



Growing
in
Christian
Morality



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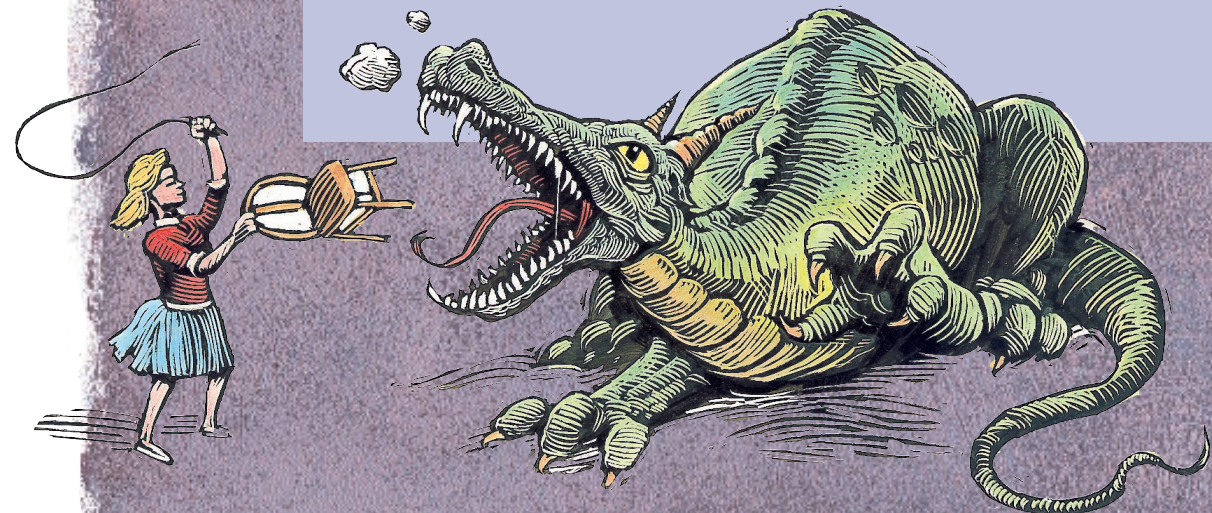
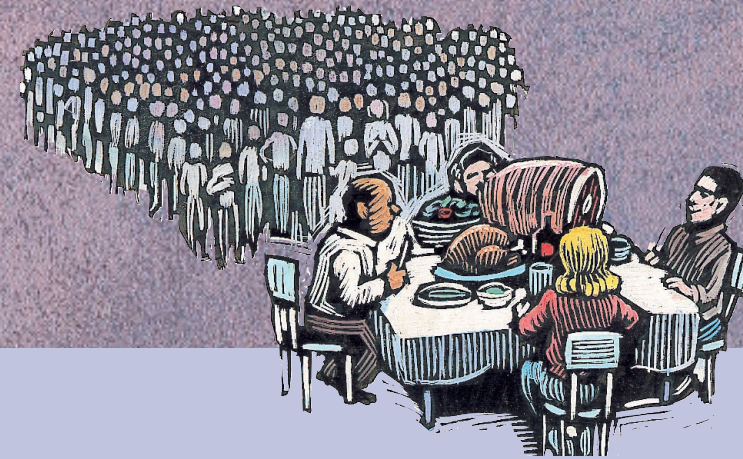


Growing in Christian Morality

by
**Julia Ahlers,
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1

Morality: Choosing What Kind of Person You Become

Three Stories, Three Kinds of Choices

Frank, Christine, and Derek

Let's begin this course in morality with three stories that will plunge us into the reality of moral dilemmas that teenagers face today.

Frank's Mess

Frank saw the police car's lights flash in the rear-view mirror even before he heard the siren. Panicking, the three other guys in Frank's car started swearing. Harley yelled for Frank to lose the cops, but Frank froze for a moment and then pulled over to the curb. Seconds later, he heard the police yelling for all of them to put their hands where they could be seen. Then, while one officer stayed next to the squad car, the other approached the driver's window. Frank's hands shook, and sweat poured down his face. The evidence convicting the four guys was crammed around them in the car.

In the next few moments, Frank flashed back on how he had gotten into this mess. His mind went over the painful events of recent months. . . .

When Frank's mother told him four months ago that they would be moving from Baltimore to Memphis so she could take a promotion, he could hardly control his anger. Frank's social life had just gotten good. He had finally found a girlfriend, and he even liked his high school. Moving forced him to start all over again, with only two years of school left to win some friends and to feel like he fit in.

Frank entered his new high school in Memphis with about as much enthusiasm as somebody going to have their wisdom teeth pulled. Most of the students seemed like snobs. He missed his girlfriend. Loneliness

and boredom finally pushed him to start talking to Harley, a guy who had joked around with him once or twice.

Then Harley invited Frank to go to the last football game of the season with him. At least it was something to do on Friday night. Frank quickly realized that Harley also expected him to drive, because Harley and his two buddies Rick and Dave couldn't get a car.

