

... What is called moral theory is but a more conscious and systematic raising of the question which occupies the mind of anyone who in the face of moral conflict and doubt seeks a way out through reflection.¹

John Dewey

CHAPTER

Theories of Moral Right and Wrong

2.1 MORAL LEGALISM AND MORAL PARTICULARISM

Moral rightness may be thought to be based either on rules (and/or principles and commandments) or on particular circumstances, or both. The first of these approaches is legalistic, in that the law is a paradigm of the attempt to regulate conduct by rules, whether they take the form of commandments from God, decrees by a dictator, or statutes enacted by a democratic legislature.

When we judge legal rightness and wrongness, we do indeed appeal to rules because laws can only be formulated in terms of them. Laws permit, prohibit, or require the performance of *acts*; they do not tell anyone what sort of person to be, or what motivation to have.² The law does not care whether the person who steals, murders, or rapes is an otherwise good person (although this may be taken into account in sentencing); it is what the person *does* that is important. And acts can be regulated.

Likewise, many philosophers have thought that the key to elucidating morality is to clearly understand the appropriate rules or principles. They believe it is conduct, not character, that morality must regulate, and rules and principles are appropriate for that role. As John Stuart Mill observes, “a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and . . . actions which are blamable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise.”³

This approach may be defined as follows:

Moral Legalism: The moral rightness of acts is determined solely by rules, principles, or commandments.

In this view, an act is right if—and only if—it accords with a correct moral rule (or principle, which may be taken to be simply a very general rule).⁴ To know what is right, we must know which rules are correct. Our knowledge of them comes first. Then we must correctly apply those rules to particular situations. (To do so, of course, requires some knowledge about the situation, but it is still the act’s accordance with the rule or principle that makes it right.)

Most standard Western ethical theories have been legalistic in this sense, appealing to principles such as the following:⁵

1. **Ethical Egoism:** One ought always to maximize one’s own personal good.
2. **Divine Command Theory:** Whatever God commands is right.
3. **Natural Law Ethics:** One ought always to act in accordance with nature.
4. **Kantianism:** One ought always to act on maxims that can be universalized.
5. **Utilitarianism:** One ought always to maximize the general good.
6. **Principle of justice:** One ought always to act justly.

This list does not exhaust the candidates for principles one might take to be central to morality. There are also, for example, such principles as:

7. **Ethics of Love:** One ought always to act lovingly.
8. **Ethics of Nonviolence:** One ought always to act nonviolently.

These principles have figured prominently in some religious and social movements. But principles 1 through 6 represent what have (arguably) been the main ones, and I discuss each in detail in Part Three.

The quest for a single principle in morality is understandable. As in science, there is a strong impulse in moral philosophy to seek a single, unifying theory—in this case, one that explains morality as a coherent whole. To be able to identify a single principle at the heart of morality would be a major step in achieving that objective. But if a single core principle cannot be identified, then two or more principles—such as 5 and 6 in the preceding list—might have to be acknowledged to be equally basic and not derivable from one another. That is, moral legalism might be *monistic* in recognizing one fundamental principle, or *pluralistic* in recognizing two or more equally basic rules or principles. Either way, these approaches share the assumption that rules or principles are indispensable to morality.

But are rules adequate for guiding conduct? Here are some reasons for skepticism: It is sometimes said that every rule has exceptions. If so, then no rule adequately covers all cases. But if a particular case is an exception, there must be some ground other than the rule for identifying it as an exception. Therefore there must, in that case, be *some* consideration besides what is contained in the rule that is relevant for determining rightness.

Suppose, for example, someone gives you a gun for safekeeping, which you promise to return when he asks for it. One day following an argument with someone else, he comes to you in a rage and demands the gun—obviously bent on doing harm with it. You have promised to return it, and one ought to keep promises (as a rule). But isn’t this case, surely, an exception? Something besides the rule is relevant here; namely, the probable harm to someone if you return the gun.⁶

So if rules have exceptions, then simply applying rules to particular situations isn't always enough to determine right and wrong. If, similarly, there should be exceptions to any principle alleged to be the sole, fundamental principle of morality, then that principle (such as the principle of utilitarianism, for example) cannot by itself be adequate either.

It is also clear that rules by their nature are general, whereas practical decisions must be made in particular situations. For this reason, rules can never take into account all the details of actual contexts.

