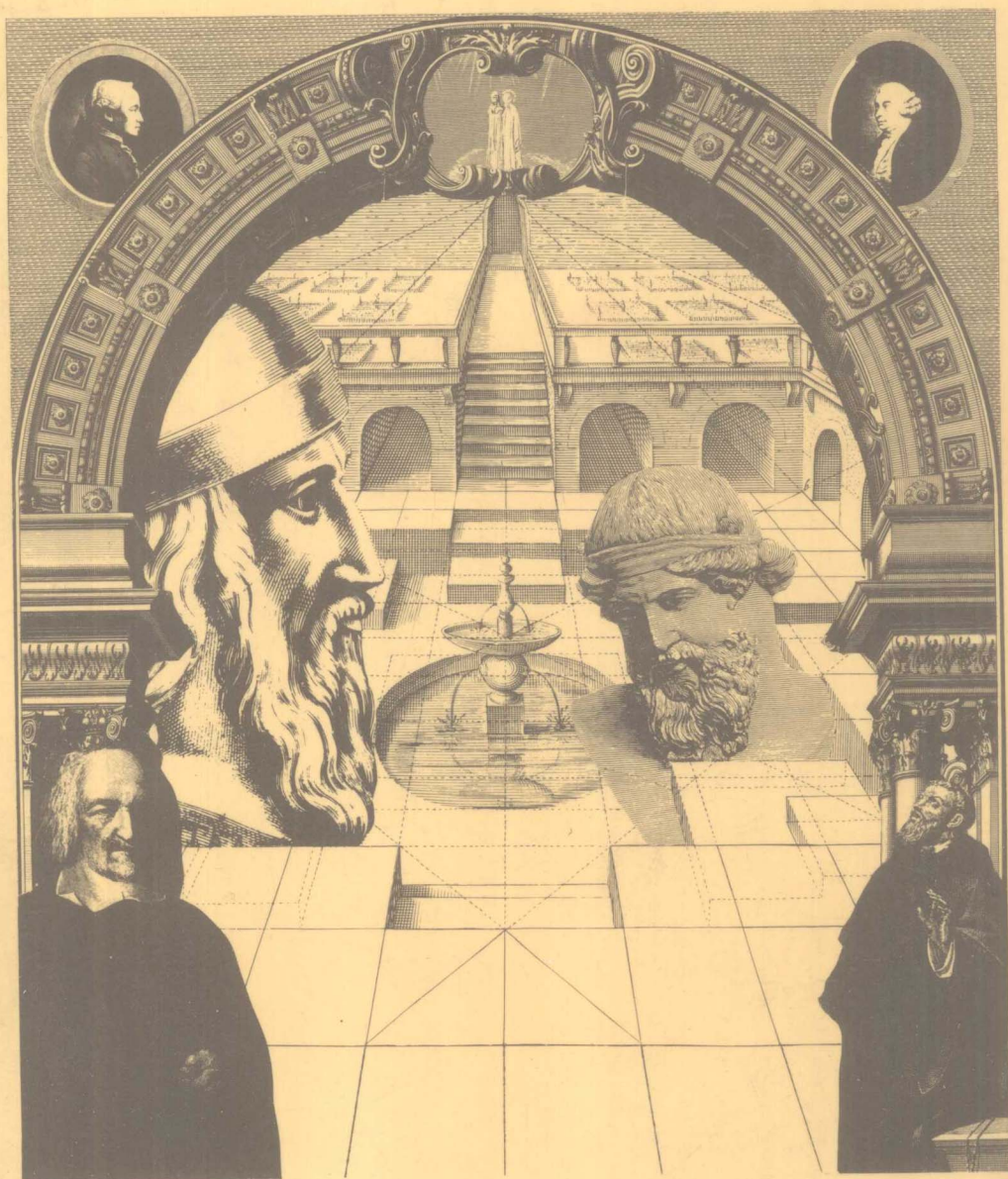


MORALITY & THE GOOD LIFE

AN INTRODUCTION
TO ETHICS
THROUGH CLASSICAL SOURCES

ROBERT C. SOLOMON



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MORALITY AND THE GOOD LIFE

An Introduction to Ethics through Classical Sources

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PREFACE

This is a textbook in ethics. It is intended as an introduction for students who have had no philosophical background but are capable of studying somewhat difficult yet indisputably important sources. The premise of this book is that the study of ethics is first of all participation in a long tradition that is based upon a (more or less) agreed-upon sequence of “great” philosophers. Of course, ethics is also an attempt to come to grips with certain perennial moral problems, but these too must be understood as part of a tradition of questions and answers as well as problems intrinsic to the human condition.

