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## A Narrative Analysis of Virtue Ethics Among Accounting Professors

Gibran N. Zogbi

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VIRTUE ETHICS AND ACCOUNTING

A Narrative Analysis of Virtue Ethics Among Accounting Professors

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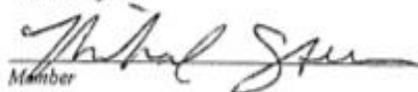
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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the vision that accounting professors had of teaching virtue ethics in their courses. The study sample consisted of eight professors who have taught accounting and related finance courses full time for at least 2 years at an institution that grants four-year (bachelor) degrees in Accounting. Participants included professors from two public and one private university. The methodology allowed for the discernment of meanings that emerged from participants' lived experiences of virtue ethics and ethics in general. Analysis of resulting themes and constructionist perceptions created a narrative conclusion that was a joint creation between the participants and the researcher. Interviews with each participant around guiding questions were the source of the narrative text. Descriptive themes included overall instabilities around ethics, inconsistent understandings of professionalism, and some uneasiness discussing conscience and religion. Catalysts for change were also identified that related to former students facing "Enron moments" and some current successes with virtue ethics. The study concluded that the vision of virtue ethics in accounting was a consequence of the true purpose of accounting and the true purpose of higher education. Accounting's best purpose extended beyond deontology and utility and the traditional purpose of higher education extended beyond technical information and employment opportunities. At the time of this study the researcher was not aware of any narrative style investigation of virtue ethics directed at accounting professors.

*Keywords:* accounting ethics, deontology, eudemonia, professionalism, utilitarianism, virtue

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Few would argue the importance of integrity and truth in any legitimate profession. However, these qualities mean something more to the accounting profession. Integrity and truth are part of the very essence of bookkeeping, financial reporting, and auditing. Now consider the dismaying reality that an *Alphabetical List of the Most Important Accounting Scandals Across 12 Countries and Beyond Since about 1980* exists (Jones, 2012). Or that the popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia has an entry titled “Accounting Scandals” which lists 91 major accounting scandals. Such references mark disturbing times in which the frequency of scandals costing tens of billions of dollars is not the greatest concern. The greatest concern is the detriment to a profession whose very core stems from reporting the truth, and the countless other industries who rely on this vital purpose (Bayou, Reinstein, & Williams, 2011; May, 1950; see also Vladu et al., 2017).

Consider the most notorious audit failure, Enron (though not necessarily the most costly) which resulted in the largest bankruptcy reorganization in American history and the dissolution of Arthur Anderson (Bratton, 2002). As a result of Enron and other scandals, the accounting industry, already saturated with well documented codes, standards, and regulations was tasked with more standards and regulations in the form of the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB) and Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) which took effect in 2002. Such regulations may have had a favorable short-term effect on scandal frequency, but the financial crisis of 2009 and the 53 major accounting scandals that have occurred since Enron (“Accounting Scandals,” 2019) demonstrate the fire is far from extinguished.

Recently, Camfferman & Wielhouwer (2019) suggested that the frequency and severity of scandals may have brought the accounting industry to a point of no return. They actually encouraged accounting academics and policymakers to modify risk assessment models to include an inherent risk of financial reporting scandal. It is too early to gauge the industry response to this article, but the authors openly acknowledged their ideas could lead to increased “moral hazard.” Such measures seem to suggest a breaking point in which the industry can no longer withstand scandals of such magnitude. Furthermore, the development of global economies that exist beyond the jurisdictions of SOX or the PCAOB pose new threats which may exist beyond these newer regulations. Regulations are necessary, but they do not completely address what many consider to be a crisis of ethics. Some of the literature suggests that accountants need to embrace ethics differently and not simply memorize more external governing codes or principles. They also need to focus on more than the mere consequences of their decisions. This point was eloquently described by Calderón, Piñero, & Redín (2018) and further developed by Cameron & O’Leary (2015).

Among other topics, this study explores virtue ethics in accounting because of its internalization of moral decision making, and how it may relate to the accounting industry’s dilemma of scandals.

The accounting profession has been supportive of including ethics in accounting curricula, but many accounting professors acknowledge that they are neither prepared nor certain of how to teach accounting ethics (Frank, Ofobike, & Gradisher, 2009). An organizing model may be useful and many have suggested Kohlberg’s approach to moral reasoning as a useful prototype (Power et al., 1991). However, Kohlberg admits to limitations. He concluded, and others have confirmed, that most individuals fail to improve beyond a law-and-order stage

(Reinstein, Moehrle, & Reynolds-Moehrle, 2006). Despite this discouraging reality, numerous studies have indicated that education is to be a force for development of higher levels of moral reasoning including (Apostolou, Dull, & Schleifer, 2013; Blanthorne, Kovar, & Fisher, 2007; Frank et al., 2009; see also Tormo-Carbó, Seguí-Mas, & Oltra, 2016). Also engaged with teaching ethics in the classroom, Mintz (2006) developed reflective learning as an approach for developing moral reasoning through the use of virtue ethics. Some have found his methods effective, but Frank, et al. (2009) found that time constraints rendered this approach unmanageable in the classroom.

In 2008, a U.S. Department of the Treasury Advisory Committee on the Auditing Profession (ACAP) made several recommendations, including one that the American Accounting Association (AAA) and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) form a commission to study the structure and content of accounting education (Ezzell & Higgins, 2010). The Pathways Commission was formed and published a 140-page document in 2012 which, according to the executive summary, is not directed toward specific academic practices but describes ongoing processes to implement improvements in accounting education. The need to improve upon the way ethics is taught dovetails with more than one of the recommendations submitted in the final Pathways Commission Report. For example, recommendation 1.2 of the report suggests greater focus of academic research on relevant practice issues like the ethics dilemma described above, and recommendation 4 reads, “Develop curriculum models, engaging learning resources, and mechanisms for easily sharing them as well as enhancing faculty development opportunities in support of sustaining a robust curriculum.” (American Accounting Association, 2012). In the spirit of the Pathways recommendations, this research seeks to

qualitatively interview a sample of accounting professors to understand their perceptions and experiences of virtue ethics in their instruction.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It has been established that the accounting profession and those who rely on its services are threatened by the frequency and severity of accounting scandals. As a relatively new profession, accountancy has evolved into a dense grid of deontological codes and utilitarian principles. This evolution chronologically corresponds with the modern era and the rise of deontology and utilitarianism. These modern philosophies emphasize an individual's adherence to external influences in lieu of internal, moral discernment. As an example, the post-Enron era saw the creation of additional deontological and utilitarian regulations in the form of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and the creation of the PCAOB. However, scandals have continued to torment the industry.

As a corollary to the scandals, the industry and academia have committed to ramping up ethics education, but there is little consensus in what to teach and how to teach it. Some literature suggests that accounting professors are not comfortable teaching ethics for a variety of reasons. Some may subscribe to different philosophies of such. Often, accounting education and post-professional continuing education are concerned with acknowledging the mere completion of ethics training (a check-the-box strategy) than with the effective formation of morally sensitive accounting professionals. Rhetorically, the question of whether ethics can be taught to adults is asked, as well as whose responsibility that should be in an already packed curriculum of generally accepted accounting principles.

The accounting industry continues on under such conditions, as many wonder not if, but when the next Enron or WorldCom will occur. Meanwhile, there has been a rejuvenation of the

importance of classic virtue ethics in the philosophy literature which has also glided into the business literature of various disciplines. However, its penetration into the deontologically fortified accounting profession and the accounting classroom has been sluggish at best. The 53 scandals that have occurred since Enron suggest there is a crisis of ethics within the profession. The renewal of the virtues may be part of the solution, but in order to teach virtue one must first understand and experience them.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the vision accounting professors have of teaching virtue ethics in their courses. This was accomplished by understanding how select professors understand ethics beginning with some of their own personal experiences. By allowing participants to share their lived experiences of ethics in and out of the classroom as prescribed by Denzin & Lincoln (2011) and Moustakas (1994), the researcher expects to identify important influences and transition factors in a professor's ethical vision. Furthermore, the researcher expects to gain an appreciation of why such factors exist and harness additional meanings that may exist behind such factors. A clinical researcher using a similar constructive narrative approach cleverly stated that his participants, "don't just tell stories, their stories tell them" (Meichenbaum, 2017). Similarly, this constructive, narrative study explored the reality of virtue ethics among the participants in order to gain an appreciation for the causes of this reality (Crotty, 1998). By understanding the causes of the virtue ethics experience with accounting professors one may then hope, through further developments, to positively influence the usefulness of virtue ethics. In essence, this study hopes to diagnose for the benefit of a possible future remedy.

This qualitative approach is suited for this study because according to Merriam (2002) it permits the researcher to analyze how and why certain factors reveal important meanings in the experiences of the participants as their ethics stories are reconstructed.

The body of research was enhanced by this study because it aims to deliver a greater understanding of the posture of virtue ethics in accounting at a critical time when deontology and utilitarian ethics dominate the accounting stage and scandals threaten the integrity of the profession.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the objective of an accounting educator? To teach knowledge of technical subject matter? To assist in the moral development and formation of a professional? Both? Other? Why?
2. How does an accounting professor understand virtue? Is the participant's understanding of virtue consistent with classic definitions? How and why does it differ? Does one experience the virtues in their personal life?
3. How does an accounting educator describe their own personal ethics? How and why was ethics learned? How was their vision of ethics formed and tested both personally and professionally? Does one's personal ethics lean towards deontology, utility, virtue, or something else, and why? Is their personal ethics consistent with what they teach? Why or why not?
4. How important is ethics to an accounting curriculum and why? Can it be taught effectively? How and what is taught? Is ethics included in course outcomes? Should it be? Why or why not?

5. What are the challenges of teaching ethics in accounting courses? Is one qualified to teach ethics? Is there enough time? Are there adequate materials? Should ethics be taught as a standalone course or embedded into existing accounting courses, and why?

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The selection of participants was made by the researcher based on each participant's ability to influence an accounting curriculum in the sense that they have the equivalent of faculty voting rights in such matters. Each participant's interest and experience was also considered by the researcher (Creswell, 2014). This purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2002) provided an informative and useful sample of participants. However, this sampling technique is not intended for statistical generalization to an expanded population as is typically the case with quantitative research (Creswell, 2014). Instead, the in-depth knowledge that is gained in this qualitative research may be transferable to other research situations (Merriam, 2002).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Virtue Ethics is a benchmark of this study because of its antiquity and its resurgence in psychology, philosophy, and business literature. In the following sections, virtue ethics is distinguished from the deontological and utilitarian philosophies which have enjoyed ascendancy in the accounting profession during much of its modern rise as a profession and its scandal-ridden history. It is worth noting that research in virtue ethics may initially seem ambiguous because virtue involves both reason and emotion. It will be established that virtue ethics stems from the mind and the heart; this may not appeal to empirical readers. Ironically, these same qualities may be what makes virtue ethics a potential part of the solution to the problem described above. This is because the human experience includes both reason and emotion, among other elements of existence (Naci & Ioannidis, 2015).

The literature map (Creswell, 2014) below serves to sequentially outline the subtopics of this literature review and summarize some of the authors and principles that support each subtopic. Among the themes revealed in the literature are the description of three primary philosophical schools of ethics and an understanding of how the accounting profession has evolved largely around deontological and utilitarian ethics. The review identifies some of the challenges academia faces in teaching ethics, an apparent deficiency of virtue ethics in accounting ethics pedagogy, and how this deficiency may subsequently affect accounting practice.

**Virtue Ethics in Accounting – Outline/Literature Map**

## **Virtue Ethics**

Virtue ethics emphasizes moral character as opposed to duty and consequence. As such, this normative ethic encapsulates not just what we do, but who we are and who we are meant to be (Thomson, 1955). Rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, western virtue ethics is said to have originated with Socrates and was embraced and advanced further by Plato, Aristotle, and later influencers including Christ, Augustine, and Aquinas (Hursthouse, 2000). The sources of morality in this philosophical ethic are intrinsic virtues. Plato describes his classical cardinal virtues in the *Republic* (Plato, trans. 2009) as wisdom, justice, fortitude and temperance. Thompson points out how Aristotle expanded the list of virtues and segmented them into broader categories of intellect and morality (Thomson, 1955). Later in his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas maintained the condition for Christ's theological virtues of faith, hope and love as a modest understanding of mankind's advancement to the supernatural order (Aquinas, trans. 1981). It is also worth noting that in the East, Confucius developed a virtue ethic that in several ways mirrored that of the early Greeks (Yu, 2013).

Virtue ethics involves the internalization of moral decisions in order to become a better version of oneself. This is based on the premise that who one becomes is more important than what they have or what they do. (Brown, 2016; Kelly, 2004). This important and foundational value dates back to Aristotle but is not inherently evident in the deontological or utilitarian principles of accounting. As such, virtue ethics stands in contrast with decisions that are based solely on *external* deontological obligations or *external* utilitarian motivations. This research does not seek to supplant deontology or utilitarianism but submits that a moral decision may not be complete unless it also considers one's internal moral purpose, character and happiness.

Virtue ethics holds as its supreme goal the happiness of an individual. However, happiness in this sense is different and distinct from the utilitarian definition of pleasure. According to (Brown, 2016), Aristotle defined happiness as the highest good for man or the completeness of man. In Aristotle's sense, the exact purpose of life is this completeness or happiness. Brown also points out that other historical figures have embraced the significance of happiness including the U.S. founding fathers who, in the Declaration of Independence, declared life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to be inalienable rights.

In the West, virtue ethics was eventually eclipsed by humanistic impulses of the modern era (Frede et al., 2002). It may be no coincidence that the rise of utilitarianism and deontology corresponded with the rise of the modern accounting profession. Perhaps the embroidery of virtue and Christianity, which was sewn by Aquinas and others, in some regards, has consigned virtue ethics to the same fate and decline as Christianity in the modern era – at least until recently.

According to Ferrero & Sison (2014) virtue ethics practically disappeared in the English-speaking world until the publication of an article titled “Modern Moral Philosophy” (Anscombe, 1958) put it, at least partially, back on the philosophical radar screen. Until that time the dominant theories of ethics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were deontology and utilitarianism as described by Kant and Bentham. These philosophies will be described in more detail in the following sections. It is worth noting, however, that the modern era of accounting may have arguably been ushered into existence with the rise of deontology and utilitarianism. (Moore, 2014)

Ferrero & Sison, (2014) provide a description of Anscombe's dissatisfaction with Kant and Bentham's ethical philosophies. Anscombe believed that Kant's notion of “legislating for oneself” (p. 375) was illogical because legislation requires a higher power and Kant's

agnosticism conflicted with such a “supreme law-giver.” She also criticized utilitarianism because she subscribed to aspects of natural law and believed certain actions were demonstrably and intrinsically wrong regardless of any and all consequence — such as the killing of innocent life. Almost by process of elimination, virtue ethics was Anscombe’s valid option because it applied the positive aspects of deontology and utilitarianism while providing persuasive responses to the weaknesses of each. Virtue ethics, like deontology, utilizes universal principles, and like utilitarianism, it measures consequences. However, contrary to deontology, virtue ethics considers one’s internal morals and character. And contrary to utilitarianism it upholds that certain prohibitions exist without exception (Anscombe, 1958).

Describing the revival of virtue ethics requires a little perspective. Socrates (470-399 B.C.) initiated virtue ethics. Plato developed the system of virtue ethics further with his cardinal virtues in *The Republic*, and virtue ethics as a philosophical construct developed yet further with Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, among others. As stated above, however, and also according to Athanassoulis (2013), virtue ethics as a viable ethical system all but vanished through the Age of Enlightenment until 1958 when Elizabeth Anscombe’s publication initiated the reconsideration of virtue ethics within the modern moral philosophical world. Another source of enormous influence in the ongoing revival of virtue ethics was the publication of *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 1981). Published by an author who experienced a philosophical conversion after age 50, MacIntyre suggests the moral viewpoints that arose from the Enlightenment like deontology and utilitarianism are philosophically flawed because they abandoned Aristoteles’s concept of design and purpose or teleology in the material world. MacIntyre argues that ancient ethics were superior because they relied on a teleological ideal of human life with its goal of aspiring to a proper character that could only be reached with preparation. MacIntyre submits that without this

embrace of moral understanding, the philosophies of the Enlightenment were eventually doomed. Furthermore, MacIntyre insists that Enlightenment philosophy fails because it ascribes moral agency to the individual which makes morality no more than a person's opinion. This reduces philosophy to an inadequate forum of curiously subjective rules and principles often governed by moral emotivism which in turn reflects on modern morality.

To the contrary, (Brown, 2016) suggests that virtue ethics considers the joining between what the individual does and who the individual becomes as a result of their decisions. Virtue ethics emphasizes character development and the improvement of oneself which is not always evident in utilitarianism and deontology. These combined aspects give virtue ethics a cohesive, balanced, and distinct framework from which to consistently evaluate human action. Virtue ethics maximizes character over utility. Its fulcrum is human purpose and freedom as opposed to equality. It is the belief that how one lives is related to the purpose for which they were designed. Virtue ethics recognizes that good life is not simply about desires and pleasures, but rather desiring goodness. "The act of choosing does not make a choice good. Rather, recognizing such a thing as goodness opens the possibility of a good choice" (Brown, 2016, p. 72).

### **Deontology in Accounting**

Many aspects of accounting dovetail with the theory of applied ethics known as deontology. Deontological ethics is characterized as law-based or obligation ethics. Its most notable advocate and pioneer, Immanuel Kant, professed that the morality of an action was based on the action's alignment with juridical laws. (Kant, trans. 2000). He submitted that the supreme principle of the science of morals is to "Act according to a maxim which can likewise be valid as a universal law." (Kant, trans. 2000, p.15).

Similarly, the accounting profession has grown up, focused on duties and obligations related to industry principles and standards which emanate from various regulatory authorities (Carreira et al., 2008). Noteworthy examples of such include the Financial Accounting Standard Board's (FASB) Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP), Generally Accepted Auditing Standards (GAAS), the Internal Revenue Code (IRC), and International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). There are others, but the preceding provide adequate backdrop for this study. Anscombe's criticism of deontology have already been described. Other criticisms of deontology emerge when conflicts arise from different obligations to multiple authorities or when new challenges present themselves of which no law or obligation has yet been established. (Osiel, 2017; Johnson, 2018).

### **Utilitarianism in Accounting**

Another theory of applied ethics inherent to the accounting profession is utilitarianism, also known as consequentialism. In 1861 Jeremy Bentham published a groundbreaking book titled *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Chapter One defines his principle of utility: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (Bentham, trans. 1948, p.17). John Stewart Mill is also credited with expanding utilitarianism by distinguishing the quantity and quality of a respective pain or pleasure. In contemporary terms, Bentham's principle of utility greatly resembles a cost-benefit analysis. "An action then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility...when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it" (Mill, trans. 2003, p.18). There is less need for an abundance of rules and laws with utilitarianism. Laws may be supplanted by the principle of utility.

Utilitarianism is embedded in the goal of financial management itself which is to maximize the value of owner's equity (Ross, 2010). Utility is often manifested through the decision making of accountants and financial managers as well as the regulatory authorities who govern them (Thomas, 2012). Among the numerous examples of accounting decisions that involve utility are inventory valuation techniques (FIFO vs. LIFO), revenue recognition (cost recovery vs. installment) and capital investment decisions involving net present value and internal rate of return calculations and even the capital asset price modeling (CAPM) to name only a few. Utility is also evident in the Conceptual Framework for Financial Reporting issued by the FASB, "The Board, in developing financial reporting standards, will seek to provide the information set that will meet the needs of the maximum number of primary users" (FASB, 2010).

### **Intersections of Utilitarianism and Deontology in Accounting**

As common applied ethics of the accounting industry are explored, a sort of check and balance between deontology and utilitarianism is often evident. The previously stated goal of financial management — to maximize the value of owner's equity — carries with it the mandate to acquire assets with the intention of generating and reporting income. This in turn dictates a maximization of revenue and minimization of expense, all of which, in a most rudimentary sense, is an exercise in utility. The reporting of progress in this prodigious goal to users of information carries a certain risk of corruption through vice and self-serving purposes that is well documented in fraud case theory as well as the more subtle tone of agency theory (Ross, 1973). This same risk is fundamental to the need for deontological rules and regulations to oversee the utilitarian generation of wealth and financial information as eloquently stated through the Conceptual Framework of Financial Reporting: "If financial information is to be useful, it must

be relevant and faithfully represent what it purports to represent. The usefulness of financial information is enhanced if it is comparable, verifiable, timely, and understandable” (FASB, 2010). The FASB goes on to define faithful representation as a depiction that is complete, neutral, and free from error.

This intersection of utilitarian and deontological philosophies is evident in typical interactions of firm leadership. Consider the common scenario where a chief operating officer, eager to present lucrative quarterly results, may be somewhat restrained after meeting with the controller who filters such results through the accrual requirements of GAAP or specific disclosures in the notes to the financial statements. Such interactions may also involve a moral, reactionary shift, as described in a study by Bolt-Lee & Moody published in the *Journal of Accountancy* in 2010. In it, the same professionals were surveyed before and after the conviction of Enron executives. They found evidence of a shift in moral philosophy from one of the “pursuit of the greatest good” to one of “rules and rights.”

Thus far we have examined the early history, recent renewal, and effectiveness of virtue ethics as compared to deontology and utilitarianism. We now shift our focus to the daunting challenges posed by teaching virtue ethics in an increasingly secular world..

### **Accounting Professionalism**

Accounting professionalism serves as another important theme in ethics literature. The preamble of the AICPA code of professional conduct calls for “an unswerving commitment to honorable behavior, even at the sacrifice of personal advantage” (AICPA, n.d.a). It goes on to define five core principles of professionalism: Public Interest, Integrity, Objectivity and Independence, Due Care, and Scope. Despite such elaborate definitions, the literature describes inconsistencies and concerns with accounting professionalism.

Virtue based professionalism is prescribed by Lail, MacGregor, et al. (2017) as a necessary path toward restoring functional financial reporting systems. Their case analysis of the accounting profession revealed that commercial and legal pressures have led to a systemic deterioration of accounting's professional ideal. Regulatory responses like Sarbanes-Oxley may have been necessary, but they have not put an end to major scandals subsequent to Enron, nor have they succeeded in restoring public trust.

Accounting professionalism was the theme of a symposium conducted by the Centre for Accounting Ethics, University of Waterloo, in Toronto, Canada, May 2015. The symposium and resulting collection of papers served to increase understanding of elements that impact accounting professionalism and to investigate how changing notions of professionalism affect the role of the accounting profession (Gunz & Thorne, 2017). Contributors to the symposium shared the fundamental notion that accounting professionalism is evolving and reacting to constant changes in the economic, social and regulatory environments that surround the profession and that further effort is needed to ensure that ethics and professionalism remain as vanguards of the accounting profession. They suggest accountants, as public servants, need to be driven more by virtue and less by commercial interests.

### **Challenges of Teaching Accounting Ethics**

Attempting to convey the extensive rules of deontology and various utilitarian strategies can result in a jam-packed curriculum for just about any accounting course. Imagine the time commitment in exhausting these two important themes and preparing candidates for professional success and/or certification. Now consider the industry's scandalous history. It is no wonder that there are ongoing challenges to how accounting ethics is being taught, as many have noted (Bernardi & Bean, 2007; Frank et al., 2009; Shawver & Miller, 2017 and West, 2018). In the

post-Enron era some have weighed in on the need to focus more accounting education on ethics, though there is no consensus on the best way to accomplish this (Chawla et al., 2015). Some of the deliberation is over whether ethics should be taught as a standalone course or whether it should be integrated into existing courses. There are valid arguments for both, but even if agreement is reached on one approach there would still be no consensus on “what” to teach (Cameron & O’Leary, 2015). Clearly the status quo has not been effective. This lack of consensus and stability around ethics constitutes a theme of great concern to a profession that is inherently reliant on honesty and integrity in reporting.

