

Lost in Transition

The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood

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Introduction

This book is about the lives of 18- to 23-year-old Americans, who we call “emerging adults.” We do not pretend to present here a comprehensive view—the complete picture—of emerging adult life. We are focused on the darker side of emerging adulthood.¹

It is true that there is also a bright side. Some of the lives of emerging adults are full of fun, freedom, new growth, and promising opportunities. There is much good in and about emerging adult life. And many emerging adults we have studied are interesting, creative, and sometimes very impressive people. But the happy part of emerging adulthood is already well documented and only part of the story.² There is a dark side as well. We think the dark side deserves more attention. It is of course more enjoyable and reassuring to focus on what is fun and happy and good in life. But at some point that becomes unrealistic, one-dimensional, even fake. If we care to know more of the fullness of the truth about emerging adults, we need to attend also to their mistakes and losses, trials and grief, confusions and misguided living. Those aspects of emerging adult life are what this book is about.

The story of this book points to one conclusion and raises some questions. The conclusion is that—notwithstanding all that is genuinely good in emerging adulthood—emerging adult life in the United States today is beset with real problems, in some cases troubling and even heartbreaking problems. Arriving at that conclusion will involve our describing some key parts of the outlooks, experiences, and practices in emerging adult life today. What we describe comes from what we heard in the course of interviewing hundreds of emerging adults in a national research project on American youth. By our reckoning, much of what we describe damages people, relationships, a sense of a richer purpose in life, a rational social order, and perhaps even the earth’s environment. We think these problems are worth describing, pondering, and discussing.

Following the recognition of those problems come these questions: Why those problems? Where do they come from? How do we explain them? What social or cultural forces perpetuate them? Why do or must emerging adults live with them? Answering these questions will shift us from description to explanation, from reporting to analysis. Our answers will not be total or exhaustive. But we hope they will illuminate and spur helpful thought, discussion, and more study.

Our motive for focusing on the dark side of emerging adulthood is not to obsess about the negative for its own sake, nor to sound some kind of alarmist knell of cultural doom. Our aim, rather, is to expand our understanding of emerging adulthood, as a means to help reflect on growing up in the United States today, on life in our society, and on American culture more generally. We think our story will give emerging adults and others who care for and about them reasons to reflect on and talk fruitfully about emerging adult life. Ideally, we hope that what we say here might contribute to the reconsideration of some of our cultural priorities and practices in ways that might enhance the well-being of emerging adults. Before we get there, however, our task is simply to provide some description and analysis of some of the less admirable, more troubling parts of emerging adulthood.

The Sociological Imagination for the Common Good

The reader may already be asking: *what kind of book is this?* Is it scientific sociology or moral or cultural criticism, or something else? The answer is that it is a particular kind of sociology, conducted, we hope, to promote the common good. It is scholarship that employs what our discipline calls "the sociological imagination" to engage in social and cultural criticism and even moral argument. Our purpose is to serve the good of people by educating readers in sociological ways of understanding and encouraging public discussions about problems we see in our own culture and society.

What then is *the sociological imagination*? It is a particular viewpoint, a perspective that teaches us to ask certain kinds of questions and looks for specific types of answers. The sociological imagination is a distinct way of seeing and thinking that takes the influence of human *social* life very seriously, in order to understand and explain the world, our lives, and the lives of others more fully. The sociological imagination seeks to understand the *personal experience of individual people*, on the one hand, and *larger social and cultural trends, forces, and powers*, on the other, by *explaining each in terms of the other*. The larger social world, it recognizes, is constructed and shaped by all of the life activities of its people. That part is not hard to grasp. But the sociological imagination additionally helps us to see that the experiences and outcomes of people's lives are also

powerfully shaped by the trends, forces, and powers of larger social institutions and cultural meaning systems.

People, of course, do a lot to shape their own personal lives. But they also always do so in the context of larger social and cultural realities that influence and govern their lives. So, sociology tells us, if we really want to understand and explain people, we need to also understand the larger social and cultural contexts that influence them. Focusing on individual psychology or personalities will not be enough. Understanding and explaining people in this sociological way draws upon a "social logic," or *socio-logic*, that expands our field of vision and increases our power for better comprehending life and the world around us. That is the promise of the sociological imagination.³ We commend it to readers and hope to demonstrate its payoffs in the chapters that follow.

To be more specific, this book is about better understanding the lives of 18- to 23-year-old Americans. But we do not simply *describe* their lives. We also seek to *understand* and *explain* their lives sociologically, by viewing them in the larger context of the culture and society in which they are lived. We argue that that larger social and cultural context powerfully influences the ideas, experiences, and outcomes of their lives. The following chapters describe the ideas and behaviors of 18- to 23-year-old Americans concerning morality, sex, consumerism, alcohol and drugs, and civic and political engagement. But to better understand and explain those ideas and behaviors, we open up our analysis to look at how different social institutions and forces help generate and promote them. We will examine, for example, the powerful influence of the objective life-course phase known as emerging adulthood on people's personal expectations, beliefs, and behaviors. We will also consider the relationship between America's pervasive mass-consumer economic system and how 18- to 23-year-olds think and act when it comes to seemingly unrelated matters like partying, moral reasoning, and religious faith. How, you may ask, does the economy relate to things like alcohol intoxication? Read on and see. In the chapters ahead we also consider how many other social institutions, cultural trends, and technological developments shape the lives of 18- to 23-year-olds in ways that they are often not even aware of. Included in these are mass public schooling, the digital-communications revolution, colleges and universities, sociocultural pluralism, the mass media, political gridlock, socioeconomic inequality, the sexual revolution, and postmodernism. By helping readers see the connections between these (usually seemingly unrelated) social and cultural forces and the personal, often private, lives of 18- to 23-year-olds, we hope to cultivate in readers the kind of "sociological imagination" described above.

But what about this book being concerned with cultural criticism, moral argument, and people's good? Is that really sociology? The mainstream of American sociology follows one of its founding fathers, Max Weber, by insisting that sociology should be "value free."⁴ We understand that approach and affirm much

that we consider good in what it tries to accomplish. But ultimately we think it may not really be consistently possible; in any case, we think it need not be the only way to conduct good sociology. In contrast to that "Weberian" view, we take what some have labeled a more "Durkheimian" approach—that is, a view following some of the thinking of another early sociologist, Émile Durkheim.⁵ Following numerous other contemporary sociologists of note,⁶ we proceed here in the belief that sociological work need not always be value free (even if it perhaps sometimes can be), that it can (and usually does, more or less overtly) take stands on moral issues. We do not assume that our position in what follows will be self-evident and universally shared (what would be the point of publishing that?). But neither do we think that the values and moral arguments that define this book and the probable lack of consensus about them prevent it from being genuine sociology. Think of this book, then, as offering a kind of "critical, public sociology."⁷

Framing the Discussion

Adults in American culture routinely take one of two different attitudes about "kids these days," both of which we think are unhelpful. The first attitude we might call the "Chicken Little" approach. This outlook is essentially one of *fear*—that "the sky is falling," when in fact the sky is probably either not falling or else has been falling for most of human history. People with this attitude are anxious that all that was good in the supposed golden days of yore is now going down the drain. They fear that something decisive has recently happened that is uniquely corrupting youth today. Things are very bad and getting worse. People who are ordinarily called conservatives often tend toward this kind of view.

The second common adult attitude toward "kids these days" we might call the "nothing new under the sun" approach. This outlook is essentially one of *complacency*—a bemused dismissal of any concern about troubles in the lives of youth, when in fact there may well be real troubles, grief, destruction, and waste that deserve addressing. "They'll grow out of it," this attitude says, glibly. "Boys will be boys," it chuckles with a wink and a wave of a hand. "It was no different when I was young" (this last phrase being a baby-boomer favorite). And so on. People who are ordinarily called liberals often tend toward this kind of view.

Adults need to engage emerging adults today with neither fear nor complacency. Both of those reactions spring from outlooks that are simplistic and counterproductive. They usually do more to confirm the political and moral ideologies of the adults who hold them than to take young people seriously on their own terms and consider what might actually be good and bad for them.

The truth is neither that the sky is falling nor that there is nothing to be concerned about in the lives of emerging adults. There are both good things to

appreciate and problems to consider in the lives of young people today. On the good side, for example, recent decades have seen declines in the rates of teen pregnancies and abortions.⁸ The proportion of youth starting and finishing college has increased over the years.⁹ And youth today as a whole are observably less prejudiced against people of other races and ethnicities than were those of earlier generations.¹⁰ We think these things are good and worth recognizing and affirming.

But such positives are only part of the larger, more complex reality. There is, again, also a dark side that shadows the lives of many emerging adults today. That dark side should, in our view, be named and taken seriously. Dismissing it as "nothing new" is, we think, lazy, apathetic, and mindless. That attitude says, "Don't bother me with the troubles, grief, or misguided lives of young people. They either don't matter or there's nothing we can do about it." We disagree.

The better attitude for adults to take toward "kids these days," we think, is something more like "realistic care." This attitude is realistic not in the sense of being jaded or holding low expectations. It is realistic, first, in actually being informed by the facts of empirical reality, rather than personal memories or simplistic, prefabricated, ideological narratives of either conservative or liberal bents which distort reality to fit larger interests. It is also realistic in that it does not expect ordinary human beings to be angels, even though it expects people to try to lead good lives. And it is realistic in acknowledging not only the resilience with which people can often survive and recover from problems in life but also the deep and lasting damage, loss, and suffering that can result from "the way kids are." It is often *not* the case that "they'll just grow out of it." We need to be more realistic than that.

This approach is also "caring." Teenagers and emerging adults desperately need other mature and concerned adults who genuinely care about and for them. Young people need to be loved, to put it as plainly as possible. They need to be engaged, challenged, mentored, and enjoyed. They, like every human being, need to be appropriately cared for, no matter how autonomous and self-sufficient they may think they are. The spirit in which this book is written, then, is not one of fear or complacency but instead what we hope is realistic care.

One other clarification is necessary. In the course of writing this book, one of the sentiments we encountered from others interested in it was something like this: "So emerging adults get drunk and do drugs. Big deal. That's nothing new. Young people today probably get drunk and stoned less than my generation did in our day" (the baby boomers strike again). In case any readers find themselves having similar reactions, let us clarify our position in response. We are less interested here in relative historical change over time than in the reality and meaning of the absolute facts today. We frankly do not ultimately care what former generations did or did not do that might not have been good. We care about emerging

adults today, what *they* believe, think, and do, and what of significance that may tell us. If something that one thinks is a problem is happening in the present, it may help to put it into historical perspective. But that alone does not put an end to the matter. In the end what matters is whether or not something problematic is happening now and how to respond to it. So we are less interested in questions like "Do emerging adults today have fewer or more problems with intoxication than those in the past?" and more interested in questions like "Why do so many emerging adults today feel such a need to become intoxicated?" Both are legitimate questions. But the second is what interests us here.

More generally, this book is about the fact that very many emerging adults today suffer from what we think are significant problems—troubles they have because of larger problems in the culture and society in which they have been raised. We think we should learn from that. And we think we as a society, as responsible adults, might be able to do something about that. That is our concern.

1

Morality Adrift

Who am I? ... To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good and bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance to you. ... [Moral] orientation has two aspects; there are two ways that we can fail to have it. I can be ignorant of the lie of the land around me—not knowing the important locations which make it up or how they relate to each other. This ignorance can be cured with a good map. But then I can be lost in another way, if I don't know how to place myself on this map.

—Charles Taylor

We begin our exploration of some of the more unsettling aspects of contemporary emerging adult life by focusing on the question of morality, moral beliefs, and moral reasoning. How do emerging adults think about morality? How do they know what is moral? How do they make moral decisions? Where do they think moral rights and wrongs, goods and bads, even come from? What is the source or basis of morality? And how important is it to emerging adults to choose what is morally good? This chapter examines their answers to these and other questions and then ponders what it all may tell us not only about contemporary emerging adults' own moral imaginations but also about the larger culture and society that has formed them morally.

In our personal, in-depth interviews that we conducted with different kinds of emerging adults around the country, we spent a lot of time talking about morality. The questions we asked approached moral matters in many different ways.¹ We worked hard not to be leading in our questions. Most of our questions were very open-ended. But we also probed a lot and pressed their answers hard, to try to get to the bottom of their moral outlooks and actions. By the time we were done interviewing so many emerging adults, we felt confident that we had solidly grasped what they assume and perceive about moral goods and bads, how they think and feel about right and wrong. We also have some ideas about

what it all likely means. The following pages describe what we found and what we make of it.

A Few Preliminaries

Readers should be aware of four important points heading into this chapter. The first is that emerging adult thinking about morality (as with most of the rest of adult Americans) is not particularly consistent, coherent, or articulate. It is not only that not many emerging adults are moral philosophers in the making; everyone knows that. But, in addition, not many of them have previously given much or any thought to many of the kinds of questions about morality that we asked. Thus, much of what they have to say about morality is peppered with uncertain phrases, such as "I don't know," "like," and "I guess."² That itself tells us something important. But it should also caution us not to set the bar too high for how much sense we should expect emerging adults to make for us when it comes to morality.

The second point relates to the first. We describe in what follows the approximate proportions of the emerging adults we interviewed (and sometimes surveyed) who expressed different, particular types of moral views. Readers should be aware, however, that in most cases these different views presented are not mutually exclusive. Several of the categories often overlap, so that the percentages do not always add to 100. That means that individual emerging adults can be included in many of the different types of viewpoints discussed below, including some that may not seem to fit together logically. That, again, partly reflects the frequent lack of consistency and coherence in emerging adult thinking about morality.

Third, we do not mean to imply in what follows that the kind of moral problems and issues that emerging adults evidently struggle to sort out are simple, easy, or obvious. They definitely are not. Moral issues can be very complicated. It often takes thoughtful instruction to see the pitfalls of different positions and to learn to work out the possible problematic implications of various moral accounts that may seem at first to make sense. Even then, it can be very tricky to hold convictions along with humility, to balance commitment with complexity, to sustain clarity amid diversity. We ourselves are, of course, not omniscient analysts. We have our own moral uncertainties and disagreements. Our intent in this chapter is simply to describe and help sort out some of what seem to us to be difficult problems besetting emerging adults today when it comes to moral reasoning.

