

Class 23 - April 20
Plato, "What is Right Conduct?"

I. Nihilism, Relativism, and Absolutism

One question which arises from *Blade Runner* is whether replicants are persons. We started to try to answer that question by asking about the nature of mind. Another question that arises is whether it is morally permissible to kill replicants. Part of the answer to this latter question depends on our answer to the first question. If replicants have minds, then we are more likely to see them as fully-fledged persons, as parts of our moral community. Another part of the answer to the question of whether we are morally permitted to kill replicants depends on more general principles of morality.

Morality, or ethics, is the study of right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair, just and unjust, virtuous and vicious.

Right and wrong tend to characterize actions.

Good and bad (and virtuous and vicious) are more applicable to people and their characters.

Fair and unfair (and just and unjust) are usually used to describe social arrangements or distributions of goods.

But, these pairs of terms are inter-related.

A 'morality' is a set of true claims about right and wrong.

Consider the following logical truth about morality.

Either there is:

- A. No morality;
- B. Exactly one morality; or
- C. More than one morality.

These three claims express meta-ethical positions.

Meta-ethics is the study of the possibility of ethics.

It is also, sometimes, the study of the meanings of ethical terms.

We can thus distinguish moralizing, or first-order ethics, from meta-ethics, or second-order ethics.

We are going to start by considering how one moralizes.

We probably all think we are ethical people, but what makes us so?

We may obey the laws, but some laws may be unjust.

We obey many customs, or religions, but there are conflicting customs.

The Aztecs practiced human sacrifice and the Aghori Hindu sect in India practice cannibalism.

We follow our moral instincts, but we can make mistakes.

History is filled with persons who literally saw other human beings as less than fully human.

Our use of reasoning in ethics may help, but it is unlikely to be an infallible guide.

Perhaps we participate in unjust institutions.

Slavery, like capitalism, had many defenders.

A is called moral nihilism

B is called moral absolutism, or moral objectivism.

C is called moral relativism.

A, B, and C are intended to be prescriptive, rather than descriptive.
There are many different codes of behavior that people actually follow.
The question is whether there is one correct code of behavior.

The absolutist claims that there is just one set of rights and wrongs.
The absolutist's claim is about what exists.
It is not about what we know.
Even if there is only one true morality, we may be ignorant of it.
So we can be absolutists without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.

This unit of our course will not tell you what is right or wrong.
It may give you some insight into how to decide that for yourselves: reasons *why*.
There are two standard examples of moral absolutism: utilitarianism and Kantian deontology.
We will look at both theories next week.
Today, we will briefly examine relativism and nihilism.

II. Relativism

There are two types of relativism, which we can call conventionalism and subjectivism.
Conventionalism says that morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other group.
Subjectivism says that morality depends on the individual.

There are at least two different sorts of subjectivism.
Thomas Hobbes derives a complicated system of justice from basic subjectivist principles.
He starts by observing that people call what they like 'good' and what they dislike 'bad'.
The social ramifications of everyone having their own standards of morality are devastating.
A world in which everyone adheres to their individual interests is what Hobbes calls a state of nature.
Life, in a state of nature, he says, is, "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."
Thus, Hobbes, argues, we enter into a social contract in which we give up all of our autonomy to a sovereign, or government.
The government protects us from each other and from external enemies in return for the absolute right to determine the laws.
Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists claim that morality is created through action.
For the existentialist, each individual creates his or her own morality.

One problem with subjectivism is that our moral beliefs tend to reflect those of others around us.
We learn moral facts from our communities.
Some philosophers take this fact to support cultural relativism, or conventionalism.
On conventionalism, right and wrong are determined by a society, subculture, family, or other group.
Herodotus tells the story of King Darius, who brought Callatians and Greeks to court to prove relativism.
The Callatians were cannibals, and ate their dead.
The Greeks cremated their dead.
Each thought the others' practice was not just repugnant but immoral.
Herodotus concludes that custom is king, that the conventionalist's view that morality depends on our society is correct.

Let's call the problem Herodotus describes Darius's puzzle.
Darius's puzzle is what to think when we discover conflicting social norms, specifically ones which are

perceived as moral norms.

Naively, we can defend our own views.

