ETHICS

selections from classical
and contemporary writers

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Andrews Reath

ETHICS
Selections from
Classical and Contemporary Writers

TENTH EDITION

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PREFACE

Starting with the 9th edition, I took over the editing of *Ethics* from Oliver Johnson, who died in 2000 after a long and productive career in philosophy. The format of previous editions has been maintained, but there are changes to some of the selected readings and some have been omitted in an effort to streamline the anthology. Oliver Johnson began the selection from the *Republic* with the myth of the Ring of Gyges from the beginning of Book II, followed by Socrates exchange with Thrasymachus in Book I. For this edition, I follow the order in Plato's text and have changed to a more recent translation. Small changes have also been made to the selections from Aristotle and Hume. Some selections included in the 9th edition in Part III are omitted in this edition, but there are some new selections as well. I have restored the selection from A. J. Ayer that had been used in earlier editions, and added a recent article by Philippa Foot and a selection by Philip Quinn that defends a religious foundation for ethics.

As in previous editions, Parts I and II are organized chronologically. Some of Part III is also organized chronologically, but strict chronological order is neither feasible nor desirable for selections written between 1971 and the present. The emphasis on the history of moral philosophy has been maintained. The continuity between the history of moral philosophy and contemporary moral theory is emphasized by including many contemporary authors who work within the general framework of one of the historically important moral philosophers. Some of the connections between contemporary and historical authors can be seen in the "Topical Contents," which suggests a problem-oriented way of organizing the selections.

Several reviewers have contributed helpful comments: Lorraine Marie Aragno, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs; Richard A. Blanke, University of Northern Colorado; Margaret Monahan Hogan, University of Portland in Oregon; Errol Katayama, Ohio Northern University; David Lefkowitz, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Ann Pang-White, University of Scranton; Gene Rice, Fort Hays State University; Michael Sontag, College of Mount St. Joseph. I am grateful to them and to all who have helped on this edition.

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What Is Ethics?

If the account given by Plato of Socrates' trial before the Athenian court is accurate, it is clear that Socrates could have avoided the death penalty. The jury almost certainly would have acquitted him if he had agreed to give up his practice of going about Athens interrogating its citizens concerning the ultimate questions of human existence. Socrates preferred, however, to run the risk of being sentenced to death rather than to abandon his way of life because, as he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

The kind of examination of life to which Socrates devoted himself is the branch of philosophy called "ethics" or "moral philosophy." In a word, ethics is rational inquiry into how to act and how to lead one's life. Ethics or moral philosophy— we shall use those terms interchangeably—is one of the oldest branches of philosophy, and over the course of its history it has encompassed many different questions: What are the proper aims of life? What goods are truly worth having, and what kinds of actions and activities truly worth engaging in? What traits of character make a person good and make a life worth living? What are the principles that distinguish right from wrong? What principles should guide our treatment of others, and what limits do they impose on our pursuit of our own happiness and our personal goals? Where moral principles limit our pursuit of individual happiness, what reasons do we have for conforming to them? What is the source of their authority? And are there objective answers to questions such as these? Are there, for example, any universally valid moral principles that all people and all societies ought to accept?

Many areas of the humanities and social sciences are concerned with human conduct and values. But as you may be able to gather from the questions just posed, ethics or moral philosophy is a *normative* enterprise rather than a *descriptive* one. It is not concerned with how people actually act, but with how they ought to act. Social sciences such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology are concerned (among other things) with describing actual human behavior and explaining why human beings act the way that they do in the circumstances studied. They are descriptive and explanatory disciplines, concerned with the empirical facts of human behavior. Moral philosophy needs a realistic view of human nature and human motivation. But its aim is not to describe people's actual behavior and goals, or even to describe the values that people actually accept—which, after all, may turn out to be flawed when subjected to critical scrutiny. Instead, moral philosophy attempts to develop a principled account of how we ought to act, what

values we ought to accept, and what kinds of goals are worth having. For this reason, it is perfectly legitimate for the moral philosopher to articulate ideals of conduct and character that diverge from, and may even be deeply critical of, a society's accepted values and practices. As a normative enterprise, moral philosophy may have an important *critical* dimension. Likewise, as a normative enterprise moral philosophy is concerned with voluntary conduct. It assumes that people are capable of exercising reasoned control over their actions and attitudes, that they are responsible for their choices and the kinds of lives that they lead, and that they are capable of examining their goals and values and changing them if they see reason to. Moral philosophy examines what goes into choosing and living well.