Fourth, and related to the previous point, there are real reasons why emerging adults hold the views about morality that we are about to explore. The problem is not that emerging adults are as a group unintelligent. Neither, we think, is the problem simply that emerging adults are generally out to

rationalize immoral behavior. Much of what we find problematic below is, we suspect, the outcome of two other things. The first is emerging adults' well-intentioned attempts to avoid potential problems that they know are real, such as coercive moral absolutism. In this sense, many of the ways that emerging adults often think poorly about moral issues are misguided attempts to achieve some good. That is worth recognizing. Second, we are convinced that most emerging adults have been poorly educated in how to think about moral issues well. The adult world that has socialized emerging adults as they have grown up has provided them with few useful intellectual tools for working on moral questions. As a result, we see in our interviews how unprepared they are for convincing and coherent moral reasoning.

Moral Individualism

The first thing that struck us in conducting interviews about moral issues with emerging adults is how strongly individualistic most of them are when it comes to morality. Six out of ten (60 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed expressed a highly individualistic approach to morality. They said that morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision. Moral rights and wrongs are essentially matters of individual opinion, in their view. Furthermore, the general approach associated with this outlook is not to judge anyone else on moral matters, since they are entitled to their own personal opinions, and not to let oneself be judged by anyone else. "It's personal," they typically say. "It's up to the individual. Who am I to say?"

Consider, for example, the following emerging adult, who explained why she does not cheat at the Ivy League university that she attends, but who also does not judge her peers who she says do cheat. "I don't know," she explains. "I guess that's a decision that everyone is entitled to make for themselves. I'm sort of a proponent of not telling other people what to do." She reports that some of her friends do things that give them unfair advantages in studying, which she considers cheating. "But that's their choice," she observes, "and I'm not going to tell them not to, though it's something that I wouldn't do. I guess it's a good example of like where no one else is hurt by it and you can get away with it." But doesn't that bother her? we ask. And why doesn't she cheat? "I don't know, I guess I want to be proud of my achievements and proud of what happened, and I want to feel like I had full control over the outcome, I think." Everyone for themselves, morally, in other words.

How then, given this moral individualism, do emerging adults explain why different individuals choose their own personal moral codes? Some cite the influence of parents. Some credit friends. Others say religion or the media. But

many of those we interviewed who take a strong individualistic approach to morality believe that they have made up their own moral views. For example:

I don't know. That's something I've asked myself a lot. I have no idea where I ever came up with the idea of like atheism, or where I came up with like just a lot of my views of right and wrong. Because a lot of ideas that I have now [about] right and wrong switch views entirely. I have never heard anybody else that has anything like it [my moral outlook] and I just don't know where it came from. Like just kinda things that I thought up, that I decided was right for me. So I don't know. I honestly don't. It just kinda came outta thin air.

We asked this young woman whether it is okay for a person to break moral rules if they can get away with it, if it works to their advantage. She replied that if the person did not think it was wrong, then they would by definition *not* be breaking a moral rule. It is "not really a moral rule then, is it?" she reasoned. "Because then, yeah, I mean, if you're okay with it morally, as long as you're not getting caught, then it's not really against your morals, is it?" She herself does not think stealing is "okay." But, she observed, "People do dumb stuff all the time. It doesn't make you a bad person per se, but like, yeah, actually, it [stealing] is a dumb thing to do." So morality is defined by each individual's personal standards. Some things are okay, other things are dumb. Whether anything is objectively morally right or wrong is unclear.

One reason some emerging adults appeal to the individual determination of morality seems to be the difficulty, and even impossibility, it appears to them, of trying to sort out difficult moral issues. It is hard enough, it seems, for one person to figure morality out for themselves. The idea of coming up with a moral system that will apply to everyone feels hopeless. Thus, one young man told us this: "Oh my goodness, these questions right now, these questions are really difficult! What makes something right? I mean for me I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it, but different people feel different ways, so I couldn't speak on behalf of anyone else as to what's right and what's wrong." Moral individualism thus relieves the burden of achieving social agreement on moral matters. In the end, moral claims can more easily take this kind of form: "Well, a lot of the times it's personal, it changes from person to person. What you may think is right may not necessarily be right for me, understand? So it's all individual."

A key conceptual confusion on this point revolves around ambiguities in the meaning of the statement that "an individual has to decide for themselves what is moral." We need to distinguish here between (a) moral claims (that are objectively true) being *embraced* subjectively by individuals through a process in which those individuals come to believe them, versus (b) moral claims (that

may not be objectively true) taking on a quasi-true *status* for certain individuals as a result of those individuals believing them to be true. The distinction is subtle but crucial. The first, which assumes moral realism, has to do with the personal subjective appropriation of an objective moral fact. The second, which leans toward moral relativism, has to do with the subjective mental construction of what is then *treated* by someone as a moral fact, when it may not be one. An example of the first might be someone saying, "I have come to believe that it is truly wrong for people to cheat on exams." An example of the second might be someone saying, "Personally, for me, it would be wrong to cheat on an exam, that's how I look at it." In both cases, the people have "decided for themselves" what is morally right and wrong. But the two kinds of different decisions mean very different things. To say that "an individual has to decide for themselves what is moral" in the first sense is reasonable but trivial. It essentially says that for someone to believe something they have to believe it. Because emerging adults care about personal authenticity, sometimes this obviously true meaning leaks into their moral reasoning and makes the rhetoric of moral individualism seem sensible. By contrast, to say that "an individual has to decide for themselves what is moral" in the second sense is seriously problematic. It supposes and proposes (1) that no objective moral truths exist (or, if they do exist, humans cannot know them well), and therefore (2) that what people take to be moral truths are only socially constructed, historically and culturally relative ideas about morality, which they may believe are objectively true (and have good reason for doing so). Most of the moral individualism conveyed by emerging adults, we think, ends up expressing this second meaning. But few distinguish between the two meanings. And so the obvious truth of the first tends to make plausible what is in fact a radical, and we think wrong, view of morality suggested by the second meaning.

A strong theme among these moral individualists, as we noted above, is a belief that it is wrong for people to morally judge other people. Each person has to decide for themselves. Nobody else can tell anyone else what to think or do. One emerging adult, for instance, viewed people imposing their moral beliefs on others as actually "sick," observing, "Who am I to judge? is the real question that I would like to ask myself. You know, this person maybe has a different view and I'm essentially trying to not impose my views on other people." Why not? we asked. "I think that definitely, just from my own experience in life, would set me apart from other people. And I don't want to be an ideologue, I don't want to be a Christian missionary." If anything, this emerging adult sees not "immoral" people but people who make moral judgments of others as society's real problem: "You know, some of these people are so firm in their beliefs, I find that that's contributed to a lot of problems that we see today, and maybe not on such a minuscule scale. So maybe [my view is] just a commitment to not imposing your

beliefs, or trying to dominate other people, or trying to control people. You know, that's very sick to me." To express one's own moral view is thus synonymous with dominating and controlling others, a kind of pathology that violates other people's dignity and rights.

Even emerging adults who themselves truly believe that other people's behaviors are definitely morally wrong also believe they should keep their views to themselves. When we asked one whether morality is simply whatever people think it is, whether her own moral views are entirely relative, she said, no, she believes in right and wrong. But, she added, "I would probably think in my head that they were wrong, but I wouldn't voice my opinion, because I'm not anyone to be able to judge anyone [else]. I don't really have a say." Why shouldn't anybody judge anybody else, we asked? Why should she not have a say? "I don't know," she answered, "because I just don't think that's right. I don't think it's anyone's place to judge anyone else." In this world of moral individualism, then, anyone can hold their own convictions about morality, but they also must keep those views private. Giving voice to one's own moral views is itself nearly immoral.

Part of what we think is the problem here is driven by ambiguities in meanings of the English word "judge." When it comes to moral matters, many Americans hear the words "to judge" or "judging" in the very negative sense of condemning, castigating, disparaging, or executing. To judge in this sense is to be self-righteously superior, hypercritical, and judgmental. And that itself seems morally wrong—we think it is wrong, in fact. Some may even call to mind the command of Jesus Christ, "Do not judge lest you be judged" (Matthew 7:1). But "to judge," of course, also has other important meanings. It can mean to assess, discern, estimate, appraise, weigh, evaluate, and critique. All of that can be done with great humility, openness, reciprocity, care, and even love for the idea or person being judged. Judging in this sense need not be self-righteous, condemning, triumphalist, or destructive. But making moral judgments in this second sense seems almost inconceivable to most emerging adults today. Here we are critiquing (i.e., judging) many emerging adults' seeming aversion to morally judging anything or anybody. Our critique, however, does not refer to the first meaning of judging above—we do not advocate emerging adults becoming more condemning, castigating, and disparaging of others. However, we *do* believe that emerging adults (and other Americans) need to improve their moral "judging" in the second sense of the word—developing better skills to intelligently assess, evaluate, and critique various moral beliefs and arguments that are claimed in the world. To try to avoid being *judgmental* is good, by our judgment. But to try for morally grounded reasons to avoid all assessment, evaluation, and criticism of every moral belief and behavior is not only ironic, it is impossible and self-defeating. The good we advocate is not to never judge anything or anyone. The good, rather, is to carefully and reasonably judge (weigh, appraise,

discern, and perhaps appropriately critique) *all* things in life—but *always* with an awareness of one's own fallibility, openness to learning, care for others, and an interest in all moving closer to truth.³ The problem is that not only do we hear precious little of that happening among emerging adults, but the very categories and structures of moral reasoning that predominate among them also seem to neutralize the very possibility of that ever happening.

Nonetheless, in the mind of many emerging adults, such a tolerant approach to moral pluralism should lead to a live-and-let-live lifestyle. Consider this case, for instance. When we asked one young woman about the moral difficulties created by moral relativism, she replied, "That's a good question. Yeah, this is where I get caught up. Oh my gosh. I guess I can understand there being rules that people follow." So where, we asked, do those moral rules come from? "I don't know," she said. "I feel like a lot of the rules are made by not just yourself, but influence from other people." But then she observed that different people and countries trying to impose their moral views on others creates conflict and wars. "The West versus the Middle East, our rules and views on life are just so different, so the problem is when you judge too quickly. I definitely know a lot of people who think America is the rule setter for the rest of the world, and I don't quite agree with that. At the same time I don't agree with people in the Middle East trying to say what their rules are." So how should people who disagree work out those differences? we asked. "I guess whatever, oh my gosh, whatever works for an individual is fine with me, as long as it's not affecting me in any way," she answered. "If you wanna make decisions and I might not agree with, that's fine," she continued, "go ahead and do what you need to do. Something that a lot of people might see as wrong, I see it as their choice, [if] I don't see it as something that affects me, I don't personally have a problem with it. But if it's something that's gonna affect me, then I guess it becomes a problem. Does that kinda make sense at all?"

Yet an equally logical outcome of moral individualism turned out to be a live-and-let-*die* lifestyle. That is because another theme in the morally individualistic outlook, especially as applied to possible moral obligations of people to help each other, is a belief that, since each person is responsible to take care of themselves, no person is particularly morally responsible to help other people in need. This exchange illustrates that logic well:

- I: Do you think people have any moral responsibility or duty to help others or not?
- R: Um, if others are your family and you see someone in danger, yeah. But I don't ever stop when I see somebody on the side of the road, so I guess somewhat sometimes. Maybe if someone is burning in the car, you should try and pull them out, but, no, not really.

- I: Are there some other examples of ways we're obligated to help other people?
- R: I mean, I really don't donate money, and even if I had money I don't know if I would, so.
- I: What about helping people in general? Are we as a society obligated to do something?
- R: I really don't think there're any good reasons, nope, nothing.
- I: What if someone just wasn't interested in helping others? Would that be a problem or not?
- R: No, I don't see why that would be a problem.
- I: And why is that?
- R: Because I mean is that really our duty, to help others? Is that what we're here for? I mean, they can help [themselves], if they're just getting by, doing what they do by themselves, then do they really need anyone else? So if they don't need help from anyone else, if somebody's asking for some other people all the time then they're not giving in return.
- I: So if someone asks for help, we don't have an obligation to them?
- R: Yeah, it's up to each individual, of course.

The major first point to understand in making sense of the moral reasoning of emerging adults, then, is that most do not appeal to a moral philosophy, tradition, or ethic as an external guide by which to think and live in moral terms. Few emerging adults even seem aware that such external, coherent approaches or resources for moral reasoning exist. Instead, for most emerging adults, the world consists of so many individuals, and each individual decides for themselves what is and isn't moral and immoral. Morality is ultimately a matter of personal opinion. It is wrong to render moral judgments of the moral beliefs and behaviors of other people—unless they directly harm you. Everyone should tolerate everyone else, take care of their own business, and hopefully get along.

At the end of this chapter we will discuss in greater depth the larger meaning of these observations. For now, we simply remind readers that there are reasons why emerging adults hold these views, which help make their thinking understandable, even if it is not tenable. One is that emerging adults have observed how purportedly universal, absolutist moral claims have led to horrific destruction and violence. The attacks of September 11, 2001—which took place when this cohort of youth was 11 to 16 years old—is an archetypical case in point. These emerging adults have also heard about the Crusades, Jim Crow America, the Holocaust, Communism's destruction of more than 100 million people, the Rwandan genocide, and so on. At the same time, these emerging adults have not been taught well how to differentiate between strong moral and religious claims

that should be tolerated, if not respected, and those that deserve to be refuted, rejected, and opposed. Very few have been given the reasoning tools and skills to discern such important differences. As a result, many emerging adults simply end up trying to completely avoid making any strong moral claims themselves, as well as avoiding criticizing the moral views of others, as we will soon see. But what few of them seem to realize is that such a position makes it impossible to rationally evaluate or criticize *any* moral wrong, including the horrific destruction and violence that helped drive them to this tolerant position in the first place. That is a problem.

Moral Relativism

Does moral individualism automatically lead to moral relativism?⁴ Not necessarily—at least in the sense that not all morally individualistic emerging adults subscribe to strong moral relativism. But many do. Moral individualism does seem to have strong intellectual affinities with moral relativism. And those who avoid moral individualism seem to have more to work with intellectually in order to resist relativism, if they in fact want to resist it. But emerging adult thinking about these matters is not often rigorous or coherent. Many hold views that philosophers would say do not rationally belong together. In any case, about three out of ten (30 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed professed a belief in strong moral relativism. (In our nationally representative survey, 47 percent of American emerging adults agreed that “morals are relative, there are not definite rights and wrongs for everybody.”)

