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Ethics for Life

A Text with Readings

Judith A. Boss

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Seventh Edition

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Mc Graw Hill Education

ETHICS FOR LIFE

To My Interns

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Preface

Aristotle wrote that "the ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it." *Ethics for Life* is a multicultural and interdisciplinary introductory ethics textbook that provides students with an ethics curriculum that has been shown to significantly improve students' ability to make real-life moral decisions.[1]

One of the frustrations in teaching ethics is getting students to integrate moral theory into their lives. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life, at one time the highest priority among entering college freshmen, has declined rapidly in the past thirty years as a motive for attending college. Criminal activities—including sexual assault, hate crimes, burglary, drug dealing, and murder—remain a problem on many college campuses. On the other hand, while the number has leveled off in the past few years, more college students are engaging in community service since 2001.[2] In addition, today's college students are increasingly committed to political activism and civic involvement.[3] Despite their good intentions, the moral reasoning of 20 percent of college students is at the level of that of a junior high student. By the time they graduate from college, 90 percent of students will not have made the transition from cultural relativism (in which morality is equated with cultural norms and laws) to independent principled reasoning.

How can ethics teachers provide students with the skills necessary to make better moral decisions in their lives? Traditional ethics courses, which restrict the study of ethics to the purely theoretical realm and avoid any attempt to make students better people, have been found to have little or no impact on students' ability to engage in moral reasoning outside the classroom.[4] While students are able to memorize theories and lines of reasoning long enough to pass the final exam, there is little true understanding and carryover into their moral reasoning outside the classroom. When confronted with real-life moral issues, most students simply revert back to their earlier forms of reasoning based on cultural norms or self-interest.

In the 1970s and 1980s, some professors who were dissatisfied with the traditional theory-laden ethics course replaced it with the values-clarification or value-neutral approach. This approach involves "nonjudgmental" and "nondirective" discussions of popular moral issues where students are encouraged to express their own opinions without fear of criticism or judgment. Unfortunately, the values-clarification approach has been found to have no positive effect on students' moral development and may even inhibit moral growth by sending the message that morality is all relative and hence anything goes as long as it feels good.

These findings have prompted researchers and instructors to look for new approaches to ethics education. *Ethics for Life* provides a curriculum that combines traditional ethics theory with a pedagogy based on the latest research on how to enhance moral development in college students. This approach has been found effective in improving students' moral judgment, moral behavior, and self-esteem.[5]

Objective

The primary objective of *Ethics for Life* is to provide a text that is solidly based in the latest research on moral development of college students, while at the same time providing students with a broad overview of the major world moral philosophies and case studies based on real-life issues.

Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Approach

One of the main obstacles students face in taking an ethics course is its perceived lack of relevance to their lives. Most ethics students are not philosophy majors. Ethics courses also tend to attract a widely diverse group of students, many of whom do not personally relate to the traditional European approach to moral philosophy. *Ethics for Life* includes coverage of, to name only a few, Buddhist ethics, Native American philosophy, ecofeminism, Confucianism, the utilitarian philosophy of Mo Tzu, feminist care ethics, and liberation ethics. The inclusion of moral philosophies from all over the world and from both women and men makes the book more appealing to nontraditional students, and it helps students move beyond the implicit cultural relativism in most ethics textbooks that privileges traditional Western male approaches to ethics.

Moral theory does not occur in isolation nor is morality practiced within a social vacuum. While the primary focus of this text is philosophical ethics, *Ethics for Life* adopts a more holistic approach. The book is presented in a historical and interdisciplinary context and includes extensive material from anthropology and sociology, political science, religion, psychology, and literature.

Because many students taking an ethics course are weak in critical thinking skills, Chapter 2 on moral reasoning includes sections on constructing moral arguments, resolving moral dilemmas, avoiding logical fallacies, and the relation between moral analysis and practice.

A Developmental Pedagogy

There is a saying that if students cannot learn the way we teach them, we have to teach them the way they learn. In creating ethics curriculums that promote moral development, one of the approaches that has held out the most promise is the use of a cognitive-developmental approach to ethics education combined with experiential education, generally in the form of community service and the discussion of real-life moral dilemmas.

