1 What Is Ethics?

1 The Problems of Ethics: An Example

Ethics, like other branches of philosophy, springs from seemingly simple questions. What makes honest actions right and dishonest ones wrong? Why is death a bad thing for the person who dies? Is there anything more to happiness than pleasure and freedom from pain? These are questions that naturally occur in the course of our lives, just as they naturally occurred in the lives of people who lived before us and in societies with different cultures and technologies from ours. They seem simple, yet they are ultimately perplexing. Every sensible answer one tries proves unsatisfactory upon reflection. This reflection is the beginning of philosophy. It turns seemingly simple questions into philosophical problems. And with further reflection, we plumb the depths of these problems.

Of course, not every question that naturally occurs in human life and proves hard to answer is a source of philosophical perplexity. Some questions prove hard to answer just because it is hard to get all the facts. Whether there is life on Mars, for instance, and whether the planet has ever supported life are questions people have asked for centuries and will continue to ask until we have enough facts about the Martian environment to reach definite answers. These are questions for the natural sciences, whose business it is to gather such facts and whose problems typically arise from difficulties in finding them and sometimes even in knowing which ones to look for. The questions with which ethics and other branches of philosophy begin are different. They resist easy answers, not because of difficulties in getting the relevant facts, but because of difficulties in making sense of them and how they bear on these questions. We reflect on the matters in question and discover that our ordinary ideas contain confusions and obscurities and have surprising implications. We discover, as a result, that our ordinary beliefs

about these matters are shaky and have complicating consequences we did not realize and are reluctant to endorse. Philosophical study, which begins with seemingly simple questions, uncovers these difficulties and then, through close, critical examination of our ideas and beliefs, seeks to overcome them.

Here is an example. You are strolling through a neighborhood park on a free afternoon when something in the bushes nearby catches your eye. It's a woman's purse, presumably lost. Or perhaps it was stolen and then discarded. You look inside and find a driver's license. You also see a huge wad of cash. The purse wasn't stolen. What should you do? Being an honest person, you look on the license for an address or look to see whether there is an identification card with a phone number you could call. In other words, you begin taking the steps necessary to returning the purse, with all of its contents, to its owner. A dishonest person would take the cash and toss the purse back into the bushes. "Finders keepers, losers weepers," he might think as he stuffed the cash into his pockets. And even an honest person, especially one who was down on his luck or struggling to make ends meet, might think about taking the cash. "Why should I be honest and return the money?" he might wonder. "After all, there is no chance of my being caught if I keep it and am careful about how I spend it, and the satisfaction of doing the honest thing hardly compares to the relief from my troubles that this money will bring. It is true that honesty requires returning the purse and its contents to the owner, but it is also true that honesty, in these circumstances, does not appear to be nearly as profitable as dishonesty." Still, any honest person suppresses such thoughts, as he looks for a way to return the purse with its contents intact. The thoughts, however, are troubling. Is there nothing to be said for doing the honest thing, nothing, that is, that would show it to be, in these circumstances, the better course of action?

In asking this question we are asking whether you have a stronger reason to return the cash to the purse's owner than you have to keep it. After all, a huge wad of cash – let's say, four thousand dollars – is more than just handy pocket money. Just think of the many useful and valuable things you could buy with it. Or if you've already bought too many things on credit, think of how much of your debt it could help pay off. Plainly, then, you have a strong reason to keep the money. At the same time, keeping the money is dishonest, and this fact may give you a strong and even overriding reason to return it. But we cannot simply assume that it does. For the question we are asking is

whether honesty is the better course of action in these circumstances, and since asking it entails asking whether an action's being the honest thing to do gives you a strong or indeed any good reason to do it, to assume that it does would just be to beg the question. That is, you would be taking as a given something for which a sound argument is needed before you can assume its truth. So our question in the end is really a question about what you have good reason to do in circumstances where dishonest action is safe from detection and apparently more profitable than honest action. Could it be that doing the honest thing in such circumstances is to act without good reason? Could it be that only ignorant and weak-minded people act honestly in them? It may seem strange to suggest that it could. But unless one can show that you have good reason to be honest even in circumstances in which you could keep your dishonesty secret and profit from it, this strange suggestion is the unavoidable conclusion of these reflections.

The question about what you should do in such circumstances thus leads us first to wonder whether you have stronger reason to do the honest thing than to do what is dishonest and then to wonder whether you even have a good reason to do the honest thing. Both questions are troubling, but the second is especially so. This is because we commonly think an excellent character is something worth having and preserving even at significant costs to one's comfort or wealth, and we take honesty to be one of its essentials. Consequently, while the first question might lead us to reconsider the wisdom of placing such high value on possessing an excellent character, the second forces us to question whether honesty is one of the essentials of an excellent character. And to think one could have an excellent character even though one was not honest is a very unsettling result. It not only threatens to undermine the confidence we have in the moral rule that calls for doing the honest thing even when dishonesty could not be detected, but it also puts into doubt basic feelings and attitudes we have towards others and ourselves that help to create the fabric of our relations with friends, neighbors, colleagues, and many others with whom we interact in our society. In particular, it puts into doubt the admiration and esteem we feel for those of unquestionable honesty and the pride we take in our own honesty and trustworthiness.

