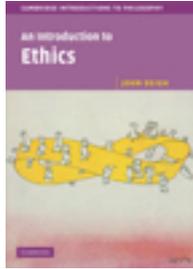


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An Introduction to Ethics

John Deigh

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Chapter

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# 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 toward 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 BC) sets his study of the problem in motion with an account of an exchange between Socrates (469–399 BC) and the sophist Thrasymachus.<sup>1</sup> 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 who

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk. I, 336b–354b.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. II, 359b–360d.

admirable in itself, as 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 community. 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ch. 16.

conclusion that a norm's being generally accepted and enforced in one's 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 wad of cash as well as by Glaucon's restatement of Thrasymachus' position. Both represent arguments for the proposition that basic standards of justice and honesty are standards of conventional morality only. The challenge, then, that they create for ethical theory is to find rational grounds for the authority that basic standards of justice and honesty carry in practical thought. It is to justify on rational grounds taking these standards as ultimate guides to what one ought to do in the conduct of one's life. Such a justification would show that one had good reason to do the honest thing for its own sake. It would thus answer the doubts that the example of your finding a lost purse containing a huge wad of cash and Glaucon's restatement of Thrasymachus' position raise about the reasonableness of doing the honest thing in circumstances in which one could profit materially from dishonesty without the least fear of being found out.

#### **4. An alternative conception of morality**

Nothing is ever quite this pat in philosophy. Many people, for instance, think of morality as a list of universal "Do"s and "Don't"s corresponding to which are universal truths about what it is right and wrong to do. The basic standards of justice and honesty appear on this list in the form of injunctions like "Tell the truth!" "Keep your promises!" "Don't cheat!" "Don't steal!" and so forth, and the truths that those who think of morality in this way see as corresponding to these injunctions are propositions in which truth-telling and promise-keeping are said to be right actions, cheating and stealing wrong actions. Indeed, on this conception of morality, the very way in which our ideas of right and wrong are connected to matters of justice and honesty guarantees the truth of these propositions. Thus, because justice and honesty are a matter of what we owe others and what we are obligated to do for them, there can be no question about whether it is right to do what justice and honesty require. If you borrow a thousand dollars from me, for example, then you owe me a thousand dollars and are obligated to repay the loan. To renege would be dishonest. It would be a violation of the duty you have assumed by accepting the loan, and to violate a duty is to do something wrong, unless of course it is necessary in order to avoid violating a more important or stringent duty. By the same token, because renegeing would be a violation of the duty you have assumed by

accepting the loan, you ought not to renege, unless of course you have to in order to avoid violating a more important or stringent duty. Clearly, then, if this conception of morality defined the subject of ethics, the problem at the heart of Plato's *Republic* would have to be re-evaluated.

The call for such re-evaluation is, in fact, an important theme among philosophers for whom this conception defines the subject of ethics. To these philosophers, the problem is based on a mistake.<sup>4</sup> The mistake, they maintain, consists in confusing the question of whether the basic standards of justice and honesty are authoritative with the question of whether they are ultimate guides to achieving one's ends or satisfying one's interests. A standard of conduct, they point out, can have authority in one's practical thinking even though it does not guide one toward achieving one's ends or satisfying one's interests. It is enough that the standard defines a duty. Thus, when you recognize that, having borrowed a thousand dollars from me, you have a duty to repay the loan, you see that you are obligated to repay it, that the duty binds you to repay me whether or not you want to and whether or not you would benefit from doing so. And to understand that the duty so binds you is to recognize the authority of the standard that defines it. Confusion sets in, however, when one thinks of circumstances in which you might be tempted to renege and so might ask yourself "Should I repay this loan?" for it is easy to misconstrue this question as a challenge to the authority of the standard that requires repayment. But the question can only represent such a challenge if it expresses uncertainty about whether you have a duty to repay the loan, and you cannot be uncertain about this. It cannot, in other words, represent such a challenge if it is merely a question you put to yourself on realizing that you might be better off defaulting. Even if you would be better off defaulting, even if you decided that defaulting was more in your interest than repaying, you would still have the duty to repay. The standard would still be an authoritative rule by which the rightness and wrongness of your conduct was measured.