Ethics for Life is organized using a developmental or progressive approach. This approach has been shown to have a higher success rate than the more traditional or values-clarification approaches to teaching ethics in terms of helping students move beyond ethical relativism and become principled moral reasoners.

Most ethics textbooks focus only briefly on ethical relativism. However, more than 90 percent of college students are ethical relativists. Rather than talk over students' heads, *Ethics for Life* starts at their level by including material on ethical relativism. The chapters in the book are arranged in the same order that these stages appear in a person's actual moral development. Only later are the students introduced to in-depth discussions of more advanced theories such as deontology, rights ethics, and virtue ethics.

Rather than lecturing from a higher stage of development (the traditional moral-indoctrination approach) or ignoring differences (the values-clarification approach), this approach entails building a bridge to the students and then guiding them across that bridge toward a higher stage of moral development and respectfully engaging them by challenging them to question their own assumptions. This process is also known as a cognitive apprenticeship whereby the teacher or mentor (the "expert") teaches the student (the "novice") a new skill by collaborating with him or her on a task—in this case the application of moral theory to hypothetical and real-life issues.[6] Respectful engagement also requires that the teacher takes an active role in the dialogue, including challenging students rather than creating an atmosphere of passive indifference and superficial tolerance.

To avoid reinforcing the belief that morality is all a matter of personal opinion and the mistaken impression that most moral decisions involve moral dilemmas, the case studies used in the first part of the book present situations where what is morally right and wrong seems clear-cut. This helps students sort out the relevant moral principles so that they later have a solid foundation for resolving more difficult moral dilemmas.

The book makes extensive use of exercises throughout each chapter. The purpose of the exercises is to encourage students to relate the theories in the text to real-life events and issues as well as to their own moral development. In addition to case studies that relate to students' own experience, case studies and personal reflection exercises are chosen with an eye to expanding students' concept of moral community. This is accomplished through the use of readings, case studies, and reflective exercises that focus on multicultural issues and problems of racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism. In addition, each chapter features pictures along with discussion questions related to issues raised in the chapter.

Also important for moral development is the integration of students' experiences by means of readings in developmental psychology and discussions of the personal meaning and relevance of these experiences to their own personal development. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth discussion of the latest research on moral development. Students are also encouraged throughout the text to relate the material to their own experience and their own moral growth.

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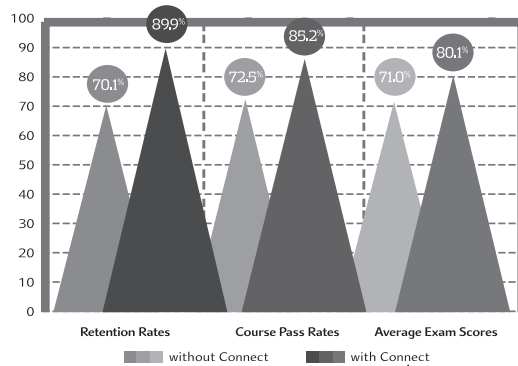
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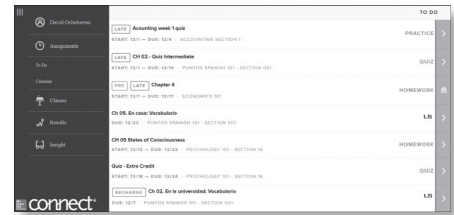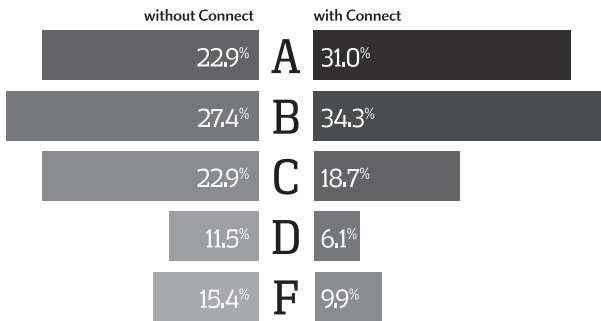
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Instructor's Manual

An online Instructor's Manual provides summaries of the chapters and readings, helpful teaching tips, and a bank of test questions for each chapter. Please contact your local McGraw-Hill sales representative for more details.

