PART FIVE

Avoiding the Hazards of Moral Discourse
Hazards and Pitfalls

A hazard of moral discourse is anything that interferes with moral judgment. The main general hazards are incompleteness and insensitivity, as we have stressed throughout our study of ethics. The ethical wheel model tries to counter these failings. It is designed to give us theoretical clarity, to help us uncover the complexity of moral reality, and to aid us in making well-informed judgments.

Beyond the general hazards of incompleteness and insensitivity, there are seven specific hazards that merit special attention: myth, cognitive mood, false analogies, abstractions, selective vision, role, and banalization. This list of inherent hazards is illustrative, not exhaustive. Even when we consciously try our best to avoid these hazards, we can still be influenced by them in the way we see and judge moral issues. Reality is not transparent. It is a fallacy to think of the mind as a docile camera or mirror that accurately reflects back to us things as they are. Human knowing is interpretative. We don’t just receive; we filter and relate everything new to something old.

What happens when we know is that we both receive and give. Knowable reality is not simply ingested as is, unrelated to the rest of our experience. It fits into the overall universe of our past experiences and knowledge. In this respect, knowledge is relational and within a context of meaning. When something new or strange and different comes before us, we try to give it meaning within the context of what we already know. If we cannot, it is frightening, like the proverbial alien from Mars. We know by fitting things into a pattern of familiarity. The mind wants to make sense of things. To do this it places a high value on familiarity and it will readily reject what appears meaningless and unrelated.

Persons arrive at intellectual maturity when, in their search for meaning, they so extend their relational field of knowledge that they overcome the narrowness imposed by hazards. Openness of the mind is the mark of such maturity. But there are always limits to how open our minds are. In our hunger for meaning we may project more than we receive. In such a situation we do not discover meaning — we fabricate it or we accept the fabrication that society has given us. Thus
at the outset we need to be aware of anything that impedes moral understanding.

**Knowing**, therefore, is a hazardous business. Because of our urgent need to make sense, we often impose meaning that is not there. And, on top of that, there are filters and barriers between us and reality. To improve our reality contact, we have to be aware of the obstacles we face. The first, and most potentially damaging, is myth. Myth has many positive meanings, but we are using it here in the sense of a distortional filter.

**Myth as Interpreter of Meaning...**

To know the ways of moral understanding, ethics must chart out a method. But the best method in the world will do little for someone whose vision of the real is captivated by a distorting myth. A full and sensitive method must recognize the hazards of moral discourse. We do not know solely "from the neck up"; all that we are is involved. We also know out of a history and a social setting. There are filters, in other words, socially and intrapersonally derived, that stand between us and what is. A good ethical method questions those filters in the hope of minimizing their distorting effect.

Myth is the first of such silent but busy filters. Immediately, it is necessary to explain what myth means in this context since, as we have said, it is a polyvalent word. Words are like people in that they have many relatives and hangers-on. When you decide to marry one to your particular purpose, it is wise to make clear in advance that it is the word you want and not the whole family of associations.

Myth in our usage is this: *It is a complex of feelings, attitudes, symbols, memories, and experienced relationships through which reality is refracted, filtered, and interpreted.* By that definition, knowledge is always to some degree mythic. Interpretation will always be affected by the complex of our feelings, attitudes, and so forth. Sometimes this will be gainful. Buoyed by a creative myth, persons may rise to heights they never would have aspired to in the absence of the myth. The confidence-inspiring myth of "American know-how" has historically served to keep our technologists working to the point of success when those working without the myth would have given up at an earlier more "reasonable" point. The myths surrounding patriotism and parenthood often bring forth generosity and imagination from the most unlikely subjects. Myths may be the vehicle of ideals that keep persons and societies moving forward. They can be described in very positive terms. But if myths limit moral cognition, they become a hazard and all the thinking done under their sway becomes impaired. Our concern here is with myth in this pejorative sense, as a limiting force in moral awareness.

Myths are historical and social in their roots. We might think of a
private myth developed in the history of one person, but this is not the common usage of the term. Normally when we speak of myth, we refer to a phenomenon that is (or has been) present and operative in the culture. Myths are the way collectivities find identity, the way they interpret and give meaning to things. All cultures are under the influence of myths. The myth of woman is an example. Although this myth is being brought under social criticism in many cultures today, it is ingrained in much of what we do and think. If we look at it closely, it can instruct us on many of the basic properties of myth.

