

WRITERS ON ETHICS

Classical and Contemporary

edited by

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Stanford University

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PREFACE

Writers on Ethics offers the reader a comprehensive selection of basic readings and related studies in the field of ethical philosophy. The editors of this volume, who differ markedly in their own philosophical orientations, have tried to do justice to the great variety of classical and contemporary approaches to ethics. The volume includes complete works by Plato, Kant, Mill, and Dewey as well as a major portion of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in the readable translation of F. H. Peters. The other selections are articles and chapters by important writers on ethics. Most of these are reprinted without omissions, and one, that by Nevitt Sanford, is published here for the first time. Contemporary thinking is amply represented, and contributions range from analytical philosophy to writings by four behavioral scientists. The latter serve as concrete examples of that close working relationship between ethics and the various sciences which is strongly advocated by a number of modern philosophers.

A general introduction situates the selections in the history of ethics and aims at giving the uninitiated reader a first orientation in ethical inquiry. Each selection is prefaced by a short introduction which places it in the context of the author's philosophy and relates it to other readings in this book. A selected bibliography of outstanding works in ethics is found at the end. There are two tables of contents, the first of which lists the readings, arranged in four parts, in the order in which they are printed. The second table of contents lists the selections in chronological order for readers who prefer to choose their own sequence of reading and in order to facilitate use of this volume as a text.

Part I presents some contrasting conceptions of the nature of the good held by major philosophers from Aristotle onward. It also includes a pertinent example of contemporary analytic philosophy, Gilbert Ryle's analysis of the concept *pleasure*. Aristotle, although he comes first chronologically, has been placed next to last in this part because we feel that his ethical theory has such a degree of comprehensiveness that it might better be read after certain of the other authors.

In Part II we present a specific ethical problem, the problem of free will. This problem has been central for ethics from the beginning; for the question of freedom implies, among other things, the question of what control human beings can assert in order to realize good and to avoid evil. Almost everything conceivable has been said about it. Many philosophers have spoken as if they had finally solved the problem. This has not prevented their successors from starting all over again, sometimes repeating what had already been said and sometimes finding still a new approach. Part II comprises discussions of this topic by four contemporaries who, in the course of stating their own views, have much to say that should prove informative about the issues and positions in the perennial debate. Readings in other Parts of the volume include discussions of the problem of freedom, notably in the selections from Aristotle, Kant, Neumann, and Sartre.

Many philosophers have held that the individual can be properly understood only by reference to his social context, while other philosophers have all but

ignored the social aspects of human existence. The editors hold that considerations of the social context of conduct are an integral part of ethics and accordingly have brought together the readings in Part III. These readings show very divergent conceptions of the relationships and respective roles of the individual and his social environment. They raise, among other matters, the question: What are the social conditions of the well-being of the individual?

Part IV is oriented towards method. The ways in which we arrive at value judgments and the logic of statements that are not only descriptive, but also evaluative and prescriptive are old topics in the history of ethics, as the selections from Plato and Aristotle in this volume show. This methodological and logical emphasis has gained particular prominence in this century, and for some philosophers ethics has become almost identical with logic. Methodological and logical discussions in ethics show a wide variety of points of view and often a high degree of controversy. Part IV represents this state of affairs.

We have had the benefit of much discussion with friends and colleagues. Until recently the three editors were members of the Department of Philosophy at Vassar College and we wish to thank the following colleagues there: C. Douglas McGee, John H. Glasse, Ria Stavrides, Frank Tillman, Vernon Venable. We are also indebted to Abraham Edel (City University), James Gutmann (Columbia), Paul Kurtz (Union), Frederick Olafson (Johns Hopkins), Nevitt Sanford (Stanford), Herbert W. Schneider (Claremont), Michael Scriven (Indiana), and Morris Weitz (Ohio State). The field representatives of the publisher have consulted with teachers of philosophy in all parts of the country on the basis of a preliminary table of contents. Their names as is customary, remain unknown to the editors, but we wish to thank them for many valuable suggestions. They will find that we have frequently heeded their advice and criticisms.

