DEDICATION

FOR ALLEN HUSTEAD (1947 – 2011)
A GOOD MAN, AN ETHICAL MAN
BY BOTH THE CLASSICAL AND MODERN DEFINITIONS.
A ROLE MODEL FOR ALL.

OTHER BOOKS PUBLISHED BY ROYAL FIREWORKS PRESS
BY JERRY CHRIS

BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO THE SOCRATIC SEMINAR
DREAMERS WHO CAN: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
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Many school and district-level administrators would like to design a simple set of ethical guidelines for the students in their schools. The ideal would be that every student in every grade would be a “good” person with ethical standards that would become habit. These administrators are backed by politicians and media pundits who seek simple solutions to the problems that face schools every day but are naïve to the actual workings of those schools, to the dilemmas teachers face, and to the confused lives today’s teens lead.

To the outsider, the task of designing a set of ethical norms does not seem that difficult, perhaps because we all believe that ours are correct. Everyone should be like us: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” We could start with, “All students should be principled.” That is a great idea, but could we ever agree on those principles? The chapter in this book on relative ethics quickly illustrates why agreement is not possible, particularly in light of the multi-cultured backgrounds of our current students. Let’s face the facts: we now live in a global society. No country, or even state, can live in isolation. Most probably, a group of 100 teachers, parents, and students assigned to the task of defining cheating would come up with 100 different definitions. Does sharing research count? How about group work? When a teacher gives the same test over and over, is the cheating the students’ fault or the teacher’s?

How about: “All students should be responsible”? Again, at first look, that seems like an obvious standard. However, is it applicable to the modern teen’s conflicting responsibilities? Suppose a student has a family obligation that requires his or her presence out of town on the same day as an important athletic event. Who comes first: the family or the team? With traditions in mind, we would all like to say, “Family, of course,” but tell that to the rest of the team members who depend on their star or the university coach with a scholarship in his pocket.

One might even suggest something more general and seemingly easier to fulfill: “All students have an obligation to maintain their personal health.” We might assume that this requires, in part, a minimum of seven hours of sleep each night. That is easy for parents to request, but those parents have never had six honors classes at the same time and have never been faced with the idea that if they do not get into a top university, they will be shunned by their classmates and labeled a failure by their relatives.

Now multiply these issues by the complexity of the ever-changing world driven by social media. It takes the Supreme Court to rule on what can or can’t be said on Facebook or Twitter according to the First Amendment of the Constitution. If that is not enough, consider the additional conflicts with peer pressure, self-esteem, and dating trends propagated by that social media. Many of us Baby Boomers may have walked six miles in the snow each way to school, but that would be a simple task compared to the conundrums a modern student faces every day.

So again, in our search for ethical standards, we are forced to return to the classics. Granted, these philosophers will not give us the simple answers for which many educational leaders had hoped. They cannot tell us that, given this situation, you must do this. If this
happens, this must be your response. The world is far too complex. What they can do is stimulate a young mind to analyze a situation using critical thinking—to consider the alternatives and make an intelligent decision. That is more than we have come to expect from our political leaders. Can a politician tell us whether we should guide our lives by altruism or egoism? Ideologies in every election demonstrate that politicians, who will make decisions for millions of citizens, are not able to agree on which is a better path. We can only hope that a community of educated, thinking students (as suggested by Plato) can do a better job than their adult leaders—their supposed role models—and “get it right” more often than not.

If there is to be one primary goal for this book, let it be that students who study classical ethics will have the humility to study other people’s viewpoints and attempt to understand them. Informed decisions, and therefore progress, can only happen when we can admit that sometimes we are wrong, no matter how right we think we are. Whether it be on a national or a personal level, none of us is infallible—yet it certainly appears that many believe they are. Television and radio are full of “journalists” screaming at us about what is “indisputably” right.

Each of the five major questions of classical ethics provides two alternatives as to how we ought to live our lives. With humility, students can study each and perhaps fulfill Plato’s dream of education and knowledge being the foundation of all of our ethical decisions. Only then will students make important decisions based on what they know they ought to do, not on what someone or some group has told them they must do.
A Classical Definition

The acceptance of one major premise is necessary for complete enjoyment of this book. It is not a new premise. In fact, it was made famous by Plato, although the ancient Chinese, such as Confucius, had long been promoting it. The premise is fairly simple: **Good citizens and correct behavior are the direct result of knowledge and understanding.**

One could easily argue that knowledge and understanding come only with critical thinking. Knowledge, in Plato’s sense, is not something memorized and regurgitated on Friday’s test. It does not result from formulas that students cannot apply without direction or documents that are accepted without analysis. For the purpose of this book, let us define critical thinking as the ability to analyze at least two sides of any issue and then to determine the wiser choice. This could be the solution to a math problem or a search for truth within historical documents. Or it could involve an ethical dilemma and a determination of the best path to choose. Our students should be trained to think critically about any problem and to come up with what they believe to be the “correct”—the ethical—solution. Without knowledge, even if at some time a student might make an improper judgment despite his or her analysis, we stand little chance of maintaining an ethical, progressive society. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to present both sides of the five major ethical arguments of classical philosophy and thereby provide students with a base of knowledge in ethics.

Modern Ethics

Upon seeing the title of this book, one might immediately ask, “Why not *Modern Ethics in the Modern Classroom*?” The answer is really very simple: modern ethics is a philosophical study unto itself. If practical application for teenagers is the purpose of ethical studies in the classroom, then theoretically-based modern ethics does not fit the bill. Modern ethics, philosophically speaking, involves philosophical analysis but not necessarily suggestions on how we ought to live our lives.

