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Introduction: Are You a Good Person?

> Then does knowledge of [the best] good carry great weight for [our] way of life, and would it make us better able, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark? If so, we should try to grasp, in outline at any rate, what the good is. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.2.1094a23–26)

Are you a good person? Most people ask themselves this question at some point in their lives—lying awake in bed at three in the morning, or perhaps when making an important decision, or at significant milestones like birthdays or graduations, or just out of the blue for no reason at all. It is an existentially difficult question, meaning that it has the power to challenge who you are and alter the course of your life forever, depending on what conclusions you reach. As uncomfortable as asking it is, as Søren Kierkegaard said, you cannot *not* be interested in it. You may be either curious about or indifferent to just about any topic there is—movies, astronomy, exercise—but *everyone* cares about questions concerning what kind of person you should be and how you should live. The mere fact of being born a human makes you deeply interested in making your self a good one.

Along with its existential challenge, it is also an intellectually difficult question in that it is very hard to know how to go about answering it; no one gets issued an owner's manual for a human life at birth that can tell you the right way to use it. The problem is that in order to know if *you* are a good person, you have to know what *a good person* is, and how do you figure *that* out? Many people get their ideas on these kinds of subjects from their society or religion, but this only solves the problem if those ideas are right—and how do you know that? We are often horrified at what past societies found perfectly acceptable—slavery, human sacrifice, repression—and they took their standards for granted as obviously right the same way that we do. So you have to wonder, at least a little, if we

might be as blind to something wrong in our views the way virtually every society before us has been.

So far, we moved from wondering about the personal question "Am *I* a good person?" to the broader inquiry "What is *a* good person in general?," but that doesn't seem to have made things easier. To answer the second, broader question, we have to figure out what standards we should use to judge the goodness of people overall, and how are we supposed to do that? Where do we get the standards to make these judgments, and how do we tell if they're the right ones? How can we determine what the right thing to do is in any situation? Are you a good person or not?

Many of the greatest philosophers in history spent their lives wrestling with these questions, and the answers they came up with make up one of the main branches of philosophy: ethics.[1] Whereas many people write off philosophy as too abstract to have much bearing on "real life" (usually without having read a word of it), ethics is concrete and crucial to your daily living. You yourself have engaged in ethics every time you asked yourself questions like whether or not you are a good person or what is the right thing to do in a particular situation. The problem, as we have seen from just starting to think about it, is that these are tough questions and many people seem content to leave the matter up to whatever their society or their gut tells them. Socrates said that being good is much more important than doing well, yet we spend our time and energy on material and societal success rather than on decency and integrity, bulking up our bank accounts rather than our moral fiber. Putting aside a little time to stop and reflect on what it means to live a good life is crucial to having one since, as Aristotle says at the beginning of this chapter, you can only aim to be good if you know where to aim.

If the bad news is that these questions are as hard as they are important, the good news is that there's a lot of help available to you. Over

1. The other generally recognized branches of philosophy are metaphysics (dealing with questions of reality), epistemology (truth and knowledge), aesthetics (art and beauty), and logic (the rules of correct reasoning).

the last twenty-five centuries, Western philosophers have offered brilliant and fascinating answers, three of which have emerged as the generally agreed-upon best, most important ethical theories: utilitarianism, deontology, and character ethics. There are plenty of other excellent theories that individual philosophers consider equally good if not better than these three and so deserve to be included in a discussion of ethics, as well as many important non-Western views that offer profound insights. However, there are only so many topics one book can cover, especially a short, readable introduction to the field. These three are the most commonly discussed, studied, and taught theories of Western ethics today, so they make a natural collection.

This book will serve as your guide to these pinnacles of the great ethical thinking that we have inherited. We will not chase down every detail or possible controversy, but will try to provide you with a broad overview of the territory. If you want to pursue a more in-depth analysis of something you find particularly interesting, this initial orientation will prepare you to do so. While experts disagree about scholarly details—that's what we do—I'll be presenting basic, reasonably uncontroversial accounts of these ethical theories. Experts may quibble with details here and there—and I will try to point out places open to more painstaking debate—but my purpose is educational rather than scholarly. My goal is to show you the way of looking at the world that lies at the heart of these systems, explaining what motivates the details rather than laying out the vast, complicated array of details themselves.

By the end of the book, you will understand how Western ethics was born in Socrates's conversations. You will grasp its main goals and some of its largest issues, and you will have a good working understanding of three leading ethical theories—John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, Immanuel Kant's deontology, and Aristotle's character ethics. You will also appreciate two twentieth-century challenges to the entire enterprise in Carol Gilligan's feminism and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. If you stick with it, these mysterious names and words will soon make complete sense to you.