Philosophers who make this criticism of the *Republic's* core problem take morality to be a system of standards whose authority in practical thought is independent of the desires and interests of those whose conduct the system regulates. The key element in this conception of morality is the idea that the standards define duties, for to have a duty to do something is to be bound to

<sup>4</sup> H. A. Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind* 21 (1912): 21–37.

do it regardless of one's attitudes about doing it or the effect on one's interests of doing it. The familiar predicament of being bound by a duty to do something that is both unpleasant and disadvantageous – a duty, say, to keep a promise to visit your cantankerous Uncle Bob when you really can't spare the time – makes this point clear. Recognizing your duty to visit Uncle Bob, you think that it would be wrong to cancel the visit, that you ought to keep your promise, even though you have no desire to see him and know that you would find the visit a nuisance as well as a loss of valuable time. The thought here that you ought to keep the promise expresses the sense of being bound by it. That your desires would be better satisfied, your interests better served, by canceling the visit therefore gives you no reason to abandon the thought as false or mistaken. If you nevertheless wonder whether you ought to keep the promise, you must, it seems, have a different sense of 'ought' in mind in asking this question. Else the question would be idle. Accordingly, philosophers who favor this conception of morality draw a sharp distinction between two uses of 'ought', one that captures the sense of being duty-bound to do something and one that captures the sense of being well-advised to do it in view of what would best serve your ends and interests. The distinction both reflects and reinforces the conception's central theme: that morality's authority in practical thought is not answerable to the desires and interests of those whose conduct it regulates.

The distinction, then, solidifies the criticism of the *Republic's* core problem that the conception supports. The gist of the criticism is that the problem rests on a mistake about the import of asking whether one ought to be just, as Glaucon did when he restated Thrasymachus' position, or whether one ought to do the honest thing, as we imagined you might do upon finding a lost purse containing a huge wad of cash. One can easily construe such questions as challenging the authority of basic standards of justice and honesty, but only, so the criticism goes, because of confusion over the sense in which 'ought' is used in asking them. Thus, for them to challenge that authority, 'ought' must be used in the sense in which to say that one ought to do  $x$  is to say that one is duty-bound to do  $x$ . But this is not the sense in which you or Glaucon would use 'ought' to ask them. The sense in which you or he would use 'ought' to ask them is the sense in which to say that one ought to do  $x$  is to say that one would be well-advised in view of one's ends and interests to do  $x$ . This is the sense 'ought' has when such questions are asked as a result of reflection on the advantages of acting

unjustly or dishonestly. But when ‘ought’ is used in this sense to ask such questions, they fail to challenge the authority of basic standards of justice and honesty. However advantageous acting unjustly or dishonestly might be in some circumstances, one may still be duty-bound to act justly and honestly in them. In short, the criticism comes down to the charge of misdirection. Plato put ethics on the wrong track, according to this criticism, when he sought to justify the authority basic standards of justice and honesty have in a person’s practical thinking on the basis of what best serves his ends and interests.

## 5. Two types of ethical theory

The opposition between Plato and the philosophers who make this criticism – let us call them Plato’s critics – corresponds to a major division among ethical theories. This division, like the opposition between Plato and his critics, reflects a disagreement over the proper conception of morality. Accordingly, theories that side with Plato support the conception that his critics regard as the source of his error. On this conception, morality comprises standards of right and wrong conduct that have authority in practical thought in virtue of the ends or interests served by the conduct that these standards guide. These theories are teleological. The opposing theories, then, support the conception on which Plato’s critics base their criticism. On this conception, morality comprises standards of right and wrong that have authority in practical thought independently of the ends or interests of those whose conduct they guide. These theories are deontological. *Teleology* and *deontology* are technical terms in ethics, and as is typical of such terms, their etymology explains their meaning. ‘Telos’ is Greek for end or purpose. ‘Deon’ is Greek for duty. Thus, on a teleological conception of ethics, the study of what it is right to do and wrong to do follows and depends on the study of what are good and bad ends to pursue or what one’s real interests are. By contrast, on a deontological conception, the former study is partly if not wholly independent of the latter. That is, on this conception of ethics, determining what it is right to do and wrong to do does not always require knowing what are good and bad ends to pursue or what one’s real interests are.

