

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCING ETHICS

### I. WHAT IS ETHICS?

All of us, at some time or other, are faced with the problem of what we ought to do. It is not difficult to think of examples. We accept we ought to help a blind person cross the road or that we ought to tell the truth in a court of law. We also recognise that we ought not to cheat in examinations and ought not to drink and drive. These ‘oughts’ and ‘ought nots’ are clear to us, although this does not necessarily mean that we always act accordingly. Because of this we also attach praise and blame to our own actions and those of others.

In all these cases we are making **moral** or **ethical** judgements. In these judgements we decide that this action is right or wrong or that person is good or bad. Ethics is, therefore, usually confined to the area of human character or conduct, the word *ethics* deriving from the Greek *ethikos* (that which relates to *ethos* or character). Men and women generally describe their own conduct and character, and that of others, by such general terms as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; and it is the meaning and scope of these adjectives, in relation to human conduct, that the moral philosopher investigates. The philosopher is not, however, concerned with merely a *descriptive* account of the attitudes and values that people hold: that ‘X believes that war is wrong’ or that ‘Y believes that abortion is right’. That X and Y believe these things may be of interest to the anthropologist or sociologist, but they are of little interest to moral philosophers. What concerns them is not *that* X and Y believe these things but *why* they do. Ethics, in other words, is much more than explaining what you or I might say about a particular moral problem; it is a study of the reasoning behind our moral beliefs, of the *justification* for the particular moral positions we adopt.

The study of ethics is split into two branches. First, there is **normative ethics**. Here we consider what kinds of things are good and bad and how we are to decide what kinds of action are right and wrong. This is the main tradition of ethical thinking, extending back to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the one we are most concerned with in this book.

Then there is **meta-ethics**, a detailed account of which is given in the Chapter 8<sup>1</sup>. Meta-ethics deals with a philosophical analysis of the meaning and character of ethical language; with, for example, the meaning of the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Meta-ethics is, therefore, *about* normative ethics and seeks to understand the terms and concepts employed there. For example, when I say ‘Saving life is good’ I might well begin a normative debate about when I should and should not do such a thing. Do I mean that all lives should be saved or only some? But in meta-ethics I will be concerned much more with the meaning of the term ‘good’ within the sentence ‘Saving life is good’. Is it something I can find in objects, so that I can easily detect it in some and not in others? Or, is it something I can see (like a colour) or something I can feel (like a toothache)?

In recent years, largely through philosophy’s increasing



CND poster against nuclear weapons

1. See below, pp. 217.



*CND protest against  
nuclear weapons*

preoccupation with the analysis of language, this branch of ethics has tended to dominate ethical discussion. It is held that one cannot even begin normative ethics without a prior analysis of the terms it uses. Certainly the overlap between the two is extensive, although whether meta-ethics is necessarily prior to normative ethics is an open question and the subject of considerable philosophical dispute.

From what has been said so far, it may be gathered that ethical statements are statements of a particular kind. They are not, for example, straightforward *empirical* statements, ie, statements of demonstrable fact, based upon experience and observation. If we say 'Atomic weapons kill people', we are stating a simple observable fact; but if we say 'Atomic weapons should be banned', we are stating what we believe ought to happen. In the first case, it is easy to establish whether the statement is true or false; but in the second, this is clearly impossible. In this instance, we are not stating facts so much as giving a *value* to certain facts – and a

negative value at that. We are expressing a point of view about a particular circumstance, which we also know is not shared by everyone. This is not to say that all propositions that give value to something are ethical propositions. We might say that 'Rolls-Royce make *good* cars' or 'That is a *bad* tyre', but we would not be attributing moral value to the cars or tyre. Similarly, in the area of art judgements (or *aesthetics*), we might speak of a '*good* painting' or '*bad* play', but usually we are not referring to the moral significance of the painting or play. All these, then, are *non-moral* uses of the words 'good' and 'bad'.

### Exercise 1

**How is the term 'good' being used in the following sentences? Which of these sentences are morally or ethically significant?**

1. That music is good
2. Democracy is a good thing
3. He is a good footballer
4. He did me no good
5. This is a good report
6. He had a good life
7. He led a good life
8. It is good to tell the truth
9. Did you have a good holiday?
10. Take a good look
11. He has good manners
12. It is good to see you
13. God is good

## II. THE PRINCIPLES OF MORAL ACTION: NORMATIVE ETHICS

When we attempt to provide standards or rules to help us distinguish right from wrong actions or good from bad people, we are, therefore, engaged in normative ethics. In normative ethics, to repeat, we try to arrive, by rational means, at a set of acceptable criteria which will enable us to decide why any given action is 'right' or any particular person is called 'good'.