The game bored Frank and so did the guys, who seemed like jerks to him. But he felt he should pretend he was having fun. Afterward, to "celebrate" the game (their team had lost), Harley told Frank to take them to a liquor store and to buy some beer, because he looked the oldest. A little later, Frank and his three "happy" passengers passed the city zoo.

"Hey," Dave yelled, "let's rip off some of those crazy signs and put them in people's yards!" Frank laughed. The zoo used large, brightly painted signs in the shape of animals to direct people to the different animal areas.

"Yeah, let's go for it. Stop over there, Frank." This time Frank didn't laugh, but when the three guys started shouting at him, he pulled into a parking spot next to a tall fence. In ten minutes, Harley, Dave, and Rick had scaled the zoo fence and returned with three signs—a hippopotamus, a flamingo, and a gorilla. They were too drunk to be quiet. . . .

Frank shook himself out of his flashback when he heard the police officer telling him to get out of the car.

Christine's Fix

Christine and her two friends Lisa and Becky hurried into the cafeteria to get in line for a quick lunch. They glanced over to the Pepsi machine where that new girl was standing, looking uncomfortable. The friends elbowed one another, recalling how the new girl had



unknowingly prompted a ripple of grins and eye rolling when she had walked into homeroom that morning for the first time.

Mrs. Cleary had introduced the new student to the class: “Everybody, this is Monica; she transferred from Central High.” Almost everyone had smiled politely at Monica then, but when she had taken her assigned seat in the front row, the smirks had begun again.

Christine, sitting near the back of the room with her friends, had heard them whisper: “Where do you suppose she got those clothes?” “Don’t know. . . . Either her grandmother’s closet or the Salvation Army reject pile.” “Check the hair.” “Got it . . . 1980s, definitely.”

So now Monica stood by the Pepsi machine, fumbling for change and looking like she didn’t want to risk sitting down at a table where she might not be welcome. Lisa, moving quickly through the line with

a carton of yogurt, caught up to Christine and Becky and said, “Let’s have a little contest to see who can guess what she’ll be wearing tomorrow.”

Becky, giggling, answered, “No, I think we should try to predict who she’ll end up hanging out with here—that’ll be more of a challenge!”

Christine liked being in on laughs, but this just did not seem funny. She felt bad for Monica, who was by now seeking out a table where people were leaving. Sure, Monica wasn’t dressed in fashion and her hair looked kind of funny, but she didn’t deserve to be laughed at.

For a moment, Christine considered saying to her friends, “Don’t include me in on your guessing game.” But she thought better—why get Lisa and Becky upset with her? So Christine kept quiet, just smiled faintly, and resolved to go and say hello to the new girl when her own friends were not around.

Derek’s Conflict

Derek finished up his geometry homework just as the bell for first period rang. He closed his book and prepared to leave for class. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his friend Jeff slipping a textbook off a stack of books on the next table. Derek wondered what was going on but kept his mouth shut.

As Derek headed for the door, he heard another friend, Jennifer, asking around nervously, “Has anyone seen my history book? I had it in this stack a minute ago. God, if I lost it! What a bummer! That book’s worth twenty-five dollars.” Jennifer stared at everyone, suspecting a prank. No one laughed. Most just shrugged their shoulders or shook their head. Jennifer’s nervousness turned to anger. Grabbing her other books, she stormed off to the school office.

Derek had seen the whole thing. Now he remembered that Jeff had misplaced his own history book last week and was going to have to pay the school for it if he didn’t find it. So Jeff had taken the cheap way out.

Derek wondered what to do. If he told Jennifer that Jeff had taken the book, Jeff would be angry and probably deny it, essentially calling him a liar. But Jennifer needed the book. Why should she end up paying for the book that Jeff lost last week? Well, Derek figured, he could tell Jennifer that Jeff had taken her book but ask her not to let Jeff know how she found out. . . . Nah, he would still get dragged into it. Derek hated these tight situations. Why did he have to get into the middle of this mess? Why couldn’t he just pretend he never saw a thing, mind his own business, and forget about it?

But Derek couldn’t forget. Jennifer was a friend. So was Jeff, but it wasn’t right to say nothing to either of them. Building his courage, Derek caught Jeff by the lockers between classes and told him he had seen him

take Jennifer’s history book. “Jeff, why don’t you just put it on her desk?” Derek suggested. “No one will ever have to know.”

“I had to take it, Derek. My dad will kill me if he gets a book bill. You know what he’s like.”

Jeff was telling the truth, Derek knew. Jeff’s dad was always erupting into anger. “We’ll figure something out, Jeff. You can borrow my book until then. But Jennifer’s a friend, and I’m on the spot here.”

Jeff glared at him. “I thought you were *my* friend.” He clenched his fists, then turned and stormed off down the hall. **1**

Distinct Approaches to Choices

In your high school years, you face a multitude of moral choices, with any number of pressures attached to each one. You may have seen people your own age thinking and acting much like the characters in the stories that begin this chapter, and you may be able to identify with one or more of the characters. The main character in each story represents a different approach to making choices.