Whether this is a high or low number depends on what one is expecting and what one considers problematic (some people, for example, think moral realists are the actual problem). However one judges it, these relativist emerging adults say that there are no real standards of right and wrong, that morality changes radically across history. They told us that different cultures believe and teach very different things morally, and that morality therefore is nothing more than subjective personal opinion or cultural consensus at any given point in time. What people take to be morality, in these emerging adults' view, has no real, objective, natural, or universal basis outside of people's heads. Morality is purely a social construction.⁵

In a discussion about the moral status of slavery, for instance, one emerging adult (who seemed unaware of the fact that there are still large numbers of slaves today around the world) argued, “Who am I to judge? I mean back then, if that's what you believed [that slavery is acceptable] and that's what happened, you know that's your right, if you thought it was right at that time. I wasn't alive then, so I can't really pass judgment on it, though in today's world I would think it'd be

utterly ridiculous, like I wouldn't agree with it. But, like I said, it's society, it changes." Another emerging adult made the following claim:

I think morals are entirely made up, I don't believe in rules or law. I think things like scientific laws are only things that we notice to be true in most instances. So nothing, I don't believe that anything can ever be 100 percent true. I definitely am a power-of-the-chaos-theory, that small little variables can change everything.

So, we clarified, she actually believes in moral relativism? "Oh definitely. I think morals are just a social tool to keep us not killing each other, to keep us in line with our culture, so it can function as a unit, because if everybody had differing views on marriage, or something like that, your culture would fall apart, and you wouldn't be able to raise children in the way that you want them to be raised, or how you want your culture to raise them." True human goods thus disappear. All that is left is *the will*—how anyone *wants* things to be done their way.

When we explained to another emerging adult a simple version of moral relativism ("Some people say that there really are no final rights and wrongs in life, that everything is relative, and morality is simply what people make it for themselves or their culture, and that we can adjust our views of what is morally right and wrong to reflect those changes") and asked her what she thought about it, she said, "I think I agree with that." So, we asked, in the future might it become morally okay, for example, to steal things from others? "Yeah, I mean, you could say that." She then explained her position by defending the possible moral rightness of mass-murdering terrorists:

I don't know that people, like terrorists, what they do? It's not wrong to them. They're doing the ultimate good. They're just like, they're doing the thing that they think is the best thing they could possibly do and so they're doing good. I had this discussion with a friend recently and she's like, "But they're still murdering tons of people, that just has to be wrong." And I was like, "*But do we have any idea if it is actually wrong to murder tons of people?*" Like what does that even mean? Earthquakes murder tons of people and I'm sure some people believe that God caused the earthquakes and that means there was some purpose for them, they just will never know it. So you could say that people who are terrorists [are okay] who somehow get brainwashed or born into cultures where they're taught that it's all right and necessary and really important for them to kill a bunch of people. In the grand scheme of things that's just because like X amount of population targeted needs to disappear. I don't believe that. But I can see that that could be an argument.

The assumption here is that it is only people *believing* things to be moral and immoral that makes them moral and immoral, at least "for them." What some think of as moral facts collapse into mere subjective moral beliefs, sheer opinions—making morally objective truth claims and judgments based upon them impossible. Thus, if people *believe* something to be right, then for them it is right, simply by virtue of their belief. Absent any morally objective standard of moral evaluation, anything could be morally right, then, as long as someone believes it. Even perhaps mass-murdering terrorists. Who is anyone else to judge them? That, again, is the strong version of the professed outlook of nearly one-third of emerging adults today.

Two-thirds of emerging adults, however, were not strong moral relativists; they stopped short of that radical position. This remaining two-thirds of emerging adults wished to resist the radical implications of strong moral relativism. We might think of many of them as reluctant moral agnostics or skeptics. They were not, to be sure, firm moral realists or absolutists. Few of them, in fact, took clear moral stands that they could defend. The majority of emerging adults could not accept total moral relativism, but many of them also could not clearly explain or defend the moral claims that they wished to make or say why moral relativism is actually wrong. Some—more than one-quarter (27 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed simply waffled on these questions, as in the following case:

I think I might agree or I do agree [with relativism]. I don't like that I agree with it. I think moral relativism kind of sucks. I think there are things that are inherently right and wrong. At the same time, situations, people change, society changes, culture changes to define, you know, what's moral. There's things that change, but there will always be absolutes.

But what are absolutes and what makes them that was impossible for him to say.

Take, for another example, this case of vacillation: "I don't think anything in life is absolute," one emerging adult told us.

You can't say, you can feel that something is absolute. You can be like, man, I feel that's ridiculously wrong, you know, you have the right to choose, that's your choice. But, I don't know, absolute's such a strong word. Um, I don't know, I really don't.

What about murder? we ask. His reply: "I mean, in today's society, sure, like to murder someone is just ridiculous. I don't know, in some societies, back in time, maybe it's a good thing." He told us that he is against the death penalty, for

example, but also thinks some political assassinations may be okay. Does he feel strongly against the death penalty? we asked. He sighs and says, "I don't know." For this young man, morality is not purely relative. But he finds it hard to identify the basis of moral knowledge or judgment, other than to say that some people might "feel" that some things are "ridiculous."

Another example of an inability to stick with a firm moral claim is this emerging adult speaking on the question of friends drinking and driving. "I don't think it's fine," he said. "I mean, I probably would have tried to help a friend who was driving drunk. But like, they obviously thought it was right and I don't. I wouldn't have done the same thing." So, we asked, are they right (in driving drunk) or are you right (in opposing it)? "That's, that's definitely a subject I would, like, it's like a religion subject." Meaning, in short, that different people have different views and it's impossible to really say which is right. Oh really? we asked, somewhat incredulous. "It seems like it," he replied. More than one out of four emerging adults we interviewed thus fell into this category of those who want to resist the chasm of strong moral relativism but find themselves reluctant to take any strong moral stands.

A similar group of emerging adults who could not affirm strong moral relativism but who often found themselves standing on soft ground when judging moral issues were those who took a "situationalist" approach to morality. All of the same things could be right or wrong, these emerging adults said, depending on the particular context or circumstances. About four in ten emerging adults we interviewed (41 percent) mentioned situations as complicating moral evaluations. In our view, taking into account the facts of particular situations is relevant for making good moral judgments. But to be clear about the kind of situationalism we were addressing, we posed for them a strongly self-centered version of situation ethics, asking whether it is "okay to break moral rules if it works to your advantage and you can get away with it." Many replied with the following kinds of answers:

I guess it kind of depends on the situation. Like taking an extra vacation day, for me it's not going to hurt anyone. In my job, it's not really going to hurt anyone. Is it morally right? Probably not, no. What's a moral rule, though? A personal thing? Well then I would say that sometimes breaking a moral rule might be all right, depending on the situation.

I would think, you know, it's still wrong. You don't, it's hard to turn something down when it's turning out to your advantage, but not really sure. Like, I'm sure everyone does it occasionally. You see someone drop five dollars, it's really hard to tell them. I wouldn't agree that it's right to take it, and I think it'd really have to depend on the situation, if

I wanted to do something like that. If it was, like, a seventy-year-old lady, I'd be like, "You dropped that" and I'd hand it to her on the spot. But just some random drunk walking down the street, wasted, and he drops five dollars, you don't need to drink no more, you know? Just situations like that.

Break moral rules? I'm sorry, what do you mean by moral rules? Like, just rules made? [However *he* thinks about "moral rules," we clarified.] I would have to say in some cases, yeah, it would be okay. It just, it would really depend what those rules were. It's on a case-by-case basis.

Often, in emerging adults' answers to our questions, moral individualism, situational relativism, and firm moral commitments jumble together in confusing statements. The following discussion—which condemns killing, acknowledges situational complexity, affirms moral individualism, and verges on relativism—provides an example:

I think that there are some worldwide moral right or wrongs, like killing someone. That's wrong, whether the person deserved it or not, or whether or not it was saving someone. It's wrong to kill someone. But sometimes it needs to be done. Troops or whatever. Whatever you're talking about. But it's complicated. Because even though it may be the right thing to do, it's still wrong to do. Does that make sense? I really don't think that there's a whole lot of right or wrong answers when it comes to it, because when you ask someone else, you're going to get a totally different answer. So it really changes from person to person. I personally think that there's some worldwide right or wrongs that everybody, or at least most people should abide by.

We recognize the real difficulties this emerging adult is grappling with in working out the complexities of the kinds of issues engaged here. Yet we remain concerned that the thinking expressed not only reflects what must have been a very poor moral education and formation, but it is also unable to result in good moral decision making and a morally coherent life. And that, we think, is a form of impoverishment.

Yet another way that some emerging adults—about one in three (27 percent) of those we interviewed—resolve their reservations about strong moral relativism is to say that, while most moral beliefs are relative, a small number of moral truths are *not* relative. This approach seemed to us to reflect better sense than most others. The majority of moral claims are not universally true, these

emerging adults said, but vary by culture and across history, whereas a limited number of moral claims are always and everywhere valid. This emerging adult, for instance, distinguished between universal moral truths and more relative beliefs that require more interpretation:

There's interpretation, everyone has different takes of right and wrong. People will give a level of right and wrong and other people might give it a different level. Like, I smoke weed and there are people who think that's really wrong, and others who think that's okay, or a little bit wrong. And then there are people that are like, "Oh whatever, I do it too." [laughs] So, it's all, I don't know, in how you look at it. Yeah, there are different things that are more open to interpretation, I think. There are moral absolutes and then there are things that people take into consideration themselves and judge for themselves. I mean, you don't kill someone, you don't rape someone, you know what I mean? There are things that are set in stone that you do not do. And then there are things that are more open to interpretation, I guess.

Such a view may be more defensible than many of those expressed above, we think, as a matter of simple moral reasoning. Even so, the lean toward individualism and relativism here is worth noticing. There are perhaps extreme cases, like murder and rape, the thinking goes, in which right and wrong are definite, but beyond those few issues, morality is open to "individual interpretation." For another example, when we asked one emerging adult, a Catholic, whether some things could be wrong for some people but not others, he answered:

That's hard, because it's really a yes and a no, because with my religion I feel that it's very, it's, it has not changed. And I think that with society today, it probably should change because people are not the same that they were back, you know, who even knows when? Things do change, things progress. For example, stem cell research, it's completely against Catholicism. But I absolutely agree with it 100 percent. I'm in the medical field, and I just I think it's amazing what they can do with stem cell research. So I would say yes, things should be changed, they are relative to certain situations. Some things are and some things are not. Some things are not relative, but some things are.

How, we asked, do you know where to draw the line between changing and unchanging moral truths? "I think, wow, it's, I guess it's based person to person," he replied. "But things that dramatically, like I guess it goes back to the consequences, positive versus negative." This may be a more complex view of morality

than many emerging adults hold. But even here, this young man has not considered the problem that it is impossible to evaluate "positive versus negative consequences" apart from some real moral standard that tells what is actually good and bad. He does not realize this, but this consequentialist ethic cannot ultimately help him adjudicate between real universal moral truths and relative moral claims. In fact, few emerging adults who appeal to good or bad consequences to help settle moral issues ever seriously consider how anyone would know or judge what for different people is good and bad.

The following emerging adult provides another example of resolving the tension between moral relativism and moral universals by conceding most of morality to relativism yet protecting a limited set of moral claims as absolute:

Moral relativism is something that I struggle with a lot. I've spent a lot of time thinking about it. My sister is completely an ultimate relativist, in that [she thinks] nobody is really right or wrong. But I have such a hard time with that, thinking that, you know, is killing someone right? Can that be right in someone's culture? I would say no, there are some things that are universally right or wrong, but then it gets into such a difficult way of defining most of these, you know? That's something I really struggle with, but I would say, I don't know, I'd say for the most part, I'd be a relativist about most things about people's practices or whatever with their lives. Who am I to say that it's wrong? But I think you can cross a line at some point, with difficult things like killing people and stealing, I would say are universally wrong regardless of someone's culture.

The relativity of cultural differences and the aversion to judging any views of other people ("who am I to say?") strongly influence the reasoning here. But in the end, while she admits being a relativist about most things, this emerging adult refuses to let go of all moral truth. In the end, murder and stealing, at least, are believed to be always morally wrong.⁶ That, we think, is a step in the right direction, but not one that most emerging adults know how to defend or make consistent with their other thoughts and feelings about morality.

While a significant minority of emerging adults today, about one in three, professes to believe in strong moral relativism, we have also seen that well more than half of emerging adults seem to want to resist relativism. But they also appear to possess few moral-reasoning skills with which to do that. We have called these cases reluctant moral agnostics and skeptics. Some of this reluctant skepticism, however, results, again, from not making certain basic but important conceptual distinctions involving, for example, the ideas of morality being "absolute."⁷ The idea of an "absolute morality" is fraught with ambiguity and so is

difficult to handle. This, we think, trips up many emerging adults and sends them sprawling toward relativism. "Absolute" in a moral context could, on the one hand, mean *universally binding*, pertaining to all people at all times. But absolute can also entail a *general principle*, which applies to all kinds of relevant situations, and not only to particular cases and circumstances. Different objectively true moral claims and beliefs can entail different combinations of these different meanings of "absolute."⁸ When most emerging adults think of morality as possibly being not entirely relative—an idea that most apparently would like to affirm—they often think of morality as therefore having to be "absolute." But all emerging adults rightly know that not *every* moral claim could possibly be "absolute" in both senses of the word distinguished above. And so, because few emerging adults have had an informed adult explain to them such conceptual distinctions, they find it difficult to affirm that morality is not entirely relative. Had they been taught some differences of meaning involved in such concepts, they would be in a better position to find some more reasonable middle ground that is morally realist yet takes into account life's moral complexities. However, without those distinctions, the nonrelativist position—which, again, seems to them to entail an impossible absolutism—appears impossible to hold. Thus moral relativism proves difficult to resist, for explicable though not necessary reasons. To rephrase this very simply, when emerging adults are asked whether they believe in absolutes, they often seem to interpret the question as asking whether they believe in statements like "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not steal," or as asking whether they believe in very general moral precepts that apply universally. And they often reply that they do not believe in such simple precepts, thinking that life is far too complicated for such precepts to be anything more than rules of thumb. They therefore seem to be relativists. But they do not need to be relativists on this account. Many may be guilty merely of failing to realize that moral precepts can be universally binding yet still be very specifically tailored to particular situations, because universally binding moral precepts are "absolute" even though they can be endlessly qualified.

