



Introduction to Ethics in Public Life: Good Practitioners in a Rising Asia

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Introduction

No one should doubt the need for close study of ethics in public life, but the particular quirks and preoccupations of this book require some explanation. This book is neither a general survey of the field, nor an in-depth examination of a single, defined problem. It is a set of case studies, relating and reflecting on the stories of specific practitioners, in identified Asian contexts, struggling to act purposefully and conscientiously within their spheres of work, to meet their professional duties as they understand them. Through careful examination of these selected cases, we can learn a great deal about the kinds of moral competence practitioners require in order to act effectively and well in public life. Or, at the very least, we have occasions for drawing lessons from moral failure. Learning comes from paying close attention to practical decision making as it is lived, to achieve a depth of understanding otherwise typically missed or ignored by students of ethics.

Of course, the proof is in the pudding, not in the recipe (or the rationale for the recipe). Some readers may wish to skip this introduction and go directly to the case studies. For others, it might be helpful if I say a few words about the general orientation that informs these exercises in practical ethics.¹

A Practical Orientation

When I began teaching at the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) more than 25 years ago, I brought with me a fairly standard training in Anglo-American analytic philosophy. That training served me well enough in the classroom. Yet, over time, I came to believe my approach failed to connect in a fundamental way with decision making as it actually occurs in the lives of people who work in the public realm. In particular, my encounter with mid-career students—in

successive classes, across different venues, from many different cultures and nationalities—moved me to reassess my approach, as I began to appreciate that decision making in practical settings is more complicated and more challenging, as well as more interesting, than typically presented in philosophical accounts. While my students and I could usually agree on which kinds of competence are required for success in practical decision making, I realized I had to reconsider how I arrived at that agreement.

To capture the difference in orientation, I began to distinguish the dominant philosophical approach, called *applied ethics*, from the alternative *practical ethics*. Applied ethics engages in a two-stage process: first, work out general principles (typically, in the academy, where one has the leisure for reflection), then apply the principles to the real world (where, inevitably, the principles are compromised by human failings or structural imperfections). For example, Ronald Dworkin, a leading theorist of law and politics, expresses his preference for the applied over the practical when he says “academic elaboration reveals the true nature or character of a moral theory.” This is so because the academic theorist is not concerned with “the practical adjustments required to make a theory manageable and efficient in politics and daily life but rather with the question whether we can accept a theory in the first place.”² The question that came to mind in my encounters with mid-career practitioners was: Why would we want to place confidence in an impractical and unmanageable theory “in the first place”?

Practical ethics, I came to believe, is more inductive. It begins with practices and judgments in real cases, and moves beyond them only to the degree needed for coming to grips with problems at hand. The idea is to uncover and refine the moral perceptions, sentiments, or conventions that are salient for practitioners, with the aim not to construct general doctrines but to improve the competence of practitioners to make reliable judgments and sound decisions in specific circumstances. Rather than aiming at grand theory, this approach is satisfied with middle-level formulations, including frameworks, classificatory distinctions, and other kinds of conceptual work (all of which will be evident in the case studies). It is also exploratory and pragmatic. To a significant degree, as we will see, it results in insights and observations related to the needs of practitioners in specific times and places—and, if we are cautious in our claims, useful for practitioners across societies. It does not result in a comprehensive theory, as part of an academic discipline aimed at finding ultimate truth.³

In accord with Dworkin's remark, John Rawls says that, when disagreement at low levels of generality occurs, we must ascend to a higher level of generality if we wish to get "a clear and uncluttered view" of the disagreement.⁴ Does greater illumination come from greater generality? One way to become uncluttered is to omit the richness and complexity—in a word, the disorderliness—of everyday life. The intractable, the exceptional, the persistently difficult are all swept away. But one thing I learned from my students is that disorderliness is a defining feature of a practitioner's world, and any realistic account of ethical decision making, if it is practical, must regard it as a constituent element. This includes disorderly features of the working environment and of moral consciousness. For example, what happens in the world is as much subject to chance, to fortuitous happenstance, as to human control. The fortuitous—accidents, natural disasters, chance confluences of events—is not inexplicable, but explanation typically comes after the fact.⁵ Meanwhile, expectations are violated, established patterns are upset. Even when practitioners manage to dominate events, what actually happens depends on the activities of numerous parties whose intentions are not the same and may not harmonize. Practitioners make decisions not only with imperfect information in a constantly changing world but under the pressure of parties with personal agendas or idiosyncratic views. Thus, the ability to foretell, let alone direct, the outcomes of purposeful action is irregular at best. The result is a constant instability in human affairs, or at least the potential for it, testing the limits of human powers. Acts of leadership invariably tempt fate.

The disorderliness is exacerbated by tendencies in human nature: the endless cravings, in Machiavelli's language, that make people forever discontented and, in a world of scarce resources, lead them to enmity and war. And the consequences need not be so dire. Practitioners make decisions not only with imperfect information in a constantly changing world but under the pressure of agendas driven by self-interest—their own as well as others'. While self-interest is only one source of conflict among individuals, it is one of the most pervasive. And when it is not a central factor, the deep passions—envy, loyalty, ingratitude, pride, ambition, vindictiveness—which are so often impervious to reasonableness, still have their effect and intensify the unmanageability of human affairs.

Finally, the practitioner's world is one of multiple sources of obligation. In the absence of a unitary framework of moral analysis, practitioners live with a fragmented moral consciousness, reflecting the

fragmented character of human life. In an early essay, Thomas Nagel identifies disparate types of human value and observes that they often come into conflict, sometimes irreconcilably. He explains this variety in terms of the human ability to adopt multiple perspectives—individual, relational, impersonal, and so on—each of which generates its own set of demands, without being subsumable under a single set of comprehensive principles.⁶ In the case studies in this book, I emphasize three distinct sources of obligation in the experience of practitioners—personal integrity, professional ethics, and shared moral conventions. While reflecting the fragmentation Nagel has in mind, these distinct sources, taken together, provide a framework for the kind of ethical diagnosis that I employ throughout the book. These sources of obligation are described at length in relating Henry's story (the first case study), but I will say a few words about them here.

By focusing on personal integrity, I mean to emphasize that how one should act is, in part, a function of who one is—or trying to become. Personal ideals and commitments set yardsticks of rightful conduct and are a continuing source of moral demands, without necessarily implying disapproval of people who make different choices or have different commitments. What is crucial is faithfulness to one's own ideal.

With membership in a profession comes an additional layer of demands, including a code of ethics and obligations to one's colleagues and the institutions in which one works. A key point about codes of ethics is that they are adopted by professional groups for many reasons, some of which are broadly political. A specific code reflects a choice by members regarding how they wish to present themselves to the public. But it often happens that members disagree among themselves as to which values and principles the profession should properly aim to uphold, and therefore which actions members should be publicly accountable for.

