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INTRODUCTION

There's a Reason You Picked Up This Book

If one extends knowledge to the utmost, one will have wisdom. Having wisdom, one can then make choices.

—CH'ENG I, *I-SHU*[1]

THERE'S A REASON you picked up this book, and it has to do with a story—your story. The plotline might be as brief as a small ethical decision you're making this afternoon or as broad as the integrity you seek for your life as a whole. It might be a story of the past—perhaps a challenging situation you were in when you worked hard to sort out the right thing to do. Maybe you landed on a good decision, maybe you didn't, but either way, you still want to learn from it. Or your story might have to do with the present, a real head-scratcher about how to handle a problem at work in an ethical and appropriate way that keeps you out of hot water. Maybe you are weighing the

risks and benefits of speaking up about something you feel is wrong, and you need a way to work through the pros and cons. Or your story might have to do with the future and your awareness that ethical challenges will arise. You wisely want to make sure that things reflect and even develop your values in life and still work out in a practical way, which, for many people, is the definition of success. You'll hear many people's stories in this book, and you will see how their stories, whether large or small, grand or granular, will come alongside yours to strengthen and inspire you. But the only story to begin and end with is yours and what success looks like . . . for *you*.

My working assumption is that you are or at least strive to be an ethical person in all your professional and private affairs. Sociologists Elaine Howard Ecklund, Denise Daniels, and Christopher P. Scheitle, who study workplace behavior and religion, have found that "most employees believe they act ethically in the workplace. Ninety-six percent of workers in our survey said they agree with the statement 'Even if it does not benefit me, I always act with integrity at work.'"[2] And it's a percentage that doesn't vary much between those who say they are very religious and those who are not religious at all. So then why read this book? Why emphasize decision-making?

While it's true that ethics plays out in a variety of ways in our lives, our conscious ethical decisions are a particular kind of opportunity, a heightened moment, to be more intentional in the effect we're having, who we've been, and who we're becoming. Which might sound simple enough, but here's the rub. Ethical decisions, whether big make-or-break moments or the myriad small decisions that ping us throughout the day, are trickier than you might think at first (or maybe you've

already learned that the hard way). They come in all shapes and sizes, sometimes in disguises that make it hard to recognize the ethics involved at all. And ethical decisions are linked with the fabric of your experiences, feelings, values, and the action that the decision leads to or not. Scholars who study how we make decisions say there are several categories of "decision strategies," with some processes leaning on less conscious factors like habit or coincidence and some being more deliberate and conscious.[3] Our focus here is to empower by giving you the tools to bring that range of factors to greater awareness and intention so that your final choice and its consequences can be as sound as possible . . . and you can feel as peaceful as possible in retrospect. Decisions have consequences, from small to great, positive to negative, and personal to financial and reputational. As we will discuss more later, we can easily find ourselves grappling with tricky situations such as conflict of interest, whistleblowing, sexual or financial misconduct, accepting job offers and then reneging, lying or bluffing, discrimination, and needing to restore broken trust. These may be on a larger scale, but they also happen in all kinds of smaller ways throughout our regular workdays—probably more than we realize at first. And often, we simply find ourselves in the ethical gray zone, where, even with all good intentions, we don't know what the best ethical choice is for the best outcome. We are shaped by the decisions we make day after day and year after year, perhaps in multiple workplaces or relationships. And in turn, for better or worse, we shape our organizations and the people we work with. Research scholars on character and leadership Michael Lamb, Jonathan Brant, and Edward Brooks describe character, based

on Aristotle, as "the collection of stable, deep, and enduring dispositions that define who we are and shape how we characteristically think, feel, and act."[4] In strengthening these dispositions over time, they aren't easily diminished by "temptations and difficulties"—which is my hope for you.

Our ethical choices aren't as freely made as we think they are, and our human decision-making processes are even more fragile. A decision may seem as though it is about a particular moment in time, but it involves the whole person, even the things we might be less aware of—past, present, and future (more on that later). As we sort through a decision, feelings and motivations may come into play, many of which are affected by biases and triggers of all kinds, both conscious and unconscious. Those in turn can impact the soundness and clarity of our decision-making—particularly if the triggers remain unconscious. One of my hopes with this book is to help you unpack what might be behind some of your thoughts and feelings so that bias doesn't remain unconscious. And I also hope to offer techniques to help you better understand your motivations—even for those readers who have already done a fair amount of work on that—so that your values can remain steady and consideration of context does not result in ethical relativity and rationalization. We may, for instance, have been affected or even wounded by an experience in our past, which can alter our perceptions of a current decision for better or worse. "Once we have an experience," psychologist Daniel Gilbert writes, "we cannot simply set it aside and see the world as we would have seen it had the experience never happened. Our experiences instantly become part of the lens through which we view our entire past, present, and future, and like any lens,

they shape and distort what we see."[5] In between the facts we accurately perceive, our minds are brilliant at filling in the subtle blanks of what we may not yet know. We think we are looking at something objectively, but our minds are already interpreting.[6] The challenge, Gilbert points out, is that this affects our ability to more widely imagine our futures and the possible outcomes there: "The clarity of the next hour and the fuzziness of the next year can lead us to make a variety of mistakes," he says. "Just as we do not remember every detail of a past event (what color socks did you wear to your high school graduation?) or see every detail of a current event (what color socks is the person behind you wearing at this very moment?), so do we fail to imagine every detail of a future event."[7] Thinking ahead takes self-awareness and self-reflection.

