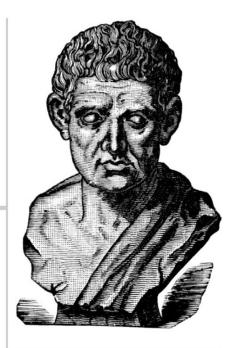NORMATIVE ETHICS ATTEMPTS TO UNDERSTAND ETHICAL ACTION BY CREATING A SET OF RULES (OR NORMS) THAT GOVERNS ACTION AND HUMAN CONTACT.

ETHICS 101

FROM **ALTRUISM** AND **UTILITARIANISM** TO **BIOETHICS** AND **POLITICAL ETHICS**, AN EXPLORATION OF THE **CONCEPTS OF RIGHT AND WRONG**

A *CRASH COURSE* IN THE **Principles of Proper Conduct**

IN HEDONISM, PLEASURE IS THE ONLY THING INTRINSICALLY VALUABLE TO A PERSON AT ALL TIMES AND PAIN IS THE ONLY THING THAT IS INTRINSICALLY NOT VALUABLE TO AN INDIVIDUAL.

IN UTILITARIANISM, MORALITY IS ALWAYS BASED ON THE RESULTS THAT ARISE AS THE OUTCOME OF AN ACTION, AND NEVER BASED ON THE ACTUAL ACTION.

BRIAN BOONE

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BRIAN BOONE

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INTRODUCTION

Ethics, also called moral philosophy, is the division of philosophy concerned with how a person should behave in a matter that is considered morally correct or good. It sounds like a simple idea—how to be good, and why it's important to be good—but it's a concept that has fascinated and agonized moral philosophers for more than 2,000 years.

Ethics means trying to figure out why one should behave morally, as well as understanding the motivating factors for that behavior. It also examines what, exactly, makes something "good" or "bad." For example:

- Is that sense of good or bad something that's naturally inside of us, or is that sense placed there by a divine being?
- Do we follow a moral code?
- Do we act morally because it is often in our self-interest to do so?
- Is ethical behavior all about the nature of the consequences of our actions?

Ethics are arguably the one type of philosophy that is readily applicable to daily life. Philosophy asks big questions like, "Is God real?" or "Why are we here?" But those big questions don't directly address how to live one's life. Ethics is the missing step between addressing the infiniteness of the universe and reconciling it with the daily existence of life on earth. If philosophy encourages moral behavior by asking the big "why" questions, then ethics is an exploration of that moral behavior, and it seeks to formulate concrete "what" and "how" answers to the questions that philosophy poses.

Ethics can and should be applied to regular life. You can tailor ethics to fit your life, and you can use ethics to make decisions and take actions that are morally "right" in fields such as medicine, business, and other disciplines. The use of ethics also brings up another ethical conundrum—why is it important to consider why a person should act a certain way? The answer lies in the concept of happiness. Simply stated, happiness is an outgrowth of ethics, be it one's own happiness or the happiness of others.

Whether you are a philosopher at heart or just interested in discovering why some things are "good" and some are "bad," *Ethics 101* has you covered. Let's delve into the fascinating and thought-provoking realm of ethics.

Chapter 1

ETHICS AND THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS

Philosophy as we know it, at least in the Western world (Europe and the Americas) sprung up around the sixth century B.C. in Greece. The Greek schools of thought dominated philosophy and all of its subsets until the first century A.D.

In their attempts to decipher the big questions about life, universe, and humanity, the philosophers of ancient Greece incorporated all the knowledge they had at the time. They didn't see much of a distinction between the theoretical secrets of the unknown universe and the quantifiable, physical world. As such, these philosophers used every tool and discipline at their disposal, including ethics, logic, biology, the nature of art, the nature of beauty, and especially, political science. For the ancient Greeks, particularly for those in Athens, politics and public life were among the most important going concerns, and their inquiries into ethics frequently focused not just on the individual's duties but also on the proper ways to lead and govern.

Many philosophers wrote and taught in ancient Greece. But this golden era of Greek philosophy is dominated by three of the most famous and influential thinkers in Western history: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Socrates (ca. 470–399 B.C.) created much of the framework and methodology for how to approach philosophy and ethics. Among these innovations is the "Socratic method." This method is a form of discourse and discussion based entirely on two or more parties asking each other an almost endless array of questions. The goal is to find common ground and highlight any flaws in their arguments so as to get closer to some kind of truth. Socrates thought that this ability is one of the things that separated humans from the rest of the animal kingdom, for we're the only animals capable of logic and reason.

