

An Introduction to: **Ethics**

“It is curious - curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare”

Mark Twain

Ethics is one of the central fields of philosophy. Its ultimate concern is how best to live our lives: Should we selfishly pursue our own desires without regard to anyone or anything else? Is it better to dedicate oneself to improving the world even at the expense of one's own happiness? Will you achieve happiness by amassing great wealth? having many friends? What other options for living a life are there? Can such questions even be answered in general?

Ethics also addresses more specific questions about right and wrong. For example, is it always wrong to lie, or are there circumstances in which lying is the ethically right thing to do? Or, how far should you go to help a friend? And, is it okay to log the Amazon rainforests if revenues contribute to a struggling local economy? As well as asking these specific questions, ethics also asks more abstract questions, like whether it is possible to justify moral judgments objectively, in a way that everyone should agree with.

Whether you realize it or not, you are constantly confronted with ethical issues and moral questions throughout your day. It might start in the morning when your father asks you if you liked his extremely under-cooked eggs and say, “They were great,” telling a white lie to spare his feelings. Is that the morally right thing to do? And then at school, you see someone being teased and bullied for being different in some way, and you fail to report it because you are afraid that if you do, you might be identified and called a tattletale, or worse, be bullied yourself. Were you being cowardly and is that the ethically wrong thing to do? That night, as you are going to sleep, you pick up the classic book *Robin Hood* and you begin to wonder if stealing can be justified and, if so, when.

We are bombarded daily with ethical questions as we go about navigating our way through our world. These questions can be really perplexing, so one way to achieve greater clarity about them is to discuss them with your fellow students.

In this unit of the web site, you will be introduced to the practice of having a philosophical discussion about five different issues in ethics. These issues were selected by students at several schools as being the issues students found most pressing. We are going to present them to you through clips from popular films and television shows. These issues are:

- bullying
- lying
- friendship
- peer pressure
- environmental action.

After a brief presentation about philosophy and ethics, your teacher will play you some film clips. You are to watch each film clip and then discuss the questions that will appear on screen with your classmates. Your job is to figure out what *you* think, share your views with your classmates, listen to what they say, and then figure out which view is the one that seems right after careful consideration This is a discussion with many different opinions being shared and

not a debate where one person wins. In philosophy, there are genuine disagreements that have not yet been settled. So the point is for you to share your ideas on an issue or a topic and explain why you think that way. You are also to listen to what your classmates have to say and figure out whether you agree or disagree with them, and why. In philosophy, the **why** is as important as the **what**.

And remember, your teacher's job is not to give you what he or she might think is the "right" answer to an ethical question but to guide you and your classmates in *your* discussion of that problem. You and your classmates will have to work through these issues with your teacher acting as a sort of referee. But you'll be playing the game yourselves. To help you, they will be giving you a handout of the *Five Guidelines for Having a Philosophical Discussion*.

Happy Thinking!!