

6. Classical Ethics

Normally, “ethics” is about what is right and wrong. It seems to me however, that to even consider this you must first know what life is for. It makes no sense for us to argue about whether duty is a virtue, for example, unless we have already established whether virtue is desirable. If I choose (in the words of the Rap song) to “get rich or die trying”, such questions don’t even arise. Duty could be judged good or bad, or more precisely, useful or useless. Its virtue is irrelevant.

Surely, some people will say, right is right and wrong is wrong. Vice and virtue are intrinsic, immutable things we recognise without even thinking. Even the money-worshipping gangster Rapper, they would say, knows when he is doing wrong, even if he is prepared, for selfish reasons, to do it anyway. If this is true, it raises another question: Where does this sense of right and wrong come from? And can we really choose to ignore it?

Thinking about what is right or wrong inevitably draws us into wider questions about purpose, freedom and the meaning of life. It also raises the issue of how we can live together well, that is to say, politics. Ethics can’t be reined in, so I have chosen not to try. I use the word liberally to describe any contribution to the big philosophical question of what I should do with what I know, that is to say, what is the meaning of life and how should we live?

From Sophistry to Philosophy

Classical Western philosophy begins in the scattered Greek cities states around the middle of the 1st millennium b.c.e.. We know that the very earliest thinkers, whose names have survived, spoke and wrote on the question of how to live a good life. Their actual words however, have not survived. We can't be sure how reliable the reports by later writers are. That is a question for academic research.

We can be surer, that in the 5th century, b.c.e., new kinds of learning bloomed in Athens, the biggest and wealthiest city at that time. Thoughts were aired and recorded, and a kind of inter-generational dialogue began that continues to the present day. A new profession was born, known today by the ancient Greek word for teacher, “sophist”.

The Sophists were the precursors of philosophers. They taught a variety of new and interesting ideas, but their focus was, as far as we know, purely practical. Their services were for hire, and were bought by those who wanted to join, or stay in, the Athenian elite. That is why they seem to have specialised in the arts of persuasion and social networking. What could they possibly have to say about right and wrong?

Whether Protagoras was the greatest, most famous or just one Sophist amongst many is hard to say. We know of him from later writers who were fiercely critical. We know that he wrote two books and we have an impression of the ideas they contained. We know that criticism of these ideas gave us the modern English definition of “sophistry”, which is “seemingly plausible but false reasoning”. We also know that it was criticism of sophistry that kick-started philosophy itself.

Protagoras famously said that “man is the measure of all things”. From this obscure aphorism it is reasonably assumed that he was a relativist. The argument goes that whatever someone thinks is true, *is* true (for him), and that's as much as can be said for “truth”. There is no way to judge opinions by appealing to some power outside ourselves, to reason, or the word of God, for example. In fact, it is dishonest to claim that you can.

Life is a struggle to assert your interests and your “truth” over others. In fact, your interests not only shape your thoughts, but also your values. The idea that right and wrong is simply a matter of opinion is called moral relativism. The related idea that whoever has power decides is summed up by the Sophist slogan, “might is right”.

Socrates did not agree. Pursuing authority figures in the market place of Athens, he questioned them as to what they meant by such things as “duty”, “honour” and “justice”. He discovered, at least to the satisfaction of his young followers, that these men didn't know. Socrates did not claim to know, but wanted to expose its absence in others, particularly, we suppose, amongst the hypocritical men on power.

The ethic that emerged among this budding band of radical truth-seekers was two-fold. On the one hand, we must pursue knowledge, not for personal gain, as the Sophists did and taught, but for its own sake. In contrast to the accumulation of influence, we should seek knowledge for the cultivation of the soul. This was the ethic of the first philosophy.

On the other hand, Socrates (and at least some of his followers) believed it was important to live a good life. Pursuing a botanical metaphor, Socrates said that critical enquiry cultivates the soul, but then it must reach out into the world in order to flourish. In other words, virtuous action in the public sphere was the “flourishing” of a good life.

The historical context of the next philosophical turn is significant. The city of Athens was locked in a struggle for regional dominance with the city of Sparta. The arms race between them had turned Sparta into a kind of war-state, in which every citizen was an intensely drilled soldier. Eventually, in 404 b.c.e. the Spartans won. Athenian Democracy ended and the rule of the so-called “30 tyrants” was imposed. It lasted only a year before popular revolt restored democracy.

