisputably *prove* on the grounds of a universal and reasonable argument that greasing palms is a bribe and not a gift, and it's immoral, not moral. We don't know if that will happen, but it might. Consequently, the fact that we're unsure now as to whether any single ethics can deal with the whole world doesn't require shooting to the other extreme and saying there'll *never* be anything but what people in specific nations believe and that's it. The culturalist argument, in other words, isn't necessarily persuasive.

It is worrisome, though. And until someone can find a way to do for ethics what scientists did for the question about the earth's relation to the planets, there will always be individuals who suspect that no such proof will ever come. Count Nietzsche among them. In the field of contemporary philosophy and ethics, those who share the suspicion—those who doubt that no matter how hard we try we'll never be able to get beyond our basic cultural perspectives and disagreements—belong to a movement named **postmodernism**.

What Are Some Advantages and Drawbacks of Culturalist Ethics?

One general advantage of a culturalist ethics is that it allows people to be respectful of others and their culture. A deep component of any society's existence, uniqueness, and dignity in the world is its signature moral beliefs, what the people find right and wrong. A culturalist takes that identity seriously and makes no attempt to change or interfere. More, a culturalist explicitly acknowledges that there's no way to compare one culture against another as better and worse. Though you can *describe* differences, you can't say one set of moral truths is better than another because all moral truths are nothing more than what a society chooses to believe.

A more specific advantage of a culturalist ethics in the economic and business world is that it adapts well to contemporary reality. Over the last decades we've seen an explosion of international commerce, of large corporations tearing loose from specific nations and functioning globally. This economic surge has outpaced the corresponding understanding surge: we have no trouble switching dollars for euros or for yen, and we can buy Heineken beer from Germany and ride in a Honda made in Japan, but few of us speak English, German, and Japanese. In that kind of situation, one where some dilemmas in business ethics end up involving people we can't really talk to, culturalism provides a reasonable way to manage uncertainties. When we're in the United States, we follow American customs. If we're sent on an overseas trade venture to Germany or Japan, we pretty much do as they normally do there. Just in practical terms, that may well be the easiest way to work and succeed in the world, and a culturalist ethics allows a coherent justification for the strategy.

The Disadvantages

The major disadvantage of a culturalist ethics is that it doesn't leave any clear path to making things better. If a community's recommended ethical compass is just their customs and normal practices, then it's difficult to see how certain ingrained habits—say business bribery—can be picked up, examined, and then rejected as unethical. In fact, there's no reason why bribery should be examined at all. Since moral right and wrong is just what the locals do, it makes no sense to try to change anything.

This view stands in stark contrast with what we usually believe—or at least would like to believe—about ethics: there can be progress; we can become *better*. In science, we know progress occurs all the time. Our collective knowledge about the sun's position relative to the planets went from wrong to right with time and effort, and we'd like the same to happen for moral uncertainties. That's why it's so easy to imagine that bribery is a dirty, third-world practice, and part of our responsibility as a wealthy and developed nation is to lead the way in cleaning it up. We clean the moral world of bad business ethics just like our scientists rid the physical world of misperceptions. More, that's a central aim of America's antibribery legislation as it applies to overseas acts: it's to cure other cultures of their bad habits. If you're a culturalist, however, then the bad habit isn't bribery; it's one nation trying to impose a morality on another.

However you may come down on the question about whether nations should be trying to improve ethical customs in other places, what's inescapable is that if you're a culturalist, you don't have any ground to stand on when it comes to criticizing the moral practices of businessmen and women in foreign countries. You don't because what's going on elsewhere is an independent and legitimate ethical system and can't be judged inferior to

our own.

Another problem with a culturalist ethics is that it provides few routes to resolving conflicts *within* a society. For example, should I be allowed to go into business for myself on the land I bought in the middle of a residential neighborhood by opening a motorcycle bar? In Houston, the answer's yes. There's a community consensus there that owning a piece of land allows you to do (almost) whatever you want with it. In legal terms, that translates into Houston being the only major American city without zoning regulations. Up the road in Dallas, however, there's a similar community consensus that the rights of landownership are curtailed by the rights of nearby landowners. The result is strict zoning laws likely prohibiting Harley conventions in the middle of family neighborhoods. At this point, a culturalist has no problem; people in Houston have their codes of right and wrong and people in Dallas have theirs. What happens, though, in Austin, Texas, which is about midway between Houston and Dallas? What if about half the population believes in landowner rights at all costs and the other half goes for a more community-oriented approach? A cultural ethics provides few tools for resolving the dispute beyond sitting and waiting for one side or the other to take control of the town. This means ethics isn't helping us solve disagreements; it only arrives when, really, it's no longer needed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Proponents of cultural ethics embrace the idea that moral doctrines are just the rules, beliefs, and customs of specific communities.
- Doing the right thing within a culturalist framework relies less on traditional ethical reasoning and more on detecting local habits.
- The culturalist view of ethics is neither true nor false. It's a reaction to the world as it is: a place with vastly divergent sets of moral codes.
- A culturalist ethics respects other societies and their practices but loses solid hope for ethical progress.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. If you're doing business overseas as a cultural ethicist, why would it make sense to consult the local chamber of commerce? Who else might you consult for moral guidance? Why?
2. You go abroad to win a contract and discover that a cash gift is necessary, so you hand it over and win the business. On returning to the United States, you put the \$200 gift on your expense report. The boss is infuriated, calls your act an "unethical, wrongheaded bribe" and says she won't reimburse you the \$200. What arguments could you use to convince her that you did the right thing and should be reimbursed?
3. Souza's bloody TV program is popular in Brazil, especially the parts where he shows video of horribly dead bodies. How could a culturalist argue that the episodes should *not* be shown on American TV?
4. A cultural ethics is neither true nor false. Explain.

4.4 Virtue Theory

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define virtue ethics.
2. Elaborate basic virtues and show how they work in business.
3. Indicate how virtue is acquired.
4. Note an advantage and drawback of the theory.

What Is Virtue Ethics?

Contemporary virtue ethics is an updated version of a theory first proposed in ancient Greece. Today's proponents acknowledge that it's very difficult to set up a list of moral rules that are going to solve ethical dilemmas across cultural lines. Typically, they don't go quite so far as the culturalists; they don't believe that basic regulations of right and wrong are *completely* independent from one community to another. In practical terms, however, there's agreement that the world is too diverse and changing to be controlled by lists of recommendations and prohibitions. So proponents of virtue suggest that we change the focus of our moral investigations. Instead of trying to form specific rules for everyone to follow—*don't bribe, don't exploit the deceased on TV*—they propose that we build virtuous character. The idea is that people who *are* good will do the good and right thing, regardless of the circumstances: whether they're at home or abroad, whether they're trying to win new clients or making a decision about what kind of images are appropriate for public TV.