This book will be filled with stories from leaders I have known and learned from. For instance, I once asked Sharon Allen, the former chair of Deloitte LLP, "What's the toughest ethical dilemma you ever faced?" I thought she would have to think back through many past decisions and then finally name one. But she didn't skip a beat.

Without a pause, she said, "It's the next one."

I thought, "Wow, she's thinking ahead, not backward. She's self-aware enough to know that something can and will happen and already has her ethical periscope looking out for it."

Sometimes making a poor choice can be tempting because doing the ethical thing may result in missing out on some kind of perceived gain or benefit in the short term. And it also might be hard to see or, more importantly, *feel* a long-term gain. A friend of mine described a moment when he was about to sell his stock after the company was bought by a prominent

insurance company. A lot of money was at stake. On an unrelated matter, he happened to be sitting outside his CFO's office waiting for a meeting when he overheard how earnings were going to miss by a few cents and how the stock price would likely tank. My friend found himself in a tough spot; he had already had plans to sell the stock, but now he possessed privileged information that he had not sought and was not part of his job. Selling the stock on the basis of that insider information would have been illegal. But no one would ever know he overheard the CFO, so why not sell it, as he had originally planned? In the end, he finally chose not to sell his stock and forfeited a large gain—a short-term loss but the longer-term win of a clean ethical record and conscience. Apparently, the indiscrete CFO must have had a loud voice, as others overheard, too, sold their stock based on that insider information and were later caught and penalized heavily by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Sometimes a good ethical choice may cost you in the short run but carry greater long-term benefits than you can know in the moment . . . including simply the ability to sleep at night. The more you can recognize an ethical dilemma when it arises and the more ready your ethical muscles are, the better you can manage the ethical gray zone, the context, and the short-term triggers and biases and their unintended and unfortunate outcomes.

The Moveable Middle

Some readers may have read the story of Joseph "Chip" Skowron III. It was widely covered in the business press. His talent, training, and experience were extraordinary. A Vanderbilt

undergraduate and Yale University Medical School graduate with both an MD and a PhD, Skowron shifted into finance, eventually becoming a hedge fund co-portfolio manager at FrontPoint Partners—an extraordinary career by any measure. He was active in his church, had a lovely family, was a generous philanthropist, and volunteered his time to perform medical procedures in poor corners of the world.

All was fine until his family, friends, and professional associates were stunned to learn that he had been arrested by the FBI and charged with obstruction of justice and conspiracy to commit insider trading. What happened? He had been tipped off by a consultant that a pharma company in which his fund was invested had negative news about a clinical trial, and he sold his shares to avoid losses. At first, he denied the charges until the doctor who had tipped him off pleaded guilty. So Skowron did, too, ending up with a five-year prison sentence and hefty fines and lawsuits that included repaying millions he'd received from his hedge fund, with Morgan Stanley calling Skowron a "faithless servant" in its suit. Skowron had been a practicing Roman Catholic. He was later reported as saying, "When I was 40 years old, I was looking out of the window of my office. I had eight cars in the garage, I had four beautiful children. I had a terribly corrupt life. There wasn't any line I wouldn't cross. . . . Over 200 people lost their jobs because of me. My wife and my children endured extraordinary embarrassment, isolation, and absence because of my choices because of the empire I thought I needed to build."[8] In a life of positive impacts and good intentions, how could such a gifted and intelligent model citizen have rationalized his actions and failed to imagine consequences?

It may be tempting to see Skowron's blind spots as a rare combination of intellect, power, and moral weakness. But the reason the ideas and stories in this book can make a difference in *your* life is the fact that we are all subject to the same rationalizations and capacity to justify something we want, without thinking ahead on behalf of our future selves. This can be found in all fields of work. Ironically, dishonesty and cheating can even happen by those studying it. In studies by one of the more prominent researchers in this field, Duke University's Dan Ariely, was himself accused of dishonesty by using fraudulent data in a 2012 study he coauthored on dishonesty.[9] In that study, among other things, he claimed that reading moral reminders such as the Ten Commandments or an honor code before taking a test reduced cheating. These studies have yet to be validated or replicated, and the paper has since been retracted, tarnishing his reputation. A sobering reminder that if even those who study cheating and dishonesty might cheat or be dishonest, we too could succumb to professional temptations to gain something we desire, be it good grades, career advancement, professional acclaim, or a financial gain.

