**Chapter 13**

On occasion I have assigned it to students, and I have to confess that they often do not like it as much as I do. The text is a dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus, a young seeker of truth. Theaetetus wants to know whether anything is certain, and Socrates agrees to help him explore the options. The book ends without a positive conclusion. A number of possible answers are given and, one by one, discarded because of logical inconsistencies. The question of what can be known for certain is still open when the two men part ways. My students are often frustrated because after plowing through what is sometimes difficult reading in Theaetetus, they want answers, not just a new and more complex set of questions.

**Why Does It Have to Be So Complicated?**

That may be how you feel after going through this book. Matters have been left open-ended, and no system I have examined has been free of questions. With each ethical approach has come a series of potential problems. Instead of solving the moral dilemmas, looking at these potential problems only seems to make matters more complicated. When we read a book that ends without giving all the “right answers,” it is not always clear what we are to make of it. It is not uncommon to feel frustrated or even a little angry. What is the point if we end up where we began? Open-endedness can make us a little crazy because we crave certainty. Especially in the realm of ethics, where so much is on the line, we would like to find a theory beyond the reach of criticism. Moreover, when we begin by assuming the truth of Christianity as our basis, we might expect clear cut answers on ethics. Since none of that was offered here, where do we go from here? Obviously, at least eleven different options are available, since there are people who support each one of the theories I have presented. However, when you notice that every system considered involves a set of difficult questions, you may give up on ever untangling the questions and finding answers. You may be tempted to go down one of two paths, both of which I find to be unhelpful. First, some people will simply turn off all the questions, shut out any ideas that are unfamiliar and return to the comfortable bumper-sticker-sized slogans I introduced in the first chapter. This is understandable, because we have a natural aversion to clutter in our lives. We like our truths plain and simple, and going back to what is familiar and easy is the path of least resistance. Moreover, books like this seem to make simple matters much more complex than necessary. After all, have not people throughout history been capable of making ethical decisions without getting wrapped up in questions about behaviorism, narrative ethics, egoism or natural law? If people can get along without all this bother, why go through it? Why does it have to be so complicated? Of course, it takes little thought to recognize that it is not the lack of reflection itself that allows some people to be morally successful. Some unreflective individuals live ethically disastrous lives. At the same time, it cannot be doubted that many people lead ethically sound lives without having thought much about ethics. When this works for particular people, it is usually because they are fortunate enough to have absorbed good ideas and habits. I know several such individuals, and you probably do too. However, even when a person exhibits moral integrity without having given much thought to the questions I have tried to address, it may be that something important is missing. It is one thing to do what is good and right, but quite another to understand why what you are doing is good. And it seems worthwhile, when the opportunity is available, to think through carefully the most important things in our lives. We do this, or at least know we should, when it comes to career choices, major purchases, religious commitments, choosing our friends and similar matters. Since the way we are treated and how we treat others is one of those important aspects of life, it is a good idea to examine beliefs about ethics. In the end, we may not change what we do or believe, but we will then have personal ownership of it because we have considered the options. That is the aim of this book. Many things look good at first, and this is also true of the bumper sticker versions of ethical systems we have considered here. However, you may have discovered that the initial attractiveness of a particular ethical approach diminishes once you become acquainted with the implications of the system. It seems preferable, then, to choose a position after looking at what is available. Better to select a system after carefully considering the options, rather than to passively accept a system because you have absorbed its ideas unconsciously or because it sounds good or is the easiest way to go. A second possible but unhelpful response to open-endedness is cynicism. Cynicism often appears to be a popular reaction to books that end without indicating a preference for one system over another. When people discover that no particular option will ever win everyone over, some are inclined to conclude that no claims to truth are valid. This attitude is attractive because it seems to put you safely beyond criticism. No one can dispute your views because you do not commit yourself to anything. Instead, you become the critic of anyone audacious enough to take a stand on ethical matters. But this approach has its own problems. First, it can be a cheap position. To do nothing other than criticize the supposed faults in the belief systems of others gives a false sense of security. The possibility that others may be wrong never makes you right. And it is always much easier to locate the weaknesses of a belief system than to defend your own view, even if your view happens to be cynicism. Second, it is impossible to drain ourselves of any convictions. People who only criticize other positions still assume a certain truth in their own criticisms. In reality, then, cynics do not play fair. They expect everyone else to defend their beliefs, but they keep their own out of sight. The last point is important, because it brings us back to the question of truth. Even though I have not endorsed any specific position here, there are a number of indications that, rather than giving up the hope that some sort of ethical truth can be discovered, the entire process of inquiry assumes that truth is possible. First, the very routine of critiquing various theories indicates that we have not rejected the notion of truth. In fact, criticism is actually a tribute to the idea of truth, because it is part of the search. Just as a construction worker will constantly measure and test a building in process to see whether things are “true,” so we will want to keep measuring by means of questions to know whether the various elements fit properly. Second, while locating a specific body of ideas that can be trusted is a difficult task, we can narrow our options, eliminating certain positions by looking for insurmountable problems. This is the purpose of critique. Knowing what is true begins with knowledge of what is not true. Moreover, while I examined the potential problems in each view, this was preceded by a statement about what a particular system has to offer in a positive sense. As I stated at the beginning of the book, though none of the systems may hang together as a whole, each one contains something worthwhile within it. When we isolate such positive points, we have located elements that may be integrated into our own view. Finally, throughout this book I have assumed the validity of certain standards of truth: logical consistency, practical applicability and a few foundational doctrines of Christianity. These have been the North Star by which I have checked each approach. Thus, rather than critique being considered a denial of truth or an invitation to cynicism, questioning is part of the process of seeking truth. One key to understanding the constructive purpose of this book is to recognize the nature of this book. This text is an introduction, and introductory texts involve certain necessary evils. The questioning process that is so much a part of this book is one of those necessary evils. Before we can know the answers, we have to ask the questions. However, inquiry can lead us into unfamiliar territory and require that we give up some of the comfort and control we once had. Some people like adventure and easily plunge into the uncertainty that comes with new possibilities. Others take the first road back to the familiar and vow never to leave again. A second necessary evil in introductory texts is that authors do not have time to address a wide range of concerns. In this book I am able to give only very general descriptions of various ethical systems. Perhaps there are parts of an ethical theory not mentioned in this brief survey that would have made a particular system more credible. I also did not examine all of the possible variations of each system. This is one reason many scholars do not like to write introductory texts. They know that others will read it and say, “I’m a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the name of an ethical system], and that’s not what I believe.” And they will be right. I have given rather generalized pictures of various theories. However, for each theory, there are more nuanced versions that may sidestep or answer many of the complications discussed at the end of each chapter. Furthermore, it should be noted that the questions raised with regard to each system are only potential problems. The intent was to point out questions that are frequently raised in relation to a specific theory. However, raising a question is different from finding a fatal flaw in a position, and there are effective means of countering a great number of these objections.

