

Class #24 - Ethics and Meta-Ethics  
Plato, "What is Right Conduct?"

I. Nihilism, Relativism, and Objectivism

We have been asking various questions about the nature of persons.  
One question arises from our brief discussion of abortion: are fetuses persons?  
More generally: What is a person? What is it that makes me (and keeps me) me over time?  
We started to try to answer those questions directly by thinking about the self.  
We proceeded to ask some questions about the nature of mind.  
When we think about minds and persons generally, we start to ask questions about whether things other than the obvious ones are people: intelligent robots? aliens? fetuses?  
Part of the answers to these latter questions depends on our answers to the first questions.  
If intelligent robots can have minds, then we are more likely to see them as fully-fledged persons, as parts of our moral community.  
If fetuses are conscious or have self-awareness, say, then the abortion question gets difficult.  
Another part of the answers to the latter questions depends on our general principles of morality.  
In our last unit of this course, we will look briefly at some prominent attempts to analyze or codify our moral principles.

We probably all think we are ethical people, but what makes us so?  
We may obey the laws, but some laws may be unjust.  
We obey many customs, or religions, but there are conflicting customs.  
The Aztecs practiced human sacrifice and the Aghori Hindu sect in India practice cannibalism.  
We follow our moral instincts, but we can make mistakes.  
History is filled with persons who literally saw other human beings as less than fully human.  
Our use of reasoning in ethics may help, but it is unlikely to be an infallible guide.  
Perhaps we participate in unjust institutions.  
Slavery, like capitalism, had many defenders.

We'll start by thinking a little bit about some meta-ethical questions about the possibility of establishing or codifying moral principles.  
Meta-ethics is the study of the possibility of ethics.  
It is also, sometimes, taken to be the study of the meanings of ethical terms.

Morality, or ethics, is the study of right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair, just and unjust, virtuous and vicious.  
Right and wrong tend to characterize actions.  
Good and bad and virtuous and vicious are more naturally applicable to people and their characters.  
Fair and unfair and just and unjust are usually used to describe social arrangements or distributions of goods.  
But, these pairs of terms are inter-related.

Let's use 'morality' to refer to a set of true claims about right and wrong.  
Consider the logical truth ME about morality.

- ME     There is:
- A. No morality;
  - B. Exactly one morality; or
  - C. More than one morality.

ME contrasts three meta-ethical positions.

A is called moral nihilism

B is called moral absolutism or moral objectivism.

C is called moral relativism.

A, B, and C are intended to be prescriptive, rather than descriptive.

There are many different codes of behavior that people actually follow.

The question is whether there is one correct code of behavior.

The objectivist claims that there is just one set of rights and wrongs.

The objectivist's claim is about what exists.

It is not about what we know.

Even if there is only one true morality, we may be ignorant of it.

So we can be objectivists without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.

This unit of our course will not tell you what is right or wrong.

It may give you some insight into how to decide that for yourselves: reasons *why*.

There are two standard examples of moral objectivism: utilitarianism and Kantian deontology.

We will look at both theories in our remaining classes this term.

Today, we will briefly examine relativism and nihilism.

## II. Relativism

There are two types of relativism, which we can call conventionalism and subjectivism.

Conventionalism says that morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other group.

Subjectivism says that morality depends on the individual.

There are at least two different sorts of subjectivism.

Thomas Hobbes derives a complicated system of justice from basic subjectivist principles.

He starts by observing that people call what they like 'good' and what they dislike 'bad'.

The social ramifications of everyone having their own standards of morality are devastating.

A world in which everyone adheres to their individual interests is what Hobbes calls a state of nature.

Life, in a state of nature, he says, is, "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

Thus, Hobbes, argues, we enter into a social contract in which we give up all of our autonomy to a sovereign, or government.

The government protects us from each other and from external enemies in return for the absolute right to determine the laws.

In contrast to Hobbes, Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists present an alternative form of subjectivism.

They claim that morality is created by each individual through her or his actions and choices.

For the existentialist, each person creates his or her own morality.

One concern about the plausibility of either kind of subjectivism is that our moral beliefs tend to reflect those of others around us, with only small, individual variations.

Social conformity to central principles of morality should be no surprise because we learn how to make our moral judgments from our communities.

Some philosophers take these facts to support cultural relativism, or conventionalism.

On conventionalism, right and wrong are determined by a society, subculture, family, or other group.