Take, for example, the rule 'Thou shalt not kill'. Opponents of the death penalty appeal to this rule to support their claim that no man, or group of men, has the right to take the life of another. Advocates of the death penalty, on the other hand, may refer to different standards, for example: that a man forfeits his life if he takes a life. Behind the question, 'Should Smith hang?' lies a debate between rival rules of moral behaviour. Having justified the rule, we then apply it to the case at hand, namely to Smith.

Normative ethics is generally split into two categories:

- 1) **teleological theories**
- 2) **deontological theories**

The philosopher C.D. Broad defined them in this way:

Deontological theories hold that there are ethical propositions of the form: 'Such and such a kind of action would always be right (or wrong) in such and such circumstances, no matter what its consequences might be. . .'. Teleological theories hold that the rightness or wrongness of an action is always determined by its tendency to produce certain consequences which are intrinsically good or bad.<sup>2</sup>

**A teleological theory** (from the Greek *telos*, meaning 'end') maintains, therefore, that moral judgements are based entirely on the effects produced by an action. An action is considered right or wrong in relation to its *consequences* – hence this theory's other name of **consequentialism**. This view undoubtedly appeals to our common sense. Often, when considering a course of action, we ask: 'Will this hurt me?' or 'Will this hurt others?'

Thinking like this is thinking teleologically. Here whether we do something or not is determined by what we think the consequences will be, whether we think they will be good or bad. Inevitably, of course, people have different opinions about whether a particular result is good or bad, and this accounts for the great variety of teleological theories. For some, an action is only right if it benefits the person performing the action. For others, this is too narrow, and the action's effects must apply to others besides the agent.

**A deontological theory** denies what a teleological theory affirms.

The rightness of an action does not depend solely on its consequences since there may be *certain features of the act itself* which determine whether it is right or wrong. Pacifists, for example, contend that the act of armed aggression is wrong and always will be wrong, no matter what the consequences. Others believe we should take account of the 'motive' behind the act. If the intention of the person performing the act was to do harm, then that action is wrong quite apart from its effects, harmful or not. Or again, many argue that certain actions are right if they conform to certain absolute rules, like 'Keep your promises' or 'Always tell the truth'. It is quite possible that, in obeying these rules, you do not promote the greatest possible balance of good over evil; but for the deontologist this does not detract from the original good of your action in keeping your promise or telling the truth.

As we shall see, this difference between the teleologist and the deontologist is the most fundamental one in normative ethics. Simply put, the former looks ahead to the consequences of his or her actions, while the latter looks back to the nature of the act itself. It is not, however, always easy to pigeonhole our everyday decisions in this way, and invariably we find that they are compounded of both teleological and deontological elements.



*Protest against capital*

2. *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1930, pp. 206-207.

## Exercise 2

**Which of the following moral commands (which you may or may not agree with) are teleological, deontological, or both?**

1. Do not drink and drive
2. Do not accept sweets from strangers
3. Do not take unnecessary risks
4. Always obey your superiors
5. Do not kill
6. Avenge wrongs done to you
7. Tell the truth
8. Never tell a lie except to an enemy
9. Love thy neighbour as thyself
10. Be ruled by your conscience
11. Never trust a traitor
12. Do not eat pork
13. Do not steal
14. Do not get caught stealing
15. Do as you would be done by

## Exercise 3

**Here are some examples of moral dilemmas. In each example: a) justify your answer in relation to a particular moral principle; b) determine whether this principle is teleological, deontological, or a mixture of both; c) think of another situation (if you can) in which you would consider disobeying this principle.**

### 1. Sanctions and Racism

You are Prime Minister of a country which opposes racism in Country X.

Should you impose sanctions against this country, even though you know these will seriously affect the already deprived black population?

### 2. The ruthless dictator

After a fair and legal election, a new President is elected in a central African state. Within a few months he reveals himself to be a ruthless and mentally unbalanced tyrant, merciless in liquidating all who oppose him. You have the power to assassinate him.

Should you?

### 3. The drowning men

Walking one day near the river, you hear frantic cries for help. Two men are struggling in the water and clearly drowning. With dismay you see that one is your father, whom you love dearly, and the other a famous scientist, whom the newspapers report is close to a cure for cancer.

Whom should you save?

### 4. The thief

Your school friend says, 'I have something important to tell you, but you must keep it a secret'. You promise you will. Your friend then confesses that it was he who stole the money from the classroom. 'But this is terrible', you say. 'David has already been accused of this and is being expelled! You must tell the Headmaster at once!' Your friend refuses.

