Unspoken Standards of Excellence Essay Assignment

Read the attached pages of Cunningham’s book, paying particular attention to what he says about the unspoken “standards of excellence” which drive the ethical behavior of communities.

Then spend some time thinking about your community of friends. Think about the stories they tell. Think about what they do together for enjoyment. Think about what drives them to try hard or laugh heartily.

What does life-lived-well mean for your community of peers? What are their unspoken standards of excellence?

Think, then, about your own values. Think about what you believe is a life-lived-well. What would you like to add, if you could, to your community’s standards of excellence? What would you most like to correct in their unspoken “list” of what makes a life well lived?

3 pages, double-spaced. Use several quotes from Cunningham to help you make your point.
Identifying who(se) we are

What’s God got to do with it?

At the end of the last chapter, we observed that *communities* create the spaces within which character is formed. When people gather in community, they participate in common practices and rehearse the narratives that undergird their life together and propel it forward. This is true not just for communities that are designated as religious, but for all the various formations in which human beings gather together: families, extended families, schools, civic groups, clubs, interest groups, and crowds that gather to watch sporting events, to listen to concerts, or to take part in any kind of public spectacle. The stories that we tell and retell, the common practices in which we engage, and all the other ways that we adjust our lives in order to be together—all these events work together to form us certain habits of mind and body that shape our character. This in turn makes certain kinds of decisions and judgments appear to be the natural or obvious ones; our communities lead us to take certain kinds of things for granted, thereby shaping our character.

**Powerful communities**

My account thus far may make it sound as though these communities wield an enormous amount of power over our lives—and in fact, they do. To use a visual metaphor, we might say something like this: the communities of which we are a part don’t merely tell us where to look and what to look for; they actually shape the lenses through which we see the world, such that wherever is “out there” will be processed, by our optic nerves, according to the patterns that the community has come to expect. This explains why most communities, to whatever extent they recognize that they are forming people in particular habits, will typically assume or argue that these are the *right* habits for a person of good character. No community claims, other than in a tongue-in-cheek fashion or with a deep sense of irony, that its purpose is to perpetuate its members in bad habits. A group says, to its own members or to others, that it seeks to carry out a process of negative formation such that the end-result will be a worse life rather than a better one. Every group believes that it is creating people of good character—assuming, of course, that it even acknowledges that it is having any moral effect on them whatsover.

As this last comment suggests, many communities assume that any effect that they might have on their members will be morally neutral. This point of view would be commonly taken, for example, by those gathering for something like a sporting event or a fireworks display. The purpose of the gathering (so the argument goes) is just to relax and have fun; it’s not meant to shape people in ethically significant ways. But the study of ethics reminds us that such gatherings always have some kind of morally formative effects—and this is even more fully the case when the group gathers repeatedly, re-enacting a common set of narratives and engaging in a common set of practices. And because most communities often don’t take much note of their own narratives and practices, they can often be unaware of the degree to which these habits form people—even if they do so in ways that turn out, on further reflection, to be morally troublesome.

All this can be a bit disconcerting. It seems to grant the gathering community an inordinate degree of power over people’s lives and, further, to insulate the community and its members from any kind of external critique. But even this way of putting the concern exposes a flaw in any such analysis: it makes it look as though we have a choice as to whether to allow the various gathering communities (of which we are part) to form us in morally significant ways. It’s not actually a choice; if we spend enough time with a particular group of people, taking part in their common practices and living by the stories that they tell, we will become like them. This is not a prescriptive claim (for example, that we ought to do so, or that we ought not to); it is, rather, a descriptive one (that’s just what happens, whether we want it to or not). We will be known by, *and we will become*, the company that we keep.

**Evading the role of community**

This analysis helps to explain why people in the modern age, particularly in democratic societies, have been so easily persuaded to adopt a model of ethics as applying only to those difficult decisions about hard cases. This approach
allows us to imagine that we can set aside the sticky business of our moral formation within our gathering communities, suggesting instead that all people of good will can make right judgments about any particular ethical quandary. If we could just convince ourselves of this idea, then we could imagine that we become good people by making the right decisions in individual cases—and that we could do so regardless of the communities to which we belong or the habits that we develop as we gather in those communities.

Keeping our "ethical behavior" separate from our "community-formed habits" thus allows us to be modern, democratic people—choosing our communities on the basis of pleasure and interest, rather than thinking about how they might be forming or deforming our moral sensibilities. If I like auto racing, I ought to be able to go with my friends to see auto racing; I don’t want someone telling me that doing so will shape my moral character such that I won’t be able to make a good ethical decision when the time comes. In fact, I don’t even want to hear the opposite argument, by do-gooders of one sort or another, that my appreciation of auto racing will somehow make me a better person. I want my moral qualities—as well as all those ethical decisions that I make—to be independent of my hobbies and my interests and the people with whom I spend my time. And if this represents a common thought-pattern among most of us, then it also explains the attraction of "lifeboat ethics" as a way of thinking about moral judgments—since that approach allows us to minimize the morally formative character of our gathering communities, concentrating instead on an abstract decision that is isolated from the actual events of our lives.