Near the end of the preparation of this volume, one of the editors, Philip Nochlin, died suddenly. A young and promising philosopher, he was at the time of his death engaged on several projects of which this volume is one. The loss of this gifted colleague and good friend has been a bitter one.

JOSEPH KATZ
ROBERT STOVER

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INTRODUCTION

The Nature of Ethics

A casual inspection of works in ethics is sufficient to impress upon us how differently various writers have conceived of their subject. It is not just their conclusions which differ. They are asking different questions from different standpoints, using different methods to answer them and each philosopher is prone to identify ethics with his own question, standpoint, method, and conclusions. There is nonetheless a unity to ethics. First, there is an underlying unity of subject matter. All ethical views are concerned in some way with distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong; and these distinctions, their employment in language and thought, and their relation to diverse areas of human experience provide the content of this book. Secondly, the views have been arrived at by thinking, by the asking of searching questions about the subject matter. They are not opinions or beliefs about what is good or right to which a person subscribes without ever having given them a second thought. Similarly, ethics in the philosophical sense, frequently called ethical theory or moral philosophy, should also be distinguished from codes or standards in actual operation in particular societies or groups, as when we speak of Hopi ethics or business ethics. Only when such opinions, codes, and standards are worked over by thought, subjected to searching analysis and criticism, do we have philosophical ethics.

This might seem to suggest that there is a simple pattern of development always open to us, leading from the naive acceptance of conventional ideas to mature philosophical understanding of the good and the right. All that we have to do is start asking searching questions. That, to be sure, is all that we have to do in order to abandon what Socrates called "the unexamined life," a life he judged to be not worth living. But one searching question can give rise to another. The question "What is really good or why?" can give rise to the question "Is universally valid knowledge of the good even possible?" Before we have progressed very far the high road to ethical insight begins to look more like a thorny path. Some philosophers have concluded, indeed, that it terminates in a dead end. They have asserted that no one, not even a philosopher, can make objective judgments as to what is good and right. It has been argued that value "judgments" and normative "judgments" are only more or less well-disguised statements of subjective preferences, which vary from person to person, society to society, and from age to age and which have no claim to universality, no claim to the allegiance of anyone whose preferences happen to be different. Usually, however, it is not difficult to start a heated debate by asking whether our disapproval of, say, a totalitarian government like Hitler's rests on no other foundation than a subjective dislike; or whether there are no objective considerations for making different evaluations of the behavior of a Raskolnikov who kills in

order to acquire his victim's money and that of an Albert Schweitzer who devotes a lifetime to caring for fellow creatures neglected by "civilized" society.

The possibility of ethical knowledge might very well be said to depend on exactly what kind of questions the ethical philosopher asks. Most would agree that the distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, are employed in connection with such familiar activities as choosing, praising, blaming, guiding, and commending. What if ethics were in fact restricted to asking questions about these activities, questions aiming at nothing more than a general description of how ethical distinctions are employed? Could we not hope for objective knowledge in ethics, knowledge in the form of pure description? Many philosophers today find such a view congenial and disavow any ethical knowledge going beyond this. Many, however, will assume that it is the proper task of ethics not only to describe but to make recommendations enabling us to ascertain and to promote the good and the right. This view, more ambitious and more controversial, is shared by most classical and some contemporary philosophers. Also, as the contents of this volume show, some social scientists support the attempt to provide theoretical foundations for sounder judgments of value, for wiser choices of ends as well as means.

Ethics is conventionally recognized as one of the major subdivisions of philosophy, in company with logic, theory of knowledge, aesthetics and metaphysics. The uninitiated student of ethics might consider himself better oriented once he had ethics definitely located within the total field of philosophical disciplines. There is something to this, but a word of caution is in order. If he is looking for a simple, generally accepted scheme establishing the identity and relationships of these disciplines he will be disappointed. These classifications are traditional and often convenient but they are not uncontested. Some of the most striking ideas in ethical theory challenge their appropriateness. One philosopher (A. J. Ayer), for example, would eliminate ethics altogether and treat philosophy as "a department of logic." Another (R. B. Perry) treats logic, aesthetics and ethics as subordinate branches of a single, more comprehensive discipline called value theory.