In a vague sense, we all know what it means to have a virtuous character; we all know people who can be counted upon to do the right thing. Think of a business situation where true character shines through. A local TV station has seen advertising revenue plummet and layoffs have to be made. Who should go? Should Jim get to stay because his wife just had their first child? Should Jane get to stay because she's fifty-seven and probably won't be able to find another job? Should John—who's a tireless worker and the station's best film editor—be laid off because he was hired only two months ago? It's a hard choice and there's no way to know for sure what's right. It is certain, however, that there are better and worse ways of handling the situation.

One strategy is to not think too much about it, to just know that two employees have to go, so you take the names that happen to come to mind, you send them an e-mail, and you instruct security to make sure they're escorted from the building. Then you go hide in the bathroom until they're gone. In other words, you weasel out. In the same situation, another person will draw up criteria for making the decision and will stand up and inform those who are being let go why the decision was made. The thoughts (complaints, regrets, excuses) of those being released will be honored and heard attentively, but the decision will stand. From the person in charge of deciding, there'll be honesty, respect, and firmness. This is virtue. You can't read it in a book, you can't memorize principles, and you can't just follow some precooked decision-making process. You have to have certain qualities as a person to do the right thing in a hard situation.

Virtue ethics is the idea that we can and should instill those qualities in people and then let them go out into the complex business world confident that they'll face dilemmas well. What decisions will they make? What will they do when faced with questions about who should be laid off or, in another case, whether to hand over a bribe in a place where everyone is bribing? We don't know. But we rely on their good character to be confident they'll do right.

Under this conception, these are the primary tasks of ethics:

- Delineate what the virtues are.
- Provide experience using the virtues.

The experience is especially important because virtue isn't so much a natural characteristic like height or hair color; it's more of an acquired skill: something you need to work at, practice, and hone. Also, like many acquired skills, doing it—once a certain level of mastery has been reached—is rewarding or satisfying. Typically, a person driven by virtue has nurtured a moral instinct for acting in consonance with the virtues. Doing right feels right. Conversely, *not* acting in consonance with the virtues is discomforting; it leaves a bad taste in the mouth. At the risk of trivializing the subject, there's a very limited comparison that can be made between learning virtue and learning more rudimentary activities like golf or dancing. When someone has acquired the skill, hitting a good shot or taking the right steps in perfect time feels good. Conversely, missing a putt or stepping on your partner's foot leaves you consternated.

What Are the Virtues and Vices?

Every advocate of virtue ethics will present a constellation of virtues that they believe captures the essence of what needs to be acquired to *be* virtuous. Typically, there'll also be a set of antivirtues or vices to be avoided to fill out the picture. Here's a set of virtues overlapping with what most proponents will offer:

- Wisdom (both theoretical and practical)
- Fairness
- Courage
- Temperance
- Prudence
- Sincerity
- Civility

On the outer edges, here's a common pair of vices to be avoided. Notice that what counts as a vice here isn't synonymous with the common use of the word, which implies a weakness of the physical body manifested as the inability to resist drunkenness, drugs, and similar:

- Cowardice
- Insensibility

How Do the Virtues and Vices Work in a Business Environment?

Wisdom as a virtue is frequently divided into theoretical and practical variations.

Theoretical wisdom is what you get reading books and hearing college lectures. It's the acquired ability to concentrate and understand sentences like the one you're reading now, even though it's not very exciting and allows almost no cheap thrills—words like *sex* and *drugs* don't come up much. Those possessing theoretical wisdom know the scholarly rules of the world in the abstract but not necessarily in practice. In the world of business, for example, someone may be able to explain the fine points of Immanuel Kant's complicated and dense ethical ideas, but that doesn't mean they'll be able to apply the lessons when sitting in someone's office in a foreign country.

Practical wisdom (sometimes called prudence) is the learned ability to take a deep

breath and respond to situations thoughtfully. For example, everyone feels like exploding sometimes, especially at work after you've had too much coffee and you didn't get the raise you wanted. After that, some guy in a meeting takes a cheap shot and jokes about how you didn't win an overseas account because you didn't bribe the right person. What do you do? Scream the guy's head off? Talk about it quietly after the meeting? Let it pass like nothing happened? Practical wisdom doesn't give an answer, but in the heat of the moment, it's the virtue of making the decision coolly, of doing something you won't regret later. Frequently, an association is set between practical wisdom and finding a spot between extremes. In this case, perhaps it would be excessive to go off right there in the meeting room (because the outburst would tend to confirm that you're not real smart), but it might also be excessive to let the jab go as though nothing had happened (because the same guy may feel emboldened to keep poking at you). So practical wisdom would be the ability to navigate a middle, prudent, route—perhaps one leading to the decision to discuss the matter quietly but sternly after the meeting.

Fairness is the virtue of judging people's acts dispassionately, evenhandedly, and from all points of view. When forming judgments about a potential client who seems to be asking for a bribe, the verdict is going to partially depend on where the client is. If he's in the United States, that's one thing; if he's in a country where clients customarily get cash under the table, that's another. No one is saying the first is wrong and the second right, but the different contexts need to be considered, and fairness is the ability to consider them, to make evenhanded judgments even in very different situations.

Courage is the virtue of moderate boldness. If you're an action crime reporter, you won't hide in a bush while pushing your cameraman out into the open to try to get some exciting footage. You won't, in other words, be a coward. At the same time, you won't be rash either, you'll know that sometimes you need to take a risk to get a good story, but it doesn't make a lot of sense to stand up and film from the middle of a gunfight.

Temperance is the virtue of self-control with respect to pleasure, especially the pleasures of the body and the senses. Curiously, Wallace Souza stands as an embodiment of this skill. As a major league drug dealer, he no doubt had constant access to good, cheap, feel-good substances. Even so, he managed to control his intake, not letting it interfere with his day job as a TV reporter, and his other day job as a legislator.

More generally in the workplace, temperance mixes well with the learned ability to delay gratification. For example, doing good work is frequently rewarded with a better job, but it's hard to find someone who feels as though they get everything they deserve every time. Temperance enters here as the ability to bear down and keep trying. It's also, on the other side, the ability to know when a larger change (perhaps looking for work at another company) may be necessary to get ahead.

Sincerity is the ability to reveal yourself to others with confidence that you'll be respected. It fits between the extremes of frigidity and emoting. Souza or any TV reporter has to do more than just give cold facts; some human, emotional component must be added to the mix. On the other hand, no one's going to watch a reporter who arrives at a crime scene, reports that he feels sad, and breaks down in tears. Similarly in international business negotiations, to establish good contact across cultures, there has to be some sharing of humanity. You need to reveal what kind of food you like or something similar to the people on the other side. You don't want to go too far, though, and talk about how Japanese food reminds you of a childhood vomiting episode (especially when doing business in Tokyo).

