Normative Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

The study of ethics arises in relation to the reality of choice. As we make a choice, we are aware that there were other options and ask ourselves if we made the best choice. As we face future choices we ask "what ought I to do?" The combination of this question and the realization that some choices are better than others leads to the study of ethics. Ethics seeks to answer this question by finding rational justification to answer the question "what is the good" in order to know what choices are best for achieving the good. This field can be divided into branches based on different aspects of the question, such as normative ethics which simply studies the question itself (what ought I to do?), descriptive ethics which studies what answers people actually give to this question and how that affects their choices, metaethics which asks what we mean by terms like *ought* and *good*, and applied ethics which seeks to discover if there is a moral law that can help solve concrete problems in contemporary choices. Although this chapter is about normative ethics, it is difficult to keep these areas distinct and we will of necessity ask about the meaning of key terms, think about how beliefs about what is good affect behavior, and seek to find solutions to difficult choices facing us in the contemporary world.

OBJECTIONS TO THE STUDY OF ETHICS

Because the previous chapter studied the history of ethical philosophy, this chapter will cover many different ideas without necessarily drawing the reader's attention to who said what and when. For instance, we will begin with the question "why study ethics at all?" Is it possible to make progress through this kind of study, and if it is, is it necessary or are there other better ways to proceed? An example of the claim that it is not possible to approach the subject in this manner is the view which says that the good cannot be known through reason. This might be because it is believed that claims about the good are simply expressions of personal preference, or that reason is limited to the natural world and the good is not a natural object, or that the good is known through intuition (immediate perception) and not through rational reflection. Such objections are calling us to clarify what is meant by "rational justification."

When we speak about giving rational justification about what is the good, we are building on the reality that people give "reasons" for what they do. If a person has no reason for an action, simply a shrug, then such silence is not the basis for conversation. By contrast, we also recognize that not all *reasons*, are *reasonable*. That is, there is a standard for *rationality* by which we can judge competing *reasons*. If there is not, if every reason is equal, then, again, there is no basis for conversation and silence is the only option.

Given this, we can respond to the claim that the good is not known through reason but instead by intuition by viewing it as one *reason* for a specific view of the good. Is "intuition" sufficient to justify a view of the good? What if others have competing intuitions? If there are competing intuitions, then the matter cannot be settled through intuition. A similar problem arises for those who claim that the good is simply an

expression of personal taste or preference. It might be true that when a person says "I believe *x* is the good," that the person is expressing an unexamined personal preference, but can we go a step further and ask for justification? And are there competing personal preferences between which we must adjudicate? Any such adjudication or analysis presupposes that there is a standard for rationality that can be used.

And so we can respond to the claim that the study of ethics is not possible by noting that there are competing views of what is good, that not all views of the good are equal, and that people give reasons in support of their view and against other views. Yet there is still the claim that even in such a process we will never come to knowledge of the good. This might be due to the belief that knowledge is not possible at all, or that it is not possible in our present condition and we must wait until the afterlife. This raises the important question of responsibility and guilt. Are humans responsible to believe and do anything? If we cannot know what is good, then we cannot know if our beliefs and actions conform to what is good, and so we cannot be held responsible for doing what is good. Therefore, consistency requires the person who says that we cannot know what is good to also maintain that there is no personal or communal responsibility. The reply might be that while we cannot know we can have probability or plausibility. Yet these become measurements of personal taste or opinion, and probability requires a known standard by which to judge what is and is not probable.

KNOWING THE GOOD

Thus, we can proceed by assuming that it is possible to know what is good, and that the alternative is silence and loss of responsibility at any level. But is it really

necessary to know the good? An example of viewpoints which say that it is not necessary to give rational justification for the good are the belief that the good can be achieved apart from reason (say, through faith where *faith* is defined as *blind belief*, or *belief without sufficiently supporting premises*), or the view that the intellect is not what is primarily important but instead the problem is in the emotions or the will. The tension between *faith* and *reason* is an especially high profile and important problem and is worth spending some time considering.

It is often the case that the mere mention of *faith* and *reason* can lead to people taking sides based on other commitments. For instance, those in favor of this view of faith often hear the term *reason* as referring to how humans actually think apart from any religious commitments (natural reasoning about the material world). On the other hand, those who take the side of reason hear the term *faith* as mindless acceptance of superstition. We want to avoid both of these representations as straw men. Here we will distinguish between *faith*, *fideism*, and *reason*. Faith is the belief in what is not visible, but as such is not opposed to rational argumentation. Fideism is the acceptance of a conclusion on the basis of logically insufficient premises—it is often the result of accepting tradition or testimony. Reason can be defined in itself as the laws of thought (identity, non-contradiction, excluded middle); it can be defined in its use: we use reason to form concepts where we distinguish between 'a' and 'non-a', and then put these concepts into judgments and arguments; it can be defined in us: humans as rational animals form concepts, judgments, and arguments as part of their nature. Nothing in this definition of *reason* and *faith* places them in competition, although there are important tensions between *reason* and *fideism*.