Ethical thought can also be regarded from a historical point of view. It has indeed been maintained that only from such a point of view can the nature of ethics be fully comprehended. Ethics, we are told, is essentially historical in character. Whatever the exact meaning and merit of this claim, there is no denying that the historical perspective is tremendously suggestive and challenging. Contemporary ethical philosophy will one day belong to the past. Will it then inevitably have become outdated? What value for us have the ethical philosophies of ancient Greece, of Rome, of early Christianity? Without presuming to answer these questions or others in the same vein, we can perhaps make the historical aspect of ethics more vivid by outlining the development from the earliest philosophers represented in this volume to the present day.

Periods in the History of Western Ethics

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, philosophers have tried to develop ethical theories that embodied an objective evaluation of the conceptions of good and bad prevalent in the societies in which they lived. Thus Plato,

writing in the fourth century B.C. under the impact of what he considered the domestic and foreign failures of the Athenian state and the corruption of Athenian society, set himself the life task of developing the principles of a society that would be truly just and sane.

The first major period in the history of ethics is dominated by the two towering figures of Plato and Aristotle, both inspired by the belief that an adequate ethical theory can be an intellectual tool leading to the reform not only of individuals but also of societies. The inquiries of these two philosophers are characterized by great scope, extending from exploration of the subtle details of the structure of human personality to analysis of social structure and political techniques.

In the second period, which may be dated roughly from the death of Aristotle in 322 B.C. to the second century A.D., ethical writings assumed a profoundly different character. Much of Plato's and Aristotle's hope for the transformation of society was given up. The happiness that Aristotle thought men could achieve by the proper combination of endowment, education, practice, congenial institutions, and external fortune seemed now to be attainable by inactivity and cautious withdrawal. Happiness itself took on a different meaning. The leading schools of ethics—the Stoics and the Epicureans—tended to agree that life was beset by suffering or its ever-present possibility; from this standpoint, in order to be happy, it sufficed to achieve peace of mind. This could be attained only by moderating one's desires, by not worrying about or counting upon the reform of social and political institutions.

The third period in ethics was ushered in by Christianity. Christianity has often shared with its Hellenistic predecessors the negative evaluation of the world and the emphasis on the ever-presentness of suffering. But Christianity could look at this situation in a fundamentally different way because it could relate this world to the spiritual world beyond. The spiritual life supplemented and fulfilled secular life; it provided a new and primary set of goals while infusing new meaning into secular activities. Christianity, for the most part, did not deny importance to this life. The varieties of Christian ethics could be classified according to the degree of importance in the scheme of things which was assigned to physical well-being, bodily activities, and secular concerns. Christianity is characteristically Western in not giving up a worldly or even a materialist orientation. One sees this in the notion of the resurrection of the body, in the emphasis on good works and in justification of secular power for the church. This dual orientation is apparent in the selection from St. Augustine in Part I of this volume, in which the good life is defined both in other-worldly and in this-worldly terms. It received perhaps its most impressive systematic formulation in the thirteenth-century writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose abiding influence as the dominant philosopher of Roman Catholicism is apparent in the essay by Victor White, included here in Part IV.

With the Renaissance we enter upon the fourth period of ethical thought. The physical and scientific conquest of nature which characterizes this period suggested to men once more that human happiness could be achieved by means of the active manipulation of things and the reorganization of social institutions. The natural sciences vastly extended the power of control not just over the forces of nature but also over the human body, leading among other things to the

diminution of suffering by applied medicine. Technology furnished tools which made possible a vast increase in man's productive output, so that economics became, for the first time, the science of wealth rather than the art of the least troublesome distribution of scarce goods. Evidence of these changes can be seen in the differences between ancient and modern hedonists, the philosophers who consider pleasure the goal of human activity. For the ancients, e.g., Epicurus and Lucretius, the pursuit of pleasure was capable of success only if men withdrew from the frustrations of this world and sought happiness in retreat, sustained by plain food and friendly conversation. With them, to a considerable extent, the pursuit of pleasure tended to assume the form of a calculated effort to avoid pain. Over against this passive conception which encouraged disengagement from organized society, there is the active or even revolutionary conception of pleasure in, for instance, Bentham and Marx. Pleasure *could* be achieved, and it could be achieved for the greatest possible number only through social organization, by comprehensive legal reform (Bentham) or by a revolutionized economy (Marx). In many ways the confidence and sense of power found in ethical theories at this time resembles that of the first period.