Carrying on the Socratic traditions was one of his primary students, Plato (ca. 428–348 B.C.). In Athens, Plato formed the first higher learning institution in the West, the Academy. One of his major contributions to moral philosophy is the theory of forms, which explores how humans can live a life of happiness in an ever-changing, material world.

The third pillar of ancient Greek philosophy is Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), a student of Plato's at the Academy, and later a professor at the same institution. One of his main theories deals with universals. He proposed whether there were "universals," and what they might be. This remains a major focus of ethical inquiry today.

The theories of these three philosophers created the Western philosophical canon, and represent the first major entries into the study of ethics.

While philosophy is ultimately the question of what is and isn't human nature, it is most definitely human nature to wonder. This is something that separates us from other creatures—we are self-aware of our existence and mortality, and we have higher brain functions that give us the ability to reason. The earliest humans most certainly wondered about the same questions that "official" philosophers and students formally posed: Why was the Earth created? What is it made of? Why are humans here? What is the purpose of it all? How can we live happy lives?

To even think about asking these questions is philosophy at its most basic and raw. Philosophers have sought to answer these questions—or at least inch closer to universal truths. These same questions have led to centuries of religious development. Most religions are like philosophy in that they are about the pursuit of answers to the "big questions"—however, religion is much more likely than philosophy to claim to *have* the answers. Philosophy is about asking questions—*always* asking questions.

Formal philosophy began in Greece in the seventh century B.C. Hundreds of years before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle would solidify the foundations of Western thought (and even before Confucius and Buddha would do the same in the East), philosophers such as Heraclitus and Anaxagoras were considering the makeup of the universe and the nature of life. Anaxagoras, for example, wrote that "there is a portion of everything in everything." That's some very sophisticated thinking, and it's an idea that has resonated throughout the centuries of philosophy and will continue to resonate for centuries to come.

Ethics versus Morality

Morality is about the good-bad duality. In a general sense, morality refers to a code or rules in which actions are judged against how

they stack up to shared values. Some things are "right," while others are "wrong." Ethics, meanwhile, refers to the rules that form those moral codes and that also come from those moral codes.

TYPES OF PHILOSOPHY

Ideas about the nature of the universe logically leads to the idea that all *people* are connected. We all occupy the same planet, and within it, individual societies and countries have their own sets of standards of behavior. Why are those standards in place? The answer is straightforward: to maintain the peace and to keep things humming along so that some, many, or all, may live lives of worth and fulfillment. This is where the philosophical branch of moral philosophy comes into play.

"Moral philosophy"—a term that is used interchangeably with ethics—is its own realm of study. It sits apart from the broad ideas of general philosophy, as well as the other branches of philosophy. In fact, there are many branches of general philosophy. The main offshoots are:

- **Metaphysics.** This is the study of all existence. This is about the really big questions. For example: Why is there life? What else is out there? Why are we here?
- **Epistemology.** This concerns the intricacies of acquiring knowledge and perception. Epistemology isn't so much about the truth so much as it is about determining how we know what we know. One question in this field might be: How do we know that what we think is the truth really is the truth?
- **Ethics.** Much more on this to come!
- **Political philosophy.** The ancient Greeks developed political philosophy in tandem with individual philosophy because, as they were laying the groundwork for democracy, it was crucial for them to determine the best way to govern so as to achieve "the greater good." Political philosophy is about the underpinnings of government and rule so as to maintain peace, prosperity, and happiness for some, many, or all.
- **Aesthetics.** This is about defining beauty, art, and other kinds of expression and appreciation thereof; the things that make being a human worthwhile.

You may have noticed that there is a hierarchy of the branches. Starting from metaphysics, the individual areas move from the biggest and broadest of questions about the biggest and broadest things, and progress down through finer and finer parts of existence. For example, metaphysics sits atop the list because it is about the study of all existence and why it is; aesthetics is at the bottom, because it's about how to improve and appreciate life itself.

THE HOWS AND WHYS OF LIFE

The philosophical branch that will be studied in this book is, of course, ethics. Ethics is about the application of philosophy. What good are answers, or at least very informed or deeply held opinions, about the nature of the universe and the meaning of life if you don't know how to apply those "truths" to how you live your day-to-day life and interact with the world around you? Ethics seeks to determine how and why one should behave in a way that is the most virtuous. At its most elemental, ethics is about doing the right thing; the philosophy behind it is about determining what those right things are, in a way that benefits the individual and society at large in a fair, just, and kind manner. In other words, ethics is about right versus wrong—both in terms of defining those extremes and how to act on the side of "right."