Both deontology and utilitarianism are concerned with achieving objectives independent of the character of the individual engaged in the discipline of accounting. They are in that sense contingent philosophies. Without external, guiding parameters these philosophies could not be practiced, and the adequacy of the ethics depends on the adequacy of those parameters. There are trends of criticism and suggestion directed at the accounting industry and accounting academia to require students to examine ethics from more of an *internal*, conscientious perspective. For example, Arthur Wyatt, in a published report on accounting professionalism and CPA culture (Wyatt, 2004) stated the “need to challenge the student to consider whether his or her value system is really in sync with what is expected of them as they embark on their careers” (p. 53). In another example, West (2018) demonstrates how an ethical accounting decision can be either “good” according to external standards or “good” according to interior values of virtue. He explains why the latter is healthier and more effective in the long term both for the individual and the industry.

Faith-based institutions have also weighed in on the dilemma of accounting ethics. Sauerwein (2013) examined the role of accounting faculty in restoring professionalism,

suggesting faculty have become too concerned “with producing technicians who are able to pass the CPA exam, and not professionals who deeply understand the accountant’s public role” (p.73). Professing that faith-based institutions are in the business of “transformation,” he challenged faculty to focus on more than content mastery and to consider “the connection between the mind and the heart” (p. 73).

This research uses virtue ethics as a benchmark because it proposes that many of the earnest goals described in Sauerwein (2013) are also fitting for secular institutions. Secular colleges certainly have different approaches to education. But interior virtue, the connection between the mind and the heart, and the transformation of the individual through education have been a part of universal schooling dating back to Aristotle (predating deontology and utilitarianism). Certainly the case has been made that in any institution, teaching should be “as much about transmitting values and social ideals as it is about transmitting knowledge and skills” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). In this sense, virtue ethics may also be essential in redeeming the accounting industry from its scandalous past.

### **Technical Ethical Mix**

There is strong support in the literature for accounting education to be balanced in both ethical and technical standards. Often accountants pursue leadership positions in the middle and later stages of their careers, and such leadership positions require much more than mere technical expertise. Kelly (2017) uses the Coast Guard Academy as an inspirational example of developing ethical leaders for the accounting profession, stating “Passing proficiency exams such as the CPA exam or navigational ‘Rules of the Road’ exams is necessary but not sufficient for future professional success.” (p. 28) The author suggests that it is important to instill moral reasoning skills and ethical standards at the undergraduate level of study in addition to technical GAAP.

The balance between technical and ethical material was also explored from a managerial accounting (MA) perspective in van Der Kolk (2019), who argued that MA performance measurement was not morally neutral. Consequently, MA students should be trained to consider moral sensitivities along with technical aspects of MA.

Frémeaux et al (2020) made another argument for the importance of balance between technical accounting and ethical accounting. They proposed that accounting professionals must be released from a disproportionate focus on technical accuracy and abstraction. They contend accountants need to reclaim their profession in the public interest by being more grounded in a person-oriented approach using a common-good principle to assuage the oppression of economic rationality through greater consideration of public interest and ethical judgement.

The same three challenges are described repeatedly in the accounting literature:

1. Limited space and time in the curriculum
2. Insufficient instructional resources
3. Faculty discomfort due to a lack of prescribed training

These are referenced in Mintz (1990), Blanthorne et al. (2007), Massey & Van Hise (2009), and Tweedie, Dyball, Hazelton, & Wright (2013), with no indication such challenges have been mollified.

Massey & Van Hise integrated lessons from multiple perspectives in an attempt to build a new accounting ethics course for the benefit of professors. Part of their course included a review of classical philosophy in which they described virtue ethics among other philosophies. A global solution was put forth by the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) and described by Tweedie et al. (2013). Their work proposed the inclusion of a more diverse set of ethical theories in the accounting standard including non-Western ethical thought. They

suggested a thematic approach to teaching ethics that accommodates the varying ethical traditions and practices of different nations and cultures. Surprisingly they suggest their approach to teaching ethics would require less space in the curriculum and less additional training of professors. In their view, most traditional ethics material is grounded in Kohlberg and Rest, which they suggest is not always consistent with one's place in society according to Confucian ideals. Their approach includes a character-versus-profit theme, but leaves questions regarding their position on relativism and the ability of college professors to adapt to a multi-cultural approach to ethics when they are already under scrutiny over being ineffective at taking a singular approach.

Given the above, it can thus be posited that a sort of tug-of-war exists within accounting professor working knowledge and, consequently, accounting curriculum. On one side (the side that usually wins) are the notoriously rigorous accounting theory and practice technical standards that are required to sit for the CPA, CMA, or other professionally recognized exams. On the other side are mandates for improvements in accounting ethics due to the frequency of global accounting scandals. These mandates typically originate from regulators, academia, and the industry (Blanthorne et al., 2007). This side often loses the tug-of-war because there is little consensus on what ethics to teach and how to teach them (Sorensen et al., 2017). The challenge is further complicated by the enticement some professors may feel to simply teach any ethics for the sake of being able to acknowledge that the box has been checked in an already over-crowded curriculum.

Working knowledge is sometimes influenced by state boards of accountancy (BOA's) because they determine academic requirements to sit for the CPA exam. According to Haverty (2019), only four BOAs (CA, CO, IL, and TX) require a separate standalone ethics course prior

to sitting for the CPA exam, but all require, on average, 24 credit hours of technical theory and practice courses. BOAs are also silent in terms of the types of ethics to be taught.

Across state lines, college accreditation councils may also influence professor's working knowledge. Both the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) have emphasized the critical importance of ethics, but, according to their respective websites, neither requires a standalone ethics course or offers specific direction as to what kind of ethics to be taught.

The literature describes how the board of accountancy in one state impacted professor working knowledge. In 2003 the Texas State Board of Public Accountancy (TSBPA) began to require all persons who sit for the CPA Examination to complete an approved three-semester-hour college course in ethics. A triangulated case study was completed by Hurtt & Thomas (2008) who analyzed experiences and attitudes of Texas accounting educators. They reported impressions of course instructors and TSBPA staff regarding their course experiences. They asked respondents which department should own the ethics class for accounting majors. Not a single respondent favored housing the accounting ethics class in the philosophy or religion departments. Instead 57% preferred that the accounting department own it and 27% preferred that the business department own it. The authors concluded that accounting professors feel they have a healthier idea of ethical topical coverage for accounting majors than outside faculty. Two of the open-ended responses in the study are shared below:

If accounting professors don't think they can teach ethics, all detractors will point and say, "indeed they have no moral compass to pass on to anyone." Being housed in the department sends the message that this work is too important to send somewhere else,

that the department has an interest and commitment to offer the course. (Hurtt & Thomas, 2008, p. 41)

However, teaching any standalone ethics class for the first time (let alone virtue ethics) can be a daunting task for accounting professors who may be more accustomed and comfortable teaching technical GAAP, particularly if they do not have personal experience or proclivities towards virtue ethics. Such was the experience described in Massey & Van Hise (2009). They held themselves to the accounting standard of “due professional care,” reading ethics journals on a regular basis, attending various seminars like the Annual Symposium on Research in Accounting Ethics and observing colleagues in law and philosophy teaching ethics courses. All this provided a basic familiarity with the ethics literature and field. Then, following the advice of Loeb (1988), they teamed up with a professional ethicist to teach their first ethics class.

The challenges and complications of creating a working knowledge in accounting ethics are further assessed in Frank et al. (2009), who described pressures faced by accounting instructors because most schools do not require distinct ethics courses for accounting students. They described how many professors are not comfortable teaching ethics because they lack a proven model from which to do so. The authors propose material that can at least start to fill this void by merging case analysis of the Ohio Board of Accountancy with the framework of Kohlbergian theory and moral reasoning.

The literature further suggests that a professor’s working knowledge of virtue ethics may also hinge on an interpretation of how they see their role in education. A critical example was made by Samons (2000), who suggested that in the modern age many professors have lost interest in what makes a person live or die well, and in their students’ character. Professors have instead pursued personal or political schemes. He further states the following:

The very fact that the modern academy now feels the need to question whether the attempt at teaching virtue to young adults can or should be made by those who spend the most time with them demonstrates a crucial problem our society faces: we now suffer from a fundamental lack of confidence in the traditional view that education has a moral (as opposed to political) as well as an intellectual aspect. (p. 25)

It follows rhetorically that if a professor does not see their role as a conveyor of virtue, what chance is there they will develop a working knowledge of it? Furthermore, if they do not have a working knowledge of it, what chance is there that they will teach virtue effectively?

In more recent accounting literature, Lail, Macgregor, et al. (2017) reinforced Samons' views arguing that virtue in professionalism is vital to restoring public trust in the accounting profession. They concluded that efforts to restore confidence in financial reporting should begin with virtues. At this juncture it is appropriate to examine further the specific accounting literature.

### **Ethics and Religion**

Religiosity and its relationship to ethics has been described in a variety of styles through the literature. Quantitative research performed by Noussair et al. (2013) found that people with regular church attendance and membership were more financially risk averse, and that Protestants were more risk averse than Catholics. Their data also suggested that the connection between risk aversion and religion was driven more by social qualities of church membership rather than by personal religious beliefs. Another study found that religious individuals were more ethical in their decision-making than non-religious individuals (Conroy & Emerson, 2004).

Bjornsen et al. (2019) explored the association between religiosity and accounting conservatism across countries, positing that religiosity enhanced accounting conservatism because religious individuals tend to be more reluctant to take risks.

Considerable literature suggests concerns with discussing religion in colleges and in society in general. Wesleyan University president and professed non-believer Michael Roth (2019) states:

As a teacher, I find remarkable resistance to bringing religious ideas and experiences into class discussions. When I ask what a philosopher had in mind in writing about salvation, or the immortality of the soul, my normally talkative undergraduates suddenly stare down at their notes. If I ask them a factual theological question about the Protestant Reformation, they are ready with answers: predestination; “faith, not works;” and so on. But if I go on to ask students how one knows in one’s heart that one is saved, they turn back to their laptops. They look anywhere but at me—for fear that I might ask them about feeling the love of God or about having a heart filled with faith (para. 5).

Pasek & Cook (2019) examined threats to social identity from religion or religiosity. They determined religion could be a consequential source of identity threat – particularly among Muslims, Jews, and highly religious Protestants.

### **Virtue Ethics in Accounting Literature**

Previous sections have established that an accounting curriculum that is fertile for the advancement of the virtues may be one where the professor has proclivities towards virtue in their personal leadership style, a working knowledge of classic Greek virtue ethics, and adequate space in the curriculum from which to teach virtue ethics. One might also conclude that accounting textbooks embracing the virtues are necessary. The topic of accounting textbooks

provides another springboard for future study. Most textbooks are the products of professors, so as one goes, so goes the other — eventually. It is also noteworthy that classic definitions of virtue ethics as put forth by Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas share a common theme of internal goodness or happiness as opposed to adherence to external obligations. With that context, the benefits of virtue ethics in an accounting curriculum include the development and exercise of moral character (Kreeft, 1992).

A comprehensive evaluation of accounting ethics education (Chawla, Khan, Jackson, & Gray, 2015) describes the heavy influence of utilitarian and deontological ethics in accounting and suggests both approaches have failed and are inadequate as standalone approaches. They suggest such methods impose external, unyielding, and overgeneralized approaches to ethical situations and “fail to instill a consistent internalized system of ethical sensitivity or reasoning in individuals” (Chawla et al., 2015, p. 20). The researchers support their statements through the application of Lawrence Kohlberg's model of pre-conventional, conventional, post-conventional moral development (Kohlberg, 1969). They recognize a need for ethics to be internalized and submit that ethics are internalized only at Kohlberg's post-conventional level. Utility and deontology do nothing to transition individuals into this important level. They further suggest accountants need training to understand the extent of ethical implications in their work. This involves an approach that goes beyond professional codes or exercises in utility. They propose that the sound alternative to codes and utility is virtue-based ethics because it offers an internalized process for ethical reasoning.

Recent history has seen a steady rise in the frequency of virtue ethics publications in psychology, philosophy, and business literature. Examples include Alzola (2017), Beadle (2017), Hartman (2017), and Stitcher & Saunders (2018); see also Wang et al. (2016). This review

focuses specifically on *accounting virtue ethics literature* which often extends from the application of principles that were first described in philosophy or psychology.

For example, almost 35 years ago philosopher Edmund Pincoffs published an important book that contributed to the revitalization of virtue ethics (Pincoffs, 1986). Relative to ancient Greek ethics, Pincoffs work is considered recent. Both he and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) have served as launching pads to accounting literature that has since embraced virtue ethics. The following sections describe the relevant accounting literature that emanates from these philosophers.

**Branching off of Pincoffs.** Edmund Pincoffs' work serves as a foundation for several accounting virtue ethics publications including Mintz (1995), who related Pincoffs' work to the accounting practice. Mintz submitted the profession has a unique need for the virtues because they enable accountants to resist pressures that emerge from conflicts of interests between client needs and the greater public. He suggested accounting educators use case analysis and role-playing to aid in the development of virtues. This is in keeping with Aristotle's claim that virtues are not inherent in an individual, they must be exercised or developed (Aristotle, trans. 2014). For over 20 years Mintz has published accounting virtue ethics work. Two examples include *Accounting Ethics Education: Integrating Reflective Learning and Virtue Ethics* (1996) which explores Aristotelian virtue ethics in relation to the classroom, and *Accounting in the Public Interest: An Historical Perspective on Professional Ethics* (2018). His passion may be exemplified by the following statement: "By not teaching ethics, accounting educators promote another value—that ethics education is not important. Nothing could be further from the truth" (2018, p. 29).

A review of accounting ethics literature was completed by Armstrong et al. (2003) and identified a prevalence of work describing moral sensitivity but a deficiency of literature addressing the virtues which they relate to ethical motivation and behavior. The authors encouraged more exposure to moral exemplars like Pincoffs to increase ethical motives in students, professors, and professionals.

Another example of Pincoffs' virtue ethics presented in accounting literature was made by Melle (2005), who advised that the primary objective of moral education is to encourage the development of the person through the development of virtues which he described as permanent temperaments which favor ethical behavior.

**Branching off of MacIntyre.** The practice of classical virtues in accounting was also advanced by Francis (1990), who grounded his theory in MacIntyre (1981). Francis describes a misunderstanding of ethics that arises from confusing rules or laws with virtues. He also emphasizes a need to resist the tendency for external rewards to dominate internal ones. He describes several internal rewards including concern for others and sensitivity to cooperation and conflict.

Similarly, West (2018) derives from *After Virtue*, (MacIntyre, 1981) but claims that Francis' work "suffers from several significant weaknesses" (West, 2018, p. 1). West's accounting work seems to go the deepest into authentic virtue ethics. Because of his timing and relevance, he is granted considerable review in this study. He provides an overview of MacIntyrean virtue ethics based on Chaps. 14 and 15 of *After Virtue*, and then describes how key concepts of virtue ethics can function in accounting. Initially he refers to MacIntyre's example of a child who is bribed to practice playing chess each week with 50 cents worth of candy. The motivated child can earn an extra 50 cents if he wins. His competitor promises to play fairly and

allow the opportunity for the child to win occasionally but only after considerable effort on the part of the child. MacIntyre and West consider these series of rules and incentives as external deontological and utilitarian influences. West would refer to the candy as an “external” good. As long as the child is motivated by candy he will play to win and may even cheat in order to win the candy. Now suppose the child grows beyond the candy and becomes motivated by his growing love for the game itself. He begins to appreciate and succeed in the critical strategies and competition of the game. He develops a new motivation to win. In this stage, if the child cheats, he realizes he will be defeating himself. West would refer to this as an “internal good” and it mirrors virtue ethics because it embraces becoming a better version of oneself through internal, open-minded development. But West also warns that moral tensions can exist in organizations that place all of their emphasis on the achievement of external goods because they can overwhelm the development of internal goods within the individuals and within the organization itself. This can stifle virtue. West suggests that the recent commercialization of accounting has contributed to the diminishment of “internal good” in accounting.

The contrast between “internal” and “external” goods described by MacIntyre and West may be exemplified further by considering the amount of emphasis spent in the classroom on understanding various principles of GAAP such as Historical Cost, Matching, or Revenue and Expense Recognition. Next consider the amount of time invested in the exploration and understanding of courage, justice, and honesty in accounting. MacIntyre and West describe these three internal goods or virtues as being necessary to achieve goodness in any practice. If an accounting professor were looking for material to relate such virtues to the accounting profession, they might be tempted to turn to the AICPA code of Professional Conduct but the virtues described above are not explicitly found in the code. The code intrinsically describes

integrity as sort of an all-encompassing virtue, but even integrity is described with an external purpose: "To maintain and broaden public confidence" (AICPA, n.d.b).

**Virtue Ethics in Auditing.** Other recent proponents of classic ethics in Accounting curriculum include Everett & Tremblay (2014) who examined the field of internal audit, which they characterized as heteronomous. In the wake of recent scandals, they explored what it means for an auditor to be virtuous and whether or not auditing has the capacity to be a virtuous practice. They examined the internal audit function through Kantian, utilitarian, and virtue lenses using phronetic research methods and found that often internal auditors are asked to embrace ethics that are conflicted and ambiguous. They also found a significant Kantian (deontological) influence in the field and challenged the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) approach to ethics resources and how they develop moral skills. Everett and Tremblay describe external moral reasoning as "lightness" and internal, virtue based moral reasoning as "heavy." Their closing comments reflect these adjectives: "While the professional bodies may not be happy with adopting such a heavy or weighty role, it may well be that their current lightness is only contributing to the deprofessionalization or proletarianization of accounting which is to say they might be the architects of their own (unbearable) lightness" (p.194).

Also in the field of auditing, Libby & Thorne(2007) grounded some of their work in MacIntyre (1981) to develop a measure of auditor virtue. In doing so their study explored the relation between auditors' virtue and professional judgment. They also validated and refined previous auditor virtue models in their surveys. Their results included reliability scores greater than .70 in accordance with Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1951) but their scales and surveys were not consistent with traditional cardinal virtues as defined by Plato. Their results

demonstrated four specific virtues with the greatest importance for auditors: integrity, truthfulness, independence, and objectivity.

This dissertation research has been established as qualitative in both nature and methodology. However, criticisms of virtue ethics often extend from what is interpreted as its abstract nature and the difficulty of measuring its presence. Therefore, the quantitative nature of studies like that of Libby & Thorne (2007) help quell this misnomer. For that reason, this literature review now turns to explore the existence of quantitative virtue ethics surveys because they provide greater credibility to the importance of the virtues. They also provide significant opportunities for future quantitative research in accounting and virtue ethics.

### **Virtue Ethics in Quantitative Leadership Literature**

Ethics and leadership are often interrelated. Therefore, before discussing specific virtue instruments, it is appropriate to review extant leadership theories in the literature.

Transformational Leadership is a leadership style that has grown in influence of late. The term was first used by Downton (1973) in his book titled *Rebel Leadership: Commitment and Charisma in a Revolutionary Process*. Later, Pulitzer Prize winner and leadership theorist James Burns defined transformation leadership as “A relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (Burns, 1978, p. 4). Bass and Avolio developed a Multi-Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and further defined transformational leadership as follows:

The transformational leader arouses heightened awareness and interests in the group or organization, increases confidence, and moves followers gradually from concerns for existence to concerns for achievement and growth...in short, transformational leaders

develop their followers to the point where followers are able to take on leadership roles and perform beyond established standards or goals. (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 28)

Transformation leadership is differentiated from transaction leadership which is defined as scripted exchanges between leaders and followers for the accomplishment of specific tasks or prescribed goals. Transaction leadership theory describes and explains the interactions that result in the completion of such specific transactions (McCloskey, 2015). The following excerpt bears a striking resemblance to the child/candy/chess scenario previously described by MacIntyre (1981):

The leader gets the follower to use his or her valued commodity to help the leader accomplish the task or goal in exchange for something of value to the follower (money, approval, or the satisfaction of a meaningful job well done). And the follower in turn fulfills their end of the bargain by exchanging something of value to the leader (an important need met, task accomplished, or goal achieved). Transactional leadership revolves around “the deal” that appeals to the self-interest of both leader and follower. (McCloskey, 2015, p. 5)

Transformation leadership is important to this study because it has been found to have a strong positive correlation with virtue ethics as measured by a quantitative survey instrument namely, the Leadership Virtue Questionnaire (LVQ) (Riggio et al., 2015). Conversely, the LVQ found laissez-faire leadership, and narcissistic leadership to have strong negative relations with virtue. Laissez-faire leaders are extremely hands-off and tend to over-delegate and avoid taking stands or intervening in matters. Both active and passive managers by exception also demonstrated negative correlations with virtue in the LVQ study. Riggio et al. studied ethical leadership from a characterological vantage. This relates to an individual’s internal moral

character which dovetails consistently with this study's understanding of virtue ethics. Their instrument defines a virtuously ethical leader as one who observes Aristotle's four cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice. One comparable study in business that measured transformational leadership and virtue ethics was Gonzalez et al. (2012), who found that the higher a leader scored in the cardinal virtues of prudence and fortitude using the LVQ, the more their followers, peers, and supervisors rated them as transformational leaders. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2011) tested an Ethical Leadership Model (ELM) in Chinese organizations and found that their ELM was strongly and positively correlated with the LVQ and positive leadership traits including job satisfaction and moral identity. Hackett & Wang (2012) considered Confucian cardinal virtues in addition to Aristotelian and proposed a six variable LVQ adding humanity and truthfulness to courage, temperance, justice and prudence. However, empirical support for their additions was not included in their publication.

Therefore, the literature establishes that transformational leadership may exude virtue ethics while management by exception leaders and laissez-faire leadership may not.

Transformation leadership resonates internally in both the leader and the followers. Transaction leadership is motivated by external rewards or objectives.

The literature includes other examples of assessment instruments that attempt to measure the ethics of organizational leaders. Brown, Treviño, & Harrison (2005) developed the Ethical Leadership Scale and empirically concluded ethical conduct within organizations is promoted by the behavior of its leaders. Another instrument, the Ethical Leadership Work Questionnaire developed by Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh (2011) defined seven ethical leader behaviors: fairness, integrity, ethical guidance, people orientation, power sharing, role classification, and concern for sustainability. Kalshoven et al. contributed a multi-dimensional

tool that helps to understand what leads up to ethical leadership as well as subsequent consequences of it. However, these and other instruments are limited in that they derive information about leaders from their followers.

The Ethical Leadership Style Questionnaire (ELSQ) created by Northouse (2012) and further developed by Chikeleze & Baehrend (2017) distinguishes itself from other instruments because it is based on the leader's self-perception about making a decision when faced with an ethical dilemma, rather than on the perceptions of followers. It has not been used extensively due only to its newness and relatively recent validation. Nonetheless, its basis in normative ethics, including the virtues, makes it relevant in this study. It was developed to evaluate the ways a leader approaches an ethical predicament. Increased emphasis on why people make unethical decisions has been apparent in the literature since the recent VW and Wells Fargo scandals as described by Carucci (2016) and Ochs (2016).

Based on a series of moral dilemma vignettes, the ELSQ categorizes a leader's primary and secondary ethical leadership styles by distinguishing among six predispositions: virtue, duty, utilitarianism, justice, caring, and egoism. Developers of the ELSQ found that leaders tend to be grounded in these six philosophical orientations which in turn determines their ethical leadership style or how they respond to a situation. Northouse defines ethical leadership style as "the ethical orientation used by a leader when resolving the issues associated with making decisions and taking action" (Chikeleze & Baehrend, 2017, p. 1). He defines the deontological orientation (duty) as doing what is right. The utilitarianism orientation is defined as doing what would benefit the most people, while the virtue orientation is defined as doing what a good person would do (Chikeleze & Baehrend, 2017).