We can't be sure what part, if any, Socrates and his followers played in these events, but we know that the new democracy was keen to get rid of those who supported the tyrants or who it believed had undermined the old democracy. Within 4 years, Socrates was accused of “corrupting the young, denying the Gods of the city and introducing new ones”. He was tried and executed.

From Cynicism to Stoicism

Three young followers of Socrates have left a trace on Western Philosophy. In the climate of fear following the old man's execution, and in the absence of their beloved teacher, the young philosophers scattered and diverged. Three distinct traditions emerged.

Antisthenes was perhaps the most faithful to his master. He believed that we must be true to our nature, and for the philosopher this meant the unimpeded pursuit of knowledge and virtue. His students took this very seriously, taking to giving up the distractions of work, money and property, and practicing their philosophy with nothing but a gown and a begging bowl. One, Diogenes, took to living in a barrel, the usual home of Athenian dogs. He was described as “Socrates gone mad” and his philosophy became known as “cynicism”, from the ancient Greek word for dog.

Diogenes not only lived in a barrel but challenged the norms of his day in other ways, including, notoriously, masturbating in the market place. He and his fellow Cynics took to the dog label enthusiastically, rejecting conventional sexual relations in favour of what was called “dog marriage”. This meant the absence of obligations and involved unconstrained public copulation. It was all too much for some.

It is said that when Zeno of Citium saw two of his fellow Cynics having sex in the street, he took

off his cloak and covered them. Whether or not this actually happened it has stuck in the imagination as a pivotal moment in the history of Western Philosophy. It perfectly exemplifies the turn of an idea.

As a Cynic student, Zeno would agree that people should be true to their nature. Only by ridding themselves of unnatural ideas and desires could they achieve mental clarity and tranquillity. On founding his new school of Stoicism, he pointed to one particular unnatural desire; the desire to control things. The universe, he said, is rational and determined. It can be understood, but not controlled. There is nothing to be gained from Cynicism's punk-like defiance of social norms. In fact, it can be dangerously provocative.

Likewise, there is nothing to be gained from struggling to increase pleasure and reduce pain. In fact, this struggle is a source of great anxiety and its ultimate failure the cause of fruitless anger. This idea would make Stoicism forever associated with a peaceful and accepting attitude toward pain and equanimity in the face of death.

It is said that Stoicism was brought to Rome in the 1st century b.c.e. by Cicero. Its ethics are love for all humanity and the importance of civic virtue, at the same time as being apolitical and morally conservative. Perhaps the latter contributed to its popularity amongst the Roman elite during the imperial phase. It was even embraced by an Emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

Around 161-180 c.e. Marcus Aurelius wrote his “meditations” while fighting on the Germanic frontier. “We are stronger than we think”, he wrote, and noted how attention to virtue brings tranquillity of the mind even in the most extreme circumstances. He was living at the time amongst the dirt and blood of war. Roman Stoicism also seems to have a touch of martial, machoism thrown in.

The pleasure principle

While the thoughts of one follower of Socrates gave rise to Cynicism (which would later spawn Stoicism), the thoughts of another gave rise to Hedonism. This thread of thought would also change significantly over time, perhaps, in part at least, due to dialogue with the other schools. The first Hedonist, Aristippus, is thought to have developed his alternative approach during the life of Socrates, and been scolded for his decadent lifestyle by the old master himself.

For historical purposes it is important to note that this Aristippus had a grandson of the same name. Both were teachers who lived most of their lives in their hometown of Cyrene (then a Greek city, now in Libya). We guess that their ideas were the same, or similar, but we have no way to be sure. Later writers have frequently conflated them, as if they were the same person. I will do the same, noting that Aristippus (one, the other, or both) was behind the Cyrenaic school of Hedonism.

The founding doubt is directed at the importance that Socrates gave to virtue. Perhaps Socrates thought, as the Cynics did, that virtue is in our nature. This simply didn't work for Aristippus, who saw that in his nature at least, virtue was a poor second to pleasure. We might say that they agreed that we should live according to our nature, but radically disagreed on what that nature was.

The first principle of Hedonism is that it is in our nature to seek pleasure and avoid pain. In response to the Cynics who believed in abstinence, that is to say, giving up pleasurable distractions in order to pursue knowledge and virtue, the Hedonists argued that wisdom allows you to enjoy such things without compromising other pursuits. Mastery, they said, is better than abstinence.