To see more clearly this difference between teleology and deontology, consider how each conceives of ethics as a practical discipline. A practical

discipline, recall, is one whose primary aim is to prescribe action relevant to its area of study. Its chief conclusions, therefore, are prescriptions of what one ought to do in various circumstances within that area. In some practical disciplines, the chief conclusions are prescriptions in which 'ought' has the second of the two senses we distinguished above. That is, 'ought' is used in them in the sense in which to say that one ought to do  $x$  is to say that one would be well-advised to do  $x$  in view of certain ends or interests. These disciplines are teleological. Medicine is a prime example. Its chief conclusions are prescriptions about what actions one ought to take to prevent illness and improve health. In other words, they specify actions one would be well-advised to do to protect and promote one's own health or the health of those in one's care. Health, then, is the ultimate end within medicine, and accordingly its study is the study of right and wrong ways to pursue this end. Alternatively, one could characterize health as a good and medicine as the study of how to achieve this good. By analogy, on a teleological conception of ethics, a certain end is taken to be ultimate – pleasure, perhaps, or happiness, or the welfare of humankind. It is the highest good for human beings, what philosophers call the *summum bonum*. The object of ethical study, then, is to determine how to achieve it, and the study of what it is right and wrong to do in the conduct of life thus follows and depends on the study of what this good consists in or, put differently, what are good and bad ends to pursue in life.

On a deontological conception of ethics, its chief conclusions are prescriptions in which 'ought' has the first of the two senses we distinguished above. That is, 'ought' is used in these prescriptions in the sense in which to say that one ought to do  $x$  is to say that one is duty-bound to do  $x$ . This alters significantly the way in which ethics is conceived as a practical discipline. Medicine, in particular, is no longer an apt model. One must look to a different discipline. Historically, following the tradition of Christian ethics, this has been jurisprudence. Accordingly, one understands moral standards, the standards of right and wrong, as analogous to the laws of a community that regulate its members' conduct. Thus, just as a jurisprudential study of the laws of a community yields conclusions about what actions its members are legally obligated to perform, so on a deontological conception of ethics, the study of what it is right and wrong to do in the conduct of life yields conclusions about what actions a person is duty-bound to perform. And just as the determination of what actions a community's laws

obligate its members to do does not depend entirely on determining what public or even private good is realized by the observance of those laws, so too the determination of what actions moral standards bind a person to do does not depend entirely on determining what good would be realized by their observance. These standards have authority in practical thought in virtue of the authority of their source, just as a community's laws have authority in virtue of the authority of the legislator or legislative body that enacted them. And in either case they have such authority independently of the ends and interests of those whose conduct they regulate.

Plato's critics believe the *Republic's* core problem is inherent in a teleological conception of ethics. A deontological conception, they think, avoids the problem. The reason they think so is plain. If the chief conclusions of ethics are prescriptions about what one ought to do in the sense of being duty-bound rather than being well-advised in view of certain ends and interests, then no fact about the advantages or benefits one would gain from violating a duty of justice or honesty in a given situation challenges the truth of the prescription that one ought to do the just or honest thing in that situation. Its truth is unchallenged by such facts since none of them is relevant to whether one is duty-bound to do the just or honest thing. All such facts, that is, are consistent with one's being duty-bound to do it. Plato's critics, then, treat the *Republic's* core problem as resting on a mistake because they believe the teleological conception of ethics it presupposes is false. The problem, however, is deeper than they recognize. A deontological conception of ethics does not avoid it.