What should you do?

**5. The doctor**

A fifteen-year-old girl comes to you as her doctor. She wants you to supply her with contraceptives. You discuss the matter with her and discover that she has never had sexual intercourse before and has never discussed the matter with her family.

Should you prescribe the contraceptives or inform her parents?

**6. The sadist**

The sadistic commandant of the camp shouts at you, 'Unless you hang your son, I'll hang him myself and these other prisoners as well!'

What should you do?

**7. The mayor**

A shop selling pornography is about to open in your town. Local feeling is running high. Some argue that you, as mayor, have the duty to prevent the sale of such corrupting literature, others that you do not have the right to censor what people read.

What is your decision?

**III. ETHICAL RELATIVISM**

Before proceeding further to discuss the normative standards of ethical behaviour, whether teleological or deontological, we first have to overcome a particular objection, which may be expressed by the frequently heard opinion: 'What's good for you isn't necessarily good for me'. This view is known as **ethical relativism**. It maintains that, because all ethical judgements are relative both to the person making them and to the context in which they are made, there can be no absolute principles of moral action. When I reach a moral decision – when I conclude, for instance, that casual sex is wrong or that I should not falsely accuse the innocent, I am making judgements which, irrespective of their deontological or teleological character, are so contaminated by individual and social preferences that they cannot have any legitimate normative value. Let us take an example.



*Aztec sacrifice*

Underpinning Aztec culture in the fourteenth century was the belief that the cycles of the sun and moon could only be sustained by 'feeding' the gods with human hearts and blood. This resulted in widespread practice of bloodletting and human sacrifice. In Tenochtitlan – which by the time the Spanish arrived in 1521 was one of the largest cities in the world – victims (often volunteers) would ascend the Templo Mayor, a large pyramid surmounted with twin shrines dedicated to the supreme god, Huitzilopochtli, where priests would then rip their hearts out with a stone knife. Spanish observers, even those most sympathetic to Aztec rituals, found this practice revolting. Today we also deplore such excesses. But this, so relativists claim, does not imply a *moral* judgement about what *is* good or bad – that the Aztecs were somehow *wrong* to do what they did. All it reveals is a moral perspective very different from ours.

Ethical relativism can take many forms. 1) There is first *individual relativism*, which is more usually known as *subjectivism*. This, in its most basic and unsophisticated form, holds that ethics is no more than a matter of opinion. A much more subtle version, which we shall discuss in the Chapter 8<sup>3</sup>, is known as *emotivism*, which states that ethical statements are autobiographical in form: they are expressions of my individual attitude. 2) There is, then, *cultural relativism*, which states that ethical standards vary according to the culture or society of the individual concerned (e.g. Aztec sacrifice). 3) Another form of relativism is *class relativism*, with its roots in Marxist theory, which claims that one's moral obligations are relative to one's economic class. 4) And finally there is *historical relativism*,

3. See below, pp. 222-224.

which makes our moral judgements relative to our own particular historical period. All these versions subscribe to the view that, because it is an undisputed fact that we all hold different ethical viewpoints, there can be no objective and normative ethical rules, binding on us irrespective of our personality, culture, class or historical context.

Although perhaps initially attractive, ethical relativism has problems of its own. There are three main criticisms of it:

1) What often at first appears as a difference in moral principles is not so in fact: it is rather a difference in how the *same* principle is applied in the context of a different set of *beliefs*. For example, the maxim 'Honour thy father and mother' may be adopted by two different societies but yet produce very different results: in Japan producing a respect close to worship, but amongst the Eskimos producing the practice of parental euthanasia (this following from the belief that parents should enter the next world in as healthy a state as possible). So here, then, we have a common principle camouflaged by social differences. And as some anthropologists have indicated, these principles may be widely adhered to: group loyalty, courage and care for the young being generally praised, and deceit, ingratitude and theft being generally condemned.

2) The fact that there are indeed different moral beliefs does not mean that there are no objective ethical standards. For the fact that what George thinks is right is not what John thinks is right does not mean that neither is right, any more than does the suggestion that, because people once believed the earth flat and now believe it round, it therefore has no shape at all. All that we can say here is that, if one person believes in one absolute standard, and another believes in another standard, one (or both) of these individuals is mistaken, not that there is no true criterion of morality. Thus it is untrue to say that, because individuals hold different moral attitudes relative to their societies, moral truth itself is relative and therefore that there can be no normative principles of moral behaviour.

