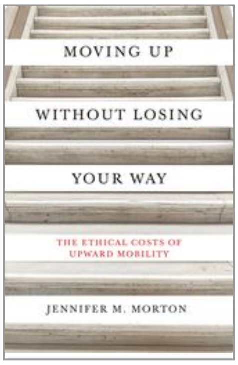

Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility
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Recognizing the Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility

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[−] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter describes the ethical costs of upward mobility and presents an argument for why they are different from other costs that strivers face on their path. It argues that understanding the nature of the ethical goods move people well beyond the cost-benefit analysis that might be appropriate when thinking about money, time, or effort. The ethical costs of upward mobility are particular and not easily offset. Consequently, loss is felt keenly by those who succeed even if they ultimately have much to gain from the sacrifices they have made. The chapter emphasizes how people who are concerned with the challenges faced by first-generation and low-income college students often fail to appreciate the significance of the potential ethical costs that strivers encounter in pursuing a better life for themselves.

Keywords: upward mobility, ethical cost, first-generation students, low-income students, strivers

Sandra* rushes into my office 15 minutes late for our appointment. Her hair is wet from the rain. She starts apologizing profusely before she even sets her bag down. I smile and try to reassure her that I’m not upset; I know that the 1 train is notoriously dreadful on a day like this. Sandra is nervous, and she has good reason to be. Her tardiness and absences are starting to become a serious problem. When she does come to class, though she tries hard to keep up with the conversation, she can barely keep her eyes open. She hasn’t turned in a few of the weekly reading responses, and the due date for a major paper is fast approaching.

At first, she tries to convince me that I should accept her reading responses several weeks late. She tells me that she really meant to turn them in, but she was running late, and the train, and work … Her voice trails off. I have a reputation for being strict about deadlines. Sandra knows there is little she can do to convince me. I’m sympathetic but explain the rationale for my policy clearly and firmly. She might not recognize it, but this is probably for the best. I can already see that if she were to try and “catch up’” by making **(p.18)** up missed work, her prospects in the class would be even worse. Each individual reading response does not make up much of her final grade, but the grade she receives on the upcoming paper matters. That is what she needs to concentrate on.

As we talk, a larger story emerges. Sandra tells me that she's been dealing with a lot of "family drama" back home. This is a catchall phrase for the situations many of my students confront: sick siblings or children, parents who need help with childcare or chores, relatives who are in legal or financial trouble. I listen sympathetically, but I don't ask for more details. My focus as Sandra's professor is on making sure she does well in class. I need to encourage her to turn her attention to the upcoming assignment. My pedagogical goal is to have her walk out of my office with a mental outline that breaks up the task of writing the paper into smaller, less daunting steps. I know from the first few weeks of class that she is a smart student and a strong writer; now I must convince her that her skills are up to the challenge of this assignment, regardless of what else is happening in her life.

Lurking beneath this exchange is a larger, more difficult conversation about how to confront conflicts between her education and those other important, yet competing, concerns. Finishing college, my colleagues and I regularly tell students like Sandra, is of crucial importance. If Sandra drops out, she is much more likely to be unemployed. Even if she finds a job, the odds are that she will make significantly less money than she would have if she had completed her degree.[1] If she accumulates debt while attending college, as many students do, she may end up worse off economically than when she started. But though she might understand this in the abstract, what is more difficult to contend with is the reality that to successfully complete her degree, she will often have to prioritize her education over her family, friends, and community. Sandra is doing everything she can to fulfill all of those obligations, but I can see that it is too much. The stress is visible in the **(p.19)** way her shoulders slump and in how her voice breaks during tense moments in our conversation. If she is to succeed in college, she will have to learn to say no to those for whom she cares. This will involve making difficult sacrifices in areas of her life that she finds valuable and meaningful, perhaps even central to her sense of who she is. And it is this difficult conversation that faculty and administrators so often skirt around when addressing the barriers to graduation that students like mine face.

Many disadvantaged students frequently confront the sort of situation that Sandra finds herself facing. Their path toward upward mobility is beset with conflicts and sacrifices. It might seem obvious that, as her professor, I should advise her to prioritize her education over those competing concerns. Though such advice is well meaning, it often disregards the painful reality of carrying it out. What would it take for Sandra to really follow that advice? What sacrifices would she have to make in order to graduate? How will her relationships with her family change when she starts placing a higher priority on finishing her degree? It is crucial that those who want to support students on this path—teachers, professors, mentors, families—fully appreciate what they are asking students to do. And, as I will suggest throughout this book, it is extremely important that strivers—those disadvantaged students who are on the path of upward mobility—recognize the nature of the sacrifices they will have to make.

It is widely accepted that strivers must make difficult sacrifices to transcend the circumstances into which they are born. What hasn't been adequately appreciated is that some of the most important sacrifices strivers make are *ethical*, that is, they concern the most meaningful and valuable aspects of a good life. What is potentially on the line is not just money, time, or hard work, but their relationships with friends and family, the bonds they have with their community, and sometimes even their sense of identity. In order to distinguish the ethical sacrifices strivers make from other costs discussed by economists and social scientists, let’s call these goods *ethical goods* and the sacrifice of them *ethical costs*.