One would need stronger reasons than these to reject rules and principles, of course. But carried to its conclusion, this way of thinking suggests an outlook on moral rightness that is diametrically opposed to legalism. We may call it moral particularism, or "particularism," for short. It can be defined as follows:

Moral Particularism: The rightness of acts depends solely on the situations in which they are performed and is not derived from rules, principles, or commandments.⁷

Aristotle at times sounds like a particularist in this sense, as we shall see in the next chapter (section 3.8). In the twentieth century H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross were particularists; so may have been the existentialists and the pragmatist John Dewey.⁸

In this view, what makes acts right is not the fact that they fall under some rule or principle, but rather certain features of the acts themselves or of the situation in which they are performed. To determine what is right, therefore, we must judge particular cases on their own merits rather than by appealing to rules and principles. It isn't easy to say, however, what is going on when we do so.

According to one account, we intuit rightness or wrongness (or goodness and badness) in particular situations—the implication being that right and wrong stand for objective properties of acts or situations we are capable of apprehending if we pay attention. In another account, rightness and wrongness consist of emotions of approval or disapproval generated by specific features of particular situations. Either way, insofar as rules have any role at all to play in particularist accounts, they consist simply of generalizations from particular instances of right and wrong, identified independently of the rules (so that if I find promise keeping to be right in this situation, and in the next, and in the one after that, and so on, I could generalize that promise keeping is always right).

You could, of course, take a middle ground that combines features of legalism and particularism. You could say that there are some valid rules or principles but that they do not cover all the kinds of cases in which moral decisions must be made. In that event, it might be said that we should appeal to rules where they are applicable but decide cases on their own merits where they are not.

Legalism and particularism, finally, do not purport to provide us with the content of morality. That is, legalism does not *per se* tell us *what* the correct rules or principles of morality are, and particularism does not presume to tell us what is right in particular cases or even kinds of cases. For that, we need normative ethical theory.

Because the theories considered in Part Three are normative, it is important to understand the nature of normative ethics and how it grows out of the

practical activities of evaluating and guiding conduct that (see Chapter 1) lies at the heart of morality. Recall that those activities are expressed in value judgments and prescriptive judgments. The notions of "good" and "bad" are central to the former; those of "right" and "wrong," to the latter.

2.2 RIGHTS-BASED THEORIES

Some philosophers, however, believe morality is primarily a matter of rights; much of the discussion of social issues is therefore conducted in these terms. The Declaration of Independence, of course, states that all people are endowed with unalienable rights by their Creator, which seems to place rights at the heart of morality. Although some contemporary writers contrast so-called rights-based theories with utilitarianism,⁹ much of the discussion of justice, even by a utilitarian such as Mill, is framed in terms of rights. And one can speak of a "utilitarianism" of rights (see section 9.2).

Few deny that there are rights or that the language we use to discuss rights is meaningful. But people seriously disagree as to whether or not rights are basic to morality—that is, as to whether right and wrong and duty and obligation are to be understood ultimately in terms of rights. Maybe rights are to be understood in terms of these other notions, or perhaps both rights and these other notions are equally essential to morality.

This raises a complex problem of metaethics. It has to do with the relationship between the concepts of right and wrong, on the one hand, and the notion of rights, on the other hand. It is a problem to which we shall return in Chapter 13. For the present, let us simply note that contemporary moral issues are increasingly framed in terms of the language of rights, and that there is at present no consensus on precisely how rights are to be understood in relation to other moral concepts.

2.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOODNESS AND RIGHTNESS

A central issue in normative ethics concerns how value and deontic concepts relate to one another (or more simply, how "good" and "right" relate to one another).¹⁰

Notice the issue's importance. To judge that something is good does not *in and of itself* tell you what you ought to do. It merely assigns value to the thing. You might be convinced that a week in Florida during spring break would be great, but you might not go because you cannot afford it or because you have an honors paper to complete. In other words, without further assumptions you cannot explain how evaluation guides conduct.