Ethics for Life is set up so it can be used with or without a community service component. Studies show that participation in community service as part of an ethics class has a positive effect on students' self-esteem and level of empathy as well as their ability to engage in moral reasoning. Community service gives them an opportunity to integrate what they are learning in class into real-life situations. To assist in this goal, exercises are provided in each chapter to help students relate classroom theory to their community service. These exercises are marked with asterisks.

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Notes

1. Judith A. Boss, "Adopting an Aristotelian Approach to Teaching College Ethics," *Philosophy and Community Service Learning* (Washington, DC: Association for the Advancement of Higher Education, 1997); and Judith A. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students," *Journal of Moral Education*, 23 (1994): 183–198.
2. U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Volunteering in the United States, 2015," http://www .bls,gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm
3. Cooperative Institute Research Program, *The American College Freshman Norms for Fall 2015*, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, January 2016.
4. James Rest, "Why Does College Promote Development in Moral Judgment?" *Journal of Moral Education* 17, no. 3 (1988): 183–184.
5. Boss, "The Effect of Community Service Work on the Moral Development of College Ethics Students."
6. See William Damon, *Greater Expectations* (New York: The Free Press, 1995). See also Chapter 7, for a discussion of this method of moral education.

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The Study of Ethics

Many college ethics students want to skip ethical theory and immediately begin with discussions of compelling moral issues. However, productive discussion of issues requires first establishing a solid foundation in the nuances of ethical theory and moral reasoning.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live as well as the justification of these values and guidelines. The first chapter, "Ethics: An Overview," begins with an introduction to ethics and a brief discussion of different types of ethical theories. It also addresses some of the fundamental philosophical questions that underlie ethics, including questions about human nature, free will versus determinism, moral knowledge, and the nature of philosophical inquiry.

The second chapter, "Moral Reasoning," provides the reader with the skills necessary to analyze and evaluate different moral theories and lines of reasoning. Developing critical thinking skills enables students to make better moral judgments and makes them less likely to be taken in by faulty reasoning.

As people develop morally, they tend to be less likely to fall for faulty reasoning and more likely to be satisfied with their moral decisions. The third chapter, "Conscience and Moral Reasoning," looks at some of the theories of moral development. The study of moral development not only enhances our own moral development, it also helps us place the various types of ethical theory and own style of moral decision making in context.

Ethics education is making a comeback. As such, speculations about what morality is are bombarding us from all sides. This is exciting: We are challenged to be on our toes and to sharpen our analytical skills in order to discern which theories are workable and which ones we need to discard. By figuring out what doesn't work, we can learn a lot. We may not have come up with the perfect theory by the end of this course, but we will have a much better sense of how to make satisfactory moral decisions.

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Ethics

An Overview

The ultimate purpose in studying ethics is not as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it.
—ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 2

It's the beginning of a new semester. Tomorrow morning is your first ethics class. You signed up for the class only because it was required. "What a waste of time," you grumble as you climb into bed. "What's the point in studying ethics? It doesn't have anything to do with real life. I wish there was no such thing as ethics or morality."

The next morning you wake up and wearily grope your way to the bathroom. As you open the door, you find to your dismay that your roommate has left the bathroom in a total mess. Your roommate's clothes are soaking in cold slimy water in the sink and bathtub, and the toilet is caked with grime. Annoyed, you return to your room and shake your roommate's shoulder: "Come on, get up. You promised to clean the bathroom yesterday."

"So what?" your roommate replies. "I don't have to keep my promises if I don't feel like it." And with that, your roommate rolls over and, looking quite peaceful, goes back to sleep.

You are now feeling very annoyed, but you manage to get ready for class, although not in time to have breakfast. You arrive at class right on time; however, the teacher hasn't turned up. You take a seat next to another student who lives in your dormitory. But instead of returning your greeting, he grabs your book bag and heads toward the door. "Stop!" you protest. "That's mine. You can't take that."