Moreover, as long as we understand ethics as focused on making hard choices about difficult situations, we will imagine that we can formulate universal rules and principles that can always be applied in those situations. These rules and principles, in order to remain truly universal, would have to be independent of the various communities of which we’re a part and of the specific moral formation that we’ve received as members of those communities. One of the seductive features of this approach to ethics (as I suggested in the introduction) is that it gives us the impression that we’re standing on firm, unshifting ground: solid, definitive rules and principles, universal and unchanging, and therefore not dependent on the people with whom we associate, the stories that we live by, or the practices in which we are engaged. While standing on such firm, unshifting ground, a person faced with an ethical decision could operate independently of all these particularities, needing only to apply the right rules in a given situation. As I have repeatedly observed, we don’t actually make decisions this way; but we certainly do like the idea of having solid ground under our feet. To suggest that the gathering community sets the standards by which we render these judgments—well, that begins to make it sound as though we’re just making it up as we go along.

But in fact, we’re not. Great many of our narratives and practices are widely shared, and are deeply a part of a long-standing, continuous way of thinking and acting. Narratives tend to endure over the generations; practices have standards of excellence and are sustained across time. Many of these ways of thinking and acting are so deeply ingrained in us that, in most cases, we don’t even have to think about what we’re doing; that’s part of what gives the appearance of firmness and solidarity with respect to those moral principles; often, we just don’t have any reason to question them. Hence, the idea that certain moral assumptions are shaped by the communities of which we are a part does not necessarily mean that everything is “up for grabs.” We share enough assumptions with most other human beings that we can feel comfortable with the specific claims of the communities of which we are a part.

Admittedly, many people feel a great deal of anxiety if they sense that moral norms may lack a fixed and permanent quality. We will examine this anxiety in detail when we consider the notion of “moral relativism” in chapter 10. For the moment, our topic is somewhat narrower: we need to focus on the fact that, even though we draw much of our moral formation from our gathering communities, we need not imagine that such formation is arbitrary or that its specific assumptions are unwarranted. Part of what allows formative communities to endure over time is their ability to form people of good character—and to have that goodness recognized and appreciated even by those who are not part of the community itself.

Learning to play the game

An example may help. Think about a sport that you might want to be able to play, but with which you are largely unfamiliar. Think about fast-pitch softball, or cricket, or curling. (Depending on which part of the world you live in, one or more of these is likely to be largely unfamiliar to you.) Now, imagine that you’d like to play this game. Note well: not that you’d like to be able to watch the game and understand it, or that you’d like merely to talk with people about it, but that you’d like to play it. How would you go about achieving this goal?

One option would be to read the official rulebook of the game, from cover to cover. This might be a marginally successful (if incredibly boring) approach to the problem, but I doubt that many people would choose it voluntarily. Even if one had a taste for that kind of thing, the rules wouldn’t tell you how to play the game well; in fact, most of the rules are limitations of one sort or another, telling you what you must do and what you cannot do while playing.
the game. (The rulebooks for a game or sport have some of the same disadvantages, in this sense, that we discovered when examining the use of rules and law in discussions about ethics.)

Another option would be to pick up some books and magazines about the sport, and to read as much as one can about it. This might help a bit, but a great deal of the material is written for an audience that already understands the game quite well, and thus would address a great many issues that won’t help a beginner learn to play. We might be better off focusing our reading on a “how-to” book of some description, a sort of instructional guide. But because these sports are physically-involved activities, a guidebook has limited usefulness; at the very least, you will have to set the book down in order actually to pick up the ball, the broom, or the bat, and to try your hand at the activity. Moreover, each of these is a team sport, which means that you will need other people around to fulfill the various roles that are required for everything to happen as it should.

This is why most people learn about these games by participating in them. We usually do this passively at first—watching the game in order to develop a sense of what is supposed to happen, and (if we’re lucky) having an experienced spectator or player close by, so that we can ask questions and start to understand some of the nuances of the game. We get together with friends to try out a few of the game’s more elementary features—pitching (or bowling) and batting (or sweeping). An experienced player, or eventually a coach, helps us improve our technique at certain aspects of the game—again, not by sending us to the rule-book or to Sports Illustrated, but usually by taking the game’s equipment in hand and going through the motions: “not like this; like this.” As we learn how to position our bodies and to train our minds in ways that allow us to play the game, certain questions arise that have not arisen before; and this takes us back into the theoretical side of things, in which we might read about (or more likely, ask someone about) how to handle a specific situation or what strategies to employ under particular conditions. We won’t all get the same advice, nor will we all go through the same training practices; and yet, we will all learn how to play the game. And most of the time, it won’t even cross our minds to worry that everyone who tells us something about the game might just be making it up as they go along.

When we’re learning a new sport, we make use of knowledge, theory, and practice; these elements all inform one another, without any expectation that there will be one single, definitive training program to provide the perfect “solid foundation” for our participation. The same is true in life: when we’re learning to act rightly, we don’t just read the rulebook (even if we could get everyone to agree on one such book); we watch others, ask questions, take a turn trying it out, ask more questions, read the advice of some experts, ask someone to show us how, and then ask more questions. There just isn’t any other way.

