

# INTRODUCTION



## The Lay of the Land

There is so much to know about our world. And for those who are the least bit curious, we have more resources than ever to give us the insights we seek. We can turn to a variety of scientists, doctors, economists, historians, and journalists to help us better understand ourselves, our world, and our place within it.

But there is a set of vital questions that such experts will never answer. These are questions about how we ought to live. Sure, financial advisors can tell us how we ought to invest our money. Personal trainers can advise us on getting in shape. Career counselors can steer us in one direction or another. But if we are interested instead in what our guiding ideals should be, in what sort of life is worth living, in how we should treat one another, then we must turn to philosophy. *Ethics*—also known as *moral philosophy*—is the branch of knowledge concerned with answering such questions.

The field of ethics is vast, and—bad news first—there is no chance of covering all of its interesting and important issues within these pages. In selecting the topics for treatment, I have chosen those that seem to me most central. These can be grouped under three headings, each representing a core area of moral philosophy:

1. **Value theory**<sup>1</sup>: What is the good life? What is worth pursuing for its own sake? How do we improve our lot in life?
2. **Normative ethics**: What are our fundamental moral duties? Which character traits count as virtues, which as vices, and why? Who should our role models be? Do the ends always justify the means, or are there certain types of action that should never be done under any circumstances?
3. **Metaethics**: What is the status of moral claims and advice? Can ethical theories, moral principles, or specific moral verdicts be true? If so, what makes them true? Can we gain moral wisdom? If so, how? Do we always have good reason to do our moral duty?

The structure of this book mirrors this threefold division. The first part is focused on the good life, with an emphasis on explaining the nature and sources of well-being. We ask, for instance, about whether happiness is the be-all and end-all of a good life, the only thing desirable for its own sake. And, naturally, we'll consider views that deny this, including, most importantly, the theory that tells us that getting what we want—whatever we want—is the key to the good life.

Then it's off to normative ethics, which is devoted to examining our moral relations with one another. Who counts—are animals, ecosystems, or fetuses morally important in their own right? Is there a fundamental moral rule, such as the **golden rule**, that can justify all of our specific moral duties? What role do virtue, self-interest, and justice play in morality? Are we ever allowed to break the moral rules? If so, when and why? These are among the most important questions taken up in normative ethics.

Finally, to metaethics. This part of moral philosophy asks questions about the other two. Specifically, it asks about the status of ethical claims, rather than about their content. We all have views about what is right and good. Are these just matters of taste? Is moral authority based on personal approval? Social customs? God's commands? Or none of the above? Is morality in more or less good working order, or is it just a convenient fiction that keeps us in our place? These are the questions that we will take up in the last section of the book.

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1. All technical terms and phrases that appear in **boldface** are defined in the Glossary at the end of the book.

There is no shortage of folks offering advice about these questions. The self-help industry has its gurus, motivational speakers, and best sellers, each aimed at guiding us on the path to a good life. Political pundits, religious leaders, and editorial writers are more than happy to offer us their blueprints for righteous living. They don't always agree, of course. It would be nice to have a way to sort out the decent advice from the rest.

Those of you turning to philosophical ethics for the first time are likely to be hoping for something that I can't provide, namely, a simple recipe for doing the sorting. It is perfectly natural to want a clear method for distinguishing correct from incorrect answers about the good life and our moral duty. Indeed, when I first went to college, I enrolled in a philosophy course hoping for just such a thing. My failure to find it left me deeply disappointed. I abandoned philosophy for a few years, and even dropped out of college for a while. After I returned, I went looking for it again. I've finally realized that in this area of life, while there is plenty of good advice, it can't be summed up in one snappy formula, captured in a neat slogan that can be inscribed in a fortune cookie or on a bumper sticker.

Ethics is hard. It needn't be weakness or fuzzy thinking that stands in the way of knowing the right thing to do, or the proper goals to strive for. We are right to be puzzled by the moral complexity we find in our lives. While we might yearn for clarity and simplicity, this wish for easy answers is bound to be repeatedly frustrated.