(p.20) The central idea of this book is that just as we take into account other costs of going to college for strivers—money, time, effort—we should consider the ethical costs as well. We turn to ethics in order to understand these costs because it is the study of precisely that which makes life good and valuable. In this chapter, I argue that understanding the nature of these ethical goods moves us well beyond the cost-benefit analysis that might be appropriate when thinking about money, time, or effort. The ethical costs of upward mobility are particular and not easily offset. Consequently, their loss is felt keenly by those who succeed even if they ultimately have much to gain from the sacrifices they have made.

This book is aimed both at those who want to support strivers in their path through college and at strivers themselves. Those who are concerned with the challenges faced by first-generation and low-income college students often fail to appreciate the significance of the potential ethical costs that strivers encounter in pursuing a better life for themselves. And though strivers know these sacrifices intimately, I hope that a thorough discussion of their nature can allow them to articulate more clearly the challenges they face.

Todd’s and Henry’s Stories of Upward Mobility

Many of those I interviewed for this book shared inspiring stories of upward mobility. I heard from professionals whose lives are dramatically different than those of their parents or the friends with whom they grew up. They have college degrees. They own their homes. They thrive professionally. Not only are they financially better off than their own families were when they were growing up, but their lives are rich and full of those ethical goods that are important and meaningful—partners, friends, work they enjoy. And they got there through education and hard work. Todd* and Henry* are no exception.

Todd, a bright and affable African American man, grew up in a predominantly minority neighborhood in Atlanta with his **(p.21)** grandparents, mother, and sister. As Todd described it, the neighborhood had experienced extreme decline in the 1970s, and when he was growing up it was “not the best neighborhood, a lot of crime, a few projects nearby.” Todd’s mother had been a drug addict. She had irregular employment with long stretches of unemployment. His dad was mostly out of the picture. Todd went to the local public school, which was, as he described it, “100 percent Black” and notoriously “crappy.” Since much of his extended family lived in the area, his cousins as well as his sister went to the same school.

Todd disliked the neighborhood school. He was teased by other students for “trying to be White,” which he interpreted as a reference to studying and getting good grades.[2] After a teacher was stabbed at the school, his mother asked a friend of hers to let them use her address so that Todd would be eligible to attend a predominantly White, middle-class, suburban magnet school. As Todd pointed out with a hint of embarrassment in his voice, this was “technically not above board, but you know …” Because his mother couldn’t drive him to school, Todd drove himself, despite not being a fully licensed driver. Again, this strategy was not legal, but, as he saw it, it was necessary to gain those educational opportunities unavailable in his neighborhood. Without guidance from his family, Todd managed to navigate the college application process and found a way to become the first person in his family to go to college. When I met him, he was pursuing a master’s degree at an Ivy League university after a few years working in the federal

(p.22) government. His prospects were bright. He is now happily married to a similarly well-educated woman and is pursuing a career in the foreign service.

Henry, now a successful White academic, grew up in the Pacific Northwest with his mother, brother, and sister in a working-class neighborhood. His mother and grandmother had grown up in extreme poverty, and Henry’s own childhood was also marred by poverty. His mother worked off and on at low-paying part-time jobs to support the family. His father didn’t play a significant role in his upbringing. The family lived in Section 8 housing—government-subsidized housing for low-income families—and received food vouchers, welfare, and free school lunches. Heat and hot water were scarce, as they are for many poor families. In the winter, the whole family relied on one space heater, which they called “the God.” Sometimes they had to heat hot water on the stove to bathe. They didn’t have a phone at home and for a year had to do without a refrigerator because the landlord refused to fix it. Henry described his memories of growing up as “feeling isolated and lonely … partly [as] a result of our socioeconomic situation, particularly, our lack of phone, my embarrassment over our living situation, and the fact that I couldn’t afford to do normal things like go to the movies with friends.”

Henry’s mother had a high regard for education. Throughout Henry’s childhood she slowly took the courses she needed to get a college degree, eventually earning an associate’s degree. Like Todd, Henry didn’t receive much guidance at home about how to apply for a four-year college, so he enrolled in the local community college that his mother attended. Eventually, he transferred to a four-year college away from home because he “worried that various problems at home would compel [him] to slow down [his] education or even drop out.” This was quite clear-sighted of Henry. I have seen how hard it is for many of my students to live at home and not allow what is happening there to negatively impact their college trajectory. Henry flourished in college, went on to a graduate program in philosophy, and is now an associate professor at **(p.23)** a well-respected public university. He is happily married. He and his wife both have good incomes and own their home.

Todd and Henry, through hard work and education, managed to overcome their circumstances. Statistics tell us that these cases are anomalous. Todd’s mother and grandparents didn’t go to college, yet he managed to not only enroll in college but graduate and thrive afterwards. After he received his bachelor’s degree, the opportunities available to him far surpassed those that would be expected to be within reach of someone growing up in his neighborhood. Once he receives his master’s degree from an Ivy League university, his prospects will be even brighter than he could have imagined as a young boy. Henry also grew up in poverty, but still he managed not only to finish college, but to earn a Ph.D. and become a well-respected tenured professor.

