I will refer to the case of a pupil of mine, who sought me out in the following circumstances. His father was quarrelling with his mother and was also inclined to be a “collaborator” [with the Nazi forces in France]; his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. He fully realized that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance— or perhaps his death— would plunge her into despair. He also realized that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother’s behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. For instance, to set out for England he would have to wait indefinitely in a Spanish camp on the way through Spain; or, on arriving in England or in Algiers, he might be put into an office to fill up forms. Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed towards only one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous— and it might be frustrated on the way. At the same time, he was hesitating between two kinds of morality; on the one side the morality of sympathy, of personal devotion, and, on the other side, a morality of wider scope but of more debatable validity. He had to choose between those two.

Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,”
lecture given in 1946
THE NATURE OF A MORAL CHALLENGE

What are moral challenges? What form do they take, and how do we identify them?

The subject of moral challenge — the kind of wrenching decision Sartre’s student had to make — is a practical foundation for beginning our study of moral leadership. Later in the course we will ask how we might usefully reason about moral challenges, (which we will address in Module II: Moral Reasoning), and how we might act upon them and use these aptitudes to demonstrate moral leadership (which we will cover in Module III: Moral Leadership). Before then, we need to understand our own moral awareness — the personal framework people use to recognize morally charged situations, and the types of such situations – moral challenges – that any of us might face.

This module comprises four readings that will help clarify and reveal the complexities of four different types of moral challenge. In it, we will consider ethical problems from a variety of perspectives and in a range of situations, from the mundane — the challenges of an insurance collection agent — to the cataclysmic — an entire Antarctic expedition stranded in icy waters.

The module comes at the beginning of the course because it forces us to start at the beginning: To consider why and how moral issues are perceived by people in particular situations. When is a challenge a moral challenge? What makes us believe that a moral issue — as opposed to, for example, a legal issue — is at stake? As we begin our progress through these readings, many of us believe we have an intuitive sense of what we mean by “moral”; we know we are in the terrain of right and wrong, and of judging whether a particular decision or action is morally sound. But we might wonder: Where do these moral views come from?

THE VIEW FROM PHILOSOPHY

Of course, philosophers have broached the topic of moral philosophy — also called ethics. They have broadly addressed the question of the origins of our moral sentiments in two different ways: Either morality exists independently of humanity or it is a human invention. The Greek philosopher Plato championed the first approach, claiming that, like mathematical principles humans must accept, live by, and cannot change, morality exists as an abstract “spirit-like” entity. Most religious theologians reached similar conclusions, arguing (in various ways and to various degrees) that morality is determined by a god or gods, and therefore exists independently of humanity.

The second approach, which argues against morality as a spirit-like object, or against morality as being of divine origin, has roots as old as the first approach, having been championed, for example, in the Greek philosophical tradition of Skepticism. Today, that approach is expressed through notions of individual relativism — the belief that individuals create and live by their own moral standards;
and of cultural relativism, which suggests that moral prescriptions come from within societies, and thus different societies may have strikingly different moral codes. Common to both of these ideas is the assumption that morality is, to one degree or another, a human invention.¹

**A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY**

As we read, study, and debate, we will use the words “ethics” and “morality” interchangeably. There is no consensus definition of these terms, and even philosophers use them differently, as is suggested by the following entry from *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*:

*ethics and morality:* “Morality” and “ethics” are terms often used as synonyms: an ethical issue just is a moral issue. Increasingly, however, the term “ethics” is being used to apply to specialized areas of morality, such as medicine, business, the environment, and so on. Where professions are involved, a governing body will typically draw up a code of ethics for its members. “Ethics” in this sense can be thought of as a subset of morality, being that aspect of morality concerned with moral obligations pertaining to the practice of a profession. On the other hand, some philosophers, from Socrates to Bernard Williams, use “ethics” in a broad sense to refer to reflective answers to the question “How should I live?” If we accept this broad sense of “ethics,” then morality becomes a subset of ethics, being that aspect of ethics concerned with obligation.²

**THE VIEW FROM SOCIAL SCIENCE**

Aside from philosophy, empirical research has also attempted to answer the fundamental question of the origins of morality and of our moral awareness. For example, Emile Durkheim, commonly regarded as a founding father of modern sociology around the turn of the twentieth century, argued for a sociological-cultural approach. He posited that morality is the deeply ingrained respect for collective society and the social order held by each individual; rules, maxims, and laws therefore have no moral authority on their own unless they are sanctioned by society as ideals that transcend individual needs or desires.

Extended to the field of anthropology, this approach has been used to explain the wide diversity in moral assumptions, often called “codes,” among different societies and cultures³ – one of which, the Ibo of nineteenth-century Nigeria, we will meet in the last reading of this module, *Things Fall Apart* by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis and another turn-of-the-century theorist, came to a different conclusion. Freud’s underlying assumption was that an individual’s subconscious desires and motivations manifest themselves in actual
behavior. He approached the issue of morality from a biological perspective, claiming that people—irrespective of society and culture—are “not gentle creatures who want to be loved and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness.”

Although he agreed with Durkheim that morality comes from society, Freud also believed that morality exists because of the universal necessity of regulating and controlling human behavior. Morality is therefore instilled in children through their development of a conscience (roughly what he termed the “superego”), which internalizes society’s mores through emotional mechanisms such as guilt in order to minimize aggressive tendencies.

Contrasting to Freudian notions of internal regulation spurred by societal demands, behavioral theories, such as those propounded by the psychologist B. F. Skinner, asserted that, through external rewards, punishments, and imitation, children learn and internalize society’s moral codes.