## Skepticism about Ethics

When people learn of the difficulties that face each important attempt to solve ethical puzzles, they often give in to skepticism. The major temptation is to regard the entire enterprise as bankrupt, or to think that all ethical views are equally plausible.

Doubts about morality are plentiful, and it would be silly to ignore them in a book that is so focused on trying to improve our moral understanding. Chapters 19, 20, and 21 are entirely devoted to such doubts; those who feel them acutely might do best to start with those chapters, and then work their way to the other parts of the book that are focused on the good life and normative ethics.

For now, let me say just a few things to the doubters. Perhaps the most important is this: among those who have thought longest and hardest about ethics, the view that morality is all make-believe, or that all moral

standards are correct only relative to individuals or societies, is deeply controversial. There are *lots* of problems with such views. Some of these problems may be devastating.

As a result, it would be a serious mistake just to assume that morality is a fiction, or that personal or cultural opinion is the ultimate measure of what is right and wrong. We must follow the arguments where they lead. They may indeed lead us ultimately to embrace such positions. But they might not. And we can't know one way or the other until we've actually done the hard work.

Since I really love this part of ethics—the metaethical part—I can't resist saying just a bit more here. In my experience, most of those who harbor serious doubts about morality base their skepticism on one or more of the following considerations:

- (A) Individuals constantly disagree about what's right and wrong, and societies do, too. If there were some objective truth in ethics, then we should expect all really smart people to agree on it. They don't. So there is no objective truth in ethics.
- (B) There are universally correct moral standards only if God exists. But God doesn't exist, so ethics is just a "human construct."
- (C) Science tells us the truth about the world, and science says nothing about what's right and wrong. And that's because nothing really is right or wrong.
- (D) If there were a universal ethic, then that would make it okay for some people to impose their own views on others. But that's not okay at all. Therefore there is no universal ethic.
- (E) If there were objective moral rules, then it would always be wrong to break them. But every rule admits of exceptions; no moral rule is absolute. That shows that we do make up the moral rules after all.

This is going to sound like cheating, but here goes: every single one of these arguments is problematic. I'm not going to defend that claim right now—that's what the last three chapters of this book are for. So I don't expect you to believe me (yet). Still, there is a lesson here: until these (or other) arguments are laid out with care and successfully defended, we are in no position to assume that the skeptics about morality are right.

I think you'll soon see that we can make a lot of progress in our moral thinking. And even if morality *is* in some way a human invention, there is still lots to learn, and there are many ways to make mistakes when

thinking about what is good and right. It's important to avoid these errors. Doing moral philosophy can help with this.

Look at it this way. Lots of people believe that when it comes to art, beauty is in the eye of the beholder—there are no objective, universal standards of good taste. Suppose that's true. And suppose that morality is just like art in this respect. Still, our tastes can be educated and improved. Many people are much wiser than I am about music and painting, for instance. Even if there are no universal standards of good taste, it would be silly of me to pass up a chance to talk with people who have thought long and hard about artistic matters. Why should I dismiss their opinions and refuse to hear them out? I'm no genius. Maybe I could learn a thing or two.

That's *exactly* the right attitude to take about ethics. Especially when so much is at stake—the very quality of our life and our relations with others—it would be terrible to close our minds to new and challenging ideas. Those who have thought so hard about the central questions of existence may well have something to teach us.

I encourage you to resist the diagnosis that in ethics, anything goes. As you'll see, good moral thinking is disciplined thinking. There are many ways that we can go wrong in our moral reflections, and failure here can have the most disastrous results. Though it is sometimes hard to know when we have got it right in ethics, it is often very easy to know when we (or others) have made a mistake. There are clear cases of people ruining their lives, or doing morally horrific things. We should keep that in mind before siding too quickly with a skepticism that says that every moral view is as good as every other.

## Ethical Starting Points

One of the puzzles about moral thinking is knowing where to begin. Some skeptics about morality deny that there are any proper starting points for ethical reflection. They believe that moral reasoning is simply a way of rationalizing our biases and gut feelings. This outlook encourages us to be lax in moral argument and, worse, supports an attitude that no moral views are any better than others. While this sort of skepticism might be true, we shouldn't regard it as the default view of ethics. We should accept it only as a last resort.