The key, in sports as in life, is to surround ourselves with the right people: to meet regularly with those who are good at the game, so that we can model our own practices on those that are known to work. And the only way to know who “the right people” are is to look at how they play the game. Those who play it well are those whom a person would seek out, in order to learn how to play. This process may sound circular, and perhaps it is; but it represents the give-and-take, trial-and-error, theory-and-practice approach that we almost always have to take when we allow ourselves to be formed in particular habits.

And so we return, as in chapter 1, to the gathering community: those who come together on a regular basis and, in the process, form one another in good habits for living well. Early in life, we don’t have much choice about the communities within which we gather: our parents, extended family, schools, and neighborhoods provide obvious limitations (though with more and more electronic communication at our fingertips, our reach is wider all the time—even at a very young age). As we grow older, we make these choices for ourselves: where to go to university, which student groups to join, with whom to gather on the weekends, and how to interact with others in person and online. Eventually, most people join the workforce; the choices are then about jobs, socializing, and where to live. Or perhaps even these options are not open to us because of constraints imposed by our circumstances (immigration status, single parenthood, socio-economic class, racial stereotypes, inadequate health care). In any case, when we connect with a particular community, this does not result solely from an evaluation of the character of the people with whom we will be associating. We choose a profession because we feel called to it; we choose a club because its activities interest us, or a neighborhood because we like the house and the price is right; we join a support group—or a gang—because there seems to be no other choice. Whether we’re conscious of it or not, the communities with which we affiliate ourselves will significantly affect our ethical framework in the long run, because they will put us in contact with the kinds of people that we will, over time, become.

Giving the community its due

If the foregoing analysis is even partially correct, this means that we probably should be paying more attention to the morally formative character of our communities than we tend to do. As I noted in the previous chapter, we typically gather on the basis of common interests or because we enjoy a particular
activity—we don’t usually undertake a moral evaluation of those with whom we’re gathering (at least not explicitly). But if we realize that the company that we keep will have a strongly formative influence on us, it would behoove us to think about its character.

Identifying who we are

The first step in this process is to examine how a given community identifies itself. It might be helpful to think of this as a series of concentric circles, in which each successive identifier further narrows the field. So, for example, a group of eight women who gather every Thursday morning to play eighteen holes of golf might identify themselves as “people who like golf,” then further as “people who like golf and who are able to spend Thursday mornings on the course,” and then as “Thursday-morning golfers who play at a certain skill level, neither beginners nor professionals”; then further as “Thursday-morning amateur golfers who enjoy conversation about politics, health insurance plans, and dentistry.” (They all happen to be dentists, so that’s what they talk about—but they don’t think of “being a dentist” as a rule for membership in the group.)

The interesting thing about the description that I’ve just offered is that, of course, very few groups of Thursday-morning golfers would ever provide an explanation of themselves that sounded anything like this. In fact, under most circumstances, they probably wouldn’t describe themselves at all; they wouldn’t be asked to do so by some curious passerby, nor even by the writer of an ethics textbook. Nevertheless, they would do things that indicate who they are. By their very actions—particularly when gathered as a group—they would signify their identity.

Some of the ways that they would do this are obvious: they would play golf, they would do it regularly on Thursday mornings, and they would talk about politics, health insurance, and dentistry. By engaging in these practices, they would be signifying their identity as people who do these kinds of things. Anyone who observed their behavior, even for a brief period of time (say, by walking along with them for three or four holes of golf) would be able to give a fairly detailed description of what held them together as a group—even if the observer had never previously met any of them.

How is the common identity of these eight golfers related to the rest of their lives, beyond those Thursday morning gatherings? At first glance, the relationship might seem rather tenuous; one might imagine that those Thursday mornings existed in isolation from the rest of their lives, and that the golf games weren’t much affected by the rest of the week’s activities. But in spite of the blocks of time that are laid out in a grid in our Day-Runners and Blackberries, our weekly activities don’t really exist in isolation from one another. Our lives tend to be fairly integrated, in spite of all the forces that work to break them down into small components. We anticipate future events and remember past events; we carry our joys and sorrows, our hopes and anxieties, from one activity to the next (even when the two events are largely unrelated). If one of our golfers spends the rest of the week worrying about her daughter’s recent eating habits, that anxiety won’t necessarily evaporate when she comes to play golf on Thursday morning. If another member of the group got into an argument with one of her fellow golfers during last Thursday’s game, that may well gnaw at her all week long. Communities are morally formative, and they help us identify who we are; but these identities are not limited to those occasions when the community is present in an immediate way. By their very nature, our identities “stick” to us as we move into other communities of which we are a part.

Gathered communities have a great many other ways of helping us identify who we are. Some use a certain form of words every time they gather; for example, someone might read out a common statement of purpose, or the members may engage in some kind of well-practiced dialogue. If we hear someone say, “Hello, my name is John; I’m an alcoholic,” and everyone in the room responds, “Hi, John,” then we know that we are at a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous: the dialogue itself is one possible description of the group’s identity. We identify ourselves by how we dress (think of fans at a sporting event), by our physical posture (think of the crowd at a rock concert—or at a symphony), and by how we greet and treat one another.

