

MORAL PHILOSOPHY

A Reader

Second Edition

Edited, with Introduction, by
LOUIS POJMAN

Moral Philosophy: A Reader

Second Edition

Edited, with Introduction, by
Louis P. Pojman

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
Indianapolis/Cambridge

This book is dedicated to the memory of the
Rev. Dr. Winfield and Mrs. Agnes Burggraaff
who lived the moral life
and showed others how to do so

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Preface

Ethics courses are gaining new importance in universities and colleges. With the increased diversity and cultural pluralism in the West; the shrinking of the globe, so that we are increasingly all in one another's debt; the gradual erosion of traditional institutions, the family, and the church; and the dilemmas brought on by medical technology, a thoughtful examination of the foundations of morality has become an issue of the first magnitude. The undermining of older structures has resulted in a widespread uncritical acceptance of ethical relativism and egoism on our campuses. Yet, students are looking for guidance in solving moral dilemmas and resolving conflicts of interest. While moral philosophy does not by itself solve the world's problems, it sets them in a broader theoretical context, throws light on them, and gives us a conceptual apparatus that at least aids in achieving our moral goals. Furthermore, the subject, like any worthy pursuit, has intrinsic merit. It is inherently interesting. In light of this there is need of a short general reader in ethical theory to be used either on its own or together with a supporting single-authored text.

This work is an expansion of the core set of articles that I used in my 200-level ethical theory course for several years. It contains the classical readings in moral philosophy as well as leading contemporary expositions of perennial problems. I begin each part of the work with a classical selection, for the questions we ask have a perennial nature. Their classical rendition, as well as some of their classical solutions, have bearing on present-day understanding.

The book contains a general introduction to moral philosophy before the first reading and short abstracts and biographical sketches before the individual readings. The thirty readings are presented in a dialectical format (*pro-con*) and

represent the most accessible readings I can find—without sacrificing argumentative cogency. Two of the readings have been commissioned specifically for this work.

Strategy of the Book

The user of this work may be interested in why I have arranged it the way I have. There is nothing sacred about this arrangement. The book can be used in many ways, but I have found the present structure optimal for teaching ethical theory.

First of all, you will find a lot of Plato in this work. Although Whitehead's dictum that the history of philosophy is merely a series of footnotes on Plato may be hyperbole, classical questions about the nature of morality are brilliantly discussed in Plato's work. It is here that the important questions are first raised in all their poignancy: Why should I be moral? (Glaucon and Gyges' Ring) What is morality? (*Republic* Book I) Does might make right? (Thrasymachus) Does God love the Good because it is good or is the Good good because God loves it? (Euthyphro) Are there objective values whose goodness is independent of whether we choose them? (Plato's notion of the Form of the Good) We may not accept all of his answers (though I think they have merit), but we cannot do better than begin with his questions.

Here is my suggestion on how to proceed in using the material in this book:

Weeks 1 and 2:

After a brief example of moral arguing over the meaning of justice or morality in *Republic* Book I, where Socrates rejects both common sense contractarianism and Thrasymachus's crude egoism, I like to confront the question of moral relativism. Between sixty and seventy percent of my students espouse some (usually crude) version

of relativism or subjectivism. A basic understanding of these issues is necessary before we can go on to other matters.

Weeks 3 and 4:

I move on to the questions of morality and self-interest, including egoism, beginning with Glaucon's question to Socrates in *Republic* Book II, "Why should I be moral?" and moving on to Hobbes, where morality is linked with enlightened self-interest (in order to prevent a state of nature). I've used Rand's and Rachels's arguments with success and look forward to using the new article by Howard Kahane on sociobiology and egoism. Although I spend two weeks on this section, it could easily be expanded to take up three weeks.

I have on occasion discussed the material in Part VIII, the relationship between ethics and religion, before discussing the problems of self-interest and egoism, and if these are burning issues among your students, you may want to try this.

Week 5:

I usually spend one week on the nature of value, discussing whether there are things with intrinsic value and things that are objectively valuable. Again Plato is the locus classicus for this discussion, and Bentham provides the clearest example of hedonism, which is criticized by Robert Nozick and W. D. Ross. Ross provides a clear presentation of value pluralism, and Derek Parfit examines three theories of the good life in a way that is especially accessible to students.