In the meantime, let's consider some fairly plausible ethical assumptions, claims that can get us started in our moral thinking. The point of the

exercise is to soften you up to the idea that we are not just spinning our wheels when thinking morally. There are reasonable constraints that can guide us when thinking about how to live. Here are some of them:

- *Neither the law nor tradition is immune from moral criticism.* The law does not have the final word on what is right and wrong. Neither does tradition. Actions that are legal, or customary, are sometimes morally mistaken.
- *Everyone is morally fallible.* Everyone has some mistaken ethical views, and no human being is wholly wise when it comes to moral matters.
- *Friendship is valuable.* Having friends is a good thing. Friendships add value to your life. You are better off when there are people you care deeply about, and who care deeply about you.
- *We are not obligated to do the impossible.* Morality can demand only so much of us. Moral standards that are impossible to meet are illegitimate. Morality must respect our limitations.
- *Children bear less moral responsibility than adults.* Moral responsibility assumes an ability on our part to understand options, to make decisions in an informed way, and to let our decisions guide our behavior. The fewer of these abilities you have, the less blameworthy you are for any harm you might cause.
- *Justice is a very important moral good.* Any moral theory that treats justice as irrelevant is deeply suspect. It is important that we get what we deserve, and that we are treated fairly.
- *Deliberately hurting other people requires justification.* The default position in ethics is this: do no harm. It is sometimes morally acceptable to harm others, but there must be an excellent reason for doing so or else the harmful behavior is unjustified.
- *Equals ought to be treated equally.* People who are alike in all relevant respects should get similar treatment. When this fails to happen—when racist or sexist policies are enacted, for instance—then something has gone wrong.
- *Self-interest isn't the only ethical consideration.* How well-off we are is important. But it isn't the only thing of moral importance. Morality sometimes calls on us to set aside our own interests for the sake of others.
- *Agony is bad.* Excruciating physical or emotional pain is bad. It may sometimes be appropriate to cause such extreme suffering, but doing so requires a very powerful justification.

- *Might doesn't make right.* People in power can get away with lots of things that the rest of us can't. That doesn't justify what they do. That a person can escape punishment is one thing—whether his actions are morally acceptable is another.
- *Free and informed requests prevent rights violations.* If, with eyes wide open and no one twisting your arm, you ask someone to do something for you, and she does it, then your rights have not been violated—even if you end up hurt as a result.

There are a number of points to make about these claims.

First, this short list isn't meant to be exhaustive. It could be made much longer.

Second, I am not claiming that the items on this list are beyond criticism. I am saying only that each one is very plausible. Hard thinking might weaken our confidence in some cases. The point, though, is that without such scrutiny, it is perfectly reasonable to begin our moral thinking with the items on this list.

Third, many of these claims require interpretation in order to apply them in a satisfying way. When we say, for instance, that equals ought to be treated equally, we leave all of the interesting questions open. (What makes people equals? Can we treat people equally without treating them in precisely the same way? Etc.)

Not only do we have a variety of plausible starting points for our ethical investigations; we also have a number of obviously poor beginnings for moral thinking. A morality that celebrates genocide, torture, treachery, sadism, hostility, and slavery is, depending on how you look at it, either no morality at all or a deeply failed one. Any morality worth the name will place *some* importance on justice, fairness, kindness, and reasonableness. Just how much importance, and just how to balance things in cases of conflict—that is where the real philosophy gets done.

## What Is Morality?

Before investing yourself too heavily in a subject matter, it would be nice to first have some idea of what you are getting yourself into. One way—sometimes the best—to gain such an understanding is by considering a definition. When you open your trigonometry text or chemistry handbook, you'll likely be given, very early on, a definition of the area you are about to intensively study. So, as a responsible author, I would seem to have a duty now to present you with a definition of *morality*.