When these views are widely shared, we might take them to transcend our culture.

Universality of customs can mislead us into thinking that our norms are the correct ones.

But, when we study isolated tribes, we can find significant departures from modern ethical norms.

What we think of as abnormal may be taken as normal.

Since the normal varies, some people think, the moral also varies.

Anthropology is filled with interesting descriptions of the variance of normality.

Some societies condemn homosexuality, while others embrace it as normal.

Some societies respect revenge killing, while others condemn all murders.

One important question to ask when facing Darius's puzzle is whether we really have conflicting moral principles.

Some norms are just conventions, mere expressions of preference.

But some people elevate such preferences to the level of morality.

Consider the Native American berdache, or two-spirit person.

Two-spirits are usually males who play traditional female gender roles.

The life of a two-spirit includes what we would ordinarily call homosexual behavior.

Many Native American tribes thus accept homosexuality as a matter of convention.

In contrast, some people believe that homosexuality is immoral.

Notice that the fact that some people believe that sexuality is a matter for ethics does not make sexual preference a moral issue.

I can deride the eating of Brussels sprouts as immoral, too.

The example of the two-spirit only shows that customs or mores are relative.

They do not show that morality itself is relative.

Certainly, there are different practices in different societies.

We can even admit that a person who violates a social code may be judged as immoral, without accepting that morality itself is relative.

Consider a society that thinks that sex on Tuesdays is immoral, and consider a couple who have sex on Tuesday in that society.

They will be seen as immoral.

We can describe how they will be shunned and derided.

But, we do not see them as immoral for having sex on Tuesday.

We can see them as having violated a norm.

Maybe they brought shame to their parents, and that makes them wrong.

But sex on Tuesday itself is not a wrong.

There is a way of understanding examples of variations in customs which does not invoke relativism.

Consider the example of head-covering among Jews and Christians in places of worship.

Jews need not believe that Christians are irreverent for uncovering their heads.

They can just see Christians as having a different manifestation of the universal imperative for reverence.

The Jew can even think that the Christian has the wrong idea of what reverence is, without seeing him as irreverent.

The normal varies with the culture.

That fact does not entail ethical relativism.

We must distinguish descriptive claims, about what people do, from prescriptive claims, about what

people ought to do.

That the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice is no argument for the moral acceptability of human sacrifice.

Ethical relativism says that morality also varies with the culture.

People do have different customs, but that does not mean that they should.

III. Nihilism and Thrasymachus

The relativist believes in morality, determined either by one's self or one's culture.

In contrast, the nihilist says that there is no morality.

According to the nihilist, what we think of as morality is just an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.

Nihilism is similar to subjectivism.

Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.

The nihilist says that there is no such thing as morality, and that right and wrong are illusions.

The main difference between the two positions is that the nihilist believes can never make moral errors, while the subjectivist believes that we can.

Thrasymachus, in the *Republic*, presents a nihilist view.

Friedrich Nietzsche presents a fuller nihilist analysis of morality as the will of the strong.

If you are interested in nihilism, try his *The Genealogy of Morals*, and/or look for Prof. Franklin's Nietzsche seminar.

In the *Republic*, Socrates is engaged in an extended exploration of justice.

Cephalus, a wealthy old man, characterizes justice as telling the truth and paying back what one owes.

Cephalus's definition only lists two examples of just actions, and is clearly incomplete.

To show that Cephalus's characterization is deficient, Socrates presents the example of a friend who has lent you a weapon.

Your friend has now gone mad and wants his weapon back.

In Socrates' example, it would be wrong to give back what one owes.

Polemarchus re-interprets Cephalus's claim: justice is giving some one what he deserves.

Polemarchus understands giving what one deserves as helping one's friends and harming one's enemies.

After two digressions (one on how justice is not to be isolated as a craft independent of other pursuits, and another on how one can make mistakes about who one's friends and enemies really are), Socrates argues that the just man can not harm his enemies.

Harming some one makes them worse, but the just man wants to improve others.

Thrasymachus thinks that all of this discussion presumes a naive acceptance of morality.

Instead, Thrasymachus argues that morality, or justice, is merely doing what the powerful want, p 11.

Those in power write the laws, and set the social standards.

The rest of us learn to act in ways which serve the strong.