3) If there are no normative principles, then it is difficult to see how any individual or society, however abhorrent, could be condemned as immoral. This in turn means that moral conflicts *between* societies become impossible and demands for social reform unattainable. For if there are different moral principles, and if these principles are justified solely because they are believed to be true, it will be impossible to condemn them on the grounds that, say, infanticide, racism or genocide, although certainly believed, are just plain wrong – and this is because *the fact that they are believed makes them right*. But to repeat: that there are many beliefs does not establish that any is right; it only establishes that each believes itself to be right. And if relativists should reply to this objection by saying that their position at least allows for a more tolerant attitude towards different cultures, then they are in danger of allowing that, after all, there is one moral value – the need to be tolerant – which has objective worth, thereby contradicting their original position.

These are the main reasons why ethical relativism is held to be philosophically unsound and that it is contrary to our fundamental moral intuitions that there are certain normative principles of moral behaviour which we feel to be intrinsically important.

#### Exercise 4

**If the following practices were commonplace in your society, would you still approve of them? Why would you disapprove of them? Do your answers lead you to suppose that there are absolute moral rules or not?**

1. Hunting foxes for sport
2. Segregating Protestant from Roman Catholic children in schools
3. Having more than one wife at a time
4. Compulsorily sterilising the mentally retarded
5. Killing Jews because they are racially inferior
6. Smoking marihuana
7. Sacrificing babies to the gods
8. Wearing fur coats
9. Denying women the vote

**Questions: Normative Ethics**

1. How do ethical statements differ from ordinary empirical statements? Give examples.
2. List four qualities of the human character that you think are good and four that are bad. Do you think them good and bad for deontological or teleological reasons?
3. Argue for a) pacifism and b) vegetarianism from both a deontological and teleological viewpoint.
4. Tom has lived alone on a desert island all his life. How would you explain to him the difference between right and wrong?
5. Are there any moral rules which you believe all societies, despite their cultural differences, should adopt? What are they, and how would you explain their universal acceptance?

**NORMATIVE ETHICS  
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#### IV. CASE STUDY: SOCRATES IN PRISON

Before discussing further the various theories of normative ethics, it is useful to have an illustration of what is involved in an ethical debate and how a moral philosopher sets about dealing with a particular moral issue. The most famous example in the history of philosophy is found in Plato's dialogue, *Crito*. Plato's teacher, Socrates, is in prison, awaiting execution. His friend, Crito, visits him and urges him to escape. Socrates' reply is a model of ethical thinking, simultaneously brave and clear-headed. After reading this extract, let us consider, as our discussion topic, an issue that arises from this debate: *When has an individual the right to disobey the State?*

Socrates was born in Athens in 469 BC, his father a sculptor, his mother a midwife. Little is known of his private life. We know that he was unhappily married, that he served as a 'hoplite' or foot soldier in several campaigns, and that even his most implacable enemies admitted that he was a man of great physical courage. We know also that for most of his life he was virtually destitute, his poverty being so extreme that many contemporary writers made fun of it, as Aristophanes does in his play *The Clouds*. Nor did his actual appearance help matters: he was short, fat, and ugly; but he was also marvellous company, funny, a loyal friend, modest, devout, and, above all, possessed of quite extraordinary intellectual gifts. These latter, perhaps more than anything else, were to bring about his downfall.

A man of such prominence could hardly avoid becoming involved in politics. For one year, 406-405 BC, he was a member of the Council of 500, and, under the Reign of Terror of the Thirty Tyrants in 404 BC, he refused to agree to the arrest of Leon, and generally made himself so obnoxious to the 'Thirty' that a special ordinance was drawn up forbidding 'the teaching of the art of argument'. Had it not been for the counter-revolution of the Democrats, he would probably have been charged with 'disobedience'.

Ironically enough, it was reserved for the reconstituted democracy to bring Socrates to trial. Upon their return to power, the Democrats proclaimed a general amnesty; but four years later, in 399 BC, and despite the fact that Socrates had always dissociated himself from the excesses of the old regime, they charged him with offences against public morality. His accusers were Meletus the poet, Anytus the tanner, and Lycon the orator – all members of the democratic party. The accusation ran: 'Socrates is guilty, firstly, of denying the gods recognised by the state and introducing new divinities, and secondly, of corrupting the young'.