Modern ethics deals with such terms as *necessary and sufficient conditions*, while it is heavily laden with analysis of precise definitions. In brief, theories can be “naturalistic” if judgments are reducible to natural science, “non-naturalistic” if they are not, or “emotive” if they are merely expressive of feelings. These terms provide students with little assistance in making real-life decisions. Further definitions in modern ethics provide only further theoretical concepts rather than the practical applications of classical ethics that are discussed in this book: the modernist terms *motivist, deontological, and consequence* are discussed in the chapter on motive vs. consequence, and *subjectivism* and *objectivism* are discussed in the chapter on relative vs. absolute ethics. Again, we must remember that we are searching for philosophies that the modern teenager can use as guideposts when making judgments.
A second question then might be, “Why not Modern Guideposts for Moral Behavior? Can’t we just say what is good or bad behavior?” Again the answer is simple: we live in a global society, and our communities are composed of a multitude of ethnicities and traditions. What is considered moral for one group may be completely immoral for another. Morality is based on the mores of the community. We can agree on stopping at a red light because some rules make our lives safer. However, can we agree that we should never leave chopsticks standing in the rice bowl because for some it is a sign of impending death? How often have our political leaders insulted leaders from other countries by not knowing the mores of that country? While a majority of the world now sees females as equals, in Pakistan in the fall of 2012, a fourteen-year-old girl, Malala Yousafzai, was shot by the Taliban for her “obscene” writings promoting education for females.

Do we all agree that it is wrong to leave the water running while brushing our teeth? Some may never have thought of this, but the amount of water run by leaving the tap open is more than the average person in Africa has for an entire day. Can we all agree that professional athletes taking steroids for performance enhancement is wrong? Yet an entire generation seemed to agree that it was permissible as they changed the record books forever.

ETHICS AND MORALITY

In a more important sense, let us consider the difference between ethical behavior—how humankind ought to behave for the betterment of society—and morality—how humankind should behave according to the established mores. In the 21st century, the Catholic Church has held steadfast to the belief that contraception is wrong. The use of condoms is strictly prohibited because sex is restricted as a method of procreation only. However, it could easily be argued that the widespread distribution of condoms in Africa would greatly reduce the spread of AIDS and therefore would be the ethical thing to do, since the common good would be greatly enhanced. Could it be that an action could be moral but unethical?

Or perhaps we should look at this conflict in reverse. We might agree that there is nothing immoral about drilling for oil off the California coast or fracking for oil shale in the expanses of Alberta, Canada. However, is it possible that these actions are unethical? One must consider not only the potential environmental destruction, but also the consequences down the road as humankind continues to add to its carbon footprint through its addiction to oil and gas. Thus again, a good argument could be made that even though these actions do not violate any rules of morality, in the long run, they could be deemed unethical.

CLASSICAL ETHICS IN MODERN TIMES

With these dilemmas in mind, let us now journey into the beliefs of the classical philosophers. Some have been dead for 3,000 years. However, the thoughts of Confucius, Plato, and friends still offer us the necessary guideposts for which we have been searching. Because they themselves do not agree on how humankind ought to live, they provide us with a healthy discussion on the five major questions of classical ethics: motive vs. consequence,
absolutism vs. relativism, moderation vs. extremism, accepting fate vs. changing fate, and egoism vs. common good. Let us now apply classical ethics to the modern classroom.

Each chapter discusses one of the five major questions and is divided into five sections. The first is a basic explanation of the philosophies of the major thinkers, aligned by their stance in a particular philosophical debate. For example, Immanuel Kant is best identified with motive ethics, while John Stuart Mill promotes consequence ethics. Criticisms of each side also are presented, and in some cases, the criticism is used to introduce the opposition. The second section in each chapter offers a variety of modern, real-life scenarios for student discussion. Some are my observations and experiences, while others are taken from recent history or the news. None of them are fiction.

Section three of each chapter presents the transcript of actual Socratic seminars recorded in grades 10–12 during the school year 2012. Although the names have been changed for student protection, the words are unaltered. The seminars were approximately twenty-five minutes long. The students in the seminars asked each other thought-provoking questions, which should generate critical thinking among the readers. It is hoped that students will enjoy these transcripts and add their own comments to those of the recorded students.

The fourth section in each chapter references classical literature that carries the themes of the philosophers. The purpose of this section is to provide a basis for interdisciplinary connections between philosophy and literature to, hopefully, excite deep-thinking students into further reading of the classics. These sections draw from six novels or plays from canon literature. The final section features a collection of famous Shakespeare quotations. Shakespeare was not included among the classics because most students are already familiar with the messages of Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, etc.
CHAPTER I

Motive vs. Consequence

CLASSICAL ETHICS: OUGHT ACTIONS BE JUDGED ON MOTIVES OR CONSEQUENCES?

Every day, humankind makes multitudinous decisions. Some may seem somewhat unimportant, such as the choice of whether to splurge by having two scoops of ice cream or to limit oneself by having just one. Others might seem unimportant but may turn out to be significant: Should we buy the Ford or the Audi sedan? Others are recognizable as extremely important, even if the consequences years later cannot readily be seen: Should we have two children or three?

These decisions are, of course, magnified when applied to a national or international scale. Do we make a law prohibiting schools from selling high-calorie desserts to children? Do we charge an import fee on all foreign-made automobiles? Do we grant automatic citizenship to anyone born in the United States? No matter the significance of the decisions, they will be guided by either individual or collective motives: we want to reduce obesity; we want more American cars sold in this country; we want to control immigration. At the same time, either intended or unintended consequences are inevitable. Quite possibly, they will be consequences that no one imagined originally. This leads to the debate: Ought we to judge actions on the merit of the intended motive, no matter the consequence, or on the consequence, no matter the motive? The classical philosophers have written extensively on the subject.

KANTIAN ETHICS

Immanuel Kant (Germany 1724 – 1804) is undoubtedly the leading spokesman for the idea that motive, not consequence, should be the main determiner of ethical judgment. As have we all, Kant often witnessed good intentions accidentally leading to bad consequences, and poor intentions often leading to good consequences. Many bad people lead prosperous and happy lives by taking advantage of others. Conversely, someone might suffer a fairly painful existence by sacrificing too often for his or her community. Because these possibilities occur, Kant determined that justice must come in the afterlife; the virtue in an act must be determined only by the motive of the doer. The consequence doesn’t factor into the good or evil of an action.