Frank: Loneliness and Insecurity

Frank is driven by a lot of pressures, a key one being his need for acceptance from his peers. He reacts to a difficult period in his life—the move to a new city and a new school—in a natural way: he feels lonely, insecure, and vulnerable. In this emotional state, most of us would do a lot to gain the approval of our new peers—sometimes too much. Even though he is the driver of the car for the evening, Frank is *not* “in the driver’s seat”; his peers are. He has surrendered control of his actions, but not his responsibility for their consequences.

1

Think of a situation in your life in which you made a decision similar to Frank’s, Christine’s, or Derek’s. Describe in writing the factors that entered into your decision.

Christine: Integrity and Fear

Christine is more secure and in touch with her emotions than Frank is. Empathizing with the new girl, Christine disapproves of her friends for their sarcastic remarks, and she resolves not to join them in making fun of Monica. We can admire Christine for being in charge of herself and for not participating in hurtful behavior, even though she remains silent with her friends about what they are doing, not daring to make a fool of herself by questioning their ridicule. Christine decides on a *private* course of action—to approach the new girl later and welcome her, but without letting her friends see her friendly gesture. Christine is not yet ready to speak up on Monica’s behalf to her friends; she is still fearful of their disapproval. But by choosing not to join in the ridicule, Christine is at least in charge of her own behavior, and she is headed down the road to integrity.

Derek: Courage When the Truth Hurts

Derek’s plight is not one to envy. Torn between two friends, it seems that no matter what he does, he will have to be disloyal to one of them—to the friend whose book was stolen or to the friend who stole the book. But, in Derek’s mind, the matter does not boil down only to an issue of loyalty, to which friend most deserves his support. (Actually, confronting Jeff may be, in the long run, the most loyal thing Derek could do for him.) Instead, the matter comes down to what is right and fair. Even though Derek feels torn over what to do, he chooses a courageous action—an action that may, however, mean the loss of a friend. **2**

Only for Young People?

You have probably seen these three approaches to choosing (Frank’s, Christine’s, and Derek’s) at one time or another in yourself or in other high school students. The fact is, however, that people of all ages—adults as well as teenagers—use a combination of these approaches. Many of us have witnessed forty-year-old Franks operating from their weaknesses and following the crowd. Age does not equal maturity. Certainly a situation like Christine’s is familiar to people of various ages, not just to teenagers. We have all, adults included, believed strongly in something but tactfully avoided saying what we believe when we fear our friends would be upset by it. The courage of Derek, too, can be seen in people who choose the right path, suffer for it, and sometimes wonder if they could have found a better way to deal with the situation.

So these approaches characterize not only teenagers but people at many stages of life. In high school, though, you are at a crucial stage of forming your identity; you may not be sure of your values and beliefs yet. Thus, many factors can seem outside your control—peer pressures or feelings or impulses that seem to compel you to do something or that blind you from seeing a situation clearly. Becoming conscious and courageous about our decisions can seem a tough, if not impossible, task. **3**

For Review

- Describe the three approaches to choosing represented by Frank, Christine, and Derek.

2

Write a brief inner monolog (self-talk) that Frank, Christine, or Derek might have had in trying to decide what to do.

3

What factors make it difficult for many teenagers to make informed and courageous decisions? List as many as you can.

**Backing Up to Define Morality**

This course is all about what it means to become morally mature, and before we go any further, it would help to reflect on just what morality is.

What Kinds of Decisions Involve Morality?

Look at the following list of choices. Decide which ones involve a moral decision and which ones are morally neutral—that is, a person would not need to use any moral considerations in deciding on them:

1. whether to go out with friends on a Friday night or stay home
2. whether to lie to avoid being blamed for something that was your fault

3. whether to go to McDonald’s or Burger King for a hamburger
4. whether to have sex before marriage
5. whether to try out for the softball team
6. whether to sell crack cocaine in your neighborhood for a drug dealer
7. whether to work weekends and evenings while in high school
8. whether to have an abortion
9. which candidate to vote for in an election

A review of the list shows that the choices are of different types. Some so obviously involve a moral dimension that we have no difficulty identifying them as moral issues—namely, 2, 4, 6, and 8. Other decisions may prompt us to say, “It depends”—1, 5, 7, and 9. Then there is decision 3, which may seem to be empty of any moral content.

Why do most people identify decisions 2, 4, 6, and 8 as moral ones? These decisions clearly are based on a person’s values and principles of right

■

Above, left and right: Dating behaviors obviously involve moral decisions, but what about decisions such as where to buy a meal?

and wrong. Furthermore, these decisions shape the *kind of person* that the decider is becoming. They go to the core of the person. For instance, the decision of whether to lie to avoid being blamed for a mistake points toward becoming a person who is honest or dishonest, trustworthy or untrustworthy.

Morality, then, has to do with the set of values and principles that guide someone's choices about what kind of person he or she is becoming. These values and principles point to the meaning that life has for that person.

Consider the “it depends” choices from the list—1, 5, 7, and 9. Given the definition of morality just stated, those items could potentially involve a *moral* choice. For example, the decision of whether to go out with friends on a Friday night or stay at home could be a moral one, depending on what the friends are planning to do or on whether the individual has to get up at five o'clock the next morning for a track meet. Now think about decision 3. Can you imagine how the choice between McDonald's and Burger King could have a moral dimension? It is possible.