Often social, historical, and biological exigencies lay the foundations for myth. Because a man does not get pregnant and cannot nurse a baby, he appeared to be the more natural candidate to leave the cave and go forth to meet the challenges of the outside world. What eventually emerged was the myth that a woman is essentially a creature of the home. Cooking and children are the realities that define her and accurately reflect her true identity. Although some attitudes are slowly changing, the unmarried woman is still unlike her counterpart, the bachelor, who is not seen as a truncated person because of his single state. She, however, is too generally seen as lacking the reality that symbolizes the meaning of her myth. A woman is defined, according to this myth, not by her professional responsibilities or personal qualities and talents but by her domestic relationships.

The myth of woman also illustrates the fact that myths can be complex and converge into an explanation of historic reality. For instance, the myth of woman associates the feminine with temptation and the origins of evil and it can be found in the larger context of cosmogonic myths that imaginatively and poetically recount human origins. Woman does not fare well in many of the larger myths. Relating an account given by Sappho and Hesiod, the fourth-century Latin commentator Servius wrote that “Prometheus is said to have stolen fire and revealed it to men. The gods were angered by this and sent two evils on the earth, women and disease.”

The power of myth lies in the fact that it can affect you without your knowing it. The myth is in you. The filter is in place, and reality dashes against it, is repelled, and does not get into your mind. That we can be so inured to them makes them treacherous. Even now we are inured to the de facto segregation of women from government and many professions where males predominate with lopsided majority.

Myths are stubborn. They are resistant to data that do not square with their interpretation. They can also be a shield for guilt. They may conveniently cover over some ugly facts that might require painful moral conversion. To attack a myth is to attack well-established vested interest. Not only will guilt be exposed but privileges lost. Myths also interlock with other myths and this gives them added strength.
Disturbing one myth might disturb other advantageous myths and this can make us defensive and protective of our myths. There are strong emotional commitments to myths, commitments that will not be unsettled simply by logical criticism. And if myths are tinged with a religious ideology, the whole foundation of our sense of reality is affected. Religiously braced myths are the most unyielding.

The etiology of the myth of woman is more complex than we could suggest in this brief treatment, but clearly this historic myth shows how profoundly the mind can be bewitched by myths. Since the power of myth is frightening, some deliberate fear of it is the mark of the wise. A critical consciousness of myth is essential to ethics. The task here for ethics is never-ending. If we manage to critique and dislodge a deleterious myth, we are likely to substitute another for it or develop a counter-myth such as the super-woman/super-mom ideal. Unfortunately, as many persons are realizing, no one can do and have it all. The mythic call to be a super-mom is unrealistic. Frustrations under this kind of myth are bound to happen. As we demythologize, we remythologize. Criticism may at least yield better myths, and fruitful myths may succeed bad ones. But since all myth is marked by stereotypical thinking, all myths call for criticism.

All professions are heavy in myth. In the medical profession, for example, there are myths about the power of a physician, the role of a nurse, and the meaning of being a patient. Because of these myths, authority is taken from the patient (who, when informed, should have the last word) and given to the medical professionals. The patients are victims of the myth too and they do not even think they have a right to make their own important decisions. Business persons also operate out of myths and this often hurts their entrepreneurial effectiveness. Very often, highly paid consultants and “motivational experts” are merely helping people escape their demonic myths and do what would have been the obviously right thing were it not for the blinding myth.

The power of myth to stereotype is the power to lock our thought patterns into undifferentiated abstractions that prevent us from assessing specific moral circumstances. Mythic thinking distorts our perception of concrete reality. For example, in the psycho-political world that we all live in, stereotypical thinking abounds in the propaganda that various parties and nations use to govern opinion. (Propaganda is always pregnant with myth.) Sometimes stereotypes reinforce biased attitudes, and when allied to fears, they create a world where symbols replace experience and where differences become threats. Because knowledge in the psycho-political universe is so heavily mediated, myths and stereotypes have easy access to the mind. Even though they can change from one generation to the next, they are forcefully operative in our judgment of diverse groups and nations. What is required
by sound ethics is the recognition of the mythic bent of our knowing. However, it is no simple matter to get a critical view; it always seems easier to criticize someone else's myths.