Identifying whose we are

When we gather as a community, in addition to identifying who we are, we also identify whose we are. We make a statement about where we really belong—our “true homeland”—and to whom we owe our allegiance or fidelity. Compared with the process of identifying who we are, this process of identifying whose we are is typically more subtle, and the reason for this is obvious: even though we’re gathering with a particular community, we all bring to the gathering other allegiances, other bonds of fidelity and care, that we don’t necessarily hold in common. Two men enjoy each others’ company at the Rotary Club, but their daughters play basketball at two different high schools—so when their teams meet, they won’t be sitting on the same side of the arena. Two people care for each other deeply at their weekly support group meeting, but they have diametrically opposing political views and so, except at their meeting, they can’t seem to have a conversation without getting into a fight.

In any given community, we usually find a fair bit of agreement and
comfort around the question of “who we are,” but we often find significant
tension when the question shifts just slightly to whose we are. Let’s return to
our Thursday-morning golfers: three of the women are single, and they’d like
to spend a little less of the morning golfing and a bit more time socializing
with other groups in the clubhouse, with an eye to possible romantic involve-
ments. But the other five women are married, and whether or not they have
any interest in this activity (let’s be kind enough not to ask them about that),
most of them suspect that engaging in it publicly wouldn’t be a very good
idea. The various members of this group are of one mind in identifying who
they are, but they have different assessments of whose they are: their alle-
giances and commitments outside the group are focused in different direc-
tions, and (at least in this case) they might want to give those commitments
priority over accommodating the preferences of the group.

In fact, when we begin to think about all the varying allegiances that we
bring to any communal activity, it’s a wonder we can get together at all. In
any given gathered community, the various members of the group would
probably all have a different answer to the questions “To whom do we
belong?” and “To whom do we owe our greatest allegiance?” And while
most communities hope that the community itself will be fairly high on every-
one’s priority list, they also recognize that—again, in a modern democratic
society in which free association is a given—most people will bring a variety
of commitments to any gathering of which they are a part.

Consequently, most groups don’t tend to put too many restrictions on their
members, at least with respect to any commitments that don’t seem essential
to the group. The golfers don’t require everyone in the group to be a dentist,
or single, or married; the Rotarians don’t require that everyone cheer for the
same school team; the support group doesn’t require conformity to a partic-
ular political platform. Admittedly, if such requirements existed, this might
strengthen the cohesion of the community; but these same requirements
would also limit its range. Many members would be placed in a situation
where they had to negotiate among conflicting allegiances, and in some cases
the community’s priorities might not carry the day. We often try to avoid such
circumstances by narrowing a group’s focus of activity: we make it clear that
“we’re just here to cheer for the team” (or listen to the band, or support one
another in our fight against an addiction); we may carry other commitments
to and from our gatherings, but we don’t let these interfere with everyone
else’s opportunity to engage in our common practices.

All this is well and good, and we have sufficiently narrowed the focus of
most of our communities that we’re able to avoid most of the potentially con-
flicting allegiances. But what happens when one particular allegiance claims
to take over all the rest?

Enter God, stage right

In a course in Christian ethics that I recently taught, just as my class was taking
up this chapter’s topic, a banner headline appeared on the front page of the
widely circulating daily newspaper USA Today. The headline read “View of
God can predict values, politics.” The article reported on a study by research-
ers at Baylor University, who had undertaken a careful examination of polit-
ical and moral attitudes among a wide range of test subjects. The researchers
also included questions that allowed the interviewees to talk about how they
understood God.

The study’s theological vocabulary was not very sophisticated; under-
standings of God were classified into the four broad categories of authori-
tarian, benevolent, critical, or distant. Most students of theology know that
these four categories do not come close to exhausting the descriptive lan-
guage about God; neither are they mutually exclusive. (Even as a matter of
emphasis, it would be problematic to label God as, say, “more benevolent
than authoritarian,” or to use any other description that placed these cat-
egories in tension with one another.) Be that as it may, this broad formula
allowed the researchers to demonstrate a high degree of continuity between
a person’s political and moral judgments, on the one hand, and, on the other,
that same person’s understanding of God.

A long, ongoing conversation

What is most surprising about this study, however, is that it could possibly
qualify as news. Throughout most of the history of human thought, com-
mentators have been nearly unanimous in their view that a human being’s
understanding of God, or of “the gods,” will be one of the most profound
and accurate indicators of the shape of that person’s life. The ancient Greek
poets and tragedians—Homer, Sophocles, Euripides—clearly believed this;
they interwove their stories of heroes and villains with stories of the gods,
whose actions and attitudes sometimes affected, and nearly always reflected,
the actions and attitudes of the human characters. The later Greek philos-
ophers had less use for the traditional pantheons of gods and goddesses, but
they still used those figures in their stories and examples; they also wrote
about a being, sometimes called “God,” who created the world and who
ultimately causes things to be and to act. Jewish tradition clearly states that
human behavior, particularly within communities and tribes, is guided (and
to some extent prescribed) by God’s good judgment. Jesus of Nazareth taught
his followers both to enter into a particular kind of relationship with God,
and to adopt a certain way of life that was compatible with that relationship.
The early Christian communities took up this same claim, often putting the two features of the new faith side by side: because God has a certain character, so should they; and since God has done particular things for them, so they felt called to act in certain ways. Islam even made the word “obedience” the very name of its faith: living and acting rightly is, by definition, a willingness to be obedient to God’s commands.