There may be times when people accept a conclusion based on authority, tradition, or testimony. The extent to which this is a problem is related to the level of importance of the conclusion. So, for instance, one may accept the authority of a newspaper on many topics. However, if the newspaper asks us to believe that the good is the acquisition of money, and what hangs in the balance is the very meaning of our lives, we would expect more proof than simple testimony. Thus, for that which is the most valuable and of highest importance (the good), we expect the highest level of proof (rational justification).

And yet, there are worldviews which maintain that the good cannot be known in this way, and yet if one does not accept certain beliefs or behave in specified ways one will suffer maximal consequences (for instance, eternal damnation). The contradiction is that while one *ought* to do *x*, one *cannot* do *x*. This is called the *ought/can principle*, and we will discuss it in more detail later. For many this has been enough to abandon such worldviews. However, it is not necessary to abandon the worldview, but instead to abandon fideism, particularly in relation to what is of highest importance. If we cannot know the good then we cannot be held responsible for doing what is good. Therefore, if the failure to know and do the good results in maximal consequences, then the good must be maximally clear to all. This raises important questions about the ethics of belief.

CULPABLE IGNORANCE

If it is clear what is good, and I do not know what is good, then I am guilty of culpable ignorance. Culpable ignorance affects making choices in two ways: first, the person involved is choosing what is believed to be good but is not actually good;

secondly, this is a mistake for which the person is responsible—the person could and should have known that what the are choosing is not actually good. This responsibility is inexcusable in that there is no one else to blame, or conditions that mitigate the guilt of this ignorance. An example of excuses that are offered for ignorance about what is good are that humans cannot really know what is good (we've sufficiently covered this already), or that beliefs about the good do not matter and that instead what is important is intuition, common sense, or some similar faculty. The problem with this excuse is that it misses the point that ethics is about choices, and that in choosing we reveal what we believe. So, it may be true that my choice is decided based on intuition, but this reveals my belief about the role and importance of intuition as an authority. I could believe differently about intuition and this would impact my choices. Another typical kind of excuse is about the external conditions or environment, but this reduces to the assertion that the good is not knowable.

THE MORAL ABSOLUTE

If the good is readily knowable so that ignorance of the good is culpable and distorts all of our choices, then at this point we should be able to start discussing some formal features of the good to help us identify it. For instance, we should think about the good in relation to the other main concepts in ethics, virtue and happiness. As the end in itself, the good is the moral absolute—other ethical concepts are defined and understood in relation to the good.

There is a considerable tradition within ethical theory that focuses on "the right," or virtues. Virtues can be understood as a means to the good, and can be classified in

various ways (Gangadean). For instance, there are material virtues such as money or a car; there are natural virtues such as a talent for music or physical strength. These are not ends in themselves but are means to ends. What about moral virtues, are they ends in themselves? Some thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, have suggested that if a person is morally virtuous in order to gain something else then this takes away from the virtuous nature of the act. This is readily seen when the "something else" is a goal like money or fame. But is the problem in the pursuit of goals or in the pursuit of the wrong goals? Money may not be an appropriate goal to justify behavior, but does that mean one should act without any goal or consequence? Rather, it seems that when humans act they act for some end (Aristotle), and the problem is not in this relationship (virtues for the good) but in a misconception of the good (the good is not money or fame).

Noting the necessity of acting for some end has lead thinkers like Aristotle to assert that all actions aim at the end of happiness. The idea of *happiness* has been understood in different ways, ranging from sensual pleasure to what is better understood as joy or contentment. Understanding *happiness* as a mental state keeps us from identifying it with sensual pleasure, but seeing instead that sometimes people are happy when they experience sensual pleasure (it is a means to being happy). Indeed, this seems to uncover a truth about happiness, which is that it cannot be pursued directly but is instead the effect of possessing what one believes to be good. If a person believes sensual pleasures are the good then that person will be happy when such experiences arise. If a person believes fame or power to be the good, then that person will be happy if fame or power are achieved.

These examples also bring to light another reality about happiness: there is a difference between lasting happiness and temporary happiness. A person who believes that sensual pleasures are the good will only be happy temporarily because of the transient nature of such pleasures. The same is true of fame and power. And so, just as mistaken goals distort virtuous acts, so too mistaken beliefs about the good provide only temporary happiness. This is because these goals are not themselves lasting, and are not ends in themselves and so are not actually the good, or the highest good, the *summum bonum*. If a person knows and achieves the good as what is lasting then the effect would be lasting happiness.

COMMON MISTAKES ABOUT THE GOOD, THE RIGHT, AND HAPPINESS

The relationship between the good, virtue and happiness, if kept in mind, would prevent most mistakes that occur in ethical theory. For instance, it has been common to search for a direct link between virtue and happiness. And yet it is commonly noted that the virtuous are often not happy, and the wicked are happy. The solution has been to postpone happiness until the next life, where the virtuous will be rewarded and the wicked punished. However, this solution concedes that there is no necessary relationship between virtue and happiness. Consequently, it has been the case that God, as a perfect judge, is invoked to guarantee the connection between virtues and happiness. This has led to another response (Nietzsche) where the supposed *virtues* that do not lead to happiness are rejected as slave-morality; the lacuna that is left in the arena of virtues is filled in various insufficient ways that are neither ends in themselves nor means to an end in itself as they are presented (power, authenticity, the absurd).