Let us take the fictional case of a perfect young man, a “church-going” Eagle scout who purposely does something harmful just to experience, one time, the feeling of being evil. He throws a rotten egg at his neighbor’s front door—widowed, ninety-year-old Mrs. Smith’s door. But coincidentally, a thief comes out with her heirlooms in a sack. The egg, intended to damage the door, cold-cocks the thief, and our evil-intending scout becomes
a hero. Kant would say that we can only judge the youth’s action as evil since the good consequence was clearly accidental.

The reverse, of course, also could happen. Our scout knows that one of his classmates has been experimenting with marijuana. He feels it is only right to go to the school counselor and confide in that adult in order that an intervention might stop the classmate’s drug use. However, one thing leads to another with the counselor and the administration, and the classmate is suspended from school and kicked off the football team—the only thing that had been keeping the boy from losing all interest in school and getting deeper into drugs. Despite the scout’s best intentions, his action leads to harm, with perhaps dire consequences down the road. Again, Kant would submit that the boy’s intentions were honorable, and therefore so was his action, regardless of the tragic but totally unforeseen consequences.

Because the basis of Kant’s philosophy involves the afterlife, he further divided humans’ good intentions. Although all good intentions are ethical, not all “score points” toward entrance into heaven. Some good intentions are based in obligation or inclination (or to avoid punishment), while others are done out of a sense of duty (what humans ought to do because it is the right thing to do). Consider the student who knows that students are texting answers during an Advanced Placement exam. Reporting the cheating is what she ought to do. However, if the student reports the cheating only to avoid possible punishment for all students, including herself, so that the school is not suspected of widespread cheating, it is not, according to Kant, virtuous (rewarded in the afterlife). If the student reports the cheating because she knows that is the right thing to do, then Kant believed that the student will be rewarded by powers beyond this earth. Similarly, the divorced father who makes child support payments only to avoid punishment from the courts should not be considered virtuous.

Criticism: Kant’s system of ethics would be far easier to accept if we always knew the intent of the action. If a small child fell overboard from a boat, and a totally unrelated man jumped in the water to save the child, it would be easy to say that the man was doing the heroic thing and should be rewarded. However, did the man jump instinctively without thinking? Did he jump because that was the right thing to do? Or did he save the child to avoid looking bad in front of the young mother who froze as the child went over?

On a larger scale, historians often salute President Truman for ending WWII with the atomic bomb. However, was his intent to end the war? To save American lives? Or because of hidden racism? We will never know. It is beyond our judgment. Again, Kant would suggest that Truman got his reward or punishment in the afterlife.

Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill (England, 1806 – 1873) and his mentor Jeremy Bentham presented the opposite view—that actions can only be judged by their consequences. Agreeing that we could never know the true motives of an individual in a particular situation, Mill sought to present an objective principle whereby actions could be judged. Utility determines all. The “Greater Happiness Principle” suggests, simply, that an action is ethical if the beneficial effects outweigh the harmful effects. The action can be deemed good if it produces the
greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. Hence, it is often associated with democracy, since what is best for the majority is the ethical choice when decisions are to be made. Mill would suggest that we do not need to know Truman’s true motive for using the atom bomb; it is an objective judgment based on lives saved versus lives lost. With the example of the hero jumping in the water to save the child, it is a simple matter of whether or not the child was saved. The underlying motive of the rescuer is unimportant.

Mill went so far as to develop a system called “Hedonic Calculus,” whereby pain and pleasure for individuals or societies might be objectively measured by terms such as duration and intensity. (Note: Hedonic comes from Hedonism since it is a measure of pleasure and happiness.) We might apply this to the Holocaust. Whether or not one wants to argue that Hitler thought that his persecution of Jews, gypsies, and gays was for the betterment of Germany, the resultant (and ongoing) pain for the Jews must be labeled as unethical. It can readily be seen that the worth of an action is separate from the worth of the agent under utilitarianism.

**Criticism:** Mill and Bentham’s utilitarianism has several obvious flaws. First and foremost, people do not usually consider the possible consequences of their actions. Many, for example, believe that this is inherent in being a teenager when it comes to sex, alcohol, tattoos, etc. (Do we dare ask if politicians ever consider the consequences of their actions?)

Secondly, there is no way anyone can possibly know the consequences of some actions until years later. Consider the teen who chooses to, or not to, apply to a particular school. One choice might lead to a cosmopolitan world view as an adult; another might lead to an isolationist, perhaps rural outlook. And this is just the beginning. At the time of the decision, there is no way the doer can evaluate all of the possible consequences that could occur many years later. (Note: The American Indians have a rule, “the Seven Generational” rule, which states that important actions should not be done until one has considered the consequences for the next seven generations.)

Mill answered this criticism with a probability theory that suggests that the agent of the action should be able to determine with some accuracy the probability of a consequence. However, much evidence in psychology shows that humans are not very good at predicting outcomes. Could a student applying to a college possibly predict with any accuracy that he or she will or won’t meet Mr. or Ms. Right only by going to a particular university—a direct result of placement in a particular city with a particular job, etc.? Additionally, we must remember that utilitarianism was written to provide an objective measure of ethics. Predictions are highly individual and therefore subjective—directly opposed to the concept of an objective measure.

A third criticism comes in the form of personal introspection: the doer knows when an action is wrong and cannot easily take credit for a positive consequence. A student might cheat his or her way into acceptance to a prestigious medical school. Even though the admission might one day lead to this person’s discovery of a cure for cancer (a great consequence), at the time of the cheating, the person’s conscience will not allow the action to sit easily.