Today ethical thought stands perhaps at the threshold of a fifth period. We may point to three factors contributing to its present state: the sciences of man and society, mathematical and logical theory, and orthodoxy and traditionalism in Christian theology.

Ours is the century in which social and psychological inquiries seem to have reached the status of sciences. At the very least, great care is being taken to arrive methodically at descriptions of individual and social behavior that are objective and verifiable. For instance, we no longer base our assertions about public opinion on a few casual impressions, but are perfecting techniques that enable us to say more precisely who holds what belief at what time and in regard to what issue. Similarly, we are perfecting techniques of inquiry that enable us to identify, for example, the conditions that determine different paths of personality development. Ethics has usually been dependent in some respect upon descriptions of human and social behavior, and as we move from the impressionistic to the scientific phase in such description, there are likely to be changes in the nature of ethical reasoning. Scientific descriptions have already fundamentally modified our ideas of what ought to be. An illustration of this is furnished by Freudian psychology. Generalizations about human behavior, obtained primarily from the observation and treatment of neurotics, have revolutionized our conceptions of the place of impulses, including sexual and aggressive impulses, in human life and thereby have profoundly altered both the goals and the techniques of child rearing.

There remains the question whether and how a theory such as the Freudian theory of personality can be scientifically translated into changed values and practices. John Dewey's *Theory of Valuation*, which is contained in this volume, is an attempt to solve this problem. He maintains that objective appraisals of both ends and means can be derived from scientific statements of fact. Only when this controversial position is put to the test can its merits be determined. We have included writings by practicing social and behavioral scientists (Neumann, Merton, Fromm, and Sanford) in order to illustrate the positive efforts being made in this direction. But they are illustrative only, and the uninitiated

will have to do considerably more reading before coming to a conclusion as to the relevance of these sciences to ethics.

Turning to the second factor, we note that striking developments in mathematical and logical theory toward the turn of the century influenced two movements in contemporary ethics. One line of development led to analytic philosophy, the other to phenomenology. Both have encouraged ethical inquiry along lines quite at variance with those we have just been considering. Analytic philosophy, in the area of ethics, takes the form of a concern with what can be called the logic of ethical terms and statements. Nevertheless, many adherents of this position would argue that this logical analysis is not without its effect upon conduct. By delimiting what sort of ethical assertions have factual content and what sort do not, which can be verified by objective procedures and which cannot, the intellectual base for conduct is more firmly established. The analytic approach predominates among professional philosophers in English-speaking countries at the present time. It is represented in this volume by Gilbert Ryle in Part I, H. L. A. Hart in Part II and by selections in Part IV.

Also interested in analyzing and clarifying the logic of valuation were the pragmatists, among them John Dewey, who were prominent in American philosophy earlier in this century. But they paid much less attention to the *language* of ethics and explicitly advocated the methodical revision of principles of conduct. In Dewey's hands this led to far-reaching suggestions for educational and political reforms.

Phenomenology has its origin in the investigations into mathematical and logical theory by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who was led to formulate a new method for philosophy as well as a new conception of its proper field of inquiry. Philosophy was now to become phenomenology, that is, to undertake pure description of phenomena, in the conviction that only thus could we attain knowledge free of presuppositions, independent of any limiting conditions; only thereby could we overcome uncertainty and end controversy in connection with the competing claims of common sense, natural science, and rational insight as sources of knowledge, including ethics. Phenomenology, particularly if one uses the term to include its various forms and progeny, is widely represented in continental Europe, much less so elsewhere. Figuring among the less orthodox phenomenologists are Heidegger and Sartre (see the selection in Part IV) who are more familiarly known as existentialists.