Once again, we also believe it would be wrong to interpret these more or less morally relativistic voices as mere self-indulgent rationalizations for emerging adults to live as (im)morally as they please. It would also be highly simplistic to conclude that emerging adults are turning an otherwise morally sound America into some kind of new Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, there are powerful institutional reasons why emerging adults think like this. And the moral reasoning of emerging adults has deep roots in American history and society. Emerging adults, for example, have been taught from their earliest days to be tolerant of others who are different, to live civilly in a pluralistic society, and to affirm the cultures of often marginal groups. Different Americans have different views about these ideas, but it is true that this kind of educational agenda has been a

response to some reprehensible historical facts, like the genocide of Native Americans, Indian wars, slavery, racial segregation, and religious discrimination in America, as well as countless other episodes of ideologically driven massacre, genocide, and war around the world. In short, these messages are well intentioned and, at least in certain ways, we think, important, valuable, and effective (emerging adults, for instance, generally harbor much less racial and ethnic prejudice and feelings of social distance than older Americans, which we consider a moral gain). Unfortunately, at least some of this tolerance-promoting, multiculturalist educational project also seems to have been based upon some shoddy moral reasoning, which it reinforces in turn. Thus emerging adults in our interviews are to some extent simply parroting to us what they have been taught by the adults who have educated them. That does not make sloppy and indefensible moral reasoning acceptable, but it does help to make it understandable.

Moral Sources

One does not have to be a radical moral individualist or relativist in order to exhibit a less than robust grasp of moral issues, weak moral reasoning, or shaky commitment to the idea of moral truth. Examining how emerging adults think about moral sources—that is, the grounds or basis for moral truths—reveals some of the uncertainty involved in their moral outlooks. Whether an emerging adult is a moral relativist or a moral realist of some variety, all emerging adults realize that something called "morality" exists in human cultures and is believed by many to have an authority independent of individual whims and desires. Again, some emerging adults view morality as objectively real, while others view morality as purely a social construction. But none deny the empirical existence of moral beliefs and claims in society. The question, then, is: What do emerging adults believe is the source of morality? Where does morality come from? What is morality's basis?

To these questions, emerging adults offered diverse answers. We wish to highlight two points about what follows. First, most of the accounts of morality's sources offered by emerging adults below are not reasonably defensible. They might make sense to some at first glance. But when analyzed, much of what follows simply does not work; it cannot hold up to basic critical scrutiny. Second, despite claiming to be strong moral individualists, as noted above, most emerging adults' accounts of the *sources* of morality turn out to be not all that individualistic. Almost all of the accounts examined below, in fact, turn out to be highly oriented to the interests, needs, or desires of *social* relations. We are not simply representing different voices here. Rather, this is another instance of emerging adult thinking being not particularly internally consistent. To some

extent, too, this seems to reflect the view that, while the basis of morality may come from different sources outside of individuals, it is only each individual who can determine which moral beliefs and claims from whatever sources are true "for them."

For starters, however, fully one in three (34 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed said that *they simply did not know what makes anything morally right or wrong*. They had no idea about the basis of morality. Tellingly, some of these stumped interviewees could not even understand our questions on this point. No matter how many different ways we posed them or tried to explain or clarify them, our very questions about morality's sources did not or could not make sense to them. They replied to our inquiries by saying things like "I just don't understand, like what do you mean?" and "I'm not really sure what you're saying." Another, when we asked him what he thinks it is that *makes* something right or wrong, simply replied, "These are just not things I think about!"

Others, as illustrated by the following exchange, seemed to understand the intent of our questions about morality's basis, but did not have any answers:

- I: What is it that you think makes something right or wrong?
 R: I'm not sure, I guess probably what it is and stuff like, I don't know.
 I: Do you think it has to do with consequences or laws or what?
 R: I don't know, I really don't know.

Still others seemed to hold some views about morality but were unable to describe or explain them, as in this exchange, which picks up with a discussion about moral relativism:

- R: I mean, I disagree. I think there are right and wrong things.
 I: Do they hold cross-culturally?
 R: Well, no, not cross-cultural. Like what may be right here may not be right in another country.
 I: So it's relative?
 R: I don't know. That is a confusing question.
 I: I know.
 R: There are thousands of cultures, it is hard. But I am not living in that culture, like here the way we are taught and stuff, I mean there are rights and wrongs, and there are definites in every culture. They may be different in every culture, but you do have definites like . . . I don't know how to describe it.

In short, this person believes in specific moral truths. But he realizes that he does so only because he was raised in a particular culture that teaches certain moral truths. So people like this have difficulty explaining the real source of genuine

morality that would apply to all human beings (and therefore why they, or anyone else, has a rational reason to disagree with moral relativism).

In contrast to that 34 percent, most emerging adults were able to offer some account of morality's source or basis. Some emerging adults, for example, professed to believe in moral right and wrong. Yet their morality does not itself have an objective reference or basis but was defined instead primarily by *what other people would think about someone*. If others would think the worse of a person for doing something, then that would be morally wrong for them to do. Positive and negative social perceptions, in other words, are morality's ultimate ground. So, for example, when we asked one emerging adult what he thought it is that makes something right or wrong, he replied, "Just, well, morals, I guess." We pressed: when he said "morals," what exactly did he mean? "Like morals as in how you want yourself to be looked at," he said, explaining:

Like if I were to beat someone up and other people would be like, "Oh man! That dude's a savage. He jacked him and he's [bad] for that" or whatever. I don't want to be looked at like that. I want to be looked at as the dude who was able to think for everybody, to be able to think what's right or wrong and stuff, to be the good guy, to be a good man, a decent man in this life. I don't want to be like everybody else. So that's really, morally how people look at you and how you want yourself to be known, to be looked at. That's what I really think of.

It is good, we think, for this young man to want to do the right thing and be thought of well by his associates. But how other people may think of someone itself cannot be the source of real morality, for a lot of reasons—such as that some other people can have a wide variety of reactions to all sorts of moral and immoral behaviors, including condemning people for doing good things (like standing up for the rights of unpopular minorities) and approving of people doing wrong things (like stealing or sexually taking advantage of someone else). Nevertheless, when asked how she decides between right and wrong, one emerging adult explained, similarly, that, "A lot of times I'll be like, 'Well, what would Luke [her cohabiting boyfriend] think if I did this?' Because he's the person I live with and I share my life with. If he's not gonna be happy with it, because it's something, a wrong, possibly a wrong decision, then that's the consequence I'll have to deal with everyday." Yet another simply said, "Morally I think about how people would look at me, and that's not that big but it's in the back of my mind." Again, while considering what other people might think about some action one might take may be a good way to help judge the right moral path, other people's views simply cannot be what makes anything morally right or wrong. Yet about four out of ten (40 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed

referred to how other people would think of them as (at least partly) defining what for them would be morally right and wrong. To the extent that emerging adults feel morally lost in their own minds, looking to the reaction of others (who they presumably trust) may provide what they consider to be mostly reliable guides to determine right from wrong.

Some emerging adults we interviewed described the basis or grounds of morality as whether or not anything *functionally improved people's situations*. If a thought, attitude, or action created a better functional situation, then it was moral, they essentially said. If it made a situation worse, then it was morally bad. This was part of the thinking of six in ten (60 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed. One, for example, explained (with a dash of individualistic relativism) that, "Wrong are the things that change things for way worse than they were before—and I kinda think again it's totally relative to the person, it depends on where you wanna go and what you wanna do." Another described the morally good in this way: "It just seems like good things are those that benefit and change for the better and help others or yourself, things that are gonna get you to a good place, some place that you should be proud of or that you're gonna wake up tomorrow and be able to tell someone about and not feel ashamed of it." For another emerging adult, who struggled to articulate his thoughts about morality, defining what is moral as situational or a functional improvement tended to marginalize the very language of "morality" and make discussing it difficult:

R: I just don't know, like, it's not like I'm ever, like, because right and wrong, I mean, there could just be, like, I guess I don't think about my decisions in terms of morality. I probably think of them in other, like, framed other ways, I don't know.

I: What other ways?

R: Like what will be more fun or what will make my friends have a better time or what will make everyone in the situation—this is something I'm always [focused on]—what will make everyone in the situation just like happy together, what will be the less, least tense situation, what will ah, um, [pause] I don't know. Yeah.

Likewise, this young man, who also took a consequentialist view of morality, had difficulty thinking about right and wrong in strongly moral terms:

I don't know if there really is a good and bad. I mean, yeah, there is. Certain things are bad, I mean inhumane, some things. But other than that, basically the world is built on corruption so bad, really it's a fine line. But right and wrong, I mean wrong? You'll go to jail for it. You'll

get killed over it. Something that's gonna affect you in a negative way. It's wrong. Don't do it. But that's about it, you know?

Because situational consequences can often turn out differently than expected, at least some of these emerging adults are not able to govern their lives with moral systems, maps, philosophies, or worldviews that can reliably tell them in advance what is right and wrong. Instead, right and wrong are only figured out after the fact, when one sees the actual consequences of living. Thus one emerging adult told us, "I don't know, I mean the only way I know [whether something is right or wrong] is if you do it and you find out that it's wrong, I don't know, if it has consequences, yeah." Another said, "Outcomes, long term outcomes. I think long term is the most important thing." Yet another agreed with these post hoc determinations of the moral status of anything:

Whatever is good or pure, it will have good repercussions, even if it's something that is hard or looks bad in the beginning. It can change, it can be like an ugly shriveled fruit, then it grows a tree kinda deal. Whereas something that is wrong usually is the opposite, it looks amazing on the outside, but it's wrong on the inside, so I think you can tell by just the repercussions of what you decided to do.

The crucial distinction that these emerging adults are missing is the difference between the *basis* or *reason* for some moral truth and the *effects* of living according to that moral truth. Right moral living should normally have certain positive, patterned effects, at least over the long run. But that does *not* make those effects per se the *reason why* those things are morally right in the first place. If they are indeed morally right, they should remain so even if they sometimes fail to have those effects. Furthermore, sometimes right moral action does *not* improve people's situations. At times, in fact, it creates major problems. Sometimes right moral action involves real costs and sacrifices—which is exactly why it can be so hard to live morally. Sometimes people doing the right thing, particularly in the context of other people doing morally wrong things—such as, for example, standing up during the civil rights movement for the civil rights of oppressed and segregated blacks living in the South—creates major social conflicts in which people die. So defining morality as that which functionally improves people's situations really does not work.

Another related but more specific basis for morality for some emerging adults is whether it *hurts other people*. For about half (53 percent) of those we interviewed, a moral violation per se is essentially defined as anything that hurts other people physically, emotionally, financially, or otherwise. "Wrong are the things that hurt people," one explained. "There are some cases where of course

it's gonna be right, it's gonna be wrong," another said, "as far as like hurting people or getting hurt or doing something that's gonna cause someone some negative effect." Still another told us, "I know what's right and wrong: if someone wants to do something destructive or something like that to someone else, I *know* it's not a good idea." And another said, "I think in a lot of ways if you aren't hurting anybody else, it's certainly more acceptable [to do the wrong thing] than if you were hurting people." Many repeated these ideas, stating that, "I would say that it [hurting someone] is immoral, it's another person's life that you're messing with, that's not yours, that's not yours," and "It's wrong to hurt people, especially if the person being hurt didn't choose it." Yet another put it this way:

The reason why something is morally wrong in my mind is that it interferes with other people's lives in incorrect ways, harms other people. I think that's the biggest thing. That's why, for example, drinking can be morally right or wrong depending on the quantity or whatever, but underage drinking and driving, it's almost always morally irresponsible because you are endangering other people's lives, you know? I mean that's where the line is really drawn, I think, it's the way it's affecting other people.

These emerging adults did not agree, however, on whether hurting oneself would also be morally bad or whether that was one's prerogative that had no moral implications. Some suggested the first position: "Oh, how it is going to affect people, you know, if it is going to hurt someone or make them feel bad. And if it isn't going to affect anyone, then it's just how it will affect you, like will it be a good or a bad thing for you, you know, morally." Similarly, another told us this:

I think right or wrong has to do with respect to others as well as yourself. Yeah, I think it comes down to respect, if you have a friend that you're talking bad about behind her back, that's disrespectful to that person. If you have a boyfriend who is cheating on you but you continue a relationship with him, that's disrespectful to yourself, so it would be wrong for you to stay with that person not treating you right. I think that's how you know what's right and wrong.

But other emerging adults who defined morality in terms of hurting people saw nothing necessarily morally relevant about hurting oneself. "Once it's affecting other people," one explained, "their thoughts and feelings have to be put into consideration, you know? But if it's only affecting yourself, the only thing you have to judge by is the way that you personally feel about it." Another shared this view:

When you're doing something wrong and it's only affecting you personally, then that's your own decision. I guess that's where I stand on drugs, is that drugs can really ruin lives and they can really mess things up. But if it's just you doing it to yourself, and it's not affecting anyone else, then that's your choice if you wanna mess yourself up like that. But if you're doing something that's affecting, that's messing up other people's lives, it's making their lives worse, I just think that's wrong. I just wouldn't wanna do something negative to impact someone else.

Another distinction made by some emerging adults who espoused the immorality-as-hurting-others approach was the difference between hurting individuals and hurting social groups. This is yet another way, we think, that strong individualism shaped their moral reasoning. For some emerging adults, not only is each individual entitled to define their own personal moral code, but it is also only the hurting of *individual persons* that could make anything morally wrong. For them it was only wrong to hurt *individuals*, and not particularly wrong to cheat or steal from an organization, such as a business. One, for instance, reported having friends who shoplift and say they don't care; he said, "I just kind of laugh and say, 'Hah, well I don't care either,' 'cause Walmart or Target or so-and-so's a big corporation, they have money. If you were stealing from me or my neighbor who doesn't have much money, then you're kind of hurting them more. Whereas, you just steal a DVD from a store, they got 10 of the DVDs, they're not gonna be really hurting." So why does *that* matter? we asked. "They have lawyers and funds that will cover them for these kind of situations," he replied. "So like, yeah, my friend tells me 'I stole a DVD,' I laugh and go, 'I don't care. That's cool.'" Then he continued to explain why, with some equivocation:

You know, it's [actually] not that cool, but it's funny, 'cause you're talking about something I don't care about. But people as individuals, I would never want to steal or hurt someone as an individual, I feel like they're more vulnerable as one person. Whereas like a corporation, like a gas station or something is not one person, even though in reality, in essence it is. It's probably like a family-owned business or whatever, eventually it'll trickle down to one person or a few CEOs or shareholders or whatever. But I think of it in terms of, if it's hurting one individual it's wrong. But if it's not hurting an individual, it's not really wrong.