After all, when people prove to be honest in their dealings with us, we praise and think well of them for not having taken advantage of us when they could. And similarly, when our own honesty is tested and we meet

the test, we feel proud of ourselves for not having yielded to the temptations to cheat or to lie that we faced. In short, we take honesty to be an admirable trait in others and a source of pride. But now the trouble our question causes becomes evident, for how could doing something that you had no good reason to do be a sign of an admirable trait or a trait in which you could justifiably take pride? To the contrary, it would seem, such action is a sign of ignorance or a mind too weak to choose by its own lights, and there is nothing admirable about ignorance or a slavish conformity to other people's opinions, nothing that would justify pride. Hence, the basic feelings and attitudes towards others and ourselves that honesty normally inspires must be misguided or bogus if we can find no good reason to act honestly except in those circumstances where dishonesty is liable to be found out and punished. Yet how odd it would be if the high regard we had for friends and colleagues in view of their honesty and the self-regard that our own honesty boosted were entirely unwarranted, if they were found to be based on the mistaken belief that honesty was essential to having an excellent character. Could it be that the people who warrant our admiration are not those of impeccable honesty but rather those who do the honest thing only when it is advantageous or necessary to avoiding the unpleasant consequences of being caught acting dishonestly?

2 Socrates and Thrasymachus

We have come, by reflecting on a common test of a person's honesty, to one of the seminal problems in moral philosophy. It is the problem at the heart of Plato's *Republic*. Plato (427–347 BCE) sets his study of the problem in motion with an account of an exchange between Socrates (469–399 BCE) and the sophist Thrasymachus.[1] Initially, the exchange concerns the nature of justice and centers on Thrasymachus' cynical thesis that *justice* is the name of actions that the powerful require the rest of us to perform for their benefit. Under the pressure of Socrates' cross-examination, however, Thrasymachus falls into contradiction and then, rather than revise his ideas, shifts the conversation from the question of what justice is to the question of whether the best life, assuming success in that life, is one of justice and honesty or the opposite. Thrasymachus boldly declares for the latter. People

[1] Plato, *Republic*, bk. I, 336b–354b.

who act with complete injustice, he argues, provided they can make themselves invulnerable to punishment, live decidedly better lives than people who are completely just and honest. The reason, he says, is that just and honest people always come out on the short end in their relations with unjust people. Just people, for instance, take only their fair share, while unjust people take as much as they can get away with. Likewise, just people fulfill their responsibilities even when doing so requires them to sacrifice money or time, whereas unjust people find ways to evade their responsibilities whenever evading them is to their advantage. In general, then, Thrasymachus maintains, to act justly is to act for another's good and not one's own, and the unjust person is not so foolish as to ignore his own good for the sake of another's. The unjust person therefore gains riches and seizes opportunities that the just person forgoes, and the life of greater riches and more opportunities is surely the better life.

Thrasymachus' ideal is the tyrant whose power over others is supreme and who, by confiscating his subjects' property and extorting their labor, uses that power to make himself inordinately prosperous at their expense. Kings and emperors who set themselves up as deities and compel their subjects to enrich and glorify them are a common example. Another, more familiar in the modern world, is the military dictator who rules by terror and fraud, who loots his country's wealth, and who lives opulently while stashing additional spoils in foreign bank accounts and other offshore havens. This type of individual, the one who practices injustice on a very large scale and succeeds, is for Thrasymachus the most happy of men. Moreover, unlike small-time criminals, who are scorned as thugs, crooks, and cheats, the tyrant who overreaches on a grand scale is hailed as masterful and lordly and treated with much deference and respect. Here, Thrasymachus thinks, is proof positive of the tyrant's great happiness. These are signs, he concludes, that the completely unjust man who succeeds at dominating and deceiving others is admirably strong, wise, and free. The completely just individual, by contrast, is at best a good-hearted simpleton.

Thrasymachus, unfortunately, proves to be as bad at defending these views as he was at defending his initial thesis about the nature of justice. Plato, it seems, who depicts Thrasymachus throughout the exchange as arrogant and belligerent, did not want him to be mistaken for a skillful thinker too. Skillful thinking is what Socrates teaches, and his lessons would be lost if so rude an intellectual adversary were allowed to display it as well.