Weeks 6–13:

In the central part of the course, I examine the three classical types of moral theories: utilitarianism, deontological (Kantian) ethics, and virtue ethics, emphasizing the first two. I am flexible in this part of the course, spending more or less time on the classics, depending on the abilities of the particular students in my course.

Weeks 6–9:

Utilitarianism (emphasizing Mill's *Utilitarianism*).

Midterm exam during week 8 or 9.

Weeks 10–12:

Deontological ethics (emphasizing Kant's *Grounding*).

Weeks 13:

Virtue ethics (emphasizing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*).

On occasion I spend week 14 on this part of the course.

Weeks 14–15:

Ethics and religion (emphasizing both the Euthyphro problem and the question of the relationship between secular and religious ethics). The Euthyphro problem has far-reaching implications, raising questions of value as well as of the nature of the relationship of religion to ethics. Bertrand Russell's "A Free Man's Worship" is an eloquent, if not slightly sad, rendition of secular stoicism. George Mavrodes' critique of secular morality is a worthy challenge to those who would build an adequate secular moral theory, and Kai Nielsen's attempt to meet that challenge presents strategies for building better secular systems of ethics.

To reiterate what I said earlier, some may want to use this part of the book (at least the Euthyphro question) earlier on, say after week 2 on moral relativism. One problem I have with placing this section last is that I often find myself taking more time than I anticipated (especially if I give more than one exam) and never get to the part on ethics and religion. In some places, however, the relationship between ethics and religion is not a burning issue, either because religion is not seen as crucial to ethics or because students already have a fairly sophisticated understanding of religion and its role in the moral life. Some philosophers cover this subject in philosophy of religion courses, so that there is less need to confront it in

this course. In sum, Part VIII is the wild card in the pack and may play a role at different stages of the course for different teachers and students.

My students over a twenty-two-year period have been a source of enlightenment and inspiration in arranging this work. My wife, Trudy, has been for me the embodiment of moral virtue, and her (now deceased) parents, the Rev. Dr. Winfield and Mrs. Agnes Burggraaff, were two of the most

deeply moral, altruistic persons I've ever known, to whom I owe a tremendous debt. To their memory this book is dedicated.

Louis P. Pojman
 United States Military Academy
 West Point, New York
 March 23, 1997

Statement on the Second Edition

I have made the following changes for this second edition. I have renamed Part II Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivism and have added Thomas Aquinas's classic discussion on Natural Law in which he justifies an objective and universal moral law based on reason and eternal law. I have also added my defense of moral objectivism, which includes a critique of moral relativism. In Part IV, on Value, I have added a section from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, on the transvaluation of values, as well as a section from Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, on the question of what gives human life value. I have added

Bernard Williams's provocative "Critique of Utilitarianism" to Part V, and Ross's classic discussion of moral rightness, especially the notion of prima facie duties, to Part VI. Part VII, on Virtue Ethics, has been enhanced by Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of the nature of the virtues in *After Virtue*, and Jonathan Bennett's essay "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," in which he argues for the importance of moral sentiments. These additions should make this a more comprehensive work, filling in some of the gaps in the earlier edition.

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General Introduction

What Is Moral Philosophy?

We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.

(Socrates in Plato's *Republic*)

What is it to be a moral person? What is the nature of morality, and why do we need it? What is the good, and how shall I know it? Are moral principles absolute or simply relative to social groups or individual decision? Is it in my interest to be moral? Is it sometimes in my best interest to act immorally? How does one justify one's moral beliefs? What is the basis of morality? Which ethical theory provides the best justification and explanation of the moral life? What is the relationship between morality and religion?

These are some of the questions that we shall be looking at in this book. We want to understand the foundation and structure of morality. We want to know how we should live.