Only in the modern age do dissenting voices begin to arise. This is the era in which human beings first suggested that a detailed plan for a way of life could be constructed without reference to God. In the ancient world, the word “atheism” referred only to a belief in a different god or gods from those that held sway in the culture as a whole; no one imagined the possibility of complete disbelief in any god. Beginning in the seventeenth century, however, this assumption began to change; people began to imagine what various human enterprises would be like if God were not a part of the picture. In the case of ethics, some thinkers began to believe that moral judgments might be made dependent on human reason alone, without ethical conversations being complicated by various groups invoking their particular understandings of God.

A number of structures have helped to strengthen the credibility of this way of seeing things. Our political system encourages it; in a democratic society, the very basis for a common culture would begin to erode if each religious group’s understanding of right action were based on a framework specific to its particular theology. Therefore, citizens are encouraged to keep their religious views private, whereas public debate is supposed to take place without reference to specific convictions about God (or even about the relationship between God and human beings). Even churches have contributed to this situation; just like the other groups that were mentioned in the previous section, churches in the contemporary setting rarely want to limit their numbers by imposing too many requirements about their members’ allegiances.

But while this strategy may work as a means of keeping a golfing group together, it cannot work, in the long run, for any group that expects to have a more significantly formative influence on the moral assumptions of its members. This is because any assessment of moral character will require some notion of what counts for “good,” and this in turn is always related to how a particular community understands God, or the gods (or whatever it treats like God or the gods). Faith—whether faith in God or in something else—has sometimes been defined as “ultimate concern”; in other words, when we speak of “what we believe” in the strongest sense of that word, we are designating whatever is most important to us, what concerns us in an ultimate way and therefore takes priority over everything else. That which we believe in most ultimately might best be described as God. In other words, a person’s “god” is—by definition—whatever ranks highest in that person’s list of allegiances. Even those who do not believe in God will have certain strong allegiances, and will therefore have certain things that function as “god” in their lives; and this in turn will always have a very significant impact in shaping their character and their judgments. This will be the case even if we set aside, either temporarily or permanently, all claims about belief in a being called “God.”

Another factor that leads us to blur the distinction between belief in God, on the one hand, and belief in something else that is treated as God, on the other, is the attempt among some religious believers (including some Christians) to make God accessible, relevant, and timely. These efforts are understandable, particularly when many people have indicated that they are not interested in a God who is primarily characterized as distant or irrelevant. Paradoxically, however, when God is envisioned as more accessible and relevant, it becomes harder to tell the difference between God and anything else that we might hold in high esteem. If, for example, God is described with popular adjectives of praise (“cool,” “awesome,” “a great guy,” and so forth), this may make God seem less distant; but if the same epithets that are used to describe God are also used to describe everything else—from that “cool” sociology professor, to the “great guy” who lives down the hall, to the “awesome” dessert last night at the cafeteria, then it becomes more difficult to understand what makes God different from anything else that we hold in high regard. God becomes just another one of the gods.

What are our “gods,” in modern culture? To what do we give our highest allegiance? What do we believe in most firmly? I want to suggest that for many people—including many Christians—what functions as “god” in their life is not actually God, a supreme supernatural being. Instead, the candidates for the role of our gods include many things other than the being that they name “God” (regardless of whether or not they actually believe in that God). For example, many people put their trust in the nation-state and its government, or in money and the economic system, or in a set of creatures comforts that make life tolerable. These are some of the answers that we use to answer the question “to whom or to what do we belong?”; these are some of our strongest allegiances; these are, in fact, our gods.

If we begin to think of our gods in this light, we will soon realize that all discussions of ethics must take into account the discipline of theology—the study of God (or the gods) and the things related to God. We often speak of theological ethics as though it were a particular subset of a larger field called ethics, alongside non-theological or secular or philosophical ethics. But to the extent that we all have certain allegiances that we prioritize over others, we all can be said to have gods; and to that extent, we all operate with theologies—implicitly, at least, if not explicitly. These theologies shape
our character and our judgments; thus it is no exaggeration to claim that all forms of ethics are, at least implicitly, theological ethics, in which our judgments about God (or our gods) definitively shape our character, our habits, our judgments, and our actions.

The significance of God in ethics

This throws a slightly different light on the perennial question of whether one can be "good without God." This question has at least two meanings, and the resulting conversations are often somewhat confusing because the two meanings tend to slide into one another. One interpretation of the question is whether an ethical life is possible without a conception of God as traditionally defined in monotheistic faiths such as Judaism and Christianity. Clearly, the answer to this question is very likely to be "yes"; most people can cite examples of atheists or agnostics who have lived according to certain moral principles and whose lives are routinely recognized, even by religious believers, as "good." However, a second interpretation of the question "Can a person be good without God?" concerns whether it is possible to avoid theological questions altogether when exploring the field of ethics. Here, we would have to give a different answer: in order to speak of good behavior, we have to develop some notion of the good; and this requires us to be clear about who or what receives our highest priorities and our commitments of allegiance. A belief in "the good" turns out to work in ways that are similar to a belief in God. Thus when the field of ethics is explored by someone who does not explicitly believe in God, that person may choose to omit all reference to God; but to the extent that the concept of "the good" has a sovereign, god-like function in that person's discourse, theological questions will never be entirely excluded from the discussion.