Finally, as a citizen of a particular country and as a human being, a third layer of obligation, including those derived from laws and authoritative moral conventions, is added to the mix. These are integral components of a (potentially) shared moral consciousness, encompassing, at the broadest level, universal principles binding on every human being whatever their personal beliefs or professional associations, such as human rights.⁷

We will examine these ideas in more detail in the case studies. The point here is that reconciliation of these fragmented sources cannot be presumed in the lived experience of practitioners. While public life

is characterized by degrees of consensus, at various levels and at various times, it is also replete with conflict and disputation. What results are inevitable clashes of duties—even while practitioners may strive as best they can to make them harmonize, or at least not get in each other's way too much. From a theoretical perspective, the choices of practitioners in the face of fragmentation are often unabashedly ad hoc, but none the worse for that, I would say. The practical question is not whether it is possible to construct theoretical resolutions; philosophers are especially skillful at such constructions, in the abstract. Rather, the question is whether it is possible to see the possibilities for good, and act effectively to realize them, in circumstances that are conflictual, fleeting, and partially out of control. My students have convinced me that the good practitioner is someone with the requisite competence to act effectively and well in such circumstances. Partly this is because the practitioner attempts to determine, not whether a moral judgment is justified in general terms, but whether a particular judgment is warranted in specific circumstances. Such a determination can occur only when taking all relevant factors into account, including the disorderly ones. If we agree on abstract principles while continuing to disagree in particular cases, it is not certain the principles are doing useful work. If we disagree on principles, too, we may require some other basis entirely for resolving our differences and making a decision. Lawyers observe that achieving moral clarity in a case often comes by more detailed examination of facts. Retreat to abstract principle can be evidence of indolence or over-intellectualization.

How, then, are sound judgments made? How does moral competence develop, and how is it sustained? These questions reflect my major preoccupation in this book. The topic of moral competence is generally neglected in schools of public management and policy, as well as in the scholarly literature. Yet, it is critical to any hope we might have for strengthening the quality of governance. By examining specific instances of practitioners making life-defining decisions in their work, I will suggest that sound judgment in practical ethics depends crucially, not on the application of general principles (especially those worked out in the academy), but on a certain understanding of virtue—or, as I prefer, competence—as a quality of historically situated individuals. It is not a matter of personal virtue but of moral competence in dealing with complex institutional and political exigencies, not qualities or dispositions of individuals in the abstract but capacities adequate to producing certain effects in the world. In

the world as it is, the good practitioner embodies a set of attributes that, while taking into account things as they are—the limitations of regimes, the faults of human beings, the disorder of society and economy, the quest for power—enable the practitioner to act effectively for the public good. I will say a good deal more about moral competence in the conclusion, as a way of drawing out some general lessons from the case studies, but it is the case studies themselves that best reveal what I have learned from my students.

For example, I have come to appreciate that practitioners learn more from cumulative experience than from philosophical reason. What is it about cumulative experience? Aristotle says, in ethics we ought to attend to the sayings and opinions of older, experienced people, that is, people of practical wisdom. These are people with a finely developed sense of what matters and why it matters. Practical wisdom is neither a science nor an art. It is not a matter of logical demonstration or of purely technical skill. It is the capacity to judge reliably in particular situations, so as to act for the good. “Because experience has given them an eye, they see aright.”⁸ The person who judges reliably has an apt temperament and is not distracted by pain or pleasure or unruly passions. More importantly, experience is required because “matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health.” Particular cases “do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion.”⁹

The need for experience is, most strikingly, what separates practical ethics from any theoretical enterprise. The considered judgments of practitioners are rooted in history and ongoing deliberation, not apprehensions of pure reason or deductions from human nature. Rawls explains that considered judgments are convictions that have passed independent tests of reflectiveness—rendered under conditions “in which our moral capacities are most likely to be displayed without distortion.”¹⁰ What are those conditions? Are they merely states of mind—when only “calm passions” hold sway and the influences of bias and self-interest are held in check—or do they also include active social learning, especially within the relevant domain where judgment is to be exercised? The view I have adumbrated suggests that sound ethical judgment requires close observation and practice, being initiated into particular ways of feeling, acting, and responding; mastering standard techniques; and eventually innovating within acquired understandings. Let’s call this the development of *operational ethical judgment*. For developing this competence, history serves better than

philosophy. Not history for its own sake, of course, but for answering practical questions: What went wrong last time? What has succeeded for others in the past? Can we identify models of exemplary conduct? Or anti-models? Cases are mini-histories that, when carefully selected and analyzed, help practitioners cultivate operational ethical judgment.

This approach has distinct implications for the subject matter of ethics.

Practical Ethics Is Strategic Ethics

In the absence of integrated, comprehensive principles of the sort that philosophers often seek, it is tempting to say that power or other non-discursive factors have the final word in public decision making. As though to say: Reasoning runs out, and then one has to act. That would be one way of giving content to the idea of the practical in practical decision making, but it is not the route I follow. Grappling with the limits of rationality and the realities of power is important, but the complexity of decision making in public life does not require setting ethics aside. I take it for granted that there cannot be professional conduct in the public sphere unless power and the pursuit of interests are guided by ethical considerations. But what does it mean to be *guided* by ethics? Does it mean that principles are always decisive? Or, are they rather one consideration among others? How then are sound decisions made? To speak of intuition in this context is not helpful, especially if the term is unanalyzed. Nor is it necessarily helpful to say that good judgment is learned through experience, for example, through the deeds of exemplary individuals or by trial and error in one's own actions. That is true as far as it goes, but more needs to be said about the craft of the ethical practitioner. An inexperienced cook follows a recipe closely; an experienced chef exhibits culinary craftsmanship.

What I aim for is a conception of ethics, and an understanding of guidance, that is appropriately practical. In elaborating this approach, I sometimes use the term *strategic ethics* to convey the idea of making a decision or devising a course of action that engages the practitioner's capacity for contingent judgment—informed by principles, to be sure, but principles that are fitting in specific circumstances of conflict, uncertainty, and risk. Thus, a critical step in understanding practical decision making is placing it in context. What problem is demanding someone's attention? What resources are available for addressing it?

What authority does the person have, or can muster, for action? What is the normative environment, and what does the environment allow or prohibit? When decision making turns on contingencies, many considerations come into play, legitimately, that would not appear in abstract statements of ideals or values. Moreover, application to specific circumstances is not an afterthought or an exercise subsequent to working out guiding principles. Contingent circumstances are integral to figuring out, in the first place, which principles are reasonably employed to guide specific decisions.

My Kennedy School colleagues will recognize this approach as an application of *the strategic triangle* to ethics. The core idea is that, in public contexts, the pursuit of public good is harnessed to the availability of resources and the authority to act. Thus, in Philip Heymann's words, the central challenge is to make desirable goals, external support, and organizational capacities fit together. "The concept is simple," Heymann observes, "its application to a rich factual context is not."¹¹ I am aware the term, strategic ethics, can be misleading, so I want to be clear. I am not proposing that ethics, when it is practical, is instrumental to other (non-ethical) purposes. Nor that, in conducting oneself so as to best realize the ideal, one has to recognize, realistically, that one will fall short. There is a tension between the ideal and the real, but that is not the point here. Rather, with practical ethics one follows a different path in determining what the ideal (or relevant principle) is. Why does that happen? In general, there are three connected reasons why practical ethics is strategic: (1) the imperative of effectiveness, which introduces considerations of feasibility; (2) the interplay of means and ends, which requires constant mutual adjustment between them; and (3) the stickiness of context, including the practitioner's moral environment. I will describe these considerations only briefly; they are illustrated repeatedly in the case studies.