It may be a reasonable supposition that in order for an accounting professor to demonstrate proclivity towards teaching virtue ethics they would first demonstrate a predisposition towards virtue in their own ethical leadership style. With this understanding, the next hypothesis of our study again demonstrates opportunity for future study.

This literature review examined virtue ethics and its position among other normative ethics that have had significant influence on the evolution of accounting as a profession. It examined the interactions of respective ethical schools in the accounting profession before exploring the literature that describes the challenges of teaching accounting ethics. It also explored specific virtue ethics in accounting literature before examining a sample of quantitative survey instruments further establishing the importance and effectiveness of virtue ethics in business leadership. This review served to relate this dissertation topic to the ongoing dialogue of ethics that is taking place in the accounting profession and it provides a framework for reinforcing the importance of this qualitative study as prescribed in Creswell (2014).

### **Chapter 3: Method**

It has been previously established that the accounting profession is supportive of enhancing ethics in accounting curricula, but often accounting professors are neither prepared nor certain of how to teach accounting ethics (Brands & Lange, 2016; Cameron & O’Leary, 2015; Gaa & Thorne, 2004; Loeb, 1991; see also Sheehan & Schmidt, 2015). Might this issue be further exacerbated by a lack of understanding of and appreciation for classic virtue ethics? Given the internal nature of virtue ethics and the consequences of this academic dilemma, a qualitative research method is in order for this study. Such a method should enable the researcher to understand the hearts and minds of accounting instructors through their individual experiences of ethics.

#### **Qualitative Method and Narrative Design**

Qualitative research methods are appropriate for investigating and comprehending the meaning of a social or human enigma (Creswell, 2014). In general terms, a narrative design of qualitative research is an informative organization of verbatim material which is gathered by the researcher in oral and/or written format. Narrative research examines and conceptualizes human experiences as they are embodied in documented form. Narrative research presumes people recognize life experiences as stories which relate events in the manner of a storyline containing beginning, middle, and end points (Wertz et al., 2011).

With consideration to the superabundance of regulation and utility governing the accounting profession and how it is taught, the narrative design of this study intends to give participants the opportunity to tell stories of their educational experience of ethics and their understanding of virtue including the variables discussed in Chapter 2. Relevant views of the participant’s ethics stories are combined with those of the researcher’s life (Clandinin, 2004) in a collaborative

narrative aimed at gaining understanding through experiences of ethics, and virtue ethics in particular, in accounting curriculums. This study does not attempt to quantify or generalize data (Creswell, 2014) but instead provides a voice for describing the human experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) of ethics and accounting instructors.

The essence of qualitative research was once described as research where “the tyranny of numbers is abandoned for the enigma of words” (Jones, 2004, p. 98). The source of such words in this project was in-depth interviews conducted according to a qualitative protocol (Creswell, 2014). Interviews were a collaborative, iterative process requiring the researcher to establish credibility and trust with participants. Interviews were conducted at the participant’s site or office, allowing them to be observed in a convenient and relaxed environment. After an informal and objective ice-breaker, the researcher spoke directly with individual participants about their specific life experiences and understanding of virtue ethics. A set of specific questions were available for general navigation purposes in the interview process to reinforce the interests of the researcher as needed. However, the conversation was informal and prompted by open ended questions, allowing the researcher to listen to and observe participants in their life experiences and understanding of virtue ethics and their interests, desires, and abilities to teach it in their accounting courses. Through the course of this interview process the researcher remained open to new questions as each participant’s story emerged. In order to assure clarity and improve format, the researcher pilot tested specific interview questions prior to the interview process (Creswell, 2014).

According to Merriam (2002), the goal of qualitative study is to understand the participants’ meanings and feelings. Such meanings are observed by individuals as they partake in the world which they interpret (Daher et al., 2017). The final project is a narrative that is reconstructed

from the experiences and stories and the meanings that are attached to them (Creswell, 2014).

This provides a lens through which readers can begin to understand the existence of, or lack of, consideration attributed to virtue ethics in these particular accounting curriculums.

According to Abbott (2008), narratives technique consists of two elements: the story and the narrative discourse. The narrative discourse conveys the story. The story is a “chronological sequence of events involving entities” (Abbott, 2008, p. 241). Abbott distinguishes characters as entities who engage in acts, in contrast to non-conscious entities who cannot. Furthermore, he states that a story is constrained by laws of time moving in a single direction from beginning, through a middle and arriving at an end. Abbott further suggests that a reader never really views a story directly. Instead it is picked up through the narrative discourse so the story is mediated by a voice, writing style, and other interpretations that might even include camera angles and actor’s interpretations. Consequently, what we refer to as a story is actually something we build. Conveying a narrative is actually a reporting of a phenomenon in which even the narrator plays a role. The story is assembled from what is seen or read or even inferred. Participants reconstructed their experiences; which the researcher recorded and reconstructed yet again. In Clandinin (2013) we are reminded of the importance of understanding that our memories are not exact replications of original events. They are recollections. This concept is central to how narrative researchers understand past events. In the same book, Carr (1986) is cited as reminding the reader that the historical past can restrict us; it does have a permanence which then allows reinterpretation, but only up to certain limits. Therefore, narrative design emerges as a balanced art form which captures events from the past while allowing the narrator to view and describe them as a temporal unfolding which may be viewed in current times.

The interviews in this study serve as a narrative text which are retold, as recommended by Merriam (2002), in story form with a beginning, middle and ending. This story consists of a joint reconstruction of both the participants' and the researcher's experiences in virtue ethics as they relate to the research question. This collaborative narrative (Clandinin, 2004) is organized around momentous events as prescribed in Riessman (1993).

Narrative strategies to enhance the strength and authenticity of this study were adopted from Creswell (2014). Examples of such strategies include the use of analogies and metaphors to clarify the researcher's understandings and using direct quotations from participants within the narrative to support the use of first person in the study.

The experience of ethics can be personal. Virtue ethics can involve both reason and emotion. At this juncture these realities are appropriately studied through qualitative, narrative design because it allows the researcher to enter deeply into the experiences of participants with free-flowing examination of their storied experiences. The data generalization aspects of quantitative analysis would be more of a constraint at this stage.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

In this study, as with most qualitative research, the researcher was the primary research instrument and story teller (Creswell, 2014; Rudestam, 2007). The researcher also served as the overall project manager, acting as the compass, conductor, and promoter (Martinelli et al., 2017). This role as research instrument lies in stark contrast to the comparable role in quantitative studies where, according to Rudestam (2007), the researcher is nearly irrelevant. With quantitative research the extraneous role of the researcher allows the study to be repeated by others consistently, which may provide further validation for generalization of findings.

Furthermore, quantitative research often utilizes instruments such as questionnaires which rely on randomness. Such was not the case in this study.

As the primary instrument, the researcher collected and *mediated* the data. Therefore, he also disclosed relevant aspects of himself including assumptions or biases, in addition to beliefs and experiences which may have affected his approach to conducting the research and mediating the data (Greenbank, 2003). The researcher documented and clarified in a distinct research journal the personal reflections, responses and insights which used in his bracketing techniques (Creswell, 2014).

In this study the researcher used bracketing for two purposes, as described by Fischer (2009). The first purpose was to recognize and set aside personal assumptions and beliefs. This is done to prevent researchers from superimposing their own theories from literature or frames of reference onto the participant's responses (Creswell, 2014). The second purpose was to interpret the data using an iterative approach of evolving comprehension until a point of saturation was reached (Fischer, 2009; Packer, 2011). This categorical bracketing played a role in determining what to render from interviews. Text was presented in such a manner that it supported conclusions reached from the words and body language observed in the interviews (Riessman, 1993).

Aside from the topic of virtue ethics, there were ethical considerations the researcher was obliged to consider with regard to the participants and the institutions involved These were addressed with the following procedures as portrayed by (Creswell, 2014):

1. Each participant was provided with documentation describing the purpose, nature and scope of the study.
2. Informed consent was obtained from each participant.

3. Confidentiality of each participant's involvement and data was secured by the researcher.
4. The interview process was completed as defined.
5. The specific roles of the researcher and each participant was defined and documented.
6. The process and format of reporting the study results were described.
7. A detailed diary of procedures was maintained throughout the study.

### **The Data Collection Process**

The data collection process was comprised of establishing boundaries of the study, identifying participants, determining interview sites, defining data recording techniques, and the identification of potential ethical concerns (Creswell, 2014). However, it is important to note that qualitative research requires a certain degree of flexibility and fluidity in its process. Adjustments are often necessary in order to capture a complete experience that relates to the phenomenon (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011). This study recognizes and embraces such elasticity and carefully reports on all methodological adjustments.

### **Boundaries of This Study**

Themes explored in this study may be described as:

- the purpose for teaching ethics in accounting;
- challenges to teaching ethics in accounting;
- the professor's personal experience of ethics; and
- the professor's understanding and use of virtue ethics.

These themes evolved as participants exchanged stories and experiences with the researcher, and such evolutions were reported as they occurred in the process.

### **Acknowledged Biases**

The researcher wishes to acknowledge a special appreciation of the virtues which was instilled in his own formation at an early age and subsequently rejuvenated in the pursuit of his terminal degree coursework and research. The researcher was educated in a predominately Christian setting. His parents fled famine in the middle east and communism in Cuba before settling in the Midwest. This diverse formation exposed the researcher to many cultures at an early age. The researcher is also an experienced accounting instructor who teaches virtue ethics in his classes. Despite these realities, there were no predetermined outcomes for this study. The researcher conscientiously guarded against any personal biases of his own formation as prescribed by Creswell (2014; see also Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009) in conducting this research. The researcher relied on skills learned during his career as a public and internal auditor to guard against personal bias. Given the education of the participants, the researcher did not expect any written or verbal communication challenges.

### **Participants and Sites for the Study**

This study did not randomly select accounting instructors to be interviewed since generalization was not a goal of the research (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011). Nonetheless participants in this study have the ability to influence curriculum beyond the courses that they directly teach. They have faculty voting rights in terms of departmental accounting curriculum decisions. Such rights are not consistently applied to titles like professor, associate professor, or assistant professor from university to university, so such titles may not be useful in selecting participants. Instead, department chairs in each institution were consulted to determine which faculty members have such voting rights. The institutions were selected from accredited two and four-year colleges offering accounting degrees within a one-hour drive from Portland, Oregon.

Institutions at which the researcher is currently employed or a registered student were excluded. Those meeting the criteria were Portland State University, The University of Portland, Pacific University, Portland Community College, and Clark Community College. Ten participants were selected for interviews. Final selection of specific participants was based on the researcher's assessment of each volunteer's understanding, interest and ability to provide the best information as described in Creswell (2014). In order to allow the participants a familiar location from which to reflect comfortably on the subject matter, interviews took place in the participant's office or conference room of choice. If they preferred an alternative location such as a local coffee shop or cafe, reasonable accommodations were made.

### **Types of Data Collected**

Initially, each participant completed the following forms:

- Participation Application Form
- Demographic Information Form
- Informed Consent Agreement Form

These forms were prepared by the researcher and approved by the George Fox University Institutional Review Board. Completed forms were signed prior to the start of the interviews and data collection. The interview process consisted of iterative person-to-person discussions. The number of interviews depended on the saturation point of subject matter with each participant, as described in Creswell (2014). According to Rudestam (2007), data recording may be described in dimensions of fidelity and structure where a properly recorded, open-ended interview carries high fidelity with little structure, while a standard set of test questions answered on paper would carry high structure. This study has high fidelity around its predetermined boundaries as its objective. Interviews commenced with open-ended questions

prepared by the researcher related to the participant's personal experience of ethics in life as well as in the classroom. The boundaries described above were embedded in the open-ended questions, but participants were free to describe their experiences and tell their stories in their own manner so long as they remained remotely on-subject. Detailed observations were made by researcher of how the participants define words like virtue, ethics, morality, law and utility. Participants' obvious moods and body language as they described such terms were also observed, as the researcher interpreted all meanings conveyed. During the study, participants were asked to keep an electronic diary of their experiences in the research for further discernment and follow-up thoughts. This provided an opportunity for participants to further discern and elaborate discussion topics and document thoughts or concerns that were not said in the interviews, as described in Creswell (2014).

### **Data Recording Procedures**

**Interview Data.** Initial and subsequent interviews were recorded using a small, unobtrusive video camera (a GoPro). In addition, comprehensive field notes were taken by the researcher during the interviews. Subsequent phone meetings and emails were documented and included in the researcher's comprehensive notes.

This study subscribes to many of the interview procedures described in Creswell (2014). For example, interview notes and recording files were labeled with the name of the participant, date, time, and place of the interaction. An interview question protocol was documented prior to data collection to assure that similar procedures were used from one interview to the next. This protocol included some soft opening banter to put the participants at ease going into the interview. A series of open-ended questions related to the themes described above were then asked. Respondents were encouraged to elaborate with real life examples.

**Observation Data.** The researcher was charged with observing and documenting relevant details including body language, the overall tone of the conversation and the mood of the participant. Initially the researcher only had time to document observations. However, each day after the interview the researcher reviewed his notes and transcribed them electronically. At this time, thoughts and feelings which were influenced by the interview observations were documented or memo'd as prescribed by Miles et al. (2014). These memos become part of the documented field notes.

In addition to a verbal expression of appreciation, a hand-written "thank you" card was mailed to each participant expressing gratitude for the valuable time and experiences that they shared.

### **Document Data**

The researcher maintained a separate, electronic file of all notes and videos for each participant and kept an electronic backup for contingency purposes. When not in use, these notes and all related documentation were locked in a fireproof safe in the researcher's home office.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis was an ongoing, iterative process commencing with the immediate review and transcription of interview notes and the memoing technique described by Miles et al. (2014). In this study the researcher was charged with making sense out of all that was said, and in some cases what might not be said but implied by the participants (Creswell, 2014). The following steps were taken in the data analysis of this study as prescribed by Creswell (2014), Moustakas (1994) and Murray & Chamberlain (1999).

A preliminary review of field notes and videos was made to establish an understanding of overall content so that data can be organized. Coding was used to segment data according to

themes and, if necessary, sub-themes based on assertions made by the participants. More specifically, the left margin was used to code anything that impressed the researcher as being fascinating or substantial in what the participant described. After several reviews of the notes, the right margin was used to document emerging theme titles and connections with other parts of the data. A similar approach was taken when reviewing the videos, but the time stamp of each substantial event or theme was used to link codes with the videos. Coding themes were summarized on a matrix into a final master list of themes. The researcher then selected three to five superordinate themes into a narrative account. The selection of the superordinate themes was not based merely on frequency of occurrence. The richness of the themes and how they were described were also taken into account.

### **Strategies for Validating Findings**

Qualitative research may require unique validation methods because reliable replication of the study is not an objective (Creswell, 2014). According to (Mishler, 1990, p. 419) and also quoted in (Rudestam, 2007), validation in the qualitative sense is “the trustworthiness of reported observations, interpretations, and generalizations.” This study will validate its findings in accordance with the methods prescribed by Rudestam who suggests that validity describes the extent of which the researcher’s inferences are grounded in the experiences of the research participants. In (Rudestam, 2007, pg. 113) he further suggests that validity may be accomplished by “spending sufficient time with participants to check for distortions, exploring the participant’s experience in sufficient detail, videotaping interviews for comparison with recorded data, clarifying tentative findings with the participants” and reworking hypotheses as additional findings prescribe. Corroborating with additional sources of data including participant diaries

and field notes also establishes the trustworthiness of the researcher's conclusions. A clear and meticulous audit trail of such methods will further establish credibility of the study.

As prescribed in Creswell (2014), the researcher was actively engaged in contemplation of the ordinary biases that stem from his own experiences as an accounting instructor and researcher of ethics. Clarification of biases was made based on recommendations of the review committee. Despite not being a peer at the time of this writing, the researcher implored his committee members in the same spirit of peer review and expected them to play a balanced judgment role by asking challenging questions about data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

### **Ethical Issues**

Codes of conduct issued by the American Psychological Association and American Educational Research Association are cited as guideline sources for utilitarian, fair and equitable research by Roberts (2010) as well as Rossman & Rallis (1998). Merriam (2002) suggests a different approach: even though qualitative researchers may rely on guidelines for ethical issues, responsibility for completing ethical research falls squarely on the shoulders of the researcher. This is because ethics can be slight and delicate. For example, she suggests there are no guidelines for determining when a positive interaction with a participant crosses a line and becomes a negative grilling. Similarly delicate circumstances may evolve around illegal situations or unanticipated harm to participants during the course of the study. The researcher needs to be aware of and sensitive to such possibilities and have the insight and courage to act appropriately and seek consultation when appropriate. According to Creswell (2014) the narrative approach may be particularly susceptible to delicate ethical considerations because of its inherent use of personal stories. Consequently, substantial trust must be established by the

researcher initially and continuously cultivated throughout the study. Trust can take time to build and may be suddenly lost.

In addition to the considerations described above, the researcher adopted the following guidelines (Creswell, 2014) with intentions of preventing immoral or unethical behavior throughout the course of this study. Neither the research question nor hypotheses were of an offensive or condescending nature towards participants. Themes and intentions of this study were transparent to all parties involved. The initial application of the study and the signed consent forms clearly state the purpose of this study and the intent to use data collected from participant stories and experiences. Open-ended questions used for uniformity and guiding the initial and follow-up meeting reinforced the purpose of the study. Some of the more obvious but important ethical controls include the fact that the researcher did not use intimidating or forceful tactics to solicit data. Coercion was not be used or tolerated in the study. Identities of the participants were protected and kept confidential. Each participant was asked to approve a fictitious name to be used in the course of any direct quotations.

The researcher was also aware of potential tensions, anxieties, and delicate exposures which may can arise in the course of honest discussions regarding ethics. Pressures or concerns can be exacerbated by miscommunication and misunderstandings. To alleviate such tensions, the researcher actively sought feedback development from participants throughout the study. These documented feedback sessions gave participants more than one opportunity to voice their experiences clearly and ensured they concurred with how their experiences were documented. Feedback sessions served to enhance the validity of the study. Additionally, the researcher was vigilant in averting the biases that can occur concerning gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability or age.

Finally, in accordance with suggestions put forth in Creswell (2014), a pre-approved Informed Consent form was signed by each participant prior to the start of data collection. This form disclosed that all data developed in the course of this study is owned by the researcher. It also stated the study would not specifically identify participants, described the study's purpose, assured the confidentiality of the participant's identities, and outlined the expected contributions of each participant. Exceptions were only granted if a participant wished to be identified in the study and signed a form documenting such intentions. Participants were assured they could withdraw at any stage of the study, and the researcher's contact information was disclosed on the form.

### Chapter 4: Results

Eight participants were selected based on their ability to help the researcher understand the problem and address the research question (Creswell, 2014). Minimum requirements included that participants had taught or currently teach accounting full time for a minimum of two calendar years in an accredited university offering four-year degrees. Initially the researcher had subjectively planned to interview 10 participants. According to Creswell (2014), survey size in qualitative research should depend on the qualitative design being used. He found that narrative research frequently included one or two participants. In this study, the researcher was confident of data saturation with eight participants. It is also worth noting that participation rates were affected by two additional factors. First, some professors responded that they were either disinterested or felt unqualified to discuss ethics. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared during this research study, disrupting life for nearly every profession, including academia.

Initially the researcher stated that participants would have to have voting rights within their respective institutions. However, the researcher discovered various gradations of faculty governance in the three universities involved with this study. It was determined that a professor could have significant influence over their curriculum regardless of their voting rights. This study was concerned with professor behavior as opposed to governance structures. Therefore, the researcher selected participants that simply had the academic freedom to influence their curriculums with regard to technical matter and ethics. Seven of the eight participants had either a PhD or DBA along with a CPA license. One participant had an MBA coupled with substantial industry experience and had taught full time to AACSB standards for 14 years. The participants averaged 21 years of teaching experience with the longest having 38 years and the shortest having six. Two male and six female professors were selected from three different Pacific

Northwest universities. Two of the universities were state colleges accredited by the AACSB and the third was a private university accredited by the ACBSP. All of the universities were offering four-year accounting degrees. Participants were offered the convenience of meeting at a time and place most convenient and comfortable for them. Six of the participants chose to meet in or near their campus office and one candidate chose to meet in a local library conference room. Due to sickness, one participant chose to meet from their home via Zoom. All participant meetings were video recorded and participants were assured that their names and institutional affiliations would be kept confidential in the final report.

### **Trustworthiness of Results**

A qualitative researcher seeks trustworthiness “through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures (Creswell, 2014). Similarly, Rudestam (2007) described *member checks* as ways in which researchers return to participants and present written narrative with the intention of confirming the accuracy and credibility of the findings. Results described in this chapter of the study were transcribed from video recordings of each interview. The transcriptions were then sent back to each participant for review over a minimum of two weeks. Participants were also asked to keep a journal of subsequent thoughts or ideas that were not shared during the interview for subsequent inclusion in the study. Prior to the construction of this chapter, each participant was then asked if the transcription that they received was accurate and captured their true feelings and responses. None of the eight participants in this study challenged the transcriptions that they reviewed. This served to establish the trustworthiness of the participants’ data.

Many of the results landed around topics that were identified in the research questions of this study. The following pages report results in accordance with techniques described by Rudestam (2007) and Merriam (2002) as follows. A brief review of each participant's background was presented, followed by ideas and themes that developed from each respective interview. These emerging interview themes were validated and illustrated with direct quotes and references from the transcribed data. Individual themes were summarized on a master grid followed by further reflection and review. This resulted in additional, all-encompassing themes such that a large narrative emerged from the individual ones. This approach provided both clarity and consistency to the thematization analysis (Merriam, 2002).

### **Participant Overviews**

In order to encourage comfortable discussion of sensitive information the names of participants were changed, and the names of their respective institutions were kept confidential. This impedes readers' ability to piece together identities. Several of the participants expressed appreciation for this. The researcher selected each initial pseudonym and shared it with the participant. One participant requested a slight modification for sentimental reasons, which was honored and seemed to enhance the connection between the participant and the study. The following pages are intended to introduce the reader to each participant and describe their pre-existing understanding of philosophical ethics. This establishes the setting for further thematic analysis later.

Table 1

*Participant Descriptions*

Pseudonym	Gender	Education And Certification	Approximate Years Teaching	Heavy, Medium, or Light Industry Exposure	State/Private College
Faith	F	PhD/CPA	38	L	State
Matthew	M	DBA/CPA	12	H	State
Barbara	F	DBA,ABD/CPA	6	M	Private
Wyatt	M	PhD/CPA	30	L	Private
Therese	F	Phd/CPA	34	M	State
Ami	F	PhD/CPA	25	M	State
Lynn	F	PhD/CPA	8	L	State
Olympia	F	MBA	14	H	State

**Faith.** Faith held an endowed chair and had been teaching for 38 years - 21 years at her current institute. She was a Professor of Accounting with an Information Systems Management emphasis. Prior to academia she worked briefly in hospitality at a hotel in the eastern United States. Most recently she taught Accounting Information Systems, Cost Accounting, and a Block Chain course. Faith was asked about her understanding of general philosophic principles and of her familiarity with deontology, utilitarianism, and the classic virtues.

Faith described virtue ethics as “what’s inside you and principles that you live by;” utilitarianism was “considering the full consequences of your actions;” deontology was described as “doing the right thing regardless of consequence.” Faith stated that she subscribed to utilitarianism/stakeholder ethics on a personal basis but did not purposefully or directly profess that in her classes.