Building on skepticism about the good, or the belief that happiness is the good, some theories present an equation in which one should act so as to maximize happiness in the self and society (utilitarianism). It is this view to which thinkers like Kant are responding because it seems to degrade virtue by making it something one does to be happy rather than valuable in itself. This objection is recognizing that many things that are not virtuous seem to make people happy and so this equation undermines the value of virtue. However, even Kant reverted to some such equation in saying that our guiding principle should be to act in a way that we can will to be universal: this reduces how we should act to what we will, and since different people will to be universal different conditions, it does not provide a ground for a universal moral law.

Precisely because of this problem the utilitarians will respond that our only option is to seek to maximize happiness, which seems to provide a universal ground for moral actions. And yet, if this approach is based on the assumption that we cannot know what is good it becomes a kind of pragmatism where the maxim "whatever works/makes people happy" becomes the guide. As noted earlier, what makes people happy may not make them lastingly happy. Consequently, if people are encouraged to pursue what will only make them temporarily happy then the outcome is actually harm rather than good: people are pursuing what is not good as if it were good, and the result is that they achieve neither the good nor lasting happiness. The notion of "what works" does not make sense unless one knows the goal: "what works to achieve the goal?"

IDENTIFYING THE GOOD

The mistakes of confusing the good with the right (virtue) and of pursuing happiness directly rather than as an effect of the good can be avoided but only if the good is knowable. In other words, it is not surprising that persons focus on being happy or on traditional virtues if the good cannot be known, although ultimately this failure to know the good also undermines the ability to know what is virtuous or will provide lasting happiness.

Until now we have discussed the insufficiency of skepticism but have not yet identified the good. In order to identify the good we need to contextualize the question: we are asking *what is good for a human*? This requires us to know what it is to be a human, or *what is human nature*? Once again, we encounter objections before we have proceeded too far. These come in the form of denying that there is a human nature. This objection can arise for a number of reasons, including the belief that there are no *natures* or universals (nominalism), or the belief that existence precedes essence (existentialism). Without addressing these in detail, which would take us far afield of our current topic, we can note that *rationality* is a presupposition of any theory, including nominalism or existentialism. Both philosophies seek to present themselves to other humans, which presupposes that both the originator of the philosophy, and the audience, are rational. Rationality involves the ability to distinguish between *a* and *non-a*, and in practice as well as theory both nominalists and existentialists distinguish between *humans* and *non-humans*.

Consequently, when we are asking what is good for a human it is *rationality* that stands out as a demarcation of human nature. Although humans need food, water, shelter, clothes, relationships, etc., humans are also willing to abandon all of these and

even kill themselves if they are not able to make sense of their lives. The use of reason to *make sense of*, or *understand*, or *find meaning in* life is an essential part of being a human in a way that food, shelter, water, etc, are not. We want food to stay alive and pursue meaning, if we are deprived of meaning we will push our food away, or it turns to ashes in our mouths. To argue otherwise is a self-contradiction: "let me help you understand why we don't need to understand."

Therefore, the good for humans is based on their nature as rational beings. As rational beings, humans try to make sense of the world, they seek for meaning. In doing this humans construct worldviews, and when these worldviews are challenged they will be justified or changed in an attempt to preserve meaning. A worldview is not merely a collection of details, but is an attempt to systematically understand reality; worldviews place details in relation to each other and to what is believed to be the highest reality. Thus, worldviews are constructed in response to the question: is there anything that is lasting, that is unchanging, that is eternal?

We can formulate an equation based on the above considerations: one's view of the good is determined by one's view of human nature, and one's view of human nature is determined by one's view of the real or eternal. We should expect, and indeed we find, that different worldviews will propose different views of the good, human nature, and the real. Even slight variations in belief about human nature or the real can produce significant differences in belief about the good, as is evidenced from quarrels about what ought to be done between sub-groups of a larger worldview (say, denominations within Christianity, or factions within Marxism).

KNOWING THE GOOD AND PRESUPPOSITINAL THINKING

For a variety of reasons it has become a feature of the contemporary world to try and solve moral/social problems without addressing underlying differences about human nature or the real. Indeed, if one's attention was limited to the news media it would seem that the only differences that exist are about what ought to be done, and that these can be solved without addressing other more basic questions. We can identify questions about human nature and the real as "more basic" because they are presupposed by claims about what is good. Learning to "think presuppositionally" is resisted at many levels of our contemporary life and society.

One example of this is what has been classically called *akrasia*, or philosophical incontinence, but more commonly "a weak will." This problem arises when a person says "I knew what was right but I didn't do it," or "I knew it was wrong but I did it anyway." This reveals a kind of tension or disunity within the person. Although we cannot question that people believe this kind of tension occurs, we can ask about how it is interpreted. Is it possible to knowingly do evil? If our choices reveal our values, and we choose what we value in the given context, then it seems we do not choose what we believe to be good. Therefore, it is impossible to knowingly do evil. Instead, we may knowing act against what we earlier considered better judgment, or the advice of others, or our tradition's moral code. The tension then between our actual choice and what we claimed to have known reveals confusion about what is actually good; quite the contrary from knowingly doing evil, we reveal that we don't know what is good.

