Introduction

Our age can lay claim to a unique moral chaos. Modernity badgers us with perplexing moral questions: Can good ethics and good business ever coincide? Should medical science do all the things that it now can do? Is truth-telling always a virtue? If it is, how can one maintain professional or personal confidentiality? Is honesty always the best policy? What are the proper criteria for the journalistic media when it comes to reporting the real news and avoiding sensationalism? Should there be an “ethics committee” in government, in business, in hospitals, in law firms, or in financial centers? How would an ethics committee function in such places?

Though every age thinks its own the worst, our immorality is at least impressive: drug abuse, the careless spread of AIDS, pollution on land, sea, and air. Some business people defend as essential to their competitive positions almost anything that they can get away with. Is profit the only goal of business? Scandals reveal the systemic corruption in parts of political and corporate life. Bribes, wheeling and dealing, influence peddling, and cheating seem, at times, to be ubiquitous. No value seems secure.

Walking or travelling some of our urban streets requires the courage of a roughrider. The United States spends more than nine thousand dollars a second for “defense,” and yet we are afraid to walk around the block at night. Even the system of justice and law is not always trusted. Just as a simpler America expected honesty, we expect the opposite. Cynicism about public institutions is rampant.

Our scientific powers throw moral questions at us daily. Science seems to have normalized surprise. Should we do some of the things that we suddenly and terrifyingly can do? What moral standards govern genetic engineering, surrogate mothering, freezing embryos for later implantation, or research on externally growing human embryos? Should we use the tissues from aborted fetuses to heal the sick? Should we keep people alive regardless of the quality of that life? What about our obligations to the environment now that, for the first time in history, we can destroy faster than nature can repair?

Militarily powerful nations have prepared the wherewithal to end the world and stored it in their silos and submarines. As the surrealistic potential for nuclear and biological warfare spreads, the question arises as to how much moral intelligence is operating on this planet. A hole larger than the continent of Australia is found in the ozone layer over
Antarctica. Is the human mind really at work on planet earth or is there a thought-free, unmanageable momentum rushing us to terracide and disaster?

At the same time, moral opportunity beckons even amid the chaos. We now have the technical genius to end hunger and poverty, but do we have the moral wisdom and will? We have the know-how to cleanse the earth, fruitfully utilize its treasury of water and topsoil, defuse the “biological timebomb,” and provide the material infrastructure for a peace the likes of which ancient seers and poets dared not imagine. While facing squarely the perils posed by our modern talents, we cannot lose sight of our modernity as a unique moment of moral opportunity and hope.

Where Is Ethics Today?
At the end of the nineteenth century, America lost interest in ethics. To see the truth of this, look at the Amherst College bulletin for 1895. The whole first page is given over to a description of the course on ethics. It is given to seniors, taught by the president of the college, and is clearly intended to be the capstone of the educational process. The educational philosophy behind this — and it was common in nineteenth-century America — was that students were not considered educated if their moral intelligence had not been refined by the study of ethics. Return to the Amherst bulletin just ten years later, in 1905, and you discover that ethics is no longer front page at Amherst or most colleges. It became an elective for sophomores or it disappeared.

What happened? What happened was that we had become infatuated with the new sciences. These sciences were good. They expanded human potential and were full of promise. We thought science, well done, would replace ethics. That was a mistake, a serious one. And since mistakes in ethics are not just unfortunate, but may be lethal, it might turn out to have been a terminal mistake. Early in the nineteenth century, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said that every great mind had blunted its wits on the question of the moral. That stopped being true almost as soon as he said it. Science became our shibboleth. If something was scientific, it was good. If we can do it, we should do it.

The nonsense of all this is dawning on us as we choke on the effects of “value-free” science, and as we sit in fear of irradiation or incineration by scientific means, and as we jog over ground waters that are filling with poison and menacing our future. Science does not do ethics. It raises questions for ethics. Science is a power, whether used in computers, medicine, business, or research. Science, to be human, must be wed to ethics. A society, to be safe, must insist on that wedding. Happily, today there appears to be a renewed interest
in ethics, but in order for ethics to make a real difference in all that we do as humans, this interest must be more than a superficial passing phase.

The ancients said: "He who reflects not in his heart is like the beast that perishes." That really is not true. The beasts are better off. Even without reflection, they have instinct that imbues them with the wisdom of survival. We have no such advantage. We will neither survive nor flourish by instinct, but only by the educated activation of our moral evaluative powers. As Nietzsche correctly says, we are "the valuing animal." We are not programmed; we have to think and opt amid competing values. Our most important and fundamental value-thinking is at the level of morals. The systematic study of moral value questions as they arrive in our personal, professional, and political lives is called "ethics."

Ethics studies moral questions, and moral questions and values are more basic than other values because they touch not just on what we do or produce or possess, but on what we are as persons. It is admittedly unfortunate if a person is not gifted with wealth, gracefulness, beauty, computer skills, and aesthetic sophistication. But it is a qualitative leap beyond the merely unfortunate if a person is a murderer, a liar, a fraud, or a thief. Here the failure is at the level of moral values, at the level of what a person is and should be as a person. Material and functional values are not the same as moral values. Confusion about moral values is drastic, and maybe fatal. The only alternative to this confusion is ethical reflection; such reflection is indispensable. Ethics, then, is an essential part of education.

**Ethics and the Professions**

Ethics is not an adornment for the professions. The very word "profession" comes from the Latin *fateor*, which means to proclaim. The professional proclaims that he or she has two things to offer to the public: *special skills and a committed sense of morality*. Skill and ethics are the two ingredients of any profession — law enforcement, journalism, physics, the medical and legal professions, politics, teaching. As proof of this point, notice that whenever we use the word "unprofessional," we are always referring to one or the other of these two ingredients. The person who is *unprofessional* either has failed at the level of the expected skill or has offended the high moral norms adopted by that profession. Unprofessional physicians are either those who do not know what they should know about some treatment or procedure, or, those who have financial conflicts of interest, who breach confidentiality, or who offend in some other moral matter. "Unprofessional" always imports a defect in the appropriate skill and/or in ethics.
Therefore, professional education, as well as any higher education, that does not educate its candidates in ethics is stunted — and ultimately unprofessional.

The Purpose of This Study
This book offers a tested ethical method that helps us in becoming more sensitive to the myriad dimensions of moral meaning in our lives. In *The Moral Choice*, published in 1976, a wheel model of ethical method was developed (by Daniel C. Maguire). This present book thoroughly reworks that model in the light of later developments in ethics and in society. Our experience in teaching this method — along with the experience of many other teachers who used and adapted this model of ethics — is incorporated into this new presentation. The method presented here is comprehensive and holistic as well as informative and practical. A method, like that in this book, is not an infallible technique or a simple grid. It is not a foolproof blueprint on how to act morally, so that when finished with it, everyone will agree on everything. What it does offer is a systematic way of identifying and assessing moral questions, a way that brings completeness and sensitivity and nuance to moral intelligence.

This method does not require one set of values to which we must all be committed. However, it does require seriousness about moral matters. It offers critical perspectives needed to arrive at morally defensible conclusions. The method is applicable to everything we as human beings do — individually and collectively — since everything we do has a moral dimension. This book is designed to enhance the learning process. Study questions are included to focus attention on significant points and ideas of each chapter and to engage the reader in a creative dialogue with ethics. The questions are found at the end of each major division of the book. A general bibliography for further research and a glossary of key terms are also included at the end of the book.