Likewise, when we asked another emerging adult, in a larger discussion about morality, whether it would be wrong to get on a train or subway without paying the fare, she replied, "It wouldn't be wrong if you didn't get caught." So, we asked, you think that it's the getting caught that makes something wrong? "Yes and no,"

she answered. "It depends on the situation." Any idea what it might depend on? we pressed. "I guess, given a situation, I mean, something as simple as a train, they charge too much anyway, so it's nothing to hop a train [without paying]." At the same time, she said, lying to an individual would always be wrong, even if you did not get caught. Why? "Because you know it's wrong. I mean, you might have a guilty conscious or not, but the other person believes it's the truth. So you have deceived another person." But why is that different from riding the train without paying? Well, she relied, "you're not deceiving no one by jumping the train." In short, the railroad or municipal transportation system is not an individual, and so one cannot really do moral wrong against them.

Again, without going into much depth, we must observe that whether or not something harms people simply cannot serve as a defensible explanation for morality's source. One reason is that acting morally sometimes involves hurting other people in some ways—think of certain situations that require telling a hard truth, for instance, or of enforcing certain kinds of justice concerning the fair distribution of goods in situations when some people will get less so that others can have more. Another, more basic reason is that *even being able to know or define in the first place what hurts or helps other people* often itself requires reference to certain moral standards and understandings of what is good and bad. Is disciplining a child who lies hurting them? Is denying food or alcohol to an obese glutton or alcoholic loved one hurting them? Is a sports coach putting players through bodily pain during training and practices hurting them? Is telling Southern segregationists that they may no longer enjoy whites-only waiting rooms, bathrooms, and public pools hurting them? Emerging adults may sometimes think so. But we would say they are wrong, even if it feels like it hurts them. In many such cases, it is only knowledge of the moral good that determines what is truly hurtful and helpful to other people. So morality itself cannot be dependent on perceptions of help and hurt as the basis of its very definition.

Moving on, many emerging adults—about 12 percent of those we interviewed—espoused a view that is somewhat related to the don't-hurt-other-people view that can best be described as a "*social-contract theory*" of morality. In essence, according to this view, moral truth does not really enjoy any objective existence—nothing that could critique a belief or practice, such as slavery, that is embraced by the majority in a society. Rather, morality is simply the name of a collective social invention agreed to by people in a group or society to advance the hedonic and functional goods of those submitting to the social compact. Their mutually policing moral norms may come to be seen erroneously as objective, natural, or universal. But in reality they are merely agreements by contract—pure social constructions.

Thus, for example, to the question of whether real moral truths exist or whether morality is simply a relative social invention, one emerging adult

answered, "Well, I don't know. I think it's mostly about pragmatically needing people to get along with each other." So, we probed, are there ultimately no real moral standards? "Well, you have to draw the line somewhere or you just end up with total anarchy," he replied. "So the government creates broad parameters and then individuals do what they want within them, the government explains at the farthest outside here's what you can't do, in the form of laws, but then within that, individuals can do and think what they want to, as long as they're not too extreme. People should not be too extreme." But what this young man obviously cannot explain, given his own frame of reference, is *why* anarchy is bad, why extremes should be avoided, why individuals should be free to think and do as they want, and why, in the end, social contracts really should be binding on everyone. Pondering those kinds of more complicated questions is way beyond most emerging adults, given the few reasoning tools they have been provided. Nevertheless, some version of the social-contract view of morality is referenced by more than a few of them. Consider, for another example, this exchange:

- I: How do you normally decide or know what's good or bad or right and wrong in life? Do you even think there are things that are right or wrong?
- R: I don't know if I think in terms so much of right or wrong [but instead more] as things that you wouldn't like them if they happened to you. Well no, that's not true. You can look at something and say that is just . . . Well, it's interesting you say that. I don't think in terms of "this is wrong" so much as that's just not right. I guess there is a lot of the "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" kind of thing. It's just one of those things. You'd like for people to be nice to you, to be forthright with you, because the world is a very unpleasant place if you don't. It seems only fair, I guess.
- I: So you're willing to behave in certain ways that put demands on you in the expectation that other people should and hopefully will too, and then we'll all have a nicer life together?
- R: Pretty much.
- I: It's kind of a social-contract theory?
- R: I mean, they won't necessarily [be nice], but you can give it a try.

Note how in this exchange an originally religiously grounded moral command (the Golden Rule) is deployed within a larger contract-theory framework to make sense of moral life. People need not "do unto others" out of obedience to or love for God but rather because if everyone does that the world turns out to be a more "pleasant" place. Morality is thus reduced to a utilitarian strategy to avoid things that "you wouldn't like if they happened to you." That helps explain why this person does not even "think in terms so much of right or wrong." What appears to be morality is actually contingent social contract.

Yet, again, morality of the kind that most people have in mind cannot be defined by social contracts, for many reasons. One is that the theory never adequately states how many people in a group must agree in order to define a moral fact and whether certain kinds of contracting parties matter more than others. If a social contract requires only a majority of people or only a minority of the most powerful, then there is no reason why feeding Christians to the lions for entertainment could not be defined as morally good, or why enforcing apartheid in South Africa could not be entirely moral. Social contracts in this way do nothing to defend the morally grounded rights or dignity of minorities, those who tend to lose in the "voting." The social-contract theory of morality, in fact, has no way at all to explain anything like human dignity and rights. All it can explain are aggregations of populations' desires, tacit agreements to proceed in certain ways, and socially normative behavior that is often mistaken as carrying true moral force. On the other hand, if everyone in a society must agree to establish a social contract, then no morality will ever be defined, since never in human history has *everyone* in a society agreed to anything, particularly on normative issues that sometimes require sacrifices. These are only a few of social-contract theory's many problems in explaining morality. But enough said on that.

Yet another common response of emerging adults to the question about knowing what actually makes anything morally right or wrong was to ground morality in *laws, rules, and regulations*. This way of thinking surprised us, since adolescence and emerging adulthood are not commonly associated with a "law and order" mentality. Prior generations of youth—think of "the Sixties"—are in fact normally associated with rebellion and the questioning of authority. Yet nearly one out of four of the contemporary emerging adults we interviewed (23 percent) referenced obedience to the laws of the land as one, if not the, key way to define morality. The essential idea expressed was that if something is in the law or regulations, then it is moral, and if it is not law, then it is outside the realm of morality. One, for instance, tried to explain his approach to morality this way: "I am an American, in American society, therefore laws apply. I may not agree with them, I may even break [them] on occasion, but when I'm caught, I do pay my bills and whatnot, I pay my dues." Another talked about the morality of not hurting other people in light of the fact that "hurting people goes against the government's laws. We have certain amendments and freedoms and rights and liberties and protections in our society that you can't violate." Yet another emerging adult similarly stressed human commands as the defining feature of morality:

I: What do you think it is that *makes* something right or wrong?

R: Like if it's something your boss tells you to do, they want it done that way, that makes it what you should do.

I: So rules and regulations?

R: Yeah, I guess rules, regulations, laws.

More than a few emerging adults were in fact adamant about the importance of not breaking laws or ignoring rules, appealing to a "slippery slope" argument, like this:

I think all of the laws, you know, laws aren't really meant to be broken, laws are put in place for a reason. Some laws can be bent, but you know, I'm big on respecting the law. And rules are also put in place, they're not really meant to be broken. They're put there for a reason. Sometimes there's even stupid rules, but I think that even if you did start breaking stupid rules, it's not a good precedent to set, because then you can start breaking other rules and stuff, and then redefining what is a stupid rule.

Another argued similarly that, "if you're breaking rules, I mean, I guess rules are there to apply structure, to keep everything organized, keep the positive consequences or whatever, and if you're breaking those then that's not really fair to everybody else. Plus you're doing it to get ahead, so that's kind of selfish." Almost one out of four emerging adults today thus seem to adhere to a view of morality that is defined essentially by legal and regulatory decrees, by reference to what philosophers call "positive law," the empirical laws of legislators and regulators at any point in time. Many also express a concern with obedience to law that might make their more rebellious baby-boomer forebears, most of whom are not yet capable of turning over in their graves, at least rock harder with agitation in their La-Z-Boys.

If what is moral is defined by or grounded in empirical laws and rules, then it makes sense that many emerging adults view morality as relative—even if this view is inconsistent with moral individualism. What such a view lacks, of course, is the capacity to successfully advance a moral critique of any existing laws, rules, or regulations. If the boss says to do it a certain way, then that is apparently the right thing to do. If it is the law, then it must be moral. Such an outlook, it is worth remembering, underwrote the explanations offered after World War II by thousands of Germans and their collaborators in other countries who cooperated with the Nazis in the mass extermination of millions of human beings. Yet few emerging adults today, who define morality in terms of existing laws, rules, and regulations decreed by authority figures, seem aware of such possible dangers.⁹ For many, simply pointing to the law answers the morality questions.

A different kind of answer that some emerging adults offered to our questions about the sources of morality is that *karma maintains justice and right*. A surprising (to us) number of emerging adults we interviewed—nearly one in six (17

percent)—spontaneously referred to “karma” as a way to explain how morality works, why it’s best to act morally, and why the universe is ultimately a morally just place. In invoking karma, they meant that good attitudes and behavior will be rewarded in this life and bad people will get what they deserve too. “What goes around comes around,” they explained. “Karma’s a bitch,” another said, making the point that you can’t escape its merciless consequences. In a discussion about morality, for example, one emerging adult told us, “Mostly just Karma. I really do believe in Karma. What you give and what you do really does come back to you, whether you realize it or not. It’s just, I don’t know.” Likewise, in a discussion about the morality of returning or keeping lost or stolen goods, one young man explained what is morally wrong about people who just don’t care and keep other people’s things for themselves, in this way: “Well, then, I guess that’s [pause] on them. What goes around comes around. I would think it would be [wrong], I wouldn’t do it.” Another developed this line of thought further:

You can bend moral views a little bit here and there, but if you bend them too much, it just becomes distorted. There sometimes is a fine line that you can cross over every once in a while, and some people might look at that alright, but I personally don’t. I don’t think you should [say] it’s relative. Because everything has its own positive and negative affect. I kind of do believe in karma, I guess. What you get, what goes around, comes around. What comes around, goes around, I should say. And if you’re going to do something negative to someone else, it’s going to come back at you in another, maybe even in a harsher way.

Talking about karma like this does not mean these emerging adults have any real interest in or knowledge about Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism or believe in reincarnation. Many did not even seem aware of those possible connections. Rather, karma appears to have become for some a pop-culture way of explaining the fair operations of good and bad in the world. Karma functions as a reminder for emerging adults that they can’t get away with bad stuff. It catches up to you. It pays off in the future to do the right thing now. Bad people will get theirs. Everyone basically gets what they deserve. Karma thus helps keep some moral justice in the world. So it serves as the basis of morality in this outlook. To be sure, karma does not exactly explain the sources of morality. Rather, it sidesteps those questions as perhaps unanswerable and instead suggests that, whatever morals are actually based upon, those who obey them benefit and those who do not pay the price.

These are many, but by no means the only accounts that emerging adults give for the source or basis of morality. Most emerging adults do subscribe to one or another of the above views. But other emerging adults appeal instead to other kinds of moral sources—religious ones, for example, such as God or the Bible. In

fact, about 40 percent of the emerging adults we interviewed—a not insignificant minority—claimed that their own moral views were somehow based in God’s commands, the Bible, or other religious knowledge or sensibilities. And another 24 percent said that they did not follow a religious moral system directly, but that religion probably operated as a general ethical influence in the background of their lives. Those are significant numbers.

But we would be wrong to believe, based on these numbers, that all or most of these emerging adults understand, embrace, and live out religiously coherent moral traditions and practices. Remember that many of the categories described above are not mutually exclusive. It is thus entirely possible, and in fact often empirically the case, that sizeable chunks of these “religiously moral and ethical” emerging adults are also strong moral individualists. Some of them struggle with, and even subscribe to, some version of moral relativism.¹⁰ And more than a few operate with syncretistic outlooks that mix more traditionally religious moral elements with some of the other views noted above, including more pragmatic, functionalist, social-contract, laws-based, consequentialist, and karmic views of morality.¹¹ This is not to say that religion, God, or the Bible does not matter to any emerging adults today. For many, they do. It is merely a caution against assuming that simply because emerging adults make reference to them as moral sources, they are necessarily living lives with a high degree of religiously grounded moral knowledge, coherence, or consistency. Very many are not.¹²

Moral Compromises

The majority of emerging adults report that they believe that people ought to do what they think is the morally right thing in any situation and obey the law, and that they usually try to do that themselves—to the extent that they understand morality. That is what we expect. But significant minorities did, in fact, leave the door open for acting otherwise. In our nationally representative survey, 16 percent of American emerging adults agreed with the statement that “it is okay to break moral rules if it works to your advantage and you can get away with it.” That number increased considerably among those we personally interviewed: one in three (34 percent) of those we interviewed said that they might do certain things they considered morally wrong if they knew they could get away with it.¹³ In our interviews we explored how they thought about this. Here are the kinds of things they said. One young man, in justifying lying and cheating, claimed that the dog-eat-dog world in which he perceives he lives sometimes requires dishonesty:

I don’t think lying is wrong necessarily. It’s life. People lie. That’s my view on the whole thing. Everyone’s done it. It’s not going to go away.

People are brought up not to cheat. I think from a moral standpoint, yeah, it's wrong. But, I don't know, people cheat. That's how a lot of people have gotten ahead in life, especially in this country. It's like a cutthroat world out there. Do or die. Get it done, or move over. You know what I mean? There's no room for weak people, almost in a sense.

So how, we asked, does he personally respond to that world?

I don't agree with it, but I live in it. I will do what I can to get ahead in this world while I'm here. Society doesn't always make sense, you don't always agree with it. It's just what it is, though. And it's hard to have one person make a change to something that's much bigger than themselves.

Another shared this general outlook. When asked how he knows right from wrong, he replied, "What formula? I guess it's society, what's interpreted as right or wrong in society. You just know, like cheating, you know it's wrong. Everybody does it, whether it's with your girlfriend, or a test, or your taxes, or, you know, everything. There's so many corrupt practices going on these days, you know."