Ethics has never been a more urgent undertaking. We live at a time in which the very existence of morals—or at least any “correct” morals—has been thrown into question. But in the pedagogical attempts to capture this urgency with reference to current moral crises (the morality of abortion, the threat of nuclear war), too many introductory ethics courses have been made “relevant” only at the cost of ignoring the tradition that gives them significance. There is no disputing that questions such as “What is right and what should I do?” are utterly necessary and ought to be asked more often and with greater insight than they are in our “bottom-line”-minded society. But, on the one hand, it is not at all clear that the heavy intellectual artillery of philosophy is usually required or even suitable to answer the more usual variety of ethical queries (for example, “Why shouldn’t I cheat on my test? Everyone else does.”). On the other hand, it is not clear that a serious answer to such questions can be provided except *within* that long tradition that stretches from Plato and the Bible to the present.

The study of ethics is this synthesis of current problems and a long tradition of answers. It is a common error to think that ethical issues can be settled in a moral vacuum, without already shared values and a broad, if vague, general understanding of the nature of morality and the importance of being moral. But it is also an error to expect that the broad understanding of ethics—even when sharpened by the study of ethics—will provide concrete answers to pressing moral problems. (One leading American ethicist tells of the time when a student walked into his office and with obvious urgency asked, “Do you believe that

suicide is ever justified?" As a matter of fact, the ethicist did believe that suicide was justifiable in certain cases, but it was equally clear to him that this was not the time to display philosophical subtleties.)

This is not to say that ethics is irrelevant to practical problems; indeed, it would be absurd if that were so. But solving problems is not the only concern of ethics or philosophy, and there are virtues of general understanding that need not be convertible into concrete solutions. It may be that no ethical theory or viewpoint is of any interest if it does not come to grips with our everyday moral concerns, but we should not thereby expect ready-made solutions to every personal problem. Indeed, one of the lessons of the history of ethics is that difficulties enter into solving even the simplest moral dilemma. The point of learning about various ethical theories or viewpoints is not to make solving problems easier for us. In fact, it may well make problem solving harder, as we come to appreciate more and more of the implications and considerations that enter into even the simplest ethical decision.

To study ethics, with the approach assumed in this text, is to participate in that tradition which reaches back over 2500 years, a tradition we tend to trace, somewhat arbitrarily, back to Socrates. It was Socrates—at least according to his student Plato (from whom we have most of the records of Socrates's teachings)—who set in motion some of the central questions of ethics, such as What is the good? and What is justice?, as well as, Why shouldn't a person always do just what is in his or her own interest, without regard for anyone else? Studying ethics is reading and thinking through such questions and the answers provided to them by Socrates and Plato and by Plato's student Aristotle, by the medieval Christian philosopher Saint Augustine, and by such modern philosophers as David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill.

It is too often said today that students are no longer interested or willing (or sometimes able) to read original texts. But these are not so difficult as supposed, and if they seem to be, it is in part because students today are confronted less and less with original philosophy texts, which means that they have a harder time reading them, which means that they avoid them more, and so on *ad illiteratum*. At the same time, it is a pedagogical fact that students resist long tracts of original text and at least at first have considerable difficulty learning the kind of critical reading required in philosophy. Accordingly, I have tried to provide both substantial portions of original texts *and* a continuing sequence of comments and suggestions. This has the effect, however modest, of providing a tutor for each student as he or she reads through the material and encouraging him or her to participate in the process rather than just struggling with the text. It is to be hoped that the commentary will allow instructors not only more freedom in leading discussions but also more confidence that their students will have had at least some minimal exposure to a broad range of issues.