The terms 'moral' and 'ethics' come from Latin and Greek respectively (*mores* and *ethos*), deriving their meaning from the idea of custom. Although philosophers sometimes use these terms interchangeably, it is useful to have a clearer conceptual scheme. In this work I shall use 'morality' to refer to certain customs, precepts, and practices of people and cultures. This is sometimes referred to as 'positive morality.' I shall use 'moral philosophy' to refer to philosophical or theoretical reflection on morality. Specific moral theories issuing from such philosophical reflection I shall call 'ethical theories,' in line with a common practice. 'Ethics' I shall use to refer to the whole domain of morality and moral philosophy, since they have many features in common. For example, they both have to do with values, virtues, and principles and practices, though in different ways. I shall refer to specific moral theories as 'ethical theories,' in line with a common practice.

Moral philosophy is the systematic endeavor to

understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories. It undertakes to analyze such concepts as 'right,' 'wrong,' 'permissible,' 'ought,' 'good,' and 'evil' in their moral contexts. Moral philosophy seeks to establish principles of right behavior that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups. It investigates which values and virtues are paramount to the worthwhile life or society. It builds and scrutinizes arguments in ethical theories, and it seeks to discover valid principles (e.g., 'Never kill innocent human beings') and the relationship between those principles (e.g., 'Does saving a life in some situations constitute a valid reason for breaking a promise?').

Morality as Compared with Other Normative Subjects

Moral precepts are concerned with norms; roughly speaking, they are concerned not with what is, but with what ought to be. How should I live my life? What is the right thing to do in this situation? Should one always tell the truth? Do I have a duty to report a coworker whom I have seen cheating our company? Should I tell my friend that his spouse is having an affair? Is premarital sex morally permissible? Ought a woman ever to have an abortion? Morality has a distinct action-guiding or *normative* aspect,¹ an aspect it shares with other practical institutions, such as religion, law, and etiquette.

Moral behavior, as defined by a given religion, is often held to be essential to the practice of that religion. But neither the practices nor precepts of morality should be identified with religion. The practice of morality need not be motivated by religious considerations. And moral precepts need not be grounded in revelation or divine authority—as religious teachings invariably are. The

most salient characteristic of ethics—by which I mean both philosophical morality (or morality, as I will simply refer to it) and moral philosophy—is that it is grounded in reason and human experience.

To use a spatial metaphor, secular ethics are horizontal, omitting a vertical or transcendental dimension. Religious ethics have a vertical dimension, being grounded in revelation or divine authority, though generally using reason to supplement or complement revelation. These two differing orientations will often generate different moral principles and standards of evaluation, but they need not. Some versions of religious ethics, which posit God's revelation of the moral law in nature or conscience, hold that reason can discover what is right or wrong, even apart from divine revelation.

Morality also has much in common with law. And, not surprisingly perhaps, some people make the mistake of equating the two. After all, laws can promote well-being and social harmony, and can resolve conflicts of interest, just as morality can.

Yet there are crucial differences. Ethics may judge certain laws to be immoral without denying that they are valid laws. Laws may permit slavery, for example, or unjust discrimination. An anti-abortion advocate may believe laws permitting abortion to be immoral.

It is possible, too, that under some circumstances the requirements of law may be at odds with the requirements of ethics. Consider the reply given by a trial lawyer when asked what he would do if he discovered that a client had committed a murder some years back for which another man had been convicted and would soon be executed: The lawyer said it was his legal obligation to keep this information confidential and that, if he divulged it, he would be disbarred.² Might not a lawyer in this situation also have a moral obligation to save an innocent man from being executed? And might it not override a legal or moral obligation to preserve his client's confidentiality?

Not all aspects of morality are covered by law. While it is generally agreed, for example, that

lying is usually immoral, there is no general law against it. (There are, to be sure, laws against lying in certain circumstances: while under oath, for example, or on an income-tax return.)

Sometimes college newspapers publish advertisements for "research assistance," where it is tacitly understood that the companies involved will aid and abet plagiarism. The publication of such ads is legal, but it is doubtful that it is morally correct.

In 1963, thirty-nine people in Queens, New York, watched from their apartments for some forty-five minutes while an assailant beat up and finally killed a woman, Kitty Genovese; they did nothing to intervene, not even calling the police. These people broke no law, but they were very likely morally culpable for not calling the police or otherwise coming to the aid of the victim.