To explain how value judgments guide moral conduct, you must be able to show some kind of connection between evaluating and prescribing. That connection could be one of three things:

1. There may be a *causal* connection between evaluating and prescribing. People may just naturally desire what they believe to be good and have an

aversion to what they believe to be bad. In that case, believing something is good might lead you to conclude that it should be pursued. If, further, Plato is right that we desire the good above all else, then to establish that something is good would suffice to lead people to pursue it (or do it, if it is an action). It would also mean that people fail to do what is good only out of ignorance of what the good is or of what will bring it about. It doesn't follow, of course, that people *should* pursue what they find good, but if this account were correct it would leave little ground for plausibly arguing that they should do anything else.

2. There may be a plausible rule or principle saying we ought to do what is good or that we should maximize value. Thus even if not everyone wants what is good, this principle would direct us to promote good. In this view, the connection between evaluating and prescribing is *normative* (it is expressed by a moral principle), although it might also be causal if it led people to guide their conduct by what promotes the good. For example, if either principle 1 or principle 5 in section 2.1 is valid, it provides a normative connection. It does so by prescribing that we promote the good (either our own or that of people generally).

3. There may be a *conceptual* connection, as there is if "right" is definable by reference to "good." This would make all cases of prescribing also cases of evaluating. To make a prescriptive judgment would be to make a value judgment plus perhaps an implied prediction about what would bring about what is good. This would be the case, for example, if it could be shown that "right" actually *means* or can properly be *defined* as "what promotes the greatest good." Then it would be impossible that what is right not promote the good, just as, given the definition of a triangle as (among other things) a three-sided figure, it would be impossible for something to be a triangle and not have three sides.

But another possibility must be taken seriously: that there is no significant connection between goodness and moral rightness at all. In that case, moral judgments of rightness have no connection with evaluations.

If we are correct that evaluating plays a central role in human affairs, it cannot plausibly be said that the idea of goodness does not in general have a bearing on our practical decisions. Nonetheless, while we quite properly let value judgments guide our conduct much of the time, maybe we shouldn't do so when we make moral judgments. If moral rightness does not in fact depend on goodness, then moral judgments must be grounded on something other than the value actualized in conduct.

Another way to put this is to say that while our prescriptive judgments may in general presuppose value judgments, our prescriptive judgments that are moral may not. Let us consider a theory that would say this (examined in detail in Chapter 6).

Suppose there is a God and that God tells us to do some things and not to do others. Suppose further that God's directives determine right and wrong. In that case, once you knew a certain act had been commanded by God, you wouldn't need to know its consequences or the value of those

consequences or anything else in order to know that it is right. (Conversely if you knew that God had prohibited something, you would know you shouldn't do it.)

You might think that God knows best and that if you do as God says it will bring about the greatest good overall for yourself and others. And, of course, you might want that. But the belief that it would bring about good would not be the reason why any particular act commanded by God was right; that reason would be solely that the act conforms to God's command. The fact that God commanded the act would make it right.

Here, then, is an outlook according to which right and wrong are determined without any consideration of what is good. This outlook makes sound moral prescriptions thus independent of evaluations.

This view still leaves open the possibility that in most of our practical conduct we still have to make value judgments in order to live well. We still have to judge what is good or bad in the way of food to eat, clothing to wear, careers to pursue, and so on. So Plato could still be correct in his claim about how central the process of evaluating is to most of our practical affairs. But in this view, he would be incorrect in extending the claim to our moral decisions.

2.4 AXIOLOGICAL AND DEONTOLOGICAL MORAL THEORIES

This discussion points the way to a central distinction in theories of moral rightness. Some such theories hold that evaluating is primary and that moral judgments depend on value judgments; others hold that prescribing is primary and that moral judgments are partially or wholly independent of evaluations. The first category encompasses *axiological* theories; the second, *deontological* theories.

For example, a metaethical theory that "right" means "approved by my society" is deontological because it makes no reference at all to value or goodness. A theory maintaining that "right" means "promotes the greatest good for my society" is axiological because it defines right in terms of good. Virtually all normative ethical theories are also of one or the other of these types.

There is considerable complexity to these theories. One must grasp it to understand them fully and to understand the more specific issues that divide them. So in the next three sections I detail the interrelationships among these theories. Don't try to memorize all this material now. Just read it through and then refer back to it as you read the following chapters.

2.5 STRONG AND WEAK DEONTOLOGISM

Deontological theories may take either a strong or a weak form. The strong form holds that what is right, wrong, obligatory, or prohibited is independent of what is good or bad. This is true of the view about morality depending on God's commands (even if God commands us to do good, it is God's *commanding* us to do good that makes that act obligatory, not the fact that obeying the command would bring about good).