Speaking of cheaters, the *Wall Street Journal* has reported that big companies are increasingly tracking even small "sins" we commit at work to weed out and fire unwanted employees without going through layoffs and severance.[10] Companies are hiring "perk police to bust employees for seemingly minor infractions that, by the letter of company law, can result in termination," things such as using dinner allowances to buy personal items rather than a meal, or watching multiple training videos at the same time. It can also serve as a warning shot to other employees. One employee "likened today's workplace to a

street with a 30-mph speed limit where you routinely get away with driving 37 mph and feel blindsided when you're pulled over and ticketed."[11] It's in these small everyday ways that something may not initially feel like an ethical decision—but it is, and it carries those consequences.

As I mentioned at the outset, I am assuming that you are ethical and strive to remain that way. Foundational to this book is the belief that most of us are not at either ethical extreme; we are neither saints, whose decisions are always faultless, nor the few "bad apples" acting from a place of malice. Instead, most of us think of ourselves as generally good people, not always perfect but trying to do the best we can with all the things that life can throw at us. In other words, we mostly fall into what I call the Moveable Middle. Imagine an ethical bell curve with a small percentage of saints at one end and villains at the other. I am neither of those extremes, and I'll wager you aren't either or else you wouldn't be reading this book. Most of us fall in the middle somewhere, capable of being ethical and yet also vulnerable to lapses for any number of reasons—we who have good days and bad days, who never set out to be unethical but over time may have found ourselves in unexpected circumstances or situations that we'd never run into before, that have quick turnarounds for a decision, that come at times of unusual pressure in our lives, or with which we simply have no experience. Many of us, at one time or another, found ourselves halfway down a slippery slope that we did not see coming, perhaps one to which our own pressures or biases led us. Or it may be we did see it coming but didn't have the guts or guidance to avert a disaster. We've probably all witnessed someone having to step down in embarrassment and

incur great familial or financial loss, and we don't want to be the next one. Or you may be in a new work setting or encountering a new kind of question, and your old ethical decision-making experiences are hindering your ability to see what is before you. Behavioral economists Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, in *Nudge: The Final Edition*, point out that a nudge—or a structure of choices that helps us make a better decision—is most needed "when decisions require scarce attention, when decisions are difficult, when people do not get prompt feedback, and when they have trouble translating aspects of the situation into terms that they can easily understand. When people are in situations that are unfamiliar or rare, they might well need a nudge."[12] I believe your ethical sources—or what we'll discuss shortly as your Q2—and your ethical decision-making framework, or your Q3, can provide just such a useful and memorable nudge.

As organizational psychologist Adam Grant observes, the cognitive tools we cling most to are our assumptions, instincts, and habits, such that they become part of our sense of self.[13] Even if you are in the rarified sainthood category and never have an ethical lapse, it's almost certain that someone you work for or with, or someone who works for you will have an ethical lapse and you will be drawn into an ethical quandary, though not of your making. "Our hearts are not morally pure, but they're not morally corrupt either," writes philosopher Christian B. Miller in *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* "Rather, they are a messy blend of good and evil."[14] But cheer up! All of us in the Moveable Middle can move toward the sainthood end of our ethical bell curve by learning from the ideas and stories in this book.

We humans like to hope that our minds are a clean slate, and when it comes to making a tough decision, it's mainly a matter of lining up clear pros and cons, weighing them, and seeing how they add up. We like to think we have the ability to perceive things objectively (which in itself is an illusion) and that we are free from bias. But research gives us a very different picture of our wonderful fragile humanity, showing how prone we humans are to feelings that tug at our decision-making ability, almost always more than we realize. For example, biases related to our tendency to choose the conclusion we would like in advance, or connected to something as mundane as how our day is going or even how hungry we are, can skew or distort our ability to see ethical options clearly. This inconsistency and randomness in our decision-making is what Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass R. Sunstein call "noise," which we'll talk more about later in this chapter.

Another problem we face when it comes to ethical decision-making is that we are not as good at predicting the future as we might think. "We call them *predictions*," Gilbert writes, "only because there is no better word for them in the English language." The problem, he points out, is that the word carries with it a sense that we've thought through something carefully and intentionally, when the reality is that our brains are always "predicting" (for lack of a better term), even without our awareness. So Gilbert instead suggests a different term altogether: "Rather than saying that such brains are *predicting*," he says, "let's say that they are *nexting*."[15] We want to use foresight to avoid the next painful experience in the future, but it is more difficult than we think because the *future* may be more difficult than we think.[16] What's more, he adds, research also