From what has been said, the divergence in the working assumptions of contemporary ethical inquiry is quite apparent. One begins to appreciate why future developments in ethics are so difficult to forecast and so fascinating to contemplate. These impressions are strengthened when we take into consideration a third factor and its influence on the present situation—namely, orthodoxy and traditionalism in Christian theology.

The mood of optimism, the confidence in material and moral progress, and the prestige of the natural sciences that marked the fourth period in the history of ethics were reflected in a tendency toward "liberalization" in all the major Western religious faiths. A closer rapport was sought between science and theology; sin and the supernatural were denied, doubted, or radically reinterpreted; man was deemed not so helpless or so wicked after all and there was hope for peace on earth and mutual good will. In due course, the Catholic Church proclaimed

such "modernism" to be heretical, a move which reinforced the already re-awakened interest in the philosophical works of St. Thomas Aquinas. In this century, after six hundred years, his writings have exhibited a remarkable vitality and have proved a source of philosophical inspiration to a number of eminent contemporary Catholic philosophers. The revival of Thomistic studies has meant that at the present time and in the foreseeable future, the non-Catholic philosopher who is engaged in ethical inquiry, whatever his particular orientation, often finds himself at odds with the formidable system of Aquinas, ably expounded and defended by Catholic colleagues. Since much of the history of philosophy since the seventeenth century has consisted of attempts to improve, refute or supplant the Thomistic system, it is not surprising that many non-Catholics have difficulty finding common theoretical ground with contemporary Catholic philosophers. This situation is evident in the difference between the Catholic defense of divine authority in ethics and the other selections in Part IV.

Somewhat the same can be said in regard to Protestant theology and theologians. Catastrophic world wars, economic crises, widespread dissatisfaction with the fruits of scientific and technological progress and continuing world tensions have strengthened and sustained an influential movement in Protestant thought which is sometimes called Neo-Orthodoxy. This movement has carried out a devastating critique of nineteenth-century liberal theology in the spirit of "Biblical Christianity." It finds a foundation for ethics in insights it considers more venerable and more adequate than those embodied in the writings of Aquinas or the traditions of the Catholic Church. It has tended to sharpen differences between Protestant and Catholic ethical thought as well as between Protestants and non-Christians. All the more interesting, therefore, is Victor White's effort (in Part IV) to state the case for a common basis for understanding among Catholics, Protestants, and non-Christians.

Why Ethical Inquiry?

A long time ago and near the beginning of the history of Western philosophy, Aristotle could say to his students: "We are not inquiring merely in order to know what excellence or virtue is, but in order to become good; for otherwise it would profit us nothing." In a similar vein, students of today might persist in holding that, although certain areas of ethical inquiry are theoretical rather than practical, the aim of ethical inquiry as a whole is to enable us to become good. Can critical reflection actually help men become good? Socrates was fond of asking his contemporaries in the city of Athens whether virtue can be taught. One thing he was trying to call attention to when he posed this question was the difference between learning by thinking for oneself and learning what someone else thinks—learning, for example, by attending a course of lectures in ethics.

Suppose, however, that one does think for oneself: is it by thinking that one becomes a morally better person? The philosophers in this volume take quite different views of the influence of reason on attitude and behavior. Some, of course, tend to restrict reason to the role of observing and describing. Those who think that reason has causal efficacy may be divided according to two main emphases. According to the one, reason when fully developed somehow directly

produces changes in attitude and behavior. According to the other, reason in the form of scientific study of the causal determinants of attitudes and conduct will indirectly result in changed attitudes and behavior. But no generally accepted answer has yet been given to Socrates' question concerning the relation of knowledge to virtue.

How does it happen that men start asking questions about what is good or right? Doubtless ethical inquiry can originate in countless ways, although it is unlikely that it will prove significant if it does not arise from or correspond to genuine perplexities, to actually experienced problems. It is doubtful, for example, whether the person who has never had to choose between conflicting goods or loyalties, who has never been in what is called a moral dilemma, can have very much insight into or understanding of such situations. In other words, it is doubtful whether significant ethical inquiry can be purely academic.