Some emerging adults claim not only that adults in society regularly lie and cheat, but report that some of those adults also explicitly teach and encourage them to do the same. Consider, for example, the following interview exchange with an emerging adult who said he would sometimes break moral rules:

- I: Okay, so what is an example of a moral rule that wouldn't be wrong to break?
- R: Cheating. If you cheat on a test. My high school football coach used to tell me that "if you ain't cheating, you're not trying."
- I: He said what?
- R: "Not cheating, not trying."
- I: So he was encouraging you to cheat?
- R: Yeah. Because he knows we probably didn't study, and it was his class he was teaching, so.
- I: Okay. So you think that's okay if you can get away with it?
- R: Yep. I mean it's bad, but if you can get away with that, use it to your advantage.

Many emerging adults, however, simply said that it is hard to make the right decisions in the middle of difficult moral situations. In response to our question about whether it is ever okay to break moral rules, one emerging adult laughed and said, "Um, let's see, I don't know if I think it's okay. I think I've done it. And I think people do what's easiest for them at that time and think it's okay, I guess." Another explained his drunk driving this way:

R: Recently I got pulled over for a DUI, so that situation was definitely wrong, and at the time I just wasn't thinking in the right mind.

I: How did you decide to do that?

R: I didn't decide, I just . . . I mean, I figured I'd done it plenty of times before and not gotten caught, so I figured I'd be able to make it away this one time.

Yet another confessed, "When I was younger I always kind of like psyched myself out of believing some of the things I did were wrong, just because it seemed fine at the time."

Others spoke about breaking moral standards more in terms of the very human experience of slipping up and making mistakes, as with this young man talking about religion and sex:

Religious beliefs affect my views about sex, because like the Bible says premarital sex is wrong. I'm not gonna say that I haven't done it before, I have, though I don't do it often at all, to tell you the honest truth. That was a problem with me and my girlfriend at a point in time, she's like "Yo, I haven't had sex with you in a month," and da-da-da, and I'm like "Yo, easy, you feel me [i.e., understand]? It's not that serious, you feel me?" Premarital sex, she knows it's wrong, because her mom is yelling at her about going to church. And, yes, yes, I agree with what religion teaches, you know what I'm saying? But of course we all gonna make mistakes and fall, of course.

Yet others took an approach that more consciously calculated costs and benefits of different courses of action:

Well, it depends what the situation is. If doing the right thing won't [help you], you know, it's easy to do the right thing as long as doing the wrong thing is not going to help you. You know what I mean? If the outcome will be the same for doing the right thing or the wrong thing, obviously you're going to do the right thing. I'm still keeping this in a competitive context. If doing the right thing is not benefiting you as much as doing the wrong thing, then that's a tough decision you have to make.

So, we clarified, ultimately moral decisions are about what would benefit him the most? "Right," he said.

Some emerging adults told us that their economic poverty forced them into violating their own moral standards. Usually these people seemed to regret their behaviors, but also felt they had no real choice. One, for instance, spoke about the tradeoff between selling marijuana and not eating:

Yeah, sure. For instance, selling drugs. Not necessarily morally unsure, you know what I'm saying? I'm saying basically that's what it is. Can't find a job, still got to eat, still got bills to pay. So I start selling weed. Okay, it's gonna get you in trouble, right. But at the same time, if you don't, you don't eat. So there's really no right or wrong line there, because you either don't eat or risk your freedom. I mean it's a choice that has to be made. [So how did you decide what to do then?] I had to eat. I had to eat. You know what I'm saying? It's a chance you got to take. It's a gamble.

Another spoke of having to steal food:

Well, there was a time where I was actually homeless, where I had my truck and stuff, but I actually had no money. I literally stole breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Now compared to if I have money and I steal something, versus where I'm actually hungry, I have no money and I need to feed myself, I view those very differently. I literally need food and have no way to provide it for myself, and no one's going to provide it for me. So I'm going to have to steal this or I'm going to go hungry.

Such hard financial conditions, according to another emerging adult, sometimes require making the "sacrifice" of breaking moral rules: "The mentality I have is, it wouldn't be hard to do what's right at all if I was in a position to do what's right, if I was [economically] stable. But since I'm not and it's still a work in progress, you know, sacrifices have to be made. I mean you have to do what it takes to get where you want to be."

To be sure, these voices do not represent the majority of emerging adults. Most emerging adults, again, profess that they believe in and normally try to do the morally right thing, as best as they can understand it. Most emerging adults do not routinely give themselves the legitimate option of selectively violating moral standards. But some do. A significant minority, in fact, does.

Happiness and Instinct

Another way to approach questions of moral behavior is to ask emerging adults how they actually would decide how to make moral choices in situations of uncertainty. In our survey, we asked emerging adults this question: "If you were unsure of what was right or wrong in a particular situation, how would you decide what to do? Would you most likely (1) do what would make you feel happy, (2) do what would help you get ahead, (3) follow the advice of a parent

or teacher or other adult you respect, or (4) do what you think God or the Scripture tells you is right?"¹⁴ Thirty-four percent of the survey respondents said they would "follow the advice of a parent or teacher," and 18 percent said they would "do what God or the scriptures" says is right. Nine percent—almost one in ten—reported that they would resolve their moral questions by doing "what would help them get ahead." The kind of thinking associated with this last answer is represented in a number of the quotes given in the previous few pages—namely, that it's a competitive world; everyone cheats, lies, and steals; that is necessary to succeed; you have to take advantage of limited opportunities; and so on.

The most frequently chosen answer to this survey question, however, was "doing what would make you feel happy." Nearly four in ten (39 percent) emerging adults we surveyed chose this answer. Slightly more of those we personally interviewed (41 percent) said the same thing when we asked the same question in interviews. Why? What did that answer mean? For some it comes back to the problem of really knowing right from wrong in the first place, which is then often resolved by falling back on moral individualism. One explained it this way:

I would do what I thought made me happy or how I felt. Because I have no other way of knowing what to do but how I internally feel. That's where my decisions come from. From *me*. My decisions come from inside of me.

Others took a quasi-utilitarian approach to moral decision making, seeking to maximize pleasure: "I guess it depends on the situation, but probably what would make me happy. Because you only have one life, might as well be happy. Every second you spend mad or upset or angry you could spend being happy and have a whole lot more fun with your life." Others gave answers suggesting a similarly egocentric orientation: "I would probably do what would make me happy, what made me happy. Because it's me in the long run." And yet others, as in this answer, talked more about the power of personal gut feelings and emotions to inform their moral choices:

Normally you're not like, "Oh, I'm gonna go commit a murder today." But then there's certain things where I'm like, "Oh, screw it, I'm going with what I think is my gut feeling." And that might not necessarily be the right thing. But if it's me fighting against my gut feelings or my emotions, that's where it gets really difficult. If it's emotional, I have a difficult time fighting that off. I usually give in.

It is important to note, however, that most emerging adults do not think about moral decision making as resulting primarily from cognitive deliberation

or actively considered judgment. Instead, most (72 percent of those we interviewed, cutting across a range of different types of answers on other questions) describe their moral knowledge and behaviors as *being based upon "instinct."*¹⁵ Most report that they *automatically* know through embodied reaction what is right and wrong in any situation. As one said, "From inside, neurons, nerves, what my body tells me." Another reported: "You can kind of just tell instinctively. You can feel if it's good or bad." "It's pretty much common sense," one told us. "You know what to do and you go with your common sense. Go with your intuition." Still another told us, "I can usually just tell right away, don't have to think about it very hard, you just know. It's hard to describe."¹⁶

Different emerging adults described this "instinctual" moral knowledge and response in different ways. Some spoke in simple physiological terms. When asked about where her sense of right and wrong come from, for example, one reported, "I don't know. Probably like our adrenaline. Like, I get, my stomach starts hurting. My heart starts beating. And all physiological things start happening. So that's where I get it from, mostly." Others spoke in more vague subjectivist terms that they think might be related to religion: "I guess that's just an internal feeling—whether it's, some people would say it's God or just a spiritual thing or your conscience, those are all really the same thing when you think about it, all kind of the same general thing in just different ways of saying it." Yet others spoke about morality as if it were hardwired in human genetics: "We all have a good, like a core, a core belief. We all have like a set of right and wrongs that's like in the strands of our DNA. That's how we know that killing each other is wrong, or hurting others or cheating or lying are wrong, not because it's in the Ten Commandments, but because it hurts people, or because it hurts you, and because it has negative repercussions." Many emerging adults agreed that morality is somehow "innate" to human nature, claiming:

I think everybody has a sense of right and wrong, unless you are clinically insane or chemically imbalanced. It's common sense for most people what's really [moral]. There is a lot of gray in between, but on the far end of each spectrum you know what's absolutely wrong and right. I think it is just kind of innate for any person with a healthy mind.

Therefore, when someone acts morally, does the right thing, they will naturally feel a kind of internal serenity:

In my heart, I could feel it. You could feel what's right or wrong in your heart as well as your mind. And most of the time, I always feel it in my heart and it makes it easier for me to morally decide what's right and wrong. Because if I feel about doing something, I'm going to feel it in

my heart and if it feels good, then I'm going to do it. But if it doesn't feel good, I'm going to know, because then I'm going to be nervous and tensed and it's not going to feel good, not going to feel right. So it's like I got that feeling, as well as the mental.

Likewise, when someone does the morally wrong thing, they will instinctively feel badly about it in body and mind:

I guess it's just kind of an emptiness, an unhappiness, and a dissatisfaction with life, and then thinking, "Wow, this isn't what I wanted with my life, I'm not happy." For sure, like I feel, like I pretty much know, when it's wrong and if I decide to do it, I'll feel bad about it, and it's kind of like an ache, like, "ergh." But in the end [when you do the right thing] it's a lot better than feeling bad about it, and you know it's one less time that you gave in to the enemy, that you gave in to, you know, your human nature, so, it's a victory even if it's small.

Some emerging adults spoke about this instinctive moral knowledge as their "conscience," which they often said had a firm grip on their lives. "You just listen to your conscience," one said. "Your conscience will tell you where the boundary is—well, a normal person's conscience will tell them where the boundary is. People aren't exactly stupid. They can figure it out." Another reported: "I think for me, personally, if I do something wrong and I know it's wrong and I don't rectify it my conscience, I have a conscience that will get at me and it'll stay at me for a while until I rectify it." Another explained, "I guess my conscience. Like, if I feel like I'm gonna do something that I'm constantly gonna keep thinking about and possibly have regrets about it, then I won't do it. I don't wanna live my life with any regrets, so I try not to do anything that I think I'll have regrets about in the future." For some, having a conscience internally meant external social controls and punishments should not have to matter in making moral choices:

It doesn't matter if you get caught or not. You should have the conscience to say that it's not okay, regardless of whether somebody else saw you do it or not. At the end of the day you did it, so I mean just because you can run a red light doesn't mean you should just because there's no cops around. I don't agree with that at all. I don't like that kind of outlook.

But for some, even belief in the power of conscience cannot overcome the relativity involved in moral individualism, since what anyone's conscience makes

them feel bad about is probably relative to what they think is right and wrong in the first place, as this emerging adult explains:

I think your conscience will get you. Your conscience will tell you that you shouldn't have done it. But I guess different, it goes back to different people have different standards. If they can, so they think it's right. [So some people might do something other people think is wrong and not have any conscience, any guilt, because it's not wrong to them?] Uh-huh. Yeah.

The point is well taken. Consciences usually only work as well as they have been morally formed. People generally do not feel bad about doing things they genuinely believe are not wrong. So the existence of people's consciences per se does not guarantee the living of genuinely moral lives.

Some emerging adults are also aware that their instinctive moral reactions have little or no rational justification behind them, or at least that they themselves have not figured out the legitimate reasons for their moral instincts. To them, morality seems merely to be society's operant conditioning of behaviors. One, for example, explained:

It's like I'm conditioned to immediately say, "Well, that's wrong," but when I actually think about it I'm like, "Well, why is it wrong?" It's honestly something I've never really been able to figure out, because really we are conditioned to think a lot of things like society tells you to think like this, and you do. And there are certain things that most people don't really deviate from too much, just because everybody thinks the same way. And I don't really know where it came from. I don't really know why we see this as right or wrong. It just is. My brain just automatically screams, "No, stealing is wrong, even if it doesn't hurt anybody, that's wrong, you can't do that." It's just, I don't know, when I actually think about it, I don't really know why. I honestly don't really have much of an answer for that.

Some other emerging adults, as with this case, explain human morality as nothing more than the social expression of natural human survival instincts:

If you and I were on a deserted island somewhere, the morals would be different, because there is no guidelines in the way if we were born there. On this desert island, we actually would be different, because we would do what we have to do to survive. You know, when it comes down to it, the only real "morals" are [merely survival] instincts. I don't

think we have [what most people take to be] morals in our instincts. I think it's more that we have instincts that tell us to do what's best for the survival of ourselves and our species. Like our instincts would not tell us to just kill other humans for the hell of it, you know, because it doesn't make sense biologically, you're killing off the species.

Such a morally reductionist view does not necessarily mean that emerging adults who hold this outlook feel entitled to transcend or violate society's moral codes, however, simply because they believe they have "unmasked" them as being only about functional survival. Thus, the same emerging adult continued with this explanation:

I mean all that stuff is like, the way I see it is like we have these rules and these guidelines because this is how you were grown up in. I feel like we're not growing up on a deserted island, we are here, we do live in this community, we have grown up a certain way. That's the way that we were raised and the way we're going to believe. So basically I don't think it's the intrinsic part of our nature, but it doesn't mean it's not important.

Society's moral orders, in other words, may fool people into thinking that morality really does have an objective ontological status with real directive force, when in fact that is simply a misrecognition of what are merely survival instincts. However, given the controlling power of society, even realizing that does not matter. There is no way to eradicate the power of instincts that give rise to moral sensibilities and no way to escape the society that inculcates moral norms. So everyone in the end has to live with the morality taught by their particular society.