These stories awe and inspire us. They also conform to a well-rehearsed narrative of upward mobility in which the sacrifice of time, money, and effort earns one a myriad of rewards later on. Todd worked throughout college and wasn’t able to partake in many social opportunities because of it. Henry lived very frugally on his student loans and saved enough money to start paying them off as soon as he graduated. These sacrifices are what we imagine it takes for a striver to succeed. What the narrative obscures is the ethical costs that are also a part of the ledger.

Understanding Ethical Goods

One of the ways in which we give shape to our lives is by investing our time and effort into activities, goals, and relationships we find valuable. Those projects and relationships end up giving a life its distinctive contours. Take a moment to ask yourself what you value in your life.

Many of us will respond to this question by citing family, friends, community, projects or interests, and, if we are lucky, work. These are the aspects of life that I have suggested we call *ethical goods*. They are distinct from those other aspects of our life that are important—financial security, material goods, **(p.24)** and time—but that generally matter to us because they enable our engagement with the ethical goods that are most meaningful to us.[3]

Ethical goods matter to us in and of themselves, but they also matter to our sense of identity. Most of us think of our identities as closely tied to those ethical goods in which we are invested. My relationship with my daughter is crucial to my identity as a mother. My engagement with my students is a part of what constitutes my identity as a teacher. My relationship, or lack thereof, with a Peruvian community informs my sense of myself as Peruvian. What this means is that a loss or weakening of those relationships is not only a loss of something that matters to me but a threat to my sense of identity.

Children and young people haven't yet determined many of the ethical goods that will engage them and become a part of their future identities. For them, the future is open, full of possibility. As they become invested in certain activities, goals, and relationships, their life starts to take on its distinctive character and value.[4] But this should not lead us to overlook how much of young people's lives is valuable and meaningful to them *now*.[5] Relationships with family, friends, peers, teachers, and others in the community form the backbone of their developing sense of identity.[6] Of course, there are many other aspects of young people's lives that are valuable and meaningful to them for the future promise they hold—education, the discovery and development of their talents, a variety of projects and interests—but what is often at stake for strivers is precisely those ethical goods that are so central to their development and their self-conception now.

(p.25) I don't intend to offer a general analysis of ethical goods here. That is the task of a lifetime. Rather, I'm going to focus on the sort of ethical goods that are so often at stake for strivers—relationships with family, friends, and community. In order to understand why sacrificing these goods is so consequential to a striver's life, we need to reflect on two important characteristics they possess. The first is that these goods are particular, and the second is that they are not easily replaced.

Particularity

The fact that I spend my time chatting with my husband after a long day at work, playing with my toddler, cultivating close friendships, using my vacation to visit my grandmother in Peru, worrying about my book, and attending to my students' progress says something fundamental about who I am and what I find valuable. It is tempting to describe these values using general categories: marriage, parenting, friendship, family, research, and teaching. But I don't value marriage as a general category; rather, I value my specific relationship with my actual husband. If my husband were replaced with another equally intelligent and funny man in the middle of the night, I would be understandably upset![7]

This is a fanciful philosopher's example, but it points to an important aspect of how we relate to many aspects of our life that give it value and meaning—they are *particular*. It is *this* friend, *this* child, *this* community, and *this* career that matter to us. Much of our lives is devoted to advancing the wellbeing and flourishing of particular people and projects. My daughter Carolina, my husband Jason, my friend Sarah, the people who make up my community in New York, and my career as a philosopher fill out the contours of a life devoted to parenting, marriage, friends, community, and **(p.26)** meaningful work. This point is important in helping us better understand the significance of what is at stake for strivers. The loss of ethical goods that are particular in this way is unlike other kinds of loss.

Not Easily Replaced

The fact that the ethical goods in question are particular means that when those aspects of our life fade or wane, their loss is not canceled out by gaining something else of value. When we lose people, communities, and relationships that matter to us, they are not easily replaced. Consider losing a dear friend to an illness. Even if you then go on to make another friend as a result of that experience—for example, in a survivor support group—the void left in your life by the first friend’s passing isn’t simply erased by the gain of the second friend. The resulting pain might be mitigated by the joys of making a new friend, but what you valued was that particular person in your life, and she can’t simply be replaced by a new person.[8] In this respect, the ethical goods in question are different than other resources one might lose, such as money or material goods, which are, in general, replaceable.[9]

Of course, not all relationships are special or meaningful to us. Some relationships might be easily replaced without much loss. After a move, the role a pleasant neighborly acquaintance plays in our lives might be filled by an equally pleasant new neighbor. But when a person or project or community matters to us deeply, we value it in its particularity, and it is not easily replaced by another. The loss in such cases is experienced as meaningful even if there is much to be gained from it.