Myth can also relate to the notion of "ideology," but the latter term implies a different kind of thought process. Ideologies, of course, contain myths and to some degree marshal them into the work of understanding and organizing collective movements. Ideology involves a rational and systematizing element that differs from myth. Ideology is a somewhat systematic way of making sense of reality. There are ideologies of capitalism and socialism. American "messianism," which sees the United States as the solution to all world problems, is a stubborn enduring ideology. Ideology and myth both can lead us to prefer our conceptualizations of the reality to reality itself. If morality is based on reality, a discerning ethics must try to get to that reality by working through myths, stereotypes, and ideologies. Looking at hazards of moral discourse, then, is not an optional exercise for ethics.

**Cognitive Mood...**

A second hazard of moral discourse is cognitive mood. An identical event or physical object will not look the same to a child, a dying person, a lover, a business executive, a poet, a Wisconsin farmer, or a nomad. Neither will any of these persons view that reality in the same unchanging light since moods change. Mood affects the way we perceive and understand, and its influence might at times be all-controlling. Even a child will learn early on that there are times to ask for things and times not to, depending on the mood of the parent. We often sense the impact of mood on others, and we ought not neglect it in ourselves.

Mood is a conditioner of our subjectivity. It can sharpen our vision and make us more sensitive, or it can place a veil between us and reality. A change of mood can induce an apology for something that an earlier mood caused. Mood can be a significant factor in the way we perceive and act. The cognitive effect of mood is not always negative, but when it is it can radically alter how we do ethics and judge moral issues. Since mood is such an omnipresent part of us, it merits consideration among the hazards of moral discourse. Mood casts long shadows over all our valuing, whether those values be aesthetic, commercial, or specifically moral. It is not just the thinking animal that evaluates; it is the thinking, feeling, sensing, believing, reacting, and culturally situated animal that responds to value. The moral person does not operate in a void but in an enormousness of intentional and external contextualizing factors. Mood is a significant aspect of this valuational context.

Mood is broader than myth and cannot be as neatly defined, although it can include myths and be influenced by them. Mood is an
affective and intellectual mode of attunement to an environment. It signifies a certain mindset that is reflective of one’s personal and cultural orientation. The mood of individuals is not entirely unrelated to the vital matrix of cultural moods around them. A mood reflects the accents within the psychic air. Certain things can be cherished while others go ignored. Paulo Freire’s work on conscientização opened up the minds of the poor in Latin America to the fact that their deprivation was not an ontological and immutable datum. For this reason, the forces of oppressive government were instinctively shrewd enough to challenge and ban his work, since it would transform the mood of the passive poor whose attitudes and feelings would be radically changed.

The mood of American consumers has changed in recent years and the market has thus been transformed. The mood in American journalism changed with the Watergate experience. It had been accepted practice for journalists to cover over some of the personal peccadillos of politicians. Personal failings were well known to reporters, but would go unreported. That is less likely now. Politicians haven’t changed that much but the mood of the press has. In this new mood, journalists perceive the right and even the obligation to reveal whatever they find. The change is in the way they now view political reality.

Mood also arises from salient decisions and commitments that have been made. The Declaration of Independence in many significant ways changed the mood of the colonies; even those who had little enthusiasm for rebellion could not be entirely immune to the lure of the new mood. A deeply felt decision to become committed to a person or cause changes one’s mood and perception. Sometimes an already existing mood becomes intensified, as is often the case at political conventions and rallies.

Religion too is a significant mood-maker. The framers of our Constitution, for example, were not just pragmatic students of social planning. They were that, but they also were animated by a religious conception of what humanity is and what it needs. As we discussed in reference to the foundational moral experience (see chapter 2), belief is a normal state of human beings, whether it amounts to religious faith or not. Belief is not limited to formal religion. Even the philosopher or the person of reason is filled with it. We have neither the time nor the power to demonstrate all that we need to accept to make life feasible and possibly good. And, therefore, we believe. There is nothing necessarily irrational in believing. Belief is an achievement of discerning affectivity. It arises from the nonrational field of perception. Though it may be utterly misguided and foolish, it may also have access to truth that reason cannot reach. This fact of our cognitive nature is important for an understanding of mood. What we believe and what we then dare hope for set the tone and create the mood in which we know and
evaluate. Those who believe little and hope little will see life through little eyes. Creativity will not be their forte. For if mood relates to the way we feel and perceive, it relates to our creativity.