## 6. The problem of deontology

Consider again the problem as it arises from our example of your finding a lost purse containing a huge wad of cash. When, having found this purse, you wonder what you ought to do, your question, according to Plato's critics, can either be about what duty requires you to do or about what you would be well-advised to do in view of your ends and interests. Ethics, they would say, concerns the former and not the latter, and therefore, since it is the latter and not the former that bids you to forsake basic standards of honesty as guides to conduct, the problem is due to a simple confusion over the meaning of the question you are asking. Yet this diagnosis is too quick. The problem, remember, arises when the question leads you to search for a

good reason to be honest, and if a deontological conception of ethics avoids this problem, as Plato's critics believe, then either you must have such a reason just by virtue of your having a duty not to take what doesn't belong to you or your search for such a reason is itself a mistake. Either, that is, your having a duty to do the honest thing is itself a good reason to do it, or you don't need to search for such a reason to recognize the authority that basic standards of honesty have in practical thought. Neither of these alternatives, however, is free of difficulties. Quite the contrary, both are open to serious objection. Neither, then, allows a deontological conception of ethics to escape from the *Republic's* core problem.

Thus suppose Plato's critics took the first alternative. Suppose, that is, they maintained that you have a good reason not to take the cash from the purse just in virtue of your having a duty not to take it. Your having a duty to do something, they might say, is itself a good reason to do it. But on what grounds could they defend this view? "Well," they might argue, "as we have pointed out, if you have a duty to do something, if you are duty-bound to do it, then you ought to do it, and plainly it makes no sense to say that someone ought to do something unless he has a good reason to do it." But this response would be a nonstarter. It would amount to begging the question. No doubt, before Plato's critics drew their distinction between a use of 'ought' that signifies being duty-bound to do some action and a use that signifies being well-advised to do an action in view of one's interests and ends, we might have accepted, as a general thesis about the use of 'ought' to prescribe action, that to say that someone ought to do  $x$  is to imply that the person has a good reason to do  $x$ . But once they draw their distinction, acceptance of this general thesis requires separate consideration of the two cases. Hence, they cannot use the thesis to defend their view without first showing that it holds for each of the specific uses of 'ought' they have identified, particularly, the use that signifies being duty-bound to do some action. In other words, before they can use the thesis they must first show that if one is duty-bound to do some action, one has a good reason to do it. And this just puts them back to square one.

In response to this criticism, Plato's critics might try a new tack. "Admittedly," they might say, "we could not use the general thesis to defend our view if the reasons people had to do things were all of one kind. For in that case it would be wrong for us to assume that saying that someone ought to do  $x$  implies that he has a reason to do  $x$  regardless of which sense of

‘ought’ one uses to say this. But the reasons people have for doing things are not all of one kind. Specifically, corresponding to the distinction we draw between the two uses of ‘ought,’ there is a distinction between moral reasons and personal reasons. The point is that just as ethics, on our conception of it, is concerned with what people ought to do in the sense of what they are duty-bound to do rather than what they would be well-advised to do in view of their ends and interests, so too it is concerned with what people have moral reasons to do rather than what they have personal reasons to do. Accordingly, saying that someone ought to do something, if one is using ‘ought’ in the sense of being duty-bound to do it, is to imply that the person has a moral reason to do it. Or in other words, your having a duty to do something gives you a moral reason to do it.”

With this response Plato’s critics would clear themselves of the charge of begging the question. But in doing so, they would be shifting the grounds on which they hold that a deontological conception of ethics avoids the *Republic*’s core problem. They would be giving up the first of the two alternatives we identified and taking the second. This should be plain, for they would be arguing, in effect, that to search for good reasons to do the honest thing, in circumstances such as yours, is to search for good personal reasons, and such a search, whatever the outcome, has no bearing on the authority that basic standards of honesty have in practical thought. To think that it does would be to make the same mistake as the original one of thinking that asking whether you ought to do the honest thing in these circumstances challenges the authority of the standards. That is, just as this question could not challenge the standards’ authority if what you were asking was whether you would be well-advised to do the honest thing in view of your ends and interests, so too your search for good reasons to do the honest thing could not challenge that authority since what you would be after would be good personal reasons to do the honest thing. To challenge the authority of these standards the question you were asking would have to be whether you were duty-bound to do the honest thing and the reasons you were after would have to be moral reasons. But to ask whether you were duty-bound to do the honest thing is to ask an idle question, and similarly there is no point in searching for moral reasons to be honest. You have such reasons because the standards have authority in practical thought, because they define duties that bind you to do certain actions, and not the other way round. Or so Plato’s critics, in shifting to the second alternative, would argue.