With these two ideas in hand, we can start to see why the standard way of portraying upward mobility falls short. According **(p.27)** to the story many of us have grown up hearing, being a striver involves sacrificing time, financial resources, and effort, but those short-term losses are made up for by substantial long-term gains. The investment of $15,000 in tuition now can be made up for by the large gains in income one will get with a college degree in hand later. Families and communities might also benefit from strivers’ success. Some strivers might be inclined to help their families financially or to invest in their communities once they are able to do so. Furthermore, the gains that result from an education are not merely economic, but improvements to one’s life in a deeper sense. Going to college can be transformative. Students gain knowledge about the world around them and their place in it. They may develop a taste for literature, music, and other art forms that they might not have been exposed to otherwise. In interacting with other students and faculty, they become better thinkers and communicators. As philosopher John Stuart Mill suggests, a university education should aim to make one a “capable and cultivated human being,” not simply prepare one for being a lawyer or doctor.[10] Communities may gain as well from having strivers succeed and go on to serve as role models for other young people. This narrative portrays the path of upward mobility as the accumulation of net gains. However, even though when we balance the losses and gains, most strivers end up having gained considerably from their success—not just financially, but in many valuable areas of their life—that doesn’t mean that the losses incurred are made whole.

By working hard, Todd and Henry gained educational and career opportunities that would have been unimaginable to many who grew up like they did. In the process, they were exposed to ideas, people, and ways of life that they might not have experienced had they stayed at home. There is undeniable value in all of this. Neither expressed regret for their choices, and both acknowledged how much better off they were compared to others who had started out like they did. But to assume that those gains **(p.28)** simply balanced out the losses experienced in the process fails to acknowledge the value of the goods that the two men sacrificed.

Todd's and Henry's Stories Revisited

Todd grew up in a neighborhood that despite its disadvantages was woven deeply into his family's life. His extended family—cousins, aunts, and uncles—had gone to the same neighborhood school and would drop by his grandparents' house regularly. He told me that his "family was kind of weird in the sense that first cousins, second cousins, third cousins, all live in the same areas. We're all there. So, there's like 80 to 90 people at any given time who are cousins." Todd's social circle began to change when he switched to the magnet school. There he started hanging out with kids who were mostly White and whose parents were white-collar professionals like dentists and doctors.

Even as Todd grew comfortable in his new social circle, he couldn't completely relax. He was worried about someone discovering that he wasn't attending the school legally. He kept his life at home largely hidden from his new friends. He had a few girlfriends whose parents welcomed him into their home, but, as he told me, "I would always avoid conversations with them, where I came from, where I actually live, because I thought it was too stark of a difference. I thought that would be a reason for them to say, 'Oh, my daughter can't see you anymore.' "

His new friends took it for granted that they were going to college, unlike the kids in his neighborhood. Todd learned what he could from them and applied to college himself. When he arrived at college he experienced what he described as "a culture shock." He was well prepared academically, but socially he experienced a persistent "feeling of still being other." Some of the struggles were financial; he found it hard to find the time or money to participate in the social activities in which his peers were involved. But the disconnect went deeper. He told me, "I felt okay walking around campus. … I could blend in a little. But once I said or did **(p.29)** something to break the illusion, I felt that it would all fall apart." These feelings continued in Todd's prestigious internship and, later, his government job. He said: "I didn't really get close to anyone. I didn't really make any friends … I think partially because we came from different backgrounds. It was hard for me." At various points, Todd was part of many different communities—his childhood neighborhood, high school, college, and workplace. Yet even as he became more a part of the communities of those who shared his level of education, he felt it difficult to connect with others in a way that would allow him to forge those new relationships.

At the same time, his relationship with his family was weakening. At first, while he was in college, he would visit home often. But as he moved farther away, he "completely cut off from them because I just wasn't running in the same circles as they were and not doing the same things that they were." When Todd moved to the Northeast, the expense of driving home became an additional deterrent. But there was another factor that also contributed to straining his connection to his family. As he told me, "A lot of my relationship with them had become very monetized in a way. … Whenever they called me, it was always about money." Todd sent his family money as soon as he started working, but his sister never thought it was enough. His calls became more infrequent because it was difficult to say no to his family's requests.

This situation was not easy for Todd. Though there was much he had gained by taking advantage of the educational and career opportunities in front of him, a deep sense of loss pervaded our conversation. When I asked him to reflect on what he would tell his younger self, he expressed some regret about the trade-offs he had made. He told me: "It was almost like I was given the choice … to sacrifice relationships for being able to survive college. I would tell my past self to try to find ways not to do that, try to find ways to not make it such a trade-off. To maybe find ways to make it more involved, like, you can still have your family there and you can still reach out to them and be with them, and not have this fear of falling back into their ways."

(p.30) Todd was clearly proud of everything he had achieved. Yet he felt conflicted about what he had had to give up in the process. His connection to his family and community became increasingly tenuous the more he achieved. And though he slowly gained new friendships, new relationships, and a new community, these gains did not simply cancel out the connections he had lost.