Herodotus tells the story of King Darius, who brought Callatians and Greeks to his court to discuss cultural variations in burial practices.

The Callatians were cannibals, and ate their dead.

The Greeks cremated their dead.

Each thought the others' practice was not just repugnant but immoral.

Herodotus concludes that custom is king, that the conventionalist's view that morality depends on our society is correct.

Let's call the problem Herodotus describes Darius's puzzle.

Darius's puzzle is what to think when we discover conflicting social norms, specifically ones which are perceived as moral norms.

Naively, we can defend our own views.

When these views are widely shared, we might take them to transcend our culture.

Agreement on customs, especially by those closest to us, can mislead us into thinking that our norms are the correct ones.

But when we study people unlike or distant from us, we can find significant departures from our ethical norms.

What we think of as abnormal may be taken as normal.

Since the normal varies, some people think, the moral also varies.

Anthropology is filled with interesting descriptions of the variance of normality.

Some societies condemn homosexuality, while others embrace it as normal.

Some societies respect revenge killing, while others condemn all murders.

One important question to ask when facing Darius's puzzle is whether we really have conflicting moral principles.

Some norms are just conventions, mere expressions of preference.

But some people elevate such preferences to the level of morality.

Consider the Native American berdache, or two-spirit person.

Two-spirits are usually males who play traditional female gender roles.

The life of a two-spirit includes what we would ordinarily call homosexual behavior.

Many Native American tribes thus accept homosexuality as a matter of convention.

In contrast, some people believe that homosexuality is immoral.

Notice that the fact that some people believe that sexuality is a matter for ethics does not make sexual preference a moral issue.

I can deride the eating of Brussels sprouts as immoral, too.

My dogmatic claim does not entail that it is wrong to eat Brussels sprouts.

The example of the two-spirit only shows that customs or mores are relative.

They do not show that morality itself is relative.

Certainly, there are different practices in different societies.

We can even admit that a person who violates a social code may be judged as immoral, without accepting that morality itself is relative.

Consider a society that thinks that sex on Tuesdays is immoral, and consider a couple who have sex on Tuesday in that society.

They will be seen as immoral.

We might describe and understand how they will be shunned and derided.

But, we do not see them as immoral for having sex on Tuesday.

We can see them as having violated a norm.

Maybe we could see them as immoral for shaming their families.

But sex on Tuesday itself is not a wrong.

There is a way to understand examples of variations in customs which does not invoke relativism.

Consider head-covering among Jews and Christians in places of worship.

Jews cover their heads; Christians remove their hats.

Jews need not believe that Christians are irreverent for uncovering their heads.

They can just see Christians as having a different manifestation of the universal imperative for reverence.

The Jew can even think that the Christian has the wrong idea of what reverence is, without seeing the Christian as irreverent.

The normal varies with the culture, but that does not entail ethical relativism.

We must distinguish descriptive claims, about what people do, from prescriptive claims, about what people ought to do.

That the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice is no argument for the moral acceptability of human sacrifice.

People do have different customs, but that does not mean that they should.

Ethical relativism says that morality also varies with the culture and sociological observations of cultural variations in norms do not suffice to establish relativism.

### III. Nihilism and Thrasymachus

The relativist believes in morality, even though it is determined either by one's self or one's culture.

In contrast, the nihilist says that there is no morality.

According to the nihilist, what we think of as morality is an expression of preference or conditioning.

Nihilism is a close view to subjectivism.

Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.

The nihilist says that there is no such thing as morality, and that right and wrong are illusions.

The main difference between the two positions is that the nihilist believes that we can never make moral errors, while the subjectivist believes that we can.

Thrasymachus, in the *Republic*, presents a nihilist view.

Friedrich Nietzsche presents a fuller nihilist analysis of morality as the will of the strong.

If you are interested in nihilism, try his *The Genealogy of Morals*, and/or look for Prof. Franklin's Nietzsche seminar.

In the *Republic*, Socrates is engaged in an extended exploration of justice.

Cephalus, a wealthy old man, characterizes justice as telling the truth and paying back what one owes.

Cephalus's definition only lists two examples of just actions, and is clearly incomplete.

To show that Cephalus's characterization is deficient, Socrates presents the example of a friend who has lent you a weapon.

Your friend has now gone mad and wants his weapon back.

In Socrates' example, it would be wrong to give back what one owes.