We said earlier that ethics is a form of rational inquiry that aims at a principled account of how we ought to act and lead our lives. It is a form of rational inquiry because moral philosophers advance claims about values and principles of conduct that can be true or false and for which they provide rational support. Does that mean that there are uniquely right answers to the kinds of questions with which moral philosophy is concerned? That is one of the questions of moral philosophy, and it would be premature to attempt an answer here. Certainly any survey of moral philosophy will reveal controversy and ongoing disagreement. But individuals engaged in moral philosophy proceed on the assumption that there are right and wrong answers to the questions that they raise, and that some responses can be rationally supported and others not. They are not merely expressing their "personal opinions," as that phrase is often understood. People who engage in moral inquiry and discussion of ethical questions do say what they believe. But they are expressing the beliefs that they think are best supported by reasoned argument, and believe that the reasons that persuade them to accept these conclusions should have rational force for others as well. They are willing to defend their conclusions by giving reasons that support them, but also to examine them critically and to reassess them should others find them unpersuasive or point out weaknesses in their views. Moral philosophy often takes the form of dialogue between people who share many assumptions in common, but who nonetheless disagree on others. But it is a form of rational dialogue in which people develop arguments intended to persuade others.

Because morality is not the only area in which we find normative principles that govern conduct and choice, it may be useful to distinguish it from other normative domains, such as law, religion, and etiquette. There are similarities and connections among all of these areas. All contain rules of conduct that are to varying degrees codified and socially reinforced. But morality should not be identified with any of them.

Both law and morality function socially to control and to coordinate human conduct and to make it possible for individuals with diverse and sometimes conflicting goals to live together. Law, like morality, defines certain actions as right and wrong (i.e., as "legal" or legally permissible, "illegal" or legally wrong, and legally required) and it defines rights and duties. To give some trivial examples of legal rights and duties, we have a legal duty to register our cars in the area in which we reside, and we have the legal right to contest a traffic ticket in court. Obviously law is much more formalized than morality. We have elaborate and fairly explicit

social processes for making and changing laws, resolving ambiguities in the meaning or application of a law, enforcing penalties for violations of law, and so on. In law, for example, formal penalties such as fines and imprisonment are assessed for illegal acts, whereas sanctions for conduct that is morally wrong are limited to such things as the pangs of conscience and the disapproval of others.

Finally, some overlap exists between what is legal or illegal and what is morally right or wrong, but this overlap is partial at most. Illegal actions such as murder, theft, and fraud are also morally wrong. Certain important legal rights, such as the right of free expression, the right of political participation, or the right to a fair trial have a clear moral basis. And many writers argue that we have a general moral obligation to obey the law. But in general the aim of law is not the enforcement of morality, and there are several important ways in which the content of law and morality may diverge. First, actions that in themselves are morally innocent may be illegal, such as failing to register one's car. Would it make sense to say that I have done something morally wrong if I fail to register my car? Probably not, because that action seems morally insignificant by itself. Someone could only claim that it is morally wrong by citing the existence of a moral obligation to obey the law; if I am morally bound to obey the law in general, then I am bound to obey this one. But even that seems insufficient. If my failure to register my car is to count as a moral failure, it would have to be due, say, to intentional disregard of the law, rather than mere forgetfulness. Second, actions that are morally wrong may not be illegal. For example, it is not against the law to lie or to deceive people in one's personal relationships, but most people would agree that such actions are in most cases morally wrong. Third, laws can be unjust or immoral. Laws permitting segregation or discrimination based on race and gender were valid laws (in a legal sense), but they were unjust or morally wrong. Here it is important to realize that we can criticize laws from a moral point of view when they violate moral standards.

The connections between morality and religion are as complex as those between morality and law. Most religious outlooks include or support a moral code in the narrow sense of a body of principles that govern how one should regard and treat others. The moral code of a religion may also have implications for a person's attitudes toward God, nature, and so on. But many religious duties do not in and of themselves seem to be moral duties—for example, duties to engage in certain religious practices or rituals, or to engage in certain specific forms of worship. Of course, this is a complicated issue. Religious practices may take on a moral dimension within the broader context of a religious outlook. For example, if one believes in God and, because of the relationship between God and humankind, believes that one has duties of worship that are moral in nature, one may think that the practices of one's religion are morally obligatory. The duty to worship God may entail that one is morally bound to follow these religious practices.