On this view, one recognizes the moral reasons one has to do certain actions by recognizing the authority that moral standards have in practical thought, and not vice versa. How such authority is to be understood, however, is not immediately clear. An explanation, though, comes directly from the way Plato's critics conceive of ethics as a practical discipline. For their conception of ethics as a practical discipline is modeled on jurisprudence. Accordingly, they see the standards of morality as analogous to the laws of a community. Such laws have authority over every member of the community and, in virtue of that authority, give each member legal reasons to do what they require him or her to do. By analogy, then, moral standards have authority over those whose conduct they regulate and, in virtue of that authority, give them moral reasons to act as the standards direct. In this way, Plato's critics can explain moral reasons as following from and dependent on the authority of moral standards and not vice versa. Thus, on this explanation, the basic standards of honesty, in virtue of the authority they have in practical thought, would give you a moral reason to do the honest thing in the circumstances you faced independently of your having any good personal reasons to do it. Yet to advance this explanation, Plato's critics would have to assume that you belonged to a community in which the standards of morality, rather than some code of positive law, say, were the authoritative standards of conduct and in which each member was subject to the authority of those standards in virtue of his or her membership in the community. And herein lies the difficulty with their view. After all, it would not be mere querulousness on your part to ask, "What community is this? And how did I become a member?"

## 7. The idea of a moral community

The impulse to think of all human beings as joined together in a moral community almost certainly lies behind the belief that morality has authority in our lives regardless of our having personal reasons to be moral. It is one source of the powerful attraction that a deontological conception of ethics has. There is a global community of all human beings, it is frequently said, a global village, as it were, and a person qualifies as a member of this village just in virtue of being human. The community's laws are the universal standards of morality, and the members have duties and rights according to these laws. This thought or something like it, let us then suppose, is what

lies behind the way Plato's critics explain how the authority of moral standards precedes and certifies moral reasons. Accordingly, the thought would supply them with answers to your questions, for it specifies the community to which they would think you belonged and sets out the conditions of your membership. But the thought itself would have to be justified before Plato's critics could claim to have shown by this explanation that a deontological conception of ethics avoids the *Republic's* core problem. Communities of different human beings exist all over the globe, and evidence of their existence consists in their written laws, published rules, territorial markers, governing institutions, financial arrangements, communal celebrations, ensigns and other symbols of communal unity, and written and oral histories. Yet there seems to be no such evidence of a global community to which all human beings belong. How then could Plato's critics justify the thought that there was such a community? How could they show that the thought did not merely reflect their aspiration to a universal morality?

Lacking empirical evidence of such a community, they must turn to what they affirm as the universal truths about right and wrong that correspond to the basic standards of morality. On their conception of morality, these truths are propositions about what fulfills and what violates one's duties, since on this conception matters of right and wrong are matters of what one ought and ought not to do in the sense of what one is duty-bound to do. These truths, moreover, are universal inasmuch as the human practices that create duty would be found in any society. These include such practices as lending and borrowing, promising and consenting, buying and selling, making friends, entering into marriage, establishing a family, offering and accepting aid, and so forth. Since a society that lacked such practices is scarcely conceivable, one might then infer from this observation that, even though no moral community of all human beings had ever been realized, the basic standards of morality nonetheless constituted a framework for such a community. One might infer, that is, that because they corresponded to universal truths about right and wrong that any reflective person would affirm, they represented valid principles governing all human social relations both within and across real communities. Such an inference appears to be the best, if not the only way Plato's critics could justify the thought on which their understanding of the authority of moral standards depends.