shows that, contrary to what many of us think, we evolve over the course of our lives, often changing more than we would have predicted. In a 2014 TED Talk, Gilbert explains that it has to do with having a misconception about whether or how we change.[17] We wrongly believe we'll be the same person in the future as now and that we won't really change all that much. In his research, he asked people how much they had changed in the past ten years, and how much they had changed usually surprised them when it came down to it. But then they were asked how much they think they'll change in the next ten. And they didn't think it was really going to be all that much. We think we've just become the person we thought we'd always be and will be for the rest of our lives—what's called the "end of history" illusion. The effect, especially when we face ethical options that could lead to divergent outcomes, is that it's much easier to make decisions about the person we are now and not the person, or people, we'll become. It's about the ease of remembering versus the difficulty of imagining. It's easy to remember something, and maybe to smooth it out in our memory. It's harder to imagine changes that haven't happened yet. And if something is hard to imagine, we believe it's not likely to happen. Which, in turn, can impede our ethical decisions in the present.

If we have a bias or trigger from a past experience or association that pulls at us in the moment, steering us toward the quickest, if not necessarily the best, answer, we can become overly attached to it if we don't incorporate a reflective process. Adam Grant calls it "escalation of commitment." Our instinct isn't to rethink it but to "double down and sink more resources into the plan," an instinct often fueled by what we think of as

a positive—"grit"—but that can have a dark side when we hang on to an ill-fated option. Sometimes, he writes, "the best kind of grit is gritting our teeth and turning around."[18] Or as John Tyson, chairman of Tyson Foods, put it once to my students, "Always strive to make an ethical decision. If you realize you've made a bad decision, quickly stop that action, turn around, rethink it, and make a new decision."[19]

The good news is that making better ethical decisions that will impact the future may not have to be so difficult or unmanageable. In the subsequent pages, we'll draw on conversation partners in fields like organizational psychology, behavioral psychology, religion, and behavioral economics to explore how decision-making is open to vulnerability and, at the same time, what tools there are to help. Self-awareness seems to be the key, along with having a reference point or checklist that you can run your thinking through. Indeed, in his book *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*, surgeon and public health researcher Atul Gawande identifies two pitfalls that even seasoned experts run up against when they're under pressure: the "fallibility of human memory and attention" and "skipping steps even when they remember them."[20] Putting our decisions through checklists can offer protection, helping us avoid missteps even in processes that are familiar to us.

In these normal ethical and reputational tripwires of life, those of us in the Moveable Middle need a sturdy, reliable ethical framework as part of our normal "operating system," one that lies beyond whatever might be tugging at us in the moment and helps us get to know ourselves better over time. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks observes that "the long

road to character begins with an accurate understanding of our nature, and the core of that understanding is that we are flawed creatures."[21] An ethical framework also helps us revisit old assumptions, possibly seeing past errors in a new light. As Adam Grant writes, "When people reflect on what it takes to be mentally fit," they often think first of intelligence. But "there's another set of cognitive skills that might matter more: the ability to rethink and unlearn."[22] I like to think of the ability to do this as part of "ethical fitness." It's like extending your general mental fitness and wellness specifically to ethical fitness. And the crucial ability to rethink and unlearn old ethical responses depends on having an ethical "gym" you can visit regularly, one that keeps your ethical muscles fit and exercised so you have muscle memory as part of your normal responses—though, as Matthew Walker points out, "muscle memory" is a misnomer. Our muscles don't actually have memories. "Muscle memory," he says, "is, in fact, brain memory." It's the routine of using the skills that becomes what we call muscle memory. "But the routine itself—the memory program—resides firmly and exclusively within the brain."[23] As Lamb, Brant, and Brooks point out, one of the key strategies for strengthening good character is through habituation: "We acquire such [good] habits through practice—by repeating or regulating appropriate thoughts, feelings, and actions over and over again until we gradually become disposed to think, feel, and act in the right ways in the right places at the right times."[24] It's that ethical routine that can become the program to keep your ethical muscles in shape. Just as athletes can recover more quickly after a misstep because they're in top shape, your ethical fitness will help you recover more quickly and adeptly after an ethical

fumble. As David Brooks writes, moral character is something each person has a responsibility to develop, but it's "not innate or automatic. You have to build it with effort and artistry. You can't be the good person you want to be unless you wage this campaign. . . . If you don't have some inner integrity, eventually your Watergate, your scandal, your betrayal, will happen."[25] An ethical process that reflects your best self and who you want to be shifts you from mere consciousness to conscience and leads toward the awareness that helps you answer two critical questions that I'll bet lie at the center of your story: Who are you today? And who are you becoming?