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS

Reasons to Be Good

Ethics are obviously important constructs of civilization, born out of a primal human need to understand the world. But why, exactly, are ethics important? Because humanity needs structure to make sense out of the world. As we collect information, we order and categorize it. This helps us decode the vast and seemingly impossible-to-understand universe. Ethics is part of this ongoing crusade of decoding.

If knowledge defines the "what" of the universe, then philosophy is an attempt to unlock the "why." Ethics is then how that "why" is carried out, giving us standards, virtues, and rules by which we use to direct how we behave, both on a daily basis and in the grand scheme of things.

WHY ACT ETHICALLY?

Philosophers have pinpointed several different reasons why humans can and should act in a virtuous manner. Here are a few:

- **It's a requirement for life.** It's our biological imperative as humans to survive and thrive, and ethics are part of the complicated structure of humanity that helps us determine the best ways to act so that each of us may live a long, productive life. Acting virtuously helps ensure that our actions are not aimless, pointless, or random. By narrowing down the vastness of the universe to a lived experience with purpose and meaning —especially if it's one shared by a society or cultural group—goals and happiness are more within reach.
- **It's a requirement for society.** To be a member of society in good standing, one must follow the codes and laws that govern that culture. Everybody has a role to play, and if the social fabric breaks down, the happiness of others is threatened. Ethics builds relationships, both individually and on a grand scale. Kindness matters, and it helps forge the underlying bonds that unite a society.

- **For religious purposes.** Some people try to act in a way they have decided is the most morally upstanding, and they get their cues from religion. This plays into a type of ethics called divine command theory. People who subscribe to this type of ethics act in accordance with the rules set forth by an organized religion, and those rules are derived from holy text or the direction of a divine entity. While some religions say it is important to act appropriately just because it is the right thing to do, they also provide the crucial incentive of consequences: be good enough, and a person will reach paradise when they die; be bad enough, and an eternity of torment awaits. In other words, we need incentives to act morally.
- **For self-interest.** Some ethicists believe that humans ultimately act out of self-service, that they do things with their own interests in mind. This viewpoint even informs their moral behavior. As hinted at in "the Golden Rule" (do unto others as you would have done unto you) and the similar Eastern idea of karma, being good can be a self-serving pursuit. Hence, if a person behaves morally, respectfully, and kindly to others—for whatever reason, and even if those reasons are motivated by self-interest—good things will happen to that person in kind.
- **Because humans are good.** This is a major theme of moral philosophy. The essential question is this: Are humans ethical because they have to be, or do humans pursue a moral life because certain acts are just naturally good, or naturally bad? As an action, this plays out in the idea that humans, by and large, are themselves naturally good, and they try to act accordingly.

Virtues

Central to the discussion of ethics is the notion of virtues. Moral philosophy is very much invested in determining not only the way humans ought to act, but also the way they act. Ethics lead to quantifiable values, and those values are the handful of qualities that direct good behavior. Most every different viewpoint on ethics is concerned with virtues, because virtues have no ties to a specific religion or ethical ideology. And many are universal. (Some aren't, but that's a question for ethicists to debate.)

THE SOPHISTS

Philosophers for Hire

Sophists were professional traveling teachers who worked as freelance tutors in Athens and other major Greek cities in the fifth century B.C. They offered—only to wealthy males—an education in virtues, which was called *arete*. They got rich but were widely resented because they had their own agenda for what to teach the children of the wealthy: warrior values such as courage and physical strength.

As Athens adopted the early vestiges of democracy later on, arete evolved to mean how to influence others, particularly citizens in political functions, through persuasion with a mastery of rhetoric, or the ability to debate and discuss. Sophistic education grew out of this and capitalized on it.

Virtues of the Sophists

Among the virtues professed by some of the Sophists were:

- **Protagoras:** Truth is relative, and so therefore everyone has their own subjective truth.
- **Gorgias:** If something does exist, we cannot ever really know it, and we have no way to communicate it.
- **Prodicus:** Wisdom is a great virtue, and those that are wise should receive more attention than the less learned.

The six main teachers in Athens at that time came to be known collectively as the Sophists. These influential philosophical thinkers wrapped up their ideas with politics, human behavior, and moral philosophy. Their names were Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Hippias, Prodicus, and Thrasymachus.