Civility is the virtue of showing consideration for others without humiliating yourself. As a virtue it doesn't mean eating with the right fork or remembering to say "thank you" to clients. Instead, it's the disposition to show others that you take them seriously while also respecting yourself. This means establishing ground rules for behavior that are independent and neutral. In essence, the idea is, when having lunch with your boss, you don't eat like you're sitting in front of the TV in your family room; you respect her, and you expect the same from her. Civility is the virtue of habitually being and expressing yourself in a way that establishes your presence solidly without threatening or impinging on others.

Vices

On the outside of the virtues, there are vices. Just as the accomplishment of a virtue—acting in harmony with it—yields a sense of satisfaction and confidence that you're living well, living a good life, so too the vices produce a sensation of unease. It's not exactly a sting of conscience (like a child feels when caught stealing); it's more a sense of weakness, deflation, and failure. *Cowardice*, for example, is a vice. It may save your job if you mess up and don't confess to the problem being your fault; but for the person trained in virtue, the job will have lost its dignity. *Insensibility* is another vice. Had Souza understood that, he may have thought twice about those people's dead bodies he rolled out for television. He may have thought of their living parents, their children. And even if he hadn't, after he'd presented the images he would've felt that he'd lapsed, that he hadn't done as well as he could.

How Do I Become Virtuous?

Virtues aren't a list of actions you can write on the back of your hand and refer to; they're ways of living, and the only route to becoming virtuous is to actually live those ways. Every society will have its own institutions for instilling virtue, and within societies different institutions will seem more apt for some than for others. In the United States, the kinds of groups that are sought out as instillers of virtue include the family, churches, schools, sports teams, Boy and Girl Scouts, volunteer and community organizations, the armed forces, AmeriCorps, and similar.

Companies play a role, too. The virtuous organization will be led by individuals who *are* virtuous, and it will reward workers—at least partially—based on their progress toward being good people. This kind of organization won't rely on employee handbooks and compliance rules to dictate behavior; instead, it will devise strategies for nurturing the skills of a good life. They may include mentor programs, carefully calibrated increases in responsibility and independence for employees, and job performance assessments that not only measure numerical results but also try to gauge an individual's moral contributions to the organization's undertaking.

Finally, when confronted with moral questions—"What kind of images should I broadcast on my TV report?" or "Should I hand money under the table?"—the answer won't be *yes* or *no*. It's never a yes or no; it's always to do what my good character dictates.

An Advantage and Drawback of Virtue Ethics

The principal advantage of virtue ethics is its flexibility, the confidence that those who *are* virtuous will be equipped to manage unforeseeable moral dilemmas in unfamiliar circumstances. The principal drawback is the lack of specificity: the theory doesn't allow

clear, yes-or-no responses to specific problems like whether I should offer a bribe.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Virtue ethics concentrates on forming good character and then trusting people to do the right thing. At the heart of ethics, the formation of good character replaces the defining of specific guidelines for action.
- A society's institutions play a key role in instilling virtue.
- The basic virtues tend to stress moderation, the ability to avoid taking extreme action in the face of dilemmas.
- Virtue ethics grants flexibility insofar as those who are virtuous should manage any situation well.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Would you call Souza's colorful professional life a profile of the virtue of courage? Why or why not?
2. How might the virtue of civility come forward in the case of international bribery, in the case that you've gone abroad in pursuit of a contract and the prospective client demands some cash under the table?
3. What are some societal institutions you've come in contact with that could be understood as teaching virtue? What virtue(s) do they instill, and how?

4.5 Discourse Ethics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define discourse ethics.
2. Show how discourse ethics can function in a business context.
3. Note an advantage and drawbacks to the theory.

What Is Discourse Ethics?

Proponents of **discourse ethics** reverse the order in which we normally address ethical uncertainties. Instead of starting with one theory or another and then taking it out into the world to solve problems, they start with a problem and try to create a moral structure to solve it. Ethical solutions become ad hoc, custom generated to resolve specific conflicts. It doesn't matter so much, therefore, that people come to an issue like bribery from divergent moral terrains because that difference is erased by the key element of discourse ethics: a foundational decision to cut away from old ideas and make new ones.

How Does Discourse Ethics Work?

When a dilemma is faced, those involved gather and try to talk it out. The discussion is constrained by two basic limits: conversation must be reasonable and civil, and the goal is a peaceful and consensual resolution. As long as these ideals control what we say, we can call the result ethically respectable.

Take the dilemma of international bribery: you've left your home office in New Jersey and

gone to Somalia seeking to win construction business on a new airport. As the recent Transparency International *Corruption Perception Index* shows, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2009," Transparency International, accessed May 12, 2011, http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table. you're going to discover that it's customary to pass some cash to a prospective client before he'll be willing to do serious business. Company policy, however, prohibits bribes.

What do you do? If you're playing by hometown, American rules, your responsibility to company policy and to broad honesty and fairness requires you to walk away. But if you're playing Somali rules where greasing a palm seems fair and acceptable, your obligation to win contracts for the company that's paying your salary requires you to pass some cash. Discourse ethics comes in here with this: instead of trying to impose one side's convictions on the other, the effort will be to overcome the divide by constructing a new and encompassing moral framework through common agreement. American rules and Somali rules are both thrown out, and new ones get sought. Here are steps on the way:

1. Define the immediate stakeholders—that is, those who're most affected by the dilemma and may be gathered to resolve it. In this case, they include you and your client. Since your responsibilities to the company are reported through your supervisor, she too could be included.
2. Establish a language for discussion. In the international world this is actually a real problem. Sensibilities must be respected, and if you're in Somalia, just assuming that everyone will speak English might be a step backward. On the other hand, you probably don't speak Somali. This step then becomes a rehearsal for the larger problem—just as you're separated by moral codes, so too you're separated by languages—and you're going to have to find a solution. You may choose a third language, you may hire an interpreter, or maybe your client will be able to speak English. In any case, an agreement must be reached.
3. Establish the goal, which in discourse ethics is always the peaceful and consensual resolution to the dilemma.
4. Define the problem. Here, it's that when cash passes from you to the client, you feel like you're handing over an illegitimate bribe, but he feels like he's receiving a typical and acceptable gift. This stage of the process would require fairly lengthy elaborations by all those involved of exactly what they understand their obligations and interests to be. Your supervisor would need to explain the company policy, why it exists and how she's responsible for upholding it. Your client might point out that his salary is quite low, and the reason for that is simple: *everyone* accepts that his income will be supplemented by gifts. (Here, he might sound something like a waitress in New York City explaining to a foreign diner that her salary is absurdly small, but everyone expects there'll be some tipping, and it'll be more than two shiny quarters.) You, finally, explain how you're being stretched between two obligations: the one to respect company policy and the other to do the job of winning contracts.
5. Propose solutions. Discourse ethics is open, a kind of ethical brainstorming: those involved offer solutions, modify each others' proposals, and try to discern whether a common ground can be mapped. In this case, someone may propose that the prospective client offer substantial evidence that money is expected and customary for someone in his position in Somalia. If the evidence can be produced, if it shows that payments are nearly universal, and it shows about how much they normally are, then perhaps all parties can be satisfied. Your supervisor, seeing that the amount actually forms part of a normal salary and isn't some extraordinary payment, may be able to reason that the money isn't a bribe because it's not doing what bribes

typically do, which is afford an unfair advantage. In this case, if everyone's paying, then no advantage will be had. It's important to note here that the logic isn't *if everyone does it then it's all right*, because discourse ethics doesn't generalize like that. All conversations and solutions are about getting agreement on this one case. So your supervisor feels like handing cash over isn't a bribe any more than tipping a waitress is. Your client, having received the money, will obviously be satisfied. You, finally, will be free to fulfill your professional obligation to win the client without sacrificing your obligation to respect company policy and your obligation to yourself to work in a way that's honest.

