

# INTRODUCTION

SOCRATES: You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words . . . [A]nd when [writing] is faulted or attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.

PHAEDRUS: You are absolutely right about that, too.

SOCRATES: Now tell me, can we discern another kind of discourse, a legitimate brother of this one? Can we say how it comes about, and how it is by nature better and more capable? . . .

PHAEDRUS: You mean the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image?

SOCRATES: Absolutely right.

The *Phaedrus* recounts a discussion between Phaedrus and Socrates that takes place while they are relaxing in the shade of a plane tree by the banks of the Ilissus. Towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates raises the question of the best way to do philosophy. He argues that philosophical texts do not produce true understanding, because they do not fully engage with their audience. A text, he points out, cannot pick up on a reader's misinterpretations or emotional resistance to its message, and so cannot respond to them. Nor can it respond to requests for clarification, or defend its theses against unforeseen objections. Finally, a text makes for a passive audience because it doesn't prompt a reader

to examine its arguments critically by, say, challenging their premisses or showing that they have unwelcome implications. As a result, readers do not necessarily struggle with the arguments in a way required to master them. Socrates goes on to claim that, pursued in the right way, discussion is superior to writing in these respects. He concludes that those who wish to impart knowledge should eschew writing and take on the role of a dialectician, who ‘chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse . . . which is not barren, but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others’. ‘Such discourse,’ Socrates promises, ‘makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it happy as any human being can be.’

As a soul in which the knowledgeable women and men interviewed here have sown their discourse, I hope that Socrates is right. But I am doubtful—and not just because I have not yet become supremely happy. For Socrates neglects some of the obvious advantages that writing has over discourse: it allows for the expression of more complex, detailed arguments, gives us the chance to reflect without the pressure to respond quickly, and allows us better to articulate our thoughts—to find the right turn of phrase, the striking illustration, or the killer counterexample that often eludes us in discussion. Most importantly, we do not have the opportunity to spend a summer’s day by the riverside talking with Socrates; books are the only access we have to most great minds.

Nonetheless, Socrates’ arguments draw attention to the advantages that a dialogue between a philosopher and an interlocutor might have over other forms of writing. After all, if the question on the reader’s lips is posed in the dialogue, then the text will not ‘remain solemnly silent’. Moreover, the ‘father’ (or mother) is on hand to prevent his or her ideas being misunderstood and to defend them against objections. Finally, a dialogue allows the interlocutor to express common feelings of resistance to the ideas advanced, and gives their author a chance to overcome them. Of course, these objectives may also be achieved in an ordinary piece of writing, where an author can raise and answer questions and objections, and anticipate and attempt to allay fears. But,

at their best, dialogues are lively and revealing precisely because the author of the ideas under discussion is deprived of control over these matters and is forced to respond to an independent questioner.

A dialogue will possess these advantages only if the interlocutor's concerns match those of the reader. It seems appropriate, therefore, to sketch briefly the three main puzzles that motivated me to engage in conversation with some of the leading thinkers on ethics. These puzzles will, I think, be familiar, since they arise in the course of reflection on our everyday experience of morality and figure in ethical discussions from Plato's dialogues onwards. Nonetheless, they have been articulated in different ways, and it may be useful to explain how I understand them.

The first puzzle concerns our 'everyday moral sense' — our capacity to arrive at moral judgements by making use of intuitive responses to particular cases along with some inchoate general rules. Its verdicts frequently carry strong conviction; moreover, they are often powerfully motivating. For instance, we are typically averse to performing an act we think is wrong, and transgressions arouse some of our harshest emotions — including indignation, resentment, and guilt — while righteous acts inspire emulation, admiration, and pride. Nonetheless, it can be difficult to articulate their rationale. Consider, for example, the case of the California transplant surgeon Dr Roozrokh, who, in 2008, was prosecuted (and acquitted) for attempting to hasten the death of a moribund patient in order to harvest his organs for transplant before they deteriorated. (The patient was registered as a post-mortem donor, but no consent had been given to interventions with the intended effect of hastening his death.) Many of us would judge such an action to be wrong, even if we were certain it could be done secretly and successfully. But, on reflection, this response is not easy to justify. After all, the benefit to those who needed the organs would be far greater than the loss suffered by the patient (who, in any case, did not have long to live); and it is not easy to see what, if anything, trumps that consideration in this case. Still, many of us will retain our initial conviction that killing the patient is wrong, despite realizing that we are not yet able to formulate a justification for this opinion. This phenomenon

raises several questions. What are the hidden determinants of such everyday judgements? To what extent are they implicitly sensitive to morally significant considerations (and therefore trustworthy), and to what extent are they determined by irrelevant factors (and therefore unreliable)?