GOING WITH THE FLOW

It's difficult to fully understand the philosophy of the Sophists because, like many texts of all kinds from ancient Greece, detailed records of their works have not survived. (Most of their arguments were oral, anyhow—they were all about debate and rhetoric, not rigorous research and synthesis.) Most of what is known about them are from text fragments, Plato's withering criticism of them later on, and other secondhand writings a generation or more removed.

While all ethical arguments are subjective in their drive to find objective ends to ethical ideas, the Sophists are widely regarded as just plain wrong. This is because they often used faulty logic to explain and justify what they said were truths. In fact, their end goals were to be private tutors and to keep the wealthy and powerful wealthy and powerful. They had no interest in overarching truths about humanity. Their ethical arguments kept in line with the idea that it is moral, or rather amoral or above the concept of morality, to act as one sees fit in order to win. Happiness doesn't matter; doing the right thing doesn't matter. The only consequence that truly matters is winning.

THE DEBATE TEAM

Similarly, Sophists liked to win public speaking contests and debates, so as to increase their standing—and salary demands—among other Sophists. So they developed methods that made their arguments sound good even if they weren't truthful. But here's what we can learn from the Sophists: the importance of debate, arguing, and seeing an argument through—and by the sin of omission, being able to back those arguments up with facts or proof, or at the very least, be able to argue a point and reason through it so the argument at least makes sense.

Here's how they did it. When arguing a position in a classroom, public debate, or competition, they would offer a best "proof" in support. Ideally this would be a quotation from a great work of Greek religious literature that told of the gods and their actions. After all, if an action of the gods was found to be similar to that being discussed in debate, then that was evidence of the correctness of the action—for the gods are gods, and they are infallible. This line of argument was not completely objective, but that didn't really matter for the Sophists, because the ones who did best in these debates and discussions were those who had a mastery of quotations. Whoever could come up with his justification the fastest was seen as the smartest, and was usually the winner of the debate. A masterful Sophist

like this would then get more work tutoring the son of a wealthy Athenian, and there were a whole series of practical courses that a Sophist could teach to his young charges. Among the skills the students were taught by their private philosophers were:

• How to argue and win despite a bad case
• How to charm someone to get what you want
• How to manipulate others in business deals
• How to do whatever it takes to win

IT'S A LIVING

The real kicker is that many of the Sophists didn't actually believe the stuff they espoused, namely the religious justifications and examples they used in their arguments. Sophists were most likely atheists, cynical about the Greek pantheon of gods and its traditions. But they did believe in the often crass, win-at-all-costs nature of their teachings. For them it was all about saying what Athenians wanted to hear so they could get work.

The Sophists may have shown a complete lack of ethics at the highest levels, which was damaging to humanity and democracy, but they did bring up some philosophical truths that are still being debated in ethical circles today. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle rose up from the Sophist tradition to create legitimate, not-for-profit philosophy that set out to investigate human nature and the right ways to act. Society's demand for wisdom required more than what the Sophists offered. But at least the Sophists espoused practical application of virtues, whatever they may be, to life, which is what ethics is all about.

It's no coincidence that today the term *sophistry* has come to mean fake knowledge that sounds real because it's surrounded by the trappings of logic, knowledge, and academia. It means the deliberate use of phony reasoning.

THE SOCRATIC METHOD

How Socrates Shaped Ethics

The period in which Socrates (ca. 470–399 B.C.) lived in Athens was known as the Golden Age, in part because of Socrates's contributions to elevating human knowledge, reason, and understanding. Socrates was educated by an early philosopher named Anaxagoras, at first splitting his time between philosophy and cosmology (the study of the nature of reality, an early form of philosophy). Eventually, he switched almost entirely to philosophy. As a way to learn, he always asked questions, pestering residents of Athens to make them realize they didn't even have a moral code.

Quotable Voices

"True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us." — Socrates

Before Socrates streamlined philosophy and ethics to be about why humans do what they do, "philosophy" was about the intersection of metaphysics, religion, and science. But Socrates was interested in the theoretical notions that prompted all of those other fields. He was the first to assert that philosophy should be about figuring out how people should live their lives, and that the cornerstone of ethics was determining which virtues carried the most merit.

NEVER STOP ASKING QUESTIONS

It's possible that Socrates's most important legacy in the Western philosophical canon is the introduction of the dialectical method of questioning. (Socrates called it *elenchus*, which translates to "cross-examination.") It's since come to be known as the Socratic method.