(1) *The imperative of effectiveness.* Practical ideals are different, in part, because efficacy is an ethical duty. That means the criteria of warranted action include what is feasible and what can be accomplished. Practitioners must think not only about what would be good to do but what can be done and what is likely to happen. Thus, among other things, what one should do depends crucially on what others in the environment are doing or can be counted on to do. Mark Moore captures the importance of efficacy when he observes that the reasoning of a practitioner "ha[s] to be grounded in the current realities of the situation, and not make unsupportable assumptions about what [the practitioner] could do to change the world... That doesn't mean

it couldn't be ambitious or risky. It is just that the risks ha[ve] to be calculated. Moreover, riskiness necessarily discount[s] the value of any strategy . . . being pursued."¹² In John Dewey's language, ends-in-view guide the emergence of specific activities and provide criteria for evaluating their success, but reasonable projects are not free-floating creations of the imagination. They must be anchored in social reality, take concrete form, and prove themselves workable in society. The factors that enhance or impair the effectiveness of particular acts or policies determine whether or not an existing social problem can be addressed—and how. Thus, practical considerations are not compromises with rules derived from abstract principles; they are valid criteria for determining which rule it is reasonable to adopt in the first place.¹³

Moral principles and cultural ideals are certainly indispensable elements of deliberation, but practical ethics is also about forms of social organization and human capacities, or the critical interplay between principles, forms, and capacities. One criterion of the reasonableness of a principle is that it can be sustained in institutional and professional settings. If a rule is prone to be misunderstood or abused, and the problem is not easily corrected, that is a good reason for saying it is not the right rule. Proper design is not simply instrumental to predetermined ends but is itself a carrier of moral value, where each institutional form "is a kind of constitution establishing a framework for the future dealings of the affected parties."¹⁴ It matters greatly, therefore, which form it is. Practical ethics takes into account the powers and opportunities, as well as the interests (including moral interests), of human agents in particular circumstances. The good practitioner thinks strategically in adjusting the fit among these considerations, attempting to integrate them in operable plans of action. Needless to say, judgments of capacity or estimates of likelihood are not static or fixed; leadership makes a difference. Some practitioners are more skillful than others, for example, in achieving their objectives by mobilizing support from initially indifferent or even hostile parties.

(2) *The interplay of means and ends.* Practical reasoning hinges not only on what to do but how to do it. Indeed, how something might (or might not) get done is crucial to determining what one ought to do. The proverbial "ten smart people" might be dazzling in their ability to devise solutions to problems but clueless when it comes to the organizational infrastructure that determines whether any proposed solution is viable. In general, a practitioner's responsibilities—whether

in designing institutions or formulating policies or giving advice—cannot be carried out without a simultaneous focus on ends and means. This is not only because both have moral significance, which is true enough; not only because an end in one context is a means in another (e.g., good health is an end in itself but also a condition of human flourishing); but also because ends and means invariably interact and involve each other (human flourishing is a factor in determining what counts as good health).

As an example, consider means/ends interactions in current efforts to transfer tasks away from government agencies and give them to private firms, that is, the market. It is often assumed that practitioners can use market mechanisms to pursue their goals, without changing the goals in the process. The interaction of means and ends suggests otherwise. Two things commonly happen: practitioners focus on only some ends and neglect others, or they fail to grasp how new ends intrude through the market itself. A mechanism such as contracting out may be thought to improve efficiency but does not, typically, improve citizen participation in decision making, let alone transparency or responsiveness. Demand-side financing (as with education vouchers) may improve accountability but impair collective self-government. And so on. In general, markets are not value-sensitive unless they are deliberately made so. Thus, we can understand the rationale for building social markets in which specific political values—racial and gender equality, workers' rights, habitat preservation—are incorporated into market calculations.¹⁵

(3) *The stickiness of context.* Aside from the interplay of means and ends, practical ideals are different because context makes a difference. Practical ethics has no grip outside of specific historical, political, institutional, and moral settings. One result is that the past ineluctably shapes the future. Decisions about what one ought to do are heavily dependent on what others have done before and found agreeable or become used to. The sequence in which things happen is often crucial to outcomes, and alternative courses of action are sometimes irreversible (increasingly so with time) because mechanisms of self-correction are absent. Limited control, combined with limited foresight, yields unintended consequences that are not easily altered. In some instances, specific acts or policies, once initiated, are self-reinforcing; they generate commitments and investments of social capital (not to mention financial capital), which are perpetuated even if suboptimal. People will have adjusted their expectations and come to rely on everyone else following certain ways of doing

things. Within a particular setting, some paths will be open, others foreclosed.¹⁶

Broadly speaking, this phenomenon is known as *path dependence*, a term coined by economic historian Brian Arthur to refer to how certain technological choices (e.g., the QWERTY keyboard or gas-powered engines) persisted long after their initial efficiency superiority had been surpassed. We see this phenomenon constantly today in the IT world, with computer programming languages and software. The benefits of increased efficiency are often outweighed by the benefits of familiarity—or the costs of changing what has become habitual. When path dependence is at work, historical frames of reference reveal the parameters of what is possible. They are indispensable to understanding the meaning of what is happening and what can be done about it. For contrast, consider an approach based on time-slice comparisons, using materials drawn from different historical periods. With time-slices, events from any historical period are regarded as illustrative because human beings are assumed to exhibit the same patterns everywhere, for example, in their motivations or in their responses to social problems. Path dependence suggests a different picture: the historical experience of a people leads it in a distinctive direction and partly (perhaps largely) determines the evaluative standards it regards as reasonable.

While insights generated by the study of path dependence have been applied effectively to social and technological development, they have not been employed as much in understanding ethical decision making. Yet the application is straightforward. We commonly recognize that novel ideas—including proposals for moral reform—typically meet considerable resistance, not only from entrenched interests and settled practices but from familiar and accepted ways of thinking. What is less commonly observed is that the warrant for taking already-accepted ideas as touchstones of our thinking is ethical as well as epistemic. It is epistemic because novel ideas are conjectural and untested. It is ethical because novel ideas destabilize existing expectations and patterns of cooperation. With time, certain ways of doing things come to be regarded as natural and legitimate; proposals for change, beyond the incremental, seem wrong, if not wrong-headed. Some components of the existing normative order, of course, are more or less determinate than others; some are more or less authoritative. Ethical precepts can be inchoate and emergent; they can also become obsolete, with altered values, new forms of organization, and new scientific or technological developments. (For a recent example of dramatic change

in moral norms, consider the consequences of scientific findings on second-hand smoke. Cigarette smokers have come to be seen not only as foolish for engaging in self-destructive behavior but also a gratuitous danger to others.) Whatever the specifics, practical reasoning occurs within the taken-for-granted legitimacy of certain values and prevailing conceptions of interpersonal relationships. Moral values are not conceptual artifacts, to be manipulated at will and imposed by fiat; they live and thrive in the midst of interconnected practices and historically validated norms.

A practitioner must be able to judge whether a particular act or policy is correct, but the criteria of correctness are exogenous. They come from the practitioner's moral environment, which can include values based on religious faith or ethnic loyalty or national pride. Practical ideas and commitments gain what authority they have by connecting to the self-understandings by which people lead their lives. Especially in democratic polities, these criteria rightly figure into determining which act or policy is acceptable, whether or not they accord with the dictates of abstract philosophy or the practitioner's personal commitments. This exogenous quality enables us to see why professional life constantly raises challenges to personal integrity (as we will see vividly in the first two case studies).