From Ethical Weakness to Ethical Wellness

Think of great athletes; they are fit in a way that relies on years of training and practice. An accomplished track star did not suddenly decide to run the four-minute mile one morning and have all the skills, strength, and endurance to do it. Elite tennis players prepare for and anticipate mid-game scenarios and know just what shot to draw on because they've practiced it thousands of times. Or think of great musicians who are fit because they've practiced scales, arpeggios, and studies for years before they perform a challenging work. A brilliant cellist did not suddenly decide to play the Bach cello suites one morning and have it artfully under her fingers immediately. They have cultivated their ability by keeping the skills going all along. In each case, they developed and practiced their skills—their fitness or wellness, so to speak—over time so they would be ready when they're playing in pressure-packed moments under the bright lights.

Our research and experience convince us that we can *become* and *stay* ethically fit by cultivating ethical strength and agility so that, when the moment comes, the muscle patterns and range of motion we need are there. The question for many then becomes *how* to get those muscles and then keep them in shape. You could certainly delve into the great classical schools of ethics, reading in-depth tomes by thinkers past and present. You could probe the great ancient spiritual and religious traditions for their wisdom on the human struggle with right and wrong and the practices that can help. You could read policies and laws related to ethics, which would easily take up multiple volumes (and lots of time). Or you might look to recent psychological and neurological studies on the way our brains work and why, realizing the "right" thing may be trickier than we think. These are all great things to do . . . if you have the time and the bandwidth. But for many of us, life's demands mean that instead, we need to harvest the core ideas from all these traditions and craft an intellectually robust, informed, and practical set of ethical tools while also cultivating the strength to wield them.

That's what we will create together in this book: ethical tools that you can easily internalize and develop strength in using, so that when you are faced with an ethical decision, whether in your workplace or in other areas of your life, you are able to recognize it and have what you need to address it. But my hope is for more than that. By working through the questions the book raises for you, you can move from simply having knowledge—the ethical exercises—to having wisdom, a reflective way of looking at decisions in your life and indeed at yourself. I hope that as you think about what success looks like in your life, and what you want it to look like in the future,

such wisdom will be part of it. As Lamb, Brant, and Brooks note, reflection on personal experience is a key strategy for cultivating character and virtue. "If, as Aristotle argues," they say, "virtue requires knowledge of why and how we act in particular circumstances, and if this knowledge comes through reflection on repeated actions, then reflection on experience will be central to character development."[26]

Life is all about decisions, in which we act out—and often find out—who we are. There are a range of ways to think about how ethics works in our lives. But given how decisions both draw on who we've been and shape who we're becoming, we'll focus here on decision-making as an elevated moment in the ethical landscape of our lives. How we want to see ourselves as behaving and how we actually behave in the moment, or our "lived ethic," can all too easily be two different things. As you reflect honestly on your recent decisions, what is your own lived ethic? What is mine? And how can it be wiser and more informed for the sake of your future self and those you care about? In her book *The Optimist's Telescope: Thinking Ahead in a Reckless Age*, social policy adviser Bina Venkataraman tells us, for instance, how expensive a lapse can be and how difficult it often is to pay back an ethical lapse. "To exercise foresight is to weigh what we know—and also what we don't know—about what lies ahead," she writes, "making the best call not just for the present but for the sake of our future selves."[27] Experiences from the past, things in the moment that can throw us off balance, and an unrealistic sense of the future can make a sound ethical decision difficult to discern. What we need are the tools and practices for effectively tackling ethical decisions, particularly when the dilemma is in the

ethical gray zone or, worse, disguised and unrecognizable until it is too late.

To create and hone those tools, I've drawn on years of teaching a class at Princeton University called "Professional Responsibility and Ethics: Succeeding Without Selling Your Soul." Credit to the title goes to my students who years ago gave that nickname to the class. It's a title that, I hope, balances the idea of the tools with that of your own story. But tools are only as useful as they are used, and they don't work very well if they remain abstract. Since there is no one perfect way to wield them, I encourage my class to try without fear of failing. In fact, I tell them they have thirty-six chances to fail, that is, to try out the questions and frameworks over the semester—that is, the thirty-six hours of class—without penalty. In the same way, you need to get to know how a particular tool—whether a question or a framework—feels in the context of your own life and work. We ethicists and theologians are a curious bunch, often wed to one particular tradition. In reality, there are many valid approaches to teaching ethics, so let's look at the one we use here.

My Philosophy of Ethics

To me, ethics is not simply about laws and compliance. Rather, it's also about character (yours) and culture (your organization's). This is not to take away from compliance officers and departments; indeed, hopefully, it will affirm their importance as one place in the larger picture. Compliance departments and guidelines are necessary but not sufficient. They tend to look backward, focused on catching those who've

violated laws and regulations, whereas ethics understood as character and culture is focused on avoiding future mistakes. Law, codes, and policy are an important place to begin, but we need to use other ethical perspectives as well. Similarly, ethics is not merely about telling people to be "good" or "moral," an approach that can be misleading and unhelpful.[28] First, telling someone just to "be moral" can put inordinate pressure on them without giving them the tools they need to fulfill the expectation. And telling people to be good can also be interpreted in too many ways. More helpful is an approach that helps you identify ethical problems as such and know your own ethical sources and tools for making an ethical decision. Such an approach helps you better imagine possible outcomes, either positive or negative, and see yourself working through them.