A final criticism comes from Friedrich Nietzsche (Germany, 1800 – 1944), who called Mill a “blockhead” for considering all humans as equals. He believed that some people
are more important or worthwhile than others. (Note: Nietzsche’s criticism of Mill was misdirected. Mill never proclaimed that all people are of equal value.) Consider if a crazed driver drove into a group of honors students picking up trash on the road as a community service project and killed them all. Now also consider the crazed driver killing a group of convicts, chained together, cleaning the freeways. Many would consider the first scenario a tragedy and the second simply just dues. But who knows what those students or convicts might have become years later? The possibilities are endless.

**MODERN SCENARIOS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. One of the major criticisms of judging actions by their motives is the idea that we are never sure of what someone’s motive is. In fact, we are often unsure of what our own motives are. When we risk our health by pulling an elderly woman from an attacking pit bull, do we do it out of altruism, out of instinct, or out of potential embarrassment because we realize that we will be criticized afterwards if we don’t? We might be quick to answer, but introspectively, we could be quite unsure. Obviously, judging someone else’s actions is even more dubious.

Consider this real-life incident that took place several years ago. I team-taught a humanities class with another teacher, a man who at the time was seventy years old. He was a once-brilliant teacher who never wanted to retire from the classroom, despite diminished alertness. However, his ideas and his love for his students more than made up for his slipping faculties, and the administration allowed him to continue teaching. Because we asked students to perform many skits and role plays, we had a skit closet—a collection of clothes, from a wedding dress to a farmer’s overalls. The students knew that whatever the assignment, they could find an appropriate costume, but often, when the class ended, they would simply throw the clothes back toward the closet instead of properly hanging them up (as teens seem to be prone to do even at home).

On one particular occasion, a young lady (we will call her Liz) asked my teaching partner if she could borrow his jacket (which he wore almost every day) so she could role play him—an easily identifiable character for the other students. The jacket was expensive, even if a bit worn. When the skit ended just as the bell rang, instead of returning the jacket to the teacher, she flung it absent-mindedly toward the closet. It wasn’t until mid-lunch that she realized what she had done. When she returned to the classroom, the jacket was gone. Now she was faced with an ethical dilemma. Should she give the teacher money to buy a new jacket and face up to being irresponsible? Should she replace it herself, hoping that he might not realize the switch? Or should she take the chance that at seventy, he might forget either that he had lent out his jacket or that it was she who lost it. He definitely had a reputation for being forgetful, and in fact, during the first few weeks that followed (during which she did not act on her error), he could not remember where he had put his jacket and cursed his slipping memory.

Almost a month and a half later, Liz did give my partner money to replace the jacket, saying that it had taken her that long to save the money, although she had never told him that was what was causing the delay. We would all agree that this was the proper thing to do. But what was her motive? Did she do it because it was the right thing to do? Or did
she have a guilty conscience that she could no longer tolerate? Or maybe a friend pushed her to do it, and she only wanted to save the friendship. Perhaps she instinctively feared bad karma. Perhaps, as a religious person, she feared retribution in the afterlife. Perhaps she realized that there was a distinct possibility that at some point he would remember that she had borrowed the jacket, and as always, he was holding what she needed most—her grade. Can we ever know for sure the motive behind an action? Probably not.

2. Often something horrible results in something good, which clouds any notion of a simplistic motive-versus-consequence debate. One such example is the use of mustard gas in WWI. Who could have guessed that the chemicals used to create the gas would actually lower white blood cell counts, resulting in the birth of chemotherapy, perhaps the best way to combat cancer? Similarly, few would say that the Holocaust in WWII was anything short of man’s greatest evil to man. For most of us, what was done is unthinkable. However, the horrific experiments performed by the Nazis, in particular on hypothermia, have given us invaluable scientific data and can never be replicated. The fact that we cannot possibly justify either of these evils, regardless of intention, only further serves to confuse us when trying to label the results “ethical.”

3. In 2000, George W. Bush was elected president and soon enacted his “No Child Left Behind” plan for education. No one could doubt that his intention was good—to design an objective measurement of student progress by which students, teachers, and schools could be judged. The hope was that this objective evaluation would pressure the students, teachers, and schools to improve. The two areas to be tested were reading and math, arguably the most important skills to be learned by youngsters. This was all well and good but was based on several false assumptions. Among those assumptions was the belief that teachers would continue to teach all subjects as they had before and that teachers, always looking for ways to improve, would not be threatened by such things as merit pay being determined by the students’ success on these tests. However, both of these assumptions proved problematic. If a teacher is measured only by reading and math scores, of course it is reasonable to expect that he or she will emphasize reading and math, whether or not pay is directly tied to the scores. Peer pressure, as well as the pressure applied by the public when newspapers publish the scores, forces the teachers to concentrate only on those two areas. Now add in the threat of a teacher’s pay, already low for a professional with graduate credit, being directly tied to student scores. Making matters worse is that all students are not created equal, and teachers with lower-ability classes need to give even more emphasis to reading and math. The unintended consequence can readily be seen in the numbers of school districts reporting cuts in science, history, geography, physical education, etc. People wonder why students cannot find Panama on a map or why the U.S. has become an “obese nation.” No Child Left Behind may help answer those questions.

4. In 1876, the southern United States had a severe problem with the dirt from the banks of the Mississippi River slipping into the river and creating a dangerous, muddy mess in one of America’s most important transportation systems. A solution was proposed—bring a fast-growing vine from Japan, the kudzu, to the banks, and
let it put an end to the erosion. Unfortunately, those who made this proposal did not realize just how fast kudza can grow and just how invasive it can be. The plant has now taken over far more than the Mississippi. By 1910 it had reached Canada. It chokes out native plants and trees, killing them by covering and smothering them, and it is nearly impossible to eradicate. Despite the best of intentions, the consequence seems to be far worse than the original problem.

