MORALITY
WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

A Historical Introduction to Ethics
For
Barbara
CONTENTS

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction: Why Be Moral? 1

PART ONE
THE GREEK TRADITION

1 Self-discipline and Tranquility: Epictetus, A.D. 50-130 11
   Epictetus's Conception of Ethics, 12
   How Good Is Epictetus's Advice? 14
   Conclusion: The Limits of the Stoic Perspective, 17

2 Happiness and the Virtues: Aristotle, 384-322 B.C. 21
   Aristotle's Argument, 23
   Some Qualifications, 27
   Moral Virtues and the Good, 28
   Conclusion: Aristotle's Achievements and Their Limits, 32

PART TWO
MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

3 The Moral Point of View: Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804 39
   Moral Laws and Moral Action, 40
   Kant's Argument Criticized, 47
   The Categorical Imperative Revisited, 50
   Conclusion: Ancient and Modern, 55
4 Self-interest, Altruism, and Social Conventions: Thomas Hobbes, 1588-1679; David Hume, 1711-1776; Joseph Butler, 1692-1752

Hume on the Nature and Source of Moral Requirements, 60
Recapitulation, 65
Butler on "Self-love," 67
Butler's Significance, 71
Hobbes on the Need for Social Rules and the Reason for Obeying Them, 74
Two Parts of Morality, 81
Moral Controversy and the Two Parts of Morality, 87

5 Utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832; John Stuart Mill, 1806-1873

What the Principle of Utility Requires, 93
Mill's Critique of Bentham, 98
Justifying the Principle of Utility, 101
Why Do What Utilitarianism Requires? 108
Conclusion: Should We Be Utilitarians? 113

PART THREE
CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIONS

6 A Contractualist Framework for Morality

A Democratic Conception of Morality, 122
What Contractualism Might Require, 129
Problems of Collective Action, 133
Contractualism and Utilitarianism, 138
Aristotelian and Humean Themes, 141
Conclusion: Morality--What's in It for Me? 145

Notes
Selected Further Readings
About the Book and Author
Index
It is possible to read this book simply as an introduction to some of the major texts and ideas in the history of Western moral philosophy. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but it is meant to be accurate and, at the same time, accessible to readers with no previous training in philosophy. It grows out of many years of teaching historical introductions to ethics; one aim of these courses is just to provide an overview of a rich and varied philosophical tradition.

I hope the book is also something more. As readers with a philosophical background will see, it is written from a distinctive viewpoint that reflects my own philosophical preoccupations. These arise out of three convictions. The first, to which the book's title is meant to point, is a democratic conviction that moral demands, if they are worth our attention at all, must be defensible to those to whom they are addressed. Second, whether or not moral truth consists in correspondence to some independent reality—whether or not "moral realism" is true—the issue of urgent practical importance regarding any moral conception is whether people have reason to care about it so that it constitutes a consensus of concern to which the members of a community can effectively appeal in their dealings with one another. The third conviction consists of a broad, philosophical naturalism: The natural world, the world of the natural sciences, is the only world there is. Morality must find its place within this world. By putting these ideas together, then, I arrive at the conclusion that moral facts, if there are any, must be natural facts about people or the world they live in, and they must be facts that most of us have a reason to care about. Moral facts are natural facts, but they are natural facts that matter.

I should say a couple of words more about the first and second of these convictions. While I hold that moral demands must matter to people and must be defensible to those to whom they apply, I do not mean that they must be defensible in terms of individual self-interest. Indeed, one of my aims is to draw attention to some of the classic arguments against the thesis that we are necessarily self-interested, and I criticize the philosophers who think we are. In general, a
defense of morality--a defense to those to whom it applies--forces us to look at two questions at once: "What does morality require?" and "what motives and interests do people normally have?" Without answers to both, we cannot carry out the project of justification. Our question must be whether there is some conception of morality and some plausible account of human motivation, such that persons motivated as that account says they are can also be expected to care about morality as it is conceived.