Even if it were thought desirable to have laws which governed all aspects of morality, this would prove impractical. In 1351 King Edward III of England promulgated a law against treason that made it a crime merely to think homicidal thoughts about the king. For reasons easy to imagine, this law proved unenforceable. Once an act has been committed, of course, intention plays a crucial role in determining its legal character. But intention alone, intention that is not acted upon, remains outside the reach of law.

The mere fact that it is impractical to have laws against bad intentions, however, does not mean such intentions are not bad, are not morally wrong. Suppose I buy a gun with the intention of killing Uncle Charlie, but never get a chance to act on that intention (say, Uncle Charlie moves to Australia). Though I have committed no crime, I have committed a moral wrong.

How else does morality differ from law? To begin with, we might say that law is enforced by sanctions³ that restrict a violator's liberty (for example, by imprisonment or fines), whereas morality does not rely on these sanctions. Morality does rely, however, on what we might call "moral sanctions," primarily those of conscience and reputation. (By morality, remember, we mean morality not motivated by religious considerations.)

Morality differs, too, from etiquette and custom, which concern form and style, rather than the essence of social existence. Etiquette determines what is polite behavior rather than what behavior is, in a deeper sense, right. Custom represents society's decision as to how we are to dress, greet one another, eat, celebrate festivals, dispose of the dead, and carry out social transactions.

Whether we greet others with a handshake, a bow, a hug, or a kiss on the cheek will differ in various cultures and social systems. People in England hold their fork in their right hand. In other countries, people hold a fork in their right hand or left hand or whichever hand a person feels like holding it. In India, people typically eat without a fork. They simply use the forefingers of the right hand.

None of these practices has any moral superiority. Etiquette helps social transactions flow smoothly, but it is not the substance of those transactions. The observance of custom graces our social existence, but it is not what social existence is about.

At the same time, it can be wrong to disregard etiquette and custom. A cultural crisis recently developed in India when some Americans went to the beaches clad in skimpy bathing suits. This was found highly offensive, though there is nothing intrinsically wrong with wearing skimpy bathing suits or, for that matter, with wearing none at all. Especially when one is a guest in someone else's home or country, however, ignoring or displaying contempt for such customs can be more than merely rude; it can be morally wrong. In the example just given, we might say it was not the wearing of the bathing suits but a kind of insensitivity that was wrong.

Law, etiquette and religion are all important institutions, but each has limitations. The limitation of the law is that we can not have a law against every social malady, nor can we enforce every desirable rule. The limitation of etiquette is that it does not get to the heart of what is of vital importance for personal and social existence. Whether or not one eats with one's fingers pales in signifi-

cance compared with whether or not one is honest or trustworthy or just. Etiquette is a cultural *invention*, but morality claims to be a *discovery*.

The limitation of the religious injunction is that it rests on authority, and we are not always sure of or in agreement about the credentials of the authority or on how the authority would rule in ambiguous or new cases. Since religion is founded not on reason but on revelation, we cannot use reason to convince someone who does not share our religious views that our view is the right one. I hasten to add that when moral differences are caused by fundamental moral principles, it is unlikely that philosophical reasoning will settle the matter. Often, however, our moral differences turn out to be rooted in world views, not moral principles. For example, antiabortion and pro-choice advocates often agree that it is wrong to kill innocent persons, but differ on the facts. The antiabortion advocates may hold a religious view that states that the fetus has an eternal soul and thus possesses a right to life, while the pro-choice advocates may deny that anyone has a soul and hold that only self-conscious, rational beings have a right to life.

In summary, morality distinguishes itself from law and etiquette by going deeper into the essence of rational existence. It distinguishes itself from religion in that it seeks reasons, rather than authority, to justify its principles. The central purpose of moral philosophy is to secure valid principles of conduct and values that can be instrumental in guiding human actions and producing good character. As such, it is the most important activity known to humans, for it has to do with how we are to live.