How to Read This Book

You may not get instructions for a human life, but you do for this book. While each chapter should be readable on its own, it's far better to read through the book in order. Deep thinker Douglas Adams once said that you cannot appreciate an answer unless you know the question, an idea that is particularly relevant to the history of thought. No one thinks in a vacuum. We think (and paint and write and act) in response to various provocations and stimulations we find in what we see, read, and think about—responding to pressing problems of the day, to questions left unanswered by our predecessors, or to problems we find within their answers.

Inspired by Socrates's method of dialogue, I have put the philosophers into a large-scale conversation with each other. *Introducing Ethics* sets up each system as a response to other thinkers. Each philosopher tries to improve on the ideas of others by answering objections or solving problems or giving a superior account of something. This way of looking at the history of philosophy shows you the motivation behind each figure's thought as well as the context around it. You will grasp not just *what* each thinker said but *why* they said it, a much deeper and more satisfying kind of comprehension. It also gives the book the overall structure of a narrative within which each figure occupies a place that makes sense, and helps make sense of their thought.

I am not reconstructing the conversation as it actually occurred, however. Instead, after exploring the start in Socrates I will be presenting the three ethicists in reverse chronological order. In other words, we will start with the latest author—the nineteenth-century English philosopher Mill—and work our way backward to the earliest—the fourth-century BCE Greek philosopher Aristotle. This is an unusual choice, but decades of teaching have taught me that they are much easier to understand when presented like this. Although not literally true, they can still be seen as talking to each other in a sense because many of the ideas that later ethicists base their views on were already around, just in less

developed forms. Examining what a philosopher said about the ideas available to them allows us to anticipate how they might have responded to the thinkers who come after them, which I will use to construct a dialogue between people who did not actually read each other's work due to their respective places in history.

Each chapter will guide you through one **primary text**, that is, one book written by the philosopher in question, occasionally drawing briefly on their other works when helpful. The start of every chapter lets you know what book I'm using in it, giving you the bibliographical information that will let you find the same edition so that you can easily follow along. You don't need to use the same edition, but it makes things easier since most of the quotations in that chapter come from it (though I will show you how you can follow along in other editions as well). Reading the original philosophical works is not at all necessary for following and learning from this book, just helpful and encouraged.

This book can be used in classes such as Introduction to Ethics, one of the most frequently taught philosophy classes, or more advanced historically oriented courses. However, I have written it not just for students but for anyone interested in the topic. You don't need any special knowledge or skills, just a hunger for meaning and an intellectual curiosity; if I have done my job, the book provides all the guidance you need to do yours.

Together with the texts it discusses, this book can also function as a kind of College Course in a Box. The book's accompanying online resources include the materials from the Introduction to Ethics class that I have been teaching at colleges and universities for twenty-five years, such as the syllabus and a number of different types of assignments: Reading Questions, Quiz Questions, Complete Tests (including a cumulative Final Exam), along with all the answers. These can be adapted and used by anyone teaching an ethics course for the first time or just looking for some new ideas for their course.

Readers can also construct their own personal Independent Study by reading the pages of the texts that are assigned on the syllabus, the relevant chapter of this book, and then working through the questions at the

end of each chapter and the online assignments. If you do all of that, you will have experienced something very much like taking my class.

I have used a few tools to facilitate the book's ability to teach you the ideas. The first time I use a technical term in each chapter I put it in **bold**; a Glossary of these terms with their definitions can be found at the end of the book. Any time you feel a little confused or vague on a term, or just want a quick reminder, take a peek at the Glossary.

Each chapter ends with two things:

1. a review of the Key Points covered within it; and
2. a list of Discussion Questions meant to provoke open-ended discussion and further reflection on that chapter's ideas.

The best way to use this book is to first read the primary text, that is, the philosophical work named at the start of each chapter which is what it comments on—Plato's *Euthyphro*, Mill's *Utilitarianism*, Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, and Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Then read the chapter of this book that guides you through it. Rereading the primary text afterward is a fantastic idea. It will read so much better—I promise. Try it with *Euthyphro*, our first, short reading; I think you'll be surprised at the difference it makes. Finally, try to contemplate the Discussion Questions at the end of each chapter, using the Key Points and Glossary when necessary. If you read this way, by the end you will have a solid, working knowledge of some of the high points of the history of Western ethics. You will be thinking some of the greatest thoughts humans have thought.

Lee Braver

Viladesuso, Spain

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