The weaker form holds that goodness is *relevant* to determining rightness but not decisive. Other things must be considered as well, such as whether you would be acting fairly, honoring a commitment, telling the truth, keeping a promise, or discharging a debt of gratitude. It may be thought that sometimes these other things are of greater moral importance than promoting good. When they are, and when you cannot both honor them and promote the good at the same time, you should, in this view, forgo promoting the good.

Most deontologists hold theories of this weaker sort, but Kant, the most noted deontologist in modern Western philosophy, held the stronger form.

2.6 CONSEQUENTIALIST AND NONSEQUENTIALIST AXIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Axiological theories vary according to how they answer three questions: (1) Where is the locus of the good that determines rightness? (2) What is the relevance of any bad that may be actualized along with the good? (3) If consequences are relevant to determining rightness, which consequences for which people or groups are relevant?¹¹

Answers to question (1) emphasize the goodness of the act itself, or of its consequences, or of a combination of the two. They thus presuppose a distinction between acts and consequences. Although it is not easy to draw this distinction precisely, everyone agrees there is one, and ethical theories differ according to the importance they attach to it.

Consequentialist theories say rightness is determined exclusively by the consequences of acts; nonconsequentialist theories deny this. Like deontology, nonconsequentialism has stronger and weaker forms according to whether it says that consequences are irrelevant to determining rightness or relevant but not by themselves decisive.

Theories holding that rightness is determined always by the good of the consequences of actions are both axiological and consequentialist or what we may call *teleological*. (They are also sometimes called *utilitarian*, but I'll speak of utilitarianism mainly in connection with theories that stress consequences for people and perhaps for other sentient beings. Teleological theories are also, somewhat misleadingly, sometimes simply called "consequentialist.")

There are other forms of axiological theory. For example, one might believe that right conduct consists at least in part in the performance of good acts. Here the assumption is that acts can be judged good apart from their consequences. Plato and Aristotle seem at times to have thought this, as does the twentieth-century philosopher G. E. Moore. Another possibility is that right conduct is simply the conduct of good people. In this view, character is most important, even if the goodness of acts and consequences is relevant. To speak of someone's goodness or excellence is to speak of virtue, and, as shown later (section 3.11), an ethics that takes virtue to be of central importance is an *ethics of virtue*.

2.7 THE BALANCE OF GOOD AND BAD IN CONSEQUENCES

Question (2) in section 2.6 is important because most acts produce both good and bad consequences. Going to the movies provides you with enjoyment, and that is good. But it also separates you from some of your money, which is bad. Dental work preserves your teeth, and that is good. But it is expensive and unpleasant, and that is bad.

In cases of greater moral significance, welfare provides needy people with money for food, clothing, and shelter (basic needs, as said earlier). And that is good. But other people are taxed to fund the payments, whether they like it or not. And that is bad. Abortion gives women the choice of whether to bear unwanted children, which is good. But it also offends some people's religious and moral convictions, and that is bad. The same is true of most controversial social, political, and moral policies.

Because most acts have both good and bad consequences, teleologists typically say that rightness is determined by there being a predominance of good over bad in an act's consequences. It would matter little that an act brought about more good than another if, in other respects, the act also brought about vastly greater harm. (If working for an hour would earn you ten dollars, but mugging someone would net you twenty dollars, the good of the second act, taken by itself, would be greater than that of the first; but the bad involved would be vastly greater than the exertion of working for an hour.)

To illustrate this point another way, suppose we could quantify good and bad in terms of units (as in fact we cannot do). Let us suppose that each of three acts—X, Y, and Z—brings about a certain quantity of both good and bad:

Acts	Good		Bad	
	X	Y	Z	
	12	5	6	10
				9
				1

Act Y is clearly wrong because it brings about less good than either of the others and is outweighed by the bad it produces. But Z, according to most teleologists, is preferable to X because even though it brings about a smaller quantity of good than X, it also brings about less bad. The balance of good over bad for act Z is +5, whereas for X it is only +2.

Specifically, teleologists say that an act is right if and only if it brings about as great a balance of good over bad as any other alternative available to the agent, and it is obligatory if and only if it brings about a greater balance of good over bad than any other available alternative.