Consequently, when Socrates renews his cross-examination and presses Thrasymachus on the merits of his claims about the advantages of living an unjust life, Thrasymachus crumbles and withdraws. Yet his defeat does not end the discussion. It leads, instead, to a restatement of his claims by participants in the conversation much friendlier to Socrates and less sure of themselves. Glaucon and Adeimantus take up Thrasymachus' challenge to the value of justice and put it in a way that moves the discussion forward. Whatever Plato's purpose in having such an ill-tempered participant introduce this challenge, it was not in order quickly to dismiss it. In the *Republic* the curtain falls on Thrasymachus at the end of book I, but the discussion of his claims continues for another nine books.

Glaucon and Adeimantus, to sharpen Thrasymachus' claims, subtly change their focus. Where Thrasymachus emphasized the benefits of practicing injustice and acclaimed the excellence of the man who successfully lives a completely unjust life, Glaucon and Adeimantus emphasize the seeming absence of benefits intrinsic to practicing justice and make the case for thinking that whatever good one can gain from living a just life one can also gain by fooling people into believing that one is just when one isn't. Rather than promote the ideal of being a tyrant with supreme power over others, Glaucon points to the advantages of being a sneak with a magical ring that gives whoever wears it the power to become invisible at will.[2] Such a sneak could enrich himself by theft and advance his ambitions by murder while remaining above suspicion, and consequently he could enjoy both the advantages of being esteemed by others as just and honest and the fruits of real crime. Like Thrasymachus' tyrant, he too can practice injustice with impunity, and for this reason he seems to live a better life than the truly just individual. But in addition, he seems also, by virtue of being able to appear to others as just, to reap the very benefits of being so. Hence, even more than Thrasymachus' tyrant, this sneak puts the value of justice into doubt. If he can truly gain all its benefits by virtue of appearing to be just when he isn't, then he shows that justice has no intrinsic merit and is therefore not worth practicing for its own sake. By introducing the fable of Gyges' ring, Plato thus turns Thrasymachus' challenge into one of the main problems of ethics: On what basis, if any, can we understand justice as admirable in itself, as

[2] Ibid., bk. II, 359b–360d.

something one has good reason to practice even in circumstances in which one would profit from injustice without the least fear of being found out?

3 The Subject of Ethics

The main problems of ethics arise, as our example of your finding a lost purse containing a huge wad of cash illustrates, from reflection on situations in life that involve matters of morality. Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. It is a study of what are good and bad ends to pursue in life and what it is right and wrong to do in the conduct of life. It is therefore, above all, a practical discipline. Its primary aim is to determine how one ought to live and what actions one ought to do in the conduct of one's life. It thus differs from studies in anthropology, sociology, and empirical psychology that also examine human pursuits and social norms. These studies belong to positive science. Their primary aim is not to prescribe action but rather to describe, analyze, and explain certain phenomena of human life, including the goal-directed activities of individuals and groups and the regulation of social life by norms that constitute the conventional morality of a society. They do not, in other words, seek to establish conclusions about what a person ought to do but are only concerned with establishing what people in fact do and the common causes and conditions of their actions. Nor is this difference between ethics and certain social sciences peculiar to these disciplines. It can be seen as well in the contrast between medicine and physiology, or between agriculture and botany. The former in each pair is a practical discipline. Both are studies of how best to achieve or produce a certain good, health in the one case, crops in the other, and each then yields prescriptions of what one ought to do to achieve or produce that good. By contrast, the latter in each pair is a positive science whose studies yield descriptions and explanations of the processes of animal and plant life but do not yield prescriptions for mending or improving those processes.

The definition of ethics as 'the philosophical study of morality' gives the chief meaning of the word. It has other meanings, to be sure, some of which are perhaps more usual in general conversation. In particular, the word is commonly used as a synonym for morality, and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral code or system of a particular tradition, group, or individual. Christian ethics, professional ethics, and Schweitzer's ethics are examples. In philosophy, too, it is used in this narrower way to mean a

particular system or theory that is the product of the philosophical study. Thus philosophers regularly refer to the major theories of the discipline as Hume's ethics, Kant's ethics, utilitarian ethics, and so forth. In this book, unless the word is so modified, it will be used solely with its chief meaning.

To grasp this meaning, however, we must be certain of what is meant by 'morality'. This word, too, is used to mean different things, and consequently, to avoid confusion and misunderstanding, we need to pin down what it means when ethics is defined as the philosophical study of morality. We could, of course, fix the right meaning by defining morality as the subject of ethics, but obviously, since our interest in fixing the right meaning is to determine what the subject of ethics is, this definition would get us nowhere. At the same time, it does suggest where to look for clues. It suggests that we look to the contrast we just drew between ethics and certain studies in anthropology and sociology. For that contrast, besides serving to distinguish ethics as a practical discipline, also makes salient two distinct notions of morality. One is that of morality as an existing institution of a particular society, what is commonly called the society's conventional morality. The other is that of morality as a universal ideal grounded in reason. The first covers phenomena studied in anthropology and sociology. The second defines the subject of ethics.