Though it is true that our decisions and commitments can significantly affect our moods, it must also be said that mood is never entirely of our own making. To some degree it comes upon us for good or for ill and, because it is spontaneous, we normally cannot reason ourselves into one and out of another. Mood arrives and departs at its own pace. It is affected by other people and even by such unmanageable things as weather and climate. Geography and climate, as well as our biological chemistry, are factors that may enter in and shape mood. Climate, for instance, can influence the tempo of life, our choice of symbols, our closeness to or alienation from the earth, and our dependence on technology. All these factors have resonance in the thinking and feeling subject.

Mood also relates to the action-reaction pendulum in human values. Though we are always in search of the elusive center that we call balance, human history is marked by broad and eccentric swings. We move from disdain toward Vietnam War veterans to jubilation over the veterans of the Persian Gulf War. We can move from global messianism to isolational nationalism, from comfort with established values to suspicion of all that is socially structured. What we react against reveals what we stand for, and as we ride the pendulum from one unbalanced view to another, a mood sets in of which we cannot afford to be unaware.

Finally, mood may be ephemeral or enduring. Sometimes it will be of little relevance to our evaluation and represent a very minor epistemological consideration. At other times, it can govern the way we interpret. Ethics must maintain a critical awareness of the reality and strength of mood and must continue to remind us that we are caught in the swirl of enveloping influences. To ignore or fail to assess these influences in our evaluation is hazardous to the way we do ethics and damaging to those who think their path is clear.

**False Analogies...**

The third hazard deals with faulty comparisons. A false analogy compares two things that are not really similar. It fails to show fundamental differences, making the comparison unfit. Used more for emotional appeal than for insight, it stresses a superficial likeness while neglecting significant dissimilarities. A correct analogy concentrates on a similarity that is essential to the issue; dissimilar aspects are of minor significance.

Almost all knowing is analogical and comparative. As we know, we relate the unknown to the known. That is a fact of our cognitive
life. Our experiences give us a fund of references to which the mind turns for enlightening comparison when something new presents itself. And that is good. The problem, however, arises when our analogical knowing is based on false analogues and when we avoid further critical analysis of the comparison. Herein lies the hazard. We can be so impressed with similarities that we overlook the differences. When there are differences, distinctions should be made. It is for this reason that false analogies are hazards of moral discourse and must be given our attention.

Our proclivity to draw too much from comparisons is understandable. For one reason, the mind’s appetite for making sense of things is quickly satisfied if that which is new or strange is compared to the known. Our minds are more comfortable with the familiar, especially in moral matters. We often attempt to understand present events by historical analogies or an issue by comparing it with another that we accept and feel comfortable with. Like all that touches on morality, the effects of false analogies are practical and often crucial. Concerning the decision to go into Vietnam, for example, Arthur M. Schlesinger comments: “The generalizing compulsions in our political rhetoric were reinforced by an uncritical addiction to historical analogy.” Some of the political rhetoric of the time, filled with references to stopping Hitler after Munich, made it seem that we were not in Southeast Asia but in another time and place. Our initial involvement to liberate Kuwait was likened by some to another Vietnam and Saddam Hussein to Hitler.

Our analogies and metaphors can trick us and convince us that they encapsulate the whole of the matter. Parents might easily use their first child as an analogue for their second without realizing the unique personality of this second child. If the reality of the first becomes the domineering analogue, the potential of their second child might not be fully actualized. Similarly, one business venture might be sidetracked by an infelicitous comparison to an earlier one. The false analogy that beclouds much of the discussion of our moral dominion over our dying implies that mercy death, even in extreme cases where death is accelerated because of unmanageable pain, is an incipient form of genocide. The comparison is, at least, questionable.

What is crucially lost in false analogies is more than just the perspective of the what? question. When they gain control, false analogies short-circuit the work of ethics and block the expository phase from presenting the empirical data to the discerning subject. Moral evaluation and judgment will be based more on figment than on fact. When making analogies, the whole of the ethical wheel model should be remembered. The use of false analogies is obviously telling for ethics as it is for any analytical discipline.
Abstractions...