He looks at you like you're nuts. "Why not?"

"Because it doesn't belong to you," you reply indignantly. "It's stealing!"

At which he laughs, "You're not making any sense."

"You have no right . . . ," you add.

The thief rolls his eyes: "Didn't you hear the latest news? Ethics, morality—they no longer exist. Isn't that great news! Now we can do whatever we like! And no one can pass judgment on anything we do, including you!"

You wait another twenty minutes for the teacher to show up; then you decide to head over to the cafeteria to get some breakfast. However, the dining staff didn't bother to report to work either. The back door has been smashed open, and trays of donuts and fruit have been taken out onto the quad, where a group of administrators and faculty members, including your ethics teacher, are squabbling over the booty. You step up onto a chair that has been tossed out on the curb, to get a better look, when someone comes rushing up from behind and knocks you down.

As you fall, you hear a sickening snap and feel a stabbing pain in your knee. You cry out in agony. Then, you recognize the person who knocked you over. It's the dean of your college. You plead for her to call for help. But she only pushes you out of her way and hurries on toward the skirmish on the quad. Off in the distance, you hear another cry for help as two men drag a terrified woman into the bushes. No one tries to stop them. A few people stop and peer at you out of curiosity before moving on. Most just stare blankly at you as they walk past. No one offers to help. And why should they? Sympathy and compassion no longer exist. The duty not to cause harm to others or to help those in need no longer exists. No one has any rights that we have to respect anymore. No more stupid obligations, such as sharing with others or keeping our commitments, to prevent us from doing what we enjoy.

As you begin to lose consciousness, you start having second thoughts about the importance of ethics and morality in your life. At that moment, your alarm clock goes off. You get out of bed and wearily grope your way to the bathroom. As you open the door, you realize that your roommate has left the bathroom in a total mess. Annoyed, you return to your room and shake your roommate's shoulder: "Come on, get up. You promised to clean the bathroom yesterday."

"Oh, no," your roommate groans. "I'm sorry, I forgot all about it." After a short pause, your roommate rolls out of bed, complaining under her breath, "I can't think of anything else I'd less rather do." You breathe a sigh of relief and go to the kitchenette to make yourself some breakfast while your roommate begrudgingly cleans the bathroom.

SELF-EVALUTION QUESTIONNAIRE*

Rate yourself on the following scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Culture determines what is moral and immoral.	1	2	3	4	5
There are no right or wrong answers. Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion.	1	2	3	4	5
I tend to stick to my position on an issue even when others try to change my mind.	1	2	3	4	5
It is important that we obey the law, even though we may disagree with it.	1	2	3	4	5
People ought to do what best serves their interests.	1	2	3	4	5
There are universal moral principles that hold for all people, regardless of their culture.	1	2	3	4	5

(continued)

Religion is the source of morality.	1	2	3	4	5
I would refuse to comply if an authority figure ordered me to do something that might cause me to hurt someone else.	1	2	3	4	5
I tend to sacrifice my needs for those of others.	1	2	3	4	5

* Explanations for each item on this scale can be found in the instructor's manual and online at www .mhhe.com/bossef17e.

What Is Ethics?

Ethics is a lot like air: It is pretty much invisible. In fact, for many centuries, people did not realize that such a substance as air even existed. So too we often fail to recognize the existence of ethics or morality until someone fails to heed it.

The term **ethics** has several meanings. It is often used to refer to a set of standards of right and wrong established by a particular group and imposed on members of that group as a means of regulating and setting limits on their behavior. This use of the word *ethics* reflects its etymology, which goes back to the Greek word *ethos*, meaning "cultural custom or habit." The word *moral* is derived from the Latin word *moralis*, which also means "custom." Although some philosophers distinguish between the terms *ethical* and *moral*, others, including the author of this text, use the two terms interchangeably.