Thus, even when abstract principles provide guidance, their formulation must be tentative, because our view is never comprehensive. We are always closer to certain paradigm cases or entrenched models of moral action. For this reason, it is not helpful to expend a great deal of effort on precise formulations of principles. The demand for precision comes from other areas of inquiry, especially the sciences, and is inappropriate in ethics. Where the philosopher asks "What is the true theory of morality, and what precisely does it justify?" the practitioner asks "What is it reasonable to do in the circumstances?" The reasonable, Bernard Williams says, depends on what makes sense and commands some loyalty.¹⁷ Ethical deliberation, when it is practical, occurs within received modes of thought and judgment. The meanings by which practitioners comprehend their experience are what matter, including their views about what is decent and fair and right. Good practitioners work within ideological and political parameters—the *public conscience* of their time, as I prefer to call it—including widely shared moral values and dominant constructs of the right way to be, say, a socialist or a democrat, a bureaucrat or a legislator, a doctor or a journalist. In this frame, principles are more resources for judgment than prescriptions for conduct. Practitioners orient themselves

by means of commonsense beliefs and maxims, settled moral conventions, exemplary models of ethical conduct (and anti-models), and analogies to familiar situations about which people agree. Objectivity in ethics is not ruled out by this mode of proceeding, but objectivity depends crucially on the availability of common understandings and an authoritative idiom in which to express them.

The need of practitioners to attend to their authorizing environment, in all its particularity, is a key reason practical ethics cannot be applied moral philosophy. The reflective practitioner depends, rather, on provisional fixed points. Like a spider whose legs are the points of contact with its web, one's ability to maneuver morally depends on what one can hold on to. These touchstones are one's considered judgments, the thoughts and sentiments in which, after due consideration, one has the most confidence. When they are deeply held, one simply cannot imagine believing otherwise. Confidence, of course, does not mean warrant. We should not even assume we necessarily understand why a particular ideal or principle or sentiment has a hold on us. Articulating a considered judgment is sometimes like discovering oneself to be in a certain condition, and it can be a surprising discovery.

Considered judgments are accompanied, characteristically, by the thought that they embody one's very best effort at moral reflection, but the results are always open to revision. Nothing is immune to critical examination. The question is: Which judgments do we have confidence in? Presumably, we have the most confidence in those judgments that are most difficult to give up or revise. Which, again, is not to say one's convictions are warranted simply because one cannot help believing them; considered judgments are not self-validating. Rather, there is simply no alternative to believing what one most strongly believes. (However, we should take note of Nietzsche's caution: "A very popular error: having the courage of one's convictions. Rather, it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one's convictions.") Further, the judgments we have the most confidence in are not necessarily the more general or foundational. Indeed, the higher the level of generality, the less certain we are about what is implied and therefore what we are committing ourselves to. Statements of general principle are commonly accompanied by unrecognized ideological baggage.

No doubt we like to harbor a picture of ourselves as autonomous and self-legislating moral agents, deciding what morality requires independently of others. But thinking practically about ethics, as I see it, means grounding public morality in social life, rather than the exercises of a self-reliant intellect. Practical deliberation occurs

within an ongoing normative order, implicating existing currents of thought and sensibility, including authoritative precepts and techniques, institutional forms and ideals. Of course, ethical reflection must get beyond the merely habitual. If customary norms were merely habitual, that is, followed unthinkingly and withheld from scrutiny, their authority would be weak. Furthermore, commonly accepted ideas sometimes embody unexamined prejudices or elements of false consciousness that should be discarded or surmounted. But the appeal to received modes of thought does not preclude reflection and reformulation. Conventional morality includes not only first-order substantive norms but also second-order criteria for their acceptance. Second-order conventions stipulate the ground rules of moral judgment, ranging from obvious criteria like sincerity and consistency of reasoning to less frequently articulated but no less important conditions like grounding one's judgments on well-founded statements of fact and taking account of the legitimate claims and expectations of others (thereby moving from an individual to a general point of view). These criteria, it should be emphasized, are not some philosopher's theoretical construction. They are settled, authoritative, and integral features of conventional moral discourse, learned ineluctably in conforming to the morality of a particular society. They make possible the criticism and correction of first-order norms that figure into everyday moral deliberation.¹⁸

Under favorable circumstances, reflection on prevailing moral standards can lead to reformulation. This can take a number of forms, such as extending the scope of a principle by analogy (say, from civil rights to gay rights or rights of the disabled), or assimilating conduct to an already existing category (sexual harassment as a form of discrimination), or changing the context of understanding (the plight of the poor and ill in developing countries reframed as a national security issue for developed countries). Notice that each of these forms of argument represents an instance of intellectual path dependence. We move from what is settled and authoritative to what is less so. In general, in practical ethics, we utilize available intellectual resources, not simply to be persuasive but to establish our moral ground as well. The central question is not how do we apply universal principles to individual cases, but how do we move from what we have confidence in and extend it reasonably to the new problems that life constantly throws at us?¹⁹

For this reason, I prefer an image of the good practitioner as embodying *esprit de finesse* rather than *esprit de systeme*. As John

Forester says, “Academics can theorize, but practitioners must improvise.”²⁰ Improvisation means acting reasonably in the circumstances, with the resources—mental, material, and moral—at one’s command. This is not second-best decision making; it is the only kind appropriate to the situation. Realizing that rules are always tentative and imperfect, improvisation is more problem-centered than rule-centered. What is required for sensible rule-application is a set of general competences, such as fact-sensitivity, responsiveness to context, and a steady focus on guiding purposes. Practical decisions cannot be made mechanically; they require complex judgment. The good practitioner, then, engages in a kind of holistic assessment—the holistic assessment of the experienced craftsman. This is not a skill like bicycle riding. For one thing, it is more conscious and reflective—in a word, conscientious—when it is done well. Conscientiousness, in some situations, requires a great deal of analytical work. Still, the end product of reflection often eludes easy articulation. Thus, with holistic judgment, we understand how an insistence on reason-giving can go awry. A practitioner pressed to “state your reason” for acting one way rather than another may identify a salient feature of the situation, but the one feature may have been selected because the practitioner had to say something. It does not follow that the identified feature will be salient in another context. No general rule is implied.

In sum, at any given moment, practitioners are part of an ongoing moral conversation, much of which is taken for granted in practical decision making—not simply because we lack the time or ability to sort through everything, which is true enough, but because the ongoing conversation embodies yardsticks of practical thinking. A practitioner’s decision, of course, will not necessarily be popular or willingly complied with, but legitimacy requires that, in the event of substantive disagreement, background norms or institutional processes grant the practitioner authority to make the decision. Perhaps the public does not believe it is wise or fair; they could still believe it falls legitimately within the practitioner’s domain. It is worth emphasizing that nothing I have said is meant to obscure the conceptual distinction between what is authoritative and what is right. They remain analytically distinct. What is right cannot be determined by appealing solely to widespread opinions or settled customs. No matter how compelling, they could be wrong. At the same time, any human source could be wrong; that is what fallibility means. Even the pronouncements of divine oracles are interpreted and assessed by human beings. The point is that practitioners, acting in public, require authority for what

they do, and that authority comes from settled and stable elements of the moral environment, whether the law or professional norms or shared moral conventions. A critical question for every practitioner is: What am I authorized to do? Or, in more active mode, recognizing that the environment can sometimes (at the margins) expand or contract by what a practitioner does: What authority can I muster in support of what I want to do? Asking and answering this question is crucial to understanding the implications of the strategic triangle.