2.8 THE GOOD OF SELF, OTHERS, AND COLLECTIVITIES

But here we must ask, “Good for whom?” (This brings us to question [3] of section 2.6.) Insofar as we are talking about consequences for people, the possible answers to this question range all the way from the person contemplating performing the act to everyone affected by it.

The position that people should be concerned only with their own personal good—that is, only with the balance of good over bad in the consequences for them personally—is *ethical egoism*. To say we should promote the greatest balance of good over bad for all people affected by our actions (which may include ourselves) is to subscribe to *utilitarianism*. Between these two lie an indefinite number of possibilities.

As noted (section 1.4), people have historically coalesced into collectivities of various sorts: families, tribes, clans, communities, societies, nation-states.¹² In addition to these more or less voluntary associations, people can also be grouped according to genetic or biological traits, such as those defining sex or ethnicity. Moral concerns can be confined to (or considered to give priority to) people comprising any of these groupings. Then the balance of good over bad for those people—and those people only—determines moral rightness.

But need one be concerned only with people? Not necessarily. Sometimes collectivities themselves are considered to be important. Their good, either instead of or in addition to, the good of the individuals who make up the collectivities is an object of concern—and in some cases, of primary concern.

Socrates took such a view as he awaited execution. His friend, Crito, had arranged for him to escape. But he refused, reasoning that to do so would be to flout his death sentence, which, though unjust, had been arrived at in accordance with the state laws. The state (here the city-state of Athens), he contended, is like a parent; people who voluntarily choose to live within its borders and enjoy its protection and benefits have an obligation not to injure it. He would be injuring the state, Socrates thought, by escaping. The state itself, as an entity, was thus an object of moral concern. Plato’s representation in the *Republic* of the ideal state likewise assigns it an importance transcending that of the individuals making it up.

In twentieth-century systems, Nazism in Germany and fascism in Italy embodied such an outlook. The fascists under Mussolini exalted the state above the individual. Hitler did the same with the nation (which he took to stand for a *people*, their culture, traditions, and values, whether or not they were part of a state—that is, under a particular government). It was to further the perceived interests of the Aryan race in particular that Nazi policy was framed.

Any collectivity, such as a race, a people, or even humankind as a whole might come to be thus highly regarded. The highest good is then understood by reference to its well-being rather than to that of the individual members (although there must, of course, be *some* connection between the good of the collectivity and that of the members, or else it would be difficult to make sense of the idea of the good of the collectivity).

The collectivity need not even consist exclusively of humans. It might include all beings capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, which would include many animals. Some ecologists even speak of the wider “biotic community” of all living things, including plant and animal life. If this wider community is taken to be of value, moral consideration may extend to it as well.

Many Eastern philosophies have long held such a wider perspective in their emphasis on the essential oneness of all things.¹³ The earth or the world as a whole may be assigned such value. Some people even think the earth may have enough characteristics of an organism to be considered a living thing.¹⁴ If so, any concern for all living things requires a concern for the well-being of the earth itself and for its environment; not simply insofar as its condition affects the survival and well-being of ourselves and other species, but for its own sake as well.

2.9 MICRO ETHICS AND MACRO ETHICS

Two types of teleological theory emerge here. Micro ethics takes the survival and well-being of individual beings to be the highest good and considers to be right whatever maximizes that good. The beings may be humans—or they may include plants and animals. Micro ethics can have a concern with the good of groups or collectivities, but it does so only insofar as that good is understood to consist of nothing more than the good of the individuals that make up the collectivity. Thus utilitarianism, when understood to be saying that we should maximize value for as many individuals as possible, is a form of micro ethics.

Macro ethics, in contrast, assigns highest value to the survival and well-being of collectivities and entities such as states, nations, races, religions, peoples, nature, and the world. Such entities are considered to be a good in themselves. Macro ethics defines moral conduct (either primarily or exclusively) in terms of what maximizes that good.

Each individual who is part of such an entity (in the case of collectivities) or whose well-being is tied up with that of the entity (in the case of superentities such as the state, the earth, or the universe) may have his or her own good. But the entity *itself* is thought to have a good over and above that of any particular individual and over and above that of the sum of the goods of any group of such individuals. So, national interest, for example, might be taken to represent a good that is more than the sum of the goods of the individuals that make it up. Individuals, in this view, may sometimes have to be sacrificed for the sake of that interest.