What lay behind these allegations? According to Socrates' pupil, the historian Xenophon, the first of these charges rested on the notorious fact that Socrates believed himself to be guided by a mysterious power, a 'divine voice', which seems to have had a largely negative function: it always dissuaded him from certain courses of action but never urged him to act. The phenomenon dated from his early years and was, so far as he knew, peculiar to himself. Hearing this 'voice' – he called it his *daimonion* – Socrates believed he was charged with a divine mission to analyse and, if necessary, expose the wisdom of all those whom society called wise. Needless to say, this relentless inquisition created many enemies among the establishment – to them he was no better than an impecunious busybody, trampling on the cherished beliefs of others – while at the same time his radical views on religion, politics and education, coupled with his invincible skill in debate, attracted the young, and created the impression that he was the leader of a new iconoclastic and subversive movement. Today we see Socrates as the founder of philosophical enquiry and one of the indisputably great men of history; but for many of his contemporaries, he was little better than a criminal, a man betraying Athenian traditions, irreligious and corrupt. That a majority should pronounce him guilty is not therefore as strange as it appears.

The account of Socrates' trial is given in Plato's *Apology*. To the credit of the jury of 500, the initial vote was far from unanimous: Socrates was found guilty by 280 votes against 220. Meletus having demanded the death penalty, it now rested with the accused, according to Athenian law, to make a counter-proposition; and there is little doubt that had Socrates asked for some lesser penalty, his proposal would have been accepted. Instead, to the surprise of the judges and the dismay of his friends, he proudly maintained that, such had been his services to the State, he should be awarded a pension for life. As a 'token' fine, he suggested payment of 1 *mina* (probably about £100). Socrates' condescending offer was quickly amended by his friends Plato, Critobulus and Apollodorus to thirty times that amount on their security. But it was too late: the judges returned a verdict of death by an increased majority. Then, in a powerful and moving speech, Socrates spoke of death and the fear of dying, concluding with

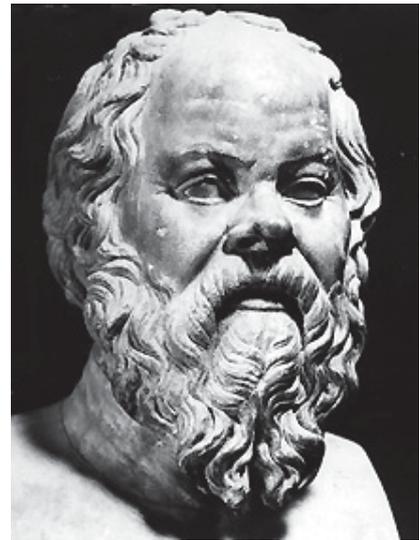
the words, ‘The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways – I to die, and you to live; but which is better only God knows’.

Normally sentence of execution was carried out within 24 hours. It so happened, however, that Socrates’ trial coincided with the absence of the sacred ship to Delos – every year a ship sailed to Delos, commemorating the deliverance of Athens by Theseus – and it was the custom that the death penalty could not be inflicted during this period. Socrates was therefore kept in prison for thirty days. Perhaps even his enemies secretly hoped he would escape and leave the country. Certainly his friends urged him to do so. But would Socrates accept their advice and run? It is at this point that one of these friends, Crito, visits Socrates in prison.

Crito tells Socrates that the situation is now desperate: the ship from Delos has been sighted, which means that, unless Socrates does something, he will be executed the next day. In a last passionate appeal to persuade his friend, Crito puts forward various arguments:

1. Most people will simply refuse to believe that Socrates chose to remain in prison. Instead they will blame his friends for not helping him and consider Crito himself contemptible for not spending the money to get him out;
2. Perhaps Socrates thinks that his friends, if they help him, will be eventually betrayed by informers, and that they will then have to pay heavy fines or even lose their possessions? If so, his fears are groundless. There were men ready to rescue him for quite a modest sum, and informers could always be bought off cheaply;
3. If Socrates died, he would be wilfully orphaning his sons and depriving them of their education, which could be completed elsewhere;
4. Socrates was taking the easiest way out, contemplating an action that was neither brave nor good. Frankly his friends were ashamed and embarrassed by the whole business.

‘Come, make up your mind’, says Crito. ‘There is no alternative; the whole thing must be carried through during this coming night. If we lose any more time, it can’t be done, it will be too late. I appeal to you, Socrates, on every ground; take my advice and please don’t be unreasonable’.



*Socrates*

### ***Socrates’ Reply***<sup>4</sup>

**Socrates:** My dear Crito, I appreciate your warm feelings very much – that is, assuming that they have some justification; if not, the stronger they are, the harder they will be to deal with. Very well, then; we must consider whether we ought to follow your advice or not. . . . Suppose that we begin by reverting to this view which you hold about people’s opinions. . . . Consider, then; don’t you think that this is a sound enough principle, that one should not regard all the opinions that people hold, but only some and not others? What do you say? Isn’t that a fair statement?