Another way of examining this question is to consider the role of worship. This concept plays an important role, not only in those gathering communities that identify themselves as "religious" and that focus their allegiance on God, but also in many communities that do not identify themselves in such terms, but which expect members to offer their full allegiance to some other being or person or idea. If we can recognize the degree to which many communities operate with certain implicit practices of worship, we may be able to understand the degree to which they also operate with certain implicit understandings of God or the gods.

When human beings gather, for whatever purpose, they often share or develop a common sense of what is most worthy of love, respect, and honor. When people gather to watch their team play in a sporting event, they share a common focus on the team and they hope for its victory. When they gather for social action—say a group of students gathering to protest a new policy at their college or university—they share a common desire to see the policy overturned. Whenever we gather, we are encouraged and sometimes inspired to focus our love and devotion on a certain person, process, or outcome.

The question we must ask is this: when does this love and devotion, which plays some role in almost all human gatherings, become worship? We often associate the word "worship" with religious institutions such as synagogues, churches, or mosques, and we assume that the word only applies when the love and devotion in question is directed toward God. But it is certainly possible, and often happens, that people who gather in communities that do not understand themselves as "religious" can nevertheless find themselves offer the full measure of their love and devotion toward a particular object or person or idea. When attending a rock concert, one can enjoy the music and the spectacle; but one can also devote oneself to the superstar on the stage in ways that are not obviously different from worship. At a football game, we're focused on the team; we cheer them on and hope for a victory. But we may also raise up the team and the victory to such a degree that it eclipses all other concerns; and again, at this point, the line between appreciation and worship becomes very difficult to discern. (In fact, the level of devotion exhibited by some football fans toward their team far outstrips that which is exhibited by some Christians toward God!) In any gathering community, those who offer complete devotion to a particular being or idea might best be described as engaged in an expression of worship.

This last point is important because, although this book is focused on Christian ethics, we shouldn't imagine that its observations apply only within the specifically Christian context. The formation that occurs within the Christian community is different in content, but not necessarily in structure or intensity, from the formation that occurs in other kinds of gatherings. So although we will eventually turn to very specific discussions of the content of the Christian faith, other approaches to ethics must still grapple with the observations in these early chapters—about the nature of ethics as focused on character, and about the role of the gathered community in forming our character through narratives and practices.

This raises some questions as to whether there can be any such thing as ethics in a general sense, as opposed to ethics that are specific to particular gathering communities—whether they are religious communities in the traditional sense (Christian ethics, Jewish ethics), or communities that are identified with a particular profession or career (medical ethics, business ethics), or communities that identify something else as their highest good (creation ethics, humanist ethics). Because of the essential role of the gathering community in the definition, identification, and formation of character, "ethics"
in the sense that we have been developing it here must always be associated with the particular allegiances that inhere in specific communities.

Hence, Christian ethics examines the understanding of good character as defined by those gathering communities that understand themselves to be Christian, and it has the strongest hold on those who identify their primary allegiances as aligned with the members of those communities. This does not mean that one needs to be a Christian in order to study Christian ethics; one need only recognize the importance of Christian communities for the identification of what counts as good character for the members of those communities. We will come to understand Christian ethics when we understand the formation of character that these communities seek to carry out; this will require us to have a close look at the stories that they live by and the practices in which they are engaged.

God in Christian ethics

Given the foregoing discussion, it will be fairly obvious that the Christian understanding of God will play a significant role in Christian ethics. We might say that Christian ethics differs from other forms of ethics, not in the sense that God has a role to play (this is in some sense true, as we have suggested, for all forms of ethics), but rather in the particularities of the Christian understanding of God and of God’s relationship to the world. Christians identify both *who* they are and *whose* they are by aligning themselves with a very specific account of God.

In order to see how this takes place, we can consider the beginning of a typical Christian worship service. Often the very first words spoken will include some kind of reference to the God in whose name Christians gather. This may come in the form of a greeting, echoed the greetings offered in the New Testament epistles that were written to the early Christian communities: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Alternatively, it may be a call to engage in an act of worship: “Come, let us worship the Lord our God.” Or, it may simply be a statement that what is to take place in this gathering is to be done in God’s name: “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.” What do such statements mean?

A detailed analysis would require us to delve deeper into the field of Christian theology than is warranted at this point in our discussion. The first statement, for example, would necessitate an analysis of the person of Christ, who is considered fully human and fully divine; we will return to this point in chapter 8. The second statement would demand at least a basic articulation of one of the most complex Christian beliefs—the belief that God is Trinity, that is, simultaneously three and one. (We will have some cause to explore this notion in chapter 7, as well as several later chapters of the book.) For the present, it is enough for us to note that, by invoking the name of God at the beginning of the worship service and describing God as the ultimate reason for and focus of the gathering, Christians are doing the kind of thing that we have discussed in this chapter: identifying *who* they are and *whose* they are.

Of course, these very abbreviated descriptions of God will not be very meaningful to anyone who has not already been drawn in, at least in a provisional way, to the narratives and practices that in Christians are habituated. Thus, in the following chapter, we will begin to analyze those habits by considering, first of all, how stories structure our lives.

Questions for discussion

1. Do all of our communal gatherings have a morally formative impact on us? Or are there some things that we do “just for the fun of it” without any moral implications? (It may help to construct the best argument you can for each side of this question.)