Like analogies, abstractions are essential means of thought. But they are also a hazard of moral discourse. In one sense, to criticize abstract thinking is impossible and contradictory, since we could not do so without using abstractions. Abstraction is vital to theory and reflection. The term “abstract” comes from the Latin ab, “from,” and trahere, “to draw.” If we could not draw or pull away from the particulars that surround us, we could develop no generalizations or standards for critical judgment. We would not be able to perceive what might be. If we could not abstract, we would not be able to think and our minds would register only immediate sense data. It is a glory of the mind that it can abstract. Abstracting allows us to go beyond the particular manifestations of the individual reality and enables us to discover what constancies exist in this infinitely variegated universe. These constancies undergird our generalizations and give us a framework for judging particulars.

Our abstracting power is such that we can move away too far from concrete reality and lose contact with it. Abstractions can be so detached from the particular that they become unreal. It is this unreal sense that lexicographers are noting when they list as possible meanings of “abstract” such things as impersonal, removed, separate, abstruse, or insufficiently factual. Ironically, the abstract presentation of truth can often sound impressively learned. Is it not the hallmark of intellectuality? Yet, it can be a form of reality avoidance that may enjoy powerful prestige. Only hard-core reality could serve to embarrass it. However, if the cognitive mood of the time is not all that concerned with the facts, deceptive, fogging abstractions may flourish.

False abstractions relate to the ought-to-is fallacy. “The wish is often parent to the thought.” Wishful impressions of what “ought to be” can press us to believe that that is what is. At the political level, we might suppose that a nation should want a democratic system of government, and therefore it does want one. With such abstractions in control, it may take a long time to realize that this particular nation may not be ready for democracy. This fallacy of abstractness can so overcome us with what ought to be that we neglect what is. Parents of a genetically damaged child, for example, may fail to appreciate what the child really is, obsessed as they can be with their stricken hopes of what that child ought to have been. Their abstract conception of what should be might overshadow the many beauties that this child may still possess. It would be abstract in the worst sense to say that the birth of a genetically damaged baby is not tragic. Many people defend aborting fetuses with serious genetic diseases. Nevertheless, after the child is born, his or her concrete possibilities must be accepted and brought to full potential. What the child is must not be sacrificed to
what the child "ought to" be. The ought in that case is abstract; the child is real.

It should be noted, however, that in good abstractions, the ought-to-is process is praiseworthy. When we abstract from the inadequate present and envision better possibilities, we are moving our perception of what ought to be toward new creative being. In proper abstraction the ought is a pressure for a transformation into a better is.

The Stereotype...

The ought-to-is fallacy shows something that is prominent in the misuse of abstraction, namely, the stereotype. In the stereotype, as in all false abstractions, the specific is blurred in the generic and the existence of genuine variety is ignored. It unrealistically generalizes. For example, there was a great American stereotype hidden in the symbol of the "melting pot." It is well known by now that the various cultural and ethnic branches have not homogenized into some stereotypical "American." Behind the idea of the melting pot was an abstract notion of nation and community that could not brook cultural pluralism and the real diversities that characterize humanity.

Abstractions then can be creative or beguiling. But we are concerned about their negative potential in this chapter. False and detached abstractions can be very attractive and to some minds almost irresistibly so. Abstractions can be cruel and even lethal. "Making love" sounds fairly concrete and specific, but it might be an abstraction that disguises a rather exploitative event. "Acceptable levels of unemployment" might cover over unconscionable failures of imagination in government policies and in relationships between private enterprise and government. "Free trade" sounds like a fine abstraction and does import some values, but it may also conceal a lot of chicanery, as a short trip through history would reveal.

Describing the conditions preceding the Peloponnesian War, the ancient historian Thucydides complained that the meaning of words no longer had the same relation to things. This fact he saw as a major mark of the unrest of that time. If words are the houses of our thoughts and abstractions, good and bad, a study of their use is an analytical necessity. Although understanding is not limited to words (we know and feel more than we could ever say), words are, nonetheless, the most common symbols of what it is we mean. Falstaff quizzically demonstrates this in Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1. He saw that the good word "honor" was being asked to cover over abstractly some realities that he was not ready to bear. When battle with all its call to glory and honor was imminent, the unimpressed Falstaff soliloquizes after being reminded by Prince Hal that he owes God a death:
FALSTAFF: 'Tis not due yet; I would be loath to pay him, before his day. What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter; honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? What is that honor? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism.

