ETHICS AND VALUES

Ethics can be defined as "the systematic study of moral right and wrong, and good and bad, together with the claims that employ these concepts." Here *good* and *bad* have to do with values ("Joan is a *good* person") while *right* and *wrong* relate to actions ("Murder is wrong"). So, why should anyone care about ethics? This is a tough question, but some common answers include the following. Many important social and political questions can't be answered without thinking hard about ethics—e.g., about genetic engineering, drone strikes, stockpiling and using weapons of mass destruction, and so on

- A functioning morality is essential to the very *possibility* of having a functioning society. In a world where morality has badly eroded, life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes). Less dramatically, societies in which people don't trust each other to behave moral often have severe problems.
- Morality and ethics impact our personal lives—e.g., when we get angry, are hurt by someone, make commitments, and so on. Ethics also helps us to think about how live right now (our current "morals") and the way we *aspire* to live. Ethics helps us think more sensibly about the difference between right and wrong, gives us some tools with which to approach moral dilemmas, and helps us address moral conflicts with other people.
- For the vast majority of people (excluding a small number of truly vicious people), morality and ethics actually play a big role in how we think our selves. Most of us want to be *good* people, both in our private lives (with our friends and family) and our public lives (as citizens, employees, students, and so on).

Ethics also addresses the question: Why should I try to live a moral life, and how do I go about this? Unsurprisingly, ethicists haven't always agreed on the details of this, but there are a number of common themes. **Socrates** argued that ALL people *want* to be ethical, and that they would be happy if they could do it, but they are simply ignorant. So, becoming a better a person is just a matter of study ethics! **Aristotle** (a few generations later than Socrates) emphasized that ethics—as the *study* of morality—can only ever be part of the solution. Aristotle thought that, in order to truly become better people, we need to continually practice being ethical. (More specifically, he thought we needed to actively work on the shortcomings we identified in ourselves during ethical reflection). In China, **Confucius** offered a somewhat similar account of practice-based ethics (though he emphasized slightly different virtues). Both Aristotle and Confucius, unlike Socrates, also seem to grant that it's possible for people to do the wrong thing even if they "know better."

WHY BE MORAL? GYGES' MAGICAL RING

In Book 2 of Plato's *Republic,* a character named Glaucon relates the story of the *Ring of Gyges.* It goes something like this: Gyges was a shepherd, and a pretty typical guy as far as acting morally goes. One day, however, he found a ring that allowed him to become invisible (ala *Lord of the Rings).* Once he did so, he went on a crime spree: he seduced the queen, murdered the king, and became very, very rich and powerful. Since people didn't know about his crimes, they loved and praised him, and (because of his large donations to the temples) even the gods liked him (so, he ended up in a pretty good afterlife.). In an effort to play the "Devil's Advocate," Glaucon claims the following (I've embellished the examples somewhat):

1. Every rational person would behave more-or-less as Gyges did, were they to be put in this situation. That is, once they knew they could *never* be caught, they would act in immoral ways in order to benefit themselves.
2. Every rational person *ought* to act as Gyges did. So, for example, it would be crazy to choose a life where one was really *ethical* but who was thought to be *unethical* (an innocent woman burned at the stake by her own children as a "witch", who then spends the rest of eternity) than a person who was really *unethical* but was thought to be *ethical* (such as Gyges).

Part of the point of this story is to introduce a distinction between "actions that are good for me, personally" (make me rich, well-liked, and will maybe even get me into heaven) and those that are **morally right or wrong.** In the *Republic,* Plato goes on to argue that (in the long run), there really isn't a difference between morality and self-interest, and the everyone would benefit by behaving morally. However, we don't need to worry (too much) about whether Plato's argument works. Instead, we have a simpler question: **"What exactly is morality, anyway?"**

Two senses of *moral:* subjective and objective. When we say something is *moral,* we are something referring to what a person, group, or society believes people should or should not do (e.g., "Drinking goes against my morals"). This is the *subjective* sense of morality. However, we can also be referring to something that is *objectively* right and wrong, independent of people's feelings and beliefs (e.g., "Murdering an innocent human being simply is wrong, no matter what Magneto thinks"). When we are using the objective sense of moral, describing something as *moral* typically says that it *is* good or *is* right (e.g., "Logan is a very moral person"; "Lying is immoral"). In normative ethics, when we are trying to figure out what we *ought* to do, we will generally be using the objective sense of moral, unless otherwise noted.