2. Do you find yourself worried or annoyed by the notion that moral formation is primarily a product of gathered communities? How might one differentiate this from a notion of moral relativism?

3. Think of a community (other than a church community) of which you are a part, and think about the ways that the community identifies *who* they are and *whose* they are. What might function as “God” or “the gods” within that community’s structure?

4. Do you think it’s universally the case that a person’s moral and political outlook is always affected by that person’s understanding of God? (In this question, the word “God” means whatever the people in question define as “god”—in other words, that to which they give their ultimate allegiance.) Is it possible to separate these two?

5. To what extent does the language of “worship” serve to describe the activity that goes on, at least among some of the members, within the gathering communities of which you have been a part? Who or what is the object of that worship?

6. Construct an argument on both sides of the following proposition: “All forms of ethics are theological ethics.”
Sources cited in this chapter and/or recommended for further reading

- Michael J. Buckley, SJ, At the Origins of Modern Atheism
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- Cathy Lynn Grossman, “View of God can predict values, politics,” USA Today
- Philip D. Kenneson, Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community
- Nicholas Lash, Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles’ Creed
- Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd edition
- Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good
- Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith

3 Reading in communion
How stories structure our lives

The previous chapter focused on the ways in which gathering communities define themselves, both in terms of their own identity (who they are) and with respect to their primary allegiances (whose they are). The chapter ended with a recognition that many communities specifically name their allegiances, and that, for Christians, this involves an invocation of God. However, we also recognized that the theological language that Christians use to describe God may not have much meaning for those who are unfamiliar with the faith’s narratives and practices. Therefore, in this chapter, we will begin the process of making those narratives and practices more familiar. Our first goal will be to emphasize the important role that stories play in structuring our lives; we will then turn to the Christian stories in particular.

Telling stories

When communities gather, they tell stories. They tell stories about the members of the community, about the community as a whole, and about outsiders, strangers, and other communities. They usually tell some of these stories repeatedly—either in an identical form each time or, more commonly, with certain elements remaining open to alteration, expansion, or omission. Within these repeatedly-told, sometimes-altered stories, one can often discern the outline of a plot or at least the description of certain characters. These plots and characterizations may sometimes be reducible to a single sentence or moral; more often, though, they are complex and nuanced, like the plot or characters in a short story or a one-act play. If we listen carefully to these stories, we will learn a great deal about the character of the communities in
which they are told, and about the people who constitute (and are themselves constituted by) these communities.

Family stories

Consider one of the most common examples of this phenomenon: the stories that are told within a family structure. From time to time, most extended families gather together—perhaps for a holiday meal, an annual reunion, or a funeral. The stories that they tell are likely to include, among other things, accounts of their travel to the gathering, news about any members not present, and autobiographical descriptions of what they’ve been doing since they’ve last seen each other. But once these new stories have been covered, most family conversations will turn to the shared history of the clan: something that happened to grandma when she was growing up, the hilarious moment three years ago when the dog upset three picnic tables, the vivid memories of a journey taken together. Many people will have heard these stories before, but they are not told simply in order to provide information. They actually serve to undergird the family structure: they point to the facts that it existed in the past and that it has been constituted by some of the same characters over time. This in turn implies that it will continue to exist in the future.

Many families will have a few stories that are told fairly often, though perhaps in differing forms, when the family gathers together. These might include stories that tell about how the family came to settle in its present geographical location, how a distant ancestor immigrated from Ireland to England two centuries ago, or how a great-grandfather moved his family from Ohio to Oklahoma in the 1920s. It might be a story of family unity at a critical moment, like that time after Aunt Edna’s stroke that we all gathered around her bed and sang and cried and fully expected that she would die, but she recovered and lived a good life for many more years. In my own family, one of the oft-repeated stories tells of the days when a cousin of mine was courting his wife-to-be; both of them discovered, at a fairly early stage of their relationship, some of the more (shall we say) idiosyncratic characteristics of the other person’s family—and decided to get married anyway.

These stories don’t usually have a single form or format. They typically aren’t written down for posterity; some of the details change on each telling. But the essential outline of the story remains fairly consistent, as do most of the characters that inhabit them. And because they are told repeatedly, they make a statement of sorts about the way the family is constituted. They describe the strength of resolve and the willingness to take risks that were exhibited by an ancestor who moved to a new land. They make reference to the family’s compassion and its unity in caring for its own members,

particularly those who are ill or otherwise incapacitated. They display a family’s foibles and quirks, as well as its tolerance and its willing acceptance of those who don’t necessarily conform to certain societal standards of behavior. And—at least in some cases—they characterize how the family treats outsiders and strangers, and the degree to which its members are willing to show hospitality to those who don’t, or don’t yet, belong to the family.