**Reaching a Conclusion**

All this has been said to remind us that this text is not intended as the final word on ethical ideas but as a small step into the discipline. Actually, by examining ethical theories, we have moved into the middle of a larger process. Obviously, a book like this looks forward. Simply giving mental assent to a particular set of ethical ideas is not an end in itself. Once our theoretical bases are established, we still have to deal with the tricky matter of applying our ideas to actual circumstances. Good theories hold their value because they allow us to do things well. Any good theory will be a useful tool in the laboratory of life. In addition, this book requires that we look again at beliefs that we already hold, and this may be the key to traversing the rather confusing maze of ideas I have considered. How you evaluate any given system will depend on a worldview you already believe. As you work through the diversity of thought, your own position will be informed by certain core beliefs that will guide you in reconstructing an ethical approach. Let me illustrate how a person might work through these different theories. Imagine a hypothetical college student named Julie, who is searching for the best of all possible ethical systems. As she looks at the various options, her first inclination is to adopt a divine command position. This approach picks up two beliefs she thinks must be at the core of any moral system—that the moral nature of God has great importance for human morality, and that humans are morally and intellectually limited. However, one of Julie’s friends disputes her choice by saying, “While parts of this system look good to me too, it gets us nowhere because not everyone believes in God.” This bothers Julie briefly, but she decides her friend’s objection is built on a mistake. Her friend is right about two things. First, not everyone is a theist. It is also true that without God, divine command theory falls apart. But this does not necessarily mean that divine command theory (or any other theistic ethics) is wrong. It only tells us that not everyone believes it. From this process Julie begins to recognize something important: every system has foundational beliefs. God’s existence is a foundational belief in several of the theories considered. Similarly, the tenet that the world is purely cause and effect is at the heart of behaviorism. The notion that evolutionary theory is sufficient to encompass even ethics is fundamental to evolutionary ethics. If we do not think that happiness is an indicator of moral rightness, we will not buy into utilitarianism. However, our lack of adherence to any of these foundational beliefs does not mean that these systems are not true. It just means that we do not believe they are true. In order to decide whether an ethical approach “gets us somewhere,” we need to resolve the foundational questions. Julie is now clear about what she had known in only a vague way before. Her ethical conclusions will depend on answers to a number of other questions that are not primarily ethical questions. Does God exist? Is there any room for human choice? Is survival the fundamental moral value? Julie now knows that many of her questions about ethical options have already been answered by what she has previously concluded about certain foundational questions. Given her foundational beliefs in a Christian worldview, which include a divine Creator who has a moral nature, Julie is unable to accept theories such as behaviorism, evolutionary ethics, ethical egoism or cultural relativism because they leave little room for such a Creator. However, she also notices that certain elements in these theories are consistent with her worldview, and she wants to incorporate these into the ethical system she finally adopts. For now, though, she decides to get back to the task of finding the best basic ethical theory. As she turns her thoughts back to divine command theory, one problem keeps nagging at her. After all is said and done, just about all major belief structures end up with the same basic set of ethical principles. Divine command theory does not seem able to explain why lying, cheating and stealing are universally condemned, even by nontheistic belief systems. Moreover, she is becoming increasingly bothered that she cannot seem to get rid of human reason, as divine command theory requires. Perhaps reason and the universality of ethical norms fit together? Julie wonders whether it is reason that allows people the world around to come to these common moral norms. One ethical system that allows Julie to connect a common knowledge of ethics and reason is Kant’s. However, this theory has a significant fault, as measured by another one of Julie’s foundational beliefs. Kant makes reason completely free of any higher authority and in this way overlooks human fallibility. Julie also is not able to accept the sharp divide Kant draws between duties and results. In her experience she recognizes that doing what is right generally leads to good results. Following moral rules brings about a longer and more satisfying life. With this last point in mind, Julie wonders whether utilitarianism and situation ethics might be right on something. Perhaps rules are not absolute, but are simply good strategies. However, she backs away from this because both seem to pick