The Pedagogy of Practical Ethics: Case Studies

In the classroom, what distinguishes practical from applied ethics is the use of cases, which means immersion in the details of actual situations in which practitioners grapple with difficult ethical issues. The underlying assumption is that, if we wish to think practically, as well as methodically, about ethics in public life, we need to ground our discussion in the lived experience of practitioners. We want to be guided in our reflections by problems of life and practice rather than academic theories and disciplinary methods.

Ethical reflection properly begins not with an abstract ideal or an intellectual puzzle but an existential situation, a problem in need of remedy. It grows, as John Dewey says, out of actual social tensions and needs, guided by the imperative to bring about a more desirable state of affairs. The connection between inquiry and practice is intrinsic. Academic detachment from the world may provide opportunities for systematic and dispassionate inquiry, but academics are not faced with the exigencies of acting effectively in the world. What is needed is the rigor that comes from working up a diagnosis adequate to making a reasonable and effective decision in an actual situation.²¹ Practical reflection is grounded in the study of real cases to avoid being sterile (having no real application) or artificial (producing solutions all too easily). Accordingly, the studies in this book deal with real-world problems in terms that make sense to the people whose problems they are. The ultimate test of ethical reflection is whether it is helpful to practitioners in their concrete existence. This requires adopting the practitioner's point of view and attending to the full array of factors involved in decision making in the world, including the contingencies of effective action. Only *thick descriptions* of situations (cases) and *close analysis* of them (case studies) are adequate to this endeavor.

The art of analysis, in large part, is the ability to weigh how contextual factors, local knowledge, and tacit understandings make a

difference in ethical diagnosis. So, what unites these case studies, more than anything, is a practical concern: not how theory relates to practice, but how concrete action can be guided by intelligence. Beyond a grasp of the logic of arguments, this requires careful diagnosis of the political environment, imagination in formulating plausible forms of intervention in the world, and factually grounded judgment in assessing the prospects of success. What matters are values in the world and the conditions under which they are fulfilled or frustrated. Not to mention the wisdom that comes from experiential learning. Of course, the use of real stories makes generalization somewhat problematic, since our considered judgments in each instance may depend on special circumstances or peculiar combinations of factors. Nonetheless, responses to real cases, I believe, are more firmly grounded in moral experience. Assuming the cases are well chosen, they should illuminate large areas of public life.

In the selection of cases in this book, the profound influence of my mid-career students, from countries around the world, will be evident. (HKS has the most internationally diverse student body of any of the professional schools at Harvard.) Three of the five cases are stories written by my students based on their personal experience. For more than 20 years, I have invited students, as the final assignment of the semester, to tell me a story about a difficult ethical conflict they encountered in their work, and then analyze it in the way they have been analyzing other practitioners' stories throughout the semester. The process of relating and reexamining a difficult moment from the past, and analyzing it methodically in light of a semester's reflection on cases of ethical conflict, has proved to be the most valuable learning experience in the course. Out of this exercise, I have received some wonderful stories, and when a story is especially promising, I work with the student to turn it into a teaching case (always in a somewhat disguised form so that the student cannot be identified). These *memoir cases* have the special feature of telling a story from a practitioner's point of view. That makes them one-sided, in a sense, but also facilitates exploration of ethical conflict as it is lived. In any given year, my syllabus contains six to eight memoir cases written by students in previous years. From this group, I have selected the stories discussed in chapters 1, 2, and 4. One of the other stories (chapter 5) is similar to a memoir case in being based largely on an extended interview I conducted with the protagonist.

Since I am offering thick descriptions, each case study tells enough of the story to allow readers to form their own views and draw their

own conclusions. Each case has sufficient detail about the circumstances generating conflict—the institutional context, the relation of the protagonists to other important agents, the resources and options available to the parties—to enable readers to engage in their own ethical analysis. The point is not to provide definitive answers to the questions raised (even if I do state my views from time to time) but to help readers think critically for themselves. There is a difference between inculcating specific moral beliefs and cultivating a moral sensibility. Max Weber observes that teachers stand in the service of moral forces if they succeed in getting students (or readers) to offer an account of the ultimate meaning of their conduct.²² What Weber means, I believe, is that there are certain virtues—conscientiousness, circumspection, sensitivity to effects—which have value independently of specific beliefs and which are the proper focus of a teacher's efforts. The cases discussed here have a richness that allows one to return to them repeatedly and find new meaning and new implications, with the potential to overwhelm any previous account one might have developed.

At the same time, my imprint is on everything. I relate the stories, explore selected lines of argument, and offer commentary on relevant circumstances. If the analyses are successful, they will demonstrate that some ethical judgments are more reliable than others: for instance, those that take better account of facts; that are informed by cumulative experience in the relevant domain of public life; and that result from a greater capacity for self-reflection—seeing issues from different sides and identifying and overcoming sources of bias. Of course, to say some judgments are more reliable than others is not to say I expect ultimate agreement. Each case is highly controversial—which is a large part of what makes them good cases for study and reflection. At the same time, there are two dangers: overestimating the amount of disagreement and underestimating the amount of disagreement. Which danger is greater will depend on the case. One task I set for myself in these chapters is to understand the reasons for disagreement when it occurs, and to survey the possibilities for agreement. I recall a pedagogical device employed by one of my teachers when I was a graduate student in the 1960s. At the beginning of a course on ethical theory, he raised the question whether it made sense to study ethics at all. This was a salient question, he suggested, because in the event of conflict there are only three logical possibilities, all of which point to easy resolutions. Either the conflict is between something right and something wrong, in which case one obviously should do

what is right; or the conflict is between something right and something else right, in which case it doesn't matter what one does; or the conflict is between something wrong and something else wrong, in which case one should do neither. So, why study ethics?

It is a ruse, of course, but an engaging one, which I have often used with my own students. *Right versus wrong* is easy in moral terms but can be very difficult in psychological terms. People often describe as a moral conflict a situation in which they are sorely tempted to act for their own advantage or the advantage of someone dear to them, while knowing perfectly well it is not the right thing to do. The struggle in such cases is how to be a moral person. *Right versus right* seems benign, at first glance, but the formulation is deeply misleading unless one has an articulate account of how it can happen that two opposing acts are both right. What kind of world gives rise to such a possibility? In chapter 1, I offer an account of how such conflicts can arise, but it does not follow that whatever one does is right, as we will see. Finally, *wrong versus wrong*, strictly speaking, is just the logical inverse of *right versus right*, but a virtue of this formulation is that some situations are best described by saying wrongdoing is inescapable: Whatever one does, one will do something wrong. (In these situations, not acting would also be wrong.) Thus, this formulation points to the problem of dirty hands, which constitutes the focus of the second case study.

Practical Ethics in Asian Settings

To this point, I have barely mentioned that the cases I have selected for analysis are based in Asia. That's because this is not a book exclusively about ethics in Asia. It's a book about practical ethics employing a framework of general application, which happens to use materials set primarily in Asia. Along the way, of course, I introduce some concepts that have a special salience for practitioners in one or another Asian country. To that extent, the moral environment is constituted in part by cultural traditions that are likely to be unfamiliar to some readers. However, we will see that, even with these special features, the concepts introduced are recognizable components of the general framework I employ and are readily accessible to us. Thus, despite the selectivity, the analysis is meant for practitioners everywhere.