The second puzzle is this. Many of our moral judgements seem objective — we think that others would be in error if they did not share them. To defend the objectivity of our judgements, we must provide impersonal criteria for good moral judgement and for carrying out moral enquiry in the right way; we must also argue that those whose views are wrong have not met these criteria. But it seems that serious enquirers who have the characteristics of good moral judges (such as impartiality, empathy, and the ability to articulate moral principles and their implications) may arrive at different ethical conclusions, even after considering the same information and range of relevant positions, simply because they ‘see’ certain basic normative issues differently. Let us suppose that in the case of the moribund patient, we conclude after careful enquiry that hastening his death would be wrong because killing someone without his consent in order to use him as a means for others’ ends is a particularly important wrong-making property of an action. Suppose further that others, after no less careful enquiry, believe that only the well-being of those involved is morally relevant, and therefore that it would be right to kill the patient. What are the implications of such disagreements?

Of course, no enquirer is perfect — reflection on a wider range of cases and views is always possible, and we may assume that such reflection would vindicate one or another of the views in question, or would show both to be mistaken. Nonetheless, we must decide how to respond to disagreements between good, though imperfect, enquirers. There appear to be three alternatives, each of which has its drawbacks. First, if we stand by our judgement that those who have arrived at an opposing view are, like us, good judges who have enquired well, it would seem that consistency requires us to accord their view some weight. After all, who are *we* to claim special insight? Such disagreement, then, would require us to be more amenable to our opponents’ view than

we were prior to learning that they disagreed with us. But this is difficult to accept—could we really be rationally compelled to move towards accepting views we find abhorrent simply because these views are endorsed by people who appear to be good judges? To avoid this consequence, we might revise our standards for a good judge so that those people who are insensitive to the considerations we find compelling are excluded. (This is our second option.) But this seems like cheating—it is all too easy to dismiss others simply because they disagree with us. And so we come to the third option: we can give up our belief in the objectivity of judgements in such cases and accept that, in reality, there is nothing here to be mistaken about. In sum, this kind of disagreement presses upon us the following questions: Are these three options the only ways to respond to this kind of disagreement? If so, which one should we choose?

The third puzzle arises from the fact that morality appears to give us reasons of great importance—for example, that an act is morally wrong seems to be a reason for not doing it that typically trumps competing considerations; and that an act is morally admirable seems to be reason enough to perform it. But it is unclear what these reasons are. This lacuna in our knowledge is critical, because we may be called upon to sacrifice our happiness, our projects, or the interests of our loved ones for morality's sake. Before we do so, we should know it is 'worth it'—that some important interest of ours or some important value is at stake. Consider, for example, the following twist on our case: imagine that your daughter will die unless she receives one of the donor's organs, and you are in a position to kill him secretly by entering his room (where he is unconscious and alone) and increasing his dose of sedatives. Let us suppose you feel, correctly, that it would be morally wrong to do so. What reasons do you have to listen to the voice of your conscience? And do they outweigh the reason you have to save your child's life?

This book aims to provide insight into contrasting answers to these three puzzles—about the reliability of our everyday moral judgements, the objectivity of ethics, and the reasons we have to be moral—by asking eleven eminent thinkers to explain and defend their views on

these and related topics. The choice of the interviewees was based on personal criteria: I invited experts whose opinions I found perceptive and provocative, and whose views contrasted with the views of other interviewees in an interesting way. Although most are professional philosophers, some have done their principal work in the sciences, insights from which, it seems to me, are relevant to answering these questions. To take just one example: the psychology of intuitive judgement can help us understand what we are responding to when we make visceral moral judgements, and so can play an important part in deciding whether these judgements are reliable.