When we use morality in the objective sense, morality is NOT:

- Identical with what is legal/illegal. For example, lying to a friend might be immoral, even though it is perfectly legal. There are also plenty of examples of laws that are immoral.

- The same as what is **prudential,** or in my best interest. For example, lying to a friend might be immoral even if (1) I could get away with it, and (2) I would (personally) benefit from telling the lies.
- The same as what a particular religion says. Religions disagree about moral issues, and many questions of morality don't correspond neatly to the sorts of things religions discuss. When we claim that something is objectively morally right/wrong, this is a claim that applies to ALL people, as opposed to people from a certain religion.

Subdividing the moral realm: Value theory and deontic theory. The moral realm divides into two parts: value theory and deontic theory. **Value theory** concerns the difference between **good and bad**. This has to do with *values*—properties of things or people. By contrast **deontic theory** has to do with which actions are right or wrong, and with what we should or shouldn't do.

THE NATURE OF VALUES

Our **values** are whatever we consider important, and try to achieve and maintain. Generally speaking, most people have a similar set of moral values (most people agree that we should respect people's rights, avoid causing them pain, etc.) but different people place different weight on these shard values (and so, people don't always agree on what the moral thing to do is). In ethics, we say that **value** claims are **normative claims,** in the sense that they relate to some norm or standard about how the world "should" be, and that they generate **prescriptive claims** about what we ought to do (or not do). These can both be contrasted with **descriptive claims,** which merely describe how the world *is,* without making a judgment about it. Here's the basic idea:

Descriptive claim (non-moral)	Normative claim (moral)	Prescriptive claim (moral)
Most people lie quite a bit, but Gina always tells the truth.	In most circumstances, lying is wrong.	You should be more like Gina, and tell the truth.
Henry enjoys playing baseball with frogs.	It is wrong to cause sentient creatures to suffer needlessly.	Henry should stop playing baseball with frogs.
55% of Americans believe that abortion should be legal.	Abortion is morally wrong (or right).	People ought not have abortions (or, it's permissible to have abortions).

As the abortion example suggests, people can *disagree* about value claims, which can lead to disagreements about prescriptive claims.

Foundational vs. Instrumental Values. Not all values are created equal. For example, there is difference between value claims like "Money is good" or "Hitting people is wrong" from claims like "Happiness is good" or "Suffering is bad." The former claims are examples of **instrumental values**—money is good *because* it allows you to buy other things you value; hitting people is wrong *because* it hurts them (and violates their rights, etc.). By contrast, claims about happiness/suffering are plausibly examples of **fundamental values.** These things aren't valuable because of anything else; they are valuable in and of themselves. There are also a variety of things that might be *both* instrumentally and fundamentally valuable. For example, many people value learning new things in and of itself ("fundamentally") but also because this new knowledge helps them to pursue other goals that they value ("instrumentally"). The same might be said of exercise, sports, etc.

Ethical Theory and Explaining Value Claims. In this class, we'll be talking about a number of **ethical theories** that try to *explain* instrumental moral claims in terms of one or more fundamental values. So, for example, everyone (or almost everyone) would agree that "murder is wrong." But why is it wrong? Ethical theories give various answers:

1. Utilitarians hold that the only fundamental value is happiness (everyone's happiness; not just yours!). So, they explain the wrongness of murder in terms of how it affects the suffering and lost happiness of the victim (e.g., all the fun things this person will miss out on), their friends and family, and/or society as a whole (after all, murder makes people frightened).
2. Kantians hold that a fundamental value involves respecting autonomy, or the right of others to lead their own lives in the way that they think best. Murder is the ultimate way of taking away someone's autonomy.
3. Virtue ethicists locate fundamental value in being a certain sort of person—e.g., being the sort of person who empathizes with others (and doesn't murder them!).
4. Natural law theorists often explain moral values in terms of (non-moral) values concerning the *nature* of things (and especially, the nature of human beings).

While some people adhere strictly to a single ethical theory, others (called **pluralists)** think that different theories work better for different sorts of questions and issues.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you hope to get out of your study of ethics (besides getting college credit!)? Trace this all the way back to one or more foundational values.
2. Describe a significant moral problem you've encountered. Explain it so others can understand it. What did you do? Why? Would you respond differently to that problem today? Why?
3. Answer these questions in order:
    a. What three to five values are most important to you?

   b. Are any of these moral values? What other types of values are on your list?
   c. Identify whether each of your values is instrumental, foundational, or both.
   d. Finally, what prescriptive claims does each value support?

4. If you were constructing an ethical theory, what foundational value(s) would you base the theory on? Why?