Macro ethics, in this sense, presupposes the principle that the good of a whole may bear no regular proportion to the sum of the goods of its parts. Any whole (including nations, states, races, religions, and so on) for which this is true constitutes an *organic unity*.

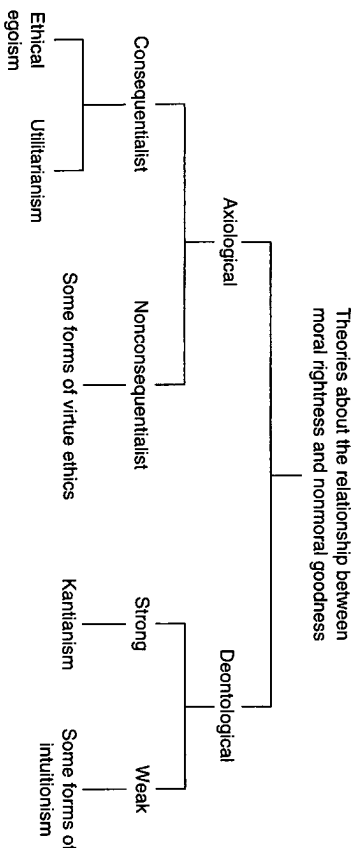
The concerns of macro ethics and micro ethics need not be exclusive, of course. Ethical egoism is a form of micro ethics. But ethical egoists such as the Epicureans stress the importance of friends and community—not because they attach value to these in themselves, but because they believe they are necessary to one’s own good. At his trial Socrates defended himself against

the accusation that he had corrupted the young by arguing that no one would do so voluntarily because no one would want to live with corrupt people.

By the same token, a macro ethics that takes the well-being of the biotic community to be the highest good would almost certainly have a concern for the good of individual human beings because they would be a significant part of that community. That community's value, even if not in direct proportion to the good of its individual members, could not plausibly be thought to be determinable apart from the good of individual people.

2.10 OUTLINE

A summary of what we have covered thus far may be found in the appendix. The following schematizes the theories discussed in a way that represents their relationships visually.¹⁵



2.11 CHARACTER AND CONDUCT

I have been talking primarily about actions, and the preceding theories all belong to what we may call the *ethics of conduct*. But some of the most important evaluations we make are of *persons*, not conduct. We judge people to be good or bad, admirable or unadmirable, praiseworthy or blameworthy, responsible or irresponsible, honorable or dishonorable, and so on. These all represent ways of assigning value to people as evidenced by their character—their attitudes, habits, motives, dispositions, and traits.

Rather than focusing primarily on conduct, this approach looks for moral guidance to models of good people or to the traits that make up excellence of character. These traits are called *virtues*, and this orientation represents the *ethics of virtue*.

Ancient ethics tended to take the form of virtue ethics in this sense; not that it did not have much to say about conduct, but the emphasis was on understanding what constitutes the excellence of the human person. This emphasis was superseded by much of modern moral philosophy, which increasingly stressed conduct and did so from a heavily legalistic orientation. Thus rules

and principles took center stage, a position they occupy to this day. Among contemporary philosophers, however, interest has flared anew in the ethics of virtue, and many believe that the ancients were essentially on the right track in emphasizing virtue. As a result, the ethics of conduct and the ethics of virtue have, in many ways, become competing outlooks. The ethics of conduct remains the dominant orientation, but the ethics of virtue is receiving increasing attention.

We want to look closely at both approaches. The next chapter begins with the classical statement of the ethics of virtue in ancient thought.