5. In the spring of 2012, the Susan G. Komen foundation, famous for its “Race for the Cure” events for cancer research, announced that it would no longer distribute a portion of its funds to Planned Parenthood because of Planned Parenthood’s connection with legalized abortion. The attention to this connection and the rescinding of the Komen group’s support was largely political. Unfortunately, the Komen group did not seem to realize that the abortion issue plays a very minor role in the overall work done by Planned Parenthood, which includes breast cancer screenings, cancer treatments, cancer education programs, and cancer research. Only when participation in the Race for the Cure dropped by 30% as a result of their stand against Planned Parenthood did the Komen group realize the mistake they had made. They went back on their de-commitment to Planned Parenthood, but sadly, the damage had been done. Despite their good intentions, the Komen people actually severely damaged their reputation as leaders in charitable contributions for cancer research, and they put a significant dent in the cancer work done by Planned Parenthood.

6. Following the world-wide epidemic of swine flu in 2010, Egypt called for the slaughter of all pigs in the country. Since there was clearly no connection between swine and the swine flu, many speculate that the Islamic leaders simply found a good excuse to cleanse the country of pork. However, their motivation is not at issue here; the consequence is. As it turns out, the pigs were largely responsible for the eating (and therefore the cleaning up) of all of the garbage left by inhabitants in the countryside. Without the pigs, the piles grew. As one can imagine, the horrible sight was the least of the Egyptians’s problems, as the potential for disease (not the swine flu) grew. In addition, at a time of economic turmoil, the growing garbage only exacerbated the problem. These were consequences unexpected by those who ruled to destroy the pig population.

7. Is it possible that both a motive and a consequence could be good, even though the action seems inherently bad? Anyone who is a fan of cop shows on TV has seen episodes in which the police know they have a perpetrator who is guilty of many crimes, but the evidence just isn’t there. Rather than allow a bad guy to get away with his crime once again, certain officers frame him for a crime they can’t prove, thus getting him off the street for good. The motive, to send the bad guy to prison, is good. The consequence, having the bad guy sent to prison, is good. However, the action itself, which involves a direct lie by the police, seems very wrong. One wonders if justice was truly served. In fact, the police action is most likely criminal. But no one can deny that having the criminal in jail is a good thing.
8. The United States fought a world war “to make the world safe for democracy.” In the 21st century, presidents make decisions based on the promise of world peace under democracy. Iraq and Afghanistan have been invaded in order to overthrow “evil” governments and implant democracy. The “Arab Spring” again brought hope of a democratic world with government by the people and equal votes for all. But has it all worked for the best? Are the new governments less corrupt than the old ones? Are the people more peaceful toward each other? Are these countries free from civil war? If not, has the motive justified the consequence?

9. Two years ago, one of the most popular teachers at our high school had his laptop stolen. As might be expected, this was a personal loss for him, but also a loss for all of his students, as their grades were suddenly in limbo, with the teacher left to begin again with the last transcript grades and add grades as they came in for the rest of the semester. Although it probably benefited a few students, many who were moving in a positive direction got no “bump” from that action. The following fall, the laptop, with the teacher’s name still on it, was spotted in the dorm of one of the most respected religious schools in America. The student who found the computer had been a student of the teacher in high school. Thinking he was doing the right thing, the student reported the found laptop to the teacher who lost it. Word spread quickly about the thief, a former religious leader in the high school, and the religious university where it was found. Now, a few years later, graduates of the high school refuse to attend the religious school, which has become a laughing stock, along with the thief and his former religious group. Although the reporting student had the best of intentions, unintended consequences seem to prevail.

10. At times, an evil motive can have good results. Recently our high school soccer team had a sophomore girl come into her own. It was one of those magical years, when the girl suddenly gained significant speed, her understanding of where to be when grew immeasurably, and new-found courage allowed her to plow into the thick of things. That all sounds great, except that another girl, a senior, was supposed to be the year’s star. Her jealousy grew. That jealousy manifested itself in an ill-conceived plan to ruin the younger girl’s reputation by snapping some semi-clothed pictures of the girl (taken on her phone in the locker room) and then posting them on a boy’s Facebook page as if they were sent in privacy to the boy. However, what the senior didn’t realize was that the sophomore girl was not yet allowed by her parents to have a Facebook account, and the hoax was soon uncovered. Although no one could prove who was behind the hoax, the other team members rallied around their distraught new star, and their attempts at comforting her soon turned into friendships that couldn’t have been expected between a sophomore and senior girls. In the end, the team bonded so well without the fallen star (whom many suspected) that they went on to win a championship that they most likely would not have won without that new-found team chemistry. An evil motive led to wonderful results.
Recently, a relative came to my family for advice. Her twenty-five-year-old daughter had fallen madly in love with a young man whom the relative believed beyond a shadow of a doubt to be gay. The couple became engaged, and wedding plans began to roll. The mother has no bigotry against gay people, but she did believe that her daughter was destined to be hurt. The boy was of a particular religion that does not recognize or accept homosexuality. The parent felt that the boyfriend was staying “in the closet,” but in time, maybe after a few years of marriage, the truth would come out, and her daughter would be crushed. Her question: Should she confront her daughter and future son-in-law? The potential for painful consequences seemed to abound. Her daughter might never speak to her again. The boy might run from the family. Or, if nothing was said and the mother’s worst fears prove true, the daughter could find herself divorced after the young man tired of an unhappy relationship with a woman. Should she confront the betrothed couple?

**SOCRATIC DIALOGUE:**
**MOTIVE VS. CONSEQUENCE**

The following Socratic dialogue took place in the spring of 2012 in a public high school classroom. The names have been changed to protect student privacy, but the dialogue itself was recorded and then transcribed without alteration. Approximately fifteen students comprised the inner circle and contributed.

**Teacher:** The basic question we will deal with today is whether we should judge our actions by the intentions, as suggested by motivists such as Immanuel Kant, or by the consequence, as suggested by utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham.

**Kelly:** I believe that a majority of people, no matter their religion or culture, want to believe that their intentions are always good. Our personal biases dictate that we support our own deeds, even if it means kidding ourselves sometimes. However, how we interpret the consequences is also determined by our own perspective regarding those original intentions. So actually neither the intention nor the consequence can be judged objectively.