The point is that just about any decision can involve morality. We go through countless moral decisions daily, even though we may never have viewed them as having moral dimensions. Our decisions, small as they may seem, shape the kind of person we are now and will become in the future, and they reflect what life's meaning is for us. **4**

Everybody's Got a Morality

Notice that so far we have not referred to morality as “good” behavior and attitudes. Morality includes *all* the values and principles that shape who a person is becoming. Morality is not concerned only with the values and principles considered good by

religious or other “good” people. (We will explore the meaning of *good* later in this chapter.) In the stories at the beginning of this chapter, the main characters were each operating from their own morality, whether admirable or not. In other words, everyone—every individual and every culture—has a morality. Morality is not reserved exclusively for “good” people.

Individuals and Cultures

Two persons may approach the same situation with vastly different moralities, but they are still each operating from *a* morality. The following story illustrates how moralities can differ:

A manager of a chemical company is faced with the fact that his company has made a serious mistake by spilling toxic chemicals into a river. The spill could endanger public health and wildlife. Because the manager operates from a morality whose basic principle is “Do whatever is needed to get ahead,” he chooses to cover up any knowledge of the spill so that his job will not be in jeopardy.

A manager of another chemical plant in a similar situation decides to go to public authorities about the spill so that it can be cleaned up as quickly as possible. This manager operates from a morality whose basic principle is “Do whatever is needed for the well-being of others.”

Like individuals, cultures have their own moralities, with a variety of moral norms and values—some that seem to benefit human beings and some that do not. Two cultures may have significantly different moral approaches. In a culture where females are not valued as highly as males, it may be socially acceptable for parents to abandon a female infant and allow her to die. In another culture, all life may be held as sacred and all children treated



as gifts to be cherished. Most people would say that both cultures operate according to their own morality but that these moralities are not equally beneficial to human beings.

Different Stages of Life

Individuals, like cultures, can have differing moralities, and individuals, like cultures, can shift from one morality to another over a period of time. Certainly this is true when a person undergoes a dramatic conversion from a life of crime or addiction to a life of responsible, healthy living, or from one religion that is not strict with its members to another that is very strict.

A more typical way that people change their morality over time is by the profound process of growth through the various stages of life.

The morality of childhood. Children obey their parents because they fear punishment, or because they want to please the ones they depend on

for love and support. We could say that the basic moral principle for a small child is “Do what your parents tell you to do so that they will be pleased with you.”

This morality works and makes perfect sense during childhood because children are not yet capable of making independent decisions about right and wrong. As they grow, children typically develop a sense that rules and laws can be important in themselves, not just because their parents are enforcing them. In fact, children can become legal sticklers: “You can't do it that way; that's not what the rules say!” However, children perceive rules and laws as outside themselves—somebody else's rules for living—and their job as good children is just to follow along.

The morality of mature adulthood. Unlike the morality of childhood, mature adult morality requires judgment based on values that are *within* the person, not imposed from without. The values

4 Review your day and record all the decisions you have made since waking up. Which decisions involved a moral dimension?

■ Above, left and right: The profound process of growth changes our morality in dramatic ways.



of mature adults are often those that they grew up with—in their family, in their church, or in their ethnic culture. However, now the values are within these individuals, taken on as their own. On the other hand, some of their values might differ from those they learned in their youth. The important thing about maturing morally is that persons have made the values and principles a part of themselves.

The in-between morality of adolescence. Somewhere between the morality of childhood and that of mature adulthood lies the often confusing world of adolescent morality. As young people attempt to move from parent-pleasing behavior and external rules to making choices that come from within themselves, they find an array of peer values to choose from, many of them reinforced by the mass media—advertising, TV shows, magazines, movies, and popular music. To be well liked or even somewhat accepted, teenagers may uncrit-

ically adopt the values of a peer group. Membership in the group offers security and a sense of being somebody. Teenagers may feel that they have “found themselves,” when in fact, they have found a group that tells them how to think and act. Actually, this process is typical and normal for younger adolescents. They tend to define themselves almost exclusively through belonging to a peer group and being accepted by their peers.

Usually by their sophomore or junior year of high school, young persons have developed confidence and have begun to trust their own judgments and opinions; thus, their reliance on peers’ opinions is not as strong. A student at a midwestern college recalls his high school years:

When I was a freshman in high school, I’d do almost anything to fit in, even if it seemed stupid. I was just trying to be cool, to pump up my ego, which must have been in pretty rough shape. I guess I mistook approval for love, but it’s a poor substitute, I must say. Later on, I found out it’s okay to be your own person. By junior and senior year of high school, I felt a lot freer to call things as I saw them instead of always looking to someone else to decide for me.

This young adult has described part of the process of transition from the morality of childhood to the morality of mature adulthood. The latter part of adolescence is often characterized by great idealism as young people’s moral sensitivities grow, and they become critical of societal values. **5**

Being Critical of the Moralities Around Us

All people are created equal, but not all moralities are. There are beneficial ones and harmful ones, life-giving ones and death-dealing ones, mature

■ Above: As teenagers move away from parent-pleasing behavior, they find an array of peer values to choose from.