But if ethics isn't only about compliance or the admonition to be good, then what else is it? My view is that it also gathers the two critical pieces of character and culture, which in turn invite deeper questions. And indeed the two are linked: In *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, investigative journalist Charles Duhigg says that organizations don't make rational choices as a whole, much as it might seem that way. Rather, they are "guided by long-held organizational habits, patterns that often emerge from thousands of employees' independent decisions."[29] What shapes and sustains your individual character or the corporate culture of the business or organization you're a part of? What role (if any) do religious or spiritual traditions play in either one? For many, their faith tradition—even if they move away from the doctrinal claims or practices—remains influential, if not central, to their

ethical grounding and sense of societal responsibility (we'll talk more about that in chapter 2). Indeed, places as seemingly unlikely as Silicon Valley are showing increasing interest, albeit in some less conventional ways, in religious traditions as a resource for meaning and ethical orientation amid the stresses and pressures of the high-tech world.[30] What other sources or reality checks do you use in ethical decision-making—a mentor, for instance, or a close family member you check in with? How carefully do you track and trust your intuition and gut instinct? This book gives you the means to think more lucidly and answer these questions more accurately.

As in the Princeton course, our path through the book will focus on interaction and engagement with other people's stories and with yours. We will use both powerful ideas and real-world applications. Or, as we will discuss further in chapter 2, you can think of it as orthodoxy and orthopraxy, particularly for those who draw on their faith tradition: that is, differentiating between right doctrine ("views or belief") and right practice (how you actually live out of your beliefs, and that can change over time). My emphasis is on the latter—how the source(s) of our ethics show up in ethical situations, what we do in real time. This helps you avoid getting lost in the weeds of theory and instead evaluate how you enact and play out particular ideas in your daily life. We'll look at it as your lived ethic and the "ethical field" in which you find yourself for a particular decision. Your lived ethic is the behavior and values you personally bring into an ethical decision. But the fact is you're never there alone. You are in an ethical field, which can be compared with a playing field in sports. That field

comprises the context in which your personal ethics and decision-making is taking place, including external factors, organizational ethics, and the ethics of other people. For ethical decisions, we are rarely solo actors. Rather, as my colleague Michael Thate and I have observed, "diverse ethical agents, with differing ethical contexts and convictions, inhabit space. The effect and influence of one's ethical actions or convictions depends on where one lives within a given ethical field" and "an agent's ethical actions and convictions are enmeshed within social relations."[31] There are many constraints and also other actors on that field who may have different ethical sources or views than you do. You may never do anything unethical (right?!), but at some point, people you work with will. How you respond may be more critical than the initial problem was. There also may be field factors such as asymmetrical power or authority, or traditional or perceived roles related to gender or cultural differences. Your ethical field might include a heavy dose of incorrect groupthink, or what developmental psychologist Todd Rose called collective illusions. As pervasive as they can be, they can still be dismantled, he says, through individual actions, "with the right tools and some wise guidance."[32] Your awareness of your ethical field at any given moment and the degree to which you affect others or are affected by them will be important in the effectiveness of your decision-making.

Given the variability and subjectivity of what it is to be a normal human who's trying their best, we need a system external to the demands and even impulses of the moment through which we can process an ethical decision, whether large or small. So, over the past twenty years of teaching,

research, and C-suite-level ethics advisory work, I developed five key questions that together create a sound ethical process that is academically robust and grounded yet easy to remember and use in your everyday life. I call them the Five Questions, or the Five Q's. Used regularly, they keep your ethical muscles strong, supple, and fit. They also provide the arc of this book.

The Five Q's

The Five Q's—when they are exercised in your daily life—give you two ways to counter impediments to your ethical decisions and think reflectively about possible outcomes. First, they give you a framework outside yourself that helps illuminate things you hadn't thought of or might tend to overlook, perspectives that were not naturally your own but that might reveal important insights. Second, the act itself of taking regular time to visit them helps you create space in your life for reflection, space that helps you engage in slower, less reactive, more insightful thinking and step away from triggers of the moment, which are the real bugaboos of ethical decisions. Both ways help you reset, moving you away from the distortion your biases and other impediments can create—if left unchecked and free to meddle in your perceptions. And just as an athlete works out her muscles in different ways on different days so that they don't become over-adapted to only one way of being used, the Five Questions will help you maintain the flexibility to adapt to different kinds of challenges that might arise in your life, keeping your ethical fitness as full-bodied and dynamic as possible. They allow you to cross-train,

so to speak, not allowing your muscles to become too reliant, and therefore overdeveloped, on just one ethical tool. They help you not just flex your ethical muscles but keep them flexible and avoid rigidity, so that they have more range of motion—as, for instance, in yoga. The Five Questions, or the Five Q's, help you move from being ethically out of shape to being ethically fit and well. And do you know what's most interesting about them? They don't stay in separate "buckets" in our lives—they interact and reinforce each other . . . as we'll see.