**Sabrina:** So you are saying that we automatically think we are doing good, even if others don’t see it that way?

**Kelly:** Yes.

**James:** I see what you mean. Last week one of my friends told another friend the truth about his girlfriend and what she had done at a party. He thought that was the best thing for his friend, but the rest of us thought he should have just kept his mouth shut because it wasn’t really that big a deal. And the consequence, by the way, was bad for everybody.

[Some smirks, as if some know the situation to which he is referring]
Jake: Do you ever know what the consequences will be anyway? Why should the consequence matter if we think our intention was good? The consequence is out of your hands.

Steph: Jake, let’s suppose you attempt to save a person who has been in an accident, and when you pull him from the car, you paralyze him. That certainly was not your intention, but doesn’t the consequence matter a whole lot more to that victim than what your intention was? He is the one in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Who cares about your intention?

Katy: I think Steph makes an excellent point. No matter how you want to measure your intention, that will always be subjective. Just as Mill said, we need something objective. The poor dude in the wheelchair is an objective result.

Kelly: You make a good point because the consequence is so drastic, but suppose the victim is only temporarily disabled, and he had been a real jerk until that time. Then, during his six months of rehab, he is enlightened and becomes a great person.

[Some laughter]

Josh: So once again, we are back to square one. We are not sure of our intentions, and we never know the consequences.

Helen: I have a question for all of you. When you act, do you really think of the future consequences anyway, or just the immediate consequences you hope for? I confess I have done a few dumb things because I didn’t think at all about what might happen down the line. Do any of you ever think beyond the immediate? Truthfully?

Steve: Truthfully, I rarely think of the immediate even. However, before I never have a date again, let me say my intentions are always good.

[Laughter]

James: I have to agree with Steve. I never stop and say to myself, “Okay, James, before you do this, let’s weigh the consequences. Plan A will get me this, and Plan B will get me this.” Sorry guys, but I think I just do what seems best at the time. Like Kelly said at the beginning, I always think my intention is the best for the circumstances.

Teacher: I am still hung up on how to judge our intentions. As Kelly said, maybe our bias determines our judgment. Do we attempt to save the man in the car wreck because it is our natural instinct, because we are a good Samaritan, or because we know everyone is watching and it makes us the hero?

Olivia: I’m not sure anyone really thinks before acting in a situation like that, so isn’t that just instinct and we really don’t deserve to be judged positively for it?
Nathan: Maybe that example is instinctual, but certainly we can come up with a scenario where a person has time to think it through. That might be better for our discussion.

Alyssa: Okay, Nathan. Movie stars adopt terribly poor children from Africa. Before they do it, they have plenty of time to think about what they are doing. I’ll grant that the consequence will be good—a new life of luxury in the U.S. after poverty beyond our imagination in Africa. But why does the movie star do it? To get herself in People magazine and become more popular, or to save the world one child at a time?

Steve: Whoa. Not to distract from your question, but who says that consequence would be good? Maybe, although we can’t understand the culture, that was the kid’s life. He was happy. Now he grows up with a zillion people watching his every move for the rest of his Hollywood-driven life.

Alyssa: Good point. I withdraw my comment about the consequence necessarily being good, but I do want someone to answer about the intention.

Olivia: How can we answer? Just as Kelly said, we never know the intention for sure. Why did the movie star do it? That’s for the National Inquirer to debate.

Sabrina: Before we go on, I have to say I’m not sure why any of this matters. Are we all agreeing there is some kind of eternal reward for having a good intention, but there is no eternal reward for having a good consequence?

Olivia: Good question, but so we don’t make this a religious discussion, maybe we can agree to think in terms of karma.

Josh: Karma is a religious concept, and even if it wasn’t, that still doesn’t really get to the heart of Sabrina’s comment a minute ago about rewards. So maybe to move this forward we should concentrate on the thought processes, the critical thinking, if you want, that goes into why we do some things and why we don’t do others.

Sarah: Wait, you all act like our intentions are based on logic. Certainly our intentions, particularly if they are based on instinct, are not necessarily logical.

Kelly: Ha, consider the male species, which is neither logical nor analytical. My experience tells me their instincts are always evil, even if they call it “true love.”

[Laughter]

Jake: Funny, funny girl. But the supreme logic of the male is a subject for another day.

Steph: Yes, well…I’m not quite so willing to say I never know my intentions. I know when my intention is good—visiting my grandmother even though I get no reward and I’m not sure if she knows I’m there. And I know (don’t laugh) when my intention is not so good—sneaking in after curfew after a party so my parents don’t know I have been drinking with my boyfriend.
Josh: Oh, the naiveté of children! You visit your grandmother because it earns brownie points for heaven. You admit she doesn’t even know you are there. Bad! But you sneak in to spare your parents the pain of realizing they have failed at parenting! Good.

[Laughter]

Steph: Very funny! But because I am such a good person with good intentions, I will say, “Point well taken.”

Jake: Or do you say “Point well taken” because you want to avoid further discussion of your personal life?

Paige: I’m jumping in here to save my friend—oh, good intentions, see? Okay, so I think we can agree that it is tough to judge intentions (and don’t anyone judge my intention for saving Steph), but can we at least establish a criteria for judging consequences?

Teacher: As the teacher, let me intercede to remind you that Mill said we could have criteria, and it would be objective. That was the basis for utilitarianism. Lives saved versus lives lost, etc.

Mark: I have been silent this whole time because I keep thinking there is no way to judge the consequences on a big scale either. Let’s go back to the car accident. The jerk has an enlightenment and then turns good. Hurray for him! But that is still only the beginning. [Grumbling in background] Please hear me out. Maybe now he intends good, but down the line his new view of life leads to another bad consequence.

Paige: Whoa. We need an example.

Mark: [After thinking] So this guy wants to start something that will really help a lot of people. He opens up a huge hardware store that will employ thousands because it sells in bulk at cheaper prices. Trouble is, he doesn’t see that it will put all the mom-and-pop stores out of business.