Henry's trajectory echoes Todd's in many respects. Henry recalled that "the hardest part about college [was] feeling … culturally out of place and my worries and guilt about my family." His sister, who at the time was struggling with drug addiction, asked to live with him during his second year at college. Henry wrote: "She asked if she could live in [college] with me and I said yes. I neither believed nor disbelieved that my sister would be able to kick her drug habit. But I wanted to give her the chance to move out of the environment [back home] and I wanted to give my mom some relief." The arrangement didn't last long, and his sister continued to struggle with her addiction afterward.

Henry grew more and more depressed and sought counseling. But when one of his counselors suggested he had no responsibilities toward his family, he grew angry. Walking away from them wasn't easy or uncomplicated, even if he felt that it was often necessary to achieve the goals he had set for himself. As he saw it:

> I do not think I could have helped to prevent any of the various things that happened to my family from happening. I doubt the overall trajectory of their lives would have been much different had I stayed. … My sister would still have struggled with addiction, my mom would still have been kicked out of her house, and all the various other events that I have not mentioned probably would have occurred too. But I would have been there for them. I would have been there, helpful and caring, with my family.

Yet again, Henry's analysis is astute—there was little he could have done to solve all of his family's problems. But he was also right that by being there, he would have been able to show his **(p.31)** family that he cared and to share in their pain. His distance frayed those relationships, though maintaining that distance probably was the only way he could have succeeded on his path. Reflecting on his experience, he wrote: "When I think about them I feel like I have no soul. I keep walking away." The keen sense of loss Henry experienced wasn't assuaged by everything he had gained. He also thought his choices reflected something about himself he found troubling.

Once we dig deeper into Todd's and Henry's stories, we begin to see the ways in which the relationships that are valuable to most of us—those with family, friends, and our communities—are particularly vulnerable to fraying on the path of upward mobility. A central difficulty for both men involved seeking a balance between maintaining the ethical goods that shaped their early lives and seeking opportunities for advancement. To find a path upward, strivers must often enter new communities, with their own distinct sets of demands. But those communities are distant, literally and metaphorically, from the families, friends, and home communities of these strivers. In becoming a part of those communities, they risk their engagement with ethical goods closer to home. It is these trade-offs and sacrifices that are largely invisible in the uplifting narratives of upward mobility we are used to hearing.

I would like to draw our attention to two points that emerge as we read through these stories. First, the ethical costs involved in upward mobility give rise to complicated feelings, sometimes even regret and guilt.[11] It might be tempting to dismiss these feelings as irrational, as Henry's therapist did, but I urge us to hold off on making that judgment. The appropriate response to the loss of something we value is to feel regret. And it is not unreasonable to feel guilt when your own choices play a role in that loss. Even when a striver is sure that his or her choices are the right ones, feelings of moral ambiguity may remain. That ambiguity often reflects **(p.32)** something deeply important about what is at stake—and recognizing that importance doesn't require us to change our evaluation that the striver did the right thing.

Second, the ethical costs of upward mobility are borne not just by the striver, but by his family, friends, and community. When a valuable relationship is lost or weakened, both parties lose something valuable. When a striver's relationship with his or her family deteriorates, the family suffers as well. When a friendship is lost, two people lose a friend. When a striver's connection to his or her community is severed, the community also bears the loss of a motivated and talented member. Ethical costs are also borne by those who stay behind. We will return to this very important point in the chapters that follow.

Trading Off Ethical Goods

Only 21 percent of low-income, first-generation students who enroll in higher education will receive a degree compared with 57 percent of students who are not low-income or first-generation.[12] Many of these first-generation students hope to achieve upward mobility by attending college, but their paths get disrupted. No doubt many of those disruptions are the result of financial, academic, and other hardships that low-income students face, but an honest account of the hurdles faced by such students should include the potential ethical costs students are liable to pay.[13] I do not mean to suggest that these costs fully or largely explain the lack of completion rates among this student population. However, in order to understand the full spectrum of costs **(p.33)** that strivers face, we shouldn't overlook the ethically meaningful portion of the ledger.[14]

Understanding these costs matters not only because doing so might help us better understand why strivers' paths get disrupted, but also because these costs are different in important ways from other kinds of costs. As we have noted, what is often at stake for strivers—relationships with family and friends, ties to their community, and sense of identity—are ethical goods that are particular, not easily replaced, and important to the lives most of us hope to lead. Consequently, their loss is a particularly difficult cost to bear, one that is not easily mitigated, even by the many gains that are reaped from educational and career success. In this section, we will investigate how these goods are traded off. With this analysis in hand, we will be able to understand the argument, developed fully in the following chapter, that strivers are more likely to bear these costs in a society, like our own, that suffers from socioeconomic segregation, an inadequate safety net, and cultural forces that privilege those who are already otherwise advantaged.