Faith considered social and environmental impact to be the ethics that she teaches. Faith suggested that social and environmental impacts go hand in hand with ethics. She did not often refer to ethics specifically in her courses but she believed that an important part of her research involved measuring social impact. Previously she was engaged in the research of corporate social reporting which considered corporate roles from the standpoint of minimizing harm. More recently she was engaged in microfinance where she says many claimed to be engaged in getting people out of poverty, but they failed to properly measure their effect. The social impact that she described as ethics in her courses involved changing people's lives in a measurable way in approaches that involve health, safety, and human rights. Faith appeared to be passionate about social impact and she aspired to be thorough about how it was measured in her research and how it was taught.

She was asked why? What were the sources of her motivation behind social and environmental impact? After a few moments of silence and apparent discernment of the question she first stated that she did not know her motivation then she suggested that in earning her tenure she had tools and a position that enabled her to make a big impact and she saw corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a good way to make that impact. She saw herself as being in a privileged position of teaching students and helping them figure out how to change the world. She recently authored a book that was published on the subject. The researcher reviewed the book but is withholding its title to maintain confidentiality. When asked if there were any more reasons behind her motivations in teaching social impact, she paused again before saying "I don't know." She then responded that her father was a social worker and involved in the Black Panthers many years ago, but she lost her father when she was only seven years old. After the researcher expressed sorrow, Faith began to refer to the contextual settings in which people make decisions

using “contexts” and “systems” almost interchangeably. She suggested that if systems were flawed and people existed within those systems, one might expect such people to fail, with the responsibility for the failure resting more on the system than the individual. She stated that contexts/systems can be very complex and difficult to correct. Accountants need to carefully consider the context or system that they are going to work in before committing to a career because it is difficult to change systems.

**Matthew.** Matthew is an Academic Director as well as an instructor. In addition to his DBA and MBA he holds a Master of Taxation. His 30-plus years of industry experience include working in the tax department of a Big Four accounting firm, as a Partner in a small CPA firm, and later as CFO of the U.S. based subsidiary of a European banking firm. After leaving the firm in 2002, Matthew continued as a consultant to the firm’s U.S. operations in the areas of financial reporting and analysis, internal controls and regulatory compliance. Matthew began teaching at his current institution in 2008. Over the years his teaching experiences included introductory and intermediate financial accounting, integrated accounting issues and financial statement analysis.

He loves to teach but currently has to spend more of his time in administration than teaching. He hopes to revert back more to teaching in the future. Currently he teaches one class per year but has taught as many as 5 classes per year in the past. He enjoys interacting and connecting with students and describes himself as more of a practitioner who teaches now than an academic. Matthew said that back when he attended school, students saw the value of obtaining a liberal arts education. “But things are different today. Students go to school today to find a job.”

Matthew was asked about his familiarity with deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics. He defined utilitarianism as “the most good for the most people or the greatest good.” He said

“deontology suggests there is an absolute right which is driven by some great authority which maybe God or maybe some other authority or set of laws.” He described virtue as sort of an Aristotelian ideal. “I cannot define it ...but it’s sort of the best way to be. What we aspire to as humans.” When asked if he subscribed to any of these personally his response was, “I personally profess to deontology because it’s in my personality. Today Utilitarianism is most prevalent in society, but accounting is dominated more by deontology.”

Matthew said that he grew up in a very religious Baptist environment and studied the Bible a lot. He even considered ministry as a career at one point. His father was a policeman and his mother a bookkeeper, “so there was a lot of deontology around.” He says he has a “perfectionist personality,” so knowing rules and following them gave him satisfaction. He added, “the Golden Rule was the right way to behave. I never speed. I’m comfortable following rules and I don’t make exceptions, and that worked for me in many professional companies. Rules are like covenants.”

One of Mathew’s stories included a time when he was the CFO of a “MoneyGram-like” clearinghouse business that asked him to record transactions on a gross instead of net basis because it would have a very favorable effect on their revenue growth. He realized this was one of the ways that Enron misrepresented its revenue. “I said no, we can’t do that.” He said he was grateful the CEO did not push back on him or his decision, and that he was not sure what he would have had to do next.

The researcher asked Matthew if students gained ethics preparedness working in the industry? He responded, “Probably not. The obligatory CPA ethics is a waste of time and mere formality. Nobody takes it seriously. Billable hours is always a greater priority.” Mathew also believed that accounting needed to be deontological because we live in such a litigious society.

He also suggested accounting text books do not offer much support for teaching ethics. He recommended a book, *The Reckoning*, (Soll, 2014) which epically describes the role of accounting in world history. In short, the book described accounting as a critical vocation. Going back over 700 years it describes how financial accountability was at the basis of building businesses, states and empires through the Italian Renaissance, Spanish and British Empires, the Dutch republic as well as the birth of the United States. It repeatedly demonstrates how decent accounting practices created degrees of trust that were necessary to create stable governments, critical societies, and wealth. It also describes how poor financial decision-making often resulted in turmoil, economic transgressions, and civil mayhem.

**Barbara.** Barbara completed the coursework of her DBA in Europe, where she lived and traveled extensively. Her work experience includes auditing energy, technology, and forestry clients with a big four firm, an international audit, tax, and advisory firm, and working in financial planning and analysis with a Medicaid and Medicare insurance provider. Barbara grew up in a south-central state in the U.S., then made her way to the Northwest for her early graduate program. After gaining work experience she had the opportunity to live in northern Europe for two years and traveled extensively throughout western Europe. She also served in the past as the Treasurer of the Board of Directors of a non-profit organization that engaged youth in music and performance in order to promote self-esteem, social skills, and emotional expression.

Barbara was asked about her familiarity with deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics. She chose to start with utilitarianism and said, "It evaluates things based on how useful they are - sort of a pragmatic approach." She was not as familiar with deontology or virtue ethics so we took a few moments to acclimate. While she was not familiar with the terms of deontology and virtue ethics, she did seem comfortable with the concepts as described earlier in this study. We

briefly discussed the founders, Bentham, Kant, Plato and Aristotle and established that virtue ethics were much older than utilitarianism or deontology but were supplanted by them in the age of enlightenment. Aristotle referenced virtue with fullness, completeness and happiness in Eudaimonia and the founding fathers referenced it in “the pursuit of happiness.” This initial discussion became our backdrop. The virtues say instead of looking outside yourself for utility or laws, look inside yourself for goodness. Barbara commented now that this was coming back to her from her philosophy classes and noted that she did not think her students studied philosophy anymore. She stated that she had students from a lot of different religious backgrounds and she respected them all, so she avoided going into any religious discussion. Barbara said she discusses values and ethics and doing what’s right in class, but without any sort of religious reference. It was strictly a business practice.

The researcher was a little surprised at this, because Barbara teaches at a private Christian university. The researcher mentioned that he teaches at a state college and likewise has to avoid ordaining one particular faith over another, or any faith at all, but suggested the virtues of faith, hope, and love had natural qualities as well as supernatural and discussing such with students was not only acceptable but perhaps even crucial towards their moral development. Barbara did not disagree.

The researcher inquired as to which of the three philosophical ethics prevailed most in her classroom discussions of ethics. “I would say adhering to the rules, obviously, because of GAAP and auditing standards, but the students ask me a lot about my experiences and that would be more like the classical. I don’t really subscribe to utilitarianism much.”

Barbara believes that we need to have rules but, “I think there is a way to say that some of these virtues are just good things you should do. Certain things you just should or shouldn’t do...you shouldn’t lie about things, you shouldn’t commit fraud.”

The researcher asked Barbara, “Why shouldn’t you lie or commit fraud?” And Barbara responded, “Because it’s just...I don’t know...I think in human nature there is just some things...in society there are just some things that you should or shouldn’t do.”

The researcher persisted, “And what you are supposed to do is driven by...?” Barbara replied:

I don’t know...rules or the way you treat people. My parents have always treated people kindly so I think I have always had that example. You don’t want to hurt people you don’t want to step on people or use people. You want to view people as people, so it’s a combination of that and the fact that it is easier to make it through the system if you follow the rules.

**Wyatt.** Wyatt has served as the chair of the accounting department in his current institution for over 12 years. With roots in the southern U.S., he started his accounting career working for an international accounting firm in the south-central U.S. He passed the CPA exam before going back to school to earn his master degree in economics from a prestigious school on the east coast, and went on to earn his PhD in economics. He has 30 years of teaching experience, primarily in accounting, economics and finance. He also serves on the board of directors of a children's theater and as a member of the Rotary Club. He is married with four children and three grandchildren. Wyatt published work related to God and economics.

Wyatt was asked about his familiarity with deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics.

“I’m familiar with Bentham and utilitarianism because I have an economics degree—greatest good for the greatest number of people.” Wyatt seemed more familiar with the concepts of

deontology and the virtues than with the terms, so we discussed those a little further. Deontology was described as being rules-based; the researcher cited the Ten Commandments and the AICPA code of professional conduct as examples of rules that are the source of ethical behavior in deontology. Wyatt grabbed a pen and paper and began taking notes as we discussed these philosophies. The researcher mentioned examples of utilitarianism (WACC, IRR) and deontology (GAAP, IFRS) in accounting and mentioned that as a profession, accounting evolved during the rise of these philosophies, which were not as ancient as the virtues. The researcher described the renaissance of virtue ethics that is apparent in the literature beginning at about 1950 and the reference to eudemonic happiness in the Declaration of Independence, which predated the rise of utilitarianism and deontology.

Wyatt felt that an economist assumes one brings value to the table and he appeared rather curious and open to the philosophical discussion which included MacIntyre's child and chess game story followed by a discussion of the accounting scandals and their relationships to these philosophies. Wyatt was asked if he personally gravitated towards one of the three philosophies, and if so, why? He responded:

Yes, I gravitate towards virtue ethics. My background is a Christian one. Christ was more concerned with your heart and soul than rules. That is how I have always viewed it. You have to get somebody to want to do what is right as opposed to making a bunch of rules because situations change. I did study Bentham quite a bit but the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people never really appealed to me because I thought utilitarianism could be devolved into a short run, feels good for the present moment but not in the long run. In graduate school I would maximize utility functions subject to a budget constraint

all the time but I never fully bought into utilitarianism as per se. What you describe as virtue ethics is the one that I have always employed.

The researcher stated that Wyatt's position may be unusual when considering his accounting and economic background. Wyatt responded that there is more to life than economic transactions. He stated, "Things that are most important are non-economic...love and relationships...and good will values of virtue ethics are not economic." Wyatt professed to his students that there is a difference between self-interest and selfishness. He described selfishness as "only looking out for yourself" while "self-interest is looking out for yourself so that you can look out for your family and your circle around you and doing things that are best for your community."

**Therese.** The researcher was covering a few classes for Therese while she was on sabbatical and had limited discussions with her regarding ethics beforehand. Prior to meeting with her, the researcher reviewed Therese's college profile, which stated that she served as an associate professor in the Accounting department of a state college where she taught intermediate accounting, accounting systems, and auditing. She had conducted empirical and behavioral ethics research related to public accounting. She also led ethics training for CPA's who attended her state-approved ethics continuing education course. It further stated that Therese had published work in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, the *International Journal of Auditing*, the *Journal of Forensic Accounting: Auditing, Fraud, and Taxation*, *Issues in Accounting Education*, *Advances in Behavioral Accounting Research* and the *Journal of Accounting Literature*.

When asked if she would share her familiarity with the concepts of deontology, utilitarianism, and classic virtue ethics she responded that she would do her best starting with deontology, which she described as:

The one where if the rules say it's ok you will be more likely to act in that direction and then I think of consequentialism as being one of them as well where the ends justifies the means...Is that the same as utilitarianism?

The researcher responded that she was pretty close to his understanding of it and sometimes stakeholder ethics also fall into that category. She stated:

And virtue ethics I have always thought of as...realizing there is more than one philosophy in it...but it is morally right to do if you feel it inside. That it's the moral thing to do. It's what you base your life off of. That's how I look at it and I'm probably off-base.

To which the researcher responded, "No actually you are spot on if that is how you feel."

Discussion continued on the characteristics and history of the three philosophical ethics, until Therese said she felt one of the struggles in the classroom was that "the students say that if it doesn't break the law...it must be okay, and I feel very strongly that we need to move them away from looking at our practice that way."

When asked which ethics she gravitated towards personally she humbly responded that she subscribed to virtue because it is how she was raised and that it was her religion. Therese continued to describe her upbringing and eventually transitioned into how she and her husband raised their own children:

Together we felt that in raising our family we wanted them to be a light...do you know what I mean?...by their actions and by their words and who they are...doing the right things...I can't put it any other way...so that's kind of been the way we are...I feel like I'm not being very humble, but it's not that at all...the biggest problem that my husband and I have is we tend to be quiet or passive in the face of people who do not act the same

way or who act in the manner that's appropriate...that's something I have worked on in my life.

The researcher responded that he was sort of the opposite in the sense that he often felt he had to work on his temperance, to which Therese simply responded, "See I admire that so much when you can just come out and say it, but (name omitted) and I are like two peas in a pod."

**Ami.** Ami was born in the Midwest and earned her first degree before marrying and earning her Master and PhD degrees in accounting in the Northwest. She worked as a certified public accountant and securities analyst before being asked to teach at a research-based public university. Currently she serves as associate professor of accounting and the academic director of the business school. Ami had also shared her teaching skills internationally, having taught MBA-level accounting courses in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She was also qualified by a state board of accountancy to offer continuing education classes to CPAs, which she did using the *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV) program referenced by others in this study (Gentile, 2010).

As with the other participants, Ami was asked about her familiarity with deontology, utilitarianism and the classic virtues in order to establish a consistent starting point for our deeper discussions. She stated that deontology is a form of ethics with clear boundaries of right verses wrong, and there is a true right which is sort of an ideal right. She wondered whether her answer was accurate, to which the researcher responded, "Not bad...and what do you think is the source of the 'right?' What determines those boundaries?" Ami stated, "that's a good question...if I look at that in an accounting context I would say that if you leaned towards the deontological side of ethics you would interpret the code of professional conduct more strictly." We continued our review of key aspects and history of the philosophical ethics and then Ami distinguished her understanding from other participants with the following statement:

I see that deontology and utilitarianism stand on a continuum, right? But the virtue ethics really doesn't sit on that continuum, right? It defines you and then depending on how you define yourself you will go either here or here (she is scratching with a pencil on a paper). So I guess I don't know many people who do either this or this...so I don't see them as "ors." I see deontology and utilitarianism as "ors" but I don't see virtue ethics that way. I think it's more of a base line.

For more clarity the researcher asked Ami to describe a time in her own life when she faced a serious ethical situation. He asked if she could describe how she processed it. The participant described a time when the university was attempting to maximize revenues that they earned from the state which were based on credit hours taught. This particular incident concerned graduate students and requiring master's students to sign up for additional hours, which would increase tuition and state funding proportionately. Ami felt that the additional hours could be justified with PhD students because they required additional support with their dissertations, but MBA-type students had no such dissertation requirement and she could not, in her own mind, justify the additional credits for such students. After consulting with colleagues, she made a moral decision to refuse the heavy recommendations of requiring master students to register for the additional classes.

She faced a lot of pushback and pressure for many months, but insisted administrators could not force her to execute such policy and continued to refuse. Some of her superiors argued this was a type of victimless crime (excluding the taxpayer) and that the ends would justify the means. Ami described several variations of the unethical strategy that other units were adopting around the state but Ami continued to refuse. The researcher stated, "That's quite a stance you took." To which she responded:

In my mind I never really pondered taking such a risk or participating because I have tenure, and I always have the capacity to leave my job, I have done that since day one...one thing I learned in college was always have the ability to quit...and I am not one to be intimidated on things like that where I have established my thinking around what is genuinely happening. I can be intimidated but not when I understand the actual circumstances of what is taking place. And so we didn't do it...and it wasn't pleasant...the number of times I received reports that said I was out of specs or I was not doing what I was "supposed" to be doing...and I just ignored them...did you get the report? Yeah, I got the report. Well what are you going to do about it? Nothing...I'm not going to talk to them...you go talk to them if you want to but I'm not going to...and you're not authorized to sign them up for those credits...and so I just ignored it...if you don't want me to be academic director anymore that's fine...find somebody else to do it and I will just go back to teaching all my classes.

Eventually the conflict was discovered by authorities and the university had to shamefully face consequences. Several people were fired and Ami's courageous stance was vindicated. When asked which type of ethics she applied during this long episode she responded with comfortable confidence:

Virtue ethics, you know, because I was not following any rules, and from a utilitarianism perspective I never considered the costs or benefits of me getting caught or even the additional revenue from the credits because I wouldn't see the additional revenue, so it was just something I was not comfortable doing.

**Lynn.** When I interviewed Lynn she was teaching intermediate accounting at a state research institute where she had taught for 8 years and was serving as the Beta Alpha Psi (BAP)

faculty advisor. She earned a Ph.D. in accounting from a prominent East Coast college. Her extensive research topics include corporate governance, capital markets, shareholder litigation and international studies and she was published in top-tier periodicals including the *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis*, *Journal of Accounting and Public Policy*, and the *Journal of International Financial Management and Accounting*. She has written book chapters and served as an ad hoc reviewer for accounting and finance journals. Lynn received a master's degree in New England and her BA in Asia. She is married.

Lynn did not appear completely comfortable with the topic at hand. She frequently glared into her lap-top (the only participant who brought one to the interview) or crossed her arms during our discussion and often gave short and sharp responses. Her contributions were of particular interest to the researcher because she gave the impression, perhaps unintentionally at first, that the topic was irrelevant or unimportant. Clearly her background and experience were more geared towards quantitative research, but her classroom responsibilities made her relevant to this study. There are accounting professors with similar backgrounds and outlooks who declined to participate in the study for reasons like, "I have no interest or experience with the topic." The researcher was stunned initially at such responses since the very core of financial reporting relies on integrity and the fiduciary trust of accounting professionals. This dichotomy will be described later. After reviewing the specific methodology of this project Lynn was asked if she had any familiarity with deontology, utilitarianism or virtue ethics. She did not.

The researcher assumed she might be more familiar with the concepts than the specific terms and began to describe each of the concepts and a little of the history around them as well as the history of the accounting profession. Lynn nodded her head frequently but did not say

much. When asked if she subscribed to any of these or how she taught ethics in her classes she responded, “I don’t teach ethics.”

The researcher asked, “Why not?” and Lynn simply responded with her arms still folded. “I don’t have time.” The researcher thanked Lynn for her honest answer. Later he asked about her own ethical formation as a child in an Asian culture, to which Lynn shared:

I feel like it’s more the daily activities...it was not a specific event. I think one just knows...it’s kind of hard to tell where it comes from...[jovial laughter]...starting with your childhood you are read so many stories...in children’s books it’s very clear what is right and what is wrong...I feel most people just know what is right and wrong...in normal activities...like if you kill somebody that’s obviously wrong right? I think in daily life lots of things are black-and-white.

Lynn made a lot of cultural comparisons and even suggested ethics could not be taught, stating North Koreans are schooled about how to be good citizens, but it is all hypocritical. Lynn drew a comparison between teaching ethics and North Korea several times in our time together. She believes accounting teachers may need to teach more details about the rules and GAAP but not how to become good citizens. She seemed to feel strongly that teaching ethics was the equivalent of North Korean indoctrination, drawing this example more than once.

**Olympia.** Olympia has been teaching accounting and finance for 14 years at two state colleges. She also serves as an adjunct faculty coordinator and volunteers at high schools (teaching economics and personal finance). She serves as treasurer of local non-profits and provides strategic business consulting for independent projects. She holds an MBA from a large state college in the Northwest, where she also became an exchange student with a well-known school of management in the UK. Her credentials also include a B.A. in economics from an East

Coast university. Olympia has a considerable industry background with Hewlett Packard, Intel, Safeco, and Prudential Financial, where she was securities-licensed.

When describing her personal ethics formation, she gravitated towards being raised in a military household. Initially she described a lot of rules and then added the significance of honor in her childhood formation:

My dad was in submarines...as a commander. So there's responsibility. There's honor and good lord, you don't lie! Like they just, you just don't! There's just nothing that would be worse. I mean if you did something wrong, you stand up and apologize and say what you did like the personal responsibility is probably comes early in that scenario, there's conflicts, there's problems there are things that are not right. I had, you know, people saluting me because I'm an officer's kid and I have a little sticker on the car like this is like, well, that's wrong...weird. But you understand the structure around it. So I think that upbringing from the military and my grandfather was in the military, you know, at a high rank and so that's probably where it comes from.

Olympia was asked to share a story of her childhood in which her father or grandfather had an ethical impacted on her.

Such a good question...[brief silence]...Well, such a long time ago. So this is a story from my dad who had expected to make Admiral, so this is a family lore kind of story but he didn't. The submarine came into doc and there was something wrong with a valve and his commanding officer wanted my dad to turn the valve off so that nobody knew it would be a problem. And my dad from his training recognized that would be a fire hazard that would be the wrong thing to do. And so he refused and he refused a direct order from a

commanding officer. So he went down and he sat near the valve while the boat was docking but he would not turn the valve off. Yea he got written up for it and he ended up losing the promotion opportunity ultimately ended up leaving the military over this...Had been serving the past 20 years or something. It's like, you know, it was a big deal and my grandfather was an admiral and this was an expected career path for my Dad. He had classmates and everyone sort of expected him to become an admiral.

The researcher expressed appreciation for Olympia's willingness to share such an important story and inquired further about the outcome for her father.

He just retired after being passed up for promotion. So between that and my...frankly my mom was a conscientious objector so he was always in some amount of trouble for that. So, he's passed up for that promotion and so he decided at that point that he wasn't going to make Admiral and he should leave the military. But he always recognized that valve issue as being a big part of it all. And then he went on to become a fortune 500 CEO like he went on and it was all good and it was it was the right happiness choice, as you have described it. And so that story in my family sort of showcases that there are hard decisions and you still have to make the right decision...and that's internal...even if it costs you.

### **Participants' Descriptive Themes**

Despite the various academic institutions (private and public), and differences in cultures, teaching and industry experiences, consistent themes emerged. Most of these themes dovetailed with topics described in the literature review. Therefore, theme results are presented in accord with topics described in the "Challenges of Teaching Accounting Ethics" section of the literature review. These influencing factors are followed by transformative observations and certain

manifestations that emerged in the study which seemed to suggest that they may serve as catalysts for change. Their potential as catalysts is apparent because these observations served to, in some cases, dramatically unite the pool of participants who were otherwise somewhat divided on their ethical perspectives. All of these descriptive themes were explored through discussions and written communications with study participants. Interview questions helped guide some of the themes and served as reasonable guard rails, but participants were reminded and encouraged to share and explore other themes that related to their own experiences in ethics. Table 2 summarizes the factors that influence virtue ethics teaching and the transformative observations that were described by participants.

Table 2.

*Descriptive Themes*

<p>Factors Influencing If and How Virtue Ethics is Taught:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of consensus and stability around ethics (what to teach/whether to teach it)</li> <li>2. Ethics divorced from character</li> <li>3. Inconsistent Understanding of Professionalism</li> <li>4. Technical/Ethics Mix</li> <li>5. Uneasiness discussing conscience and religion</li> </ol>
<p>Transformative Observations and Potential Catalysts for Change:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Former students facing Enron Moments</li> <li>2. Virtue Ethics in Practice</li> </ol>

**First Theme: Lack of Consensus and Stability around Ethics.** Results indicate there is little consistency or stability in how ethics are understood and whether to teach any ethics at all, let alone virtue ethics. For example, the data show two accounting professors in the same college have completely different understandings of ethics, as well as their role in teaching it. This

applies to the private college as well as the state colleges. Lynn, for example, stated quite frankly that she does not teach ethics. She only teaches technical material because she does not have time to teach anything else, and she does not believe ethics could be taught, regardless. “Unless you are a sociopath you know what is right and wrong, but many people just choose the wrong though they know it’s wrong.”