This good, as the highest value, provides unity to the diverse choices that face humans. This is true collectively and individually. Confusion about what is good, or

changeableness over time, result in the statements noted above. This condition is due both to inconsistency on the part of persons (saying one thing and doing another, believing contradictory propositions), and differing levels of awareness (to what extent is the person leading the unexamined life). Tensions between societies, within a society, between individuals and within an individual, are traceable to competing visions of the good, and are therefore resolvable through coming to a common understanding of the good.

However, as we noted above, one's view of the good presupposes one's view of human nature and the real. As the moral absolute (virtue and lasting happiness are understood in their relation to the good), the good presupposes that there is a metaphysical absolute. If nothing is real then this includes the good and choices. Or if all is one and nothing is absolute, then there can be no meaningful distinction between good and evil since *all is one* translates into *good is evil*. This means that ethics as the study of the good must presuppose that there is a metaphysical absolute, there is something that is eternal and unchanging and something that is temporal and changing. Consequently, when we study applications below, the first will be about the relationship between ideas of God and ideas of the good.

KNOWING THE MORAL LAW AND FREE WILL

Before considering applications we must first ask if there is a moral law that humans can know about which explains the relationship between choices and the good. The first consideration is the knowability of the moral law and how this relates to human freedom. In speaking about freedom we must distinguish between a free will (nothing

hindering what is willed), and a will that could have done otherwise (no determining cause of the will). The former is compatible with pre-determination or causation because what is important is that the will is not hindered, whereas the ability to do otherwise requires that there is no cause. Thus, in speaking about a free will we are asking if there is anything that hinders the will so that the person cannot do what is wanted.

One way this has been expressed is as the *ought/can* principle. For thinkers like Kant this principle was used to argue that freedom requires the ability to do otherwise, since if one cannot do otherwise than one may not be able to do what ought to be done. When the consideration is limited to the will this is a problem. But as has been seen above, the will is affected by beliefs. Therefore, the first level of the ought/can principle is the level of what can be known. If a person ought to do something, then this *something* must be knowable to that person. If it is not knowable, then the person cannot will it.

One objection to the idea that beliefs affect the will is that there does not always seem to be a one-to-one connection. That is, people report changing their beliefs (say, I now belief that smoking is unhealthy) without a corresponding change in the will (I still want to smoke). The problem is that this analysis is too superficial. Beliefs are connected to a larger worldview framework (which in the example may not have been changed), and they are related presuppositionally (the smoking example is not a basic example). So, while I might change my belief about smoking, I may not have changed my belief about the good—perhaps I believe the good is pleasure in some sense. Therefore, my will is not affected much by the new conviction about health because health is not my goal, pleasure is my goal. This robust analysis of a person's beliefs is much more fruitful in explaining the relationship between beliefs and actions, but it also

faces the problem that people are not very conscious or consistent and so they may not be aware of their own beliefs and even to the extent they are aware they may hold contradictory beliefs.

The issue is therefore not whether one can do otherwise, since one does not want to do otherwise but wants to do what is wanted. The issue is whether one wants what ought to be wanted, and how to change what is wanted if necessary. The *ought/can* principle is transformed into the *ought/can/want* principle which says "if I ought to do it then I must be able to do it, and if I can do I must want to do it." But in order to want to achieve the good, one must know what is good. Therefore, freedom requires that the good and the moral law are knowable. This means that the following can all be true:

1. One cannot want otherwise than one does in fact want
2. One is responsible because:
    a. The good is easily knowable
    b. One does not want the good

Indeed, this seems to be the central requirement for responsibility: one could know what is good if one wanted to know what is good. In much discussion the energy is spent on whether one can want what is good if one cannot want otherwise; this is misspent energy if there is not a clearly knowable good. Freedom to want the good requires that the good is knowable. Freedom requires clarity.

CLARITY, RESPONSIBILITY AND HUMAN NATURE

The need for clarity about what is good relates to the discussion earlier about rationality. There must be a distinction between what is good and what is non-good. If

there is no such distinction then there can be no rational justification for which choice to make. This is the basic act of reason, distinguishing 'a' and 'non-a.' All other acts of reason presuppose this most basic act. So just as freedom requires clarity, so too clarity requires rationality. These three are related, so that if one cannot know the good, or the good is not clear to reason, or one denies rationality, then one is not free to want what is good and one cannot be held responsible. Furthermore, the reality that the good is clear to reason provides the foundation for responsibility: humans are inexcusable for not knowing what is clear about the good.