Prioritizing Ethical Goods Under Constraints

In valuing my relationship with a family member or friend, I have a reason to devote myself to it that I wouldn't have otherwise.[15] I spend time and energy thinking about how to help my friend Sarah when she needs emotional support because she is an important part of my life. If I did not value our friendship, then she would not play the same role in my thinking and action that she does now. This is another way of saying that valuing a good, whether it is a friendship or a family relationship, requires that we *prioritize* it **(p.34)** when making decisions. But we are also finite beings with limited time and resources—we cannot prioritize everything. As a consequence, we face *ethical conflicts*—situations in which two or more goods we value are at play and we cannot prioritize them both. In such cases, we must decide to put our time and effort into one thing we value at the expense of another. That is, we must make a *trade-off*—a sacrifice in one valuable domain of our lives for the sake of a gain in another.

Trade-offs arise because we are constrained by how much time, money, or attention we can invest in a particular good. These constraints are not inherently a bad thing. Friendship is a special relationship in part because we cannot have that kind of relationship with everyone. We only choose some people to make a part of our lives in this way. Constraints allow us to focus our energy on a few goods, whether they be people, projects, or goals, and these become important to who we are and what we value. Sometimes the conflicts we face are easy to resolve. I will choose to spend time with my daughter over many other projects and goods that I value because I do not value them nearly as much as my relationship with her.

But even though we all face constraints, the constraints we face are not all equal. For those in poverty, the constraints imposed by not having enough time, money, or attention to devote to the goods in their lives are acute and can have a negative effect on their ability to lead flourishing lives. Furthermore, when other areas of one’s life are already severely restricted by a lack of resources and opportunities, any potential harm to one’s relationships with family, friends, or community is especially disheartening.

Think back to Sandra, who we saw struggling to balance all of her obligations at the beginning of this chapter. The particular details of the real Sandra’s situation are no doubt complex; for the sake of our discussion, I will rely on a composite, fictionalized picture of Sandra based on my experiences teaching students like her. Suppose that Sandra’s sister is sick and needs caretaking. Now she has to decide between attending to her sister or attending an **(p.35)** important class. She is facing an ethical conflict that requires a trade-off. But having to choose between her love for her family and her desire to pursue an education is not only emotionally difficult. The trade-off she decides to make will also have important consequences for her success in college and, in turn, for her future. The consequences of either choice are potentially devastating—damage to a meaningful relationship or failing to finish her degree. As we will see in the next chapter, because of the socioeconomic structures into which they are born, strivers are liable to face this kind of tragic conflict more frequently than those who are better off.

A Puzzle

At this point in the argument you might be wondering: How does a decision in a one-off case like this lead to the sort of ethical costs strivers are liable to pay? Of course, Sandra’s choice is difficult, but even if she chooses not to be there for her sister this time, she can make up for it by choosing to help her sick sister on another occasion. When confronted with such conflicts, isn’t it possible to balance the competing values by prioritizing one good some of the time and the conflicting good other times? In fact, if we return to Todd’s and Henry’s stories, we see that they were both trying to pursue something like this strategy. While in college, Todd chose to drive home to visit his family on weekends even though there were many other things he could have been doing on campus instead. And Henry agreed to have his sister stay with him while she was struggling with her addiction even though he was working hard to graduate from college and find a better life for himself. So how is it that Todd and Henry ended up feeling like they had sacrificed those relationships?

There is a genuine puzzle here. As we have seen, one fundamental challenge of the human plight is the struggle to accommodate all of the goods we value within the limitations of a finite life. We all make trade-offs. But a single instance of forgoing a particular **(p.36)** good won't make us less engaged with it. It is how we handle these conflicts *over and over again* that determines the people we become. The person who chooses family over competing goods repeatedly is the one who we think of as valuing family. A good friend is not one who only occasionally prioritizes friendship but one who prioritizes it consistently. Cultivating those goods in our life—relationships with family and friends, education, our relationship with our community, our hobbies and interests—requires that we make repeated choices to invest in them. Eventually those small choices add up to genuine engagement.

The puzzle then is that strivers might never feel like they are rejecting or sacrificing family, friends, or community, but they might come to discover after a number of years that they didn't invest enough in those relationships. It is beyond the scope of this book to fully specify what counts as "enough." The answer no doubt varies from individual to individual and is highly context-sensitive. But the point here is that if we really do care about a sibling or a friend, we always feel the pull to prioritize them, even if in some situations we feel that, regrettably, other goods—education, career, or our own wellbeing—must take precedence. And those with whom we have those relationships might, quite understandably, feel rejected or undervalued when we neglect to choose them, especially if we do so over and over again. I will return to this important point later in the book, but it is important to be reminded that the ethical goods we have been discussing—relationships with family and friends and the ties that one feels to one's community—are goods not only for the striver but also for the striver's family, friends, and community. The erosion of these goods is felt by them as well.

The problem is that strivers face ethical conflicts that make it particularly difficult for them to be able to invest enough in all of the areas of their life they value while doing what they need to do to succeed in the path of upward mobility. It is the frequent difficult trade-offs they are forced to make in their circumstances that ultimately weaken their relationships with their families, friends, **(p.37)** and communities. This erosion in areas of their life that they find meaningful and valuable can, in turn, affect their sense of who they are.