Domains of Ethical Assessment

It might seem at this point that ethics concerns itself entirely with rules of conduct based solely on an evaluation of acts. However, the situation is more complicated than this. Most ethical analysis falls into one or some of the following four domains:

Domain	Evaluative terms	
1. Action (the act)	permissible ┌───────────┐ obligatory ── optional └───────────┘ neutral supererogatory	not permissible wrong
2. Consequences	good, bad, neutral	
3. Character	virtuous, vicious, neutral	
4. Motive	good, evil, neutral	

Let us examine each of these domains.

(1) *Action*. The most common classification of acts may be as obligatory, optional, or wrong.

(i) An obligatory act is an act morality requires you to do, an act it is not permissible for you to refrain from doing.

(ii) A wrong act is an act you have an obligation, or duty, to refrain from, an act you ought not to do, an act it is not permissible to do.

(iii) An optional act is an act which it is neither obligatory nor wrong to do. It is not your duty to do it; neither is it your duty to not to do it.

Theories which place the emphasis on the nature of the act are called ‘deontological’ (from the Greek word for “duty”). These theories hold that there is something inherently right or good about such acts as truth telling and promise keeping and something inherently wrong or bad about such acts as lying and promise breaking. The most famous of these systems is Kant’s moral theory, which we shall study in Part VI.

(2) *Consequences*. We said above that lying is generally seen as wrong and telling the truth is generally seen as right. But consider this situation. You are hiding in your home an innocent woman named Laura, who is fleeing gangsters. Gangland Gus knocks on your door, and when you open it, he asks if Laura is in your house. What should you do? Should you tell the truth or lie? Those who say that morality has something to do with consequences of actions would prescribe lying as the morally right thing to do.

Those who deny that we should look at the consequences when considering what to do when there is a clear and absolute rule of action will say that we should either keep silent or tell the truth. When no other rule is at stake, of course, the rule-oriented ethicist will allow the foreseeable consequences to determine a course of action. Theories which focus primarily on consequences in determining moral rightness and wrongness are called ‘teleological’ ethical theories (from the Greek *telos*, meaning “goal-directed”). The most famous of these theories is utilitarianism, which we shall study in Part V.

(3) *Character*. While some ethical theories emphasize principles of action in themselves and some emphasize principles involving consequences of action, other theories, such as Aristotle’s ethics, emphasize character or virtue. According to Aristotle, it is most important to develop virtuous character, for if and only if we have good people can we ensure habitual right action. Although the virtues are not central to other types of moral theories, most moral theories include the virtues as important. Most reasonable people, whatever their notions about ethics, would judge that the people who watched Kitty Genovese being assaulted lacked good character. Different moral systems emphasize different virtues, to varying degrees. We shall study virtue in Part VII.

(4) *Motive*. Finally, virtually all ethical systems, but especially Kant’s, accept the relevance of motive. It is important to the full assessment of any action that the intention of the agent be

taken into account. Two acts may be identical, and one judged morally culpable, the other not. Consider John's pushing Joan off a ledge, causing her to break her leg. In situation (A) he is angry and intends to harm her. In situation (B) he sees a knife flying in her direction and intends to save her life. In (A), what he did was clearly wrong. In (B), he did the right thing.

By contrast, two acts may get opposite results and, on the basis of intention, be judged equally good. Imagine two soldiers trying to cross enemy lines in order to communicate with an ally. One is captured through no fault of his own, and the other succeeds. In a full moral description of any act, motive will be taken into consideration as a relevant factor.

In this work we will examine several fundamental questions in moral philosophy. In Part I, through Socrates' discussion with Polemarchus and Thrasymachus, we look at the question, "What is the morally right conduct?" In this classical discussion we find embedded many of the questions to be examined later in this book: "Is morality objectively valid?" "Why should I be moral?" "What is the nature of morality?"

In Part II we examine the question "Are moral principles valid relative to cultural or individual approval, or are they objectively and universally valid?" We begin with a classic example of cultural difference, Herodotus's account of the Callicians and Greeks being offended by each other's burial rites. Ruth Benedict sets forth a defense of moral relativism, and Louis Pojman defends a form of moral objectivism.