Ami had a very different understanding of her role in teaching technical accounting material and ethics:

I feel as though when I teach a course I have to decide between breadth and depth, and I’m always going to err on the side of depth. So rather than feeling like I have to teach 16 chapters because I have a 16-week term, I look more carefully at what are the important topics that we need to cover. What do they need to come away with? I’m not serving them well if they turn around and they don’t retain anything. So what are we doing that is repetitive and experiential and they can always learn the other less important topics if they have to but they come away learning say six topics very well. On that note I don’t think you can actually teach technical content alone. You have to look at choices involved. I used to teach an accounting course to engineers and that was always a challenge. Whenever you are in a situation where you have to make choices you have to consider costs/benefits. What are the trade-offs and those choices that have an ethics or legal component you have to kind of think about that. You have to prepare students not just for the technical content but how that technical content is going to be used. If you take revenue recognition as an example... You may be teaching to help them get a job with just technical material, but you might not be helping them to retain a job if you only teach technical material. Ami further stated that she found no problem devoting as much

as 20-30% of class time to ethics. She would fold ethics material in with the technical material in her courses because she believed that experience enhanced the effectiveness of both materials for the students.

Faith considers social impact and environmental issues to be the ethics that she teaches, though she does not refer to them as ethics in her courses. When asked repeatedly what her motivations are behind teaching these issues as ethics, she did not know initially. Eventually she acknowledged that her father, who died when she was only seven, was a social worker and activist. She also felt that as a tenured professor she was in a unique position to bring about social change and environmental issues, and she saw that as sort of a privileged obligation.

Barb also had some difficulty defining and justifying her ethics. She was asked which ethical philosophy prevails most in her classroom ethics discussions. She responded:

I would say adhering to the rules obviously because of GAAP and auditing standards but the students ask me a lot about my experiences and that would be more like the classical. I don't really subscribe to utilitarianism much. We have the rules but I think there is a way to say that some of these virtues are just good things you should do. Certain things you just should or shouldn't do...you shouldn't lie about things you shouldn't commit fraud.

The researcher persisted a little, "Why shouldn't you lie or commit fraud?" and Barb responded:

Because it's just...I don't know, I think in human nature there is just some things...in society there are just some things that you should or shouldn't do. Do what helps you sleep at night is basically what I believe...I guess there are a lot of different thresholds of that but I just feel like they understand there are certain things that are wrong or right as far as ethics...religious principles aside but when you are in

business you just shouldn't make up fake financial statements or you shouldn't take advantage of your co-workers; you just shouldn't.

**Second Theme: Ethics Divorced from Character.** This factor was evident in some of the data provided by Faith. She suggested certain economic structures worked like systems. If systems were flawed and people worked within those systems, then they could likely fail as well. Consequently, the responsibility for the failure was more with the system than the individual. Faith stated that "context influenced what people did." This left little room for individual character in the assessment of the systems.

Another source of data illustrating this factor was found in the following dialogue which began when the researcher asked another participant, Lynn, if she remembered any time in her personal life where her ethics were challenged. Lynn paused for a while and seemed either scared or confused by the question, so the researcher offered to share his own personal experience as follows:

Years after my public accounting stint I was a product manager for a large insurance company and my peers and I were sitting in a room much like this and our director brought up a pricing strategy to price below costs in order to put a smaller, regional competitor out of business.

Lynn interrupted, "Good." And the researcher was a bit surprised at her sudden interest in the topic. The researcher continued:

I felt bad about it but did not have the courage to speak up immediately. Eventually I did speak to the director but he did not seem to care, so I went over his head and eventually the director was terminated. I felt bad that he was terminated but I was also having

trouble sleeping with his predatory pricing strategy. I was ok with competing but competing just in order to put somebody out of business was not right with my character.

Lynn's next remarks seemed divorced from consideration of character.

There is nothing wrong with that. It's a good pricing strategy. I teach cost accounting and there are many examples of companies who do that to grow market share. That's competition and pricing strategy. Pricing 101 is about how to get rid of competing people. That's what brings you the profit right? It's unethical to create a bogus company or to change a number, but it's not unethical to compete.

The researcher persisted a little with an economic argument because he could see that he would gain no ground with character.

What if this pricing strategy was for the sole purpose of reducing competition so that prices could rise and the winner moved towards oligopoly or monopoly? The consumer is worse off right? How is that good for business? How is that good ethics?

Lynn repeated:

It's unethical to create a bogus company or to change a number but it's not unethical to compete. That's management's job. If you are just trying to make more money in a legal way there is nothing wrong. In China there is a new coffee company that is growing rapidly and gaining market share by pricing under cost and they have been successful enough to undergo an IPO now.

The researcher continued, "Earlier you mentioned that you taught 100% technical information and no ethics. Do your textbooks ever offer ethics cases and do you ever use any of those cases in your coursework?" Lynn responded, "I think I use fraud cases sometimes. I teach people what is fraud and how to detect fraud and how people commit fraud. But...[long pause]...but I'm not

teaching how to be a nice person, which means nothing.” The researcher asked, “Why does it mean nothing?” The participant replied:

How can you teach how to be nice? It means nothing... Well...[silence]...well, look at North Korea. I'm pretty sure in their textbooks it describes how to be a nice person. Look at a lot of socialist countries. If you look from the outside everything is good...in their news everything is good (strong sarcasm in her voice) they teach all about how to be an outstanding citizen. This is actually interesting...if you watch US news 95% is bad news and maybe 5% is good. If you watch north Korean or Chinese News 95% is good and only 5% is bad, but it's not real. But that does not mean that the US people are more unethical than Chinese people. Actually they are much worse. I'm just saying you have to be more specific. You have to teach people something specific. What is fraud and what is not. You cannot simply teach them to be a good person because it's abstract. So it doesn't have any meaning.

In contrast, Therese's experience was somewhat more characterological. In her narrative below she describes a little of her experience teaching a CPA continuing education course in which she used *Giving Voice to Values* (Gentile, 2010). She uses the same program in her college courses:

One of the struggles in the classroom is that the students say 'it doesn't break the law or it's a rule so it must be ok' and I feel very strongly that we need to move them away from looking at our practice that way...The firms keep coming back to us because they too were looking for something more than a 'check the box approach' to ethics. In most cases other ethics courses are very dry and if it's online it's amazing if you can stay awake. In this case we have a series of three sets in the framework: Understanding yourself,

understanding others, and the third is scripting. There is a series of exercises where you learn about yourself and others and their points of views and in the end you face scenarios in which you script a response but the crowning glory of the whole thing is that at the end we ask you to script a response to a time when you *didn't speak up* in a values challenge when they felt they should have and they were disappointed in the result. So in our research the biggest pressure in public accounting is the pressure that you get from clients...that consistently comes out number one. What tools do you have to be able to speak up in a situation where you are afraid of losing the business or losing the client but inside you know it's the right thing to do...what tools do you have to speak up? Some people...maybe you...feel really comfortable saying 'I'm not gonna do that' but other people need a little more time to consult and think about it and then 'we'll get back to this' you know 'get your ducks in a row'. That's what it's all about.

Barbara also declined to acknowledge character in some of her narrative despite being given ample opportunity. In the following dialogue she goes as far as recognizing that she has a conscience but then she closes the discussion with more deontology-based ethics without much acknowledgment of her personal character. The researcher asked, "What do you think business in general subscribes to with ethics? Which of the three philosophies that we discussed is most prevalent in business?" Barbara responded,

Accounting is deontological but business in general is utilitarian. We talk about this a lot in class...people are not going to do something unless they have incentive to do them. So they are going to make money from it or fill some sort of goal they have. I talk about why we go into business. Because we want to make money or help people, but you cannot

help people unless you have money to help. People are driven by incentives for sure whether it's a monetary one or some sort of emotional fulfillment or something like that.

The researcher followed up with, "So what is your personal philosophical perspective and what brought you there?" To which Barbara responded, "I know that there are rules in society to help society run smoothly and to keep people safe." And the researcher continued, "Tell me a story about how you arrived at that philosophy of life?" and Barbara added, "Probably just a mixture of the way that I grew up, my education. I have a guilty conscience and I am very ethical and follow all the rules." The researcher continued, "Can you share a little about how you grew up and what may have influenced you in this direction?"

Yea my parents are good people. They are kind people. I guess they didn't necessarily say we follow the rules but I have just always been sort of a by the book person. I did well in school and followed all the rules and avoided trouble. I guess I learned early on that life is easier when you do everything right because you can sleep at night and you don't have to worry about things. I just looked at life from a "things are easier if you do what you are supposed to do" perspective.

The researcher persisted one more time with, "And what you are *supposed to do* is driven by...?" To which Barbara replied,

I don't know. Rules or the way you treat people. My parents have always treated people kindly so I think I have always had that example. You don't want to hurt people you don't want to step on people or use people. You want to view people as people so it's a combination of that and the fact that it is easier to make it through the system if you follow the rules.

**Third Theme: Inconsistent Understanding of Professionalism.** Until recently a formal definition of professionalism was somewhat evasive. It continues to evolve but some roots may be found in the Carnegie Foundation's Preparation for the Professions Program (PPP) which examines several professions including law, medical and religious clergy. They found common attributes of professionalism and professional formation to include "competency and a commitment to excellence, moral reasoning, understanding of interpersonal relationships, integrity, adherence to the ethical codes, and social responsibility to communities and the public good (Hamilton, 2012)." Two years later the AICPA adopted its Code of Professional Conduct whose preamble calls for an "unswerving commitment to honorable behavior, even at the sacrifice of personal advantage." The code further describes the accounting professional's duty to public interest as follows:

A distinguishing mark of a profession is acceptance of its responsibility to the public. The accounting profession's public consists of clients, credit grantors, governments, employers, investors, the business and financial community, and others who rely on the objectivity and integrity of members to maintain the orderly functioning of commerce. This reliance imposes a public interest responsibility on members. The public interest is defined as the collective well-being of the community of people and institutions that the profession serves. (AICPA, 2014)

Against this background the data results of this study data showed divergent understandings of professionalism, even within the same university. Wyatt was asked, "What is a professional?" to which he responded:

Like the difference between a bookkeeper and an accountant. A bookkeeper does the books but an accountant analyzes and presents the numbers fairly. A professional has communication skills and is capable of taking on more responsibility.

The researcher pondered duties to the public interest and to the profession which are inherent in the AICPA code of professional conduct, so he persisted further. "Anything else?" to which Wyatt responded with a brief silence followed by:

Yeah, a professional accountant has to communicate things fairly and ethically. We have a former student working in our accounting shop here on campus. There is a security there that she needs and it's a good fit for her experience and demeanor. She may never be a CEO or CFO but she might be a controller someday. She had a lot of personal problems when she was a student. So many kids have messed up lives today. Some of them make problems for themselves but others are just victims of trouble. I never had such issues growing up. I never had to worry about where my next meal would come from and if there was trouble or I was in trouble my dad was always there to talk to me. We have a student graduating this year who will work for Moss Adams downtown and she has had a lot of personal challenges, but I have told her to hang in there and not give into the aggravations and problems because if she does, 'I'm going to give you a profession that you can have your whole life.' Accounting is different from management. It's a reliable and distinct profession that has consistently had high demand. If you are an accounting major, there is a job available for you and you will work with decent people.

Wyatt's response demonstrated a genuine concern for his students which is commendable.

However, it did not embrace the fullness of accounting professionalism.

Matthew was also asked, “So what is an accounting professional?” The researcher observed that his response, which follows, was much closer aligned with the AICPA’s Code of Conduct and Professionalism but it left little room for virtue in its explanation.

It’s qualitative like the AICPA code of professional conduct. Let’s focus on that. My students role play using the Code as a point of reference. In that I try to teach my students that accounting is a special vocation because it is charged with serving the best interest of society. Serving society is bigger than just serving the clients who pay us. Much of this awesome responsibility stems from the SEC’s 1933 and 1934 acts which demanded the oversight of publicly traded companies after the onset of the Great Depression.

Accounting is the only profession with such an awesome set of responsibilities.

Accountant’s opinions matter. There is a dichotomy/challenge in working for a client but having to also serve the greater public. That’s why accountants have to subscribe to deontology. If deontology fails, maybe technology brings us to a new place where rules do not exist yet, then they fall back on utilitarianism.

In contrast, Barb’s description of professionalism was brief. She was asked how should would define accounting professionalism, to which she candidly responded, “Like being a professional? Going to work, doing your job, growing in your job, I guess you don’t have to grow in your job if you don’t want to. Some people are just happy doing the same job. But being ethical and doing what is right.”

Faith emphasized “Dressing for success, creating a resume, and learning to network.” She reminded me that students in her university were often described as being unpolished because of many of their immigrant statuses. She said she had to rely on others to emphasize professionalism more. By others she meant Beta Alpha Psi and other instructors.

**Forth Theme: Technical/Ethics Mix.** This factor related to the mix of time and energy that instructors spend on technical matter verses ethics. Often, participants delved into this subject before even being asked the question as described in dialogues above. The researcher interpreted some of the frequency of discussion on this topic to be an indication of data saturation (Merriam, 2002). Such responses needed to be carefully evaluated because the data already suggested very different understanding of terms like, “professional” and “ethics.” However, limited time did emerge as a theme for some, though not all, of the participants.

The researcher asked Faith, “How do you see your role as a professor? As a teacher of technical material? Moral development of students? Professional development of students?” After a few moments of consideration, she responded, “85% technical standards, 10% social responsibility, based on my social research work, and 5% professional development which includes dressing for success; creating a resume; learning to network.”

A similar conversation with Therese was transcribed as follows. The researcher stated, “There is another deliberation among professors in the business and accounting fields. Is our primary job to teach technical skills which help students find jobs or do we have an important role to also play in their moral development?” Therese immediately responded, “We have an important role to play in moral development.” The researcher asked, “How would you quantify those roles in terms of the energy and time that you spend in them?” To which Therese replied:

They are integrated. They go together. The students need to work with me. They need to put in the time on those technical items but then you bring in (take leases for example) and you bring in a broader discussion about a company that misclassified their leases and you start to ask why they did it that way and it easily transitions into ethics. It’s really hard for me to separate the two. It’s not 75/25 they are too connected.

The researcher persisted a little, “I’m going to push back a little and ask you to quantify the energy that you spend.”

I guess I just said it, so it must be what I feel; around 75/25 with the 75 being technical.

So it was... you know...to make sure that we had developed a student that has the requisite technical knowledge and then I am bringing in the context. I wish it was 50/50 but no I won’t say that.

The data described Ami with a similar approach of entwining technical material with ethics. The researcher inquired with her, “I see how you potentially encompass the technical matter with ethics but if you had to quantify how much of your time and energy you spent in each direction, could you?” Ami replied:

I don’t know that I ever thought of it that way because I see those two objectives so ingrained. I don’t know that I would say I’m going to spend 30% of my time on ethics because each topic has some sort of potential to get away from the rules and procedures and let’s put it in the organizational context. What happens there and what can happen in different contexts.

The researcher persisted a little:

I think you used the word ingrained or entwined so clearly you don’t see those two aspects as being opposed to each. They can be rather related to each other and taught accordingly. That’s a very interesting perspective that I have not come across that much. But I’m going to push back a little and ask again: where do you spend the bulk of your energy?

Ami’s response:

Well it depends on the topic but the technical matter is the bulk. You can go with the 80/20 rule or the 70/30 because if you give them all the ethical material but fail to teach them the technical matter you are not helping them either.

Uniquely, Ami also suggested that she never felt that she did not have enough time to teach ethics.

In some instances, this data was difficult to extract from the participants. For example, Olympia seemed to equivocate a little on this factor, almost giving the impression that she was afraid to answer it honestly. She starting out at 50/50, but upon some persistence on the part of the researcher she ended up at 80/20 with the 20% being more miscellaneous than ethics related. She was asked by the researcher, “So what do you think? As an accounting teacher. Are you obligated to assist in moral formation, or just kind of the technical material? Help them get a job and maybe pass the CPA exam” Olympia responded:

Um...so...I believe that half of my value as a teaching professional is modeling good adult behavior. There's the content. But they can also Google content. So with that said, well, I believe that the value proposition is really modeling good behavior...good adult behavior and dealing with, you know, what can be ethical issues appropriately in a classroom. The time and the size of the classes makes it difficult so I always bring in the Giving Voice to Values curriculum because I do think it's important that they have an opportunity to explore their own approach to ethics and we do clearly talk about the ethics. I do a lot of little exercises to call out and show how you could end up in this ethical situation slate and we do some things like with the WorldCOM where I'm like, oh just...just do this small adjusting journal entry and then we keep accelerating and by that point, they're all in right? And that we show how that could happen and what those

ethical considerations look like it's good business to demonstrate a strong ethical framework. Good people leave businesses with bad ethics.

The researcher replied, “Wow, you have said a lot there...I’m going to back up a little bit because one of the things I thought I heard was that you believed half of your purpose was to teach them right from wrong?”

No, no, I don't think I said that. So I said half of my purpose in being there is modeling good adult behavior and so it’s probably not half. It's something less. But there is...in our courses some of the students come from great backgrounds and some of them come from terrible backgrounds. And just acknowledging that they are people and acknowledging that we're in this together and we're going to find the right way through this class has a value proposition that’s maybe beyond the debit and credit because most of the students in the intro classes are not going to be accountants.

The researcher persisted, “So I'm going to press this a little more please. How much of your energy, your time, your expertise is devoted to technical matter vs formation matter?”

Oh, that's a good question. So now I'm going to, I'm going to flip a little bit here. So when we structure the question this way. Technical in terms of my energy...figuring out how to deliver the content that is in the text book in ways the students understand it...is at least at least 80% of my energy.

The researcher, “And the remaining 20% for other matters?”

Yeah, I’m ...I'm the person...I appreciate that I am the person in many cases where students will show up in my office or to talk to me about other things that are going on and I... I’m still their instructor...I'm not their friend or their psychologist, but I can help direct them to resources that are... so honestly I talk about modeling good

behavior...some of this is cheerleading like... you know... breath...breath [chuckling]  
Like when we do my test I write on my board “no panicking...keep breathing...keep calm students...yes you can use a calculator etc.

Wyatt’s data suggested that he wished he could do more. The researcher asked, “So if you had to quantify how you spend your time and energy?” And Wyatt responded,

90% technical and 10% all the rest. But I do believe that as an educator I have a role in moral development. That’s why I am a chair of a committee on our campus right now which is rethinking what and how we are teaching. When I teach non-technical matter I teach the virtues because that’s what’s in your heart.

The researcher, “You articulate that very well. In addition to your spoken words are there other tools that you use?” And Wyatt replied:

Good question...there are things that I do and things that I could or should be doing right? We participate in Cash Oregon, AARP, and VITA to give students a chance to exercise charity in their work and talk to them about more than just tax law. I need to do a better job of articulating that. We will be doing tax returns with these non-profit organizations and helping the impoverished with their taxes on Friday mornings as an example. This is not just about learning the details of tax law. This is a volunteer service to the community. Since we made it a class it’s not technically a volunteer act but it is a service to the community.

Barb’s response was also somewhat elusive in terms of how much specific time or energy she spent on ethics. She was asked, “As an educator do you see your role as primarily to teach technical accounting or do you see a significant part of your role to include ethical/moral formation?” And she replied:

I think both for sure. I have a mentor role as well where I help them to understand what they need to find a job and develop careers and become professionals. I do all of the job opportunity coordination on campus and I help students prepare resumes and prepare for interviews. I wish we could be academic advisors also but that is a separate group at this college.

The researcher persisted, “So you see part of your responsibilities as being to ethically develop students into professionals and not just teach GAAP? Can you quantify how much of your energy and time go there?”

I would say maybe 50/50 because a lot of my purpose is to prepare you for career. I don’t spend half of my time but it feels like half of my goal or aspiration. As far as time goes, I probably spend 25% on recruiting, networking, make connections, affinity events etc.

Career placement seems to be a big part of professionalism.

The researcher continued, “In that 25% non-technical piece, how much of that is dedicated to teaching ethics? Do you have enough time to teach ethics?”

I have plenty of time and we even do some community events like Cover Oregon or field trips. My husband works as a CPA and we will visit his office to visit some of the real life of an accountant. It just depends on how deep you want to get. I get bored if I stay on the same topic for too long. We have an ethical leadership class that all business majors have to take and we rely on that to go deeper with students. The person that teaches that is really into conflict resolution. She just finished her DBA. She does a lot of ethical case studies with people who have done bad things like certain bad professionals.

The researcher asked, “Do you know which ethical inclination she subscribes to in her class?” and Barb replied, “I have no idea. But they use a lot of cases.”

**Fifth Theme: Uneasiness Discussing Conscience and Religion.** The researcher tried to avoid initiating conversation about religion because he worked in a public college and two of the three colleges he interviewed at were also public. But participants sometimes brought up religion as if it were unavoidable, yet they were also not always comfortable with it. Therese was asked to which of the three primary philosophies she subscribed and she responded, “Humbly I gravitate towards virtue. It’s how I was raised, it’s my religion.” At that moment she abruptly paused and pointed to the camera and apologetically said, “I did not mean to say ‘religion’ but it’s who I am.” The researcher tried to assure her of confidentiality and encouraged her to say what came to her mind.

Later in the conversation this descriptive theme emerged again. Therese asked the researcher to share his definition of virtue ethics and to distinguish the virtues from virtue ethics. The researcher described the four cardinal virtues of Plato and then described Aristotle’s contributions through eudemonia (happiness). The researcher mentioned that he enjoyed asking his students to share their definition of happiness. He gave an example of how courage related to eudemonia and followed with a summary statement about being the best version of oneself. The researcher also described how the Founding Fathers referenced happiness in the Declaration of Independence, which predates the philosophies of Kant and Bentham. He closed with describing the virtues of faith, hope and love suggesting that they had both natural and supernatural properties and that the natural properties could be discussed with students in a secular university setting. Therese agreed, but then described discomfort with displaying her faith in a secular class:

It’s OK to discuss the natural properties of faith, hope and love without crossing the line, but over the years I have become more careful because, for example, I don’t wear my cross anymore to class and you may find that sad but I found that it actually put me in

uncomfortable situations with students sometimes and crossing a line and making assumptions or even mentioning it, and I feel that I have to be the same to all my students and I know that seems very sad to you.

The researcher responded that he thought she explained her intentions, and those may be noble.

Theresa responded,

Well, we're trying. I too want to be respectful to all of the faiths and those who do not have faith. Exactly because if one student comes to me and says you understand me because fill in the blank, and another says you don't understand me because fill in the blank, so by eliminating it I am able to relate to everyone. Do you know what I am trying to say?

This theme emerged again with another participant, Lynn, but in the opposite direction.

When the researcher asked, "Can you share with me a story about how your family influenced your understanding of right and wrong?" She described some of the childhood reading that influenced her understanding of right and wrong, but then rather abruptly stated, "My friend once told me it doesn't matter what religion you are." The researcher was a little surprised at the participant's abrupt religious statement and confused by where it came from. Lynn continued to describe her experience of moral development as follows:

I feel like it's more the daily activities. It was not a specific event. I think one just knows. It's kind of hard to tell where it comes from...[jovial laughter]...starting with your childhood you are read so many stories. In children's books it's very clear what is right and what is wrong. I feel most people just know what is right and wrong. In normal activities like if you kill somebody that's obviously wrong right? I think in daily life lots of things are black and white.

Lynn described an inherent, internal conscience directing what is right and wrong in an individual. But when asked about the future of accounting and ethics her conscientious existence was supplanted with more deontology:

I think we may need to teach more details about the rules and more rules, but we cannot teach them that they need to be good citizens...that's a North Korean method and it's not effective. It's nothing. So I don't know, I think maybe in class we could give them more cases. I think the best use of our time is to make sure they understand US GAAP.