I'd certainly like to. But I can't. There is no widely agreed-on definition of morality. We know that it is centrally concerned with protecting people's well-being, with fairness, justice, respect for others, virtue, responsibility, rights, liberties, social cooperation, praise, and blame. But the precise nature of such concern is highly disputed, as we'll soon see.

The absence of a definition does not leave us entirely in the dark. (After all, no one has yet been able to offer informative definitions of *literature*, or *life*, or *art*, and yet we know a great deal about those things.) We can get a sense of our subject matter by considering the questions that are distinctive of ethics—namely, those that structure this book, the ones focused on the good life, our duties to others, the nature of virtue, etc. We can supplement this by considering the starting points listed above, and many others that we could easily identify.

We can also better understand morality by contrasting its principles with those that govern the law, etiquette, self-interest, and tradition. Each of these represents a set of standards for how we ought to behave, ideals to aim for, rules that we should not break. But the fact that a law tells us to do something does not settle the question of whether morality gives its stamp of approval. Some immoral acts (like cheating on a spouse) are not illegal. And some illegal acts (like voicing criticism of a dictator) are not immoral. Certainly, many laws require what morality requires, and forbid what morality forbids. But the fit is hardly perfect, and that shows that morality is something different from the law. That a legislature passed a bill is not enough to show that the bill is morally acceptable.

We see the same imperfect fit when it comes to standards of etiquette. Forks are supposed to be set to the left of a plate, but it isn't immoral to set them on the right. Good manners are not the same thing as morally good conduct. Morality sometimes requires us *not* to be polite or gracious, as when someone threatens your children or happily tells you a racist joke. So the standards of etiquette can depart from those of morality.

The same is true when it comes to the standards of self-interest. I've just been watching the entire run of *The Shield*, a police drama set in a crime-ridden district of Los Angeles. Early in the series, the main character, Vic Mackey, murders a fellow police officer who was set to reveal Mackey's corruption. Mackey successfully frames a criminal for the murder: a classic case of protecting one's own interests by acting immorally. Though the relation between self-interest and morality is contested, it is a plausible starting point to assume that morality can sometimes require us to sacrifice our well-being, and that we can sometimes improve our lot



in life by acting unethically. So the standards of morality are not the very same as those of self-interest. (We will see a challenge to this view when considering *ethical egoism* in chapter 8.)

Finally, morality is also distinct from tradition. That a practice has been around a long time does not automatically make it moral. Morality sometimes requires a break with the past, as it did when people called for the abolition of slavery or for allowing women to vote.

True, people do sometimes speak of *conventional morality*, which is the set of traditional principles that are widely shared within a culture or society. These principles, like those of the law and etiquette, are the result of human decisions, agreements and practices. Conventional morality can differ from society to society. At least some of its principles can be traced to common misunderstandings, irrationality, bias, or superstition.

When I write about morality in this book, I am *not* referring to conventional morality. I am assuming that some social standards—even those that are long-standing and very popular—can be morally mistaken. (We'll examine this assumption at length in chapter 19.) So when I talk about morality from this point on, I will be referring to moral standards that are not rooted in widespread endorsement, but rather are independent of conventional morality and can be used to critically evaluate its merits.

It's possible, of course, that conventional morality is all there is. But this would be a very surprising discovery. Most of us assume, as I will do, that the popularity of a moral view is not a guarantee of its truth. We could be wrong on this point, but until we have a chance to consider the matter in detail, I think it best to assume that conventional morality can sometimes be mistaken. If so, then there may be some independent, "critical" morality that (i) does not have its origin in social agreements, (ii) is untainted by mistaken beliefs, irrationality, or popular prejudices, and (iii) can serve as the true standard for determining when conventional morality has got it right and when it has fallen into error. That is the morality whose nature we are going to explore in this book.

## Moral Reasoning

Moral reasoning, like all reasoning, involves at least two things: a set of reasons, and a conclusion that these reasons are meant to support. When you put these two things together, you have what philosophers call an **argument**. This isn't a matter of bickering or angrily exchanging words.