**Crito:** Yes, it is.

**Socrates:** In other words, one should regard the good ones and not the bad?

**Crito:** Yes.

**Socrates:** The opinions of the wise being good, and the opinions of the foolish bad?

**Crito:** Naturally.

**Socrates:** To pass on, then: what do you think of the sort of illustration that I used to employ? When a man is in training, and taking it seriously, does he pay attention to all praise and criticism and opinion indiscriminately, or only when it comes from the one qualified person, the actual doctor or trainer?

**Crito:** Only when it comes from the one qualified person.

**Socrates:** Then he should be afraid of the criticism and welcome the praise of the one qualified person, but not those of the general public.

4. Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969, pp. 84–96.

**Crito:** Obviously. . . .

**Socrates:** Very good. Well now, tell me, Crito, we don't want to go through all the examples one by one, does this apply as a general rule, and above all to the sort of actions which we are trying to decide about: just and unjust, honourable and dishonourable, good and bad? Ought we to be guided and intimidated by the opinion of the many or by that of the one – assuming that there is someone with expert knowledge? Or is this all nonsense?

**Crito:** No, I think it is true, Socrates. . . .

**Socrates:** In that case, my dear fellow, what we ought to consider is not so much what people in general will say about us but how we stand with the expert in right and wrong, the one authority, who represents the actual truth. So, in the first place your proposition is not correct when you say that we should consider popular opinion in questions of what is right and honourable and good, or the opposite. Of course one might object 'All the same, the people have the power to put us to death.'

**Crito:** No doubt about that! Quite true, Socrates; it is a possible objection.

**Socrates:** But so far as I can see, my dear fellow, the argument which we have just been through is quite unaffected by it. At the same time I should like you to consider whether we are still satisfied on this point: that the really important thing is not to live, but to live well.

**Crito:** Why, yes.

**Socrates:** And that to live well means the same thing as to live honourably or rightly?

**Crito:** Yes.

**Socrates:** Then in the light of this agreement we must consider whether or not it is right for me to try to get away without an official discharge. If it turns out to be right, we must make the attempt; if not, we must let it drop. As for the considerations you raise about expense and reputation and bringing up children, I am afraid, Crito, that they represent the reflections of the ordinary public, who put people to death, and would bring them back to life if they could, with equal indifference to reason. Our real duty, I fancy, since the argument leads that way, is to consider one question only, the one which we raised just now: Shall we be acting rightly in paying money and showing gratitude to these people who are going to rescue me, and in escaping or arranging the escape ourselves, or shall we really be acting wrongly in doing all this? If it becomes clear that such conduct is wrong, I cannot help thinking that the question whether we are sure to die, or to suffer any other ill effect for that matter, if we stand our ground and take no action, ought not to weigh with us at all in comparison with the risk of doing what is wrong.

**Crito:** I agree with what you say, Socrates; but I wish you would consider what we ought to *do*.

**Socrates:** Let us look at it together, my dear fellow; and if you can challenge any of my arguments, do so and I will listen to you; but if you can't, be a good fellow and stop telling me over and over again that I ought to leave this place without official permission. . . . Now give your attention to the starting point of this inquiry – I hope that you will be satisfied with my way of stating it – and try to answer my questions to the best of your judgement.

**Crito:** Well, I will try.

**Socrates:** Do we say that one must never willingly do wrong, or does it depend upon circumstances? Is it true, as we have often agreed before, that there is no sense in which wrongdoing is good or honourable? . . . Surely the truth is just what we have always said. Whatever the popular view is, and whether the alternative is pleasanter than the present one or even harder to bear, the fact remains that to do wrong is in every sense bad and dishonourable for the person who does it. Is that our view, or not?

**Crito:** Yes, it is.

**Socrates:** Then in no circumstances must one do wrong.

**Crito:** No.

**Socrates:** In that case one must not even do wrong when one is wronged, which most people regard as the natural course.

**Crito:** Apparently not.

**Socrates:** Tell me another thing, Crito: ought one to do injuries or not?

**Crito:** Surely not, Socrates.

**Socrates:** And tell me: is it right to do an injury in retaliation, as most people believe, or not?

**Crito:** No, never.

**Socrates:** Because, I suppose, there is no difference between injuring people and wronging them.

**Crito:** Exactly.

**Socrates:** So one ought not to return a wrong or an injury to any person, whatever the provocation is. Now be careful, Crito, that in making these single admissions you do not end by admitting something contrary to your real beliefs. . . .

**Crito:** . . . Go on.

**Socrates:** Well, here is my next point, or rather question. Ought one to fulfil all one's agreements, provided that they are right, or break them?