This section's observations about morality being known "instinctively" are curious. In very many ways, emerging adults today express many of the difficulties that beset modern and postmodern moral philosophy—skepticism, relativism, subjectivism, and the interminability of debates due to the inability of any one school or approach to decisively win the arguments. That is not surprising. However, that the vast majority also believes that moral knowledge can be instinctively known is surprising, in at least one sense, which is that—despite all the individualism and social constructionism that is evident in so much emerging adult moral reasoning—on this point most emerging adults seem to be giving voice to something like the very premodern notion of a *natural law*.¹⁷ Very few know about this theory, and not many more would likely subscribe to it if they did. Yet the way many emerging adults speak about moral knowledge as being instinctive, automatic, prerational, embodied, common sense, and perhaps even genetically rooted suggests a possible connection to the premodern idea that the universe inherently contains moral truths that all but the most morally deformed people

cannot fail to know. Such a natural law may exist, according to different theories, simply because that is the way reality is, as some ancient Greek philosophers believed, or because a creator God purposefully designed it that way to reflect his goodness and character, as various theistic traditions have taught. Of course, "moral instincts" can be explained in other ways, including as the result of evolutionary natural selection. Still, we find it interesting that so many emerging adults insist upon an experience of moral knowledge that seems to hew so closely to a traditional natural-law theory, even when they know nothing about it theoretically and are otherwise so very modern and postmodern. Could it be that many emerging adults today are, along with all of their other assumptions and views, also nascent, unschooled, crypto believers in a natural law? If so, the incongruity of it would not be impossible, given the lack of coherence in much else they had to say.

Moral Dilemmas

Yet another way to gain some perspective on the moral reasoning of emerging adults is to engage them on the question of moral dilemmas. A moral dilemma is a complex situation that involves a conflict between moral imperatives, such that choosing one would violate the other. Psychologists, philosophers, ethicists, and other scholars interested in moral life and reasoning often use moral dilemmas to help sort out how people process difficult moral issues. In our interviews, we also raised questions about moral dilemmas. We asked emerging adults to tell us about any experiences they have had facing moral dilemmas recently and how they went about resolving them. In the context of a larger discussion about moral rights and wrongs, goods and bads, we asked this question: "Can you tell me about a specific situation you've been in recently where you were unsure of what was right and wrong?"¹⁸ Their answers were revealing.

First, one-third of the emerging adults who we interviewed (33 percent) simply could not think of any moral dilemmas or difficult situations that they had personally confronted in recent years. They replied, simply, "I really don't know, 'cause I've never had to make a decision about what's right and what's wrong," and "Nothing really is coming to mind. I haven't had too many really huge moral dilemmas that I've had to navigate through in my lifetime, I don't think. Nothing is coming to mind right now." Others said, "Not really when it comes down to like moral fiber," and "Not really, unsure. Being logical as I am, I have most of it down to a logical right or wrong things. I don't know." After a long pause to think, another answered our question this way:

I'm trying to think about some time when I decided not to steal something. I mean, not that I decide to steal things very much. [laughs] But I'm

trying, that's the kind of default thing my mind goes to. Hmm. [pause] Not really. I think the reason why I can't is because, up until a couple weeks ago, I'd only been basically faced with, my immediate task has been to read this stuff, learn this stuff [in high school]. I haven't really been out in the world. I don't know, I can't think of anything that has happened recently where I've really been torn up about it. I'm totally blank on that one.

What this absence of moral dilemmas may mean more broadly we discuss below.

Second, nearly one in three (29 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed offered what they thought were examples of moral dilemmas that they had faced. But these in fact turned out to be not moral dilemmas having to do with right and wrong, but rather some other kind of practical decision they had had to make. These situations or problems they described to us actually had little or nothing to do with moral conflicts. Some of them concerned simple household decisions, such as whether to buy a second cat litter box:

Well, I guess just today, this cat I'd gotten recently, it started to develop an area of wanting to use as a litter place that's not the litter box. I've been cleaning it up and trying to use that spray stuff to get away the smell of where she's gone, but she seems to keep going there. So I kind of already had the idea in my head that I did go to my mom to confirm if she thinks this is probably the best idea. I'm thinking of getting a second litter box to give her. So the best way to phrase that is, I guess, I made the decision but confirmed it with my mom.

Note: the "moral dilemma" here was not, say, whether to take the cat to a shelter or euthanize it, but simply what to do about it urinating in the wrong place. Other kinds of examples offered merely concerned whether the emerging adult should make a particular consumer decision:

Well, I guess, renting the apartment thing, whether or not I would be able to afford it. So I just sat down and write down pros and cons, and work out the budget and see if it was doable. [So was there anything about moving that concerned the *morally* right thing to do, or was it just about finances?] It was just figuring out the finances.

Others' stories concerning money had to do with risk taking that might involve fines:

Like "Should I park here?" you know, for 20 minutes when I only have enough change for 15, you know, should I risk getting that parking

ticket? [laughs] Choices like that. [So how did you decide what to do?] [laughing] It's usually what costs less money, say, as a college student that guides my choices, you know. I try to be more healthy when it comes to choices about like that, I guess.

Still other examples offered had to do with self-acceptance and the nerve to dress up among peers:

I mean mostly with me, it's being myself and being comfortable with who I am. Like today, this is a true story, you know, dressing, putting on dress shoes and khakis and being comfortable going to class in a tie. You know what I'm saying? I feel like in my heart a man should dress for the job he wants. That's what they say, right? A man should dress for the job that he wants. I want to be in the public eye, I feel like I should dress the part. So that's the way I feel, so an issue or a challenge for me is not worrying about what others think of that. Because not everybody my age feels like it's important to wear a tie.

Yet other examples of pseudo moral dilemmas *could* have been real moral dilemmas if the issue was engaged differently, but it was clear that the emerging adults really only had in mind things like technical cost-benefit analyses. Consider, for instance, this case about drilling for oil:

Oh yeah, I've got a good one for you: offshore drilling. I mean it's not an individual situation but a lot of conversations I have, you know, friends whose parents are senators and congressmen and that sort of stuff, so we talk about that kind of thing and I think there are just situations when you don't know what's right or wrong. The cost-benefit analysis that has to be done and that sort of thing, so.

Finally, some faux moral dilemmas simply have to do with trying to break bad habits, like driving badly:

Pulling out in front of somebody when I was driving and I probably shouldn't have, but I did anyway. If I make myself nervous I'm gonna get in a car accident. I've done that once and I never want to do it again. Just kinda like fast or jerky, or if people make me mad I just get stressed and go around them really fast. And I shouldn't drive like that. I know it and I do it anyways. One of these days I'll get pulled over for speeding, I'm sure. My insurance is already really high so I shouldn't speed, but I do it anyways.

These cases make it clear that many emerging adults do not have a good handle on what makes something a *moral* issue or what the specifically *moral* dimensions of such situations are. The idea of distinctively moral goods and bads, rights and wrongs, is not engaged. What comes to the fore instead are straightforwardly practical, utilitarian, financial, and psychological dilemmas.

So, including (1) those emerging adults who could not think of any moral dilemma that they had faced, (2) those who offered examples that were in fact not moral dilemmas, and (3) those (not discussed here) who simply declined to answer the question (about 3 percent), two-thirds of the emerging adults we interviewed (about 66 percent) proved simply unable to engage our questions about moral dilemmas in their lives.

The remaining one-third of emerging adults we interviewed did manage to tell us about genuine moral dilemmas they had faced recently in their lives, specific situations in which they were unsure of what was morally right and wrong to do. Of that one-third, about 35 percent described moral dilemmas they had faced concerning personal relationships (many of which had to do with whether or not to break up with a romantic partner), about 25 percent described dilemmas that involved alcohol or drugs (such as whether to drink and drive), and 20 percent described facing moral dilemmas in workplace situations (such as dealing with inappropriate or harassing behavior by colleagues). Another 10 percent described moral dilemmas concerning abortion, adoption, or other child-related decisions. And the remaining 10 percent described moral dilemmas involving choices about future schooling or work, which seemed to involve genuine moral issues. Some of their examples of moral dilemmas were somewhat trivial. Others were truly profound, difficult, and troubling. For the purposes of this chapter, it is not necessary to spell out specific examples of these moral dilemmas; the reader can imagine them. Our primary point here is that only a minority of emerging adults—about one-third—can, in the context of a three-hour interview including a long section discussing morality, speak meaningfully about any struggles, conflicts, or dilemmas they have faced in their moral experiences and decision making. The rest either think they do not face any moral conflicts or uncertainties, think that they do when in fact they really do not, or do not understand what “moral” means.

Some Reflections

Our presentation of emerging adult voices on the topic of morality is, we admit, not perfectly balanced, in the sense that not every perspective and argument was given its exactly proportional weight or space in this chapter's exposition. We have highlighted a number of what we think are significant dominant and

minority voices of particular interest. And we have backgrounded some of the more conventional viewpoints. We could have quoted more emerging adults saying that there is a moral right and wrong, that people should be good, that God gives commandments, that the Bible tells them how to live, and so on. They certainly exist and are part of the larger story. But we do not think that quoting them at length would have added much insight or value to our analysis. In mainstream American culture, those views are fairly standard, representing the default—what's expected. Many Americans may not actually believe them, but they still represent the inherited, conventional, predictable, baseline positions. So reciting them here would contribute little. Instead we have focused on what we think are more interesting and important themes expressed by different types of emerging adults. And we have provided estimates of the proportion of emerging adults that express those themes, in order to help place their numbers in a larger context.

What we have found, in short, is that moral individualism is widespread among emerging adults and that a sizeable minority professes to believe in moral relativism. We also found that emerging adults resort to a variety of explanations about what makes anything good or bad, wrong or right—many of which reflect weak thinking and provide a fragile basis upon which to build robust moral positions of thought and living. We learned that a substantial minority of emerging adults admitted that, for various reasons, they do violate or would consider violating their own moral standards and those of society if it worked to their advantage and they thought they could get away with it. We found that the majority of emerging adults say that they do not or would not refer to moral traditions or authorities or religious or philosophical ethics to make difficult moral decisions, but rather would decide by what would personally make them happy or would help them to get ahead in life. Finally, we discovered that the vast majority of emerging adults could not engage in a discussion about real moral dilemmas, but either could not think of any dilemma they had recently faced or misunderstood what a moral dilemma is.

So what does all of this tell us? First, we think the widespread moral individualism and solid minority presence of moral relativism among emerging adults today tell us that the adult world that has socialized these youth for 18 to 23 years has done an awful job when it comes to moral education and formation. Moral individualism and relativism are simply intellectually impossible and socially unsustainable positions. Any college sophomore philosophy major should be able to handily deconstruct them both. Yet the majority of American youth have entered emerging adulthood committed to moral individualism. And a substantial minority of them have done the same with moral relativism. On these two elementary points, these emerging adults are simply lost. They are morally at sea in boats that leak water badly. That is not an acceptable situation.

But if these emerging adults are lost, it is because the larger culture and society into which they are being inducted is also lost. The forces of social reproduction here are powerful. That so many emerging adults today are adrift in their moral thinking (though not necessarily in how they live, we think) tells us that the adult world into which they are emerging is also adrift. The families, schools, religious communities, sports teams, and other voluntary organizations of civil society are failing to provide many young people with the kind of moral education and training needed for them even to realize, for example, that moral individualism and relativism make no sense, that they cannot be reasonably defended or sustained, that some alternative views must be necessary if we are to be at all reasonable when it comes to moral concerns. Colleges and universities appear to be playing a part in this failure as well.¹⁹ There are many explanations for this situation that deserve to be better understood. But for the moment our point is simply this: the adult world of American culture and society is failing very many of its youth when it comes to moral matters. We are letting them down, sending many, and probably most, of them out into the world without the basic intellectual tools and basic personal formation needed to think and express even the most elementary of reasonably defensible moral thoughts and claims. And that itself, we think, is morally wrong.

Consider one example of this kind of intellectual failing. Central to many of the confusions in emerging adult moral reasoning is the inability to distinguish between objectively *real* moral truths or facts and people's human *perceptions* or *understandings* of those moral truths or facts. The error of not distinguishing these two things is this: the *realities* themselves are confused with, and therefore dependent upon, people's *cognitive grasp* of them. What *actually* exists is conflated into what is *believed* to exist. But those are different things that must be kept separate. For example, the moral truth that human slavery is a categorical moral evil stands true whether or not people understand and believe it. Many people before the nineteenth century did not believe this, but that itself did not make slavery morally right. When people do not believe moral truths, we rightly say that they are wrong. Slavery is a moral evil. The truth status of that fact does not depend on people's subjective recognition or assimilation of it, any more than the existence of germs or the Grand Canyon depends on people knowing about it. Whatever people know or believe, it is true that germs and the Grand Canyon exist and slavery is evil. As Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it."²⁰ What most needs to happen, then, is for people to conform their minds and lives to the reality of those truths. In short, moral realism is the only position that makes sense.

Yet most emerging adults do not understand that. Some cannot even begin to grasp the distinction made here. They think that people believing something to be morally true is *what makes it* morally true. They assume that if some

cultures believe different things about morality, then there is not a moral truth at all. These mentalities naturally lead to moral skepticism, subjectivism, relativism, and, ultimately, nihilism. Are we surprised then that these are precisely the directions in which we see many emerging adults today actually heading? Among the many problems here is that few of them have thought very far through the intellectual impossibilities and practical consequences of their approaches. Why? Not because emerging adults are dumb. It is rather because many representatives of the adult world who are responsible for socializing youth have in the previous two decades not asked them to do that or shown them how. And why not? Because, we suspect, a lot of them do not know how to do that themselves. In which case, we should be thankful that—since behavior often lags behind the implications of thought—many people act more morally than they are able to justify.

Much of this is institutionally located. Good and bad ideas do not float about in the air. They are the products of particular institutional practices. To modify an observation by Karl Marx, the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling institutions.²¹ Take public schools, for one example. Schools are one of the most powerful socializing institutions of youth in American society today, along with families and the mass media. Public schools are the dominant institution among all school types. Before we interviewed our respondents as emerging adults, we had previously interviewed them twice, when they were still teenagers, some of them when they were as young as 13 years old. So we know a great deal about their lives before they entered emerging adulthood. One big theme that stuck out in our previous interviews was the fact that the schools, especially public schools, that our younger respondents attended studiously avoided talking about potentially controversial moral issues. Over and over again, these teenagers we interviewed reported that their teachers always sidestepped and evaded questions and problems that might generate disagreement or conflict in the classroom. "No, my teachers avoid controversies like that like the plague," they would typically say. "Anytime anything that might make trouble or hurt someone's feelings come up, they say we aren't going there," others confirmed. "Nope, we can't talk about religion or them hot-button moral issues in school, 'cause they don't want to open up that can of worms" was a typical report. In short, it appears that most schools, especially public schools, are not teaching students how to constructively engage moral issues about which people disagree. Quite the contrary, schools are teaching students that the best way to deal with difficult moral problems and questions is to ignore them. The moral pedagogy of most middle and high schools clearly seems to be: *avoid, ignore, and pretend the issues will go away*. Needless to say, that is naive and impossible. It actually resembles highly dysfunctional families that have sets of issues that nobody is allowed to bring up or discuss and that are instead carefully tiptoed around.