The humorous and realistic Falstaff instinctively checked the key words used in time of war. At such times, words function even more than usually as abstract shields covering much that is unsavory and cruel in the concrete. The flight to abstraction is distinguished by a hesitancy to call a spade a spade. "Nuclear deterrence policy" means a readiness to incinerate millions of people. It means genocide, and it also means a bankrupting military budget to finance research, production, and deployment.

Again in the same insidious vocabulary, "taking out a city" means reducing it and its inhabitants to radioactive ash. False abstractions like to hide behind euphemistic terms. "Taking out" has a clean sporting ring to it. A good block in football is described as "taking out" the other player. The euphemism helps the abstraction to conceal what it really intends. Bombing is described as "a defensive ordnance drop," a confused and chaotic retreat as "a retrograde action," and "invasions" as "incursions." Escape and surrender becomes "peace with honor." Civilian casualties become "collateral damage." What would Falstaff say?

Not all abstract euphemisms are mischievous. If we speak of "mercy death" rather than "killing," the phrase is not an abstract cover-up. "Killing" is too unnuanced a term to describe the compassion and truth of the situation. When a patient is already in a painful dying process, the reality of the particular what is different and calls for different phrasing. The mischief of false abstractions and euphemisms occurs when they are used to cover up the moral reality of the circumstances.

The moral problems here relate especially to the questioning and expository phase of ethics. False abstractions cut that phase short. They can also relate to the evalutional phase. For instance, they can open the way to deviant uses of creative imagination. Because they impose meaning, false abstractions boggle ethics and prevent it from honestly uncovering moral meaning. If modesty rightly besits the ethical enterprise, bad abstractions are arrogant by nature. This phenomenon of false abstractions is a real hazard of moral inquiry and a necessary concern of a sensitive ethics.
Selective Vision...

The fifth hazard that we face in moral discourse is selective vision. What we select to see tells us much about ourselves and what we consider to be morally significant in our lives. In selective vision our attention is fixated on the nonessentials, while the truly important matters are passed by. It gives us the illusion of moral accomplishment. Businesspersons who would never break a local ordinance at home by burning their leaves or by dumping their garbage on the village green can go to work and make clandestine decisions that will pollute the air we breathe and the water we need; all this is done without compunction and with an aura of civil propriety.

The apparent ability to miss moral meaning is all too typical of selective vision. Preoccupation with minutiae is a permanent human problem that ethics must confront. The German chaplains in the Nazi army who were busy warning their troops against sinning with prostitutes are an example of selective vision and misplaced moral emphasis. What we choose to be morally concerned with also needs ethical evaluation. The apparent ability of these chaplains to miss the collective and political meaning of the larger moral issues shows how selective vision can dominate an ethics. When this happens ethics ends up specializing in the picayune and neglects the important moral issues that must be faced. Selective vision does not want its moral tranquility unsettled, but a holistic ethics must do just that.

Role and Banalization...

The last two hazards of moral discourse that merit our special attention are role and banalization. Related closely to myth and cognitive mood, role refers to the kind of lifestyle associated with a particular function or office an individual assumes. Its implications for ethical method lie in the fact that a particular code of ethics may come along as an unsuspected stowaway when one embarks on a new role. A role is powerful because it is socially and mythically endorsed and because it can create a mood that affects the way we see things. There is, of course, great positive potential here. Selfish persons, for instance, may rise to unpredicted heights of altruism when they assume a new role that implies a benevolent way of life.

It is not hard to think of the carefree and frivolous individual who becomes serious minded and responsible when the new role of parent is experienced. Role can have a morally sobering effect. The psychology might be as simple as that used in making the troublemaker the leader of a group. However, it is with the negative influence of role that we are concerned. A new role may contain a poor code of ethics, and when it does, it becomes a hazard of moral discourse.