One way in which ethical inquiry can begin is with the stark realization that many persons violate in practice the conventional moral principles to which they pay lip service and which we for our part have taken for granted as the guiding principles of our own conduct. Such hypocrisy is especially shocking when it is encountered among persons whom we thought we knew or among those who are supposedly models of or guardians of public morality—prominent men and women in business, law, government, or the church. Realization of the facts of life in such cases can be extremely thought-provoking and can issue in a cynical attitude toward any objective standards of conduct and evaluation. The result is perfectly illustrated by the position put forth by Thrasymachus, a character in Plato's *Republic*, in the following words:

You must consider, foolish Socrates, that the just is always a loser in comparison with the unjust. First of all, in private contracts: wherever the unjust is the partner of the just you will find that, when the partnership is dissolved, the unjust man has always more and the just less. Secondly, in their dealings with the state: when there is an income tax, the just man will pay more and the unjust less on the same amount of income; and when there is money to be distributed the one gets nothing and the other much. Observe also what happens when they take an office; there is the just man neglecting his affairs and perhaps suffering other losses, and getting nothing out of the public, because he is just; moreover he is hated by his friends and acquaintances for refusing to serve them in unlawful ways. But all this is reversed in the case of the unjust man. I am speaking of injustice on a large scale in which the advantage of the unjust is more apparent; and my meaning will be most clearly seen if we turn to that highest form of injustice in which the criminal is the happiest of men, and the sufferers or those who refuse to do injustice are the most miserable—that is to say tyranny, which by fraud and force takes away the property of others, not little by little but wholesale; things sacred as well as profane, private and public; for which acts of wrong, if he were detected perpetrating any one of them singly, he would be punished and incur great disgrace—they who do such wrong in particular cases are called robbers of temples, and kidnappers and burglars and swindlers and thieves. But when a man besides taking away the money of the citizens has made slaves of them, then, instead of these names of reproach, he is termed happy and blessed, not only by the citizens but by all

who hear of his having achieved the consummation of injustice. For mankind censure injustice, fearing that they may be the victims of it and not because they shrink from committing it.*

One reason for mentioning moral cynicism in particular is that philosophers often make scant mention of it once they get involved in ethical theorizing, even though it may have been a stimulus to reflection in the first place. We easily lose sight of any cynicism of our own when we become involved, in our turn, in thinking about ethics; the challenge of understanding what some philosopher has to say or of working out some idea can make us forget our own feelings about the very subject matter under consideration. Only if we take the trouble to compare our ideas with our feelings and attitudes can we be at all clear about where we stand in our own appraisals and choices and achieve consistency between theory and practice.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, the roots of moral distinctions and of ethical inquiry are to be found in the facts of ordinary behavior, social custom, and individual habit. Values are embedded in the ways of ordinary behavior. Most of them remain unarticulated until their malfunctioning in a crisis or the heightened sensitivity of an original person force articulation and, frequently, a desire for readjustment. Stability seems of tremendous importance to the human being, and traditional ways readily acquire an aura of sacredness. Criticism of them may incur the charge of sacrilege. Police, prisons, even the executioner can be pressed into service to combat the very mention of an unconventional idea. But since the days of Socrates, unconventionality in regard to values has been virtually the trademark of ethical philosophers. Almost all of them have clashed with established authorities, although their fates have differed as widely as that of Socrates, who had to pay with his life for his disagreement, and that of John Stuart Mill, who could promote his minority opinions as an elected member in the British Parliament.

The root of all ethical inquiry seems to lie in the very condition of man. If we might add another to the many definitions of *homo sapiens* we could call him the unhappy animal. Discontent seems to spring both from the ever-changing conditions of man's natural and social environment and from the variability of his inner nature and desires. Philosophers have reacted differently to the fact of this discontent. They have considered it an inevitable evil and, at the other extreme, a desirable spur to constant effort and the discovery of new potentialities in man. Some philosophers have thought this discontent remediable either here or in the life to come; others have attempted to dismiss it as due to a lack of perspective. Whatever view one takes, it can scarcely be questioned that discontent has been a persistent stimulus to ethical thought; and with discontent, ethical inquiry seems likely to endure.

* Jowett translation, slightly revised.

PART I

DIFFERING CONCEPTIONS
OF THE GOOD