All of this is sociologically intelligible. Middle schools and high schools usually have some degree of cultural diversity among their students. These days, especially, teachers and school administrators mostly feel pressure to get their students to perform well on standardized tests. They also more generally want to minimize any sort of trouble or conflict in school, to have their work go smoothly. Given the mass nature of education and limited resources, simply maintaining order becomes the number one goal. Many teachers and principals have enough difficulty simply contending with basic forms of misbehavior and academic underperformance. So the idea of purposefully and directly engaging students for good educational reasons, in moral issues over which people disagree seems like asking for trouble. Red flags fly up all over the place. Teachers, many of whom perhaps are not sure themselves how to think well about moral problems, envision out-of-control arguments in the classroom and students' feelings getting hurt. Principals foresee angry parents and lawsuits. At which point the discussion is shut down. And so the opportunity to provide a basic education in moral reasoning is treated like the Black Death. Cutbacks in American higher education in programs in the humanities in favor of increased investments in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics may contribute to this tendency as well.

To be clear, we do not think that American public schools should be in the business of promoting one particular *substantive* moral position on specific moral issues. Private schools may do that, but not public schools. But *all* schools certainly should be promoting the particular position that *it is good to learn how to think clearly and coherently about important issues, including moral issues*. That is what education is all about. Schools do not need to teach *what* in particular students should believe on every moral matter. But they certainly could, and, we think, should, teach *how* to reason well when it comes to moral problems.²² Every school could teach how to identify rival presuppositions, how to civilly question and critique differing positions without creating explosive conflict, and how to eliminate certain arguments for their lack of intellectual merit. Why cannot schools be places that model how to have a good, constructive argument? Why can't teachers show that we need not be afraid of all disagreement, that it is possible for people who differ about matters they care about to talk things out and perhaps move forward together? This may be asking a lot. But if centers of education cannot do this, then what hope do we have for sustaining our larger pluralistic society? Knowing how to think well in the most basic ways, including about morality, is as important for our nation and society, we believe, as learning algebra and having a football team. We have to be able to rise to the occasion—or else live with the consequences of the kind of moral outlooks seen in this chapter.

But it is not just schools. Another factor is that, with the advent of globalization, the Internet, digital video, and cable and satellite television, this cohort of

young people has exponentially more information, narratives, and political, ideological, and moral claims at its fingertips than any generation before. This mass of information, stories, and claims is also less filtered and evaluated by institutional gatekeepers—book editors and news executives, people who might guarantee some level of accuracy, significance, and value—than it ever was in the past. Therefore, the most important and reliable information, stories, and claims instantaneously flash onto the same screens along with the most bogus, irrelevant, and misleading ones. In short, most emerging adults today are inundated with more competing information, narratives, and truth claims than any person could possibly assimilate, assess, and synthesize. And along with this flood of information comes a plethora of morally relevant beliefs, claims, and arguments. Making good sense of it all can be very difficult, if not impossible—especially when adult institutions, like families, schools, and congregations, are not providing youth with the kind of critical reasoning skills needed to do that well. So an overwhelmed incoherence often prevails and emerging adults retreat to the kind of seemingly safe moral positions that we have observed in this chapter.

Moving on next to the accounts offered by emerging adults about the source or basis of morality, again we find little reason for encouragement. One-third said they simply didn't know what made anything right or wrong, good or bad. Others offered ideas—that moral action is determined by what other people will think of the actor, for example, or by whether it improves circumstances functionally—that make little sense. Others espouse views, such as positive laws and rules defining morality, that at least seem to possess some level of consistency but in the end reduce morality to sheer power and will, without apparently realizing it. Similarly, the social-contract theory of morality that some emerging adults propounded descends from a long line of serious thinkers (although these thinkers have usually sought to explain the basis of civil society and political life, not morality), but it also proves unable to sustain a thick notion of what morality is or to explain why people finally should act morally when that involves personal cost. Furthermore, while not hurting other individuals is certainly an important part of most moral traditions, it is not really possible to ground morality *per se* in a "no hurt" rule. For one thing, as noted above, in many cases the definition of "hurt" itself depends on some substantive morality. What is or should be hurtful or not often depends significantly on what one thinks is ultimately truly good or bad in life. Finally, whether or not karma is real and operates as advertised, in the end referencing karma does not answer the question of morality's source; it only says that, wherever morality comes from, some kind of moral justice will prevail in the end. These critiques and the others mentioned above obviously only just begin to touch on a few of the problems involved in emerging adults' accounts of the sources or origins of moral truths. That will have to do for present purposes. The point, at bottom, is this: a large proportion

of emerging adults today are lost, confused, or misled in their thinking about what makes anything morally good or bad—and yet they are generally not aware that this is so.

Furthermore, that sizeable numbers of emerging adults feel free to engage in moral compromises and violations under the right circumstances does not shock us. We are moral realists in more ways than one. We think that fact is neither new to the world nor the end of the world. However, we also do not believe that the moral orders and experiences of societies remain constant throughout history. Things can definitely get morally better and worse. And the difference between better and worse can matter profoundly for the potential flourishing of human life in those societies. Therefore, we think it is worth examining that one in three emerging adults admit being prepared to violate the moral right or good if it helped them and they could get away with it. We do not think it likely that such attitudes are unrelated to other aspects of their problematic moral reasoning noted above, including moral individualism, relativism, confusion about moral sources, and so on. We also have similar reactions to our finding that seeking their own happiness and getting ahead in life constitute the primary means for the majority of emerging adults for deciding moral issues in contexts of uncertainty. Our view of human beings did not lead us to think it would be dramatically otherwise. But that itself does not mean that happiness and getting ahead represent good primary moral decision-making criteria that serve either emerging adults or our culture and society well.

Finally, we think the widespread inability to address the question of moral dilemmas indicates an anemic view of what even counts in emerging adult life as moral or as concerning morality. We know from the rest of the interviews that most emerging adults in fact face all kinds of real moral challenges, conflicts, temptations, difficulties, dilemmas, and sometimes tragedies in their lives. Some of the remaining chapters in this book make that clear. It is not the case that emerging adults today do not have to grapple with serious moral dilemmas. We know that. But it also seems that very many emerging adults hold views of moral right and wrong, good and bad, that make many of the truly moral features of different life experiences invisible. Stated differently, most emerging adults today seem to live in morally very thin or spotty worlds. Most of what goes on around them seems to appear to them as amoral or extramoral—as mostly concerning basic issues of functional costs and benefits, psychological impacts, and utilitarian calculations. Morality, for many emerging adults, mostly concerns extreme things, like murder, rape, and bank robbery. For many, driving drunk, doing drugs, cheating on a partner, cheating in school, stealing, and having abortions also qualify as moral issues. But most of the rest of life seems not to have many moral implications or challenges involved. Much of life seems to them to be a neutral zone, in which moral goods and bads are absent or irrelevant.²³

It is this learned blindness to the moral dimensions of much of human life that enables many emerging adults to say with straight faces, as one interviewee did, "I don't really deal with right and wrong that often." Rather than seeing so much of human personal, interpersonal, and social life as infused with significant moral meanings and implications, as it most definitely is, many emerging adults segregate "moral" matters off to the side, as part of a narrowly defined set of issues or problems, like driving drunk, stealing, and murdering. And that produces a moral myopia that in turn undermines the ability for robust moral reasoning.

In such a world, doing drugs, for example, becomes a matter of individual moral "interpretation," which in the end boils down to one's personal opinion. Completely removed from moral consideration, in that case, are the many real moral ramifications of doing drugs in the present war-on-drugs world. Emerging adult drug users do not consider as a moral issue, for example, the massive bloodshed that the drug trade causes in other parts of the world, such as Mexico, among those involved in illegally supplying drugs to meet the immense U.S. demand for them. They do not think morally about how their drugs are implicated in the promotion of gangs and gangster warfare that kills thousands in the United States and beyond. They do not weigh the moral implications of the hundreds of thousands of American men and women—often emerging adults themselves—who sit in prison for narcotics convictions, peers who have risked incarceration to make a small share of some of the money that they spend on their drugs. Drug-using emerging adults do not consider the tax dollars spent combating the illicit drug industry that might otherwise be used for much better purposes. All of that is invisible. Rather, whether to use drugs is either defined as not a moral issue at all or is narrowed down to things like whether drugs will be bad for one's health and future relationships and job prospects. This is what we mean by the learned blindness to morality.

Complicating this picture, very many emerging adults (like most other Americans, as we know from other interviews of other research projects) are somewhat schizophrenic when it comes to morality. On the one hand, most emerging adults know that nearly everyone breaks rules, that the world is full of questionable people, and that even they themselves are far from perfect. They know that they sometimes do the wrong thing. In this "inclusively immoral" world, it is not really a problem to think, do, say, and advocate the morally wrong things, however, because "everyone is like that." Nobody is any worse than anyone else.

On the other hand, many if not most emerging adults tend to define what is wrong or immoral as *extreme* cases—"murderers, rapists, and bank robbers" being an almost archetypical representation of what or who is immoral. This has the agreeable effect of defining most emerging adults as not immoral, as never doing anything of questionable morality. This "exclusively immoral" world effectively "others" those who do moral wrong as being very far away, very much

unlike the ordinary people that most emerging adults view themselves to be. When those who are not moral are only terrible people, then one is automatically exempt from being not moral, since not many view themselves as terrible. One therefore clearly belongs to the category of moral. Emerging adults (again, like the rest of adult Americans) tend to keep both of these understandings of morality in play at the same time. As a consequence, they are normally able at any given time to acknowledge all of the moral problems and failures in their lives, yet without having to feel too bad about them or to think of themselves as nonmoral people. That too affects their moral reasoning.

Having defined moral problems away to the far extreme, as having to do with "murderers, rapists, and bank robbers," emerging adults can then afford to be rather blasé about the necessary moral underpinnings of any functioning society—including even a liberal society. That the social order that emerging adults enjoy works as well as it does can simply be taken for granted. That schools, banks, corporations, and the rest function as well as they seem to is simply assumed to be normal. Functional order and social prosperity are taken to be the natural default, not valuable accomplishments that take real collective human effort. The idea that a democracy or a republic or any humane society requires that its citizens continually invest in the common good, or even actively contribute to institutional functionality, by sustaining and practicing moral virtues, such as acts of care and goodness, that go beyond simple procedural justice, is either inconceivable or else sounds laughably old-fashioned. Consider, for instance, the reflections of this emerging adult in our discussion about the value or purpose of morality: "I would like to have an answer like, 'For society to function.' But I don't necessarily think that's true." In her mind, society functioning is a given, a natural fact, to be assumed without asking much morally of its citizens. This is for her in part because nobody in her experience actually seems particularly immoral or destructive: "I don't feel like I personally know any mean or evil people. I have never met anybody that I've watched do something just out of spite and evilness." We are glad this is true for her. But she has obviously not studied much history or read much in the newspaper. So, we probed, the threat of social disorder doesn't really seem real to her? "It doesn't really. Sometimes the world is a scary place, but I think there are enough sane people to hold it together," she answered. The question of morality is thus transformed from a thick one about goodness, right will, and wise choices, to a thin one about sanity and reason. In short, morality as it has been perennially defined in human history and experience can simply be set aside, and all will surely be well with the world.

One thing in all of this that we think emerging adults need to realize is that moral relativism and complete tolerance for every other point of view actually do not respect or honor those points of views; quite the opposite. People often think that they are showing consideration for different beliefs when they say

"whatever." But what they are really, if unintentionally, saying is, "I don't care enough about what you think or believe to pay it any attention. Your view doesn't make any difference, it doesn't deserve to be taken seriously." To really respect and honor someone's point of view requires taking it seriously enough to actually learn about and consider it, question it, and perhaps challenge it if it seems problematic. Sometimes opposing what seems to be a bad idea is the greatest respect one can show it. By contrast, as Wendell Berry points out:

If I merely tolerate my neighbors on the assumption that all of us are equal, that means I can take no interest in the question of which ones of us are right and which ones are wrong; it means that I am denying the community the use of my intelligence and judgment; it means I am not prepared to defer to those whose abilities are superior to mine, or to help those whose condition is worse; it means I can be as self-centered as I please.²⁴

That understanding turns the tables on the standard assumptions of many Americans today. We think that undermining this widespread pseudo respect for different ideas and beliefs in the form of passive tolerance of them is a key part of strengthening the moral imaginations of emerging adults today.

To repeat what we said in the introduction, whether or not the situation we have described in this chapter is any better or worse than it was among young adults in previous generations is not our interest. Our concern is the state of things among emerging adults today and what it means for the future. Even if it could be shown that young adults of past generations were less morally thoughtful and coherent than those today—which we highly doubt—the fact is that the world we live in itself has become much more complicated, pluralistic, and arguably morally challenging than it was before. And that ups the ante when it comes to dealing well with moral issues. To take the simple position that "things have always been bad" is entirely unhelpful. Comparisons to the past may be interesting, but they do little to help us address the difficulties of today and tomorrow. What matters now is how well equipped we are to address the challenges of the present and the future. On that matter, when it comes to moral reasoning among emerging adults, we do not find the evidence reassuring.

To be clear, again, we are not suggesting that all or most emerging adults are moral reprobates. Some of what some of them say makes real sense. Some of what others say in fact seems to be trying to give expression to real moral difficulties and challenges in the world. A few emerging adults are quite clear-headed and impressively articulate. And many others in fact live decent, and sometimes morally very impressive, lives. Our central point does not have to do with moral degeneracy. Our main point concerns moral education and training. American

emerging adults are a people deprived, a generation that has been failed, when it comes to moral formation. They have had withheld from them something that every person deserves to have a chance to learn: how to think, speak, and act well on matters of good and bad, right and wrong. Therefore, in Charles Taylor's words, with which we opened this chapter, "We have to fight uphill to rediscover the obvious, to counteract the layers of suppression of modern moral consciousness."²⁵ It is not that emerging adults are a morally corrupt lot (although some of them are). The problem is more that many of them are simply lost. They do not adequately know the moral landscape of the real world that they inhabit. And they do not adequately understand where they themselves stand in that real moral world. They need some better moral maps and better-equipped guides to show them the way around. The question is, do those maps and guides exist, and can they be put into use?