Because I reject the thesis that people are merely self-interested, the question in the title ("what's in it for me?") has a sort of double purpose. For parts of what has traditionally been studied under the title "ethics," it raises a hope that actually can be fulfilled, for these parts do contribute to one's own good. At the same time, it calls attention to the fact that other parts of morality cannot be so justified. For them, the answer to "what's in it for me?" is "not much." But that does not mean these aspects of morality cannot be defended at all. For, again, people are not merely self-interested. They are susceptible to moral considerations of various kinds. They are able to adopt the perspective of others and to care about what can be justified to them. And so, even when morality requires that we adopt an impartial standpoint, morality can still be justified, at least to most normal people.

In the course of examining a number of key historical texts, this book focuses on ideas about what morality is, what ethics is about. The ideas it examines range from the Greek notion that ethics is concerned with what an individual needs in order to flourish to Hume's idea that morality is concerned with the well-being of others and is rooted in natural capacities for sympathy and benevolence that lead us to share this concern. And, of course, it explores other ideas as well, most notably Kant's version of the idea that moral laws are laws of reason. It also explores various sophisticated, or not so sophisticated, ideas about human motivation.

Readers familiar with the philosophical literature will find, no doubt, that some of their favorite topics have been omitted. This is inevitable in any book, but I hope, in this one, that what is omitted is at least omitted for a reason. To take one example, though there is a chapter on Bentham and Mill, there is no discussion of the distinction between direct and indirect utilitarianism. That is because, from the perspective of this book, what is most striking about utilitarianism is something both the direct and indirect versions have in common--their aggregative, maximizing consequentialism. It is this feature of the theory, after all, which writers in the contractualist tradition attack
even when the utilitarian principle is viewed, in the style of rule-utilitarianism, as a "principle for institutions."

Omitted also is any discussion of religiously based ethical theories. As important as these may be for the history of ideas, theology has no place in the philosophical naturalism that I presuppose. What I hope I have managed to include are the major historical alternatives in terms of which contemporary debates tend to be framed. For someone who wants to get a sense of the differences between Greek ethics and post-enlightenment ethics, of the Greek notion of the virtues, of the modern debates between Kantian and utilitarian theories, and of the way in which contractualist theories draw on both traditions, this is meant to be the book.

William N. Nelson
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In working on this book I have benefited from the advice and suggestions of many people. Early on, Howard Curzer and Cynthia Freeland read a draft of the first half and offered detailed comments and criticisms. Eugene Schlossberger and Nancy Snow read a revised and augmented version of the same material for Westview Press, and later Alan Ryan, David Schmidtz, and Henry West read and commented on the complete text. My daughter, Sarah, read sections, offered comments, and, when the title needed changing at a late date, made the suggestion that led to the final version. Spencer Carr of Westview Press read draft after draft, commenting, criticizing, and asking hard questions. It has been a great help that he knows both publishing and philosophy, but just as important for me has been his good cheer and sense of humor. It has been a pleasure to work with him. Needless to say, not all of these people agree with what I say or with how I say it, but each made suggestions that have improved the final version. I am grateful to all of them for their help. I am grateful, too, to Barry Brown, at the University of Houston, who helped immensely with the task of formatting the final text.

I owe another debt of a different kind to my family—my wife, Barbara, and my children, Andrew and Sarah. Much of what I have managed to learn about how to live my own life I have learned from them. They help make it the good life that it is.

W.N.N.
MORALITY
WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

A Historical Introduction
to Ethics
INTRODUCTION: WHY BE MORAL?

"Why be moral?" is not the only question of moral philosophy; nor is it necessarily the most important. But it is a surprisingly good place to begin an introduction to moral philosophy. One reason is that there is no way to answer this question, or even to discuss it intelligently, without raising and investigating a number of other important issues in moral philosophy.

