# Part Three Problems in Value Theory

# **Introduction to Part Three**

Steven B. Cowan

Axiology (or Value Theory) is the branch of philosophy that studies value. Broadly speaking, it asks questions like, "What has worth or value?" and "What kinds of things are valuable?" and "What are the different sorts of value?" As such, the field of axiology has three major subdivisions. These are: ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy. Since political philosophy is a very large and complex discipline in its own right, I have devoted Part Four of the book to essays in that area. Here in Part Three, I include essays related to ethics, aesthetics, and the deeply existential problem concerning the meaning of human life.

## **Ethics**

Ethics, of course, has to do with matters of moral right and wrong. As a philosophical discipline ethics is typically divided into three sub-fields. *Metaethics* deals with fundamental questions concerning the meanings of ethical concepts such as "good," "bad," "right," and "wrong," as well as the metaphysical status of moral values (e.g., Are they subjective or objective?).

Normative ethics seeks to develop and justify an ethical theory about what makes actions right or wrong. Finally, applied ethics applies normative ethical theories to resolve real moral issues such as abortion, capital punishment, affirmative action, and so on. Part Three does not include any essays on issues in applied ethics. However, two metaethical problems are addressed in chapters 11 and 13: the question of the status of moral values (specifically, the question of whether or not they are relative or objective); and the problem of the relationship between God and ethics.

Chapter 12 deals with a key debate in normative ethics over what makes actions right or wrong.

#### Moral Relativism vs. Moral Objectivism

Few things are more obvious than that people have disagreements about what is right and wrong. Some people believe that abortion on demand is morally permissible, but others strongly oppose abortion. Many people believe that capital punishment is the penalty that murderers deserve while many others think the death penalty is atrocious. Homosexuality is believed by some to be morally offensive, yet others claim it is a perfectly acceptable alternative lifestyle. And so on.

These differences of opinion on moral issues provide a basis for *moral relativism*, the view that what counts as right and wrong is a matter of individual or cultural preference. For the moral relativist, there are no universally binding moral principles or values. Nothing is objectively or intrinsically right or wrong.

Chapter 11 contains a classic selection from Plato's *Republic*, the story of "Gyges's Ring." With this riveting parable involving a man who gets away with much evil with the help of a magic ring, Socrates is confronted with the question, "Why be moral?"—that is, why choose to be moral when immorality serves one's purposes and one can get away with it? Gyges's Ring thus poses a serious challenge to *moral objectivism* which claims that moral considerations always outweigh other concerns. But do they?

#### Normative Ethics: Consequences vs. Principles

Among other things, a normative ethical theory is supposed to tell us *what makes our actions right or wrong*. In the history of ethics, two approaches to this question have dominated.

Consequentialism is the view that consequences are what make an action right or wrong. If the results of your action are good, then your action was morally right; but if things end up badly because of your action, then it was wrong. Consequentialism comes in several variations, depending upon what counts as a good (or bad) consequence. However, the most prominent variety of consequentialism is *utilitarianism*. For the utilitarian, what counts as a good consequence is the *maximization of happiness for the greatest number of people*. More specifically, if an action results in an overall balance of happiness over unhappiness for the group of people affected by the action, then the action was good; otherwise it's bad. Representing this view in chapter 12 is a selection from J. S. Mill's (1806 – 1873) *Utilitarianism*, in which he lays out the basic principles of the utilitarian ethical system and defends it against common objections. In seeking to establish the truth of utilitarianism, he contends that happiness is the only thing that is desirable as an end, all other things being desirable only as a means of acquiring happiness. This, of course, is the classic doctrine of *hedonism*, the view that pleasure or happiness is the only intrinsic value.

The second dominant approach to normative ethics is *deontology*, the view that acting on the correct rules or principles, regardless of consequences, is what makes an action right. Failing to follow such principles makes an action morally wrong. The most influential variant of deontology is *Kantianism*, developed initially by the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Chapter 12 begins with excerpts from his work, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Kant believed that morality had to be grounded in human reason or rationality. That is, it had to be rational in every situation to do what morality requires; otherwise, morality would have no objective binding force. With this in mind, he developed the supreme rule of morality, what he called the *categorical imperative* (CI). In its first and primary form, CI states (by way of a simple paraphrase): *Do only those actions that can be universalized*. In other words, we should only do an action that, if everyone did it, would not entail a contradiction or some other kind of absurdity. For example, we should never make a lying promise (e.g., promising to repay a loan

knowing that you never can). Why? Because, if everyone lied when they made promises, then we would all expect that every promise was bogus and no one would accept a promise as genuine. In other words, if everyone made lying promises, then no one could (successfully) make a lying promise—and that's a contradiction. In this way, Kant sought to establish that being moral was always the rational thing to do, because immorality always resulted in an irrational contradiction.