First, *Q1: What is ethics?* Chapter 1 will look at different definitions of ethics, arriving at my own working definition that incorporates different classical ethical perspectives and balances reflection, decision, and action. I identify three modes of preventive, live, and restorative ethics, which help you be more aware of where different kinds of ethical decisions lie in the course of forethought and action. And you'll learn how to parse an ethical case so you have a structure on hand to use when a decision involves a group of people and a complex fact pattern.

Second, *Q2: What is the source of your ethics?* Chapter 2 will help you unpack your own ethical sources, whether for the first time or as a chance to revisit and deepen what you already know about yourself. Even if you feel you know well the source from which you most derive your sense of ethics, taking another look at it can help you reflect on both its healthy and unhealthy manifestations, whether it be your favorite philosopher, a religious tradition, or your family's ethics. My model of the Three Lenses, based on traditional approaches to ethics, will give you a handy tool for testing a potential

decision from three different perspectives: based on rules and regulations (what I call the Right Lens), the greater good or goal (the Good Lens), or judgment calls based on context and character (the Fitting Lens). Each lens might indicate a different outcome or slightly varied pros and cons in order to help you evaluate a range of potential consequences. And a balcony-view of the work-ethics emphases of the three Abrahamic religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) also provides a template for looking at whatever wisdom tradition may be operative in your life or the lives of those you work with. Whatever your source, you'll grow your awareness of the particular values you draw from it and the different ways those values can take shape in real life—in other words, their ethical flexibility.

Third, *Q3: What is your ethical decision-making framework?* Building on your reflections on your ethical sources (chapter 2), you'll expand them to include the other factors present in your ethical decision-making framework, whether it has been more unconscious for you or one you have already spent time with. Growing in your awareness of how to walk a problem through the paces of your framework, including the abovementioned Three Lenses, is especially helpful when you are navigating a new situation or a situation with competing values, such as, for instance, a new use of technology or hybrid work methods that impact your work in new ways. As I will mention in chapter 1, behavioral psychologist Elke Weber sees that "one of the defining features of an ethical conflict is that it involves being pulled between two or more objectives, values, or ideals, which can elicit strong emotional reactions."[33] Your Q3 helps mitigate against the human tendency to

rationalize, especially when we're feeling vulnerable. Your ethical decision-making framework, or your own Q3, can help you complexify a question, breaking away from a simple binary yes/no for a more revealing look at the layers and nuances of a situation. You may still have to arrive at a yes or a no, but you'll do so with a better appreciation of the true diversity within the situation. Using your Q3 opens up time and space for curiosity and therefore for learning. "Psychologists find that one of the hallmarks of an open mind is responding to confusion with curiosity and interest," Adam Grant writes.[34] To inspire your creation of your own Q3, you'll see some creative examples from my students. Used regularly, your Q3 gives you a tool for thinking through future scenarios and possible outcomes in a way that helps you avoid either naivete, on the one hand, or the fear or confusion that can leave you paralyzed, on the other.

Fourth, *Q4: What is your public language for ethics?* Knowing your ethical framework and process is one thing, but the ability to explain—and perhaps at times even defend—an ethical decision requires practicing how you talk about it, particularly in a public situation or one in which those who are around the table may have different ethical languages or conclusions than you do. It may be that you are working to explain the ethics of a department, organization, or business and need to shift into a language accessible to partners, stakeholders, or a wide range of the public. The mission statement or internal code of ethics of an organization becomes its own form of public ethical language, for which we'll look at some examples—and, of course, those draw on the organizations' Q3's, or frameworks. Whistleblowing, too, can be or utilize a

kind of ethical language or explanation. In the end, your public ethical language, or your own Q4, may have more far-reaching effects than your immediate conversations. By modeling the thoughtful intentionality, curiosity, and self-awareness that's part of your Q3, you set the tone for others to be more reflective themselves. You might also help a team come to consensus, if not agreement. As ethicist and educator Mary C. Gentile observes in *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right*, "Recognizing that our differences or disagreements about values, though real, do not preclude the development and pursuit of shared goals is a helpful primary position to adopt when we think about how to voice and act on those values."[35] Without realizing it, you may even be improving the learning culture of your organization.