Almost every thinker interviewed has something to say on each of the three main puzzles. The book is therefore organized not into parts that address each question separately, but into parts that bring together interviews that are most directly relevant to each other. In Part I, 'Ethics and Intuitions', I interview two philosophers and a psychologist, all with strongly contrasting attitudes towards our intuitive moral judgements. Frances Kamm takes our everyday moral sense seriously and tries to uncover the principles and values that underlie and justify these judgements. Peter Singer, by contrast, argues that these judgements are typically determined by unreliable factors, including simple rules of thumb, ways of thinking formed by religious outlooks that we no longer regard as authoritative, and prejudice. He argues for strongly revisionary ethical views, which he grounds in certain basic values. The third discussion is with Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize winner for his work on the determinants of intuitive judgements. Kahneman outlines ways in which our intuitive moral judgements may be unreliable, and discusses the extent to which they are revisable on reflection. While some of our apparently erroneous intuitions are malleable, he argues, others seem immune to reflection. He concludes that our inability to shake off some unfounded judgements and the accompanying, powerfully motivating moral emotions condemns us, to a certain extent, to be driven by emotions we do not endorse.

Part II, 'Virtue and Flourishing', consists of conversations with two philosophers who approach moral questions from the perspective of virtue ethics. Philippa Foot points to a particular kind of evaluation

of living things, which involves assessing them as defective or sound members of their species. (For example, a deer should be swift, and if it is not, it is defective.) The attribution of virtues and vices, Foot argues, is just one instance of this kind of evaluation, involving cases in which a human's will is either defective or as it should be. For example, humans have need of the virtue of temperance, and if they lack it, this is a defect, just as not being fleet is a defect in a deer. She concludes that norms for attributing virtues and vices are objective, because they are norms for good functioning *qua* member of our species.

Alasdair MacIntyre is well known for his excoriating criticism of contemporary moral discourse, which, he has claimed, traps us in rationally interminable disputes. He has also argued, however, that a reformulated version of Aristotle's idea of a human *telos*, or aim in life, can provide a standpoint from which we *can* rationally evaluate moral judgements. Our conversation focuses on his ideas about the ends of human life and the account of the virtues that he derives from them.

Part III, 'Ethics and Evolution', discusses the origin and current function of some of our moral sentiments and convictions. Ken Binmore, a leading contributor to the evolutionary theory of strategic interaction, outlines the ways in which our sense of fairness helps us coordinate with others in mutually advantageous ways by suggesting how to divide the benefits of coordinated action. He also argues that generally this is *all* that our sense of fairness can motivate us to do; with limited exceptions, it moves us to act only in ways that are in our interests. (For example, under normal circumstances, it won't prompt us to direct aid or resources towards someone in need when it is not in our interest to do so.) Fairness, he concludes, should be stripped of its veneer of nobility.

Allan Gibbard agrees that morality has its origin in our need to coordinate our behaviour advantageously with others, but draws less revisionary conclusions from this fact. He argues that this understanding of the origins and current function of morality vindicates two elements of our moral life: our search for agreement in ethics, and the punitive moral emotions of indignation, resentment, and guilt. We must engage in normative discussion with others, he explains, because such discussion

is essential for settling on the terms of social life. And once we enter into such discussion, consistency in according authority to ourselves and others as normative judges moves us towards accepting shared norms. Gibbard also argues that moral anger and guilt are relatively cost-effective ways of policing these norms, so that we have reason to be glad that we experience these emotions.

Part IV, 'Unity and Dissent', contrasts T. M. Scanlon's attempt to give a unified account of morality with Bernard Williams's suspicion of such accounts. Scanlon argues that the morality of 'what we owe to each other' encompasses those principles to which everyone would agree if they were motivated to find practical principles that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject. To act rightly, on this view, is to act in ways that people could not reasonably reject; to act wrongly is to act in ways they could so reject. Scanlon argues that this conception of morality reveals to us a reason to be moral: acting rightly places us in an attractive relationship to others—we can justify our actions to them—while acting wrongly ruptures the relationship. This relationship, he claims, is attractive to humans in all times and places. Moreover, he argues, it is a precondition for many other valuable relationships, such as friendship and love. As a consequence, it rightly has special importance in our lives.

Williams explains why he is sceptical of Scanlon's and other attempts to offer a systematic account of morality and a single motive for accepting its verdicts. He also comments on the historical and genealogical methods of enquiry that he thinks can help us, as he puts it, 'make *some* sense of the ethical' even though we cannot have an idealized, unified version of it.