Kelly: OMG, this is hopeless.

Jake: Thanks for making my original point. The consequences are out of our hands. It’s hopeless. Both Kant and Mill were way too simplistic in their philosophies. Can you imagine if we added in the modern world, like intentionally good text messages that really hurt someone?

Katy: No! Don’t go there! Our world is a different world, for sure. Do you really want to debate the unintended consequences of TV or the Internet or Facebook posts? Kant and Mill had no idea!

Teacher: So do you want to throw out the philosophies of the great deontological thinkers and the great utilitarians?

Helen: Wow. Definitely not. Do I dare admit that I have changed my mind a couple times here? We may not have definite answers, but I’m going to think about my intentions more now.
Jake: And how do we talk in Kant-Mill terms? Even our car wreck terms are completely out of their realm.

Alyssa: Cars or horse and buggy? Same thing. I don’t think the philosophical questions change. Maybe we should all be published and famous.

Teacher: Yes, I agree. Thank you!

**LITERATURE WITH**

**Motive vs. Consequence Themes**

*FRANKENSTEIN by MARY SHELLEY*

**Plot**

Whether or not the reader believes Victor Frankenstein is justified in his pursuit of knowledge about the creation of life, Victor’s intent seems to be admirable since he is a scientist studying philosophy and chemistry. The story begins when Victor is rescued with his dog sled on the way to the North Pole, and he recounts the strange tale of his search for the secret of life. Some years before, he had created a creature out of old body parts and given it life. He is sickened by the sight of the monster and falls ill, and the monster escapes. When his younger brother is murdered, he suspects the monster. A young, innocent girl staying at the Frankenstein house is accused and executed. Despite Victor’s original intentions, the monster’s creation has evolved into horrific consequences. Soon, the monster reappears and confesses but claims he was justified because he needs a female partner. However, after Victor creates again, he realizes the harm he has done and destroys the female monster, much to the chagrin of the original monster, who now seeks revenge by killing Victor’s bride, Elizabeth. Victor then vows revenge and tracks the monster toward the North Pole, the point at which the book began. Victor dies before he can destroy the monster, but the monster grieves over Victor’s death and soon dies on the ice.

**Sample quotes**

“Frightful must it be, for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world.” (Shelley, Introduction)

“So much has been done.... More, far more will I achieve; treading in the step already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.” (Victor, Chapter 3)

*THE STRANGER by ALBERT CAMUS*

**Plot**

When deciding whether we should judge actions by motive or consequence, we cannot ignore the argument that we never know our motives for sure. Camus’s existential novel suggests that a person might not even have a motive as he or she drifts through life, making the consequence the only thing of importance. Meursault attends his mother’s funeral,
sleeping most of the trip, and then shows no emotion when he arrives, including not wanting to see her body. After the funeral, he walks on the beach, where he meets a former coworker, Marie. They watch a comedy together before spending the night, and after she leaves, he lounges in bed until noon. He later will say, “It didn’t mean anything.” The following day, he agrees to write a letter for a friend, Raymond, who wishes to regain his mistress for the express purpose of beating her, and later testifies on Raymond’s behalf. Soon, for no clear reason, he shoots Raymond’s mistress’s brother. Meursault is arrested but displays no remorse. Not surprisingly, he quickly adjusts to jail and spends most of his days sleeping. At the trial, many, including Marie, testify about his indifferent and unmotivated character. Even in the face of his execution, he remains an atheist, insisting that the world has no meaning. Throughout the book, the reader is left asking “Why?” but the question is never answered. We, as with the jury, can only judge the consequence.

Sample quotes

“I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn’t dissatisfied with mine here at all.” (Meursault, Chapter 1)

“Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why…. What did other people’s deaths or a mother’s love matter to me…? Salamano’s dog was worth just as much as his wife.” (Meursault, Chapter 2)

THINGS FALL APART BY CHINUA ACHEBE

Plot

The first portion of the book describes in detail the life of Okonkwo and his clansmen in lower Nigeria. The Ibo people seem nothing like the stereotypical “heart of darkness” view of Africa. We glimpse their familial relationships, cultural traditions, worshipped deities, and survival necessities. We may not agree with the righteousness of much of their lives, but that would be the subject of the chapter in this book on relative ethics. What does concern us here is the arrival of the missionaries, who, in the name of their god, and therefore presumably with good intentions, attempt to convert Okonkwo’s people to Christianity and in the process destroy their culture. Led by Mr. Brown, the missionaries tell the villagers that they worship false gods and that it is idolatry. The villagers, of course, cannot understand concepts such as the Trinity. However, Mr. Brown is civil in his approach to the villagers. This changes when he falls ill and is replaced by the intolerant Reverend James Smith. When a convert, Enoch, unmasks the “earth god” during a ceremony, his compound, along with Smith’s church, is burned to the ground. The commissioner offers to meet with the clansmen but has them jailed and abused instead. Okonkwo, acting as a leader and expecting support, kills one of the court’s messengers. However, the others are not willing to go to war to preserve their culture, and Okonkwo hangs himself. A journalist begins his story with a telling title: “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.” Although the Christian missionaries might believe they have good intentions, the reader cannot help but wonder if they see themselves as superior to the Africans. The consequences of their attempted conversion of the Ibo people further confuses the ethics of their missionary work.
Sample quotes

“And at last the locusts [colonizers] did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast hungry swarm.” (Acheba, Chapter 7)

“The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his own religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (Obierika, Chapter 20)