Community stories

The examples that I have offered concerning family stories also apply to the stories of other kinds of communities. While I will eventually suggest that practically all gathering communities rely on a certain set of stories for maintaining their identity, the process may be easiest to imagine if we think of a community that is small enough, and whose members live in close enough proximity to one another, that at least some of their members are able to gather fairly often. One of the best examples of this kind of community is the small town or village; here, because people live very close to one another and have come to rely on one another, they tend to gather fairly frequently. They also tend to tell stories. The role of storytelling in a small town or village is frequently celebrated in fiction writing; one example is the work of the American writer Garrison Keillor, whose stories about a fictional Minnesota town called Lake Wobegon are poignant reminders of the importance of storytelling in shaping and maintaining a community’s identity. The African-American novelist Toni Morrison frequently emphasizes how various stories are handed down by means of an oral tradition through family structures. For many black communities in the US context, this served as a significant means of forging and maintaining identity, particularly in the face of sustained efforts by others to efface or distort that identity.

A single story does not, of course, constitute the character of an entire community. But when certain stories are told repeatedly, and when they become a staple of the gatherings of a particular community, they take on a greater significance. Stories that are told repeatedly are often particularly entertaining as well; but most communities have a huge repertoire of entertaining stories, so the only way to account for a story’s frequent retelling is to recognize that its significance transcends its mere entertainment value. Particularly when a community repeatedly tells a story about itself, it is remembering and reasserting certain shared assumptions, beliefs, and practices that bind the community together.

At the same time, these stories shape the community and its members in certain ways. This may be more obvious in the case of relatively new members of the community; such persons need to learn these stories in order to
understand the group and their own potential role within it. But stories are not just for newcomers; they are also for those who have lived in the community all their lives and know the stories by heart. By telling a story, we remind ourselves of certain qualities that we may already know we possess, but which we don’t often actively bring to mind. We often allow certain features of our identity to recede into the background; we’re busy doing other things, or it doesn’t seem all that important to reiterate, or perhaps we’re simply modest about it. But part of what helps a community to maintain a particular character over time is precisely the telling of the story that demonstrates and emphasizes it.

For example, the members of a small town may particularly pride themselves on their willingness to help one another out in moments of extreme need. They don’t feel any desire to boast about this; they don’t announce it on a plaque at the town hall or fashion it into a motto to attach to the welcome signs at the town limits. But these moments of extreme need don’t come along every day, so they aren’t always being reminded of this element of the town’s character by simply doing it and watching it happen. However, they do tell stories about it: specific, concrete stories, about the time the pipes froze at Mark Johnson’s house and how George down at the supply store brought his friends and a whole case of propane torches to thaw them out. How the neighboring town’s school bus broke down three miles out of town, and how Evelyn Rockwell saw it and drove straight to Pat’s beauty parlor, and how all seven women who were there at the time, even though none of them had kids or grandkids on that bus, got in their cars and drove out there and took all those kids to school. Everyone in town knows these stories; they’ve heard them hundreds of times. They don’t end with a moral (“and this shows that we help each other out”); they don’t have to, because everyone knows that already. Nevertheless, by telling the story repeatedly, the community reinforces its own understanding of its identity: this is the kind of people they are. The stories emphasize particular qualities that help to characterize, and to constitute, the community.

These stories, which help communities to identify who they are, don’t have to be told in a traditional “storytelling” setting. In fact, under current cultural conditions, it may be fairly uncommon for people to gather around in a circle while someone “tells a story.” More often, we learn the stories of a community in a much more diffuse way, over a long period of time: we hear the pieces of stories in brief vignettes, pick up threads here and there, and catch snippets that we only later piece together. The stories that constitute a community and give it its identity are not often told in a continuous, straightforward way; but this fact does not prevent a particular narrative from emerging and becoming clear over time.

Broadening the picture

The significance of stories and storytelling is not limited to small, tightly-defined communities. It also helps us identify much more amorphous groups—for example, the citizens of a particular nation-state, or all people in a particular age group, or everyone who uses a particular category of consumer goods. While these are not regularly gathering communities in the sense that a family or a church congregation might be, the members of these groups do engage in certain practices and rituals that draw them together, in spite of the fact that they may be too large to gather as a unit or too diffuse to think of themselves as a community. Any group in which the members have a particular identity that is sustained through common practices probably also shares a common story or set of stories— even if they never gather as a single group.

A few examples may be in order here. Most nation-states have identity-forming stories of their own, even though all the citizens never gather in a single place at any one time. Young people often learn these stories from their parents and in school; American children will tell the story of Paul Revere’s ride or of George Washington’s hard winter at Valley Forge as narratives that identify the ingenuity, determination, and perseverance that is thought to characterize Americans. Or, to take an example from another sphere of life, consider the community of people who regularly purchase a certain kind of consumer good. These people will rarely gather in any combination whatsoever, and would not usually tell a certain story to constitute their identity. Nevertheless, these stories are often implicit both in product advertisements and in the accounts that people offer as to why they purchase a particular product. For example, when tobacco products were more widely advertised, the images that marketers employed often told an implicit story in which the smokers of a particular brand were successful in their work, their friendships, and/or their romantic and sexual relationships. The implicit narratives of these visual advertisements had a formative effect on the consumers, who then came to see their own lives through these same categories. This example is also a reminder that the kinds of moral formation that stories can bring about are not always salutary ones; we can be formed in bad habits by stories, just as we can be formed in good habits.

Storytelling and moral formation

As the previous paragraph was already beginning to suggest, stories play a highly significant role in the process of moral formation within a community. This is why stories are such an important (and contested) aspect of child-rearing: the stories that we tell our children will shape their moral and