Perhaps the most important point to make here is that, although morality is often given a religious basis, it need not be. A religious outlook may base morality in divine authority by understanding moral principles as divine commands, or as representing God's will for humanity. Religious beliefs may then provide the motivation to act morally. Furthermore, it may be part of a religious outlook to hold that the content of morality has been made known to humanity through

divine revelation, for example, through the words of a prophet or sacred text. But the dominant trend in moral philosophy since the 17th century has been to find a basis for morality that is independent of religion and any conception of divine authority. Moral philosophers have argued in different ways that morality is based in reason—that human beings have the capacity to discover the content of morality on their own through the use of reason and that our understanding of these principles, in conjunction with normal features of human psychology, can motivate us to comply with moral principles. Moreover, given the diversity of religious and nonreligious outlooks in the modern world, many thinkers believe that it is extremely important that we find a basis for morality that does not presuppose a religious outlook.

Of course, one can accept a philosophical account of morality that bases it in reason while also thinking that it has a religious basis. There is no apparent inconsistency in accepting both. The claim that we can discover the content of morality on our own through reason can be, and historically often has been, incorporated into a religious outlook. And a religion can believe that morality has a basis in divine authority in addition to its having a basis in reason.

Etiquette, like morality, is a source of rules telling us how we ought to behave in certain circumstances whose overall aim is to promote social harmony and good relations between people. But certainly the "ought" of etiquette is not the same as the "ought" of morality. The rules of etiquette—such as rules that govern proper forms of greeting, dress, and eating, or that specify how certain social rituals (weddings, funerals, and so on) should be carried out—are conventional. They are matters of social custom in ways that moral principles are not. We should expect variation in such customs between one society or historical period and another. As is the case with law, behavior that is morally innocent may be contrary to etiquette. It should be clear that etiquette and morality are different. At the same time, there may be connections between them. For example, a code of etiquette consists, in part, of conventional signs of respect, and most people would agree that showing respect toward others is morally obligatory. Thus, in many situations we fulfill this duty by observing the conventions of etiquette.

The Relevance of Ethics

Our quick survey of some of the questions of ethics should make it clear that the study of ethics is not merely a subject of academic interest. Although a person with an inquiring mind can lead a fulfilling life without ever delving into the fields of, say, linguistics, paleontology, or cosmology, one cannot in the same way avoid the questions of ethics. They are questions that any reflective person will encounter in the course of his or her life. Ethical issues arise in many areas of our lives. They include questions that we face as individuals—issues concerning our personal goals in life, personal relationships, and proper conduct in our interaction with others. As citizens of a democratic country we must face the pressing social and political issues that confront modern societies—issues of equality and basic civil rights; questions about what counts as discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality and how

past and present discrimination should be rectified; ethical issues arising out of new developments in science, technology, and medicine; environmental issues; questions of international justice; and so on. All are studied by scientists and social scientists, policy makers, religious leaders, and politicians, and we discuss them together as fellow citizens. All at root raise ethical questions.

Socrates' challenge to examine one's life and one's basic values is particularly relevant for those who are making the transition to adulthood and independence. Almost all of us have, without questioning, accepted the moral precepts and practices that we were taught while growing up. However, there comes a time when one begins to look critically at the moral precepts and values that one has always accepted. It may be that one is confronted with a novel situation or a social issue in which the principles that one has learned do not apply, or in which they either demand or permit an action that now suddenly seems wrong. Or perhaps one encounters people with very different backgrounds, or one begins to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the modern world, with the result that one begins to question values and principles that one had always taken for granted. For someone in this situation, the question is what to believe and why. What justifies the familiar conventional precepts that one has always accepted? Are they justified by more basic principles or should they be revised or abandoned?

The study of moral philosophy can provide one with tools for addressing a range of ethical issues. The ethical dimensions of current social issues are studied in philosophy courses on "applied ethics" or "contemporary moral issues." The focus of this book is more general. We concentrate on philosophical accounts of the nature of good and bad, or the basic principles of right conduct. This field is sometimes called "moral theory" or "ethical theory," as opposed to "applied ethics." Both fields are important. What one can hope to gain from the study of moral theory is an understanding of some of the different theoretical approaches to ethical questions that will enable one to think about a variety of issues with greater sophistication.

