CHAPTER 1
Understanding Ethics

Chapter Summary
This chapter begins by defining ethics and how people decipher between “right” and “wrong” or “good” and “bad” behavior. It explores how people live their lives according to a standard or “right” or “wrong” behavior and how their personal set of morals are formed. Society plays a role in the traditions and customs that shape the standards or moral set that people adopt. Common standards shared among individuals can be called values or a values system. Some people have different definitions of ethics such as, personal integrity, rules of appropriate individual behavior, rules of appropriate behavior for a community or society, and some define ethics as simply “doing the right thing.” The Golden Rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, is also a goal of living an ethical life by some. There are also some ethical theories discussed, which are divided into three categories: virtue ethics, ethics for the greater good, and universal ethics. The chapter is concluded with a discussion on ethical relativism, applied ethics, ethical dilemmas, and how to resolve these situations.

Learning Objectives
After studying this chapter, the student should be able to:

1. Define Ethics.
2. Explain the role of values in ethical decision-making.
3. Understand opposing ethical theories and their limitations.
4. Discuss ethical relativism.
5. Explain an ethical dilemma.
6. Apply a process for resolving an ethical dilemma.

Extended Chapter Outline

Objective 1: What is Ethics?
1.1. The opening Frontline Focus case shows how a rental agent faces an ethical decision with her new boss.
   1.1.1. The field of ethics is the study of how people try to live their lives according to a standard of “right” or “wrong” behavior.
   1.1.2. Many people define what’s right and wrong as a result of many factors such as how they were raised, religion, and the traditions and beliefs of their society.
   1.1.2.1. Society is a structured community of people bound together by similar traditions and customs.

Objective 2: Understanding Right and Wrong
2.1 Moral standards are principles based on religious, cultural, or philosophical beliefs by which judgments are made about good or bad behavior.
2.1.1 Beliefs come from numerous sources:
   2.1.1.1 Friends
   2.1.1.2 Family
   2.1.1.3 Ethnic background
   2.1.1.4 Religion
   2.1.1.5 School
   2.1.1.6 Media – television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet
   2.1.1.7 Personal role models/mentors
   2.1.1.1 One’s morality represents a collection of all these influences as they are built up over your lifetime.

2.1.2 Culture is a particular set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that characterize a group of individuals.

2.2 Standards of ethical behavior are absorbed by osmosis as you observe the examples set by everyone around you.
   2.2.1 The terms morals and values are often used to mean the same thing – a set of personal principles by which you aim to live your life.
   2.2.2 Value system is a set of personal principles formalized into a code of behavior.

2.3 A person’s values can be said to have a specific “worth” for them. This is expressed in two ways:
   2.3.1 An intrinsic value is where a value is a good thing in itself and is pursued for its own sake, whether anything good comes from that pursuit or not.
   2.3.2 An instrumental value is where the pursuit of that value is a good way to reach another value.

2.4 The impact of a person’s or a group’s value system can be seen in the extent to which their daily lives are influenced by those values.
   2.4.1 The greatest test of any personal value system comes when you are presented with a situation that places those values in direct conflict with an action.
   2.4.1.1 Lying is wrong – but what if you were lying to protect the life of a loved one?
   2.4.1.2 Stealing is wrong – but what if you were stealing food for a starving child?
   2.4.1.3 Killing is wrong – but what if you had to kill someone in self-defense to protect your own life?

2.4.2 The grey area makes the study of ethics so complex.

2.5 Four basic categories of ethics:
   2.5.1 Simple truth – right and wrong or good and bad.
   2.5.1.1 Simply assuming that everyone is committed to doing the right thing.
   2.5.2 A question of someone’s personal character – his or her integrity.
   2.5.2.1 Looks at ethics from an external rather than internal viewpoint.
   2.5.3 Rules of appropriate individual behavior.
   2.5.4 Rules of appropriate behavior for a community or society

2.6 For some, the goal of living an ethical life is expressed by the Golden Rule.
2.6.1 The **Golden Rule** is to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

2.6.2 The danger with the Golden Rule is that not everyone thinks like you, acts like you, or believes in the same principles that you do.

**Objective 3: Ethical Theories**

3.1 Ethical theories can be divided into three categories: virtue ethics, ethics for the greater good, and universal ethics.

3.1.1 **Virtue ethics** is a concept of living your life according to a commitment to the achievement of a clear ideal – what sort of person would I like to become, and **how do I go about becoming that person?**

3.1.1.1 The problem with virtue ethics is that societies can place different emphasis on different virtues.

3.1.2 Ethics for the greater good is a theory that is more focused on the outcome of your actions rather than the apparent virtue of the actions themselves.

3.1.2.1 Also referred to as **utilitarianism** – Ethical choices that offer the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

3.1.2.2 The problem with this approach to ethics is the idea that the ends justify the means.

3.1.3 **Universal ethics** refers to actions taken out of **duty and obligation** to a purely moral ideal rather than based on the needs of the situation, since the universal principles are seen to apply to everyone, everywhere, all the time.