If this—or any—solution is reached, then discourse ethics will have done what it promised: open a way for concerned parties to reach agreements alleviating conflicts. Whatever the agreement is, it's an ethically recommendable solution because the definition of what's ethically recommendable is just agreements reached through discussion.

An Advantage and Drawbacks to Discourse Ethics

The main advantage of discourse ethics is that the search for solutions opens the door all the way. Everything's on the table. That gives those involved just about the best hope possible for a resolution benefitting everyone joined in the discussion.

There are two main drawbacks to discourse ethics. The first is that everything's on the table. If what's morally acceptable can be as broad as anything a group agrees to, there's the potential for ugly solutions. On the face of it, the international bribery resolution—*hand some money over because it's not really a bribe and it's more like tipping a waiter*—seems pretty harmless. But it doesn't take much to see a slippery slope developing. If this kind of gifting is OK in Somalia where salaries are low, then why not in the United States too if it happens that a particular client has a low salary relative to others in that line of work? Or why not *every* client because, really, pay in that line of work is substandard? This can go on and on, and before you know it, the entire economy is corrupted. Obviously, that won't *necessarily* happen, but it could, and this is one of the reasons so many insist that any serious attempt to do ethics must begin with some basic defining of inbounds and out-of-bounds, some dividing of right from wrong. Discourse ethics doesn't do that.

The second drawback to discourse ethics is that for every ethical dilemma faced, you have to start over. Since the entire idea is to clear the deck and make a new solution, anyone facing a significant number of ethical dilemmas in their line of work is going to be constantly clearing the deck and beginning anew. Of course there may be some components of past discussions that could be carried forward—what you learned on the trip to Somalia may be helpful in Uzbekistan—but that doesn't change the fact that the ethical recommendation to start from zero and talk problems out is going to lead to a lot of talking.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Discourse ethics solves dilemmas by asking those involved to discuss the matter reasonably until they can find a consensual and peaceful solution.
- Discourse ethics allows tremendous latitude in the search for solutions to conflicts, but it risks allowing solutions that many would consider unethical.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. A five-step process was discussed to chart the advance of discourse ethics. Summarize each of these steps in your own words.
2. Describe a business situation where discourse ethics might work well. Why might it succeed?
3. Describe a business situation where discourse ethics might not work well. Why might it fail?

4.6 Ethics of Care

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define the ethics of care.
2. Show how an ethics of care functions in a business context.
3. Note advantages and drawbacks to the theory.

The Rules of an Ethics of Care

Sometimes advocated under the titles of community ethics or feminist ethics, an **ethics of care** switches the focus of moral regulation from the individual to networks of social relationships. The basic question isn't about yourself; it's not "What should I do?" Instead, it's always about a larger us: "What should be done to nurture the connections among those of us closest to each other?"

A quick example dilemma: There's a flaming car wreck involving your sister and a Nobel Prize-winning medical scientist, and you have the strength to rescue only one of the two. Which should you save? A strict utilitarian—someone believing we should always act to bring the greatest good to the greatest number—will go for the scientist. Saving him will likely produce future medical breakthroughs in turn saving many others, which means the greater good will be served by dragging him out. But how many of us would actually do that? Wouldn't you go for your own sister before some scientist you've never met? And wouldn't most of the rest of us agree that we'd do the same thing? If the answer is yes, an ethics of care provides a way of understanding and justifying the impulse, which is, before anything else, to protect those bound to us.

There are three critical steps on the way to formalizing care as a coherent ethical orientation. Each is a shift away from traditional ethics.

1. At the center of attention, independent actors are replaced by a web of interrelated individuals. (Ethics is not about me and you; it's about us.)
2. The impartial application of abstract principles is replaced by the maintenance and harmonizing of human relationships. (Ethics is less about the fair imposition of rules and more about crafting social integration.)
3. Tensions between the rights of individuals get replaced by conflicts of responsibility to others in established relationships. (Ethical tensions aren't my rights versus yours; it's me being torn between those I care for.)

In the international bribery example up to now, we've treated all those involved as anonymous individuals: it hasn't mattered whether or how long they've known each

other. It's only important to know that there's a supervisor X back at the US company headquarters, and there's the person Y who's gone abroad to win a contract, and there's the prospective client Z expecting a bribe. That's it. Maybe the three have never exchanged more than fifty words in a single conversation, or maybe they're all cousins who meet for family blowouts every two months. We haven't asked because it hasn't mattered what their personal relationships may be. That will have to change, however, within an ethics of care because there are no anonymous, single individuals: everyone has a place—near or far, integral or accidental—within a social network. For that reason, all morality resembles the car wreck. It's charged with human attachment, and because the ethics of care makes those attachments the center of deliberation, you have to know how people are related to each other before beginning to know how they should treat each other.

Turning this perspective toward the bribery example, the overseas client, let's say, is an old and loyal client of the company, and also one who's always gotten a little extra from one or another employee. About the company, it's not an anonymous multinational but a medium-sized, extended-family concern. Brothers, uncles, nieces and nephews, and a hodgepodge of others all work there. For years, it can be added, this overseas contract has been vital to the company's success. Now all this counts for something within an ethics of care. As opposed to the traditional idea that the best moral lessons show us how to coldly, impersonally, and impartially apply abstract rules, here we're checking to see who's involved, because the reason we have morality is to vitalize our human relationships.

An ethics geared to strengthen bonds isn't necessarily easy to enact. Take a company like Oil-Dri, about which *Forbes* recounts,

Oil-Dri now makes about \$240 million a year in revenues. At the company's 50th anniversary party, the CEO asked anyone related to anyone else at the organization to stand up. Of the company's 700 or so employees, almost 500 rose. Klaus Kneale, "Is Nepotism So Bad?," *Forbes*, June 20, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/06/19/ceo-executive-hiring-ceonewtork-leadership-nepotism.html>.