The final part, 'Love and Morality', addresses the relationship between moral reasons and the reasons of love. Harry Frankfurt argues that the answer to the question 'How should one live?' should not be sought in moral requirements. Rather, he believes, it must be sought in the structure of our will, by uncovering the desires we have and want most fervently to maintain and act on. (The desire to be moral, he adds, may not figure prominently among them.) Among the things



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we are so committed to desiring and pursuing, Frankfurt singles out the things we love. We love something, Frankfurt says, when we *cannot help* wanting to desire and pursue it. (Our children's well-being is typically such a thing.) When we realize that we love something, Frankfurt argues, we realize that we have found something we are unshakeably committed to wanting. When we know what we love, he concludes, we know how we want to live.

David Velleman argues that this is a misguided view of love. Rather than seeing love as a particular structure of unwavering desires, he regards it as an arresting awareness of an individual's value *qua* person that disarms our emotional defences. Stripped of these tendencies to close ourselves off from her, we become vulnerable to emotions like sympathy and disappointment. Nevertheless, we need not have any desire to be or do anything for the object of our love; we may, in Velleman's words, 'care *about* this person without caring *for* her or wanting to take care *of* her'.

Velleman also draws attention to the ways in which love and moral sentiments are kindred attitudes. For according to his view, both love and morality are a response to the value of each person, *qua* person, taken separately. He concludes that our love of some people does not threaten our attachment to morality. Instead, he argues, love provides us with a moral education by making us vividly aware of the value of each person.

At the beginning, I mentioned my doubts about Socrates' claim that the knowledge gained through philosophical discourse will make us 'happy as any human being can be'. It is an interesting question, though, what we can reasonably hope to gain from discourse on ethics. In the first place, I think we can expect to correct some of the errors to which we are prone. Many of the convictions that have been central, over the centuries, to people's common-sense morality seem clearly wrong, including the justifiability of slavery; the inferiority of foreigners, of people of different races, of women, of atheists, and of people of other religions; the wrongness of homosexuality; and the legitimacy of wars of conquest. It would therefore be naive to suppose that our

common-sense morality is not mistaken on some counts. Where our everyday moral judgements *are* correct, however, we may hope to find a deeper justification for these judgements, so that we can act on them with greater confidence.

We also have reason to hope that our moral sentiments will match the judgements we endorse on reflection. This is not something we can take for granted: experience teaches that there are acts we believe are wrong but that we do not shrink from performing; it also shows that we may continue to have aversive responses to certain acts long after we have concluded that these responses are unwarranted. Insofar as our sentiments are at odds with our considered judgements, we are alienated from these sentiments; in serious cases, this threatens our sense of self-control. The better the fit between our judgements and emotional responses, the more we will be at one with and in control of ourselves.

With regard to the objectivity of ethics, I hope we can conclude that it makes sense to engage in joint enquiry into ethics, even with people who have strikingly different views. We must settle on some rules for living together; and it is a more attractive prospect to be able to reason with others about what these rules should be than to relate to them only as people whom we can pressure, cajole, or seduce into adopting our way of seeing things.

Finally, I think we have reason to hope that our enquiries will vindicate our sense of morality's importance. Of course, morality can feel unduly constraining—sometimes we want to be unhampered by moral scruples and free from the sting of guilt that accompanies our transgressions. Nonetheless, I do not believe it would be liberating to conclude that we have no important reason to be moral. Rather, I imagine it would be a profoundly disorienting experience, and difficult to recognize ourselves in the people who would emerge from it. More positively, the discovery of a rationale for being moral would eliminate some of our misgivings about acting on moral motives when doing so comes at a cost. When we act on these motives after reflectively endorsing them, we may act more wholeheartedly, and with greater conviction, than before.

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My experience in writing this book has left me optimistic about the prospect of finding at least partial solutions to some of our ethical puzzles. Some of the answers proposed here strike me as true, at least in part; all of them yield unexpected insights. I remain uncertain, however, whether my hopes for ethical enquiry will be realized. Still, for those of us gripped by ethical questions, it matters little whether the answers will prove heartening; we must simply follow the arguments where they lead.

**References**

The quotations from Plato's *Phaedrus* are from the translation by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 275d–276a and 276e–277a. The case of Dr Roozrokh is reported in Jesse McKinley, 'Surgeon Accused of Speeding a Death to Get Organs', *New York Times*, 27 February 2008.