5 Write a “moral development” autobiography, describing the changes you have seen in your own morality as you have grown through the life stages from childhood until now.

How does your experience correspond with the process described in the text?

Universal Rules?

An earlier section of this chapter pointed out that moralities can differ from one society or culture to another. You may wonder if all cultures or religions around the world hold any principles in common—or if there is no universal agreement on any principles.

Although unanimous agreement among all individuals on anything is impossible, we can find consensus on many values and principles among the most



In fact, many of the values and principles held by Christianity are espoused by the other major faiths as well. Note the Golden Rule as expressed by six world religions:

- *Buddhism.* Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.
- *Hinduism.* Do not do to others what would cause you pain if done to you.
- *Judaism.* What is hateful to you, do not do to others.



enduring of the world’s religions. Because these religions speak for so many of the earth’s people and have stood the test of centuries, we can trust that when these religions all share a similar principle, that principle is considered universal.



- *Taoism.* Regard your neighbor’s gain as your own gain and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.
- *Islam.* No one of you is a believer until you desire for your sister or brother that which you desire for yourself.
- *Christianity.* Do to others whatever you would have done to you.



Universal principles that most of the world’s people believe in do exist. These principles speak a deep truth about what it means to be human, and they transcend all cultures and religions. How they are applied to everyday life varies, of course, but remarkable consistency in the principles themselves does exist around the world.

■ Above: In clockwise order from the top, the symbols are Taoist, Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu.

ones and immature ones. It is up to us as we develop into mature adults to be critical of the moralities we find in our pluralistic North American society, in which values and principles often seem to be dished up as options, like a cafeteria-style lunch.

Looking critically at the values of our society does not mean we are being disloyal to it; a critical stance means we are being sensible and living as responsible citizens. In particular, we need to ask ourselves:

- Do some of the values promoted in our society really contribute to the well-being of all people, empowering them and freeing them? Or do they rob people of well-being, power, and freedom?

Some values in our society are among the most noble that humankind has ever known, for example, these beliefs:

- the equality of all persons
- the importance of individual action and initiative
- democracy as the way to govern and make decisions
- equal rights to freedom of speech, religion, the press, assembly, and so on
- the obligation of more fortunate people to help less fortunate people

But in addition to the many positive things we can say about North American values, commentators have pointed to the presence of other values that permeate society through the mass media and other means—values that need to be questioned by all of us. Some of these values even contradict the noble beliefs listed above:

- *Materialism.* The assumption that happiness lies primarily in possessions and a high standard of living

- *Competitiveness and a “me first” attitude.* The assumption that getting ahead and being number one are all-important
- *The “isms”—racism, sexism, ageism.* The assumption that some people and groups are better, more human, and more deserving of rights than others, based on some accidental characteristic like skin color, sex, or age
- *A “quick fix” mentality.* The assumption that the quickest possible escape from problems or pain is the best solution
- *Violence.* The assumption that physical or psychological harm to others is the means to get one’s way **6**

Whenever we adopt a critical stance toward societal values, we become more conscious of who we are and what we want out of life. We refuse to follow the noise of the crowd and instead decide to follow another, quieter, inner voice. Henry David Thoreau, a nineteenth-century philosopher and essayist, described this reality with a good piece of advice:

*If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away. (Walden, page 346) **7***

For Review

- What is morality? What kinds of decisions involve morality?
- Describe the morality of childhood, of mature adulthood, and of adolescence.
- What five values in North American society need to be questioned by all of us?

6 Use ads from magazines or newspapers to create a collage that illustrates the negative values listed on this page. Make up a title for your collage.

7 Do some research and write a report on Thoreau’s life. In what ways did he march to the rhythm of a “different drummer”? Do you know of a “modern-day Thoreau”—either personally or through the news? Describe him or her.

Which Morality Will Be Mine?

The Kind of Person I Am Becoming

The major moral question that each of us has to answer for ourselves is this:

- **What kind of person am I becoming, and what kind of person do I want to become?**

Morality is about making decisions that shape our character and reflect our understanding of the meaning and purpose of our life. This is about as important as questions get! **8**

Yet, we cannot decide what kind of person we want to become all at one moment or even in a year. We may want to be able to say yes to one direction for our life and no to another in one definite decision. But reality is usually more complicated and less dramatic than that. We answer the crucial question *What kind of person do I want to become?* in thousands of day-to-day, apparently small decisions. Taken together, these decisions create the kind of person we are becoming and will become. The creation of this person is the most important task of anyone’s life as a human being.

A wise saying captures this truth:

- Plant an act; reap a habit.
- Plant a habit; reap a virtue or a vice.
- Plant a virtue or a vice; reap a character.
- Plant a character; reap a destiny. **9**

As one student says, “Becoming somebody is like becoming a pianist; you have to practice every day until you get good at it.”

Unless we become conscious of the significance of our daily choices, we will go through life with

8 Write a brief essay answering this question as best you can:

- What kind of person am I becoming, and what kind of person do I want to become?

9 Read a biography of someone who fascinates you, and write about the acts in that person’s life that turned into the habits (virtues or vices) that shaped her or his character and destiny.