In response to the Stoics who focused attention inwardly, that is to say, they wanted to improve themselves not the world, the Hedonists espoused action. We do things in the world to maximise our pleasure and minimise our pain. Aristippus said that he “endeavoured to adapt circumstances to myself, not myself to circumstances”.

Epicurus was born in the mid-4th century b.c.e., and lived into the 3rd. He was a contemporary of Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic school. His first interest was probably natural philosophy and atomic theory. When he became a teacher, he taught that the universe consists only of atoms and void, although there is a tiny amount of indeterminacy that makes freewill possible. The Gods have no interest in us, and we should not bother thinking about them.

He shared with the Cyrenaics the belief that pleasure was the goal of all human action, but added three important points. Firstly, the absence of pain is a pleasure and secondly, pleasure isn't cumulative. Together these greatly simplify our goals. Rather than a life of thrill-seeking self-indulgence, simply avoiding pain brings sufficient pleasure. In fact, chasing unnecessary pleasures is more likely to fill us with insatiable desires.

Philosophy was, for Epicurus, medicine for the soul, and just as medicine is informed by physical theories, so was his philosophy. Physical pain he said can be endured. If it is long-lasting it is mild, and if it is severe it is short. Mental pain, that is to say, anxiety, comes mostly from the fear of the Gods and of death. But the Gods have no interest in us and the soul is made of atoms that are scattered when we die. In death there is no soul to experience pain, so there is nothing to fear.

Epicurus taught that it is in our nature to avoid pain, and our greatest pain comes through fear. Wisdom overcomes fear, which is why the priority of philosophy is to get a better understanding of the physical world. Free of anxieties about the Gods and death, and not chasing unnecessary pleasures, we can achieve mental tranquillity.

His third important point was that pleasure can be gained from virtuous action. So, while pleasure is prior to virtue, they are not in conflict. People get pleasure out of doing good for others, so Hedonism need not reject virtue. For Epicurus, a life of pleasure is impossible unless you “live wisely, and honourably and justly”. He shifted the Hedonist's attention away from purely personal pleasures and toward how we treat others.

Epicurus believed in the idea of “natural justice”. A law, he said, might seem good and just, but if it does not produce natural justice then it is neither. Humans have evolved societies for mutual benefit, that is to say, to avoid harming each other. So we naturally recognise injustice as that which harms people. We should live, Epicurus argues, under the rule of law, and shape our laws to match natural law.

Nevertheless, Epicurus counselled against involvement in politics. He argued that it can be painful with no greater pleasures than we get from a simple life. He advised philosophers to “live in obscurity” and cultivate friendship. Friends must be valued for their own sake, because it is only by the suspension of any other purpose that we can be secure in our friendships. This may well have been the founding idea of a school as a community.

Love and power

The third follower of Socrates to have left a trace on Western Philosophy was Plato, and it is by far the biggest. He wrote 36 books, and it is really only from these that we have any idea of what Socrates did and said. When the old man was executed, Plato fled Athens, not least because he had family connections to some of the “30 tyrants”.

In his major work on politics, *The Republic*, Plato criticises the culture of his day for lionising “success” and making celebrities of sports stars and the rich. People will be flawed, he said, if their heroes are flawed. Democracy in such a culture could be a terrible thing, not least because hidden powers can lurk within it. It is fair to be suspicious of whoever promotes these unworthy celebrities.

For Plato, people should only have power to the extent that they are able to admire the right people. The right people, in his view, were those trained in rational thought and civic virtue, in other words, philosophers. He said “unless philosophers become Kings of states or else the people who are now called kings become real or adequate philosophers... there can be no respite from evil either for state, or I believe, for the human race”.

It is clear that Plato's politics centre on the qualities of leaders. What matters is not so much how society is organised, but whether the rulers are of the right calibre. This is “elitism”, in contrast with “constitutionalism”. But he goes on to explain that these “Guardians” should be trained for at least 15 years in reason and virtue. This is important because Plato is not saying that it must be an inherited elite. Anyone of virtue could be trained and could join.

This raises the question of what virtue actually is, that is to say, how should we, as individuals, actually live? To answer this, Plato takes the idea of virtue one step further, and calls it “love”. For this reason, Plato's ethics can be thought of as a theory of love. His most famous book on the subject is *the Symposium*, which imagines a gathering of great minds to give speeches and discuss the question. Typically, it is the character of Socrates, who gives the climactic oration.