Polemarchus re-interprets Cephalus's claim: justice is giving someone what that person deserves. Polemarchus understands giving what one deserves as helping one's friends and harming one's enemies. After two digressions (one on how justice is not to be isolated as a craft independent of other pursuits, and another on how one can make mistakes about who one's friends and enemies really are), Socrates argues that the just person can not harm her or his enemies. Harming some one makes them worse, but the just person wants to improve others.

Thrasymachus believes that all of this discussion presumes a naïve acceptance of morality. Instead, Thrasymachus argues that morality, or justice, is merely doing what the powerful want.

The just is always a loser in comparison with the unjust. First of all, in private contracts: wherever the unjust is the partner of the just you will find that, when the partnership is dissolved, the unjust man has always more and the just less. Secondly, in their dealings with the State: when there is an income tax, the just man will pay more and the unjust less on the same amount of income; and when there is anything to be received the one gains nothing and the other much. Observe also what happens when they take an office; there is the just man neglecting his affairs and perhaps suffering other losses, and getting nothing out of the public, because he is just; moreover he is hated by his friends and acquaintances for refusing to serve them in unlawful ways. But all this is reversed in the case of the unjust man. I am speaking, as before, of injustice on a large scale in which the advantage of the unjust is more apparent; and my meaning will be most clearly seen if we turn to that highest form of injustice in which the criminal is the happiest of men, and the sufferers or those who refuse to do injustice are the most miserable, that is to say tyranny, which by fraud and force takes away the property of others, not little by little but wholesale; comprehending in one, things sacred as well as profane, private and public; for which acts of wrong, if he were detected perpetrating any one of them singly, he would be punished and incur great disgrace - they who do such wrong in particular cases are called robbers of temples, and man-stealers and burglars and swindlers and thieves. But when a man besides taking away the money of the citizens has made slaves of them, then, instead of these names of reproach, he is termed happy and blessed, not only by the citizens but by all who hear of his having achieved the consummation of injustice. For mankind censure injustice, fearing that they may be the victims of it and not because they shrink from committing it. And thus, as I have shown, Socrates, injustice, when on a sufficient scale, has more strength and freedom and mastery than justice; and, as I said at first, justice is the interest of the stronger, whereas injustice is a man's own profit and interest (*Republic*, Book I; it's p 11 in our reading, in a different translation).

Those in power write the laws, and set the social standards.  
The rest of us learn to act in ways which serve the strong.  
Thrasymachus claims that what we ordinarily call injustice is actually a virtue.  
The petty criminal is served by his theft, as long as he is not caught.  
The more unjust a person is, the better he will be able to avoid being caught.

The ultimate height of injustice, says Thrasymachus, is the enslavement of a nation.  
Subjects of an authoritarian leader laud the despot's actions, instead of denouncing them.  
What Socrates describes as vice, then, looks exactly like virtue.  
What we call morality, Thrasymachus argues, is learned through reward and punishment.  
So generally-accepted guides for behavior are just expressions of the interests of those in the position to reward and punish.  
Conversely, what is wrong is what is against the interests of the strong.  
Those in power are thieves and people laud and obey them in order to protect themselves.

#### IV. Socrates' Response to Thrasymachus

Against Thrasymachus, Socrates argues that the rulers do not rule for their own benefit, but for the benefit of their subjects.

He first argues that rulers may be wrong about what is in their interests.

If we do what they tell us to do, we could actually be working against their interests.

Thrasymachus responds that the true ruler would always be right about what his interests are.

Socrates then argues that the true ruler works in the interests of his subjects, not in his own interest.

The true ruler earns no personal benefit from ruling.

Socrates notes that rulers must be paid or threatened with the punishment of being ruled by a worse person, since the ruling itself is not in their own interests.

Thrasymachus responds to Socrates with an analogy of a shepherd and a sheep.

You fancy that the shepherd or neatherd fattens or tends the sheep or oxen with a view to their own good and not to the good of himself or his master; and you further imagine that the rulers of states, if they are true rulers, never think of their subjects as sheep, and that they are not studying their own advantage day and night. Oh, no; and so entirely astray are you in your ideas about the just and unjust as not even to know that justice and the just are in reality another's good; that is to say, the interest of the ruler and stronger, and the loss of the subject and servant; and injustice the opposite; for the unjust is lord over the truly simple and just: he is the stronger, and his subjects do what is for his interest, and minister to his happiness, which is very far from being their own (*Republic*, Book I; pp 10-11 in our reading).

The shepherd cares for his sheep, and wants them to be healthy.