Notes

1. *John Dewey: The Later Works: 1925–1953*, vol. 7: 1932, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 164.
2. I am speaking here of human law as it exists in contemporary U.S. society. This does not apply to some conceptions of divine law that seek to regulate one's inner life (thoughts and motivation) as well.
3. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1948), p. 21. Originally published in 1863.
4. Rules are often taken to cover only certain types of acts, such as promising or truth telling, and to admit of exceptions. They are also frequently regarded as subordinate to principles, in the sense of requiring an appeal to a principle in order to justify a rule.
5. What follows are only rough approximations of the relevant principles, most of which are elaborated later.
6. As Plato concludes in the example from which this is adapted, in the *Republic* (Stephanus 331).
7. If there is a God, and a command from God makes something right, then whenever God issues a specific command to someone in a specific situation, the rightness of that act depends solely on that situation. This might make it seem that theories based on divine commandment are particularistic rather than legalistic. However, because most theories that appeal to God's commands (see in Chapter 6) deal with commandments to perform certain types of acts (and hence lay down certain rules or principles), I regard such theories as forms of moral legalism. If God's commands make acts right, and God issued *only* specific commands for specific situations, then arguably the divine command theory would be a form of moral particularism.
8. Ross could allow that rules of *prima facie* obligation sometimes determine rightness if it were ever the case that only one rule applied to a particular act. But in fact he believes that every act tends to be *prima facie* right in some respects, and *prima facie* wrong in others, which suggests that more than one rule always applies. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 33.

For good discussions of particularism, see J. Dancy, "Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties," *Mind* 92, no. 368 (1983): 530–547; and also his *Moral Reasons* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993). See also David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1988), Ch. 13. Both give somewhat different characterizations from mine; Dancy's argument in particular is too complex to detail here.

9. See, for example, H. L. A. Hart, "Between Utility and Rights," in *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Alan Ryan (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 77–99; and *Utility and Rights*, ed. R. G. Frey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
10. Following W. D. Ross, in *The Right and the Good*. The issue might, with appropriate modifications, be put as the question of the relationship between value judgments and prescriptive judgments, or even more fundamentally, between the activities of evaluating and guiding conduct.
11. Weak versions of deontology, recognizing as they do the relevance of goodness, need to answer these questions as well.
12. Not that humans are known ever to have existed in complete separation from one another; but historical evidence shows that they have formed increasingly larger social units over time.
13. Although some Western philosophy from Parmenides through Hegel and Bradley has shown a strong metaphysical bent in this direction (and in Schopenhauer something of an ethical bent as well), it has rarely shown reverence for all life.
14. This is the so-called Gaia hypothesis, after Gaia, the Greek goddess of the earth. See, for example, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth*, by James Lovelock (New York: Norton, 1988).
15. I am indebted to Richard Werner for the essentials of this diagram.

Discussion Questions

1. Section 2.3 examines possible relationships between goodness and rightness. Which of those possibilities seems to you most plausible, and why? Do you ever make judgments of what is right or wrong apart from the consideration of whether they would be promoting something that is good or bad? If so, in what sorts of circumstances?
2. What is the distinction between axiological and deontological theories? What is the distinction between the strong and the weak versions of each?
3. Why is it important to distinguish between the amount of good an act may produce and the balance of *good over bad* that it may produce?
4. Do you think Socrates did the right thing (as represented in section 2.8) by refusing to escape a death sentence on the grounds that by escaping he would be injuring the state? Are collectivities like nations or states capable of suffering injury in a literal sense? If so, how should their well-being be weighed against that of the individuals who make up the collectivity?
5. What is an organic unity? Do you think there are any organic unities? What would be examples of candidates for organic unities?
6. What is the distinction between an ethics of conduct and an ethics of virtue?

Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways.¹

Alasdair MacIntyre

Virtue in Ancient Philosophy

CHAPTER

3

3.1 KINDS OF VIRTUE

Think of someone you particularly admire—a living person or someone from history, fiction, or film. Then ask yourself what you admire about him or her.

The answer will almost certainly be that the person has certain qualities you value, such as trustworthiness, reliability, truthfulness, courage, friendliness, leadership ability, musical, artistic, or athletic accomplishment, and the like; in short, some excellence of character, intellect, or achievement.

Qualities that make for excellence we call *virtues*. These may include natural qualities such as strength, speed, or intelligence; acquired qualities such as expertise at chess or accomplishment at playing the trombone; qualities of temperament such as a good disposition or a sense of humor; religious qualities such as faith or piety; and qualities of character such as benevolence, kindness, perseverance, courage, or wisdom.

We judge persons as well as actions. And it is with persons that the ethics of virtue is primarily concerned. But the concern is not merely to judge persons; it is to provide guidance for conduct as well. Where the governing imperative in the ethics of conduct is "Do what is right," the imperative in the ethics of virtue is "Be a good person."

How does one do this? How does one become a good person (or continue to be one if one already is)? This requires asking first what constitutes a good (or virtuous) person.