This is obviously an organization where relationships matter and where management is accounting for human concerns and networks when hiring people. No doubt there's a lot of camaraderie in this workplace, but imagine how difficult it must be to dole out promotions when everyone knows everyone else in that personal, almost familial way. Within a more traditional ethics, one of the first steps to making a promotion decision is to clear away all the personal stuff before evaluating each employee directly and simply assess his or her professional merits. Within an ethics of care, however, any promotion decision—more or less any decision at all, for that matter—is going to require the subtle, complex, and difficult balancing of many individual and highly emotional situations and circumstances.

Something similar happens within typical families. Most parents trot out the idea of treating all their children identically—they all get their first car at the same age and so on—but if a sibling has special problems at one stage of their development, they'll normally get special treatment in the name of preserving the family unit. The other brothers and sisters probably complain, but if they're old enough they understand that protecting those who are vulnerable is one of the first imperatives of caring for each other as a group. An ethics of care in essence takes that model from the family and

extends it out into the world of business. Applying it to the promotion question, if there's a member of Oil-Dri saddled by, let's say, a difficulty with alcohol, then that might actually be a *positive* consideration within care-based thought. Promoting someone who has had problems and reinforcing their attempt to get past them may serve the general harmony of the entire group. As a result, someone who's less qualified in purely professional terms may get the promotion in the name of caring for the social web.

How Might the Case of International Bribery Be Managed within an Ethics of Care?

Traditionally, ethics features questions about the competing rights of individuals. For example, when I offer a bribe, am I impinging on the right of another to compete on a level playing field for the same business? Starting from an ethics of care poses a different question: does giving a bribe reinforce or weaken the bonds of human relationships defining my place in the world? The answer, obviously, depends. If the company is Oil-Dri where everyone's deeply connected, and it's an old client, and a little gift of cash has always been slid under the table, then the maintenance of that network's vitality and human health becomes a powerful argument in favor of continuing the practice.

Keeping the wheels turning isn't the only solution, however. Discomfort with doing something that seems underhanded may lead the overseas representative to try a different way of keeping the contract going, one that's based less on money under the table and more on aboveboard selling points. Quality of service as proven by work performed in previous years may offer a way to keep the business and personal link intact. There may be, in other words, a less controversial route to the same end of maintaining and enforcing existing relationships.

Alternatively, a different client, one not demanding a bribe, may be sought to purchase the company's goods and services. Nothing in an ethics of care requires those participating to preserve *every* bond. Sometimes it happens in families that a member becomes so toxic and damaging to the rest that the connection needs to be severed in the name of maintaining the larger whole. The overseas bribery relationship may be one of those cases. It's hard, of course, to break away, but there are other potential clients out in the world and going after them may, in the final analysis, do more for the social health of the core group than clinging to a problem at all costs.

Finally, enrolling in an ethics of care doesn't mean going blind to what's going on outside the circle of care. One fact from the larger world that should be taken account of comes from a recent article in the *Washington Post* about foreign business bribes: prosecutions of international bribery by the US government are picking up. Carrie Johnson, "U.S. Sends a Message by Stepping Up Crackdown on Foreign Business Bribes," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2010, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/07/AR2010020702506.html>. Ethical concerns should normally be distinguished from legal considerations, but there's no doubt that few events interrupt human relationships like a jail term. Cutting the bribery relationship, therefore, may be necessary regardless of how important the particular client and business are for the larger whole.

Conclusion. The activation of an ethics of care may justify continuing to pay money under the table. Or it may lead toward a less controversial way of maintaining the business relationship. Or it may cause a break between the company offering services and the overseas client demanding a bribe. There's no way to know for sure which path will be

the right one, but in every case the choice will be made in the name of preserving and nurturing the human relationships surrounding the decision.

Advantages and Drawbacks of an Ethics of Care

The advantages of a care-based ethics include the following:

- It can cohere with what we actually do and think we ought to do, at least in cases like the car accident cited at this section's beginning. In a certain sense, it corresponds with our natural instincts to act in favor of and protect those under our care and those involved in our lives.
- It humanizes ethics by centering thought on real people instead of cold rules. Presumably, everyone agrees that ethics is ultimately about people: unlike the hard sciences, the end results of morality are tallied in human lives. To the extent that's right, an emphasis on care seems well suited to the general practice of ethics.
- It allows us to focus our energy and concern on those who are closest to us. Everyone knows that there's injustice in the world, just as we all know we can't solve every problem. The ethics of care allows us to focus our energy naturally on the most immediate human needs.

The main disadvantage of an ethics of care is that it threatens to devolve into tribalism: There's my group, and I take care of them. As for all the rest of you, you're in your groups and in charge of yourselves. This isn't *every man for himself*, but it comes close to *every social group for itself*.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An ethics of care makes the nurturing of our immediate communities and the protecting of those closest to us the highest moral obligation.
- In business, an ethics of care asks us to review decisions not in terms of hard rules but in terms of how they will affect the people with whom we share our lives.
- An ethics of care humanizes moral decisions, but it threatens tribalism.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the three major steps an ethics of care takes away from most traditional theories? Can you put each one in your own words?
2. An ethics of care is frequently compared to the morality guiding a family. Can you think of another comparison that encapsulates how this ethics works?
3. Imagine that you had two parents and a sister working for Oil-Dri in the United States. The overseas client you've been sent to do business with is a half brother from your father's first marriage. He demands a bribe. How could the ethics of care be used to justify accepting or refusing?

4.7 The Cheat Sheet: Rules of Thumb in Applied Ethics

The following tables summarize the theories considered in this textbook. The first

includes the traditional theories and the second encapsulates the contemporary theories built to respond to cultural relativism.

Table 4.1 The Traditional Theories

Name	Guidance for ethical action	Focus of our efforts	Typical questions asked in the effort to fulfill obligations	Conception of the person implied by the theory	Strength and weakness
Duty	Learn the basic duties to ourselves and others, and obey them.	The duties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To whom do I have obligations? What are the obligations? How do the obligations weigh against each other? 	We are rational actors.	Gives clear guidance in many situations; is inflexible in the face of special cases.
Fairness	Treat people identically unless they differ in ways relevant to the situation. (Treat equals equally and unequals unequally.)	Resist prejudice and personal feelings.	Does everyone get an equal chance? (If they don't, how are the differences justified?)	We are rational actors.	Promises egalitarianism but can be difficult to implement in complex reality.
Kant	Learn the basic duties to ourselves and others, and obey them.	The categorical imperative in two articulations: actions must be universalizable <i>and</i> treat others as ends and never as means.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the act I'm considering universalizable? Am I being careful not to treat others as means to an end? 	We are rational actors.	Gives clear guidance in many situations; is inflexible, especially in the face of special cases.
Rights theory	Maximize freedom.	Learn the individual's basic rights, live them, and respect others' right to live them.	Does doing what I want impinge on the basic freedoms of others?	We are distinguished by the possession of dignity.	Allows individualism but does little to resolve conflicts between individuals.
Egoism	Increase my well-being and happiness.	Learn about my desires and welfare, and serve them.	What makes me happy over the long term? How can I get that?	We are driven toward pleasure and away from pain.	Good for me in the short term, but might not let us live together as a society.
Altruism	Increase the well-being and happiness of others.	Learn about others' desires and welfare, and serve them.	What makes others happy over the long term? How can I help them get that?	We are driven toward pleasure and away from pain.	Others benefit, but may be difficult to justify devaluing yourself.
	Increase the well-	Learn about the desires	What brings the greatest	We are	The general welfare is

