

Reading Guide #5 - Ethics

Plato, "What is Right Conduct?"

1. According to Cephalus, what makes for a pleasant old age?
  2. According to Cephalus, how does wealth lead to happiness? Be specific.
  3. What is wrong with defining right conduct as telling the truth and paying back what you owe?
  4. How does Polemarchus first define justice, or right conduct?
  5. "The just man then has turned out to be a kind of thief." (5) Explain in detail how Socrates arrives at this conclusion.
  6. How does Socrates argue that it is never right to harm anyone?
  7. How does Thrasymachus define justice? Be specific.
  8. How does Socrates argue that, on Thrasymachus's definition of justice, it will be right to do what is not in the interest of the stronger?
  9. How does Cleitophon amend Thrasymachus's definition? Why does Thrasymachus reject this change?
  10. Socrates concludes, "[N]o other ruler, in any kind of government, insofar as he is a ruler, seeks what is to his own advantage... (10)." Sketch his argument. Why does Thrasymachus resist this conclusion?
  11. How is Thrasymachus's sheep and shepherd analogy a response to Socrates's argument that true rulers always rule in the interests of the governed?
  12. According to Thrasymachus, who has the greater advantage, the just person or the unjust person?
  13. According to Thrasymachus, what is the difference between the despot and the petty thief?
  14. According to Thrasymachus, why do people denounce injustice?
  15. Why do politicians need to be paid, according to Socrates?
  16. Why does Thrasymachus argue that justice is not a virtue?
  17. Sketch Socrates's argument that the just man is good and wise, and the unjust man is ignorant and bad.
  18. What does Socrates say about an army of unjust people? What does he learn about individual people from this?
  19. How does Socrates argue that the soul has a function? What is the function of the soul?
  20. According to Socrates, what type of person lives the best? Why?
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Plato, "Why Should I Be Moral?"

1. Of what does Socrates want to convince his audience?
2. What are the three different kinds of goods, with respect to why we desire them? According to Socrates, which kind of good is justice? What is the general opinion?
3. How will Glaucon proceed to praise the unjust life?
4. What, according to Glaucon, is the source of laws and covenants?
5. Why, according to Glaucon, do people act justly?
6. How, according to Glaucon, would some one who possessed the ring of Gyges act? What does he think this shows?
7. Describe the unjust man and the just man, as Glaucon depicts them. Which life is preferable?
8. What are the three parts of the soul, according to Socrates? What is a just man?
9. What is an unjust man, according to Socrates?
10. Why does Glaucon call the comparison between Socrates's just and unjust men ridiculous?
11. What effects, according to Socrates, does behaving unjustly have on a person?
12. Is it better, according to Socrates, to be caught while behaving unjustly, or not to get caught?

John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism"

1. What is the Greatest Happiness Principle?
  2. Why do some critics consider utilitarianism "a doctrine worthy only of swine" (141a)? How does Mill respond to this objection?
  3. How does Mill propose to determine which of two pleasures is more desirable?
  4. "[It is] better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (143a). Explain. How does Mill rectify this claim with his hedonism?
  5. According to Mill, why might people sometimes choose lower pleasures over higher ones?
  6. Why is measuring an individual's happiness not the way to evaluate an act, according to utilitarianism?
  7. For the utilitarian, what is the ultimate goal of human life?
  8. Does utilitarianism see self-sacrifice as good in itself? What good is it?
  9. How does Mill say that you can prove that some thing is desirable? How does this relate to utilitarianism? What more needs to be shown in order to establish utilitarianism as the sole standard of morality?
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Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine"

1. What does the experience machine provide?
  2. "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?" (124b).
  3. What kinds of things do we want to do? Can the experience machine facilitate these things?
  4. Does the experience machine allow us to be what we want to be? How is plugging in to the machine like suicide?
  5. What do we want out of life, besides experiences? What does this mean for the experience machine?
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Immanuel Kant, "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals"

1. What is the only thing Kant thinks good without qualification? Why are intelligence and wealth not good without qualification?
2. Why is the good will good?
3. Contrast Kant's notions of inclination and duty. When does an act have moral worth?
4. What's the difference between an hypothetical and a categorical imperative?
5. What's wrong with using happiness as a standard for morality?
6. Why must the possibility of a categorical imperative be investigated *a priori*?
7. Explain the categorical imperative in the formula of universal law.
8. According to the formula of universal law, why is suicide wrong?
9. According to the formula of universal law, why is false promising wrong?
10. According to the formula of universal law, may we neglect our natural gifts?
11. According to the formula of universal law, why may you not neglect others in need?
12. How are the answers to questions 8 and 9 different from the answers to questions 10 and 11? That is, what are the two ways in which one can fail to be able to will a maxim?
13. Why can we not will a universalized transgression to a moral law? What can we will about the transgression?
14. "Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, *exists* as an end in himself, *not merely as a means* for arbitrary use by this or that will..." (545a). Explain.
15. What's the difference between things and persons?

16. What, specifically, is the second formulation of the categorical imperative?
  17. According to the formula of the end in itself, why is suicide wrong?
  18. According to the formula of the end in itself, why is false promising wrong?
  19. According to the formula of the end in itself, may we neglect our natural gifts?
  20. According to the formula of the end in itself, why may you not neglect others in need?
  21. Why are systems of morality based on hypothetical imperatives heteronomous? How is Kant's system autonomous?
  22. What is a "kingdom of ends," according to Kant? In the third version of the categorical imperative, in what does morality consist?
  23. What is Kant's distinction between price and dignity? What kinds of things have dignity?
  24. What is autonomy, for Kant? What is freedom?
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John T. Noonan Jr., "Abortion is Morally Wrong"

1. What is the theological definition of humanity? Why is it not a narrowly theological definition?
  2. How is viability an alternative criterion for humanity?
  3. How is the concept of viability elastic?
  4. According to Noonan, what is the most important objection to using viability as a definition of humanity?
  5. Can experience be used as an alternative criterion for humanity? Explain.
  6. Can the feelings of parents be used as an alternative criterion for humanity? Explain.
  7. Can humanity be defined in terms of social visibility? Explain.
  8. "Moral judgments often rest on distinctions, but if the distinctions are not to appear arbitrary fiat, they should related to some real difference in probabilities" (355b). Explain. How do considerations of probabilities underlie Noonan's criterion of personhood?
  9. How does Noonan argue that the probability argument is not arbitrary?
  10. Is Noonan's proscription of abortion absolute? Explain.
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Mary Anne Warren, "The Personhood Argument in Favor of Abortion"

1. What is a moral community? How do criteria for humanity differ from criteria for moral personhood?
2. How does the traditional argument against abortion equivocate?
3. What are Warren's five criteria for personhood? Are they all necessary conditions?
4. What kinds of human beings may not be people? What kinds of people may not be human beings?
5. "Thus, in the *relevant* respects, a fetus, even a fully developed one, is considerably less personlike than is the average mature mammal, indeed the average fish" (361a). Explain.
6. What consequences for the abortion debate does Warren derive from her criteria for personhood?
7. Does a fetus's potential personhood give it an overriding right to life? Consider the speck-of-dust and alien-replication examples.