Long ago, in his classic work *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explored a number of significant connections between knowledge and ethics. For example, under some circumstances, a lack of knowledge can excuse someone from blame. Thus, suppose that a person had good reasons to believe that a certain chemical is medicine which can cure a given disease. In reality, however, that chemical is poison. The person in question did not know that the chemical is poison, so he gave it, with tragic consequences, to someone who was ill. If his lack of knowledge was not his own fault— if for example it was not due to his own negligence— and if he had excellent reasons to believe that the chemical actually is effective medicine— then the person may be excused for giving poison. On the other hand, if the person’s lack of knowledge was indeed due to his own negligence, it would not excuse him from blame. This example is just one of many different important connections between knowledge and ethics.

According to Aristotle, because knowledge and ethics are significantly interrelated, a person must acquire appropriate knowledge— and apply it wisely— to be ethical. This includes knowledge about virtues and vices, as well as knowledge about the specific circumstances under consideration. It follows that wisdom and excellent ethical judgment depend upon effective knowledge management. Thus, among other things, parents, teachers and community leaders should take steps to make certain that their children can attain the knowledge needed to become virtuous. The amount of such knowledge is enormous, and Aristotle believed that a person must live for several decades before he or she could attain sufficient knowledge and experience to become ethically wise.

In the Western world, since the time of Plato, philosophers have offered a variety of theories of knowledge and have engaged in many debates about the fundamental nature of knowledge. Those debates continue to this day, and they often are interesting and helpful. Fortunately, however, we do not have to wait until all philosophers agree— if they ever do— about the fundamental nature of knowledge. Instead, our commonsense everyday understanding of knowledge is sufficient to explore some important connections between ethics and the management of knowledge. We know, for example, that knowledge can be created, stored, secured, copied, shared, applied, taught, learned, forgotten, lost, stolen, and managed in many other ways. Some of those ways are ethically reprehensible, some are ethically admirable, and some are ethically debatable. In the pages of the present book, a number of connections are explored between knowledge management and important ethical considerations.

All of the discussions in the book take for granted the fact that we are living in “the Information Age”, and that we therefore have available to us a vast array of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which can be used to create, compile, extract, store, retrieve, compare, filter, convey, disseminate, encode, hide, steal, scramble, erase, buy and sell information. And because knowledge and information are closely related, the tools of the Information Age are having an enormous impact
upon our ability to manage knowledge. This book explores some aspects of that enormous ICT impact together with some related ethical issues.

A number of such issues can be viewed as questions of fairness and distributive justice. For example, in today’s “knowledge economy” what is fair compensation for knowledge workers whose jobs and accomplishments are so central to the well being of society? Another issue of distributive justice concerns new knowledge being generated, in economically developed countries, by innovative companies and research laboratories. Doesn’t justice require that this new knowledge- and related ICTs for managing it- be shared globally in ways that benefit poor countries as well as wealthy ones? Shouldn’t knowledge and related ICTs be shared in ways that reduce “the digital divide” between the “haves” and the “have-nots”? And shouldn’t that sharing include knowledge about the many diverse cultures of the world, as well as various ways to preserve and defend their cultural values, rather than merely disseminating knowledge and values of wealthy influential Western (i.e., America and European) countries?

One of the most effective ways to share knowledge globally- and also to spread cultural artifacts and values- is to use person-to-person (P2P) file sharing on the Internet. However, P2P distribution in the past has generated major worldwide ethical and legal questions involving, for example, ownership of intellectual property, privacy rights, security questions, and violations of personal freedom. These are fundamental issues that could take years- perhaps, even decades- to resolve. Since P2P knowledge sharing is here to stay- and it also provides new cultural, personal and business opportunities- many ethical, legal and cultural challenges lie ahead.

Knowledge sharing is related to a number of other ethical questions. For example, constant and rapid changes in the world economy make it necessary for businesses, if they are to remain competitive, to renew continually the knowledge resources that are embodied in their experts, their policies and their procedures. But sharing new knowledge that can help a business remain viable might also benefit its competitors and thereby threaten its own existence. On the other hand the economy generally and, therefore, the specific companies within the economy, depend upon new widely disseminated knowledge. There is tension, therefore, between knowledge protection and knowledge sharing.

A very special and important kind of knowledge sharing is the education of our children. Teaching involves the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, as well as the facilitation, by teachers, of student self-learning. New ICTs have led to “distance learning” over the Internet, as well as ICT-enhanced teaching and learning in a traditional classroom. Pedagogical ethics requires that the new tools and teaching/learning techniques of the Information Age provide effective education. In addition, the new ICT teaching tools and methods require that teachers, if they are to remain effective, must acquire new knowledge themselves in order to be able to use the new tools and methods successfully. Global education issues are also ethically important, including an educational version of “the digital divide” in which distance learning and computer-assisted learning are concentrated in the developed world, thereby perpetuating the unjust distribution of knowledge between economically developed and underdeveloped countries.

Another global issue, of growing importance, is the possible development of a “global ethics” that could result from knowledge sharing among a wide diversity of the world’s cultures. Access to the Internet in many different cultures has enabled a worldwide conversation about ethics and values. As part of that conversation, some philosophers have argued that the Internet is “inherently democratic”; and therefore, as more and more countries gain access to the Internet and to knowledge about democracy, respect for human rights and freedom will grow, and democracy could become the dominant form of governments worldwide. Other, more pessimistic, philosophers and social thinkers have argued, instead, that the powerful ICT tools of the Information Age might actually be used by politically and economi-
cally powerful people, companies, and governments to control and withhold knowledge and thereby dominate—perhaps even enslave—a vast majority of the world’s population.

In addition to the above-mentioned knowledge-related ethical issues, there are issues related directly to ethical knowledge itself. For example, is knowledge about traditional ethical theories from philosophers, such as Aristotle, Bentham and Kant, sufficient to make a person ethically wise? Or does ethical wisdom require broader, tacit, and perhaps more intuitive kinds of knowledge? Can recent theories and experiments in moral psychology shed any light on the kinds of knowledge that wise persons actually use to make ethical judgments and to live ethical lives? These and related questions are also addressed in the pages below.

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