This book is composed of substantial texts coupled and broken up with background and commentary, suggestions, and study questions. The works are not complete but, given the context of an undergraduate course, more than sufficient to give the student substantial knowledge of the classical texts. This

book is adequate for a full course in ethics, but it is concise enough to allow the instructor time to include other approaches—whether more contemporary authors and issues or particular moral dilemmas—in addition to the classic texts and materials presented here.

It is appropriate to comment here on the typical use of the masculine noun “man” in many of the authors included here. Aristotle, for example, develops an ethics which is literally just for men. More modern authors—Hume, Kant, and Mill, for example—use “man” as a generic term for “humanity.” This grates against our contemporary sensibilities, and I have accordingly used more neutral language in the commentaries. The original language has been left in the texts as a matter of accuracy, not as a matter of approval.

I would like to express my thanks for the many useful comments and suggestions provided by colleagues who reviewed this text during the course of its development, especially to Daniel Bonevac, The University of Texas at Austin; Izchak Miller, University of Pennsylvania; John J. Stuhr, Whitman College; James J. Valone, visiting associate professor, Loyola University of Chicago; and Stephen Voss, San Jose State University. I also want to thank Kaye Pace, Anne Murphy, and David Dunham, editors at the McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Robert C. Solomon

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In the following pages, some of the classic texts in the history of ethics are presented with introductions and commentary to help the beginning student through the readings. It is not to be expected that most instructors will attempt to use all the readings; in fact, some may want to use only three or four of them. Several possible combinations are particularly recommended:

I. Basic Sequence

Plato, *Crito*

Augustine, *City of God*

Kant, *Groundwork*

Mill, *Utilitarianism*

(optional: Nietzsche selections)

II. Historical Survey

Plato, *Crito*, *Republic*

Aristotle, *Ethics*, (Book I)

Augustine, *City of God*

Hobbes, *Leviathan* (first chapter)

Hume, *Treatise*, *Inquiry* (Book I)

Kant, *Groundwork* (Books I and II)

Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chapters 1 and 4)

Nietzsche (some selections)

Sartre, *Existentialism*

III. Emphasis on Justification

Aristotle, *Ethics* (Books I to III)

Augustine, *City of God*

Hobbes, *Leviathan* (first section)

Kant, *Groundwork* (Chapters 1 and 2)
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chapters 1 and 4)
Nietzsche, selections from *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Genealogy of Morals*
Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*

IV. Individual and State

Plato, *Crito* and *Republic*
Aristotle, *Ethics* (Books I to III)
Hobbes, *Leviathan* (first section)
Hume, *Inquiry* (Chapters 2 and 3)
Kant, *Groundwork* (Chapters 1 and 2)
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chapters 1, 2, 5)
Sartre, *Existentialism and Bad Faith*

V. The Virtues

Plato, *Crito*
Aristotle, *Ethics* (Books I to IV)
Augustine, *City of God*
Kant, *Groundwork* (Chapters 1 and 2)
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chapters 1 to 3)
Nietzsche, selections
Sartre, *Existentialism*

VI. Ethos and Ethics

Plato, *Crito*
Aristotle, *Ethics* (Books I to IV)
Augustine, *City of God*
Kant, *Groundwork* (Chapter 1)
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chapters 1 and 4)
Nietzsche, selections
Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*
Sartre, *Existentialism*

VII. Happiness

Aristotle, *Ethics* (Books I to III, X)
Augustine, *City of God*
Hobbes, *Leviathan* (first section)
Kant, *Groundwork* (Chapter 2)
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chapters 1, 2, 5)
Nietzsche, selections from *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Will to Power*
Camus, *The Stranger*

VIII. Freedom

Plato, *Crito*
Aristotle, *Ethics* (Books I to III)

Augustine, *City of God*

Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Kant, *Groundwork* (Chapters 1 and 2)

Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Chapters 1 and 2)

Nietzsche, selections from *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Will to Power*

Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*

Sartre, *Existentialism*

Study questions are provided at the end of each chapter; thought questions appear in the discussions of the text as well. A glossary is provided at the end of the book, but new and technical terms are also explained when they are introduced in the text. The introduction is an attempt to provide a simple overview of ethics for the student who has no or little familiarity with the subject.