In Part III we inquire into the relationship of morality to self-interest. Why should I be moral even when it is not in my interest to be so? Or is it really in my interest always to be moral? Or is morality simply enlightened self-interest, in a manner that precludes altruism? Our reading here from Plato's *Republic* picks up where we left off in I.1, discussing the issue of morality and self-interest. Then we turn to Hobbes's classic account of egoism as the basis for a contractual

morality. Ayn Rand defends a strong form of egoism, and James Rachels offers a comprehensive critique of ethical egoism. Howard Kahane argues for a type of morality that may be said to be based on rational self-interest, whose primary form is reciprocity.

In Part IV we examine the nature of value. Are there any intrinsic, objective values, or are all values subjective, simply objects of desire? Here we examine Platonic objectivism, Bentham's hedonism, Ross's value pluralism, and Parfit's objective theory of values.

In Part V we begin an examination of the three major ethical theories in the history of Western moral philosophy, looking first at utilitarianism. We will read part of John Stuart Mill's classic work *Utilitarianism*, as well as Kai Nielsen's act-utilitarianism and John Hospers's rule-utilitarianism, Bernard Williams's critique, concluding with a critical analysis by Sterling Harwood.

In Part VI we examine Kant's deontological ethics, reading a sizable portion from his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, as well as an analysis by Fred Feldman. William Frankena concludes this section with an essay that attempts to reconcile utilitarianism with deontological ethics.

Part VII contains five important readings on virtue ethics, beginning with Aristotle's classic rendition in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Bernard Mayo provides a contemporary interpretation of virtue ethics, and William Frankena criticizes this school of thought for failing to tie the virtues into stable principles. David Norton criticizes Urmson for not going far enough with his proposal and develops a fuller account of an ethics of character.

Finally, in Part VIII we turn to the relationship of ethics to religion. Are all moral principles based on divine commands, or are they autonomous, having independent validity? And, whatever our answer to that question, does secular morality have the resources sufficient to motivate compliance with moral reasons, or does morality

need the support of divine sanctions? George Mavrodes argues that morality without a deeper metaphysical basis is impoverished, but Bertrand Russell and Kai Nielsen argue to the contrary, that morality can stand without the support of religion.

It is to be hoped that these readings will stimulate you to do your own thinging on each of the major questions raised in the study of moral philosophy. The challenge is as exciting as it is important, for, to quote Socrates, “We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.”

Notes

1. Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines *normative* as “of, or relating or conforming to or prescribing norms or standards.”
2. This question was asked, and this reply was given, in the television program *Ethics in America* (PBS, 1989).
3. A sanction is a mechanism for social control, used to enforce society’s standards. It may consist of rewards or punishment, praise or blame, approbation or disapprobation.
4. Although Americans pride themselves on tolerance and awareness of other cultures, customs and etiquette can be a bone of contention. A friend of mine tells of an experience early in his marriage. John and his wife were hosting their first Thanksgiving meal. He had been used to small celebrations with his immediate family, whereas his wife had been used to grand celebrations. He writes, “I had been asked to carve, something I had never done before, but I was willing. I put on an apron, entered the kitchen, and attacked the bird with as much artistry as I could muster. And what reward did I get? [My wife] burst into tears. In *her* family the turkey is brought to the *table*, laid before the [father], grace is said, and *then* he carves! ‘So I fail patriarchy,’ I hollered later. ‘What do you expect?’” (from John Buehrens and Forrester Church, *Our Chosen Faith* [Beacon Press, 1989], p. 140.)

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PART I

What Is Morally Right Conduct?

Introduction: Plato's Moral Philosophy

Plato (427–347 B.C.) lived in Athens, the great Greek democratic city-state, in the aftermath of its glory under Pericles. He was Socrates' disciple and the founder of the first school of philosophy, the Academy. In his dialogues, and especially in the *Republic*, from which our first selection, as well as selections III.5 and IV.10, are taken, he sets forth and develops some of the ideas of his teacher, Socrates.

Socrates (470–399 B.C.) is the father of moral philosophy, the first philosopher in the Western tradition to raise fundamental questions about the nature of morality: “What is justice?” “What is virtue?” “Can virtue be taught?” “What is the good life?” “Why should I be moral?” “Is morality more than mere convention?” In our first two selections Socrates deals with two central questions, “What is justice or right conduct?” and “Why should I be moral (or just)?”