The ideas of clarity, responsibility, and inexcusability are directly related to the idea of a moral law. The idea of a moral law initially can be confusing because it is asked "in what sense is it is *law* if it can be violated?" The purpose of articulating a law, such as the law of gravitation, is to understand an inviolable law of motion. The moral law is a *law* in precisely this way; it is a law of the human actions that are necessary to achieve the good, and therefore also a law about what happens when one does not achieve the good. In this sense it is inviolable: if one wants the good one must know and do the moral law; if one does not follow the moral law one will not achieve the good and the consequences are predictable. The first question we must consider involves the very existence of such a law. Is there a moral law that governs which actions achieve the good?

One common objection to this idea is that it overlooks the particularity of each person and tries to generalize in a way that is unhelpful. This is an objection from Nietzsche and the existentialists, among others. Behind this objection is a belief that there are only particulars, a view called nominalism. In the medieval period this view,

held by thinkers such as William of Ockham, lead to the divine command theory. This theory says that humans cannot know *the good* because there are no universals, and therefore God must tell humans the moral law. In late modernity, Nietzsche also rejected universals, but since he rejected theism as well, he did not suggest divine command theory but instead the *will to power* (a view found in the interlocutor *Thrasymachus* from Plato's Republic). Although this involves important epistemological and metaphysical questions, for our purposes in normative ethics we can notice that it is a very unhelpful position. To answer the question "what ought I to do" with some variation of "whatever makes you happy," "what will give you power over others to make you happy," "whatever best expresses your unique personality so that you will be happy" do not help in any way in settling the question "what can provide lasting happiness as opposed to only temporary happiness?"

Drawing out its implications, the view that there are no universals but only particulars must conclude that there is no good, there is no human nature, there are no universal situations but only moments each different from the last. The implication for normative ethics is that there can be no rational justification to answer the question "what is the good, and what ought I to do?" Such a doctrine cannot be articulated into a philosophy without becoming self-contradictory (relying on universals expressed in words). Indeed, adherents of such a view often argue that reason is useless and that instead one must rely on intuition. But if *reason* is that by which we make distinctions such as 'a' and 'non-a,' then the claim that we must go beyond reason cannot be distinguished from its opposite (we should not go beyond reason) and is therefore not

communicating anything to the speaker or the listener. Reason, in this sense of the term, is inescapable.

This objection requires that extreme claim that there is no human nature, nothing that all humans share in common. This faces the problems just discussed. Most persons do not deny that there is common human nature. The implication is that there is one good. This is because what is good for human nature will be good for each individual that shares in this nature. Consequently, the moral law that describes how to achieve the good is applicable to each human as human. This does not deny that circumstances are variable. Indeed, there is a need for learning discernment in applying the moral law to particular cases. And yet there is a moral law that is applied, meaning that there is a description of how humans must act to achieve the good; not just any and every action results in what is good.

THE GOOD AND THE MORAL LAW

The relationship between knowing and doing means that the moral law is both a guide to the good and a source of teaching about the good. The only way to know the good is to keep the moral law, and by observing the structure of the moral law we are taught about the nature of the good. Because we are seeking the good for humans, the moral law originates in human nature. So, we can speak about the first moral law as a law about the human good and the highest reality. As has already been noted, the basic question that is asked in Ethics is "what ought I do to," and this is answered by knowing what is good for humans. Thus, the entire endeavor of Ethics is grounded in the reality of choice, and this reality is the beginning of the moral law. And so the beginning of the

moral law draws our attention to the role of choices in our lives, and the need to know the good. Furthermore, since the good is grounded in the real, pursuit of the knowledge of the good requires that we know what is real.

The moral law, therefore, begins with the concepts of choice, the good, and the real. These are universal for humans and provide the foundation on which to discuss a universal moral law. All humans make choices, all choices assume the good, and the idea of the good is grounded in the idea of what is real. However, these formal concepts are given different content within different worldviews. In order to think about this content the moral law must address, in addition to the origin of the concepts within human nature, the nature of these concepts in order to give them content.

For instance, since there is one human nature there is one good for all humans. This does not mean that there are not different personalities within the framework of human nature, but that those personalities, as human personalities, are pursuing the same good together. This means that the good is a source of unity within the reality of diversity, and that the failure to know the good is the source of disunity. In order to better understand this we can use methodology we have used throughout this chapter and consider the alternative. What if there are a diversity of highest goods? (John Finis). If these highest goods are incommensurable (as opposed to saying that they are really brought to unity under some higher good) then there can be no final unity within individuals, between individuals, or between groups. This incommensurable disunity, in the individual, would mean that there could be no rational justification for choosing one of these goods (and all the means required to achieve it) over another: the individual

would be frozen in inaction. The very acting of choosing is a witness to the fact that people believe there is a highest goal toward which they can make progress.