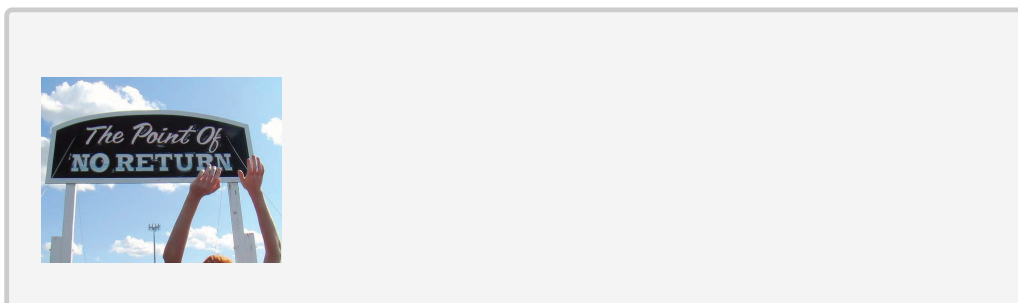
Utilitarianism	being and happiness of everyone collectively.	and welfare of everyone, understood as an aggregate, and serve them.	happiness and good to the greatest number over the long term? How can I help us get that?	driven toward pleasure and away from pain.	served, but injustices at the individual level may persist.
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Table 4.2 The Contemporary Theories Responding to Cultural Relativism

	Guidance for ethical action	Focus of our efforts	Typical questions asked in the effort to fulfill obligations	Strengths and weaknesses	Reaction to cultural relativism
Eternal return of the same	Be myself.	Think through the eternal return.	Would I do this if it had to be repeated in the same life, which recurred forever?	Maximizes individual authenticity but provides no specific recommendations for action.	Abandons morality altogether.
Cultural ethics	Follow local customs and practices.	Learn local customs and practices.	What do the locals do?	Helps you fit in but allows little hope for ethical improvement.	Accepts the proposal that moral rules are just a particular community's beliefs.
Virtue ethics	Develop good moral character.	Learn and practice the virtues.	Am I acting with integrity and in accordance with values learned?	Allows flexibility but provides little specific guidance.	Tries to protect against cultural relativism by developing an adoptable but consistently moral character.
Discourse ethics	Produce solutions to moral dilemmas.	Talk it out: use rational conversation to reach a peaceful, consensual agreement.	What do you think? How about this possibility?	Provides a broad range of possible solutions but every conflict must be addressed from scratch.	Replaces a culture's moral rules with the attempt to fabricate new rules to function in specific situations.
Ethics of care	Nurture and protect immediate relationships.	Respond to the needs of those nearest us.	Which solution preserves healthy and harmonious relationships among those involved?	Humanizes morality but risks tribalism.	Replaces a culture's moral rules with loyalty to those whose lives touch our own.

4.8 Case Studies

I Wouldn't Change a Thing



Source: Photo
courtesy of Patrick
Hawks,
[http://www.flickr.com/
photos/pathawks/7962
54651/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/pathawks/796254651/).

Tamica Tanksley graduated from Temple University in Philadelphia in 2000. About a decade later she worked her way into an important role in the office of Pennsylvania State Senator Vincent Hughes: she's codirector of his community affairs outreach and efforts. Though not a celebrity or mightily important in politics, what she's done with her life up to now earned her a brief write-up and a chance to answer a few interview questions in Temple's Internet Alumni magazine. "Tamica Tanksley, SCT '00," Temple University, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.myowlspace.com/s/705/index.aspx?sid=705&gid=1&pgid=1021&cid=1612&ecid=1612&ciid=3725&crd=0>.

She describes her job responsibilities as linking the senator with "community leaders, educators, religious organizations, constituents and various institutions within the public and private sector." It all comes naturally to her. As she puts it, "I didn't choose politics, politics chose me. And if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing....Working in the government sector where my daily responsibilities afford me the opportunity to empower and inspire everyday people is a career that ignites my passion for people."

It's not just heavy, public service trudging, though; Tanksley also finds the job "fun" because it allows her "creative juices to flow into a sea of possibilities," and in a different part of the interview she calls the work, in a sense, victorious: "As a citizen and voter, I've learned that this game of life is not won by standing on the sidelines. In order to provoke change and improve the quality of life for everyone, we must get into the game because victories are won on the field."

How'd she get the job? The way a lot of people start off in politics, by serving in that same office as a volunteer worker.

Finally, since it's a Temple University website, the interviewer tries to get in a plug for the school and succeeds with this memory Tanksley produces of Dr. Jean Brody's public relations course and the prof's infamous (at least on the Temple campus) red pen: "While I was often saddened by my white paper being flooded by red pen marks, I quickly learned that Dr. Brody and her red pen refined the best in me. With each passing assignment, the red marks lessened and my knowledge and experience increased. Moreover, it was the red that encouraged me to do my best work, which has ultimately contributed to the dedicated worker I am today."

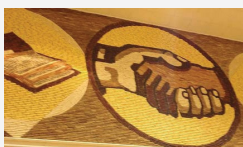
QUESTIONS

1. Tanksley reports about her young life up to this point that "if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing." Can you use this as a point of departure for
 - defining Nietzsche's eternal return and showing how it works?

- characterizing Tanksley’s professional life as one fit for approval by Nietzsche’s eternal return?
2. The values guiding Wallace Souza’s work as a news reporter in remote Brazil—especially the kinds of images judged appropriate for TV there—are quite different from those guiding TV reporting in the United States. Why does Nietzsche believe this kind of cultural clash is a reason to subscribe to the eternal return and simultaneously abandon traditional ethical theories, which attempt to pertain universally?
 3. Tanksley reports about her young life up to this point that “working in the government sector where my daily responsibilities afford me the opportunity to empower and inspire everyday people is a career that ignites my passion for people.” How might an advocate of the eternal return respond to this sentiment? Explain.
 4. Whose life seems more in tune with how you imagine yourself living the eternal return, Souza’s or Tanksley’s? Why?
 5. For virtue ethics, knowing what to do with your life—responding to its problems, choosing goals to reach for—isn’t something you can just figure out no matter how intelligent you may be or how many ethics classes you’ve taken. To succeed, you also need a good society, one that does two things:
 - Teaches the virtues through its institutions
 - Provides a way to practice using the virtues

How could Dr. Jean Brody be considered a teacher of virtue? What particular virtues did she teach Tanksley, and how did she provide a way to practice using them?