The role of a political advisor may make it "natural" to engage in
many questionable practices. A news reporter may easily lose discretion and sensitivity when intent on getting a story. The role mentality simply prescribes that this is the way things are done. As a boy begins to play the role of "a man," he may inertly accept the expectations that he will show no fineness or delicacy of taste and that he will abandon the natural resource of tears. Students may see their role as passive receptacles of information, not as active participants in a process of learning and discovery. Some intellectuals may see themselves as above manual labor or some lawyers may be convinced by their established role that idealism is incompatible with their calling. In every case, the bad ethics that may go with a role is a problem, a hazard, that a holistic ethical theory must face.

Regarding banalization, the words of the French paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin are instructive. "What too closely envelops us," he wrote in The Vision of the Past, "automatically ceases to astonish us." The truth of this statement is illustrated by the story of two bricklayers. When they were asked what they were doing, one replied: "Laying bricks!" But the other exclaimed: "Building a cathedral!" Banalization is a loss of crucial perspective and failure to perceive as fully as we should. It obstructs our understanding by blunting our sense of wonder and dulling our affective response especially to moral value. A sense of awe, which we discussed in chapter 1, is foundational to the process of moral experience. Banality is the opposite of this ecstasy and awe upon which the moral process is built. Even our routines can sing. Ethics is hampered by those who are deaf to such songs.

Things that we have grown accustomed to can become banal in our eyes; unfortunately, no sphere of human activity is exempt. We can be so used to doing something that we fail to see its significance and we become apathetic. Banality is a mindset that interferes with moral perception by rendering moral meaning trite. No area of morality is ever really trite.

Regarding these various hazards of moral discourse, we repeat that the list is not exhaustive. There are many ways in which human knowing can go astray, and if we do not recognize hazards, we can easily succumb to them. As we mentioned throughout Part Three, each of the evaluative processes and resources represented by the spokes of the wheel model of ethics can be abused and can serve to diminish our contact with reality. Some of these hazards overlap with others and with problem factors treated in the development of the method employed here. We do not apologize for the overlap if it served, as we intended it, to show an undisclosed side of a moral question. The important thing is for ethics to resist the temptation to view its enterprise as transpiring in a vacuum or in a purely objective and uninfluenced way. It transpires in the maelstrom of social and per-
sonal history where moral values confront us with the need to do ethics.

**IN FINE...**

Justice Holmes used to say that science makes major contributions to minor needs. Ethics is the attempt to make at least minor contributions to major needs. Modern persons have been little attracted to the work of ethics even though their technological genius has caused exponential increases in the number of questions requiring ethical judgment. What we have done in these pages is to present the fruit of many years of professional effort to discover how we as the valuing animal should best do our valuing. We have not sought to solve the problems we have introduced, but we have attempted to show how moral problems can best be addressed.

There is no area of human experience that is not the bearer of moral meaning. Ethics seeks to bring method and some completeness to the human conversation on moral values from which no one is dispensed. If it does that even somewhat well, it will serve a world that is, thus far, more clever than wise.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Why should ethical method be concerned with hazards of moral discourse? How do hazards relate to the ethical wheel model? How do they interfere with the search for moral understanding? Can you suggest potential hazards other than the ones already given?

2. Identify some American myths operative in our thinking today. How do they influence moral decisions? For example, does the song “America the Beautiful” contain benevolent mythic thinking and how can it affect the way we perceive such questions as pollution, acid rain, and depletion of natural resources?

3. In many significant ways, myth defines reality for us, and it is a major achievement to discover wherein it is unreal. Investigate mythic thinking behind such terms as “jihad,” “crusade,” “the promised land,” “individualism,” and “inalienable rights.” How are myth and ideology related?

4. How are myths operative in our attitudes toward the homeless and AIDS victims? How are myth and stereotypical thinking related?

5. Show how cognitive mood can influence moral decisions that have political and legal ramifications, such as those dealing with oil exploration, drilling, and transportation, and those dealing with abortion, capital punishment, and immigration laws. Discuss how religion can control mood. Explain how cognitive mood can relate to the ethical questions *when*? and *where*? Could a company have a certain cognitive mood?
6. Explain the danger of false analogies and how such a danger can radically affect moral decisions. Give some examples of abstractions that might be morally needed and some that seem to cover up bad intentions.

7. Show how selective vision, role, and banalization can prevent us from perceiving full moral reality. Use examples.