Fifth, *Q5: How do you stay ethically fit?* This question comes full circle to where we began, with the need to stay ethically fit and well and the ways to do it. Using your ethical tools regularly and consciously—thus activating your Q3 and Q4—can lead to more robust ethical thinking and help you avoid an error that could otherwise cost you or someone else credibility, reputation, finances, or a career. And that, in turn, can help you reflect more deeply on what "succeeding without selling your soul" means to you. It can help you shape the life you want to lead and be remembered for. As the billionaire entrepreneur Ron Shaich (he made Au Bon Pain into a national brand, then founded and headed up Panera) has described, it can help you do a "premortem," an intentional approach to knowing what is most important to you in life and checking in on and updating those plans regularly. Each year, Shaich

thinks about key areas in his life: "his relationships with his body, his work, his family, friends and God."[36] As the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "The most fascinating parts of Shaich's premortems were the sections about his work. . . . The premortem has become such a crucial part of his life that he made it an organizational framework at his companies." "'I imagine my body old and fragile, my breathing shallow, my life energy almost extinguished,' he wrote in *Know What Matters*, his 2023 book. 'I try to evoke the feelings I want to have in that moment—a sense of peace, completion and, most importantly, self-respect. Then I ask myself: What am I going to do now to ensure that when I reach that ultimate destination, I've done what I need to do?'"

To help you think about your own premortem, at the end of each chapter are two brief lists. The first, called "If You Remember Nothing Else . . . ," is a phrase I used with my students for quick takeaways capturing some of the most important points of the lecture. The second, "Ethical Workout," will give you prompts to reflect more deeply on your life and practice using the tools from that chapter. Just like when you play sports or do public speaking, you have to anticipate what might come at you. You rehearse how to respond so you are not surprised or thrown off when it happens. You are able to think, "Oh yeah, I can do this, I've been practicing it." Indeed, one of the ethical habits I encourage in my students is ethical self-reflection. "Reflection on experience can help us develop the virtue of 'practical wisdom,'" Lamb, Brant, and Brooks write. This is "the capacity to discern morally salient features of situations and deliberate about how best to act."[37] The exercises at the end of each chapter

can help you go deeper in practicing such wisdom. You can also use supplementary tools to this book, found online at www.the5questions.com. Sharing your thoughts with a friend, colleague, or support group can open further questions and points of view. And I always encourage a daily practice of skimming a reputable, fact-checked news source such as the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times*, which gives you a chance to apply your tools and awareness to the wider landscape of society and workplaces we're in. In that way, this book, like the course, takes what philosophers call a phenomenological approach: in other words, how does an ethical tool or question manifest itself in a specific real context, or phenomenon, of your life.

In short, our human ethical judgment is more important now than ever. You matter, and so do your ethical decisions, whether it's one you encounter only once, or one that you run into many times over the course of a career or lifetime. Especially in a world where tech, quantum computing, and generative artificial intelligence have more and more ability to replicate human functions, the value we humans offer will lie in the ethical discernment and insightful perspectives we bring to bear to a nuanced decision that algorithms can't replicate. "In the future," Bina Venkataraman observes, "the human edge is going to come from what we value and from our judgment, not from going head-to-head with machines to parse facts."[38] Or from a behavioral perspective, Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass R. Sunstein, the authors of *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*, agree: "As long as algorithms are not nearly perfect—and, in many domains, objective ignorance dictates that they will never be—human judgment

will not be replaced. That is why it must be improved."[39] Especially with the significant presence of AI in many decision-making processes, such as in hiring, educational admissions, or medicine, it is imperative that we have decision-making tools that allow for what the human mind can uniquely perceive and create beyond the limitations of algorithms. We need a process for making ethical decisions confidently but not arrogantly, for being informed and not naive, empowered and not paralyzed. Above all, we need tools that not only allow for but engender humility and the wisdom it brings, which may be the most important tool in your kit.

The way that judgment shakes out in our everyday ethical decisions can set up a future to look forward to—or not. Who are you now, and who are you becoming? Or, put another way, what will your future self thank you for doing—or not doing—today?

If You Remember Nothing Else . . .

- Ethics may not always pay in the short run, but it will almost always pay in the long run.
- You may never do anything unethical (right?!), but people you work with will. How you respond may be more important than the problem itself.
- Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are related but different things. The former may shape the latter, but the latter is all people see.
- Like a playing field in sports, your ethical field is the context in which your own ethics and decision-making is taking place and includes external factors, constraints,

organizational influence, and the ethics of other people in the picture.

Ethical Workout

1. Reflect on what initially interested you in this book and jot it down. What story is behind it, and how did it involve an ethical decision? Is there something you are confronting now, or something from your past? Keep it handy as you go through each chapter, and make notes as you do the Ethical Workout at the end of each one.
2. Choose a reliable, fact-checked news source that you subscribe to and commit to looking at the headlines regularly in light of the questions this book is raising for you.
3. Think of the different factors at play in your own ethical field in a current situation in which you have ethical choices to make. Write them down or sketch them out, and keep that close at hand as you read. For example, does the ethical field of your workplace put limitations on what women can say or do, or discourage junior personnel from speaking up when around senior people, or have company values that differ from your own?

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