Mordidas



Source: Photo
courtesy of Myki
Roventine,
[http://www.flickr.com/
photos/mykroventine/
847530903/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/mykroventine/847530903/).

In Mexico City, police salaries are extremely low. They live decently enough, though, by adding bribes (*mordidas* in Spanish) to their wages. During a typical week they pull in bribe money that more or less equals their monthly salary. All the locals know how it works, especially when it comes to the most avid collectors, the traffic cops. In the standard procedure, the officer pulls a car over, takes out his codebook, walks up, and hands it to the driver. Ostensibly, he’s allowing confirmation that the law actually prohibits whatever was done. This is what actually happens: the driver slips about

fifty pesos (a little under five dollars) into the book, closes it, hands it back, and is free to go. Business Ethics Workshop video, accessed May 12, 2011, http://businessethicsworkshop.com/Chapter_4/Mordida%20in%20the%20booklet.html. The practice is so routine that frequently the procedure is abbreviated and participants don't even bother trying to hide the payoff or going through the codebook pantomime. They may approach the officer's patrol car and directly drop the money onto the guy's lap. Business Ethics Workshop video, accessed May 12, 2011, http://businessethicsworkshop.com/Chapter_4/How_to_purchase_a_police_officer.html. Or they may stay in their own car and just hand cash out to be directly pocketed. Business Ethics Workshop video, accessed May 12, 2011, http://businessethicsworkshop.com/Chapter_4/Quick_mordida.html. Regardless, the transaction is smooth and efficient.

Despite the bribery's efficiency and its penetration to society's core, not everyone in Mexico City is happy with the constant mordidas. According to a story in the city's largest circulation daily, a mayor in one of the suburbs decided to take a lonely stand against the informal police action. Since *all* the police are in on it, he couldn't resort to an *Untouchables*-styled internal affairs operation. And since all the citizens considered the payoffs perfectly normal, he couldn't appeal to them for help either. Really, he was left with only one choice. To interrupt the habit, he made traffic tickets illegal. His suburb became a free driving zone where anybody could do whatever they wanted in their car and the police couldn't respond. A lot happened after that, but there's no doubt that the payoffs stopped. Alejandro Almazán, "Fin de la mordida," *El Universal*, November 16, 2003, accessed May 12, 2011, http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_notas=54910&tabla=ciudad.

QUESTIONS

1. About the bribery in Mexico City, not only is it the way things have been done as long as anyone can remember, but the process actually makes a lot of sense; it's even very economically efficient because the middlemen are being cut out. Instead of having to pay an administrative staff to process traffic tickets, then accept deposits into the city's account, and then redistribute the money back out as part of police salaries, here the money goes straight into the officer's pocket.
 - What is cultural relativism, and how does the vision of ethics associated with it diverge from the traditional ethical theories?
 - The Mexico City process of getting and paying off a traffic ticket is different from the US process. What values and advantages can be associated with the process in Mexico City? How can it be justified in ethical terms?
 - The Mexico City process of getting and paying off a traffic ticket is different from the US process. What values and advantages can be associated with the process in the United States? How can it be justified in ethical terms?
 - The Mexico City process of getting and paying off a traffic ticket is different from the US process. How can that difference be converted into an argument in favor of the idea that cultural relativism is the

right way to look at things? Does the argument convince you? Why or why not?

- Your company, FedEx, has sent you to Mexico to open a branch in Mexico City. You'll be there for three months, with all expenses paid. Can you make the case with a culturalist ethics that FedEx should reimburse not only your car rental and gas but also the two mordidas you had to pay even though you obviously don't have any receipts?
- After you return from your successful overseas experience, FedEx assigns you to train a set of recruits to go to Mexico and open more branch offices. When you talk about the police and mordidas, would you counsel a culturalist approach, or would you advise them to go by the book (as that phrase is understood in the United States)? How would you justify your decision?
- For owners of office buildings in Mexico City, FedEx is a great client. They pay their rent every month and they're probably willing to negotiate an amount in dollars, which is extremely attractive because the Mexican peso is prone to the occasional and steep devaluation. As a result, if you're opening up a new FedEx office, you're going to have building owners lining up, trying to rent you space. Does a decision to play by local rules and pay mordidas to cops also allow you to play by local real estate rules, which allow you to take a generous cash gift in exchange for renting in one building instead of the place across the street? Why or why not?
- You are sent to Mexico City to rent office space. You find two equally good spaces only distinguished by the fact that one owner offers a larger bribe than the other. No one's watching, no one will ever know, you can do whatever you want. What do you do? Why?

2. Think of yourself as a virtue ethicist.

- Very quickly, what are some of the virtues you personally attempt to live by, and what social institutions played a role in shaping your character?
- If you were sent to Mexico on a work assignment and found yourself in the situation typically faced by local drivers after being caught driving a bit fast, how would you handle the situation? Which virtues might come into play?
- Most advocates of virtue ethics believe companies—like other organizations including schools, churches, and community associations—play a role in instilling virtue. If you were training FedEx recruits destined to open branch offices in Mexico City and you wanted to prepare them for the ethical challenges of bribery, what virtues would you seek to instill in them? Can you think of any life experiences that some recruits may have had that may have formed their character to respond well to the situation on the Mexican streets?
- The mayor in suburban Mexico City who decided to cancel traffic tickets was, in fact, fighting against what he saw as corruption. Most advocates of virtue ethics believe government organizations play a role in instilling virtue in its citizens. Could this action be considered part of that effort? What virtues might it instill? How would it help people become better practitioners of those virtues?

3. The video *Mordida in the Booklet*

(http://businessethicsworkshop.com/Chapter_4/C4.html) shows a motorcycle officer getting paid off. One curious aspect is how long and intense the discussion stretches between the officer and the pulled-over driver. What they're doing is negotiating the amount. The fifty peso price tag is a good average, but the number can drop or climb depending on the give and take. Business Ethics Workshop video, accessed May 12, 2011, http://businessethicsworkshop.com/Chapter_4/Mordida%20in%20the%20booklet.html.

- What is the five-step process of discourse ethics? How could this bribery negotiation be understood within it?
 - According to Transparency International's *Corruption Perception Index*, Mexico is a place where people doing business make many informal agreements involving bribery, kickbacks, insider dealing, and all sorts of similar practices. Except for the fact that those involved are wearing suits, most of these scenes resemble the one between the motorcycle police officer and the driver: people talk for a while, come to a mutually satisfying, peaceful conclusion, and some money changes hands. Do you see this as an indictment of discourse ethics, a justification of the approach, or something else? Justify.
4. In the newspaper article about the Mexico City suburb where the Mayor decided to ban traffic tickets, the reporter interviewed a police officer described as "an old transit cop whose juicy bribes had helped buy his gold necklaces and bracelets." This was the old cop's reaction to the situation (translated from Spanish): "I got my buddies together and I told them, 'This sucks, now what're we going to do for money?'"