Why, then, the partiality toward Asia? There are several reasons. One is personal: Asia is a region of the world where I have spent considerable time in recent years. On the initiative of my colleague

John Thomas, I participated in and eventually became faculty chair of HKS's Singapore Program, which sponsors a variety of joint activities with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. I have also participated in various teaching programs (some of them in-country and others at HKS) designed for government officials from China, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Vietnam. Inevitably, in interacting with these various audiences, I came to appreciate the contours of contemporary geopolitics and the efforts of Asian countries to reestablish their former prominence on the world stage. I came to believe that I was getting a glimpse of where the world is headed.

Another reason is more intellectual. Each case I have chosen for discussion illustrates, to some degree, the struggle of developing countries to transition into what we call the modern world. This struggle is not only economic and political; it is moral. Simply put, it is a struggle to preserve what one believes to be of value in one's own culture or tradition while adapting to new circumstances and participating in new relationships. My protagonists often find that their own traditions contain the crucial resources they need to address ethical challenges, even as they modify them to deal effectively with novel situations. Preserving what is of value is not motivated simply by emotional attachment (or nostalgia for an imaginary past); it is required by the need for moral grounding as one contemplates possible innovations. Only with a sense of moral grounding is one in a position, as an individual or as a society, to consider fashioning life anew. Thus, many of the case studies involve a hybrid of traditional beliefs and transplanted values, displaying the ongoing syncretism that makes Asian countries fascinating laboratories of political and ethical development. It is this syncretism, these questions of evolving moral identity and self-understanding, which I find preoccupying.

In particular, my focus is on emerging democratic aspirations and increasing commitment to standards of professionalism, which are constituent elements of the new moral environment in Asia. My working assumption is that countries in transition are often more aware of the kinds of moral competence that democratic societies require if they hope to succeed, and therefore are fertile sources of learning. Thus, ethics questions faced by practitioners in Asia are central to the connecting thread of this book, namely, identifying the kinds of moral competence that enable democratic societies to realize their core ideals. At the same time, I want to make clear that to engage in practical rather than applied ethics means starting not with general principles (then evaluating institutions or civil society against them)

but starting with specific protagonists situated in specific, complex societies, for whom existing institutions (whatever their character) have various degrees of authority—along with various norms, practices, models, and the like. So, democracy as a subject of study does not have a leading or dominant role in these case studies; it is a recurring background feature, illuminated by the protagonists' stories. As a general matter, I do not believe that all institutions, regardless of their aims, should be organized democratically, or that, if they are democratic, they have to be democratic in the same way. Sometimes tossing a coin or deciding on the basis of merit is preferable to taking a vote. Sometimes delegating authority to a representative is preferable to full citizen participation in decision making, or consultation preferable to bargaining. So, we should not think that all democratic societies look alike. Yet, certain thematic elements distinctive of democratic societies recur in the cases, in particular that public office in a democracy is an assignment from others, not a license to follow one's own lights no matter how well intentioned. It requires an enlargement of moral vision and a variety of special skills to work toward realizing the good of others.

It is important to emphasize that I do not claim any special expertise in Asia as an anthropologist or philosopher. I approach the case studies, rather, as a practical ethicist. My aim is to demonstrate that issues faced by practitioners in this region can be placed in a *framework of general application*, useful across societies and cultures. As Philip Selznick observes, the moral order that exists or is emergent in a given place—the level of moral achievement or of moral regression—depends on local circumstances and historical contexts, but when we want to examine and make sense of moral experience, we bring to bear what we know about more general features of the human condition.²³ The more diverse the voices presented, the more confidence we can have that the general framework has broad application and thus is well chosen. By analyzing cases situated in Asia (including some with Western protagonists), I am able to introduce a great diversity of voices, all of which should be part of any conversation we have about ethics. This is done in two ways: by featuring practitioners who embody alternative ways of life, and in some chapters by focusing specifically on dramatic encounters between people coming from different social worlds or cultures. The five protagonists include a doctor in Singapore, a political activist in India, a midlevel bureaucrat in the disguised central Asian country of Kalanistan, religious (and secular) missionaries in China, and a journalist in Cambodia.

Let me emphasize that the five protagonists have their peculiarities. Readers might even find some of them quite eccentric. I have chosen them because each, in his or her own way, is compelling and demands attention. Each has something to teach us about moral competence—different in each case.

In a moment, I will describe the cases and indicate how they are organized. Let me note first that the selection of cases reveals a distinctive feature of this book: It is self-consciously comparative. I take for granted Alasdair MacIntyre's admonition: "We now inhabit a world in which ethical inquiry without a comparative dimension is obviously defective."²⁴ Practical ethics tracks the experience of practitioners, and increasingly practitioners face ethical challenges that cross familiar geographical and cultural boundaries, finding themselves attempting to mediate between settled (familiar) understandings and alternative (unfamiliar) ways of life. Accordingly, in today's world, it is especially important that moral learning transcend local boundaries. Practitioners need to understand the point of view of others and be prepared to give due weight to what is sound in alternative perspectives. Those who do are that much more competent and resourceful in carrying out their responsibilities. To paraphrase John Stuart Mill, a person who knows only one way of doing things does not really know that. Without a grasp of how things could be different, the one way appears to pose no difficulty of understanding or justification.

Highlighting cultural diversity, of course, adds to our sense of the fragmentation of moral life. The abundance of values—and fulfilling ways of life—seems to entail a large area of indeterminacy in moral reflection. Even when reasonable standards of knowledge and deliberation are met, people may judge differently. Thus, the sources of obligation are disparate not only within individuals, since they lack a standard for rendering all moral values commensurable, but also between individuals. This disparateness is intensified in cross-cultural situations. When people from different ethical traditions confront one another in a practical context, what may we reasonably expect? We are familiar with situations of asymmetric power, where effective control lies in the hands of one party or group, and thus does not involve mutual deliberation. (As Nietzsche reminds us, in situations of asymmetric power, the strong are likely to favor standards that legitimize their power; the weak are likely to favor standards that delegitimize the strong.) But is deliberation across ethical traditions possible? To what extent can we succeed in justifying our conduct to one another?

If we do not reach agreement on specific principles, can we at least converge on a framework for identifying acceptable principles?²⁵ In considering these questions, I try to keep in mind that culture is not a very perspicacious concept. Its use often depends on background images that surreptitiously introduce unwarranted assumptions. One is the image of a seamless web—culture as a unified, integrated, comprehensive system of values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices, which strongly constrain its members. In this view, individuals acquire their culture through socialization and express it in their conduct unproblematically. Values and attitudes are non-reflective and customary, rather than reasoned and deliberately chosen. (Emile Durkheim's work offers a classic expression of this picture.) Often accompanying the seamless web is the image of culture as an exclusive social club. In this image, which has less to do with internal coherence than distinctiveness from others, the world is divided into sharply defined, unitary, enclosed realms of meaning and value. Each person is a member of one club or another, and each club has its own rules and its own standards of interpretation and justification—internal to itself and inaccessible to other clubs. Moral concepts illuminate the meaning of conduct within the club's boundaries but are opaque to those outside.