3.1.3.1 Universal ethics argues that there are certain and universal principles that should apply to all ethical judgments.

3.1.3.2 The problem with this approach is the reverse of the weakness in ethics for the greater good.

**Objective 4: Ethical Relativism**

4.1 **Ethical relativism** is where the traditions of your society, your personal opinions, and the circumstances of the present moment define your ethical principles.

4.1.1 This idea implies some degree of flexibility as opposed to strict black-and-white rules.

**Objective 5: Ethical Dilemmas**

5.1 **Applied ethics** is the study of how ethical theories are put into practice.

5.2 **Ethical dilemmas** are situations in which there is no obvious right or wrong decision, but rather a right or right answer.

5.2.1 When faced with an ethical dilemma, the decision you must make requires you to make a right choice knowing full well that you are:

5.2.1.1 Leaving an equally right choice undone.

5.2.1.2 Likely to suffer something bad as a result of that choice.

5.2.1.3 Contradicting a personal ethical principle in making that choice.

5.2.1.4 Abandoning an ethical value of your community or society in making that choice.
5.2.2 The “answer” to an ethical dilemma is often the lesser of two evils – it’s more a question of whether or not you can arrive at an outcome you can live with.

5.2.3 Three step process for solving an ethical problem:
   5.2.3.1 Analyze the consequences.
   5.2.3.2 Analyze the actions.
   5.2.3.3 Make a decision.

5.2.4 Arthur Dobrin identified eight questions you should consider when resolving an ethical dilemma:
   5.2.4.1 What are the facts?
   5.2.4.2 What can you guess about the facts you don’t know?
   5.2.4.3 What do the facts mean?
   5.2.4.4 What does the problem look like through the eyes of the people involved?
   5.2.4.5 What will happen if you choose one thing rather than another?
   5.2.4.6 What do your feelings tell you?
   5.2.4.7 What will you think of yourself if you decide on thing or another?
   5.2.4.8 Can you explain and justify your decision to others?

Objective 6: Ethical Reasoning

6.1 Ethical reasoning is a process of looking at the information available to us in resolving an ethical dilemma, and drawing conclusions based on that information in relation to our own ethical standards.

6.2 Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of ethical reasoning:
   6.2.1 Level one – Preconventional – perceptions of right and wrong are initially directly linked to punishments or rewards
      6.2.1.1 Stage 1 – Obedience and punishment orientation – avoidance of punishment and deference to power and authority
      6.2.1.2 Stage 2 – Individualism, instrumentalism, and exchange – satisfaction of own needs
   6.2.2 Level two – Conventional – becomes aware of broader influences outside the family
      6.2.2.1 Stage 3 – “Good boy/nice girl” orientation – focused on meeting the expectations of family members
      6.2.2.2 Stage 4 – Law and order orientation – increasingly aware of his or her membership in a society and the existence of codes of behavior
   6.2.3 Level three – Postconventional – makes a clear effort to define principles and moral values that reflect an individual value system rather than simply reflecting the group position.
      6.2.3.1 Stage 5 – Social-contract legalistic orientation – focused on individual rights, and the development of standards based on critical examination
      6.2.3.2 Stage 6 – Universal ethical principle orientation – focused on self-chosen ethical principles that are found to be comprehensive and consistent
**Key Terms**

**Applied Ethics:** The study of how ethical theories are put into practice.

**Culture:** A particular set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that characterize a group of individuals.

**Ethical Dilemma:** A situation in which there is no obvious right or wrong decision, but rather a right or right answer.

**Ethical Reasoning:** Looking at the information available to us in resolving an ethical dilemma, and drawing conclusions based on that information in relation to our own ethical standards.

**Ethical Relativism:** Where the traditions of your society, your personal opinions, and the circumstances of the present moment define your ethical principles.

**Ethics:** How people try to live their lives according to a standard of “right” or “wrong” behavior – in both how we think and behave toward others and how we would like them to think and behave toward us.

**The Golden Rule:** Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

**Instrumental Value:** Where the pursuit of that value is a good way to reach another value.

**Intrinsic Value:** Where a value is a good thing in itself and is pursued for its own sake, whether anything comes from that pursuit or not.

**Society:** A structured community of people bound together by similar traditions and customs.

**Universal Ethics:** Actions are taken out of duty and obligation to a purely moral ideal rather than based on the needs of the situation, since the universal principles are seen to apply to everyone, everywhere, all the time.

**Utilitarianism:** Ethical choices that offer the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

**Value System:** A set of personal principles formalized into a code of behavior.

**Virtue Ethics:** A concept of living you life according to a commitment to the achievement of a clear ideal – *what sort of person would I like to become and how do I go about becoming that person?*