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INTRODUCTION

Today in a wood, we heard a Voice.

We hunted for it but could not find it. Adam said he had heard it before, but had never seen it. . . . It was Lord of the Garden, he said, . . . and it had said we must not eat of the fruit of a certain tree and that if we ate of it we would surely die. . . . Adam said it was the tree of good and evil.

"Good and evil?"

"Yes."

"What is that?"

"What is what?"

"Why, those things. What is good?"

"I do not know. How should I know?"

"Well, then, what is evil?"

"I suppose it is the name of something, but I do not know what."

"But Adam, you must have some idea of what it is." "Why should I have some idea? I have never seen the thing, how am I to form any conception of it? What is your own notion of it?"

Of course I had none, and it was unreasonable of me to require him to have one. There was no way for either of us to guess what it might be. It was a new word, like the other; we had not heard them before, and they meant nothing to us.

Mark Twain¹

¹Mark Twain, extract from "Eve's Diary," *Letters from the Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 75–76.

WHAT IS ETHICS?

Ethics is the study of a way of life, *our* way of life—its values, its rules and justifications. It involves doing what Mark Twain's Adam and Eve were just beginning to do—thinking about “good” and “evil” and what they mean.

The word “ethics” refers both to a discipline—the study of our values and their justification—and to the subject matter of that discipline—the actual values and rules of conduct by which we live. The two meanings merge in the fact that we behave (and misbehave) according to a complex and continually changing set of rules, customs, and expectations; consequently, we are forced to reflect on our conduct and attitudes, to justify and sometimes to change them.

Why do we need to study ethics as a discipline? Isn't it enough that we *have* ethics, that we do (most of us, most of the time) act according to our values and rules?

In some societies, having ethics might be sufficient without the study of ethics as well. But this cannot be the case in our society, for at least four reasons:

1 Our ethics are continually changing. Consider, for example, the enormous changes that our society has experienced over just the past few decades in the realm of sexual morality; behavior is accepted today which would have been wanton immorality fifty years ago (for example, topless beachwear for men!). Only twenty years ago, many people considered it “unethical” for a wife to work, except in cases of dire family need, and it was perfectly acceptable—in fact even commendable—for a husband to spend so much time working at his career that he virtually never saw his children. Some of these changes have to do with changing economic and social conditions in our society; others are reflections of deeper ethical shifts, more emphasis on individual freedom, for example, and less emphasis on the differences between the sexes and traditional roles. Changes in ethics are always disturbing and disruptive; the study of ethics enables us to understand the nature of these changes and, just as important, to discern the stable basis of values that underlies them.

2 We live in an ethically *pluralist* society, in which there is no single code of ethics but many different values and rules. Some people in our society emphasize individual success and mobility; others emphasize the importance of group identity and stable cultural tradition. Some people insist that the ultimate value is individual freedom; others would insist that general welfare is more important, even if it interferes with individual freedom. Some people consider it absolutely wrong to take a human life—even if the life in question is that of an unborn zygote or fetus; others do not believe that such life counts as human; it should be sacrificed if necessary to the well-being of the mother. None of these differences in ethics are easily reconciled; in fact they may be unreconcilable. But that makes it all the more important that we understand the nature of these differences, and this is much of what ethical discussion and debate is about.

3 Our ethics involves *choice*. In fact, freedom of choice is one of the main values of our ethics. But to choose between alternative courses of action or opposed values requires intelligent deliberation and some sense of the *reasons* why one should choose one rather than another. This too is the function of ethical study and discussion.

We might note that the importance of choice in ethics is often confused with the idea that we “choose our own values.” This is quite different however. (Jean-Paul Sartre argues for it in the final selections of this book.) Ethical choice almost always involves decisions between already established possibilities, and these we do *not* choose. A student deciding between joining the navy or going to law school does indeed have an important choice to make, but the alternatives and their values are provided by the

society as a whole. Having to choose between alternatives, however, is more than enough reason to be clear about their values and implications, and this too is a central function of ethics.

