Class #25 - Morality and Self-Interest
Plato, "Why Should I Be Moral"

I. Pascal's Wager

In our last class before break, we discussed relativism and nihilism.
One worry that motivates nihilists is whether we can justify morality without appeal to religion.
Some people believe that we must appeal to God to support moral beliefs, to motivate personal sacrifice.
By punishing wrongdoers and rewarding those who do good, the idea of God creates moral motivation.
Without God, some people argue, life has no meaning and there is no reason to be good.

Call the person who says that morality is grounded in religion the religious moralist.
One opponent of the religious moralist says that we can have morality independent from God and religion.
Call this opponent of the religious moralist the secular moralist.
The religious moralist worries that secular morality is incoherent.
It provides no motivation to sacrifice one's own interest for that of others.
If secular morality is unmotivated, then we must choose between religious morality and nihilism.

Some people hesitate to embrace religious morality in the absence of what they deem to be compelling proof of the existence of God.
The seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal argued that we need not have decisive proof of God's existence in order to adopt a religious morality.

Consider how to calculate the expected value of a bet.

Expected value (EV) = (Payoff x Odds of winning) - (Cost of the Bet x Odds of losing)

For example, let us say that you bet six dollars that you will roll a one or a two on one roll of a fair die.
If you roll a one or a two, you get six dollars.
If you roll a three, four, five, or six, you lose six dollars.
Your odds of winning are 1/3; your odds of losing are 2/3.
So, your expected value is (6 x 1/3) - (6 x 2/3) = -$2.
This means that on average, you will lose $2 for each time you make this bet.
If you play this bet a thousand times, you are likely to lose about two thousand dollars.

Let's imagine, instead, that you get 2 to 1 odds.
If you roll a one or a two, you get twelve dollars.
If you roll a three, four, five, or six, you lose only six dollars.
Now your expected value would be (12 x 1/3) - (6 x 2/3) = $0.
The bet is even and you can expect to break even, within predictable ranges of deviation, over any number of chances.

In Pascal's wager, we are wondering whether or not to act as if God exists, just as before we were wondering whether to take the bets.
We do not know whether God exists or not.
We can act as if God exists, or we can act as if God does not exist.
The combination of these two options creates four possibilities, as shown in the following chart.

	God exists	God does not exist
Act as if God exists	Finite Sacrifice + Infinite reward = **Infinite reward**	**Finite sacrifice**
Act as if God does not exist	Finite Reward + Infinite Punishment = **Infinite Punishment**	**Finite reward**

To calculate the expected outcome of acting as if God exists, we multiply the probability of God existing times an infinite number, and subtract the probability of God not existing P(N) times a finite number.
Of course, we do not know the probability of God existing.
According to Pascal's wager, it does not matter as long as we ascribe some probability to God existing.
The expected value of acting as if God exists will be infinitely large on any finite value of P(G).

> EV = (Payoff x Odds of winning) - (Cost of the Bet x Odds of losing)
> EV = P(G) x infinity - P(N) x some finite value

For the first term, any number, even a very small number, multiplied by an infinite number yields an infinite number.
So, the first term will be an infinite number.
For the second term, any number multiplied by a finite number will be a finite number.
So, the second term will be a finite number.
An infinite number minus a finite number is an infinite number.
So, the expected value of acting as if one believes in God is infinitely positive.

Conversely, the expected value of acting as if God does not exist is infinitely negative.

> EV = P(N) x some finite value - P(G) x infinity

The expected result of acting as if God does not exist is infinite punishment.
So, purely on a rational basis, in the absence of knowing whether God does or does not exist, we should act as if he does.

Pascal's wager only works if we give some positive value to the probability of God existing.
If we are certain that God does not exist, then even the infinite reward and punishment multiplied by zero end up at zero.
But proofs of non-existence are difficult to find.

As a practical matter, the fear of God does not seem to work as a moral motivation.
Even religious people act immorally.
More importantly, respecting persons out of fear of punishment, whether by God or the law or one's parents or peers, is mere egoism and not morality.
If we act morally out of fear, we are actually just acting in our self-interest.
But morality is supposed to oppose self-interest.
When we help some one merely for a reward we may not have acted morally.
It is difficult to determine if some one acts morally when self-interest is involved.

The secular moralist argues that we can justify morality without appeal to religion, or even to Pascal's wager.

One way to justify morality would be to appeal to our intuitions about right and wrong.

Ordinarily, we judge pretty consistently in most cases.

We more-or-less all know which acts are wrong and which ones are good.

We may have some difficulty subordinating our interests, but that doesn't arise from any difficulty knowing about morality.

Another approach is to try to maximize the production of reliable sources of human happiness: freedom from pain and want, security and emotional peace, creative work, art and music.

We seek happiness from these sources.

Further, we can see that others lack these, and we can find satisfaction in helping them.

We will examine two objective approaches next week.

From the objectivist's point of view, nihilism, the only other option, reveals a lack of compassion, not an insight into truth.

II. Plato and Moral Motivation

Our discussion of Pascal's wager raised two distinct meta-ethical questions.