A second reason for starting with this question has to do with the contemporary cultural and political climate. We find ourselves confronted, both as individuals and as a community, with what seems like a much broader range of difficult choices than ever before. Some of these choices arise from things like advances in medical science that create opportunities never available in the past. Other choices result simply from cultural change—from the fact that people have come to consider as possibilities options that used to be ruled out without any thought.

We face many new and difficult choices, and many people see these as moral choices. There is no question in their minds that the right choice is the choice dictated by morality. And so we find ourselves bombarded on all sides by moral demands: We are told that abortion is immoral and must be outlawed, but also that women have absolute rights to make their own choices regarding abortion; that moribund lives must be preserved as long as technologically possible, and also that people have rights to "die with dignity." And we are told that capital punishment must be abolished, that the policy of nuclear deterrence is immoral, whether or not it works; and we are even told that it is immoral for women to be umpires in the major leagues.

Obviously, we cannot heed all of these demands. They are not even consistent. In the case of some, were we to heed them, the costs, both in financial terms and in terms of human happiness, might well be immense. Yet, once the term "moral" is attached to a demand, few people, at least in public and especially in political discourse, feel free
to ignore the demand. No one wants to admit indifference to morality. If these are true moral demands, however, and if I am right in saying that what they require could be extremely costly in terms of human happiness, then it seems to me that the question "why be moral?" is a very important question indeed. Moreover, if the costs of being moral are high enough, the answer may be that there is no good reason to be moral. Perhaps, as philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche have thought, morality is a disaster for anyone who cares about human well-being, not to mention his or her own well-being.

Most philosophers would object to this way of looking at the issue. They would agree that many of the alleged demands of morality are unreasonable, if not downright repressive. But they would say that I have chosen my examples unfairly. The rigid, inflexible, and repressive rules some people associate with morality are not genuine moral rules. The real requirements of morality do sometimes demand sacrifice, but not usually great sacrifice; and the sacrifices they do demand are in the service of liberal and humane ends. The genuine requirements of morality, most philosophers would say, are important because they protect and promote central human interests.

This sounds like a reasonable response. But notice what it means. It means that we cannot answer the first question I raised—"why be moral?"—without answering a second question, namely, "what kind of thing does morality require?" Perhaps it is true that the actual requirements of morality are important and reasonable and that the shrill exhortations of dogmatic moralists are based on mistaken conceptions of morality. But that remains to be shown. We have two questions to answer, not just one. And how is the second question to be answered? Many philosophers have thought that in order to understand what morality requires, we need to understand what morality is, that is, what it is about or what its point is. And that, of course, is a third question. (Just as an example, if the point of morality is to enable people to live together in peace and harmony, then morality actually requires whatever is required to produce peace and harmony.)

Indeed, there are really more questions than these. When we ask "why be moral?" we need, as I have just said, to think about what we are trying to justify. We also need to think about what kind of justification we have in mind. If we think the requirements of morality are important, the question remains, important for whom, and in what way? Questions like these represent a fourth kind of question. No doubt, different people would accept different answers. Some would be satisfied if they were shown that moral or ethical conduct serves the interests of others, or of society. But others find this kind of answer
Introduction: Why Be Moral?

inadequate. Perhaps, like the inquisitor I imagine in the title of this book, they will want to know "what's in it for me?" As they see it, the fact that moral conduct serves the interests of others justifies morality only to someone who is already concerned about social good; and that, they would say, is itself an ethical commitment. How can morality be justified to someone who is not already moved by moral considerations?

Once again, the person who raises this question may have in mind more than one kind of answer. A particularly interesting kind of answer, however, and one that has aroused a good deal of interest in the history of philosophy, is that being moral, though it seems to require a concern for the good of others, also contributes to one's own well-being, one's own good, where this in turn means something like happiness. Some philosophers have thought that this idea must be wrong. After all, if we know anything about morality, we know that morality is meant to serve as a check on self-interest. Nevertheless, others remain convinced that one is better off being moral than not being moral, and that the demands of morality can be justified by appeal to this idea. To explore this line of thought in any depth, of course, we need to deal with yet another basic question, a fifth one, namely, "what kind of life is a good or happy life?"