4 Ethical values are often in *conflict*. Even when people agree on certain values, there will inevitably be times when two (or more) accepted values run up against one another. Conflicting goals and customs force us to reconsider continually our ethical priorities; freedom of speech sometimes threatens safety, security, or sensibilities—the proverbial yelling “fire” in a crowded theater, for example, or when newspapers publish classified military secrets or when pornographers “hide behind the first amendment.” The value of free enterprise must sometimes be weighed against the tragedy of unemployment and the commercialization of society. The virtue of honesty must be balanced by concern for the consequences of telling the truth, and the virtue of courage must be measured against the danger one faces.

The key concepts of ethics define the specific values by which we live, including honesty, courage, success, money, marriage, the value of life, and the significance of death. Our ethics determines what we should want, what we should do, what we should prefer, and how we should live. But ethics also includes more abstract concepts such as the ideas of happiness and justice, the value of freedom and its sibling concept of responsibility. Such ideas do not tell us what to do in particular situations so much as they inform us of the overall goals and ideals which set the stage for our every action. More general still are the crucial concepts of *good* and *evil*, *right* and *wrong*. We do not do just whatever we want to do; we also want to do what is right and try to be a good person. These, accordingly, define the key questions of ethics: What actions are right? What is a good person?

It is worth noting too that asking these questions is itself an essential part of our ethics. We expect people to do what is right, but we do not value a person who unquestioningly does whatever he or she is told. Some of the most immoral acts of the century have been committed by people who unquestioningly did what they were told to do. Right action and good people, therefore, depend upon the right kinds of thinking as well as doing what is right. The study of ethics, in other words, is itself part of our ethics.

Ethics and Ethos

The word “ethics” comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning character or custom, and the derivative phrase *tá êthiká*, which Plato and Aristotle used to describe their own studies of Greek values and ideals. An *ethos*, as we use that term today, is the character of a culture. Ethics, on the other hand, begins with a concern for individual character—including what we blandly call “being a good person”—but it is also the effort to understand the social rules which govern and limit our behavior, especially those ultimate rules—the rules concerning good and evil—which we call *morality*. Ethos and ethics go hand in hand.

The close connection between ethics and social customs (“mores,” which shares an etymological root with the word “morality”) inevitably raises the question whether morality is nothing but the customs of our particular society, our ethics nothing but the rules of our particular ethos. On the one hand, it is clear that ethics and morality are very closely tied to the laws and the customs of a particular society. Kissing in public and making a profit in a business transaction are considered immoral in some societies, not in ours. But, on the other hand, we are firmly convinced that not any laws or customs

endorsed by an entire society are equally acceptable. The rules of etiquette may be merely a matter of local custom or taste, but the prohibition against cannibalism, for example, would seem to have much more universal power and justification than the simple reminder, “that just isn’t done around here.” Indeed, we would probably insist that cannibalism is immoral even in a society which made it permissible by law.

An *ethos* is that core of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings that gives coherence and vitality to a people (or *ethnos*, an ancient Greek word significantly similar to *ethos*). It may be spelled out explicitly in terms of laws, but much of an ethos resides in the hearts and minds of the people, in what they expect of each other and what they expect of themselves, in what they like and dislike, value and disdain, hope and fear. It is an essential part of our ethos, for example, that individual success and “standing out in the crowd” are very important to us, though there is no law or moral principle that commands that this should be so. In some societies, by way of contrast, individual ambitions and eccentricities are entirely unacceptable. “The nail that sticks out is the one that gets hammered down,” reads a traditional Japanese proverb. We should not assume that all *ethê* (plural of “ethos”) are the same.

Where morality is concerned, however, this dependence on the local ethos is not so obvious. Prohibitions against cannibalism and incest are not mere matters of local custom, nor, we might think, is the condemnation of lying, cheating, cruelty, and stealing. Nevertheless, some ethicists conscientiously restrict their studies to just their own societies, without even attempting to pass judgment on societies other than their own. Many ethicists insist that moral principles—at least the most basic rules—are universal and common to all societies. Others, called *relativists*, have actually argued that ethics is indeed relative to an ethos and nothing outside of that ethos. “What is moral in India can get a man hanged in France,” wrote one eighteenth-century relativist, his conclusion being that morals are nothing but the local customs of a particular community.