The High Price Strivers Pay

Let's take stock. I have argued that upward mobility involves ethical costs. These are the sacrifices that strivers make in areas of their lives that are meaningful and valuable—family, connection to community, friendship—which I have called ethical goods. These costs are quite significant because the ethical goods that are at stake are particular and not easily replaced. I have argued that these costs are the result of ethical trade-offs that are made in the face of conflicts between different goods. Sometimes these ethical conflicts are the results of resource limitations that we all face as human beings, but, as we will see, the distinct limitations faced by strivers lead them to confront much more costly and meaningful trade-offs than are faced by more affluent students.

When we tell students to value and prioritize their education, we are in effect telling them to choose education over other competing goods. For those who are fortunate enough to have abundant resources, those competing goods might be time with friends, effort they could expend in pursuing hobbies, or financial resources they might spend on travel. For example, a very well-off student at an extremely selective university is blessed with the option of applying her time and effort toward many potential ethical goods. She still faces many hard choices—choosing between a study abroad program in Italy or a great internship at Google is a hugely consequential choice for this student's future career and her developing identity.[16] But the consequences of her choices are different in two important respects from those strivers face. The first is that the potential negative consequences of her choice **(p.38)** are unlikely to be devastating, as they might be for the striver. A low-income college student who fails out of college is much more likely to stay mired in poverty, saddled with debt. The second key difference is that the costs of the privileged student's choices do not impact her family or community in the same way. A striver who chooses not to play a caretaking role for a sick member of her family in order to attend class has added a significant burden to her already deprived family.

Of course, the majority of students are not either privileged like the student described here or in the dire circumstances many strivers face. Most of them confront situations that are somewhere in between these two extremes. Some middle-class students will incur ethical costs because their families confront a sudden medical or financial emergency. Others might be in better socioeconomic circumstances but still find that their education creates a distance between themselves and those with whom they are close because they are the first in their family to go to college. What the comparison between the privileged student and the striver helps us see is that in order to really understand the ethical costs at stake, we need to look at more than simply the choice being made and take into account the circumstances under which those choices are made. Let's imagine two very different sets of circumstances for Sandra to elucidate this point.

In the circumstances typical of a striver, Sandra faces not only a difficult choice between two aspects of her life that she values, but a situation in which either choice is bad in some important respect for both her and her family—she's either putting her college trajectory at risk or saddling her family with having to find someone to care for her sister. Now imagine Sandra growing up in an upper-middle-class family. Her sister is sick, but she is going to college a few hundred miles from home. If her parents can afford to hire a caretaker to attend to her sister's day-to-day needs, then although Sandra would be just as concerned about her sister, she would experience the conflict between her education and her sister's wellbeing differently.

(p.39) This comparison illustrates one of the central points of my argument: ethical costs are embedded in larger social, economic, and cultural structures. They do not occur in a vacuum, and they do not affect everyone equally. In the next chapter, with the help of recent work in social science, we will return to this point and situate this phenomenon in concrete social and economic factors—housing segregation, lack of a safety net, and cultural mismatch.

Reconsidering Sandra's Choice

When she came to my office, Sandra was struggling with everything she had to deal with at home and school. She was falling behind in class, but she needed to pass to be on track for graduation. As her professor, I understood my role to be helping her succeed in my class. But, stepping back from that role, I want here to consider the larger ethical question: What should a student like Sandra do? As we have seen, the answer is not as simple as we might have initially thought. Of course, Sandra is in college to get a degree, and doing so, in all likelihood, will make her life substantially better in the long run. With a degree in hand, she might be in a better position to help her family financially after a few years. And if she has taken on debt, it is even more important that she graduate. I strongly believe that this is true for most of my students and other strivers.

But we also need to ask: What is on the other side of that equation? What will she be trading off for the sake of succeeding in college? Those of us who went to college in more fortunate circumstances don’t always fully understand what is at stake when students who are otherwise academically capable struggle to graduate. We might interpret such students as irrational or lazy, dismiss their choices as simply the unfortunate product of circumstance, and maybe even conclude that those students do not value education, but rarely do we acknowledge that they might be responding to a genuinely difficult ethical choice. Understanding **(p.40)** the broader context in which students are making such decisions should lead us to be wary of drawing such conclusions. If Sandra decides to care for her sick sister, it does not mean that she doesn’t care about her education; rather, she has decided that in this instance her family takes priority. Another student in a similar situation might just as reasonably decide to prioritize going to class. These are hard choices.[17] Though these students are making different trade-offs, both are likely to feel guilt and regret once their decision is made because they still value the good they sacrificed.

For strivers, choosing to prioritize their families and communities often means that they risk not finishing their degrees and falling off the trajectory of upward mobility. Students who are fortunate not to face such choices do not value education more; rather, they are lucky to be in circumstances that don’t require them to make extremely painful sacrifices in those aspects of their life that matter deeply to them in order to advance their educational goals.