Admittedly, that there are two notions of morality is not immediately evident. It should become so, however, from seeing that no conventional morality could be the subject of ethics. A conventional morality is a set of norms of a particular society that are generally accepted and followed by the society's members. These norms reflect the members' shared beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil, and they define corresponding customs and practices that prevail in the society. As is all too common, sometimes these beliefs rest on superstitions and prejudices, and sometimes the corresponding customs and practices promote cruelty and inflict indignity. It can happen then that a person comes to recognize such facts about some of the norms belonging to his society's conventional morality and, though observance of these norms has become second nature in him, to conclude nonetheless that he ought to reject them. Implicit in this conclusion is a realization that one has to look beyond the conventional morality of one's society to determine what ends to pursue in life and what it is right to do in the conduct of life. And it therefore follows that a conventional morality cannot be the subject of a study whose principal aims are to determine what

are good and bad ends to pursue in life and what it is right and wrong to do in the conduct of life. It cannot be the subject of ethics.

A concrete example may help to flesh out this implication. Not that long ago the conventional morality in many if not most sections of the United States condemned interracial romance and marriage, and even today in small pockets of this country norms forbidding romance and marriage between people of different racial backgrounds are still fully accepted and vigorously enforced. Imagine then someone raised in a community whose conventional morality included such norms coming to question their authority as it became increasingly clear to him that they were based on ignorance and prejudice and that the customs they defined involved gratuitous injuries. His newfound clarity about the irrational and cruel character of these norms might be the result of a friendship he formed with someone of another race, much as Huckleberry Finn's epiphany about the untrustworthiness of his conscience resulted from the friendship he formed with the runaway slave Jim. Huck, you may remember, suffered a bad conscience about helping Jim escape from bondage but then quit paying it any heed when he discovered that he could not bring himself to turn Jim in and would feel just as low if he did.[3] That we think Huck's decision to disregard the reproaches of his conscience – the echoes, as it were, of the conventional morality of the slaveholding society in which he was raised – perfectly sound, that we think equally sound a decision to go against norms in one's society that prohibit interracial romance and marriage, shows that we recognize the difference between what a particular society generally sanctions as right action and generally condemns as wrong and what one ought to do and ought not to do. Ethics, being concerned with the latter, does not therefore take the former as its subject.

The possibility of a sound decision to go against the norms of the conventional morality of one's society implies standards of right or wise action that are distinct from those norms. The reason why is plain. A sound decision requires a basis, and the basis, in this case, cannot consist of such norms. It cannot, in other words, consist of norms whose authority in one's thinking derives from their being generally accepted and enforced in one's society. A decision to go against such norms, a decision like Huck Finn's, represents a conclusion that a norm's being generally accepted and enforced in one's

[3] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ch. 16.

society is not a sufficient reason to follow it, and consequently it could be sound only if its basis did not consist of standards whose authority was that of custom. Its basis must consist instead of standards that derive their authority from a source that is independent of custom. These standards may of course coincide to some extent with the norms of a conventional morality. That is, they may require or endorse many of the same acts as those norms do. But coincidence is not identity. However coincident they may be with the norms of a conventional morality, they nonetheless derive their authority in practical thought from a different source and therefore constitute a distinct set of moral standards.

What could this different source be? Since the standards in question can form the basis of a sound decision to go against the norms of the conventional morality of one's society, they must be standards that rational and reflective thinking about one's circumstances support. Accordingly, the source of their authority can fairly be said to be rational thought or reason. Here then is the second notion of morality. It is the notion of morality as comprising standards of right and wise conduct whose authority in practical thought is determined by reason rather than custom. Unlike the first notion, that of morality as an existing institution of a particular society, it represents a universal ideal. The standards it comprises are found, not by observing and analyzing the complex social life of a particular society, but rather by reasoning and argument from elementary facts about human existence taken abstractly. Morality, conceived in this way, is the subject of ethics. Its philosophical study consists in finding the standards it comprises, expounding them systematically, and establishing the rational grounds of their authority in practical thinking. And unless otherwise indicated, subsequent references to morality in this book should be taken, not as references to some conventional morality, but rather as references to the set of standards that this ideal comprises.

Having arrived at this understanding of ethics, we can now see immediately why the problem at the heart of Plato's *Republic* is central to the study. For it would be disconcerting, to say the least, if it turned out that the authority that basic standards of justice and honesty had in our practical thinking derived from custom only and was not backed by reason. It would be disconcerting, that is, if no ethical theory could show that these standards were integral to morality. Yet this possibility is clearly implied by our reflections on the example of your finding a lost purse containing a huge