Another participant, Faith, was comfortable describing herself as a utilitarian when it came to her personal ethics, but when asked about a time when her personal ethics were put to the test her response was much more along the lines of internal virtue and conscience. She described a time years ago when she "borrowed" a small sum from her employer's till to purchase a soda. The action never left her. She stated, "When you cheat that stays with you. You change yourself inside. You always know that you cheated, and it may never leave you." She shared this with her students because they were having issues with academic honesty. The researcher noted that Faith was not comfortable stating that she personally subscribed to virtue ethics. Instead she insisted that she subscribed to utilitarianism.

Barb was asked initially about her familiarity with deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. There was no reference to religion in the question, yet part of her response included a statement that she has students from a lot of different religious backgrounds and respects them all, and thus avoids going into any religious discussion. This was despite her employment in a private Christian university. Finally, Barb also avoids words like "conscience" or "virtue" in her ethical motivations even though they seemed to fit her rationale. Instead she used the following words to describe why an accountant should not lie or commit fraud:

Because it's just...I don't know I think in human nature there is just some things. In society there are just some things that you should or shouldn't do. Do what helps you sleep at night is basically what I believe. I guess there are a lot of different thresholds of that but I just feel like they understand there are certain things that are wrong or right as far as ethics - religious principles aside - but when you are in business you just shouldn't make up fake financial statements or you shouldn't take advantage of your co-workers you just shouldn't.

Barb mentioned, "do what lets you sleep at night" three more times during our interview. but she did not refer to her conscience or virtues a single time.

When Olympia was asked which of the three philosophies she subscribed to she replied: Oh, there's not one...[long pause]...I believe, probably most strongly from a virtue ethics standpoint, although not from a religious standpoint, I'm not religious. I have used utilitarian on a regular basis, where we talk about the greater good, you know, vaccinations ...and you know the good decision rules and obligations are like guardrails...they are the ethics of last resort in some places...I feel like they usually exists for a reason. It's not, they're bad. They are just the first order, for me personally.

Olympia referenced religion just like the other participants even though the question made no reference to religion.

### **Transformative Observations and Catalysts for Change**

The researcher observed two themes that had an amalgamating effect on participants. First, a particular question uniformly heightened their interest in the study. Even though answers were not consistent, a frequent realization of disappointment and recognition for a need to

improve or change was apparent in many of the responses. Participants often felt they wished they could do more. This theme was evident, but not unanimous.

**Sixth Theme: Former students facing Enron Moments.** Near the end of each interview, most of the participants were asked how their former students would respond when faced with an Enron or WorldCom moment of temptation. Would their classroom experience prepare them to make a good ethical decision? Matthew's response left little room for hope.

After a short pause and an expression of seriousness on his face:

Good question. No. Simply because there is not enough time to go into ethics adequately. Over the course of a 4-year accounting degree a typical student might discuss ethics 2 to 3 weeks. The rest of the time students are engaged in technical material that they need to pass the exam and/or get a job. I personally am not too concerned with technical matter because I believe that ethics and critical thinking gets you the job.

Barbara's response offered some hope but little confidence:

[hesitantly] You know I would hope so [abruptly stands up and adjusts her chair]. I don't know that I am teaching them as much as they need to tackle every ethical situation. I feel that since we have a standalone ethics class that I don't have to go so deep. Auditing is all about ethics and seniors are take auditing so I talk a lot about ethics there. I feel like they have a good foundation but I don't know...especially because I think ethics is kind of a personal thing as well. I don't know how much they get out of it or take to heart but I would hope that they would get it.

Barbara was also asked what philosophical ethics her accounting students were learning in the dedicated class and she did not know. Wyatt's brief response was similar in tone:

That's a great question and I don't know the answer. No way I can answer it. I'd like to think that we prepare them but I don't know that we do. Been here for 11 years and I don't have any feedback either way.

Therese gave a more positive response with some reservation:

I was answering yes in my head until you said the good decision part and the reason is that I do believe that I provide them tools for that situation and I have worked on them thinking about how they can be the best they can be and the internal of it...I believe that when I think back over the hundreds of students that I have had I can even picture the students that I know would make the right decisions but I honestly believe that others will struggle...so I was ok until you finished the question because it's a diverse population and I am picturing a student who I know...as long as we worked together...he might take a short cut.

Ami provided the longest and most confident, positive response after a brief moment of thoughtful consideration as she thumped her pencil on the table.

Yeah I do [confidently]. I think with the Giving Voice to Values program it does because they...and I don't use a lot of cases ...but they will or will not take action and then we develop strategies for taking action...and we ask them to question things and I talk to them about the power that they have as new employees. They don't always believe that they have power as new employees but I teach otherwise because a powerless new employee could easily find themselves on a slippery slope. I say you have the power of asking questions...this seems unusual...or I have not seen this before...let me take this to one of my colleagues...often time people will back up and say you don't need to do that...we can do this differently...you know that person senses there could be a problem

right? So ask a lot of questions. Don't be accusatory. Investigate a little on your own. Read the regs. Share with your colleagues...have you ever seen this before? Is this typical? Because sometimes new professionals are intimidated or may be taken advantage of if they are not alert to their responsibilities. So preparing them to respond...I think those that...not 100% but those that have taken the time to think about that will be prepared and in effect we ground them in past experiences that they had and show them how past experiences that they had could be re-written and sort of what would happen if they had done things appropriately. This is how you felt and what you did when you were intimidated. Now let's turn it around and see what you could have done differently. So rather than taking a made up case in some instances we are taking their own personal histories as teaching moments.

Recall that Lynn initially stated that she taught no ethics and 100% technical material. When this question was presented, Lynn gave a reluctant response as if it obliged her to realize some importance of teaching ethics. Her response began with a long serious pause followed by:

Like I said they already know right or wrong they just choose not to do the right thing. That's the one difference. I can teach them what is right or wrong but I cannot teach them how to make a decision. That's how I feel. Unless they are a socio path they know what is right or wrong [laughter] but most people know right or wrong they just choose not to do it [smiling].

The researcher persisted a little, "OK I'm going to push back a little and with respect. I asked you a yes/no question and I didn't hear a yes or a no." And Lynn replied, "I don't feel it's my job to teach right and wrong." The researcher replied, "OK so your answer is 'no' because you don't feel it is your job to teach right and wrong." And Lynn continued, "I don't know what I am

supposed to teach them...I think they know what is right or wrong.” The researcher persisted, “Do they know right or wrong before or after your class?” And Lynn responded:

Well, before they know right or wrong but after my class it's more clear because I teach US GAAP and they know what is US GAAP and what is not US GAAP. That's my job. I let them know what is right and what is wrong and what are the rules. But I cannot teach them. Actually, in a different moment in a different scenario they may make a different decision.

Olympia was more accepting of the question but was not very confident and clear in her response which started with a stern facial expression:

Oh...I can't say. I mean I... I don't have that much influence I don't think...I really don't. I think they walked into my class with that strength or they didn't walk into the class with that strength. I'm not sure I...there may be some reinforcement...But I can't, I cannot in any way say that my teaching would influence what they did.

**Seventh Theme: Virtue Ethics Outcomes.** Although this was not a quantitative study, the data did provide some potential for connections and future research. For example, the researcher observed that the two responders with the most confidence in their student's ethical choices during Enron moments (Ami and Therese) stated that they personally subscribed to virtue ethics and their personal experiences corroborated this. Ami compared virtue to deontology and utilitarianism rather uniquely:

I see that deontology and utilitarianism stand on a continuum right? But the virtue ethics really doesn't sit on that continuum right? It defines you and then depending on how you define yourself you will go either here or here (she is scratching with a pencil on a paper) So I guess I don't know many people who do either this or this...so I don't see them as

“or’s.” I see deontology and utilitarianism as “or’s” but I don’t see virtue ethics that way. I think it’s more of a base line.

Ami also had one of the more comprehensive understandings of professionalism:

Well an accounting professional needs to be technically competent. They have to be consistently seeking to stay up with the current new knowledge and they have to be thinking of themselves as a member of a greater profession meaning they have responsibilities not just to themselves but to the greater profession as well because they represent that profession every time they walk out the door...those are the big ones...you can drill deeper but those are the big ones.

Therese’s personal rational towards virtue ethics and professionalism was evident in the following responses:

And virtue ethics I have always thought of as realizing there is more than one philosophy in it but it is morally right to do if you feel it inside...that it’s the moral thing to do...it’s what you base your life off of...and one of the struggles in the classroom is that the students say it doesn’t break the law or it’s a rule so it must be ok and I feel very strongly that we need to move them away from looking at our practice that way.

### **Selected Participants’ Additional Narrative and Biographical Data**

Throughout this chapter, lived experiences of participants were explored and reviewed. Results were arranged according to descriptive themes that become apparent through the transcription and analysis of notes and video recorded discussion data (Merriam, 2002; Rudestam, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In that process four of the eight participants emerged as individuals who personally subscribed to virtue ethics. For that reason, additional biographical

and narrative information was explored on these particular participants with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding of their ethical formations and motivations in accordance with the research question. Special care was taken to continue to protect the participant's identities in this secondary process.

Three common themes emerged in the four participants that personally subscribed to virtue ethics which are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

*Characteristics of Participants who Subscribed to Virtue*

Common Characteristics of 4 Participants who Personally Subscribe to Virtue Ethics				
1) Early, Strong Religious Formation	Therese,			Wyatt
2) Performed Advanced Research in Ethics	Therese,	Jane		
3) Non-Textbook Ethics practice with students (GVV)+	Therese,	Jane	Olympia	
+Giving Voice to Values (Gentile, 2010)				

**Early, Strong Religious Formation.** Therese was asked to specifically describe how her upbringing affected her ethics, to which Therese replied,

At the start it's my large Catholic family and we followed the rules but my parents by their actions spoke to greater purposes...It's just who they were...my mother was a teacher and my father was a jack-of-all trades but it wasn't just you went to confession it was did you really go in and it was...(she struggles to find the right words) almost ethereal...it was a daily part of our life whether it was something that we did and my parents were a great influence.

When asked if she ever rebelled against her faith or her parents or went through some of the rebellious phases a lot of teenagers experience, she mentioned having sort of an exploratory year when she moved off to college but eventually realized, after consulting with her mother, that she missed her traditional life and her faith so she reverted back. She and her husband have worked diligently at passing their faith on to their children.

Wyatt was asked why he gravitated towards the virtues and his response was that it was due to his faith. He was asked to describe how his faith was developed.

I grew up with it. I grew up in a little town [name withheld to protect identity] and my Dad was the financial officer of a small university down there and I grew up on a Christian college campus and the preachers were all out of the theology department down there and well trained. I never had a special conversion experience...I just grew up in it.

Wyatt was asked if he ever went through a rebellious stage in his early life or if he ever questioned the existence of God, to which he responded quickly and directly. "No I didn't. I just grew deeper in it." When asked what helped him grow deeper in his faith, he said it had a lot to do with him being around individuals with like faith and the amount of good reading that he did. "I am a good academic but not necessarily a good accountant. I love reading about theology and how it relates to economics."

**Performed Advanced Research in Ethics.** Ami and Therese not only teach ethics in their accounting classes, they research and publish on the subject. Together they have published literature in various journals on topics including action-oriented ethics, accounting ethics and corporate social responsibility, ethical financial reporting, and various training approaches with accountants and ethics.

**Extra-curricular Ethics Practice with Students.** Ami, Therese, and Olympia consistently used *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV) (Gentile, 2010) in their courses. This tool did not focus on ethical analysis, but instead emphasized ethical execution. According to the Darden School of Management at the University of Virginia website the curriculum starts with questions:

What if I were going to act on my values? What would I say and do? How could I be most effective. This curriculum has been piloted in over 1,055 schools, companies and other organizations on all seven continents, the Giving Voice to Values curriculum offers practical exercises, cases, modules, scripts and teaching plans for handling a wide range of ethical conflicts in the workplace. (*IBIS Initiatives - Giving Voice to Values (GVV)*, n.d.)

The time and energy involved with introducing an ethics curriculum in addition to the many cases presented in their accounting textbooks was considerable.

When asked whether she felt as if she had done an exceptional job teaching ethics in the classroom, Therese referred to GVV:

Yeah. Intermediate accounting, and we had already worked through our program of Giving Voice to Values and we get to an exercise based on a true story in which there is a study group and there are only two people there that day and one person always seems to have the right answer and the other person says I'm not there with you and it turns out that the one person had unethically obtained the solutions manual online and you're asked what you should do if you were in this scenario? So we are reading this case in class and [she laughs because of this extraordinary experience] suddenly one of her students in the back of the class stands up and says 'I did that...I'm guilty'...he had actually lived what the case was describing...and the whole class shrieked and the guilty

student apologized at that very moment...here the class is deliberating a supposedly hypothetical case and this single student admits to identical circumstances.

The use of GVV also came up in Ami's interview. Ami and the researcher were discussing the definition of virtue ethics when Ami referred to GVV:

So in that context I would say we do some work in the area of Giving Voice to Values. So here you have already sort of gone through the rubric to determine if a boundary has been crossed so now the question is how do we address it? So it's more of what we would call performative ethics. So in that framework there is one part of the framework which is doing a personal/professional inventory so when I did that in my 438 class [Advanced Cost] we went through quite an extensive process of helping them to determine who they were as individuals and which boundaries they would not cross. What is your vision of yourself as a professional? And how do you see that going forward so we had sort of a whole personal/professional ethics inventory. It may have not been exact virtue ethics but it was about getting people to identify themselves and their values. You know and which of these values do you prioritize because we probably don't prioritize all of them equally. If you looked at the five most commonly shared values and I probably won't name them all. Just like I can't name the Seven Dwarves [we chuckle]. It's like honesty, respect, compassion, integrity, so when they do the study and they look at what values come up consistently these five come up most frequently regardless of culture, ethnicity, geographic region, hierarchy, and so that gives you a framework from which you can find common space.

Later in the interview Ami and the researcher were discussing the idea of having a standalone ethics class verses integrating it into all business classes. Again, Ami referred to GVV in her response:

So, to think about a standalone course vs spreading it around - we have integrated Giving Voice to Values in courses from the 200 level to the 400 level courses. It has become like the fabric of the courses as much as debits and credits and with that experience we have seen sort of a remarkable internalization of it. You don't get internalization in a standalone course. You have to have repeated kind or reinforcing.

Then, wanting to share more of the flavor of GVV with me, Ami described one of the cases used in the curriculum as follows:

I'll tell you this story quickly where there was a module in auditing on code of conduct and then there was a case about a woman who started at a CPA firm and they asked her if she had taken the exam and she said no because she didn't want to be embarrassed because she took it but she didn't think she had passed the exam. When the results were published, she passed. And she was dancing around the office celebrating but her manager said you stated that you didn't take it. She replied that she said that because she didn't want to be embarrassed if she failed. And the manager said but you lied. And she was fired. That's a real case.

Next Ami was eager to describe a change in the ethical culture of her students that she attributed to using GVV:

And we decided that in order to assist students we would post answers to a case but we asked our students not to look at them. And we went into class and asked how many students looked at the answers. And every student said they did not look but because we

have a learning management system we could tell that all but one student was lying. That led to quite a bit of discussion. Then we let that go and then over a 4- to 5-year period we did this. We introduced Giving Voice to Values into the curriculum and we emphasized shared values and professional values and developing a personal, professional profile and understanding yourself as well as the motivation of others to think about things more holistically. And eventually we decided to do it again where we posted the answers and asked the students not to look at them. Some people may argue with the ethics of this but that's ok. We did it again and it turns out that nobody looked and nobody lied this time. When we asked them why they responded that way they said that they had developed this sort of community and they felt responsible to one another and they had this moral community of understanding. And so that is way different from sitting down and teaching them philosophy. We've taken them through a series where we have developed them professionally.

Olympia reiterated much of what Therese and Ami had said about GVV. But she was also certain to point out a caveat:

The tagline for giving voice to values is not about teaching ethics. It's about if you've decided you want to do something, you decided, you've already decided you want to say something. How, how could you do it?

The researcher responded, "Okay, so it's downstream a little of sensing the ethical situation?"

Olympia agreed, saying, "Yes it's more. It's more about the 'how' than the 'what.'"

### **Results Summary**

Data results suggest: (1) Study participants have a lack of consensus and stability around ethics. There is no uniformity around what to teach or how to teach it. There is little uniformity

in their own personal ethical subscriptions. One claimed to personally subscribe to utilitarianism, three claimed to subscribe to deontology and four to virtue ethics, but there was not always consistency around what they claim to subscribe to and how they make personal ethical decisions; (2) There are instances where heavy emphasis on systems and performance results serve to divorce ethics from individual character; (3) Professionalism according to the AICPA is not consistently understood or taught; (4) There is little consistency in the balance of technical and ethical material being taught, and the definition of non-technical material was found to be quite fluid; (5) An unsolicited sensitivity toward and against conscience and religion emerged in some of the data; (6) Most of the participants became surreal or exhibited increased interest and sometimes regrets when asked if their former students could successfully face an Enron type ethical moment; this was seen as a potential catalyst for change; (7) The two participants who believe their former students would fair best when facing an Enron moment both subscribe to virtue ethics on a personal basis; (8) The four participants who claimed to personally subscribe to virtue ethics had an early and strong religious formation, done advanced research in ethics, use an ethics curriculum outside of their accounting textbook, or all of the above. The results described the posture of virtue ethics in this sample of accounting academia at a critical time when deontology and utilitarian ethics dominate the accounting stage and scandals threaten the integrity of the profession.

**Research Question Revisited.** The purpose of this study was to explore the vision that accounting professors had of teaching virtue ethics in their courses. This was accomplished using the narrative method to understand how selected professors appreciated ethics beginning with some of their own personal experiences. By allowing participants to share their lived experiences of ethics in and out of the classroom as prescribed by Denzin & Lincoln (2011) and Moustakas (1994), the researcher identified emerging themes and transition factors in the professors' ethical visions. The researcher gained an appreciation of why such factors exist and harnessed additional meanings that exist behind such factors. These results provide answers to the research questions at the core of this study.

*What is the objective of an accounting educator? To teach knowledge of technical subject matter? To assist in the moral development and formation of a professional? Both? Other? Why?* Results were widely split, which developed the first theme regarding the lack of consensus and stability around ethics. The researcher also found that relativistic responses to such questions were really no answers at all. Without a consistent response to these questions accounting professors suffer from an identity crisis and their credibility is vulnerable to challenge by students and industry. This was particularly evident with the vastly different responses given by professors teaching at the same college.

*How does an accounting professor understand virtue? Is the participant's understanding of virtue consistent with classic definitions? How and why does it differ? Does one experience the virtues in their personal life?* Several professors had neither a theoretical nor a practical understanding of virtue ethics. The second emerging theme, that ethics were frequently divorced from character among professors and within the classroom, further spoke to these questions. The researcher found that a professor's personal formation usually had a greater bearing on their

ethics vision than whatever they learned in formal training. Some professors did not understand virtue ethics because they were not subject to developmental formation involving virtue ethics. Others may have been exposed to the virtues but never practiced it in an Aristotelian sense, and never faced considerable temptations of character in their professional careers or personal lives.

*How does an accounting educator describe their own personal ethics? How and why was ethics learned? How was their vision of ethics formed and tested both personally and professionally? Does one's personal ethics lean towards deontology, utility, virtue, or something else and why? Is their personal ethics consistent with what they teach? Why or why not?* Some professors had difficulty describing their own ethics, as if they had not personally forged it or visited it in some time. Others seemed preoccupied with stating what they thought the listener expected to hear, but their own personal experiences did not always support their answers. There were instances where professors gave nearly textbook responses regarding the virtues without realizing it. Culture also played a strong role in how a professor described their personal ethics. Cultural diversity is generally seen as a positive characteristic in academia, but the researcher questions if all cultural affects as they relate to virtue ethics have been completely understood.

*How important is ethics to an accounting curriculum and why? Can it be taught effectively? How and what is taught? Is ethics included in course outcomes? Should it be? Why or why not?* Professors often grappled with these questions, sometimes downplaying the significance of ethics in the course of their narrative until faced with the question of, "How well do you prepare your students for Enron moments?" Then many would often pause for reflection and slowly adjust their position on this question in a surreal fashion. Some would see the significance of ethics in a new light. Other professors acknowledged the importance of ethics

throughout their narrative and found it most effective to intertwine ethical content with technical matter in their teaching.

*What are the challenges of teaching ethics in accounting courses? Is one qualified to teach ethics? Is there enough time? Are there adequate materials? Should ethics be taught as a standalone course or embedded into existing accounting courses, and why?* The literature review consistently described the same three challenges of teaching accounting ethics as follows:

1. Limited space and time in the curriculum
2. Insufficient instructional resources
3. Faculty discomfort due to a lack of prescribed training

Results from this study showed that more than one professor easily overcame challenges related to limited space and time in the curriculum. This may suggest this first challenge was something of a scapegoat with certain professors. The second and third challenges were also touched by this study in that superficial training and cursory instructional resources may not be adequate in nudging the virtue ethics needle among accounting professors. Virtue ethics are compellingly potent when understood and experienced. Such awareness may require more of a philosophical conversion or awakening than cursory training and materials. Such results suggest effects on students as well as faculty, because if we expect faculty to be tuned in on the ethical formation of their students then they themselves must first experience some ethical formation.

### Chapter 5: Discussion

The frequency and severity of accounting scandals is a threat to the profession and the many disciplines and vocations who rely on accounting services. The goal of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the vision that accounting professors have of teaching virtue ethics in their courses. This involves understanding how selected professors personally understand and experience their own ethics. By exploring the lived experiences of accounting professors both in and out of the classroom as prescribed by Denzin & Lincoln (2011) and Moustakas (1994), the researcher was able to detect important themes and transition factors in a professor's ethical vision. The researcher is not aware of any narrative study on virtue ethics involving accounting professors. By understanding the causes of the virtue ethics experience with accounting professors the researcher hopes to positively influence the use of virtue ethics. This is critical because accounting lags behind the well-documented renewal of virtue ethics taking place in medicine (Marcum, 2012), law (Annas, 2017), and various other business disciplines (McPherson, 2013).

Results of this study demonstrated significant instability around ethics. Ironically, such a lack of uniformity resides in stark contrast to the strict deontology governing the rest of the accounting practice. Often human nature was disregarded in the study's ethical discussions because ethical discussions are frequently void of characterological realities. Even the basic principle of professionalism was described in very relative terms. More than one professor also shared positive experiences of virtue ethics in the classroom and a powerful way of submerging ethics in technical material. Those same professors demonstrated confidence in their students when faced with a serious ethical challenge in the workplace. The study also, at least partially,

debunked the challenge of limited time and space in the curriculum. That issue emerged as more of an alibi.

The following discussion represents discernment of how the descriptive themes that emerged in the results related to the literature and the research questions of this study. The themes that emerged in the data analysis largely governed the format of this discussion. Data findings responded to the research questions while exploring the visions that accounting professors had of teaching virtue ethics.

The research problem arose from the reality that the accounting profession and those who rely on its services have been threatened by the frequency and severity of accounting scandals. As a relatively new profession, accountancy has evolved into a dense grid of deontological codes and utilitarian principles. The post-Enron era saw the creation of additional deontological and utilitarian regulations in the form of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and the creation of the PCAOB. However, scandals continue to torment the industry. The 53 major scandals that occurred since Enron suggest a crisis of ethics within the profession which challenges the academia that prepare professionals. Meanwhile the rekindling of 2,400 year-old classic Greek virtues that has occurred in philosophical, psychological, and certain business literature was posited as a potential part of the solution due to its distinctive internal effect on the individual. It is understood, however, that in order to teach virtues one must first understand and experience them.