Love, Socrates says (and we assume Plato agrees) is not one thing, but many. More precisely, it is like a ladder that touches the earth and reaches up to the heavens. We first experience love as an attraction to a thing of beauty. This is where “Eros”, the form of love connected to sexuality, comes in. Eros is not same as sexual desire, which is a kind of bodily function. Rather it is an attachment to the object of this desire, through which we may appreciate beauty itself. Through the contemplation of beauty we can acquire wisdom and rise to a higher form of love.

For Plato, we don't love others who are like us, but instead seek something we lack. We are attracted to qualities we want and unconsciously strive to become better versions of ourselves. In a sense, a relationship of love is one of mutual education. Hence, it can sometimes be difficult, yet still ultimately fulfilling.

Plato set up his own school, the Academy, in 385 b.c.e.. In its lifetime, the power and wealth of Athens gradually slipped behind Rome, its rival in the west. In the late 2nd century b.c.e., all the Greek lands became part of the Roman Empire, and Greek culture was also, to some extent, absorbed. Plato's philosophy does not seem to have travelled well, at first. Perhaps a philosophy of love didn't suit this martial, materialistic age.

Aristotelian ethics

Nevertheless, one student of the Academy, Aristotle, did make it big in the Roman world. The initial attraction of his thought may well have been his systematic view of nature, but his systematic ethics also caught on. It was schematically straightforward and gratifyingly down-to-earth.

Firstly, he accepted the Hedonistic principle: it is a natural human goal to seek pleasure. Like Epicurus (who lived later) he said that it is natural for humans to be virtuous. Virtue can be cultivated by observing virtuous people and following their example. You can pick up the habit

and as good things flow you feel the reward and the motivation to continue. It is a good thing, Aristotle believed, to push yourself to be as good as you can be. Through virtuous action the soul flourishes and we can achieve happiness.

Virtuous behaviour itself is best understood as falling on the balancing point between vices. Aristotle called this the “golden mean”. For example, it is a virtue to be witty. Some people are bores. They may have knowledge but lack charm and imagination. Other people are buffoons. They have humour, but lack intelligence and tact. Between these two is the golden mean of wittiness. It is one of the qualities that successful and happy people have, along with such things as courage, liberality, patience and modesty.

Such people are “great souls”. While many people aim for “contentment” (an animal-like inclination to settle for challenge-free comfortableness), great souls aim to “flourish”. They seek to perfect rationality and act with effortless virtue. Such a life, according to Aristotle, would be the most worthwhile.

Aristotle also wrote about art in a way that is relevant to the question of how we should live. Good art, he says, is cathartic, that is to say, it releases emotions and cleanses the mind. In tragedy, for example, we see other people's lives going wrong. We sympathise, face our fears and are delivered. This helps us deal with our feelings of fear and pity, through which we can find the golden mean.

Politically, Aristotle was, like Plato, an elitist. Again it is leaders, not power structures, that matter, and societies can be judged healthy or unhealthy depending the kinds of people they celebrate. Aristotle goes beyond Plato however, in arguing that philosophers can help men of virtue acquire power. His school is said to have been the first to teach “Rhetoric”, the art of persuasion. Such skills can not only be used for self-interest, as the Sophists had done, but also in the service of virtue.

From doubt to revelation

For generations after Rome absorbed Greece, Stoicism and the ideas of Epicurus and of Aristotle soaked through its intellectual life. Philosophy really did provide guiding principles for the lives of a great many people. This was during Rome's 3½ centuries of relative stability, prosperity and centralised imperial rule. The dominant philosophies were practical, worldly and conservative.

What happened next is perhaps one of the most widely debated events in Western history, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Why it happened is not our immediate concern, but the process deserves a mention. Historical events are the context in which ideas are aired, become popular and are preserved. Devastating plagues from 250-270 c.e., for example, and the destruction of Rome in 410 c.e., were probably significant. Certain developments in philosophy around and between those dates are important in the history of ethics.

Particularly in those decades of plague, the empire experienced a rash of cults. One of them is now known as Neo-Platonism. Despite the fact that Plato wrote a lot, he is said to have sympathised with Socrates' disdain for recording arguments. Written words, Socrates said, can't defend themselves and crude criticisms will stick to them. Plato broke the proscription only to save his master's wisdom from being lost. It is quite possible that he didn't write down some of his own arguments. Hence it is quite possible that the Neo-Platonists lived by the unwritten doctrines of Plato.