I have raised so far a series of basic questions, including:

- Why be moral?
- What does morality actually require?
- What is the good life? (or what is human well-being?)
- What is morality about?
- What kind of answer to "why be moral?" is a good one?

If this book were meant to be a systematic treatise on moral philosophy, I would go on to explore possible answers to these questions and, perhaps, endeavor to show that there is at least some reasonable conception of what morality requires, and some corresponding reasonable conception of human well-being, in terms of which it is possible to show that being moral contributes to well-being (or is at least consistent with it). Indeed, in my final chapter, I will attempt to show this. But while I do aim to address substantive issues in moral philosophy, I also mean to write an introduction to the history of ethics. Rather than proceed directly to answer the questions I have raised, then, I will use them as a way of organizing my discussion of certain central works in the history of moral philosophy: As I approach the philosophers I discuss, my question will be how they would answer these questions. I hope to show both that the history of ethics makes more sense when approached with substantive issues in
mind and also that a historical perspective contributes to our understanding of the substantive issues.

Of course, not all the philosophers I discuss will answer my questions in the same way. Not all of them even ask these questions. Indeed, it is one of my main themes that the Western tradition in moral philosophy is not a history of different philosophers investigating the same questions and coming up with different answers. Instead, in a quite clear sense, it is a history of different philosophers asking different questions and, not surprisingly, offering different answers. Moreover, even when the questions raised by different philosophers appear to be quite similar, it is often clear, on investigation, that the philosophers' understanding of what those questions meant, and what kind of answer would be appropriate, are quite different.

These differences should not be exaggerated. Even when different people have asked different questions, it often seems plausible to say that they are dealing with different aspects of the same underlying phenomenon; and it is also often true that the issues they address are complementary. That is, the answer one theorist offers to one question is clearly useful to others dealing with other issues. Still, what we find when we look at the history of ethics is something less than a coordinated effort to find answers to a single set of questions. Instead, we find disagreement not only about answers and procedures for finding answers but also about the questions themselves.

Disagreement about the questions themselves, I should point out, is characteristic of philosophy—and is often frustrating for students. In the more specialized sciences that have spun off from philosophy (like physics or biology), there is usually a good deal of agreement about what the basic questions are, and even about how to go about answering them. As sciences progress, more and more answers are discovered. For students, the job is to learn the answers, to learn why they are correct, and, for the more advanced, to learn how to discover more. Philosophers, though, whether they are engaged in pure philosophy, or in the philosophical study of a more specialized discipline, push their investigations further. And often that means questioning the questions themselves. Why should we be asking this question rather than that?

This means that studying philosophy is like a juggling act: You have to keep both answers and questions in the air at the same time. You frequently end up with a lot of "ifs." "If this is the question, then here is a possible answer, but if we ask a different question . . . ." That is one of the things that makes philosophy difficult, but it can also make it especially rewarding. Once you get the hang of it, it is liberating, for it means that you don't have to be stuck with someone else's conception
of what the right questions and the right methods are. And the very best and most exciting work, in just about any field, has always come from those who had the ability to conceive of new ways of approaching an old subject. One of the great advantages of a historical approach to ethics is just that it provides us with such a variety of different approaches.

I began this introduction by drawing attention to an increasingly shrill, moralistic strain in public discourse, a moralism that is both self-righteous and dogmatic. One might think that, as a philosopher who specializes in ethics, I would applaud this development, but I do not. I would certainly like what I view as a moral or ethical outlook to become more prevalent. But I do not equate a belief in the importance of a moral outlook and rational moral discourse with a dogmatic commitment to any particular moral judgment regarding the kinds of issues we confront as a society. Dogmatism and objectivity are, in fact, incompatible. People like me, who believe that moral judgments can be objectively true or false, believe that the true ones are true only if they can be supported by good evidence. They think evidence needs to be examined, and reasons on both sides considered. Dogmatists believe what they believe without considering evidence and without being willing to reexamine what they think in light of the evidence. What believers in moral objectivity really care about is whatever is supported by the best evidence. They are prepared to accept the possibility that even what they think is correct might not be.