### **Overall Vision of Virtue Ethics among Accounting Professors and their Courses**

The revival of virtue ethics that was described in much of the philosophy, psychology, and business literature (Alzola, 2017; Beadle, 2017; Hartman, 2017; Stitcher & Saunders, 2018) was not yet overwhelmingly apparent in the experiences of these eight participants; nor was it entirely vacant. More apparent was the substantial dichotomy observed between the accounting

curriculum and accounting professors' methods of teaching ethics. The accounting curriculum was confirmed to be extremely deontological and subject to uniform and precise principles like GAAP by both the literature (Chawla et al., 2015) and all eight of the study participants.

As a simple example the researcher considered how depreciation methods were described in accounting course work. It was not sufficient that GAAP prescribed exact methods of calculating cost allocation of fixed assets using double declining balance methodology (DDB). The IRS code further compartmentalized fixed asset cost allocation and the use of DDB into modified accelerated cost recovery (MACRS) tables. The results left little room for variation in the determination of cost allocation. These and other cost allocation methods were a topic in every beginning and intermediate, and tax course and would typically consume an entire chapter in textbooks.

Now contrast such uniformed, rule-based precision with the diverse and conflicting results of this study of how participants experienced and taught ethics in their accounting courses. Professors holding offices across the hall from one another had vastly different understandings of ethics, professionalism, and what their roles as professors were. This dichotomy was consistently evident in both of the public colleges as well as the private college that were visited. One professor would passionately embrace ethics and another would insist that it was a waste of time or unteachable.

The researcher was concerned at times by the vision of mixed signals that students received when they attended multiple courses from these various instructors within the same college. The researcher noted the effect this would have on the credibility of the professor and the institute regarding important subject matter. The researcher concluded that ethics and professionalism do not receive the same consistent approach and scrutiny as do typical

accounting principles. This is despite the substantial importance of ethics to the viability of the accounting profession, as described in the literature.

On more positive notes, the researcher also observed familiarity and appreciation of virtue ethics with several participants in both their personal experiences as well as what they taught. The potency of virtue ethics even became apparent without a participant realizing or acknowledging it. Contrary to extreme time limitations described in the literature, (Blanthorne et al., 2007; Massey & Van Hise, 2009; Mintz, 2006), some committed participants were able to find considerable time in their curriculum to exercise ethics with their students in a creative and effective manner, often embedding it with technical matter and sometimes emphasizing professionalism and ethics with the same fervor as technical matter. One element that helped make this possible was the existence of a pre-established ethics pedagogy like GVV (Gentile, 2010). Though not specifically related to virtue ethics, dynamic teaching methods like GVV seemed to have a transformative effect on both instructor and student. This suggests considerable opportunity to build and use more of these tools. A dynamic tool that practiced and reinforced virtue ethics could bring effective uniformity to the teaching of accounting ethics.

Despite the misalignment of professorial inclinations around ethics and professionalism, their passions and concerns were commonly united around the importance of ethics when they were asked how well their former students would fare when faced with an Enron moment. The researcher noted that the two participants who felt confident that their students would fare well both subscribed to virtue ethics on a personal basis and actively used GVV in their course work. They also had performed considerable research into ethics.

Further elaboration of these and other discussions are made around each descriptive theme in the following sections.

### **Analysis and Conclusion from Emerging Themes**

**Lack of Consensus and Stability around Ethics: Analysis and Conclusions.** This descriptive theme evolved around whether to teach and what to teach and dovetails closely with the fourth research question: How important is ethics to an accounting curriculum and why? Can it be taught effectively? How and what is taught? Is ethics included in course outcomes? Should it be? Why or why not?

Lynn stated that she taught only technical material and that ethics was not teachable. Faith subscribed to teaching environmental issues and social impact issues as accounting ethics. Wyatt and Mathew wanted to teach more ethics but could not find the time. Barbara relied on other courses to teach ethics and was not aware of the philosophical approach in that class. To the contrary, Ami and Therese not only implanted ethics with their technical material but reinforced ethics using GVV. Several professors declined to participate in the study citing that they had “no experience or interest in ethics.”

Studies submitted by Mintz (2006) and West (2018), as well as the profession’s scandalous history and the AICPA’s code of professional conduct, consistently demonstrate that ethics and professionalism are inherently imperative to all accountants. The researcher acknowledged that participation was free and voluntary, but for an accounting professor to claim they had no interest or experience in ethics was the equivalent of a veterinary scientist having little interest or no experience with animals. There remains significant confusion and a superficial “check the box” or “flavor of the month” approach to ethics by some academics and this will undoubtedly impact students and the future of the profession.

Further analysis suggested that part of the reason for the lack of consensus stemmed from an overall lack of appreciation for virtue ethics and ethics in general. Several participants did not

fully grasp the gravity of the subject matter until they were asked how their students would fair in an Enron moment. At that moment facial expressions sometimes froze, sudden silence gripped them and hesitation in most responses augmented this experience, seeming to reflect accountability with some professors and disappointment on the part of others. In this study the researcher noted that professors who had formally researched and published material on ethics had a greater appreciation for the subject as well as greater confidence in their student's performance during Enron moments and they personally subscribed to virtue ethics. The researcher concluded that there may be a greater need for accounting professors to be coached in the significance of ethics in order to build greater consensus and stability around it.

**Ethics Divorced From Character: Analysis and Conclusions.** This theme dovetailed somewhat with the second research question: How does an accounting professor understand virtue? Is the participant's understanding of virtue consistent with classic definitions? Does one experience the virtues in their personal life? This theme also referred to the third research question of how an accounting instructor describes their own personal ethics? The following participant responses developed this theme.

Faith suggested that certain economic structures worked like systems. If systems were flawed and people worked within those systems, then they could likely fail as well, but the responsibility for the failure was with the system and not the individual. Faith further stated that "context influenced what people did." This left little room for the characterological effect of the individuals that comprised those systems. Similarly, Lynn interpreted predatory pricing as an acceptable strategy of competing that was entirely divorced from the consequences of putting a competitor out of business using unfair pricing and the economic effect to the consumer. Lynn stated:

I teach people what is fraud and how to detect fraud and how people commit fraud.

But...[long pause]...but I'm not teaching how to be a nice person, which means nothing...How can you teach how to be nice? It means nothing.

Initial analysis suggested that if a professor did not personally experience the virtues in their own formation, they were not likely to profess them. Personal formation did not play such a significant role in the presentation of technical material because it was ethically neutral. In some regards this suggests technical accounting material may be easier to teach, and also indicates the considerable influence of culture in shaping accounting ethics.

Further analysis suggests that in addition to culture, history plays a part in this theme. The historical context referenced in Carreira et al. (2008) and Frede et al. (2002) refer to how deontology and utilitarianism supplanted virtue ethics just before accounting began to evolve into a modern profession. The fruits of this reality were seen when Barbara commented that she had little recollection of her accounting professors discussing or teaching ethics except for a tax professor who emphasized the IRS code around home office deductions. Lynn did not even seem to distinguish accounting from deontology:

I think we may need to teach more details about the rules and more rules but we cannot teach them that they need to be good citizens...that's a North Korean method and it's not effective. It's nothing. So I don't know I think maybe in class we could give them more cases. I think the best use of our time is to make sure they understand US GAAP.

Furthermore, the researcher observed that the separation of ethics and character may have also been related to a lack of enthusiasm around philosophy, which was also found to be facing a sort of relevance crisis among some of the participants. For example, the researcher recalled how irrelevant and unconnected the early part of his discussion seemed with participant Barbara. She

eventually embraced the subject after mentioning “This is all coming back to me now from my philosophy classes, but I don’t think students study philosophy anymore.” This statement left the researcher under the impression that Barbara and her students felt that good philosophy did not really matter beyond the course that covered it. To the contrary, the researcher acknowledged that logic and good philosophy were always intended to transcend coursework into the chore of life thus making it relevant to all vocations and professions. Without extending too far beyond the scope of this study the researcher recalled the historic and academic roots of the *Ph.D.* to further substantiate his position.

**Inconsistent Understanding of Professionalism: Analysis and Conclusions.** The concept of professionalism is fundamentally connected to ethics and encompasses competence, integrity, and various important duties to clients, to the accounting profession, and to society at large. On July 1, 2014 the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) issued a Statement on Standards in Personal Financial Planning Services which instituted authoritative guidance and enforceable requirements for members who provide financial services. The statement included a specific and rigorous Code of Professional Conduct which obliged that members act:

With integrity, objectivity, due care, competence, fully disclose any conflicts of interest (and obtain client consent if a conflict exists), maintain client confidentiality, disclose to the client any commission or referral fees, and serve the public interest when providing financial services. (AICPA, n.d.a)

Seven of the eight participants were CPA’s who were required to pass an ethics exam and complete continuing education consisting of four hours of ethics work every two or three years, depending on the specific state. An inexperienced perspective might suggest that key factors are

in place which include well-documented, rigorous standards as well as testing and ongoing education. However, the *Journal of Accountancy* suggested the reality is that most CPA's subscribe to a "check the box" approach to ethics, doing the bare minimum to advance their objective without experiencing any sort of genuine internal ethical transformation (Hankins & Blass, 2015). Some of the results of this study seemed to concur.

Despite the ethical standards and factors described above, the researcher experienced significant variations in participant's responses to "What is Professionalism?" The wide variations were typically demonstrated within the same college. Wyatt described professionalism "Like the difference between a bookkeeper and an accountant. A bookkeeper does the books but an accountant analyzes and presents the numbers fairly. A professional has communication skills and is capable of taking on more responsibility." Faith described the five percent of time that she devotes to professional development as time spent teaching her students to dress for success, create a resume, and establish a business network. Barb's description of professionalism was also unique:

Like being a professional? Going to work, doing your job, growing in your job, I guess you don't have to grow in your job if you don't want to. Some people are just happy doing the same job. But being ethical and doing what is right.

Not all of the participants varied from the AICPA's standards. Matthew's definition of professionalism was much more aligned but understandably left little room for virtue:

It's qualitative like the AICPA code of professional conduct. Let's focus on that. My students role play using the code as a point of reference. In that I try to teach my students that accounting is a special vocation because it is charged with serving the best interest of society. Serving society is bigger than just serving the clients who pay us. Much of this

awesome responsibility stems from the SEC's 1933 and 1934 acts which demanded the oversight of publicly traded companies after the onset of the great depression. Accounting is the only profession with such an awesome set of responsibilities. Accountant's opinions matter. There is a dichotomy/challenge in working for a client but having to also serve the greater public. That's why accountants have to subscribe to deontology. If deontology fails, maybe technology brings us to a new place where rules do not exist yet, then they fall back on utilitarianism.

Such variation in responses highlighted important shortcomings of how accounting professionalism is experienced in the classrooms. Such inconsistencies can lead to dire consequences. Hankins and Blass' (2015) article, like many others, suggested the importance of the "tone at the top" in promoting a healthy culture of professionalism: "Warren Buffett, in testimony before a Congressional subcommittee in 1991, said: 'Lose money for the firm, and I will be understanding. Lose a shred of reputation for the firm, and I will be ruthless.'" The researcher concluded that for young, often unemployed accounting students, the "tone at the top" regarding professionalism and ethics is the tone that resonates from academic instructors and their curriculums.

**Technical/Ethics Mix: Analysis and Conclusions:** According to West (2018) there is a need in the contemporary accounting practice to restore intelligibility and moral discourse. He offered the use of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics as described in MacIntyre (1981) as the best approach to accomplishing this essential task. Any degree of success may hinge on a professor's willingness to teach something other than pure, technical GAAP. One of the obstacles to West's proposal was time. Over the years Blanthorne et al. (2007), Massey & Van Hise (2009), Mintz (1990) and others have referenced time and space limitations in the accounting curriculum as one

of three impediments to teaching ethics. In the spirit of candor this research also asked what is the objective of an accounting educator? To teach knowledge of technical subject matter? To assist in the moral development and formation of a professional? The technical subject matter approach is closely related to other contemporary demands of accounting education including the acquisition of gainful employment and success in passing the CPA exam.

The researcher asked participants what percentage of their time and energies were devoted towards teaching ethics verses technical accounting. It is nearly impossible to know what actually goes on in a classroom given the qualitative methods of this study, but one takeaway was that just because a professor was teaching technical GAAP does not mean they were teaching ethics. Several participants preferred to use non-technical time to discuss subjects like the environment, social justice, resume preparation, and dressing for success. Consequently, while a typical instructor might use 75-80% of their resources teaching GAAP, far less than the remaining 20-25% of their resources may be dedicated to ethics. Faith and Lynn claimed to teach none of the traditional ethics described in this study. Faith described her curriculum as consisting of 85% technical material, 15% social justice, and 5% was dedicated towards employment services leaving no time characterological or any accounting ethics. It is important to note that the researcher appreciates the importance of discussing environmental responsibility and social justice issues, but suggests they would be more effectively discussed when built on a solid foundation of virtue. Lynn claimed that she had no time to teach any ethics because her intermediate accounting curriculum has to cover every financial statement account. Olympia initially stated, "I believe that half of my value as a teaching professional is modeling good adult behavior." However when pressed to state specifically how much of her time and energy was

devoted to ethics in her curriculums she reluctantly stated that 80% of her curriculum was devoted to technical matters and 20% to all the rest, including ethics.

The researcher observed that some participants initially took comfort in a superficial 80/20 response, as they were not comfortable with acknowledging that in reality they may not be teaching any of the ethics expected by the industry, the AICPA, or the various state societies. Students are usually content with this because they have little understanding of philosophy and ethics and they are more concerned with gaining employment and/or passing the CPA exam. This reality stung even more when confronted with the question of how their former students would fare when faced with an Enron moment.

On the contrary, the two participants that demonstrated the most confidence in their former students' ethical performance were Therese and Ami, and they responded consistently to this question. Ami's response was quoted in an earlier section of this study and included the importance of integrating ethics with technical material even if it is at the expense of limiting the amount of technical material being covered because she preferred depth to breadth in her curriculum. Therese put it this way:

They [ethics and GAAP] are integrated...they go together...the students need to work with me...they need to put in the time on those technical items but then you bring in (take leases for example) and you bring in a broader discussion about a company that misclassified their leases and you start to ask why they did it that way and it easily transitions into ethics. It's really hard for me to separate the two. It's not 75/25 they are too connected.

The researcher's own experience was consistent with that of Ami and Therese. The researcher has years of experience teaching basic and advanced cost accounting, basic and advanced financial accounting, and basic and advanced tax and corporate finance courses. While

curriculums of such courses are certainly packed, there is room for ethics if the professor recognizes the importance of it. Some topics are expendable in lieu of ethics because they are redundantly covered in other courses. For example, capital asset models using net present value and internal rates of return are covered in cost accounting and again in some advanced managerial courses. They are also covered extensively in introductory finance classes. Financial ratios are covered in introductory financial accounting courses, intermediate accounting courses and corporate finance courses. There are certainly other examples. Furthermore, most students retain less than half of what they study in a given course. Given these realities, the “depth versus breadth” approach described by Ami and Therese makes sense and may anecdotally improve retention. Finally, most students expect to take a separate CPA preparation course before sitting for the exam. Such prep courses are very much focused on covering every element of the financial statements and they are conducive towards that objective. The researcher submits that a college classroom may be one of the single most effective places for an accounting student to experience virtue ethics if it is approached properly. The CPA review courses are appropriately geared towards breadth, with retention only long enough to pass the exam. Certain aspects of well-taught college courses can and should last a lifetime. Data analysis of this study has led the researcher to conclude that of the three recurring impediments consistently described in the literature:

1. Limited space and time in the curriculum
2. Insufficient instructional resources
3. Faculty discomfort due to a lack of prescribed training

The second and the third have the most credence. In fact, the researcher respectfully suggests that the first may be somewhat of an alibi for not addressing the second and the third impediments.

**Sensitivity Towards Conscience and Religion: Analysis and Conclusions.** The data showed the researcher experienced certain sensitivity towards the discussion of religion and conscience even though he did not initiate such discussions. This descriptive theme may be associated with other themes including the lack of consensus and stability around ethics as well as ethics being divorced from character. Data results described how Therese apologized for mentioning religion when she was relating to her personal experience of virtue ethics. Also, when the researcher asked Barbara if she was familiar with deontology, utilitarianism or the virtue ethics, part of her reply included an unsolicited disclaimer stating that she had students from a lot of different religious backgrounds and she respected them all so she avoided going into any religious discussions. She further stated that she discussed values and ethics and doing what is right in class without any sort of religious reference. She described her ethics as strictly business practice. This response surprised the researcher because Barbara taught at a private Christian university! Barbara also seemed opposed to referencing any sort of internal conscience in her discussion. The data above demonstrated that her way of describing conscience repeatedly was to simply “do what lets you sleep at night.” Faith professed utilitarianism, but when relating her personal experience described her internal conscience. The researcher noted that Faith seemed proud of her utilitarian response but behaved virtuously. Rhetorically, the researcher asked why.

Conscience and religion can be hot spots in an ideologically charged climate, and whether specific actions are prohibited may be less impactful than how students and other faculty

interpret them. Therese was afraid of how she would offend some students if she wore her cross pendant in class. The researcher recently went to class after attending an Ash Wednesday service that left a cross on his forehead and was criticized in his student evaluations for such.

Rhetorically the researcher asked if a person wore a pentagram tattoo in a public classroom would anyone be concerned?

Words like conscience, faith, hope, love, temperance, prudence, humility, and fortitude have supernatural qualities when discussed in a religious setting. However, West (2018) and others submit such terms also have vital natural qualities that may be essential to a healthy and positive ethics discussion in a public or private school setting. Such virtues may greatly enhance or easily surpass discussions around utility and deontology. Computer processors follow rules, but humans exist beyond rules. They have an emotional existence that complements their reason and both are cultivated in a healthy ethical experience. Shying away from such words and realities devalues ethics, education and life in general. The researcher submits that this excessive sensitivity may be the result of the recurring dominance of deontology and utilitarianism among accounting academics, the limitations and perils of which have been described by MacIntyre (1981), Pincoffs (1986) and others.

### **Analysis and Conclusions around Transformative Observations and Catalysts for Change**

Chapter One of this study established that the accounting profession and those who rely on its services are threatened by the frequency and severity of accounting scandals. As a consequence, the industry and academia have committed to ramping up ethics education with little consensus in what to teach and how to teach it. The dozens of scandals that have occurred since Enron suggest there is a crisis of ethics within the profession. The literature has suggested recurring impediments over many years that have significantly impeded progress. This study

next turned to examining potential catalysts for change in the accounting ethics phenomenon through further analysis of the data.

**Former Students Facing Enron Moments: Analysis and Conclusions.** Data showed that the participants had a diverse set of values and opinions on the subject matter. Given such circumstances and the challenges described in the literature, a reader might conclude that a unified, effective approach to accounting ethics pedagogy may be akin to herding cats — or even tigers. However, the researcher observed a common unifying expression from all of the participants when asked about how their former students would face Enron moments. Even the least supportive participants moved toward recognizing the gravity of the circumstances and their humble role in it as an educator. Lynn demonstrated this descriptive theme the least; her mannerisms softened as she conceded the need to teach more “rules” after hearing the question. That was quite a concession from the participant who initially said she taught no ethics and only technical information.

The researcher pondered why this unification occurred and how it might help the cause to promote accounting ethics. Part of the answer may lie in human nature and psychology. Ami, Therese and Olympia referenced the use of *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV) (Gentile, 2010) in their ethics work with students. Ami and Olympia suggested that GVV was more about *how* to behave ethically than *why*. Review of this product confirmed some of Ami’s observations. For example, in her book Gentile states:

Furthermore, in the study of ethics, the emphasis is typically on models of ethical reasoning, such as deontology or duty-based ethics, utilitarian or consequentialist ethics, virtue ethics, and so on. The emphasis is therefore again on various external frameworks

that can help us to discipline our thinking about various ethical choices and dilemmas.

(Gentile, 2010)

Furthermore, Gentile quotes Martin Seligman as follows:

There is astonishing convergence across the millennia and across cultures about virtue and strength. . . Confucius, Aristotle, Aquinas, the Bushido Samurai Code, the Bhagavad Gita, and other venerable traditions disagree on the details, but all of these codes include six core virtues. (Gentile, 2010)

Gentile goes on to name virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. She references other experts including Rushworth Kidder, Thomas Donaldson and Thomas Dunfee who have all posited similar sets of shared values that seem to transcend most of humanity. The researcher did concur that a certain set of shared values was common among most of us and one or more of those shared values resonated with our participants when they were asked about Enron moments. This strengthens aspects of this question as a catalyst for change. Specifically, accounting professors may need a greater awareness of how ethical temptations can affect their former students. They may also need greater awareness of the direct role and responsibility they have in affecting such significant outcomes. This question made ethics personal to the professors, and that made it real.

Another aspect of GVV relating to this study will be discussed in the next catalyst for change.

**Virtue Ethics in Practice: Analysis and Conclusions.** As previously noted, this is not a quantitative study, but the two participants that demonstrated the highest confidence in their former students share some common attributes. They personally subscribe to virtue ethics, have formally researched ethics, and utilize GVV with their students. The researcher recognized that

all three of these attributes may be catalysts. In this section the researcher explores the GVV pedagogy and its potential as a catalyst for change.

Three participants in this study and authorities worldwide have given GVV favorable reviews. Academics from Harvard to Stanford and industry leaders in diverse cultures around the world have praised its approach and effectiveness in improving ethics in business and organizational culture. Its pedagogy does not focus on *whether* to behave ethically, but on *how* one might do so successfully. Its application of cases does not imply countless, relative outcomes which can water down ethics, instead offering real solutions of substance to which students can lay hold.

Upon discussing the GVV pedagogy with Ami and reviewing Gentile (2010), the researcher was reminded of important aspects of virtue ethics. Not only do Gentile's shared values connect with Greek and Confucian virtues, but Aristotle submitted that virtues and vices are acquired by practice or habits. Unlike intellectual virtues which may be acquired through schooling, moral virtues are acquired through practice which forms habits (Aristotle, trans. 2014). The researcher posits that one of the reasons that pedagogies like GVV may be a catalyst for change is because they present a healthy way of practicing ethics in an Aristotelian sense.

### **Conclusions**

The researcher was privileged to explore emerging themes and potential catalysts for change in how accounting professors view and practice virtue ethics using the narrative design of this study. Results were based on lived experiences that were described in participants' own voices and body languages. Such lived experiences and emerging themes were often reverberated as contrasting views and perspectives were researched, discussed, and analyzed through the

various chapters of this study. The lived experiences of the participants as well as the researcher completed a narrative with a beginning, middle and end.

The beginning of this narrative included an objective of experiencing a vision of virtue ethics with accounting professors through their personal and classroom experiences. This objective was transformed with some participants who did not have a working definition of virtue ethics. Through their personal stories, however, the researcher would sometimes identify virtue ethics in action even without the participant's conscious realization. The researcher accepted that as part of the inherent magnitude of the virtues. Virtue ethics is big! In some cases, the virtues are so big that they cannot be seen from where we stand because we cannot always see the forest for the trees. But virtue is there.

The middle of this narrative included some tensions and respectful disagreements about whether *any* sort of ethics could, or should, be taught. The researcher was astonished by some of the gaping deviations in accounting ethics perspectives even within the same institutions. In addition to the obvious realities these tensions described, these tense moments were helpful because they predicated one of the catalysts of this study. The tensions made the unifying moments more apparent and more real. They also encouraged the researcher to objectively consider alternative perspectives throughout the study. These alternative perspectives led to the richness of the narrative experience and fortified some of the conclusions.