**Crito:** One ought to fulfil them.

**Socrates:** Then consider the logical consequence. If we leave this place without first persuading the State to let us go, are we or are we not doing an injury, and doing it in a quarter where it is least justifiable? Are we or are we not abiding by our just agreements?

**Crito:** I can't answer your question, Socrates; I am not clear in my mind.

**Socrates:** Look at it in this way. Suppose that while we were preparing to run away from here (or however one should describe it) the Laws and Constitution of Athens were to come and confront us and ask this question: 'Now, Socrates, what are you proposing to do? Can you deny that by this act which you are contemplating you intend, so far as you have the power, to destroy us, the Laws, and the whole State as well? Do you imagine that a city can continue to exist and not be turned upside down, if the legal judgements which are pronounced in it have no force but are nullified and destroyed by private persons? – how shall we answer this question, Crito, and others of the same kind? . . . Shall we say 'Yes, I do intend to destroy the laws, because the State wronged me by passing a faulty judgement at my trial'? Is this to be our answer, or what?

**Crito:** What you have just said, by all means, Socrates.

**Socrates:** Then what supposing the Laws say . . . 'Come now, what charge do you bring against us and the State, that you are trying to destroy us? Did we not give you life in the first place? Was it not through us that your father married your mother and begot you? Tell us, have you any complaint against those of us Laws that deal with marriage?' 'No, none', I should say. 'Well, have you any against the laws which deal with children's upbringing and education, such as you had yourself? Are you not grateful to those of us Laws which were instituted for this end, for requiring your father to give you a cultural and physical education?' 'Yes', I should say. 'Very good. Then since you have been born and brought up and educated, can you deny, in the first place, that you were our child and servant, both you and your ancestors? And if this is so, do you imagine that what is right for us is equally right for you, and that whatever we try to do to you, you are justified in retaliating? You did not have equality of rights with your father, or your employer (supposing that you had had one), to enable you to retaliate; you were not allowed to answer back when you were scolded or to hit back when you were beaten, or to do a great many other things of the same kind. Do you expect to have such licence against your country and its laws that if we try to put you to death in the belief that it is right to do so, you on your part will try your hardest to destroy your country and us its Laws in return? And will you, the true devotee of goodness, claim that you are justified in doing so? . . . Both in war and in the law-courts and everywhere else you must do whatever your city and your country commands, or else persuade it in accordance with universal justice; but violence is a sin even against your parents, and it is a far greater sin against your country.' What shall we say to this, Crito? That what the Laws say is true, or not?

**Crito:** Yes, I think so.

**Socrates:** 'Consider, then, Socrates,' the Laws would probably continue, 'whether it is also true for us to say that what you are now trying to do to us is not right. Although we have brought you into the world and reared you and educated you, and given you and all your fellow citizens a share in all the good things at our disposal, nevertheless by the very fact of granting our permission we openly proclaim this principle: that any Athenian, on attaining to manhood and seeing for himself the political organization of the State and us its Laws, is permitted,

if he is not satisfied with us, to take his property and go away wherever he likes. . . .

On the other hand, if any one of you stands his ground when he can see how we administer justice and the rest of our public organization, we hold that by doing so he has in fact undertaken to do anything that we tell him; and we maintain that anyone who disobeys is guilty of doing wrong on three separate counts: first because we are his parents, and secondly because we are his guardians; and thirdly because, after promising obedience, he is neither obeying us nor persuading us to change our decision if we are at fault in any way. . . . These are the charges, Socrates, to which we say that you will be liable if you do what you are contemplating; and you will not be the least culpable of your fellow countrymen, but one of the most guilty. . . . You have never left the city to attend a festival or for any other purpose, except on some military expedition; you have never travelled abroad as other people do, and you have never felt the impulse to acquaint yourself with another country or constitution; you have been content with us and with our city. You have definitely chosen us, and undertaken to observe us in all your activities as a citizen; and as the crowning proof that you are satisfied with our city, you have begotten children in it. Furthermore, even at the time of your trial you could have proposed the penalty of banishment, if you had chosen to do so; that is, you could have done then with the sanction of the State what you are now trying to do without it. . . . Now, first answer this question: Are we or are we not speaking the truth when we say that you have undertaken, in deed if not in word, to live your life as a citizen in obedience to us?' What are we to say to that, Crito? Are we not bound to admit it?