An ethics of care shifts the focus of moral thought away from the fair imposition of rules and toward the maintenance of immediate personal relationships. Ethics isn't about treating everyone equally so much as it is about keeping companions together.

- Listening to this officer, who do you suppose exists within his web of social responsibility?
- Assuming this officer practiced the ethics of care, would he treat these two drivers differently after pulling them over: his nephew and some out-of-towner he's never seen before? Why might he (not) treat them differently? Are there circumstances under which he'd actually demand more money from the nephew? What could those be?
- According to the newspaper article, in the first two months of ticketless existence in the suburb, about two hundred people were struck by moving vehicles, and twenty were killed. From the perspective of the ethics of care, can these numbers be used to form an argument against this policy and in favor of a return to the previous, corrupted reality?

Money for Nothing



Source: Photo
courtesy of Richard
Riley,
[http://www.flickr.com/
photos/rileyroxx/2969
244149/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/rileyroxx/2969244149/).

In his blog *thezspot*, author Z raises two questions about people receiving unemployment paychecks. Both are laced with suspicion of fraud. First, people who are collecting unemployment checks are required to show they're at least trying to get a job, but Z writes that some are "showing up for interviews in jeans and t-shirts." Then he asks, "Do these people really want the job, or are they just showing up to say that they are actively seeking work?" Business Ethics Workshop, accessed May 12, 2011, http://businessethicsworkshop.com/Chapter_4/Unemployment_fraud.html.

He goes from there to a second critical point. "Some people," Z says, "are collecting unemployment checks even though they're actually working." What they do is turn in their unemployment form listing the days they worked, and those are deducted from the check they receive. That sounds OK in the abstract, but, he adds, "The problem is that these people who are 'on call' are not taking shifts that are offered to them. Those shifts don't get deducted from their unemployment. So, while there are people who are actually unemployed, struggling and looking to find work, there are Union employees sitting at home deciding when they do and don't want to come in. And collecting unemployment."

From the posting's response section, here are two contributions:

1. It's not easy for me to swallow that my taxes are supporting people who could be working.
2. I have a question. I live in Wisconsin and I know of somebody who is collecting unemployment but is not actually going to any job interviews or is even applying for jobs. Is this illegal? If so, how can I report this without them knowing?

QUESTIONS

1. If you were using the eternal return to chart your way through life, would you have any problem "sitting at home deciding when you do and don't want to come in while collecting unemployment"? If you're all right with that, how would you respond to the complaint from the response section that someone is paying taxes to support your lifestyle?
2. Thinking about the people showing up for job interviews in jeans and t-shirts, what might be lacking in their character according to a virtue ethicist? If the government is one of those institutions proponents of virtue look to for the

instillation of good character, what might the government do in this situation in the name of encouraging virtue?

3. The second cited response to Z is a question about how an unemployment cheat can be reported “without them knowing.”
 - About this silent reporting, why is this *not* what a proponent of discourse ethics would recommend?
 - How could the five-step process of discourse ethics be applied to the situation? Would the guy complaining about paying taxes be included in the discussion? What kind of proposals might be voiced to rectify the situation?
4. Starting from the ethics of care, is there a situation you could imagine that would justify the actions of workers who take some shifts but decline others, and collect unemployment for those declined hours?

A Single Parent in the Army



*Source: Photo
courtesy of US Army
Africa,
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/usarmyafrica/4034104565/>.*

The post of cook in the mess hall is probably one of the Army’s least dangerous assignments, the closest you get to actual battle is a food fight, but it’s still a military job where you go and do what your orders command. For Specialist Alexis Hutchinson, a twenty-one-year-old Army cook, that meant catching a flight to Afghanistan. She missed hers, though, intentionally. She regretted abandoning her unit, but felt she had no choice. The single mother of a ten-month-old, she says she couldn’t find anyone to care for her child during the absence; the only potential help, her mother, was already overwhelmed by caring for three other relatives with health problems. Hutchinson’s fear, according to her lawyer, was that if she showed up at the airport, the Army “would send her to Afghanistan and put her son with child protective services.”

For its part, a military spokesman says, “the Army would not deploy a single parent who had nobody to care for a child.”

The situation is under review, but for the present, just like anyone else who refuses deployment, she’s under military arrest on her base in Georgia. “Mother Refuses Deployment,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/17/us/17soldier.html>.

QUESTIONS

1. Virtue ethics
 - The military is cited by virtue ethicists as a potential character-building institution, one of the places a society molds a good citizenry. What are some of the virtues the military could be expected to instill? How are those reflected in this situation?
 - Families are a cited source of virtue. What values should we expect family life to instill? How are those virtues reflected in this situation?
 - Is there any way to bring the military virtues and the family virtues together for Hutchinson? If so, what might it be? If not, why not and what should she do?
2. Proponents of discourse ethics walk through a five-step process on the way to reaching a negotiated settlement to moral conflicts. What might the five steps look like here?
3. One of the objections to discourse ethics is that it can set up a slippery slope—that is, the people involved can form a solution that bends the rules a little bit, and next someone else wants a little flexibility too, and then someone wants a little more, and before long, the rules have completely disappeared and everyone's doing whatever they want. Could you sketch out how this process could happen here, with the end result being the Army more or less losing the values at the core of its existence?
4. Ethics of care
 - One of the key elements composing an ethics of care and distinguishing it from traditional ethical theories is this: At the center of attention, independent actors are replaced by a web of interrelated individuals. Ethics, in other words, isn't about me and you, it's about us. In Hutchinson's case, she finds herself in the midst of at least two networks of "us," two communities of people to whom she owes an allegiance and care. Describe these communities and the links binding them.
 - Another of the key elements composing an ethics of care and distinguishing it from traditional ethical theories is this: The impartial application of abstract principles is replaced by the maintenance and harmonizing of human relationships. Ethics, in other words, is less about the fair imposition of rules and more about crafting social integration. Can you find an example of this conflict between an ethics of rules on one side, and an ethics of relationships on the other, in Hutchinson's situation?
 - Another of the key elements composing an ethics of care and distinguishing it from traditional ethical theories is this: Tensions between the rights of individuals get replaced by conflicts of responsibility to others in established relationships. Ethical tensions, in other words, aren't my rights versus yours, it's me torn between those I care for. In the case of Hutchinson, how is she torn?
 - In general, do you believe there's a place for an ethics of care in the military? If so, where? If not, why not?