Thrasymachus claims that what we ordinarily call injustice is actually a virtue.

The petty criminal is served by his theft, as long as he is not caught.

The more unjust a person is, the better he will be able to avoid being caught.

The ultimate height of injustice, says Thrasymachus, is the enslavement of a nation.

Subjects or an authoritarian leader laud the despot's actions, instead of denouncing them.

What Socrates describes as vice, then, looks exactly like virtue.

What we call morality, Thrasymachus argues, is learned through reward and punishment.

So, generally-accepted guides for behavior are just expressions of the interests of those in the position to reward and punish.

Conversely, what is wrong is what is against the interests of the strong.

Those in power are really thieves, but ordinary people laud and obey them in order to protect themselves from punishment.

IV. Socrates' Response to Thrasymachus

Against Thrasymachus, Socrates argues that the rulers do not rule for their own benefit, but for the benefit of their subjects.

He first argues that rulers may be wrong about what is in their interests.

So, if we do what they tell us to do, we could actually be working against their interests.

Thrasymachus responds that the true ruler would always be right about what his interests are.

Socrates then argues that the true ruler works in the interests of his subjects, not in his own interest, p 10.

The true ruler earns no personal benefit from ruling.

Socrates notes that rulers must be paid, or threatened with the punishment of being ruled by a worse person, since the ruling itself is not in their own interests.

Thrasymachus responds to Socrates with an analogy of a shepherd and a sheep.

The shepherd cares for his sheep, and wants them to be healthy.

But, the shepherd's only real concern is for him/herself.

The shepherd takes care of the sheep only so that they can be of greater use to the shepherd, not because s/he is concerned with the interests of the sheep themselves.

Socrates and Thrasymachus proceed to compare the just person to the unjust person.

Thrasymachus insists that the unjust man is good and wise, while the just man is ignorant and bad.

This argument may depend on an equivocation between two senses of 'good'.

The first sense is opposed to evil and usually entails self-sacrifice.

The second sense of 'good' involves actions of objects that are beneficial to us.

So, healthy food is good, and exercise is good.

This second sense might entail some self-sacrifice, but it is primarily about self-interest.

When Thrasymachus says that the unjust man is good, he uses 'good' in the second sense.

Socrates seems to be using the first sense in order to draw a contrast with Thrasymachus.

One important question is whether and how these two senses are related.

Socrates and Thrasymachus agree that the just man wants advantage over the unjust man, who is unlike him, but does not seek advantage over other just people.

The unjust man wants advantage over every one.

Experts try to outdo laypersons, who are unlike them, but not other experts, who are like them.

The idea is that if one doctor has found a cure for a disease, other doctors seek the same.

But, the expert is one who is knowledgeable, and wise, and good (in the beneficial sense).

So, the wise and good man seems to want advantage over those unlike him, but not over those like him.

This is just how we characterized the just man.

So, Socrates argues, the just man is wise and good, and the unjust man is not wise and good.

Thrasymachus holds to the claim that injustice is more powerful than justice.

Socrates argues that a city must be just in order to rule other cities, p 16.

The soul of a person is analogous to a city, according to Socrates.

Just as a city must be harmonious to be strong, so must a person must be in harmony.
The soul rules over the various parts of a person, and it must rule in harmony.
Which is to say that a person must be just, in order to be successful and happy.

Thrasymachus is not convinced by Socrates's arguments, though he accedes.
The *Republic* continues for ten books, exploring the analogy between the city and the soul.
We will look at Book II in our next class.

V. Nihilism Today

Putting Thrasymachus's arguments aside, nihilism seems inconsistent with our uses of moral language.
If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then our use of these terms as motivations is puzzling.
The terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.
Contrast ethics with food preferences, about which we are nihilistic.
There is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes better than chocolate.
I may prefer one, or the other, but my preference need not apply to others.
If some one has different tastes, there is no fact which will decide which are the right preferences.
We can urge someone to consider different preferences, but after that, it is up to them to decide.
The question of what we prefer is distinct from the question of which it is better to eat.
There may be reasons to eat broccoli rather than chocolate,
But we are considering which we like best.
Morality seems different from preferences regarding the taste of food.
When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.
It has a force for others.