In the end of this narrative the researcher concluded that the vision of virtue ethics in accounting is a consequence of the true purpose of accounting and the true purpose of higher education. Appreciation of this end result required perspective. As mentioned previously, the researcher stated that one of the participants, Matthew, recommended a book, *The Reckoning*, (Soll, 2014) which epically describes the role of accounting in world history. In short, the book

describes accounting as a critical vocation. As such, accounting is much more than a conglomeration of rules and utility tests which may inevitably be replaced with artificial intelligence. The accounting vocation requires virtue ethics in addition to deontology and utilitarianism because of the intricate and essential role that financial accountability plays in the economic balance and evolution of society.

Similarly, for over 2,000 years higher education has meant much more than mere technical or career instruction. Pure technical information may also be inevitably supplanted with systems of artificial intelligence. Students are free-thinking souls gifted with emotion and reason. Higher education, whether public or private, is charged with a sacred task of providing sustenance and formation to the emotion and reason of these individuals who represent the future of the accounting profession, and indeed of civilization itself. The virtues are a critical staple in the appetite of this noble task. To question the importance of this task is to question *happiness* in the eudemonic sense of the term. It is to question the expectation that each of us has the ability and the right to become the very best version of ourselves. And the accounting profession has the same obligations to be the very best version of itself. If the modern accounting education excludes virtue ethics it excludes these sacred rights and opportunities. The alternative may be the profession's scandalous status quo. Vociferously the researcher asks: just how well is that going?

### **Implications for Theory**

The literature review included observations over several years by Blanthorne et al. (2007), Massey & Van Hise (2009), Mintz (1990), and Tweedie, Dyball, Hazelton, & Wright (2013) which consistently describe the same three obstacles to teaching accounting ethics as follows:

1. Limited space and time in the curriculum
2. Insufficient instructional resources
3. Faculty discomfort due to a lack of prescribed training

This study determined that limits in curriculum space and time were in fact overcome by more than one professor. Ami and Therese were both successful at interweaving technical material with ethics to create a more effective classroom experience.

The remaining two obstacles (insufficient instructional resources and the lack of faculty training) were experienced as understatement in this study. It was determined that these obstacles will not be overcome with superficial, cursory resources - particularly if the prescribed moral principles are virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is a very potent characterological persuasion. As such it was found to be linked to a person's own character formation and personhood. If a professor is expected to morally develop their students in the virtues then he or she must themselves have experienced some moral development in virtue ethics. Otherwise, virtue ethics takes on sort of a "check the box" subject that may or may not have been covered in a long-forgotten philosophy course. As such, a philosophical awakening or transformation may be necessary in order to overcome all three of these recurring obstacles. Culture also had its obvious influences in our results, and as academia embraces cultural diversity it must also understand related ethical implications.

Accounting evolved as a profession during the period of enlightenment where reason supplanted virtue ethics due in part to its internal characterological nature. Since then, the literature has demonstrated a strong revival of virtue ethics (Anscombe, 1958; MacIntyre, 1981; and West, 2018), but many of the participants in this study seemed stuck in purely deontological

approaches to ethics. Accounting needs to continue to evolve with the revitalization of virtue ethics if it is to maintain its relevance.

### **Implications for Practice**

Without a departure from the status quo the next major accounting scandal becomes inevitable. With that backdrop this study demonstrated several implications for the teaching and practice of accounting. Accounting is highly deontological and often includes intense methodologies that subscribe succinctly to GAAP and/or the IRS code. Uniformity is key in such applications. And yet there still appears to be no coherent uniformity around how ethics are understood and taught, as described in the first emerging theme of this study. Such a lack of uniformity and the willingness to accept it do not speak highly for the profession, or for some of the professors who teach it.

This lack of consistency was further evident in several professors' understanding of professionalism, which emerged as the third theme in this study. Accounting cannot be practiced consistently without a consistent understanding of what it means to be a professional accountant. The AICPA code defines it succinctly, but the professors in this study had not absorbed that definition entirely; this demonstrates some of the problems with relying solely on a deontological approach to ethics.

Another theme that emerged in this study was the separation of character from ethics. The practical implications of this theme relate to human nature. Humans exist as both rational and emotional beings. By excluding character from ethics we exclude part of human nature. This study suggests that ethics cannot be properly valued, and understood when it excludes part of human existence.

The fifth theme that emerged from this study included an uneasiness discussing conscience and religion. Several professors implied that teaching virtue ethics felt like teaching religion, which they felt was not appropriate in an accounting course, particularly at a public university. This theme confirms a lack of understanding about what virtue ethics really is. Plato's virtue ethics predates Christianity by hundreds of years. In the East, Confucius' virtues, which strongly mirrored the Greeks, were even older. Christianity certainly embraced virtue ethics through Christ, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, who explained the supernatural aspects of the virtues. However, these realities do not negate the natural qualities of virtue ethics, nor do they converge the two into a single subject. It is acceptable, and indeed necessary, for an accounting professor to practice being the best version of herself, and the engagement of virtues like hope and charity are necessary elements if professors are to engage the whole person in their instruction.

Perhaps one of the most obvious practical implications from this study emerged from the sixth theme, former students facing Enron moments. This also emerged as a catalyst for change. Most of the participants were asked how their former students would respond when faced with an Enron or WorldCom moment of temptation. Would their classroom experience prepare them to make a good ethical decision? Less than half of the participants responded with confidence that they were adequately preparing their students for such temptations. This line of questioning also served as a sobering moment, causing most participants to pause briefly and realize more deeply the enormity of teaching accounting ethics effectively. Consider how future employers would view such results. Rhetorically the researcher asks, would you hire a student whose professor had little confidence in their ethical sensitivity and stamina during an Enron moment? Is it healthy for academia or industry to maintain such low expectations?

### **Limitations of Conclusions**

The conclusions in this study were based on the accounts and representations of participants who were selected using “purposeful sampling,” as described by Creswell (2014). As such, findings were based on eight individuals. This volume may be more than adequate for narrative research, but is not statistically generalizable on to a greater population. However, results may be transferable to the readers of the research through connections between elements of this study and their own personal experiences. Elements may also be transferable to future research using quantitative methods which could then be generalized. Consequentially, results and conclusions have social connotations, but only through the concept of transferability.

This interview process explored the participants’ descriptions of past experiences in retrospect extending over the time frame of their entire lives up to the point of the study. It did not track changes in narratives taking place after this study.

Study conclusions could also be affected by researcher bias. The researcher has personal involvement in the subject matter as an accounting professor. He also has strong personal convictions towards virtue from both a philosophical and religious perspective. Like MacIntyre (1981), the researcher experienced a type of ethical conversion.

Additional limitations typically associated with interview based qualitative research are described by Creswell (2014) as follows:

- Data is often obtained through indirect information filtered through the views of the participants
- Data is harvested in a designated place as opposed to a live setting
- Participants demonstrate various degrees of perceptiveness and abilities to articulate their experiences

It is also worth noting that these interviews were conducted in January, February, and March of 2020 just before quarantines were issued in Oregon and Washington to address the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher was planning to conduct more interviews with a wider selection of participants up until the quarantines were issued. However, Creswell (2014) takes the position that qualitative research with a narrative design frequently includes one or two participants and the eight that participated in this study were adequate to achieve data saturation.

Virtue ethics is a critical ingredient in the *complete* accounting education. Future resources should be committed to coaching faculty in understanding and grasping the virtues as more than a static idea that they may have studied once upon a time in a required philosophy course. Rather, they must be understood as a dynamic force of attitude and truth that is transformative not only in their students but in themselves. Considerable opportunity exists in the creation of effective accounting pedagogy which practices virtue ethics in an Aristotelian sense.

### **Significance of the Study**

Three categories of research significance were described by Kottler & Sharp (2018). These included statistical significance, theoretical significance, and practical significance. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, statistical significance was not feasible. The study utilized narrative and interpretive theories to record, analyze and interpret the ethical experiences of participants. The determination of practical significance to individuals or society at large is left to the reader. Similarly, transferability is left to the reader and their own experiences of the phenomenon.

Conclusions and implications of the study could likely resonate with a broad audience including accounting professors, practicing accountants, college accreditation boards, state

boards of accountancy, higher education students of accounting and various users and analysts of financial information. Growing trends of virtue ethics were found in philosophy and psychology literature, but for the most part virtue ethics research is in its formative years with regards to business and accounting literature.

In quantitative research the Leadership Virtue Questionnaire (LVQ) was developed by Riggio et al. (2015) and used to test Plato's cardinal virtue traits in leadership. Accounting firms were included in the test stages of this instrument. In addition, Chikeleze & Baehrend (2017) performed further validation of the Ethical Leadership Style Questionnaire (ELSQ) which was developed by Northouse. The ELSQ was a quantitative tool used to measure various philosophical leadership styles, including virtue. Unlike the LVQ, which was intended to be asked to subordinates, the ELSQ was directed at leaders themselves.

On the qualitative side of research, two pioneers in accounting literature are Mintz (2018), who has been publishing on ethics and accounting for the last 20 years, and West (2018), who published an effective adaptation of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) to the accounting profession. At the time of this study the researcher was not aware of any narrative style investigation of virtue ethics aimed at accounting professors in the Northwest or anywhere in the world. Mintz, West and others have emphasized the theoretical significance of virtue ethics in their research, whereas this study examined the practical significance of such theories in the classroom through the minds and hearts of accounting professors.

Practical significances harvested from this study began with its narrative approach focusing on genuine lived experiences as opposed to ethical theories. Professors were interviewed in comfortable settings of their choice and their confidentiality was assured. This encouraged them to loosen up and share their lived experiences openly. Video recordings

allowed the researcher to capture more than their words. Facial expressions and body language was analyzed during the peaks and valleys of the conversations.

The researcher set out to explore virtue ethics among college professors but discovered a lack of consensus around ethics in general. There were significant separations between ethics and character in the data and inconsistencies in how the participants viewed professionalism. Of the three challenges described by Blanthorne et al. (2007), Massey & Van Hise (2009) and Mintz (1990), *faculty discomfort due to a lack of prescribed training* was most evident. However, the researcher noted exceptions to *limitations of space and time in the curriculum* with certain participants who emphasized more depth and less breadth in their curriculums. This allowed them to embed ethics into their technical work effectively. The third prominent challenge, *insufficient instructional resources* was also notably identified and partially affected by the use of GVV (Gentile, 2010). The scandalous history has demonstrated that deontology and utilitarianism have not met expectations. This study asked, what about virtue? Where is it in our accounting curriculums? Are our professors versed in it?

This research demonstrated how virtue ethics has re-emerged as a leading moral theory which does not supplant deontology and utility, but places character above them. Being an ethical accountant requires developing and demonstrating virtues like courage, compassion, wisdom, and temperance while discouraging vices like greed, jealousy, and selfishness. Results of this study demonstrate that such qualities were not taught in technical-only curriculums. Artificial intelligence can master purely technical material, but only virtue can protect the essence of accounting. Virtuous accountants will be more productive and competitive in the long term and they will be versed with the strong temperaments that are necessary to face a rapidly changing world. Promoting the best version of oneself also brings about the best version of a

profession. The literature demonstrates that many other professions have already turned this important corner. This study demonstrated that to some extent accounting lags behind because of its overreliance on deontology and utility. Some professors have not kept up with the resurgence of virtue and continue to claim they do not have time or space in their curriculums. The reality is that deontology and utility are incomplete without virtue. Those who claim they do not have the time or space to teach virtue ethics are missing the sacrosanct role of accounting in our society. Technical material is easier to teach and may in fact be taught with artificial intelligence in the foreseeable future. Virtue incorporates the human side of accounting. To exclude it from curriculum is to, in some way, exclude the individual from the profession.

### **Future Research**

The potential for follow-up research to this study is significant because virtue ethics in accounting is still in its formative years. One quantitative study could include the application of the ELSQ on various accounting professors with the objective of quantitatively determining their own philosophical leadership qualities. The results could suggest how prevalent or rare virtue leadership is among college professors, with further outcomes of studying how a professor who does not have virtue leadership qualities can effectively teach virtue ethics.

A mixed methods study could examine accountants who are currently incarcerated or sanctioned due to unethical behavior. Examining their upbringing and formative college years, including if and how they studied ethics, could shed some direct light on their behaviors and provide further support for unified ethics pedagogy.

The experience of philosophy among generations may also be related to this study. Determining baby boomer familiarity with philosophy and virtue ethics in particular and

comparing it to later generations could shed some valuable light on how ethics has evolved for the better or worse.

This study also demonstrated significant variations in perceived ethics based on the professor's culture. Further research into the effects of cultural diversity in virtue ethics could improve the understanding of globalism and its effect on ethics.

Another mixed methods study of accounting students before and after they complete accounting courses covering virtue ethics could help determine the effectiveness of ethics pedagogy on ethical motivations and behaviors.

A qualitative study might build on the successful momentum of GVV by designing more effective pedagogies that incorporate the internal characterological values of virtue ethics in the accounting classroom. These teaching tools should appropriately focus on the *why* in addition to the *how* in order to enrich the ethical experience. The enlightened accounting profession often over emphasizes deontology and utilitarianism to its peril. Virtue ethics is mistakenly viewed as too abstract and difficult to measure and teach. This study has demonstrated the contrary, but the existence of effective tools for building and exercising virtues within the accounting profession are clearly nonexistent. Future research would involve the application of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle envisioned morality like a craft that could initially be learned from a master but then needed to be practiced. Virtue ethics needs to be exercised like a muscle so that it can grow and be strengthened. The anatomical analogy continues in that the accounting profession could benefit from virtue ethics isometrics and calisthenics. These training exercises would focus on business ethical dilemmas that integrate an individual's internal character in addition to legal codes and consequences. The overarching goal would be to demonstrate how one could consistently emerge from a practical ethical dilemma as a better version of oneself.

The bells and whistles of video production could be incorporated to encapsulate the students into a dilemma with multiple potential outcomes and students could explore each outcome in terms of their internal character, happiness and external consequences. These exercises could prove useful to instructors in all levels of accounting education as well as ongoing continuing education seminars for professionals. They could also be designed to incorporate accounting principles such as revenue recognition to enforce technical and ethical training simultaneously. Well over 50 major accounting scandals have occurred since the advent of the PCAOB and Sarbanes-Oxley. The profession is well disposed for a *new* and *ancient* approach to ethics.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Solicitation for Participation

#### Sample Participant Solicitation

##### (Via Email)

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral candidate at George Fox University and I am conducting qualitative research into the accounting professor's experience of virtue ethics.

Because of your qualifications and responsibilities in academia you have been identified as a valuable contributor to the final stages of my research. I would be honored to have you as part of this study.

Aspects of the study for you to consider:

- Participants will remain completely anonymous. Only aggregated data will be included in any resulting publication or presentations.
- Your expected commitment will consist of an initial interview (45 to 90 minutes) to be located at a time and place that is convenient for you. This interview will be recorded.
- The only required additional involvement will be in the form of email which will be a summary of your interview to confirm that your experiences were accurately understood and recorded; a follow up phone call might also be made only if further clarification is needed.
- You will be asked to sign an informed consent form which has been approved by the George Fox University Review Board if you are interested in participating. Results of the study will be the property of the researcher and George Fox University.

So what do you think Dr. \_\_\_\_\_? Can I count on your participation? If you have questions please call me at (xxx)-xxx-xxxx anytime. I hope to work with you and learn from your experiences in accounting ethics. If you intend to participate, Fridays are wide open for me as are Monday and Wednesday mornings. If necessary, I can also make weekends available. If you are willing to participate please put forth a date, time and location that works best for you.

With Gratitude,

Gibran Zogbi D.B.A., A.B.D.  
George Fox University

**Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form**

**VIRTUE ETHICS IN THE ACCOUNTING CURRICULUM INFORMED  
CONSENT FORM**

**Virtue Ethics in the Accounting Curriculum:** Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

<b>Project Information</b>	
Project Title: Virtue Ethics in the Accounting Curriculum	Project Number:
Site IRB Number:	Sponsor: George Fox University
Principal Investigator: Gibran Zogbi	Organization:
Location: Various Colleges/Professor Offices/Meeting Rooms	Phone:503-998-9262
Other Investigators: N/A	Organization:
Location N/A	Phone:

**1. PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY**

- *You are being asked to participate in a research study designed to explore the vision that accounting professors have of teaching virtue ethics in their courses. You will be asked to share some of your own personal experiences of ethics to help identify what influences your experience of ethics both in and out of the classroom.*

**2. PROCEDURES**

- *You will be asked to tell stories about your experience of ethics and different philosophies of ethics. You will be interviewed more than once so that the researcher can be sure to accurately record your perspectives. Once the interviewer feels confident that he captured your contributions accurately he will share the information with you via email and ask for your confirmation and/or additional edits. To*

*assist the researcher in capturing your complete contributions to the study your interviews may also be video recorded.*

- *You should expect to be interviewed once or twice if necessary in person with additional follow up questions completed via email or phone on an as needed basis. Your total time commitment should be between 2 to 4 hours spread out over a 2 week period at a time and place that is convenient for you.*

### **3. POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORT**

- *The only risks involved are related to any sensitivities or tensions that you may or may not have discussing your experiences of ethics. To alleviate these risks your researcher will seek ongoing feedback from you regarding the content that you share and your comfort sharing it.*

### **4. OWNERSHIP AND DOCUMENTATION OF SPECIMENS**

- *Any information that you share during the interviews and subsequent follow up communications will be research data that is owned by the researcher for study purposes.*

### **5. POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

- *You may gain a greater understanding and appreciation of ethics as a result of this study. This study may also serve to enhance to enhance how accounting professionals are educated.*

### **6. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- *There is no financial compensation for your participation in this research and there are no expected financial costs to you for participating.*

### **7. AVAILABLE TREATMENT ALTERNATIVES**

- *N/A*

### **8. AVAILABLE MEDICAL TREATMENT FOR ADVERSE EXPERIENCES**

- *This study involves minimal risk. In the unlikely event that you are injured as a direct result of taking part in this research study, emergency medical care will be provided through 911 or by transporting you to your personal doctor or medical center. Neither the researcher, George Fox University, nor the Federal government will be able to provide you with long-term medical treatment or financial compensation except as may be provided through your employer's insurance programs or through whatever remedies are normally available at law.*

### **9. CONFIDENTIALITY**

- *Your identity in this study will be treated as confidential. The results of the study, including laboratory or any other data, may be published for scientific purposes but will not give your name or include any identifiable references to you. However, any records or data obtained as a result of your participation in this study may be inspected by the sponsor, by any relevant governmental agency, by your employer's Institutional Review Board, or by the persons conducting this study, (provided that such inspectors are legally obligated to protect any identifiable information from public disclosure, except where disclosure is otherwise required by law or a court of competent jurisdiction. These records will be kept private in so far as permitted by law. Code names and aliases may be used to protect confidentiality for identifying data.*

### **10. TERMINATION OF RESEARCH STUDY**

*You are free to choose whether or not to participate in this study. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate. You will be provided with any significant new findings developed during the course of this study that may relate to or influence your willingness to continue participation. In the event you decide to discontinue your participation in the study,*

- *Please notify (Gibran Zogbi, 503-998-9262) of your decision so that your participation can be orderly terminated.*

*In addition, while it is not anticipated, your participation in the study may be terminated by the researcher investigator without your consent. It may be necessary for the sponsor of the study to terminate the study without prior notice to, or consent of, the participants.*

## **11. AVAILABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

- Any further questions you have about this study will be answered by the Principal Investigator:

Name: Gibran Zogbi

Phone Number: 503-998-9262

- Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject will be answered by:

Name: Gibran Zogbi

Phone Number: 503-998-9262

- In case of a research-related emergency, call: 911

## **12. AUTHORIZATION**

*I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local laws.*

Participant Name (Printed or Typed):

Date:

Participant Signature:

Date:

Principal Investigator Signature: Date:

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:

Date:

### **Appendix 3: Application and Interview Summary**

(Fields left blank to protect identities in this report)

**Study title:** Virtue Ethics in the Accounting Curriculum

**Study purpose:** To understand the accounting professor's experience of virtue ethics and determine if/how it is manifested in their accounting curriculums.

**Scope of study participants:** Between 3-15 voluntary participants.

**Participant qualifications:** Having taught accounting and related finance courses full time for at least 2 years at an institution that grants four-year (bachelor) degrees in Accounting.

**Participant's role:** Attend an initial recorded interview session of up to two hours in length with researcher; Review and, if necessary, edit a summary of what the researcher understood from the interview via email or, if necessary, via phone or future meetings. Such correspondence is to take place in time and places that are mutually acceptable to both parties but not to exceed a total of two months. Participants are encouraged to keep a diary during the course of the study to document any further thoughts or experiences related to the study's purpose. Diaries may be submitted to researcher at any time prior to the interview date plus 14 days.

**Study site:** On or near college campus where participants teach or an alternative site agreed to by participant and researcher. Site to be agreed upon from interview to interview between participant and researcher.

**Study researcher:** Gibran Zogbi, doctoral candidate in Doctor of Business Administration program at George Fox University. Contact: Phone (xxx)-xxx-xxxx); e-mail: gzogbi@georgefox.edu

**Participant's Name and Alias:**

**Participants Title**

**Participants Biographical Information:**

**Participant's Publications:**

**Participant's Daytime phone:**

**E-mail address:**

**College or university where Participant Currently Teaches:**

**Participant's Interest in the Purpose of the Study:**

**Outline of Initial Interview**

#### Appendix 4: Questionnaire for Guiding Study Interviews

The researcher will be the instrument as is consistent with most qualitative research. The following questions may be asked to channel discussions within the boundaries of the study.

Interview Questions used in the Interview Process after Icebreaker  
(Designed to develop Beginning, Middle and End of Stories)

- Are you familiar with Deontology? Utilitarianism? Classic Virtues? If not, please allow me to provide an overview for you. Do you subscribe to any of these personally? Professionally? More than one? Why or why not? If not, is there a particular school of ethics that you do subscribe to? Please share it with me. When did you develop such an affinity? What influenced you? Tell me about that experience or another experience the lead to this.
- Do you teach virtue ethics in your accounting classes? Why or why not? If so how? Is it tied to specific learning objectives? Do you think your methods are effective? Why or why not? When did you first start to teach virtue ethics? Tell me about a specific experience of this.
- Please tell me about your earliest experiences of making ethical decisions in life? Did those experiences have an effect on your personal, long-term, formation of ethics? How? Do those experiences influence how you teach accounting ethics today? How?
- Please tell me about a time when you faced a serious ethical challenge in your life (personally or professionally). How did you approach it and why did you choose this approach? Did you think your approach was optimal? If it could have been better in hindsight how so? Why?
- When did you decide to teach accounting? What influenced you in this decision? Tell me about how you do or don't find the experience of teaching accounting to be rewarding and fulfilling? What do you like or dislike the most about it?
- What is your primary objective in teaching accounting? Does it include anything beyond technical subject matter (i.e., what is needed to pass the CPA exam?) If so what? Why or why not?
- As a professor do you recognize any role in the moral development of your students? Why or why not? If so, when and how were you influenced in this role? How would you describe that role? How important is it? Has your understanding of this role changed over the years? Please share how? Can you tell me how this role has evolved for you?
- Please tell me about a time in one of your classes when you feel that you were very effective in teaching virtue ethics or ethics in general? What lead to that experience?

How do you know that you were effective?

- Please tell me about a time in one of your classes when you feel you were not very effective in teaching ethics. What led to that experience? What adjustments have you made?
- Tell me about your future plans for teaching virtue ethics or ethics in general? Are they different from the past? Why or why not?
- How would your former students perform if faced with an Enron moment? Would they make an ethical decision? Are you confident that your classroom preparations would prepare them for such moments?