We can also consider the claim that the good is not achieved through reason, that it is not knowledge. In itself this is a knowledge claim about the good, and so it is claiming that some knowledge achieved through reason about the good is desirable. However, the crux of this objection is that it seeks to dichotomize *reason* and *intuition*, and assert that subjects such as goodness and beauty are best, or only, known through intuition. Of course, the problem would be that if this were true it could not be argued for or communicated without relying on reason. But it is also based on a superficial view of reason, where reason is limited to calculating or quantifying rather than most basically as the laws of thought. Reason, understood in this latter way, is necessary for intuition itself since in intuition we distinguish between *beauty* and *non-beauty*, or *good* and *non-good*. Properly understood, there should be no tension here. Intuitions, as one source of information available to humans, must be subject to the same rational scrutiny as other sources of information such as common sense, tradition, and sense experience. It is this process that distinguishes humans from non-humans and helps us begin to define the good as the fulfillment of human nature in achieving knowledge.

THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

Yet the good cannot simply be defined as knowledge. As we pursue knowledge of reality, we want to know not just about fleeting and changing aspects of reality, but about what is unchanging; we want to know the highest reality. In this way the ethics of choice begins immediately with the ethics of belief: what ought I to believe? What I

believe about reality will shape what I believe is good, and this in turn will affect what I choose.

The first response by many has been either skepticism or fideism. We considered skepticism about the good earlier, but not about the human ability to know reality. Both skepticism and fideism (belief without sufficient proof—blind belief) agree that knowledge as inferential certainty is not possible. The skeptic says that therefore we should withhold belief (W.K. Clifford), and yet it has been pointed out that in some cases the choice is momentous and we must choose (William James). Consequently, the fideist says that although we cannot know we must believe. The problem is in choosing which of the various systems competing for our allegiance to believe in a fideistic manner.

We can unravel some of this problem using a similar methodology as above when discussing skepticism about the good. Does the reality of choice and the good tell us anything about knowing what is real? Can we know what is unchanging and eternal (without beginning)? Or is our knowledge limited to sense data which is by its nature temporary and impermanent? This quickly becomes a question about appearance and reality: everything that appears to me is changing, but I cannot conclude from there that everything is change and impermanence without committing the fallacy of overextension (concluding with a universal based on a particular—there may be more in reality that what appears to me).

We can formulate rules to guide us in the ethics of belief. For instance:
First, we should not believe a contradiction. The use of reason to distinguish between *a* and *non-a* also helps us avoid confusing *a* and *non-a*. Thus, nothing is both *a* and *non-a* at the same time and in the same respect. Initially this will not seem helpful in the kinds

of examples considered by many philosophers. For example, in the work that set the standard for discussing the ethics of belief, W.K. Clifford's *Ethics of Belief*, Clifford discusses the ethical nature of a belief held by a ship-owner about the seaworthy nature of his ship. He concludes that we should not believe anything without sufficient evidence. The kind of example used, and the notions of *sufficient* and *evidence* (coupled with the fact that Clifford was a mathematician) result in a kind of probabilistic analysis of the ethics of belief. The ship owner asks "have I performed all the necessary examinations of my ship, have I check the weather and carefully planned the voyage?" With these kinds of questions in mind, the ship-owner can conclude that there is a good chance the voyage will be safe. These kinds of choices are common and important, but how does this relate to our consideration of the basic question for normative ethics "what is the good?"

This leads us to our second rule, which is that we must learn to think presuppositionally. This means we must learn to identify what is presupposed in a belief, and know if those presuppositions are true, before we can speak about the belief being true. We notice that Clifford's example contains logical and ontological presuppositions. Some brief examples are that Clifford assumes some things exist. In Clifford's example the things that exist are temporal and changing. Because they are temporal and changing they depend on previous changes and causes. Is there anything absolute? Anything that is eternal and unchanging?

There must be something eternal. If *none is eternal*, then this implies that all is temporal and changing, which implies that all had a beginning, which implies that all came into being, which implies that all came into being from non-being. To assert that *being* can come from *non-being* is to blur the most fundamental distinction there is, the

distinction between existing and not existence, being and not being. An *a* can come from a *non-a* as in a chicken from an egg. But both of these are examples of beings, indeed, every distinction between *a* and *non-a* is a distinction between beings. If being can come from non-being then in this respect there is no distinction between being and non-being (they can both give rise to being); this is the blurring of what is fundamentally different, and this difference is a clear difference.

If it cannot be the case that *none is eternal*, another option is that *all is eternal*. This could mean an eternal series of temporal beings, or an unchanging being without beginning or end. An eternal series of temporal beings, like Nietzsche's eternal return, would make all choices meaningless: they have happened and will happen (much of the history of continental philosophy after Nietzsche is a coming to terms with this absurdity without questioning its presuppositions). If *all is one* in either sense above, then there is no real distinction between *good* and *evil*. If all is one, then good is evil. The implication is that no choice matters in that one cannot choose to do what is good, or achieve what is good, or even know what is good since this is not a real distinction.

The only alternative that preserves the meaning of choice is that only some is eternal. This leads to our third rule for the ethics of belief which is that we must have integrity, we must have consistency between our beliefs and between what we say we believe and what we do. If all is eternal and there is no distinction between good and evil, then a person that continues to argue for their position (implying it is the correct one) it no living with integrity. But if we conclude that *only some is eternal* can we know what is eternal? As we think about *being* we are aware of ourselves, personal being without extension, and we are aware of the world, non-personal being with extension.