A Few Definitions

A **habit** is a regular pattern of acts.

A **virtue** is a good habit, an inner readiness to accomplish moral good.

A **vice** is a bad habit, an inner readiness to accomplish moral evil.

Character is the combination of our virtues and vices.

Destiny is what finally becomes of us, which depends on the character we build in response to God’s help.



our eyes closed. A seventeen-year-old girl expresses this reality in the following comment:

We're all so impressionable, you know? Your sense of self, who you are, comes from where you decide to go, what you choose to do, who your friends are, what you buy, things like that. You're surrounding yourself now with what you want to become later.

Turning Points

Looking back on life, we can sometimes identify a significant turning point that set us in a new direction, for example, deciding to hang around with a different group of friends, joining a club or sports team, or breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Years later, we recognize just how important that decision was in shaping the kind of person we have become. Listen in on a conversation about such a turning point that happened three years ago in Katie's life, when she was twenty-two:

Katie: My life would have been so different if I'd kept up that sick relationship with Phil and never married Josh.

I mean, I would probably be a senior aide in the office of a national politician by now if I'd stayed with Phil. He certainly had all the connections and the experience necessary to groom me for a career in politics. I probably would've been good, too. Even other people besides Phil told me that. And you know, part of me liked that possibility, even though I knew deep down that Phil was no good for me. I liked the idea of being in such a powerful and influential position. I'd also probably have more money and my own house by now!

Ellie: But Katie, think about it. Would you really have been happy? Phil tried to possess you, and you

know it. You said it yourself many times, especially toward the end. It was like you were being swallowed alive.

Katie: You're right. When I think about it, I know I got out of that relationship by the skin of my teeth. A lot of me was already buried when I was going with him; it was like being half-dead. That's why meeting Josh was so incredible. I could be my true self with him, and he never tried to possess me and control me. That weekend when I told Phil to get lost is still so clear in my mind. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but I'm so glad I had the guts to do it.

Even now, I'm still recovering parts of myself that got buried when I was with Phil. But I'm truly happy right now, and I'm feeling more like my real self all the time. **10**

What's Good?

As discussed earlier, choosing a morality to live by is highly important in our life. It makes a big difference which set of values and principles we choose to guide our decisions, for some values will lead to our becoming one kind of person, and others will lead to our becoming quite another kind of person.

Most of us want to be *good* persons. We want to be guided by good values, to make good choices, and to live the "good life." Few people deliberately choose evil; usually, evildoing is the product of choices that the individual *thought* were good.

Here are some false assumptions about what is good:

- Good is getting other people to like me or admire me.
- Good is moving up financially.

10
Have you experienced any turning points in your life that required you to make a decision? If so, describe how one of these choices set you in a new direction.

Decisions, Decisions

Life is a series of choices about who we will become.



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- Good is making my pain or discomfort go away.
- Good is getting rid of my problems as fast as I can.
- Good is having more control.
- Good is feeling good.
- Good is not getting the blame for something I did.
- Good is making people do what I want them to do.

Can you think of examples of how people can get into big problems because they hold one or more of the above assumptions about what is good for them? **11**

Look at the meaning of *good* in this way: It is good for a thing to be what it is meant to be. For instance, it is good for a rock to be part of the soil; for a tree to put down its roots into the ground, shoot its branches up to the sky, and produce leaves that generate oxygen; for a mountain lion to roam wild and feed itself on its prey; for a hen to scratch the ground, run around pecking for insects, and lay eggs; for an eagle to spread its wings and soar.

Likewise, it is good for a human being to be human, in all that this implies. Morally good actions are those that are in harmony with being a fully human person. In other words, you do good when you act in a way that is truly human—in your relationships with yourself, with other persons, with the earth, and with God.

Maybe you are already asking yourself this question:

- If being good means being fully human, what does it mean to be fully human?

That question has been addressed in one way or another by every major religion and philosophy in the history of humankind. In the next chapter, you will be looking at the Christian response to that question. **12**

This section of the chapter began with a question: What kind of person am I becoming, and what kind of person do I want to become? The way we answer this question for ourselves makes an enormous difference at the personal level.

The effects of a person's character, however, go far beyond that individual's life. Unbelievable as it might seem, what we make of our character in some way touches and affects the whole world, even those parts of it we will never personally see. Doing good on even the smallest scale contributes to the good of the whole human community, just as doing evil contributes to its harm. As the poet Robert Penn Warren expressed it: "The world is like an enormous spiderweb and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter." **13**

For Review

- What is the major moral question that each of us has to answer for ourselves?
- What wise saying expresses how day-to-day decisions lead to one's life destiny?
- What makes an action morally good?

11

Select three of these assumptions about what is good, and write down examples of how they can lead to problems.

12

List at least ten characteristics of what you think describes a fully human person. Compare your list with those of others in the class. Which characteristics show up on most lists?

13

Using Warren's idea of the world as a spiderweb, imagine and write about how the vibrations from a good or bad act you do might ripple to "the remotest perimeter"—to the lives of people on the other side of the globe.

Becoming Morally Mature: An Uphill and Downhill Journey

One thing must be clear to us as we go about the business of building our own character: Growing morally is *not* about making no mistakes!