Some of the Main Questions of Ethics

In order to present a more informative characterization of the subject matter of ethics, let us distinguish two fundamental concepts—the good and the right. Two of the basic questions with which moral philosophers have been concerned are "What is good (or bad)?" and "What is right (or wrong)?" Answers to these questions provide the basis of a normative theory that can provide guidance about the goods worth seeking in life and the basic principles by which we should govern our actions. What is the difference between these two questions?

When we say that something is good we are saying that it is in some way desirable. When philosophers talk about *the good* they generally mean that which is truly desirable or worth having for its own sake. An account of the good encompasses the proper aims or *ends* of action: Which of the kinds of goods that human beings tend to desire are truly worth having or pursuing for their own sake? What sorts

of activities are truly worth engaging in? It is common to make a distinction between what is *good in itself* and what is *good as a means*. Something is good as a means, or good *instrumentally*, if the reason to seek it is that it is a means to something else. For example, we do not desire to go to the dentist for its own sake; it may even be quite unpleasant. We do it as a means to something else that we do value, namely the health of our teeth. By contrast, something is good in itself if it is desired or chosen for its own sake, and not as a means to anything beyond it. Goods of this latter sort, sometimes called *final ends*, might include happiness, self-realization or self-development, friendship, success, integrity, and so on. Philosophical discussion of the good is concerned with final ends, or what is good in itself. In most contexts, the good is understood as what is good for the individual—as the ultimate end (or ends) that individuals would choose for themselves under the direction of reason, possession of which is truly fulfilling or makes their lives worth living. The good in this sense is what each of us truly has reason to aim at. Philosophers differ in their views on the nature of the human good. Some have argued for the view known as *hedonism*, according to which the sole final end is pleasure. Others have argued that the good lies in some objective end or activity other than pleasure. Still others have concluded that the search for a single ultimate good is misguided, arguing that we must recognize a plurality of intrinsic goods and final ends, which are not reducible to any single good.

Discussion of the good tends to focus on what is good or bad from the point of view of an individual, but in some contexts it may focus on states of affairs that are good or bad in an "agent neutral" sense, or from everyone's point of view. For example, one might think that it is a bad thing if a child suffers—not just a bad thing for the child (or for the child and its parents), but a bad thing period—and that in consequence anyone in a position to relieve the child's suffering has a reason to. Here the child's suffering is viewed as bad from an agent-neutral point of view, that is, from anyone's point of view. Philosophers who think along these lines might argue that it is a good thing when human beings (or other sentient beings) flourish and a bad thing when they suffer, and that we all have reasons to act in ways that promote the flourishing and diminish the suffering of human (or other sentient) beings.

Whereas the good is concerned with the proper aims or ends of action, right and wrong are generally viewed as properties of actions themselves. When we are faced with a difficult choice and are uncertain about how to act, we ask what the right thing to do is. When we reach a decision we often express it by saying "This is what I ought to do." But the word "ought" is used in different senses, to which correspond different senses of "right" and "wrong." If one sells a stock that a week later doubles in price, one will likely say in retrospect that one made the wrong decision; one ought to have waited. Someone considering two different ways of achieving some goal, who suddenly discovers that the first way has substantial hidden costs, will decide that he ought to take the second way; that is the right choice under the circumstances. Someone torn between two very different career paths realizes after much reflection that although one involves certain risks, it is what she really wants to do. She decides that that is the right choice. In each of these cases, one decides what one ought to do by determining what will best satisfy one's

desires or advance certain desired ends. But there is a special moral sense in which actions can be right or wrong that calls into play the idea of moral obligation and is not in any straightforward way a matter of whether the actions best satisfy one's desires or advance one's ends. Ethics is concerned with right and wrong in this sense—specifically, to articulate the basic principle or principles by which we distinguish right and wrong action and determine what our moral duties and obligations are.

When we say that an action is morally right, we mean that it is called for or required—that one ought to do it. When an action is judged to be wrong, one ought to refrain from doing it. In each case the moral "ought" expresses the judgment that there are especially weighty reasons for either performing or refraining from the action, which override or take priority over reasons based on one's desires and personal goals. One ought to perform or to refrain from the action whether one wants to or not, regardless of the effect on one's desired ends. Many people follow the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant in thinking that moral reasons are "unconditional" in the sense that they bind us without appealing to our desires, interests, and ends. Principles of right conduct apply primarily to the proper treatment of others, and spell out our duties to others (although some thinkers hold that we can have duties to ourselves). Their role is to impose constraints on the pursuit of both personally desired ends and socially desirable goals, limiting both the ends that we may permissibly adopt and the means that we may take to our ends.