The philosophers I will discuss here are not dogmatists. All of them make an effort to provide some kind of systematic defense for their conclusions. None means merely to assert alleged moral truths, and none rests his conclusions merely on faith, or commitment, or religious conviction. But what kind of defense can one offer for a moral judgment? What kind of evidence is possible? The best way to answer this question is to refer the reader to the discussions, in the chapters that follow, of the particular arguments philosophers have offered. Many of them are good arguments that support their conclusions with the evidence of experience or with common sense observations about the facts of personal or social life. They may simply remind us, for example, of the things we have learned, as we grow, about what is or is not satisfying in our lives, and of what attitudes have caused us trouble. Some of the arguments we will discuss, however, are not so good. Like anyone else, philosophers make mistakes of reasoning. They leap to conclusions, they generalize too quickly from a small sample, or they overlook alternatives to the conclusion they favor. It will be my job to try to point out those errors. But even when there are errors, they are seldom silly errors. We can usually understand the philosophical
temptations that lead to them, and we can learn not to repeat them ourselves.

Still, one might wonder just how any experience or any facts about life in society could, all by themselves, tell us what is right or wrong, good or bad. The answer is that they can't. What they show will depend partly on what other assumptions one is willing to make about the purpose of morality, about the nature of the basic questions of ethics. Thus, for example, if we think morality is something like a code of behavior whose function is to promote some goal, either for an individual or for society (just as rules for investing have the function of helping people to achieve success in the stock market), then it is clear how facts about human experience could be evidence for or against an ethical theory. It is also clear, on this assumption, that if a theory is a good theory, there ought also to be some interesting answers to the question "why be moral?" as morality is conceived in that theory.

The arguments of the philosophers I will discuss, then, like any arguments, rest on assumptions; and these philosophers, by the standards of the twentieth century, are relatively unaware of the extent to which they are making controversial assumptions. Or, at least, that is the way they naturally appear to us, for we may be aware of more alternatives. Assumptions these philosophers thought obvious, proofs they thought beyond question, often seem to us dubious. That is another reason why it is valuable to look at the history of philosophy. We are sufficiently distant from it that we can look at it objectively, critically. We can see the flaws and shortcomings. But the real payoff comes when, having become aware of these shortcomings, we ask ourselves whether we really have an improvement, whether our assumptions are any more firmly grounded. The answer, more often than not, is that they aren't. When we understand that, we may be in a better position to approach moral conflicts in a spirit of respect for the opinions of others and to think creatively about how to resolve them, free from the assumption that the answers have already been found and need only be forced upon those who disagree.

I will begin my discussion of moral philosophy with two representatives of the ancient Greek tradition. I will then take a giant leap to the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and discuss several philosophers from that period. Between these two periods, as I will explain, ideas about what morality is, what its point is, and what its requirements are, changed quite dramatically. The reason, I suspect, had a lot to do with the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition—a tradition which obviously did not influence the early Greeks. In any case, within each period, though there are often
significant disagreements among philosophers, there are also important similarities just beneath the surface.

Along with many others who have recently written on this history, I will take Aristotle to be the main representative of the Greek tradition, and I will discuss him at length in Chapter 2. I will start, though, not with Aristotle in the fourth century B.C., but with the Stoic philosopher Epictetus in the first century A.D. Not only are his views a great deal simpler and easier to expound than Aristotle's, but also his conception of the ethical life, it seems to me, contrasts far more sharply with modern ideas about morality. It seems like a good place to start, then, if we want to begin thinking about ethics in a new way.
References