The identification of ethics and morality with cultural norms or customs reflects the fact that most adults tend to identify morality with cultural customs. Philosophical ethics, also known as *moral philosophy*, goes beyond this limited concept of right and wrong. Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, includes the study of the values and guidelines by which we live and the *justification* for these values and guidelines. Rather than simply accepting the customs or guidelines used by one particular group or culture, philosophical ethics analyzes and evaluates these guidelines in light of accepted universal principles and concerns.

More important, ethics is a way of life. In this sense, ethics involves active engagement in the pursuit of the good life—a life consistent with a coherent set of moral values. According to Aristotle, one of the leading Western moral philosophers, the pursuit of the good life is our most important activity as humans. Indeed, studies have found that even criminals believe morality is important—at least for others. Although criminals may not always act on their moral beliefs, they still expect others to do so. Almost all criminals, when asked, state that they do not want their children to engage in immoral behavior and would get angry if one of their children committed a crime.[1]

Aristotle believed that "the moral activities are human *par excellence*."[2] Because morality is the most fundamental expression of our human nature, it is through being moral that we are the happiest. According to Aristotle, it is

through the repeated performance of good actions that we become moral (and happier) people. He referred to the repeated practice of moral actions as **habituation**. The idea that practicing good actions is more important for ethics education than merely studying theory is also found in other philosophies, such as Buddhism.

[A] man becomes just by the performance of the just . . . actions; nor is there the smallest likelihood of a man's becoming good by any other course of conduct.

—ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 4

At the age of seventeen, Aristotle became a student at Plato's Academy in Athens, where he remained until Plato's death twenty years later. The Academy was founded by Plato in 388 B.C.E. and lasted over nine hundred years; it is reputed to be Europe's first university.[3] Plato's famous Academy was not like universities today, with organized classes, degrees, and specialized faculty. Instead, it was more of a fellowship of intellectuals interested in Athenian culture and the opportunity to listen to and exchange ideas with the great philosopher Plato.

Aristotle later opened his own school, the Lyceum, in Athens. The Lyceum contained a garden known as "the walk," where Aristotle supposedly had the habit of walking while teaching his students. In 323 B.C.E., Aristotle was accused of impiety for teaching his students to continually question the accepted ideas

The philosopher Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.) with his disciple Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) at the Academy in Athens. The Academy is reputed to be Europe's first university.
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and norms of the time. Several years earlier, in 399 B.C.E., the Athenians had sentenced Plato's teacher, Socrates, to death on similar charges. Aristotle fled to Euboea rather than take a chance that "the Athenians should sin a second time against philosophy." He died in Babylon a year later.

Exercises

1. Complete the Self-Evaluation Questionnaire on pages 4–5. Relate your answers to your ideas regarding the ultimate source of morality. Discuss how this influences what criteria you use in making moral decisions in your life. Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.

2. One way to define what we mean by "moral" is to look at the lives of those whom we regard to be good people, as Aristotle looked up to Plato. Do you have a hero? If so, who is your hero and why?

3. Do all actions have a moral dimension? If not, why do some actions involve moral judgments while others are morally neutral? Explain using specific examples.

4. Discuss ways in which participation in an academic community has encouraged you, as it did Aristotle, to critically analyze your ideas and assumptions about morality and moral issues.

5. Do you agree with Aristotle that practicing moral virtues and behavior is more important for ethics education than the study of moral theory? How might his approach be integrated into a college ethics course?

Normative and Theoretical Ethics

> *. . . a complete moral philosophy would tell us how and why we should act and feel toward others in relationships of shifting and varying power asymmetry and shifting and varying intimacy.*
>
> —ANNETTE BAIER, *Ethics* (1986), p. 252

There are two traditional subdivisions of ethics: (1) theoretical ethics or meta-ethics and (2) normative ethics. **Theoretical ethics** is concerned with appraising the logical foundations and internal consistencies of ethical systems. Theoretical ethics is also known as **metaethics**; the prefix *meta* comes from the Greek word meaning "about" or "above." **Normative ethics**, on the other hand, gives us guidelines or norms, such as "do not lie" or "do no harm," regarding which actions are right and which are wrong. In other words, theoretical ethics, or metaethics, studies *why* we should act and feel a certain way; normative ethics tells us *how* we should act in particular situations.