The extended, or material, world is not eternal. If matter is eternal then it would be self-maintaining. The material world is not self-maintaining in that it tends toward sameness, and once at sameness it stays at sameness. And yet the material world is not currently in a condition of sameness (it is highly differentiated in terms of hot and cold). Therefore, the material world has not always existed. What is eternal is not material, but is instead personal and conscious (traditionally the term for this kind of being is *spirit*, in contrast to *matter*).

Although I am conscious, I am not eternal. If I were eternal then I would have all knowledge. Having existed without beginning, I would have had enough time to learn what can be learned, and after this amount of time if something has still not been learned then it cannot be known in any amount of time. And yet I do not have all knowledge. Therefore, I am not eternal.

Combining these, we get: *something is eternal*, *matter is not eternal*, and *the self is not eternal*. The implication is that what is eternal is a spirit with the qualities consistent with eternality. These include being infinite and unchanging (as well as eternal) in knowledge and power. Does it include goodness? In a recent debate with Alvin Plantinga, XXXX says that it just as possible that such a being is infinite in evil or indifference. And yet, if this being is the creator of what is not eternal (the temporal world), then this seems to rule out indifference as one cannot create with infinite deliberate wisdom and yet be indifferent. Similarly, infinite evil seems to be a contradiction in that evil is contrary to itself, and infinite evil would be infinitely contrary to itself—it could not continue to exist. The only option left is goodness.

THE GOOD AND GOD

These considerations bring us to what is called *Theism*. God exists, by which is meant a spirit who is infinite, eternal, and unchanging in power, knowledge and goodness. God is related to the good in that God, as the creator, is the determiner of human nature and therefore the determiner of what is good for human nature. Notice the methodology requires to get here: although it took steps, each step involved avoiding a contradiction and building to the next step. Sequentially, these were: something must be eternal, only some is eternal, matter is not eternal, the self is not eternal, what is eternal is a spirit that is infinite and unchanging in power, knowledge and goodness. Should a rational being know this? Clifford, the "father" of the ethics of belief, rejected belief in God because he said there was not enough evidence, where by *evidence* he meant sense data. However, this criterion rules out belief in God from the beginning since the changing world of sense data is by its nature temporal, and the question of God's existence is about what is not changing and is eternal. On the other hand, William James allowed for belief in God as the result of some experiences. But, again, these experiences as such are not able to prove that there is something eternal. So while these thinkers came up short, it seems they should have known that only God is eternal through the process of reason.

We can contrast knowing God as the determiner of good and evil for humans with the many other ethical theories that have been discussed in the history of philosophy. For instance, divine command theory also claims that God determines the good, but says this occurs apart from the nature of things. In this view, God's will determines the good to be whatever God wills it to be. Consequently, humans cannot know the good apart form

divine revelation. In order to avoid this consequence, there are many ethical theories that seek to ground the good in some aspect of human nature so that the good is knowable by all.

One example is utilitarianism and deontology. These seek to ground the good in, respectively, pleasure and virtuous behavior. Or ethical egoism (personal pleasure), naturalism (individual instinct), tradition (collective instinct), existentialism (will apart from essence), humanism (the good as actualization of potential), and contemplation (the good in exercise of the intellect). In pursuing the good as some aspect of human nature each of these affirms the universality of the good. However, in doing so apart from the metaphysical absolute each of these isolates and therefore distorts the good. For instance, in humanism the good is human excellence—the actualization of human potential. Yet without knowing what is the metaphysical absolute, one cannot know what it is to be excellent because different visions of the absolute produce different views of excellence. Or, in contemplation, the act of the intellect is understood to be an immediate perception of the forms or the unmoved mover. This view says that the good is difficult to attain because the desires of the body keep us from this vision; therefore, the body must be left behind and then the direct vision can be attained in the next life. Consequently, the knowledge of God is not through the nature of what God has made, but apart from it.

DEVELOPING THE MORAL LAW

What we have considered thus far in the ethics of belief provides us with a foundation about the good and God on which to build in considered specific applications of the moral law. For instance, if we by-pass these considerations and attempt to directly

solve problems such as piracy in the Indian Ocean, problems that contain many presuppositions, we will fail. We can apply various moral theories to the situation, but as long as these are incommensurable this will simply be an academic exercise. If we wish to arrive at unity we must have a common good that can serve as the foundation of knowing what we ought to do. Furthermore, this good must be grounded in the nature of things, particularly in the source of the nature of things—the metaphysical absolute. The alternative is that the good is not grounded in the nature of things and become arbitrary and subjective.

There are consequences to not having this foundation for the moral law in place. Specifically, since the moral law began with the use of reason to distinguish between *good* and *non-good*, and between the *eternal* and the *temporal* (non-eternal), the consequences relate to what happens when we fail to use reason. We use reason to find meaning, to understand what *is* and what *is not*. When we fail to use reason we fail to draw appropriate distinctions and we will not find meaning. In failing to find meaning we fail to see a purpose and this results in boredom. As we seek to avoid boredom we generally go to excess which results in a sense of guilt. As these three combine (meaninglessness, boredom, and guilt), we spiral further into non-rational or irrational behavior as we attempt to fill our lives and avoid the lack of meaning.