Mistakes will happen to everyone. People who are considered moral giants are not the ones who were perfect all their life. Rather, they are the folks who made mistakes—even big ones that would seem to wreck forever their chances for happiness. But they learned from these mistakes and then went on living as deeper, wiser persons. As a high school junior testifies from his own experience, "Sorrow builds character."

Growing Through Mistakes

An interview with a college English professor offers an illustration of one student's growth through learning from mistakes and problems:

Jerry was the best student in my American literature seminar. On his papers and tests, he got straight A's. He was very bright and worked hard. The only thing I couldn't figure out was his silence in class. I mean, he never joined in. I even asked him once about it. He turned red and apologized, but he still didn't talk.

Toward the end of the semester, Jerry started looking awful—messy, sloppy clothes, dirty hair, and tired. I was to the point of asking him what was happening, when he just didn't show up for class. Finally I got a notification from the college counseling center that he



had been hospitalized and that I should give him an incomplete. He would be able to make up the work later. I asked a couple of Jerry's friends about him. They finally told me that Jerry was in treatment for alcoholism.

I was shocked. It did explain a lot, but still. Anyway, I sent Jerry a few notes just to reassure him. And after a couple of months, he showed up at my office. He looked great—had lost weight and picked up some color. I didn't want to push him, so the first meeting we just talked about his class work.

Anyway, eventually Jerry told me what had happened. Evidently, when he was a freshman, he felt so lonely and shy that he would have a couple of beers to get himself to talk. It worked, but he couldn't control his drinking. Pretty soon he was drinking regularly; on weekends he'd get wasted. I remember his exact words: "I never realized how much I disliked myself until I was in treatment. I guess I drank so I could overcome my fears."

Crazy—I had seen a bright, competent, cooperative student. All Jerry had seen in himself was a somewhat stocky, freckle-faced, homely guy, too shy and ugly to be popular. He was an ace in the Computer Hackers' Club, but even that made him feel bad because he felt stereotyped as a nerd. You just don't know what's going on with people, I guess.

Holy People Who Had Rocky Starts

You may wonder, Who are some of these moral giants that grew through their mistakes? And exactly what mistakes did they make anyway? Two holy people of the Catholic tradition offer powerful examples to us of the ability to turn one's life around. One is Augustine of Hippo; the other is Dorothy Day.

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine (354–430), born in North Africa, was a brilliant young man. From the time he started going to school, he easily led his class. Yet, at age sixteen, he had to leave school because his father could not pay his tuition; heavy taxes at that time made it impossible. During this year of idleness, Augustine acquired habits that he would later regret and repent of. With a group of wild friends, he went to prostitutes, got drunk, gambled, and led a purposeless life. Returning to school and finishing his studies at eighteen, Augustine then became a teacher. He also took a mistress. Taking a mistress



was not uncommon among non-Christians of the time, but Augustine's mother, Monica, a devout Christian, had tried to raise him in the Christian faith.

Augustine next became a Manichaean, believing that there was one god who created good and another god who created evil, and that therefore, people were not responsible for their sins. Monica could only pray for her son's conversion; he was too brilliant and stubborn to be influenced easily.

Then suddenly, Augustine moved to Rome with his mistress and their young son. A year later, he went to teach in Milan. There he studied the Greek philosopher Plato and was influenced by the wise Bishop Ambrose. Slowly, through the insights of Plato about the reality of spiritual things, the truth of Ambrose's message, and the influence of his mother's love, Augustine began to reform his life—but not without first taking another mistress!

At last, after much dissatisfaction and searching, Augustine was converted to Christianity. Later he became a priest, then a bishop. Today he is regarded as one of the greatest theologians in the church's history and is considered a father of the church.

Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day (1897–1980), like Augustine, had a rocky start. Always a passionate advocate for justice, in her twenties she took up a career in

■ Above: Augustine of Hippo, today considered a great church theologian, lived an idle and corrupt life as a young man.

journalism to further the radical causes she believed in. At that time, she got involved in a fairly “fast” life, becoming a part of the radical Greenwich Village community in New York City.

Casting about for a career, Dorothy entered nursing school but then dropped out a year later because she could not keep up the required discipline of study. She had an unhappy love affair, became pregnant, and had an abortion. Soon afterward, she wed another man, took up heavy drinking, and shortly split up with her husband.

Dorothy had no attraction to organized religion at this point in her life. But, always reflective, she read the Bible, especially the Psalms, while she was in jail. (She had been picked up on suspicion of being “dangerous” and “a communist” because of her social activism.) During this jail time, a fellow prisoner, a prostitute, inspired Dorothy with her gentle kindness and her nearness to God in mind and heart.



Within five years of her jail experience, Dorothy was into a common-law (unofficial) marriage with a man who fathered her daughter—a child that Dorothy wanted very much and that her husband did not. By this time, Dorothy and he were growing apart. The final blow that separated them was Dorothy's decision at age thirty to become a Catholic, a choice that baffled her atheist husband. As biographer Robert Coles recounts, Dorothy once recalled, “I think I realized on the day I was baptized how long I had been waiting for

that moment—all my life” (*Dorothy Day*, page 9).

