

The Story of Ethics
Human Nature and Human Fulfillment
Prentice-Hall, 2003

Introduction

“Do you think it a small matter to determine which whole way of life would make living most worthwhile for each of us?” --Plato

You walk through the streets of a big city and a dirty, smelly person wearing moth-eaten clothing begs for your money: “Can you spare some change?” Judgments or questions rush through your mind. About this person’s moral character: Does she lack ambition? Is she an alcoholic? Or is she a scammer? About the benefits to her and to society of giving her money: Will it encourage laziness? Foster a drug addiction? Or will your kindness allow her room to gather herself so that she can get a job? About yourself: Will generosity somehow benefit you by creating the kind of society that you want to live in or by making you the kind of person that you think you ought to be? Hard questions all; ethical judgments all.

Perhaps you are a college student and face the question “Why are you in college?” You don’t have a good answer to that question (“It’s better than flipping burgers at McDonalds”) and your lack of a good answer plagues you during finals week. Just when you most need to be motivated to study, your lack of a goal or a vision makes you wonder whether it is really worth all the trouble. You look around enviously at those pre-med or pre-engineering students whose lives are entirely planned out; you see that their clearly perceived goals keep their minds alert and their bottoms stuck to their chairs when you are tempted to run off to a party. Why ARE you in college? Because it’s the next thing to do after high school? Because it’s good to get away from home and parental authority? Because it’s a good place to make new friends and, perhaps, snag a mate? Because you will get a more interesting and higher paying job? Because it’s good to get an education? Maybe your answer is simply and painfully, “I have no idea.”

Going to college, most of us believe, makes some sort of contribution to a good life. In what does that good life consist? Knowing lots of things? Earning lots of money? Having lots of friends? Sex and booze interspersed with sleep? A spouse and children? Big houses and fast cars? Serving the community? Working at an interesting job? Loving God? Again, these are all ethical questions. And again, these are all hard questions.

We are all familiar with cursory “Dos and Don’ts” answers to ethical questions: Don’t murder, steal or lie. Do be faithful to spouses, kind to friends, and generous to the poor. Ethical or moral theories¹ are offered to answer a variety of questions such as:

1. What kind of persons are human beings?
2. What kinds of life should we live to fulfill ourselves as persons?

Ethics Through History, Introduction

Should we settle for the “Dos and Don’ts” answers to these questions? Will, for example, the avoidance of murder and lying and faithfulness to spouses really satisfy us as persons? Will generosity really make us happy? If not, why be generous or tell the truth?

Some people answer (1) by claiming that we are totally self-absorbed and, hence, consider “Dos and Don’ts” morality a constraint on their self-interest. Suppose, for example, that I want, more than anything, lots of money. Generosity constrains or is opposed to my desire. So generosity will frustrate, not satisfy, my deepest desire. It should be noted, of course, that if people are generous to me (and I would like to encourage that behavior), their generosity will satisfy my desires. But the demand that I be generous runs contrary to my desire to accumulate wealth.

Great moral thinkers like Plato and Aristotle did not believe that morality constrained or frustrated our desires. Indeed, they believed that morality was the primary contributor to a good, satisfying, and fulfilling life. This was echoed by medieval thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, and late modern thinkers such as Marx, Mill and Kierkegaard. Even such a revisionary thinker as Nietzsche bases his moral theory to his views on human nature and, therefore, on human satisfaction given our nature. Morality and the good life, according to this diverse batch of thinkers, are intimately interrelated. The connection is supplied by their respective views of human nature. One simply cannot answer questions about the nature of morality and the good life without also, and perhaps first, answering questions about what makes human beings essentially human.

If you think humans are basically and irredeemably selfish, you might opt for the views of Thrasymachus, the Sophists or Hobbes. If you suppose that humans are initially selfish yet capable of obtaining the divine grace necessary for moral transformation, you may embrace the views of Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, or Kierkegaard. If you conclude that our finer nature can be trained by proper education for selfless pursuits or for contemplation, you may prefer the views of Plato or Aristotle. If you judge that human beings are by nature good and social, you may prefer the views of Marx. And if you believe that humans are animal-like in their need for power and dominion, you may find the views of Homer and Nietzsche attractive.

This text addresses the various ethical theories in the context of judgments about human nature. Most of these great thinkers will defend (roughly) traditional morality -- kindness, moderation, wisdom, justice, and generosity. Yet their differing views of human nature will require radically different justifications of traditional morality and the good life. Others defend more revisionary approaches to morality, valuing power, domination, pride, and enmity. We will examine these thinkers’ views of human nature and the relationship of morality to the good life.

This text is necessarily selective. There are a few major thinkers in the history of Western thought that every educated person should be acquainted with. Not everyone will agree with all of my choices, but I think most people will agree with most of my choices. That is all that could be expected. I have also tried to present the most central views as clearly as possible. That means omitting a great deal of peripheral (but often important) positions of various thinkers, and also avoiding the complex (but often

Ethics Through History, Introduction

important) debates about subtle matters of interpretation of texts. It is my intention to present the central and least disputed views of these major moral thinkers.²

Because of the tremendous challenges to certain views of morality moral thinkers felt the need to construct complex and persuasive arguments in defense of morality. The attraction of immorality led Plato, for example, to develop and elaborate a grand anthropological and metaphysical system within which his views of morality safely fit. Big problems require big solutions. While most contemporary philosophers find Plato's theories extravagant, his moral theory has the advantage of resolving some severe challenges to traditional morality. His, and every moral thinker's, views need to be considered in their historical context -- as responses to real challenges that their cultures faced. The sympathetic and historical understanding of their arguments will yield a more fruitful and critical analysis of their positions.

Notes

¹ I will not make any distinction between ethics and morality in this text. The terms will be used interchangeably.

² If you are using this book as a textbook for a class, this will permit your professor to show his or her, no doubt superior, knowledge of these matters!