Ethics and Morality

In modern European and American philosophy, “ethics” is often treated as a synonym for “moral philosophy” and philosophers who study ethics are called “moral philosophers.” This in itself tells us a great deal about our own ethos, the fact that morality is considered so central to ethics that the one is virtually defined in terms of the other. Morality is indeed one of the central concerns of ethics, and moral principles (such as “thou shalt not kill”) do comprise some of the most important restrictions and demands on our way of life. But morality is not the whole of ethics, even if it is one of the most important concerns of the ethicist. What makes morality a particularly difficult topic is the fact that moral principles at least seem to make absolute and universal claims, while many ethical rules seem to be more optional and relative to a particular society. For example, in Homer’s Greece it was considered important to be brave and stand fast if an enemy came leaping after you with a sword. Today we would consider this, at most, an option which only the foolhardy would choose. But the moral principle that one should not kill the innocent just for fun is a principle that was central to Homeric Greek ethics as it is for us today. Many moral philosophers would say that the principle that one should not kill the innocent (sometimes summarized today simply as “the right to life”) is a moral principle precisely because it is thought to be absolute and universal—that is, to apply to all people in all circumstances at all times without regard for particular cultural circumstances or situations.

Two Bases for Ethics: Rules and Virtues

We have been emphasizing the importance of moral principles in ethics, and, indeed, our entire ethical tradition is built around the importance of formally stated rules, from the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament to the policy of “government by laws, not men” put into law by the framers of the American Constitution. But this emphasis on principles is also a matter of ethos; the ancient Greeks, for instance, would not have understood our emphasis on rules and principles. They were far more concerned with the virtues and the character of individuals. Obeying the rules was more or less taken for granted, but a good person was not just someone who obeyed the rules. He or she had to have virtues, skills, and abilities which made society better, and this was something much more than simply abstaining from evil. (Indeed, a Homeric Greek with many warrior virtues might indulge in a great many evils and nevertheless remain an ethical hero. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter to the gods, and Achilles often behaved like a spoiled brat.)

At the beginning of this introduction, we commented that the root of the English word “ethics” is the Greek word *ethos* and that the words are still connected in their mutual reference to the whole of a society and its life. But as we pursue the history of the subject of ethics, we can see that two very different kinds of concerns emerge, even though they are obviously connected: (1) the concern for rules and principles, in particular the principles of morality, abstract and impersonal rules which make no reference to particular persons, and (2) the character and characteristics of particular persons, which are only partially a matter of obeying the rules. (Consider the absurdity of a person trying to obey a rule to the effect that everyone ought to have a sense of humor, for example.) Moral obedience and personal virtues do not always go hand in hand; they may even conflict, as we shall hear from the great German “immoralist,” Friedrich Nietzsche. Many students find, for example, that some of the characteristics they enjoy in their friends are quite different from the characteristics they list in people they admire, and some of these are quite different again from the moral characteristics they list as central to being a good person.

Ethics and Anthropology

Ethics is the attempt to understand our own ethos—the rules and principles which we take to be most important and the characteristics of people we value most in our heroes, our friends, our leaders, and—most importantly—ourselves. As such, ethics has a close affinity to anthropology (as well as to sociology and psychology and, sometimes, biology). One might say that ethics is the anthropology of our own way of life, an attempt to understand and formulate as clearly as possible our own rules and customs and expectations—why, for example, we expect a person who behaves badly to be punished, or why we think that people who work hard ought to get more than people who refuse to work at all, or why we think that modesty is a virtue and getting angry not a virtue.

The study of ethics is the attempt to come to grips with our peculiar ways of doing and valuing things, to be clear about what it is that we are doing and why it is that we value the things that we value. But in this sense, ethics is not anthropology, for it is *our* culture and *our* ethos that are under scrutiny. Philosophers often distinguish between *descriptive* statements and *prescriptive* statements; the former tell us what the facts are, but the latter tell us what ought to be. It is one thing to describe what people do and what they value; it is something more to enter into their lives and tell them what they ought to do