THE VIEW FROM DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, the field of developmental psychology used these foundations to flesh out more intricate and nuanced theories of moral awareness.

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, typified this approach by noting that “socialization in no way constitutes the result of a unidirectional cause such as the pressure of the adult community upon the child . . . Rather . . . it involves the intervention of a multiplicity of interactions of different types and sometimes with opposed effects.” This approach thus acknowledges that morality within society can be challenging and often conflict-ridden. In this module, Sophocles’ play Antigone will allow us to explore the clash of two firm, but different, moral imperatives. Similarly, Things Fall Apart will illustrate how competing moral views are approached by those living in dynamic and changing societies and cultures.

One of the best-known and most influential theories of developmental psychology has been Lawrence Kohlberg’s description of stages of moral judgment. Positing that moral awareness develops in children and in adults, Kohlberg and his colleagues began a systematic inquiry into this moral development terrain. His work, and that of many researchers subsequently, suggested a developmental progression that ranged from an externalized sense of right and wrong enforced by obedience and punishment—most often (but not solely or necessarily) found in children—to an internalized appreciation of moral principles with which an individual constantly interacts. This research suggests that by facing, discussing, analyzing, and acting on a succession of moral challenges, individuals can develop increasing moral awareness and judgment over the course of their lives.

In this module, we will have an opportunity to witness an example of this turbulent process of moral development ourselves, in Allan Gurganus’ novella Blessed Assurance.
TYPES OF MORAL CHALLENGE

While philosophers, social scientists, and empirical research help us understand moral awareness and its development, identifying and analyzing the kinds of moral challenges people face is equally important, and has also been a focus of examination.

Plato, for example, in questioning the universality of certain moral principles, asked: “To speak the truth and to pay your debts . . . even to this are there not exceptions? Suppose that a friend when in his right mind has deposited arms with me and he asks for them when he is not in his right mind, ought I to give them back to him?”9 For Plato, the answer was clear-cut: Protecting others from harm is a more compelling moral imperative than speaking the truth or paying debts.

Two thousand years later, Jean-Paul Sartre, the twentieth-century French writer and philosopher, found the student’s dilemma noted above – whether to fight the Nazi occupation or to stay and console his mother – a more difficult scenario with no right answer. Moral arguments could be mounted on each side.

In their research, developmental psychologists have typically used such confounding ethical dilemmas as a basis for interviews with subjects; for example, Kohlberg’s “Heinz Dilemma” questions whether a husband, after exhausting all other options, would be justified in stealing an unaffordable but life-saving medication from a pharmacist for his critically ill wife, who otherwise would certainly die.10

The complexity of options in such situations makes it all the more important to look carefully and critically at how we think about the right thing to do, especially if we are to come to terms with what we believe is right. Literature, and fiction in particular, can illuminate these timeless human issues, placing characters in situations that we can then ponder, analyze, and debate.

RIGHT VERSUS WRONG CHALLENGES, RIGHT VERSUS RIGHT CHALLENGES, AND TYPOLOGIES OF MORAL CHALLENGE

If moral challenges pose varying degrees of difficulty, and require a diverse array of considerations, then it is little wonder that philosophers have attempted to create a typology or scheme for categorizing types of moral challenges. One distinction they make is between a right versus wrong situation and a right versus right situation.

Right versus wrong challenges are described as those with clear, or mostly unambiguous, ethical imperatives, which point to a right answer, however difficult (or simple) that answer may be. As the first reading of this course, Ernest Shackleton’s fight for his crew’s survival will shed light on this type of challenge.

No matter how perilous Shackleton’s situation in the frigid Antarctic seas was, however, leading ethicists have argued that true ethical dilemmas only exist in right versus right scenarios, which are “genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in one of our basic, core values.”11

Right-versus-right dilemmas have been further classified into different types of challenges. Rushworth Kidder, an ethicist, identifies four basic “dilemma paradigms”
in which competing values exist on both sides of a moral challenge. These four paradigms — general categories into which he believes all moral challenges can be classified — are, first, telling the truth versus maintaining loyalty; second, considering the needs of the individual versus considering the needs of the community; third, accounting for short-term versus long-term considerations; and, fourth, weighing the ideal of justice against the competing imperative of mercy. As useful as his paradigms are, however, very little in the study of ethics is simple or universally accepted; diverse typologies, paradigms, and ways of considering moral challenges compete and coexist.

**OVERVIEW OF READINGS IN THIS MODULE**

The readings in this module have been selected to reveal and illuminate the complexity of four different types of moral challenge.

- **The challenge of right versus wrong.** *Endurance*, the story of Ernest Shackleton’s leadership of twenty-seven men stranded when their ship sinks in the Weddell Sea off the coast of Antarctica, will allow us to examine a right-versus-wrong dilemma, which, in this case, is the challenge of survival.

- **The challenge of right versus right.** *Antigone* will suggest the complexity and potential tragedy of a right-versus-right scenario, represented in the play by two competing “rights,” or moral positions, one taken by Antigone, and the other by Creon, king of Thebes.

- **The challenge of a moral dilemma.** In *Blessed Assurance*, we will follow the decisions and actions of Jerry, a young white agent who collects funeral insurance premiums from poor African-Americans in the American South. This novella will provide insight into the actual process of responding to a moral dilemma — a type of right-versus-right conflict in which competing positions cannot be reconciled.

- **The challenge of new principles.** *Things Fall Apart*, a story of the conflict between the Umuofia, an Ibo clan of Nigeria, and Christian missionaries and British colonial authorities, will illuminate the challenges posed by new moral principles to both individuals and societies as a whole.

**NOTES**