one aspect of the good and collapse all the others into it. Virtue theory does a better job of recognizing the full spectrum of good, and Julie is especially attracted to the idea that goodness is not simply a matter of following rules. She knows too many legalists to put the entire weight of ethics on law alone. Motive and character seem to be important also to her understanding of Christianity. The big negative in virtue ethics is that in its classical form it assumes that people can develop these virtues on their own. Hauerwas’s version of narrative ethics gets around this problem, but to Julie’s dismay, it also seems to eliminate any common ground for ethical discussions with those who do not buy into the Christian tradition. In the end, everything points toward natural law for Julie. That approach includes a number of the things she finds attractive in other theories. Natural law answers the question of why everyone seems to have a fundamental agreement on moral principles without absolutizing reason. It adopts from utilitarianism or situationism the idea that good actions will have good results, and it seems quite easily blended with a virtue ethics approach, which focuses on a person’s moral character. While placing a strong emphasis on human reason, it also pays attention to human fallenness and brings in divine law to answer the question of salvation. While Julie does not care for the egocentric approach in Rand’s ethical egoism, natural law does allow a means of fulfilling our needs while caring for others as well. This perspective, with a bit of help from narrative ethics, also allows Julie to make sense of cultural diversity without completely relativizing all moral practices, as cultural relativism does. Thus, Julie’s conclusion is that the best approach is a natural law theory with liberal doses of virtue and narrative ethics thrown in. The story of Julie, as stated here, is not intended to provide what I believe is the best answer to ethics. We should also not assume that Julie was infallible in her process of sorting through the different ethical approaches. She may have missed some possible solutions to her objections to some views, and she could have overlooked some big problems that attend the conclusion she did adopt. And Julie will be the first to tell you that she still has some unanswered questions and that she has perhaps not yet asked certain questions she should have asked. We should also note that Julie has done several things correctly. First, she did not give up on the process but kept sorting through different possibilities. Second, she began with her most basic beliefs in order to locate the best potential for a beginning point. Third, she has kept an open mind toward the positive points from other ethical approaches, even those she would have rather not liked at all, and has integrated them when possible. She was careful to make certain that the various elements would hang together and be consistent with other parts of her worldview. Finally, Julie did not feel that she had to have all the answers before committing herself to a position. Ideally, she will continue to refine her views and tie up the loose ends. Even if you go through the same kind of process Julie went through, you still may not be clear where you come out on all the specifics. The best some people can do for now is to commit themselves to a broad outline of basic beliefs, with perhaps more questions than answers. This position leaves many Christians with an uncomfortable feeling. After all, aren’t we after answers? At this point it may be helpful to recognize that your inability to come to specific conclusions may indicate that you have grasped another aspect of truth. Truth is not just a description of a certain body of facts that correspond to reality (although this should not be ignored), but it also describes the process we use to get there. This brings us back to Theaetetus. The lack of conclusive answers at the end of Theaetetus has caused some to assume that Socrates finds little use for the concept of truth, but the reality is just the opposite. In fact, Socrates’ strongest criticism was reserved for a group called the Sophists, who were cynical about the possibility of discovering what was good or right. Many of the Sophists gave up the search and reduced ethics to the realm of subjective opinion (a tendency that is very strong today as well). In contrast, Socrates says ethical rightness is objective and capable of discovery if we search faithfully enough and use the proper methods. While Socrates was convinced that truth is available, he was also concerned about another aspect of truth: truthfulness in method. I am sure that there were times when he would have liked to take the easy route and accept answers that had initial plausibility. However, it was precisely because of his respect for truth that he rejected the bumper stickers of his age when they did not hold up to scrutiny. Socrates can remind Christians of something valuable here. Many of us feel pressured to come up with the right answer right away. However, this can lead us to be dishonest in the process. Truthfulness, goodness and rightness need to characterize not only our conclusions but also the means by which we get to our conclusions. And if there is anyplace where Christians should be honest, it is the ethical process.