My experience of college was vastly different than that of my students. Yet I relate to some of the challenges strivers face because I was a different kind of striver—an immigrant. When I was growing up, Peru was ravaged by terrorism, poverty, and corruption. My mother and aunt had both immigrated for better opportunities, and my grandmother encouraged me to seek a way out too. I was privileged both in being able to leave and in the manner in which I was able to do it—my aunt and uncle were able to support me financially through college, and I was able to attend a wealthy college that offered me substantial financial aid to cover what my family could not. Despite these advantages, when I immigrated to this country I increased the distance between myself and many aspects of my life that constituted a significant source of meaning and value for me at that time. The sacrifices I made, which pale in comparison to those of students born into disadvantage, paid off **(p.41)** for me in a big way. I can now make a good living and spend most of my hours engaged by work that I find fulfilling and rewarding. But I am ever more distant from my country, my culture, and, crucially, the people I grew up with.

Once we understand the nature of the hard choices faced by strivers, I think we have to resist temptation to judge those who make different choices too harshly. Many Peruvians immigrated for better economic opportunities when I did, but many also decided to stay even when they had the opportunity to leave. They chose to remain close to those whom they loved and to a country and community they cherished. Many of them will readily admit that their economic prospects would have been better if they had gone elsewhere, but they weren’t willing to sacrifice much of what they valued for the sake of those opportunities. This was not an unreasonable or irrational choice—there were good reasons on both sides. And it would be preposterous for me to blame my fellow Peruvians who chose to stay, even if as a result their educational or economic achievements were diminished. Yet it is not unusual to hear or read that same sentiment about those who remain in impoverished communities in the United States.

I do not intend to generalize about the motives of those whose lives are marred by lack of economic and educational opportunities. My point is rather that when we seek to understand the ethical conflicts and sacrifices that are so often a part of the story of upward mobility, we should consider the possibility that the choices faced by those born into disadvantage are much more ethically nuanced than we may initially perceive. They are not simply choosing to forsake opportunities for educational and financial advancement; some are choosing to stay engaged with genuinely valuable goods.

As her professor, the best I can do for Sandra is to clearly lay out what is at stake in the options before her. I can advise her about what she can reasonably expect to gain from a college degree. I can tell her how important it is that if she does pursue a degree, she finish it. It would be much worse if she were to drop out with **(p.42)** significant amounts of student debt. We can discuss strategies for studying that will help her carve out some time and space to focus on her schoolwork away from home. And I can acknowledge how difficult her choices are. What I should not do is portray a falsely optimistic picture of the path of upward mobility. The narrative we offer strivers should include a true accounting of the ethical costs they might incur to succeed.

Notes:

(1.) Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Unemployment Rates and Earnings*.

(2.) This comment by Todd touches on a highly contentious topic of debate among social scientists—whether there is a culture of poverty that can be blamed for the educational underachievement of some minority groups. In a seminal paper, Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu argued that African American students often adopt a culture that is in opposition to mainstream White culture, and that in this “oppositional culture” doing well in school is not valued (see their “Black Students’ School Success”). Much of the subsequent research has put this theory in doubt. For more on this debate, see Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, “Assessing the Oppositional Culture Explanation”; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, “It’s Not ‘a Black Thing.’ ” I discuss some of this work in the following chapter.

(3.) We can also make this point by saying that time, money, and material goods matter instrumentally, whereas the ethical goods in question matter intrinsically.

(4.) For a thoughtful philosophical discussion of what we owe children whose future is open in this way, see Feinberg, “Child’s Right to an Open Future.”

(5.) Robert Noggle develops a careful philosophical position that aims to respect a child’s burgeoning values. See his “Special Agents.”

(6.) For an overview of the importance of those early caregivers as understood by attachment theory, see Bretherton, “Origins of Attachment Theory.”

(7.) In the philosophical literature on love, philosophers argue that what we love and value is particular. See Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*; Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*; Scheffler, “Valuing.”

(8.) I discuss the idea of mitigating ethical goods in the final chapter.

(9.) For a philosophical discussion of the link between value and irreplaceability, see Cohen, “Rescuing Conservatism.”

(10.) Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 186.

(11.) For a heartbreaking discussion of these feelings from the perspective of a counselor and psychologist, see Jensen, *Reading Classes*.

(12.) One of the biggest challenges in higher education is that of college completion, in particular among low-income students. See Bowen and McPherson, *Lesson Plan*; Cahalan et al., “Indicators of Higher Education Equity.”

(13.) We should not overlook the role of food and housing insecurity in college completion and success. For more on this issue, see Goldrick-Rab, *Paying the Price*.

(14.) No doubt more social science research has to be conducted to understand how and when these kinds of costs arise. My role as a philosopher is to explain the nature of these goods in order to understand how their loss affects the ethical life of those who must bear them.

(15.) For a sophisticated philosophical discussion of this idea, see Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances*.

(16.) Thanks to Gina Schouten and to an anonymous referee for pushing me to make this point clearer.

(17.) For a philosophical discussion of hard choices, see Chang, “Are Hard Choices Cases of Incomparability?” Her TED Talk provides an accessible introduction to her analysis; see “How to Make Hard Choices.”