OF MICE AND MEN BY JOHN STEINBECK

Plot

Perhaps Steinbeck’s novel stands alone as a story of good people with good intentions causing undeserved consequences. This is foreshadowed from the beginning when we find that Lennie, the giant, mentally challenged man, loves petting soft things but often accidentally kills them. His intentions come from the purest of hearts, but this has no bearing on the consequences. It is also clear early on that George, his companion, knows that a sad fate is inevitable for Lennie but charitably cares for his close friend like a brother. They share a dream of one day owning their own farmland and raising rabbits. When they report to their next job, George again covers for Lennie’s odd mannerisms by saying that Lennie was kicked by a horse. Curley, their new boss’s mean-spirited son, is married to a flirtatious wife, whom George knows must be kept away from Lennie. In their last job, Lennie innocently touched a woman’s dress, and they were forced to flee after she cried rape. When Curley picks a fight with Lennie, Lennie crushes Curley’s hand. Soon after, Lennie accidentally kills his puppy, and Curley’s wife, who was pleased that Lennie broke her husband’s hand, attempts to console him. When she allows him to touch her soft hair, he inadvertently breaks her neck. Lennie flees to a prearranged spot where he and George have agreed to meet if “a bad thing” happens. Before the lynch party arrives, George, out of mercy, shoots Lennie in the back of the head—a final well-intentioned act with a tragic but necessary consequence.

Sample quotes

“With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don’t have to sit in no bar room blowin’ in our jack jus because we got no place to go. If them other guys gets in jail, they can rot for all anyone gives a damn. But not us.” (George, Section 1)

“Maybe if he sees somethin’, he don’t know whether it’s right or not. He can’t turn to some other guy and ask him if he sees it too. He can’t tell. He got nothing to measure by. I seen things out here.... If some guy was with me, he could tell me I was asleep, an’ then it would be all right. But I jus don’t know.” (Crooks, Section 4)
FAHRENHEIT 451 BY RAY BRADBURY

Plot

Although futuristic, the novel depicts how any government—past, present, or future—with laws it believes to be for the betterment of humankind actually can lead its citizenry to dire consequences. At the same time, it shows how individuals with good intentions, although they might be in violation of the law, could assist humankind in reversing those consequences. Montag’s job, as directed by the government, is to burn books and thus to prevent people from the “pain” of intelligent conversation or independent thought. Three events change Montag’s life: first, he meets a young girl, Clarisse, who surprises Montag with her love of nature and other people. Second, his wife, who spends her days watching TV, attempts suicide. Third, a woman caught with a book chooses to be incinerated along with her books. When Clarisse is killed, Montag searches for meaning in his life. Beatty, the fire captain, gives Montag the government’s justification for depriving people of books and thus keeping them happy. With the help of Faber, a retired teacher, Montag begins reading. However, his wife betrays him, and his house is burned. Montag flees and with Faber’s help finds “the book people,” who have preserved books by memorizing them. When the city is blown up in war, Montag and the book people are left to rebuild humankind, after the government, despite its good intentions, has led its citizenry to the brink of dehumanization.

Sample quotes

“We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal as the constitution says, but everyone made equal…. A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man’s mind.” (Beatty, “The Hearth and the Salamander”)

“It [fire] is perpetual motion…. It’s a mystery…. Its real beauty is that it destroys responsibility and consequences…clean, quick, sure; nothing to rot later. Antibiotic, aesthetic, practical.” (Beatty, “Burning Bright”)

DON QUIXOTE BY MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

Plot

Some may consider Quixote a dreamer, some a madman, but few could argue that his intentions are always good, even if the consequences are most often bad. After reading novels about chivalry, Quixote sets out to defend the downtrodden and weak. He promises to make his friend Sancho a governor as they begin their heroic journey in the name of Dulcinea, a peasant woman whom he envisions as a princess. As he mistakes normal behavior as threats against his knighthood, he continues to act the fool and anger citizens. The reader might find many of his adventures humorous, such as riding against the windmill giants, but they can only view his actions as motivated by the cause of good. Sancho continues to support him, often bearing the brunt of the retaliation from those Quixote “helps.” Even a duke and duchess play games with his goodwill. When a maid falls in love with him, Quixote remains faithful to Dulcinea, who is actually a prostitute. When
he reaches Barcelona, he is vanquished by a friend disguised as the Knight of the White Moon. At the end, Quixote dies of a fever after abandoning his chivalric quest. Chivalry is dead in reality, but for the dreamer, good intentions are always uppermost.

**Sample quotes**

“For what I want of Dulcinea del Tobosco she is as good as the greatest princess in the land. For not all those poets who praise ladies under names which they choose so freely really have such mistresses…. I am quite satisfied to imagine and believe that the good Aldonza Lorenzo is so lovely and virtuous.” (Quixote, I, Chapter 25)

“There are two sorts of beauty, one of the mind, the other of the body; that of the mind displays and exhibits itself in intelligence, in modesty, in honourable conduct, in generosity, in good breeding; and all these qualities are possible and may exist in an ugly man.” (Quixote, II, Chapter 58)

**SHAKESPEARE QUOTES**

**MOTIVE VS. CONSEQUENCE**

Find out the cause of the effect, or rather say, the cause of the defect, for this effect defective comes by cause. *(Hamlet II . 2)*

After your death you were better (to) have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live. *(Hamlet II . 2)*

Though this be madness, yet there is method in ’t. *(Hamlet II . 2)*

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pith and moment with this regard their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action. *(Hamlet III . 1)*

Let Hercules himself do what he may, the cat will mew and dog will have his day. *(Hamlet V . 1)*

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men’s cottages prince’s palaces. *(Merchant of Venice I . 2)*

How oft the right of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done! *(King John IV . 2)*

Every way makes my gain. *(Othello V . 1)*

The attempt and not the deed confounds us. *(Macbeth II . 2)*

Things bad begun make strong themselves by it. *(Macbeth III . 2)*

Nought’s had, all’s spent, where our desire is got without content. *(Macbeth III . 2)*

Dids’t thou never hear that things ill got had ever bad success? And happy always was it for that son whose father for his hoarding went to hell? *(Henry VI II . 2)*

Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall. *(Measure for Measure II . 1)*

They say best men are moulded out of faults, and for the most, and become much the better for being a little bad. *(Measure for Measure V . 1)*