The alternative is a return to the life of reason in the pursuit of meaning. This is a return to distinguishing between the creator and the created. And yet even this move can be clouded. Francis Bacon identified *idols* that keep humans from attaining knowledge. These are misrepresentations of reality. Idols involve a reversal of thinkning: rather than thinking of the less basic in light of the more basic (the creation in light of the creator), an

idol is the most basic in light of the less basic (the creator in light of the creation, or God in light of man). Thus, although the theistic religions recognize the reality of the metaphysical absolute as creator, they each understand the justice and mercy of God differently. Conflicts between the theistic religions are global and have persisted for centuries. Yet, the common approach to solutions is to think only of the less basic; if unity is to be reached it must first occur at the most basic level. What is required by divine justice? Can God's justice be set aside by his mercy? Can humans satisfy divine justice by their own suffering or good works? Or must divine justice and mercy be reconciled in one event of atonement? The consequence of not addressing these questions is continued disunity at every level of human civilization.

The resistance on the part of humans to thinking presuppositionally, and instead focusing normative ethics on practical and psychological problems, is a problem of integrity. Integrity begins as consistency within our own nature as rational beings. Attempting to solve moral problems apart from thinking presuppositionally is a denial of our natures. Attempting to solve moral problems at only the practical and psychological levels, and not the logically basic and philosophical, is a denial of rationality. Integrity requires thinking about what is most basic first, and then drawing out consistent implications for the other areas of life. If a person had integrity then that person would know what is clear at the most basic level. The consequence of not having integrity is confusion and mental impression.

The goal of integrity is knowledge of what is lasting, and humans can have hope that this knowledge is attainable. This is a knowledge that comes through knowing the nature of things, which in turn reveals the nature of the creator. Therefore, the work of

pursuing the good is a goal for humans that spans individual lives, cultures, and civilizations. It is a goal that requires all of humanity contributing to the outcome. It is a knowledge that is too grand for any individual to attain apart from the work of the whole. In contrast to contemplation where the individual thinker is alone in the vision of God, this is a knowledge of all aspects of reality which cannot be attained through individual effect. Consider the many diverse dimensions and levels of reality, and the effort needed to uncover each and explain it to others. This is a work that calls everyone to give their best and develop their excellence toward the goal of fullness. The reality of moral evil adds to the work in that the knowledge attained is not only of the world, but also of the conflict between good and evil in history, and the justice and mercy of God in providing redemption. Hope that the goal will be achieved can be seen on many levels, including success thus far, and the purposes of God in human history. The failure to think of one's work in terms of this goal is that work becomes empty and meaningless—at best one works for self-pleasure which is fleeting.

We can continue to draw out applications of the moral law to many other areas of human life. These include the need for authority that is based on insight into the good rather than physical power or personality; the need to affirm human dignity and hold others accountable for their humanity; the relationship between the good, friendship, and marriage as well as our origin in the union of male and female; the role of value and talent in human society as we learn to demand what is good and value those who produce the good; the need for the whole truth as a basis for justice, including truth at the most basic level; and finally the role of suffering in the pursuit of the good such that for those who understand the good all things are seen to work together.

One inevitable objection to proceeding in this presuppositional manner is that it is not quick enough in settling problems that occupy our attention. For instance, how does this apply to the problem of piracy, or terrorism, or hunger? However, it is not true that presuppositional thinking does not apply to these matters. Rather, the approach is to build on a lasting foundation rather than working toward solutions that are either not permanent or not helpful. A lasting foundation must first take into account what is actually good and the source of the good. Then we can ask "how does this apply to piracy?" Where are the pirates at in their thinking about the good? From the interviews I've heard they are skeptics about the good, and have said that since we cannot know what is good they will focus on getting money to lead a more comfortable life. But perhaps their country is war-torn precisely due to this kind of skepticism: if we cannot know what is good then what is the point of building a peaceful civilization as opposed to simply doing whatever it takes to get ahead? If we want to provide a lasting solution to these kinds of problems we must be able to show that humans can know the good, and that humans can make progress in achieving the good. As long as we ignore these questions we are really accepting the skepticism of the pirates.

CONCLUSION

Needless to say, there is much more work to be done in the study of normative ethics. What we have done here is to formulate a foundation on which this work can be done in a way that lasts. This foundation includes identifying basic concepts in the study of ethics, considered how mistakes about these concepts have led to problematic ethical theories, thinking about the relationship of the good, human nature, and God, and

drawing out some implications from this relationship to a moral law. We also spent time on problems of skepticism and fideism, responded to objections from these positions, and thought about the nature of a free will. In order to understand wehre to begin, we articulated some rules for the ethics of belief—these rules were based on the nature of rationality at its most basic level, and in the need to know what is basic if we are to know anything else. We can end with an encouragement to begin—that is, we can summarize the above as an attempt to lead the examined life. Therefore, as we conclude we can also begin this process, a process of curiosity of what is good, and fear of not attaining or knowing the good.