The fact that ethical requirements can set limits on the pursuit of our desires and personal ends leads to another question that has occupied philosophers since at least the time of Plato. Given the possibility of conflict between ethical demands and self-interest, why should we act justly or morally—especially in situations where we are required to refrain from some action that would contribute to our happiness or where we can profit from injustice? What is the relationship between morality and self-interest? What is the basis of moral obligation? Plato is concerned with demonstrating that only the just person can be truly happy, so that the ultimate reason to act justly is that it leads to true happiness. Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century British philosopher, argues that the reasons to institute and to comply with moral rules, and thus the basis of moral obligation, lie in long-term self-interest. Both thus hold that when we take the larger point of view, there is no real conflict between morality and self-interest. In contrast to Hobbes, the 18th century British philosophers Joseph Butler and David Hume, as well as Kant, base moral obligation in forms of motivation that are not self-interested—Butler in conscience, Hume in our natural capacity for sympathy, and Kant in reason.

Theories that attempt a systematic account of ethical thought will encompass both the right and the good, but a thinker's overall approach may be shaped by which concept is emphasized or by how these concepts are related. Ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, as well as medieval thinkers such as Aquinas, tend to focus on the nature of the good. For them the basic question of ethics is what is the true human good, which they see as the final and overarching end at which all conduct should be directed. In these theories, the concept of a *virtue* becomes one of the key notions. The virtues are those traits of character

that are either conducive to, or form part of, the true human good—the charac-
teristics that we need to develop in order to attain the highest good. Proper treat-
ment of others is addressed by specific virtues such as justice and generosity. These
virtues may set limits to self-interested conduct, but they are nonetheless conceived
to be part of the individual's good. As we will see, in the early modern period
beginning in the 17th century, greater emphasis is placed on the notion of the
right, and duty and obligation become central notions. A common aim of the
thinkers of this period is to identify the basic principles of right conduct and to
explain why we are obligated to follow them.

Within the modern period, we find two competing approaches to understand-
ing right action that are distinguished by the ways in which the right and the good
are related. Many thinkers agree that it is a feature of common-sense moral
thought to accept a number of principles of right conduct that we should follow
for their own sake—simply because they are right, and not because doing so serves
some further end. Thus we think that we should keep our promises and agree-
ments simply because we have made them. We think that individuals have certain
rights that ought to be respected, even in circumstances in which violating some-
one's rights might benefit others or serve some larger social end. Kant develops
a moral theory that derives principles of this sort from a more general principle of
respect for persons. According to Kant, persons, because they are rational agents,
have an absolute value that imposes inviolable limits on how they may be treated.
Certain ways of acting are required or impermissible as a matter of respect for the
persons affected. In a moral outlook of this kind, principles of right conduct are
defined without bringing in a conception of the good in the sense that the princi-
ples of right conduct identify reasons for action that are not based on the pursuit
of desired or desirable ends. The principles of right conduct are immediately bind-
ing and should be followed for their own sake. Furthermore, these principles
impose limits on the ends that we may pursue and the ways in which we may pur-
sue them. An end has no value if it can be achieved only at the expense of violat-
ing a principle of right conduct. (For instance, to use one of Kant's examples, my
happiness is not really a good if I have achieved it by violating someone else's
rights.) A moral outlook in which the right in this way is prior to the good and
serves to limit what is good is referred to as "deontological," a term derived from
the Greek word for "ought."

The competing approach is called "teleological" (from the Greek word for
"end," *telos*) or "consequentialist" (referring to the importance of consequences).
The basic intuition behind teleology or consequentialism is that right action is
directed at producing good results in the world and that the value of an action
comes from its consequences or the end at which it is directed. These theories
begin with a conception of what is good, and then define right action as the action
that will produce the most overall good, or has the best consequences. Different
forms of consequentialism are possible, depending on how one defines the good.
The most influential form of consequentialism, and the one represented in this
volume, is a theory called "utilitarianism," which was articulated in the late 18th
and 19th centuries by British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.
Utilitarians define the good as human happiness and then define the right as what