Normative ethics affects our lives at all levels: personal, interpersonal, social (both locally and globally), and environmental. Normative ethics gives us practical hands-on guidelines or norms that we can apply to real-life situations.

Because of this, it is sometimes referred to as *applied ethics.* A professional code of ethics is an example of a set of practical moral guidelines.

Moral guidelines are not simply a list of dos and don'ts that others impose upon us, however. As adults, it is not enough just to do as we are told. We expect to be given good reasons for acting certain ways or taking certain positions on moral issues.

Theoretical ethics operates at a more fundamental level than normative ethics. Theoretical ethics takes, as its starting point, the most basic insights regarding morality. Moral norms and guidelines need to be grounded in theoretical ethics; otherwise, morality becomes arbitrary. In this text, we will concern ourselves primarily with the theoretical underpinnings of ethics.

Metaethical theories can be divided into cognitive and noncognitive theories. **Noncognitive theories**, such as **emotivism**, claim that there are no moral truths and that moral statements are neither true nor false but simply expressions or outbursts of feelings. If moral statements are neither true nor false, there is no such thing as objective moral truths.

Cognitive theories, on the other hand, maintain that moral statements can be either true or false. Cognitive theories can be further subdivided into relativist and universalist theories (Table 1.1). **Relativist theories** state that morality is different for different people. In contrast, **universalist theories** maintain that objective moral truths exist that are true for all humans, regardless of their personal beliefs or cultural norms.

TABLE 1.1   Metaethical Theories

NONCOGNITIVE	COGNITIVE		
	Relativist Theories	**Universalist Theories**	
Emotivism	Ethical Subjectivism	Ethical Egoism	Deontology
	Cultural Relativism	Utilitarianism	Virtue Ethics
	Divine Command	Natural Law Ethics	Rights Ethics

Relativist Theories

According to the **relativist theories**, there are no independent moral values. Instead, morality is *created* by humans. Because morality is invented or created by humans, it can vary from time to time and from person to person. **Ethical subjectivism**, the first type of relativist theory, maintains that moral right or wrong is relative to the individual person and that moral truth is a matter of individual opinion or feeling. Unlike reason, **opinion** is based only on feeling rather than analysis or facts. In ethical subjectivism, there can be as many systems of morality as there are people in the world. Many college students—especially freshmen—maintain that morality is relative to each individual. We'll be studying this theory in more depth in Chapter 4.

Moral values are not absolute but relative
to the emotions they express.

—EDWARD WESTERMARCK (sociologist)

Cultural relativists, on the other hand, argue that morality is created collectively by groups of humans and that it differs from society to society. Each society has its own moral norms, which are binding on the people who belong to that society. Each society also defines who is and who is not a member of the moral community. With cultural relativism, each circle or moral system represents a different culture. The majority of Americans believe that morality is culturally relative (see Chapters 3 and 6).

We recognize that morality differs in every
society, and is a convenient term for
socially approved habits.

—RUTH BENEDICT (anthropologist)

A third type of relativist theory is **divine command theory**. According to this theory, what is moral is relative to God. There are no universal moral principles that are binding on all people. Instead, morality is dependent on God's will and may differ from person to person or from religion to religion. We'll be examining this theory in depth in Chapter 5.

Ethical subjectivism, cultural relativism, and divine command theory are mutually exclusive theories. When theories are mutually exclusive, a person cannot consistently hold more than one of the theories to be true at the same time. For example, either morality is created by the *individual* and the opinion of the individual always takes precedence over that of the collective, or else morality is relative to one's *culture* and the moral rule of the culture always takes precedence over that of the individual.

Universalist Theories

Universalist theories, the second group of cognitive theories, maintain that there are universal moral values that apply to *all* humans and, in some cases, extend beyond the human community. Morality is *discovered*, rather than created, by humans. The basic standards of right and wrong are derived from principles that exist independently of an individual's or a society's opinion.