In fact, Dorothy believed her life had just begun, and in some sense, it had. Dorothy Day went on to turn her radical passion for peace and justice, her career in journalism, and her devotion to Jesus and the Catholic church into a movement. It would change the face of much of North American Catholicism and have an impact on the worldwide church. In 1933, with Peter Maurin, a self-made philosopher and extraordinary man, Dorothy founded the Catholic Worker Movement. The movement consists of a newspaper (which still sells for a penny a copy), houses of hospitality for homeless people and hungry people in communities all over North America, and a strong witness of protest for justice and peace.

Today many people—Catholic and non-Catholic alike—consider Dorothy Day a saint.

■ Above: Dorothy Day moved beyond a difficult young adulthood to found the Catholic Worker Movement.

What’s great and sad at the same time is that it took treatment for alcoholism for Jerry to finally face who he is and start accepting himself. There’s a real—I’m not sure if this is the right word—*depth* to him now. I really admire Jerry. He goes to Alcoholics Anonymous and has made some friends there. He’s still quiet in class, but he’s gotten more involved with other things on campus, like Big Brothers, a group that works with kids from town who need extra attention. There’s something else, too: Jerry really seems to listen to other people now. One of the women who knew him before this happened even told me the other day that Jerry is so different, everybody respects him. He may be a resident assistant in a dormitory next year. **14**

Self-esteem as a Factor

A less dramatic, but nevertheless true-to-life, testimony to the ups and downs of moral growth comes from Sheila, a college junior who recalls from her own experience how important a sense of self-esteem is in influencing moral development:

When you’re a freshman or sophomore in high school, all you can pay attention to is what people will think of you. Everything you do—even dumb stuff—is decided by how it will make you look to other people.

By the time you get to be a senior, you’re used to the people, and they see you a certain way. You just are who you are and you pretty much accept that. Of course, you always struggle with that, I mean feeling a little insecure about your image, but . . .

Anyway, then you go away to college. It’s like being in high school again, in a way! I mean, you’re around new people, and you want them to see you the way they think you should be, so you have to adjust. You

try to impress them for a while. And then, as you get older, you realize it doesn’t matter what they think. You know that if you’re going to be happy with who you are, then you have to start feeling comfortable with yourself again.

Self-esteem and self-acceptance, as most of us realize, have everything to do with morality and moral growth. If we feel at peace with who we are and not tied up with anxieties about how we are coming across to others, we will be freer to make decisions based on our own values and the needs of a situation, not on our fears and insecurities.

However, as seen in Sheila’s description of the transition from high school to college, self-esteem is not a constant in life: it goes up and down. At times we feel on top of the world about ourselves, and at other times we are tied in knots by the negative messages we keep giving ourselves. Getting started in a new situation—like the first year of high school or college—can make us feel vulnerable again. Looking back years later, we may think that we made some pretty screwed-up moral judgments. And maybe we did.

The fact that there is no mistake (except suicide, which is permanent) that we cannot recover from gives us hope. The journey of life will be filled with ups and downs, hills and valleys. We just have to believe that when we are in a valley, the hills are still there waiting for us. **15**

For Review

- How can mistakes enable us to grow morally?
- How is self-esteem related to moral decision making?

14
Interview an adult who is willing to talk about how she or he turned a mistake into an opportunity for growth. Write up a summary of the interview.

15
Draw a diagram of the ups and downs in your self-esteem over the years. Label each peak and valley with a word describing each experience.

What Self-esteem Looks Like

People with poor self-esteem may . . .

1. believe deep down that they are not worth much
2. be scared of making any mistakes
3. constantly wish for an “ideal” body
4. stay with activities and interests that are known and safe
5. be unable to accept compliments
6. be preoccupied with how they appear to others
7. either brag a lot and act superior or put themselves down and act inferior
8. either try to dominate others or let themselves be a doormat
9. engage in self-destructive behavior such as drug abuse or starvation diets
10. be either defensive to criticism or devastated by it

People with healthy self-esteem can . . .

1. believe deep down that they are worth a lot
2. make mistakes and learn from them
3. accept their body even though it is not perfect
4. explore new opportunities and interests in order to grow
5. accept compliments
6. relate to other people spontaneously
7. be happy with themselves without feeling superior to others
8. treat others and themselves with respect
9. take care of themselves physically and emotionally
10. consider criticism a potential means for growth

On to the Journey

In this chapter, we have considered what morality is and noted that everyone has a morality they live by. Some moralities ultimately give life, and others do not. It makes a big difference, then, which morality—which values and principles—we decide to own for ourselves.

This course will present to you the moral vision of Jesus. It will help you consider what Jesus and the Christian tradition have to say about good-

ness, about what it means to be fully human. Buying or not buying into that vision, of course, is your choice. No high school course, book, or teacher can make you own something that you do not want to own. But many people believe, with good evidence, that Christian morality points to a path toward true happiness in life if it is taken seriously and owned in a person’s depths.

So this course will introduce you to the Christian moral vision, as an attempt to help you find your own path in life, the road to your destiny.