**Crito:** We cannot help it, Socrates.

**Socrates:** 'It is a fact, then,' they would say, 'that you are breaking covenants and undertakings made with us, although you made them under no compulsion or misunderstanding, and were not compelled to decide in a limited time; you had seventy years in which you could have left the country, if you were not satisfied with us or felt that the agreements were unfair. . . . It is quite obvious that you stand by yourself above all other Athenians in your affection for this city and for us its Laws; – who would care for a city without laws? And now, after all this, are you not going to stand by your agreement? Yes, you are, Socrates, if you will take our advice; and then you will at least escape being laughed at for leaving the city. 'We invite you to consider what good you will do to yourself or your friends if you commit this breach of faith and stain your conscience. It is fairly obvious that the risk of being banished and either losing their citizenship or having their property confiscated will extend to your friends as well. . . . Incidentally you will confirm the opinion of the jurors who tried you that they gave a correct verdict; a destroyer of laws might very well be supposed to have destructive influence upon young and foolish human beings. . . . And will no one comment on the fact that an old man of your age, probably with only a short time left to live, should dare to cling so greedily to life, at the price of violating the most stringent laws? Perhaps not, if you avoid irritating anyone. . . . But of course you want to live for your children's sake, so that you may be able to bring them up and educate them. Indeed! By first taking them off to Thessaly and making foreigners of them, so that they may have that additional enjoyment? Or if that is not your intention, supposing that they are brought up here with you still alive, will they be better cared for and educated without you, because of course your friends will look after them? Will they look after your children if you go away to Thessaly, and not if you go away to the next world? Surely if those who profess to be your friends are worth anything, you must believe that they would care for them.

'No, Socrates; be advised by us your guardians, and do not think more of your children or of your life or of anything else than you think of what is right; so that when you enter the next world you may have all this to plead in your defence before the authorities there. It seems clear that if you do this thing, neither you nor any of your friends will be the better for it or be more upright or have a cleaner conscience here in this world, nor will it be better for you when you reach the next. As it is, you will leave this place, when you do, as the victim of a wrong done not by us, the Laws, but by your fellow men. But if you leave in that dishonourable way, returning wrong for wrong and evil for evil, breaking your agreements and covenants with us, and injuring those whom you least ought to injure – yourself, your friends, your country, and us – then you will have to face our anger in your lifetime, and in that place beyond when the laws of the other world



*Death of Socrates*

know that you have tried, so far as you could, to destroy even us their brothers, they will not receive you with a kindly welcome. Do not take Crito's advice, but follow ours.'

That, my dear friend Crito, I do assure you, is what I seem to hear them saying, just as the mystic seems to hear the strains of music; and the sound of their arguments rings so loudly in my head that I cannot hear the other side. I warn you that, as my opinion stands at present, it will be useless to urge a different view. However, if you think that you will do any good by it, say what you like.

**Crito:** No, Socrates, I have nothing to say.

**Socrates:** Then give it up, Crito, and let us follow this course, since God points out the way.

With these arguments, Socrates condemned himself. The story of his final day is told, in simple and moving language, by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedo*. Socrates says goodbye to his wife and family, his friends gather about him, and the jailer enters, himself deeply upset by what he has to do and describing Socrates as 'the noblest and the gentlest and the bravest of all the men that have ever come here.' Despite Crito's efforts to delay matters, Socrates takes the cup of hemlock and 'quite calmly and with no signs of distaste', drinks the contents in a single draught. Seeing this, many of his friends break down and weep uncontrollably. Socrates paces the room and then lies down, covering his face.

Pinching one of his feet, the jailer asks him whether he can feel anything. Socrates replies that he cannot. Then, just before the poison takes full effect, Socrates uncovers his face and murmurs, 'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget.' – meaning that he wished to honour the God of healing and implying that death is the cure for life. 'It shall be done', answers Crito. 'Is there anything else?' There being no reply, his companions realised that Socrates was already dead.

In narrating these tragic events, the concluding words of the *Phaedo* form a fitting epitaph: 'Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man.'

### Questions: Socrates in Prison

1. Make a list of the arguments employed by Socrates and Crito. To what extent are they teleological, deontological or a mixture of both?
2. Socrates appeals to certain moral rules, which, he claims, are of universal application and should be obeyed. What are these rules and how far do you think they are justified?
3. To what extent is Socrates right in his condemnation of public opinion?
4. Are there experts in right and wrong? If there are, who are they? If there aren't. How can Socrates distinguish between right and wrong actions?
5. Do you think Socrates has an old-fashioned and outmoded view of the State?
6. In what circumstances do you think Socrates would disobey a State Law? When would you disobey one?
7. Are there any circumstances in which retaliation is justified?
8. Does a man, wrongly convicted of a crime, have the right to escape from prison? In your answer, take account of Socrates' reply to Crito.
9. What is the relationship between legality and morality? Give examples of a conflict between them.
10. 'I'd rather be a coward for five minutes than dead for the rest of my life.' (Irish saying). Discuss.

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