The *Republic* is a classic dialogue on political philosophy, centering on the nature of goodness and of the good life. Although the Greek idea of *justice* has some different connotations from our concept of morally right conduct, it is close enough to our concept to be serviceable in pro-

moting an understanding of the central features of moral philosophy.

The dialogue takes place around the year 422 B.C., in the Athenian home of Cephalus, an elderly, prosperous businessman. Socrates is in his 40s. Those present, besides Cephalus and his son, Polemarchus, include two of Plato's brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, and the sophist Thrasymachus. Socrates is the narrator.

In the initial discussion Cephalus defines justice or right conduct as telling the truth and paying back what one has borrowed. Socrates quickly dismisses this definition with a telling counterexample. Polemarchus then takes over from his father and, citing the poet Simonides, argues that right conduct is to give each man what is due him: doing good to one's friends and evil to one's enemies. This undergoes modifications under analysis but is finally rejected as inadequate. At this point Thrasymachus jumps in and vehemently argues that justice is that which promotes the interest of the stronger: Might makes right. As the argument proceeds, Thrasymachus changes his thesis to claim that injustice is more profitable than justice and is the way to happiness.

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What Is Right Conduct?

PLATO

So we went to the home of Polemarchus, and there we found Lysias and Euthydemus, the brothers of Polemarchus, also Thrasymachus of Chalcedon, Charmantides of Paiania, and Cleitophon the son of Aristonymus. Polemarchus's father Cephalus was also in the house. I thought he looked quite old, as I had not seen him for some time. He was sitting on a seat with a cushion, a wreath on his head, for he had been offering a sacrifice in the courtyard. There was a circle of seats there, and we sat down by him.

As soon as he saw me Cephalus welcomed me and said: Socrates, you don't often come down to the Piraeus to see us. You should. If it were still easy for me to walk to the city you would not need to come here, we would come to you, but now you should come more often. You should realize that, to the extent that my physical pleasures get feebler, my desire for conversation, and the pleasure I take in it, increase. So be sure to come more often and talk to these youngsters, as you would to good friends and relations.

I replied: Indeed, Cephalus, I do enjoy conversing with men of advanced years. As from those who have travelled along a road which we too will probably have to follow, we should enquire from them what kind of a road it is, whether rough and difficult or smooth and easy, and I should gladly learn from you what you think about this, as you have reached the point in life which the poets call "the threshold of old age,"¹ whether it is a difficult part of life, or how your experience would describe it to us.

Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, he said, I will tell you what I think of old age. A number of us who are more or less the same age often get together in accordance with the old adage.² When we meet, the majority of us bemoan their age: they miss

the pleasures which were theirs in youth; they recall the pleasures of sex, drink, and feasts, and some other things that go with them, and they are angry as if they were deprived of important things, as if they then lived the good life and now were not living at all. Some others deplore the humiliations which old age suffers in the household, and because of this they repeat again and again that old age is the cause of many evils. However, Socrates, I do not think that they blame the real cause. For if old age were the cause, then I should have suffered in the same way, and so would all others who have reached my age. As it is, I have met other old men who do not feel like that, and indeed I was present at one time when someone asked the poet Sophocles: "How are you in regard to sex, Sophocles? Can you still make love to a woman?" "Hush man, the poet replied, I am very glad to have escaped from this, like a slave who has escaped from a mad and cruel master." I thought then that he was right, and I still think so, for a great peace and freedom from these things come with old age: after the tension of one's desires relaxes and ceases, then Sophocles' words certainly apply, it is an escape from many mad masters. As regards both sex and relations in the household there is one cause, Socrates, not old age but the manner of one's life: if it is moderate and contented, then old age too is but moderately burdensome; if it is not, then both old age and youth are hard to bear.

I wondered at his saying this and I wanted him to say more, so I urged him on by saying: Cephalus, when you say this, I don't think most people would agree with you; they think you endure old age easily not because of your manner of life but because you are wealthy, for the wealthy, they say, have many things to encourage them.