In my view, these images exaggerate the coherence and constraining power of culture. They fail to recognize the multiple ways in which the goods of life can be ordered even within a single society. We have only to observe that every existing system of morality has its dissenters. As William James observes, there are “innumerable persons whom [the reigning morality] weighs upon, and goods which it represses; and these [people] are always rumbling and grumbling in the background.”²⁶ To avoid these blind spots, it is tempting to adopt a different image of culture, at an opposite extreme from the seamless web, namely, culture as a tool kit. In this picture, culture is fragmentary across members and inconsistent in its expression. It is a set of resources that can be consciously mobilized and put to political uses. The tool kit includes symbols, stories, values, rituals, and worldviews, “which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.”²⁷ In this view, cultural expertise is the ability to exploit the tool kit to construct effective strategies of action or persuasion, the way (to offer my own example) the US civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s framed the case for political equality in language drawn from the Old and New Testaments, even though the discourse of rights was foreign to these sources.

The tool kit image captures the sense of moral fragmentation I have been emphasizing, but it does so at the apparent cost of turning values into rationalizations of ends pursued for other reasons. I prefer to regard cultural, including moral, traditions more like schools—learning environments, each of which makes available the resources for moral understanding and criticism, including self-criticism. (I take moral conformity itself to be a reflective practice that generates criteria for its own assessment. Of course, to say resources are available is not to say they will be used, or used well.) With the capacity to reflect and follow lines of reasoning and make new discoveries, about ourselves as well as others, we enlarge our understanding and our moral space—although success in this endeavor may require a more encompassing idiom. Patterns and continuities are identified, yet they are also transcended as new configurations emerge. In this way, we allow for the possibility of a common educational experience across societies, to which this book aims to contribute.

I do not want to underestimate—but equally not overestimate—the difficulty of taking others seriously. The question is about the basic transparency of human beings to each other. I resist the impulse to transform partial and perhaps complementary perspectives into irreconcilable standpoints, yet do not want to deny real differences. It is all too easy to go wrong in either direction, assuming others are just like us or, alternatively, completely opaque to us. No matter how successful we are in understanding alien normative orders, cases will arise where we regard a society as admirable, highly cultured, sophisticated, or advanced (whichever term one is inclined to use) and still regard some of its practices as unacceptable, if not repugnant. This demonstrates, at least, that taking others seriously does not require suspension of judgment. So, in engaging in comparative inquiry, I do not mean “merely comparative,” as though one were simply to take note of alternative belief systems and mark some similarities and differences—a purely descriptive enterprise. Rather, comparative inquiry involves reflective assessment and evaluation. At the same time, no one inhabits an ideal moral space, and it is likely that many current beliefs are mistaken, as we understand even the wisest people to have been mistaken in the past. The fact of reasonable disagreement is not an obstacle to the discovery of right answers, only to overconfidence in one’s own answers.

The caution I would stress is to avoid the tendency to consider one’s own thinking as uncovering necessities of thought, without putting them to the test by examining the shape of moral thought in

other historical periods or other cultures. Regard for other people's capacity for moral agency, their exercise of self-determination, the pride they take in their own political and cultural achievements—all of these provide a basis for acknowledging the duties of respect and mutual regard. As I have stressed, a good faith effort at cross-cultural reflection is hard work. Yet without it we have no right to feel confident about the views we hold.

Case Studies in Practical Ethics

The five case studies in this book are arranged as follows:

Chapter 1 analyzes the first of three memoir cases in the book, written by one of my students (“Henry”) recounting a personal experience from his professional practice in Singapore. Although Henry is a doctor, not a public official, his story exemplifies how personal ideals can be challenged by professional norms and common understandings of what morality requires. In relating Henry's story, I present, in a very deliberate way, the framework that informs my analysis in subsequent chapters. It begins with Henry's upbringing in a family of Chinese descent and the values he derived from his education and religious community. It then adds a layer of commitments from his membership in the medical profession, including codes of ethics and obligations to his colleagues and the institution (a hospital) within which he is working. Finally, as a citizen of Singapore and as a human being, a third layer incorporating laws and authoritative moral conventions is added to the mix. This mix introduces considerable complexity into the question Henry faces, even though, in the end, the resolution of his difficulty seems fairly clear—which is one reason this case is a good starting point.

Henry's story shows how ethical conflicts arise even for the most conscientious individual. Like Henry, each of the other protagonists in these case studies is challenged to manage multiple sources of obligation and commitment—as a condition of effective moral agency in public life—when, as often happens, they come into conflict. Some do it better than others.

Chapter 2, also based on a memoir case from one of my students (“Khalil”), introduces a complication in the analysis of integrity by highlighting a conflict that appears to lie *within morality itself*. The concern is with occasions when a practitioner reasonably believes that an unethical or immoral act is compelled by circumstances to serve the public interest. This is known as *the problem of dirty hands*,

which constitutes the most troubling type of ethical quandary practitioners encounter. It typically results in the loss of innocence, with the realization that, in the world as we know it, circumstances are not ideal for the achievement of public good. Skill in dealing effectively with the moral messiness of the world is fundamental to a practitioner's success. The central question for analysis is whether anything that could count as *integrity-preserving compromise* is possible in such a situation. If so, what does it look like?

Along the way, I describe briefly the circumstances that give rise to dirty hands situations. These have to do with various limits in human capacities—limits in human motivation, in the ability to control events, and in human rationality. To be a realist in ethics is to acknowledge that the demands of public life may exceed our capacities in certain crucial ways, even as we struggle not to abandon the effort to act effectively and well—or, as well as we can—in specific circumstances. Since the most important lessons on how to act well in a non-ideal world were taught by Machiavelli, I use his work as a touchstone for my reflections on dirty hands. He enters the discussion not as a political theorist but as an advisor to practitioners. The case is also a useful vehicle for exploring the range of options, beyond “obey or resign,” available to dissenters within organizations—including protest, disobedience, and subversion. It facilitates discussion of the various forms of self-deception by which individuals hide (or protect themselves) from the truth about questionable conduct, such as euphemisms (for example, “enhanced interrogation”), causal fantasies (“it was the only way to get the information”), or unwarranted objectification (“everyone would agree”).

Although readers will notice the presence of Western influences in Henry's and Khalil's approaches to the problems they face, chapter 3 explores in a more deliberate way questions that arise in the practice of exporting ethical ideas to other places. The topic, in other words, is *the ethics of exporting ethics*. With globalization, we are constantly reminded that national borders are not moral boundaries. Often, however, we do not know where the boundaries are, or what we are supposed to do when we encounter deep differences. In the context of a rising Asia, these quandaries pose special challenges for practitioners, who are required to engage in a kind of double reflection: to grasp what something could mean to others when at variance with one's own understanding, and to contemplate the contestability of one's own worldview. The challenge is highlighted by featuring individuals engaged in missionary work—religious and secular. A variety

of activities fall within the category of missionary work today, including exporting ideas of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

The main discussion reviews some early modern history, offering a critical assessment of missionary work conducted by a group of Jesuits in China in the seventeenth century—the first instance in the modern period of sustained missionary work by Westerners in that country. A constant theme in East-West encounters, over the centuries, has been the endeavor of Western visitors “to change China,” in Jonathan Spence’s felicitous phrase. These efforts failed for the most part, for the Chinese proved to be exceedingly adept at turning the barbarians against themselves and protecting what they most valued in their culture and way of life. Yet, the story of the various attempts to bring about change, as Spence notes, “speak[s] to us still... about the ambiguities of superiority, and about that indefinable realm where altruism and exploitation meet.”²⁸ The specific focus of my analysis is the initial missionary period and especially the most well known of the Jesuit visitors, Matteo Ricci, who set a pattern for the Jesuit mission in China for many decades. Of special interest is Ricci’s adherence to the Jesuit instruction to *make accommodation* to the situation and needs of the persons to whom he was ministering. The effort to conform to people’s customs and ways of understanding was a central component of his strategy for winning converts to Catholicism. It also was a strategy that, in the words of John O’Malley, a leading contemporary Jesuit historian, could “be separated by only a hair’s breadth, or less, from opportunism.”²⁹ That hair’s breadth—that is, the ethics of accommodation as Ricci practiced it—is the central concern of the chapter. In an addendum, I discuss briefly a contemporary (secular) missionary effort: promoting the rule of law in China. Identifying three points of similarity with the Jesuit mission and one striking difference, I draw lessons about current efforts at exporting “best practices” from one country to another.