Still, it falls short of justifying that thought. Although it may appear that the universal truths about right and wrong that Plato's critics affirm correspond to standards of conduct that constitute a framework for a moral community of all human beings, the appearance is misleading. These truths may correspond to such standards, but then again they may not. For what makes them true (if they are true) is the existence in every human society of practices that create duties, and consequently we would need some further reason to think they corresponded to standards of morality that constituted a framework for a moral community of all human beings. Without such a reason we cannot assume such correspondence and therefore cannot assume that they correspond to standards whose authority goes beyond that of custom. The standards they correspond to may just be the social norms of a conventional morality. These, too, define duties.

Consider marriage, for example. Marriage may be a practice in every human society, and if it is, then it is a universal truth that being faithless to your spouse is wrong inasmuch as the duties that marriage creates include duties of fidelity to one's spouse. Yet this truth may correspond only to the social norms that define such duties, norms that differ among themselves according as the society to whose conventional morality they belong practices monogamy or polygamy, enforces patriarchal or egalitarian relations among the sexes, permits or prohibits widows to remarry, and so forth. Consequently, what Plato's critics represent as the standard of morality to which this truth corresponds may come to nothing more than a generalization of these different norms, in which case no standard corresponding to it would have authority in practical thought that went beyond the authority of custom. The same points, then, apply to the other universal truths about right and wrong that Plato's critics affirm. Hence, these truths do not provide sufficient grounds for justifying the thought on which the critics' understanding of the authority of moral standards depends.

The problem at the core of Plato's *Republic* has traditionally been a problem about justice. The philosophical study of morality is a study of standards of right and wise conduct whose authority in practical thought is determined by reason rather than custom, and the problem is how to understand the basic standards of justice as having such authority. How are these standards to be explained as part of morality? Critics of Plato have insisted that this problem rests on a mistake. In their view, no conception of morality that left open the question of whether morality included these

standards could ever be right. Thus, on the correct conception, as they see it, the basic standards of justice are paradigm moral standards. This idea is the essence of deontology. But in putting it forth deontologists invite the charge of infecting morality generally with the problem of finding rational grounds for the authority of standards of justice. That they invite this charge is obscured by their various efforts to insulate morality, as they conceive of it, from embarrassing questions: their distinction between two senses of 'ought', the corresponding distinction between moral and personal reasons, their supposition of a moral community of all human beings, their appeal to universal truths about matters of right and wrong. But, as we've now seen, these efforts serve only to postpone the time at which deontologists must answer the charge. Full insulation of morality from these embarrassing questions is not possible. To answer the charge, then, they must show that the authority moral standards have in practical thought, on their conception of morality, is determined by reason and not custom. Otherwise their conception comes down to nothing more than a piece of abstract anthropology. Hence, far from avoiding the *Republic's* core problem, it faces that problem writ large.

## 8. Ethical theories and moral ideals

To answer the *Republic's* core problem requires explaining how justice and honesty qualify as excellences of character. This requires in turn explaining how acts of justice and honesty are in themselves reasonable, that is, how an act's being the just or honest thing to do gives one, by that fact alone, a good reason for doing it. Developing these explanations is a task of ethical theory, and one can find among the many theories that philosophers, since Plato, have put forward a broad range of different explanations. The explanations that teleological theories offer connect acting justly with the achievement of the good that is taken to be the ultimate end of right and wise action, the *summum bonum*. What this end is varies from one teleological theory to another, but on any of them, the explanation must be that acting justly and honestly are necessary means, or perhaps the best means to achieving it. Deontological theories, by contrast, must offer explanations of a different kind. Since on these theories the rightness of acting justly and honestly is not a matter of whether such actions contribute to the achievement of some end but rather a matter of their conforming to standards that have authority

in practical thought independently of a person's ends, the explanations they offer must bring to light some point to acting justly and honestly. They must, in other words, so enlarge our understanding of those standards and their place in human life that we see a point to our conforming to them. If, instead, a deontological theory offered no such explanation, it would leave us in the dark about why we conform to them. It would ask us to take their authority on faith and to obey it blindly. It would therefore fail to show that they had authority in practical thought that was backed by reason rather than custom and would thus fall short of a central aim of ethical theory.