The first concerned whether to adopt nihilism, relativism, or objectivity.

We are going to proceed to reject nihilism and relativism, and to accept moral objectivity.

Before we get into the details of any particular moral theory, we will look at the second meta-ethical question raised by Pascal's wager: Why should I be moral?

Even if I believe that there is one morality, and even if I know the right thing to do, the question why I should sacrifice my self-interest for those of others remains.

This question is at the root of the problem of egoism.

The problem of egoism holds even for the religious moralist, since to obey a moral law out of fear of eternal punishment, or desire for eternal reward, is just another form of egoism.

Glaucon, in the *Republic*, also worries that egoism can not provide moral motivation.

There are three kinds of actions I am motivated to perform.

First, there are things I just like to do.

I know why I should eat chocolate pudding (in moderation); I like it.

I need no pudding motivation beyond that which egoism provides.

Second, there are actions that I both like to do, and are good to do.

I know why I should ride my bicycle; I like it, and it is healthy.

If you do not like to exercise, consider loving someone who loves you.

It is good to do, but it is also pleasurable.

Glaucon mentions having good vision, which is an accurate, if unexciting, example.

I need no bicycle motivation, since, as in the first case, egoism provides sufficient motivation.

Third, there are things that I do not like to do, but I fear the consequences of not doing.

I know why I should pay my taxes.

If I get caught, I will suffer more than if I had paid them.

Egoism does not provide sufficient motivation to pay taxes for most of us.

We also need the threat of punishment.

Thus, Socrates divides all goods into these three classes: things that are just pleasurable (chocolate

pudding), things that are both pleasurable and rewarding (cycling), and things which we have to do in order to get or avoid something else (paying taxes).

If just, or good, actions were of the first or second kinds, then there would be no problem of moral motivation.
The problem discussed in our reading arises because doing good seems to be in the third class.
Glaucon says that most people think that justice is of the third kind, like paying one's taxes.
He argues that justice is not something we want to do, but something we have to do.
Socrates tries to convince Glaucon that justice is of the second kind, like riding my bicycle.

Glaucon starts his argument by considering the example of the ring of Gyges.
The ring made Gyges invisible.
Gyges, with his power of invisibility, killed the King of Lydia, married the Queen, and ruled the land.
You might have other ideas of what to do with an invisibility ring.
Glaucon argues that the just man, if given the ring, would behave exactly like the unjust man.
Glaucon believes that this shows that the main goal of the just man is not to be just, but to appear just.
We want the rewards that come with a good reputation, but also the spoils that come from maximizing our self-interest relative to the interests of others.

In order to determine whether justice itself is desirable, Glaucon compares a just man to an unjust man.
Since we do not want to confuse being just with having a reputation for being just, we should compare a just man who has a reputation for being unjust with an unjust man who has a reputation for being just.
Glaucon adds that the truly just man would be unconcerned with his reputation, and even hindered by it if it were too good.
If the just man were rewarded for his goodness, then we might have trouble determining if his real motive were justice or the rewards.
(We will return to this theme when we read Kant.)
Similarly, the truly unjust man will never be caught doing bad things, and will have a good reputation.
When we compare these two men, it is clear which one we would choose to be.
Justice, like paying your taxes, Glaucon argues, is good for its consequences but not valuable in itself.

III. Socrates' Account of Moral Motivation

Glaucon has argued that egoism can not provide moral motivation since it is in our interests to be unjust while having a reputation for being just, rather than being just and having a poor reputation.
Socrates rejects Glaucon's argument.
His response is a bit complicated and metaphysical.
He divides the soul into three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive parts.
The just man is one whose three parts are balanced appropriately.
The unjust man is ruled by appetites, instead of controlled by reason.
This way, injustice is a kind of disease among the parts of the soul, and no one wants to be diseased.
So, we prefer to be just, p 59.

Glaucon, the interlocutor here, concedes to Socrates' argument.
There is certainly something to be said for Socrates' description of our inner lives.
The unjust man will constantly be at war with himself.
When one lies, or cheats, or steals, one makes enemies and has to worry about being caught and revenge.
The just man can live at peace with himself.

If we really were confident of not being caught, then we would have no reason to worry.
But if we steal enough to make a significant difference in our lives, people will ask questions.
The more wealthy we are, the more prominent and public we become.
Perhaps Glaucon's story is really unrealistic after all.
Consider whether people like Bernie Madoff are well-served by their injustice.
Plato has provided an argument that it is better for us to be just than unjust since the unjust man is unhappy and the just man can live at peace with himself and others.

Prima facie, it seems that the religious moralist has an easier solution to the problem of egoism than the secular moralist.
But there are secular answers to the problem.
Socrates argues that we should be moral because it is in our interests.
Another option is to argue that the secular moralist can find moral motivation in the abilities of humans to suffer and feel happiness, and in our desire to live in a world in which people are moral.
Both of these explanations may be unsatisfying.
When there is just one cookie, and we both want it, is it in my interest to cede the cookie?
Both secular and religious moralities have problems with moral motivation, though.
So, we can put the question of moral motivation aside, and proceed to the major secular moral theories.