Chapter 4, analyzing the third memoir case in the book, features a Western journalist in Cambodia (“Ann”) who gets caught up, by chance, in the care of two local women. The story begins when some of Ann’s journalist colleagues are targeted with hand grenades at a political rally. Many of the injured end up at local hospitals. In the effort to track them down and attend to their needs, Ann becomes diverted and begins to take on the care of two women she encounters by accident in these settings. Much of the discussion focuses on the details of this care—in particular, a moment when Ann attempts to enlist the assistance of two other Cambodian women who are

relatives of the people she is caring for. Their resistance is the occasion for reflecting on the source of Ann's expectations and possible cultural differences underlying the divergent reactions. The encounter raises a large question about ethics in public life: How do we weigh obligations to individuals with whom we have the most direct or intimate relationships against obligations to strangers, especially those in desperate need? If we aim to give concrete meaning to the duty to care for humanity, what does that entail in specific encounters among people who barely know each other? What is the appropriate way to regard strangers as fellow human beings worthy of moral concern?

The final case study, in chapter 5, recounts the search by Indian political activist Aruna Roy for a public platform that would enable her to act on the basis of strongly held ideals and, at the same time, become an effective political force in India. In a process that spans more than a decade, she comes to understand the importance of *unlearning* much of what she had been educated and trained to believe, to open herself to listening to the concerns of the poor and socially marginalized people she wishes to serve. This process, in turn, leads her to realize that, instead of finding some preexisting organization whose work she could participate in, she needs to construct a new organization, to reflect her new understanding of the work to be done. Thus, self-transformation and transformation of the political environment come together in a single momentous project.

While the framework introduced in chapter 1 guides the analysis, this case provides an opportunity to illustrate a specific conception of the role of practitioners in a democratic society, which I refer to as *democratic professionalism*. This conception has several key components, including a preference for certain organizational forms (flat rather than pyramidal), ways of exercising power (facilitative rather than directive), and styles of leadership (as a catalyst rather than commander-in-chief).

In the conclusion, I draw together some threads from the case studies by sketching five generic traits that I regard as core attributes of the good practitioner. (These are, of course, variable attributes of actual persons.) These are not character traits or personal virtues in the usual sense but qualities of those acting in public capacities. They are requisite skills for dealing successfully with complex institutional and professional exigencies, adequate to producing beneficial effects in the world. The tag names I use for the six types of competence are *civility* (regarding the grounds of public action), *prudence* (including the often delicate balancing of obligations to clients or constituents

or superiors, on the one hand, and professional norms or the public good, on the other), *reflection* (to grasp what something could mean to others when at variance with one's own understanding, and to contemplate the contestability of one's own worldview), *respect* (for the responsible agency of others), and *proficiency* (in designing and sustaining ethical institutions). I describe and illustrate each of these traits in terms of the case studies. Although the cases themselves are much richer than this summary statement about competence suggests, this chapter provides a takeaway for the reader who is eager to know what it all amounts to.

Improving Ethics in Public Life

Let me conclude by emphasizing that this is not an academic text for a well-defined field. The field does not exist. Nor is it a how-to book, with simple directions to follow when facing a conflict, or clear rules for becoming a virtuous person. It is a book that engages in ethical diagnosis in specific professional settings, designed to help practitioners develop the skills they need for acting effectively and well in the real world. The focus is on developing skills, not learning rules. But, as I said at the beginning, the proof is in the pudding. So, the burden is on the case studies themselves to offer compelling examples of how ethical analysis is done when it is practical. I hope it will be clear in the telling that I greatly admire the people whose stories are presented in this book—each in different ways—even while I try not to let my admiration blind me to their weaknesses and limitations. Each protagonist, having consciously—and conscientiously—pursued a civic vocation, bears witness to the ideal of public service. Each chose to exercise his or her personal gifts with an overriding regard for the well-being of others. Taken together, they give me confidence that, even in difficult circumstances, it is indeed possible to act ethically in public life.

Notes

1. This discussion draws on ideas initially elaborated in my essay “What Makes Ethics Practical,” in the Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series, RWP08–013 (March 2008).
2. Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 286. Adam Swift and Stuart White assert: “Theorists should not allow political constraints, or the results of social science, to corrupt their

- reflection on ultimate principles.” “Political Theory, Social Science, and Real Politics,” *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, ed. David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 67.
3. For a parallel argument regarding jurisprudence, in contrast to legal philosophy, see Roger Cotterrell, “Why Jurisprudence Is Not Legal Philosophy,” *Jurisprudence* 5:1 (2014), pp. 41–55.
 4. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 46.
 5. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), p. 164.
 6. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 128–141.
 7. My view of universal moral standards parallels Rawls’s approach in his last major work, deriving them from the history and usages of international law and practice, not from any comprehensive philosophical or religious doctrine. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 41, 68. For a sharp critique of the more typical philosopher’s quest for decontextualized principles, see Samuel Moyn, “Human Rights in Heaven” (circulated draft, 2014).
 8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.11, 1143b13, trans. W. D. Ross.
 9. Aristotle, 1140a25–1140b19 and 1104a4–9.
 10. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 42.
 11. Philip Heymann, *The Politics of Public Management* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987). For more explicit use of the strategic triangle as an analytical tool, see Mark H. Moore, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and *Recognizing Public Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Moore discusses US cases exclusively and does not deploy the strategic triangle to illuminate ethical quandaries.
 12. Mark H. Moore, “On Creating Public Value” (circulated draft, September 2003), p. 5 n.11. Thus, the possible is not determined by the actual; at the same time, judgments of feasibility are inevitably based on conjecture.
 13. For an account of practical considerations in setting rules for police officers’ use of deadly force, see Kenneth Winston, “Teaching With Cases,” in *Teaching Criminal Justice Ethics: Strategic Issues*, ed., John Kleinig and Margaret Leland Smith (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing, 1997), pp. 161–181.
 14. Lon L. Fuller, *Principles of Social Order*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2001), p. 286.
 15. For further discussion, see Kenneth Winston, “Moral Competence in the Practice of Democratic Governance,” *For the People: Can We Fix Public Service?*, ed. John D. Donahue and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003), pp. 169–187.
 16. I draw these points from the excellent discussion in Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), especially Chapter One.

17. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 116.
18. H. L. A. Hart, *Law, Liberty, and Morality* (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 71.
19. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, p. 104.
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