Implicit in every theory's answer to the *Republic's* core problem is an ideal of human life. Indeed, no ethical theory could be complete if it did not imply such an ideal. A complete ethical theory not only formulates and systematizes the standards of morality, but also justifies them by laying out the rational grounds of their authority in practical thought. Such justification, at a minimum, requires explaining conformity to these standards as meaningful conduct, for you would be at a loss to understand how the authority of these standards could have rational grounds if you could not find any meaning to your conforming to them. A complete ethical theory, then, as part of its justification of moral standards, explains how conformity to them is meaningful, and it does so by showing how such conduct contributes to your realizing an ideal of human life. Ideals, generally, serve to make actions meaningful in our lives. Many, like those of athletic prowess, artistic creativity, commercial prosperity, romantic love, family togetherness, triumph over the elements of nature, and so forth, give meaning to common activities of life by presenting models of success in those activities. Having a model or picture of what success in them consists in enables us to see their pursuit as something important, worthwhile, or fulfilling. To be sure, none of these ideals serves to make conformity to moral standards meaningful. While they present models of success in activities that moral standards regulate, conformity to moral standards is not what success in those activities consists in, and therefore to explain such conformity as meaningful an ethical theory must incorporate an ideal that applies directly to it. Let us call such an ideal a moral ideal. It is moral ideals, then, that ethical theories imply in their answers to the *Republic's* core problem.

Needless to say, many people in daily life are seldom if ever troubled about the meaningfulness of their conforming to moral standards. By and large, they recognize that general conformity to moral standards by the

members of a community is necessary if people are to live together peacefully and that conforming to them also brings such personal advantages as an untarnished reputation and the goodwill of others. Asked, then, the point of following such standards, they would likely respond by citing one or another of these advantages and not some moral ideal. Still, there are times when one's circumstances invite acts of dishonesty or injustice that would neither disrupt social life, tarnish one's reputation, nor cause one to lose the goodwill of others. Our example of your finding a lost purse containing a huge wad of cash is a case in point. At these times, one realizes, if one is sufficiently reflective, that the point of one's conforming to moral standards cannot be the necessity of such conformity for social harmony or for maintaining a sterling reputation and the goodwill of others. At these times, to find meaning in one's conforming to them, one must seek a fuller understanding of their place in one's life, and the search, if successful, leads one to affirm some moral ideal.

By the same token, then, an ethical theory, if it succeeds in justifying moral standards, affirms a moral ideal. Its justification of them consists in laying out the rational grounds of their authority in practical thought, and it cannot do this without giving meaning to a person's following them in circumstances in which neither social peace nor personal advantage would be harmed by his ignoring them. It cannot, that is, lay out such grounds without implying a moral ideal. In this regard, an ethical theory articulates the thinking of a reflective person who finds himself in such circumstances and who, having been brought up to act justly and rightly, now wonders whether there is a point to doing so. His thinking might take any one of a number of different avenues. Each one would correspond to a different moral ideal guiding his thought. Accordingly, there are a number of different ethical theories that articulate these different avenues of thought and that affirm these different ideals.

It will be the project of the next several chapters to examine these different theories. The first ones we will examine are teleological. (See Appendix for a diagram of these.) Afterwards we will take up those that are deontological. Once our survey is complete, we will turn to an important twentieth-century skeptical attack on these theories and the alternative ethics it offers. Our examination of the latter will lead to general questions about practical reason and ethical knowledge, whether either is possible and if it is, how shall we understand it. The [final chapter](#) will deal with these issues.