But, the shepherd's only real concern is for him/herself.

The shepherd takes care of the sheep only so that they can be of greater use to the shepherd, not because s/he is concerned with the interests of the sheep themselves.

Socrates and Thrasymachus proceed to compare the just person to the unjust person.

Thrasymachus insists that the unjust man is good and wise, while the just man is ignorant and bad.

This argument may depend on an equivocation between two senses of 'good'.

The first sense is opposed to evil and usually entails self-sacrifice.

The second sense of 'good' involves actions of objects that are beneficial to us.

So, healthy food is good, and exercise is good.

This second sense might entail some self-sacrifice, but it is primarily about self-interest.

When Thrasymachus says that the unjust man is good, he uses 'good' in the second sense.

Socrates seems to be using the first sense in order to draw a contrast with Thrasymachus.

One important question is whether and how these two senses are related.

Socrates and Thrasymachus agree that the just man wants advantage over the unjust man, who is unlike him, but does not seek advantage over other just people.

The unjust man wants advantage over every one.

Experts try to outdo laypersons, who are unlike them, but not other experts, who are like them.

The idea is that if one doctor has found a cure for a disease, other doctors seek the same.

But, the expert is one who is knowledgeable, and wise, and good (in the beneficial sense).

So, the wise and good man seems to want advantage over those unlike him, but not over those like him.

This is just how we characterized the just man.

So, Socrates argues, the just man is wise and good, and the unjust man is not wise and good.

Thrasymachus holds to the claim that injustice is more powerful than justice.  
Socrates argues that a city must be just in order to rule other cities.

Would you have the goodness also to inform me, whether you think that a state, or an army, or a band of robbers and thieves, or any other gang of evil-doers could act at all if they injured one another?

No indeed, he said, they could not.

But if they abstained from injuring one another, then they might act together better?

Yes.

And this is because injustice creates divisions and hatreds and fighting, and justice imparts harmony and friendship; is not that true, Thrasymachus?

I agree, he said, because I do not wish to quarrel with you.

How good of you, I said; but I should like to know also whether injustice, having this tendency to arouse hatred, wherever existing, among slaves or among freemen, will not make them hate one another and set them at variance and render them incapable of common action?

Certainly.

And even if injustice be found in two only, will they not quarrel and fight, and become enemies to one another and to the just

They will.

And suppose injustice abiding in a single person, would your wisdom say that she loses or that she retains her natural power?

Let us assume that she retains her power.

Yet is not the power which injustice exercises of such a nature that wherever she takes up her abode, whether in a city, in an army, in a family, or in any other body, that body is, to begin with, rendered incapable of united action by reason of sedition and distraction; and does it not become its own enemy and at variance with all that opposes it, and with the just? Is not this the case?

Yes, certainly.

And is not injustice equally fatal when existing in a single person; in the first place rendering him incapable of action because he is not at unity with himself, and in the second place making him an enemy to himself and the just? Is not that true, Thrasymachus?

Yes. (*Republic*, Book I; p 16 in our reading).

The soul of a person is analogous to a city, according to Socrates.

Just as a city must be harmonious to be strong, so must a person must be in harmony.

The soul rules over the various parts of a person, and it must rule in harmony.

A person must be just in order to be successful and happy.

Thrasymachus is not convinced by Socrates's arguments, though he accedes.

The *Republic* continues for ten books, exploring the analogy between the city and the soul.

We will look at Book II in our next class, after the break.

## V. Nihilism Today

Putting Thrasymachus's arguments aside, nihilism seems inconsistent with our uses of moral language.

If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then our uses of these terms as motivations is puzzling.

The terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.

Contrast ethics with food preferences, about which we are nihilistic.

There is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes better than chocolate.

I may prefer one, or the other, but my preference need not apply to others.  
If some one has different tastes, there is no fact which will decide which are the right preferences.  
We can urge someone to consider different preferences, but after that, it is up to them to decide.  
The question of what we prefer is distinct from the question of which it is better to eat.  
There may be reasons to eat broccoli rather than chocolate,  
But we are considering which we like best.  
Morality seems different from preferences regarding the taste of food.  
When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.  
It has a force for others which seems unexplained by moral nihilism.

Still, moral properties seem spooky to many people.  
They aren't the kinds of properties we can observe directly.  
It is difficult to know how to resolve disagreements over moral claims.  
Adopting nihilism allows us to avoid the difficult questions about how to resolve moral conflicts and establish moral principles.