Plotinus, who lived through those troubled times, put into words what Plato (perhaps) would not. Firstly, we humans are souls occupying a body. The soul can be dominated by the body or the

other way around. A soul that masters the body is freer to think and contemplate the eternal and perfect forms. Virtue also raises the soul from the body to the intellect. Beyond this we mere mortals can only catch the slightest glimpse. Higher than the intellect is the unknowable and indescribable origin of everything. The Neo-Platonists called this “the One”.

You can see how Neo-Platonism is a kind of systematised and mystified version of Plato's theory of love, as attributed to Socrates in *the Symposium*. Its school was a community that took people through a kind of mystical ascent to a divine conclusion. You can see how it lends itself to a cult, and you can imagine how it fought for Roman hearts and minds in an age of insecurity and early death.

Amongst the other cults alive at this time was Christianity, which would later metamorphose into the state religion. We don't know how much these cults influenced each other, but it seems likely to me that they did. Early Christianity evolved a similar ethos to Neo-Platonism. Its monastic communities are similar to the old philosophical schools in which initiates are guided through daily orders to master their bodies. Through study and prayer they reach up to a mystical realm at whose pinnacle is divinity.

After years of training, those who have risen to higher levels may act as spiritual and moral leaders of states, just like Plato's “Guardians”. The Christian church, which spread throughout the empire and beyond, became the only significant source of education for well over a thousand years after the empire fell. Its hierarchy became an instrument of power, holding Kings to account and conferring or denying legitimacy to them.

Something Christianity had that philosophy didn't was an unimpeachable moral exemplar, not merely a great soul in the Aristotelian sense, but a perfect one. In the person of Jesus, the Christians not only had a divine King, which was not an unusual concept for Romans raised on the deification of Emperors, they also had an embodiment of love. The Neo-Platonist idea of reaching up to the divine through the love of a real, physical man, is echoed in Christian doctrine.

The destruction of Rome in 410 c.e., prompted the old Augustine of Hippo to write a book called *The City of God*. He had studied Neo-Platonism and been a sceptical philosopher before his conversion to Christianity. Augustine took the Neo-Platonist notion of the body as a flawed vessel as an explanation for the existence of evil in the world. At its simplest, the idea is that God is perfect and calls souls from their bodies towards him. Evil therefore, is not a separate force opposed to God, but simply the imperfections that God wants us to overcome.

The human soul has the capacity for reason through which it can know the forms of things. Without the distant goal of the divine however, reason leads us into the mire of scepticism. We can choose which route to take, so by freewill alone, choose faith. Augustine said that we should not reason to understand, but believe in order to reason. The destruction of a city devoted to earthly desires and futile, dispiriting doubt, symbolised the turn to something higher and better.

From revelation to consolation

One hundred years later, a Barbarian King ruled over Rome, yet the city's Senate still sat. One of its prominent members was a highly respected scholar called Boethius, who the King first employed, then accused of conspiracy and sentenced to death. While in prison, Boethius wrote one of the most influential books in European history.

In *the Consolations of philosophy*, Boethius condenses all of the best arguments from Stoicism, Epicurus, Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists, and repaints them all in Christian colours. He says that God wants us to be happy and live well, and we can do this by choosing virtue and reason. Riches

do not add to happiness but create new insatiable desires. Fortune is a wheel that turns. It brings blessings and disasters in equal measure.

Philosophy allows us to glimpse the world from the divine point of view. Through virtue and reason the soul seeks communion with perfect, eternal truths, and ultimately, the divine. Reason reveals that there is no evil, just the imperfections of the world as they appear from a limited, human point of view. Perfection in this world is impossible, but we can find it, and happiness, in the next. Reason, for Boethius, was inseparable from faith. The revelation of Jesus and the consolation of philosophy combine to free us from fear, the true source of pain in our lives.

When you get on a train of thought, it's not always possible to know where it's going to go. The question of what life is for spun off in different directions, one important one that we have discussed ended up in a mystical union with the oneness of God. This train of thought, Neo-Platonism, has parallels with early Christianity that suggest influences, one way, the other, or mutual. For some it represents a journey from the pain of scepticism to the joy of consolation.

Other routes that influenced ancient Roman minds: Stoicism, Epicureanism and Aristotelianism, waned in the twilight of the Western Empire. They seemed to vanish during the age of barbarian invasions. Perhaps because of their origin in the example of Socrates, they sought tranquillity of the mind in the face of death, yet none could match the promise of eternal life offered by the new religions. None could match the comforts of faith that dominated western thought for the many centuries that followed.

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