You see your best friend’s husband dining with another woman. You think you should tell your friend about it, but she'll be devastated.

Do you tell her?

You’re a politician being persuaded by colleagues to help legislate a certain law. It’s not a policy you agree with, but these colleagues are important. Not helping them could mean political suicide. What do you do?

You’re an executive with a big corporation, but are unhappy with your work. You’ve always wanted to teach. You’re about to quit your high-paying job when your wife tells you she’s pregnant. Do you keep your job for the money or follow your dream?

These aren’t just questions from the game of Scruples. They’re real-life dilemmas that happen to real people. At certain points in our lives, we are all faced with tough moral choices.

How do people make decisions? What are the reasons behind people’s behavior? These are questions philosophers have pondered for centuries.

Sigmund Freud shed some light on the mystery of human behavior early in this century. His writings and clinical psychoanalytic research revealed that much of our behavior and decision-making is determined by motives that lie in our subconscious.

Traditional Freudian theory concludes people are selfish and act only in ways that will satisfy their inner needs and desires. Morality, say traditional Freudian theorists, is a learned behavior, socialized by our upbringing.

But “Freud never said that unconscious motives determined behavior,” says Ernest Wallwork, a professor of ethics at SU who believes people have been misreading Freud for years. Correcting that misreading is the goal of his new book, Psychoanalysis and Ethics.

Wallwork believes we are not ruled by the unconscious motivations present in us. “To understand there are unconscious motives doesn’t mean that they determine our behavior,” he says. “They only have strong impact on behaviors if they remain unconscious. But if they become conscious, one can then choose among conflicting motives which to follow.”

While Wallwork retains the Freudian view that the self is always in conflict with mixed motivations, he argues that behavioral choices can still be made intelligently.

He also rebuffs the idea that, as egoists, people behave only in ways that promote their own self-interests. Altruism can be a pleasurable pursuit, he says.

“The mature, loving person is capable of loving others and acting for them,” Wallwork says. In other words, people do nice things for other people because it makes them feel good.

Wallwork’s theories came from years of research, as well as practical training in psychoanalysis.

As an ethicist, he was bothered by an absence of material on moral decision making in ethics literature. He knew, however, this topic was addressed in readings on psychoanalysis.

These readings, coupled with courses he taught at SU involving both analysis and ethics, sparked his interest about what psychoanalysis could contribute to ethics.

“The more I taught Freud, the more...
I began to appreciate the complexity of his thought,” says Wallwork. “I began to think there were aspects of Freud’s thought—deep sophisticated aspects of his thought—that hadn’t been appreciated.” Many of these aspects, he says, were particularly important because they concerned moral decision-making and ethics.

Wallwork began to take an avid interest in Freud’s clinical work and the process of psychoanalysis.

While psychoanalysis provides rationalizations for certain behaviors, it also broadens the concept of moral responsibility, he says. Patients are then challenged to take responsibility for their revealed unconscious motivations.

“One of the things I’m doing in this book is bringing out the ethical conditions for the possibility of psychoanalytic knowledge,” says Wallwork. “Analysis only takes place in an ethical setting, and ethics is part of the whole analytic relationship.”

As part of research for his book, Wallwork became a psychoanalyst, studying at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute. “I discovered in the process of doing research that I couldn’t really talk to analysts unless I was also an analyst,” he says.

Today, Wallwork weaves together his understanding of ethics and psychoanalysis. “My practice of psychoanalysis is also my practice of ethics,” he says.

Wallwork divides his time among three positions—as an ethics professor in SU’s religion department, as a psychoanalyst in private practice in Washington, D.C., and as a bioethicist at the clinical center for the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. This fall, he’ll make semi-monthly trips to the University of Chicago, where he has been asked to give an endowed lecture series and seminar series.

He’ll also try to gain an even deeper understanding of how people make tough choices by bringing together the study of his clinical work with his philosophical understanding of ethics.

“A lot of people have problems making decisions because they only see part of the issue,” says Wallwork. “They don’t allow themselves full access to their feelings and the implicit evaluations that are part of the full range of human feelings.”

—Andrea C. Marsh