#### God and Morality

The famous Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, wrote, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." He believed that without God to serve as a foundation for morality, then there could be no objective moral values or obligations. Atheism, in other words, implies moral relativism.

Not everyone has agreed, however, that morality depends on God. The problem of understanding the relationship, if any, between God and morality goes all the way back to Socrates in ancient Greece. In Plato's famous dialogue, *The Euthyphro* (included in chapter 13), Socrates asks a man named Euthyphro to define the concept of *holiness* (today we might substitute the concept of moral goodness). After a series of proposed and failed definitions, Euthyphro finally settles on this definition: *holiness is what pleases all the gods*. Then Socrates asks what many have thought to be a devastating question: "Is something holy because it pleases the gods, or does it please the gods because it is holy?" This question forms the basis of the *Euthyphro Dilemma*, and it's potentially devastating because it seems to show that morality cannot be dependent on God.

## **Aesthetics**

Aesthetics is a branch of value theory concerned with beauty, taste, and the appreciation of art.

Among the many important aesthetic problems addressed by aestheticians, one stands out: Are our aesthetic judgments objectively true? We have all heard the expression, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." The idea here is that whether or not something is beautiful is a matter of individual taste, and no one's taste is any more authoritative than anyone else's. This view is called aesthetic relativism, and a great many people today accept this view.

The opposite of aesthetic relativism is *aesthetic objectivism*. According to this view, some things are truly beautiful and some things just aren't—beauty is *not* merely in the eye of the beholder.<sup>1</sup> Or, put another way, some aesthetic judgments (e.g., "*Starry Night* is beautiful") are objectively true, and some are false. This implies, of course, that some art works (and other things) can be better or worse aesthetically than others.

One of the better known historical essays on aesthetics is David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste," included as the historical selection for chapter 14. Hume begins by noting the great variety in people's taste (preferences) in aesthetic matters. However, Hume dismisses as "absurd and ridiculous" the explanation of this diversity represented by a simple form of relativism that claims that all moral sentiments are equally valid. He argues that while aesthetic judgments are based on people's subjective sentiments, those sentiments can be improved and refined by practice and careful comparison with the sentiments of others. It's the lack of such practice and comparison that explains the great diversity in matters of taste. The "standard of taste" that provides the basis for correct aesthetic judgments is, for Hume, the consensus of well-informed critics from across time and cultures.

## The Meaning of Life

Perhaps the one philosophical question that almost every human being contemplates at some time or another is the question of life's meaning. We ask questions like, "Why are we here?" or "Why am *I* here?" or "What is the purpose and significance of human life?" There have been three basic answers to the problem of discerning life's meaning.<sup>2</sup>

- *The theistic solution*. On this approach, meaning in life is found in relationship to a personal God. Without God, life can have no real meaning. But, since God actually exists (they believe), life can and does have meaning.
- The pessimistic naturalist solution (nihilism). Those who take this approach agree with theism that without God there would be no meaning to life. The problem, though, as they see it, is that there is no God—or at least there is no good reason to believe in God.

  Therefore, for the pessimistic naturalist, life has no meaning.
- The *optimistic naturalist solution*. Those in this camp also deny the existence of God; but they do not think that life is therefore meaningless. They believe, instead, that God's existence is irrelevant to the question of whether or not life has meaning.

Perhaps the best introduction to the question of life's meaning is provided by Albert Camus in his well-known work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Selections from this work comprise chapter 15. Camus claims that the only serious philosophical problem involves the question of suicide. No other philosophical question matters unless we can find a reason to think that life is worth living. Why think that life is *not* worth living? Camus's answer is that life is absurd. Camus believes that God does not exist, and for this reason life can have no objective meaning. All of the things

we do, all of our hopes and dreams, are devoid of significance; they don't matter. So why care about life at all? Why not just commit suicide? Camus appeals to the ancient myth of Sisyphus to explain why he thinks that suicide is not really the answer. Sisyphus had offended the gods and his punishment was being condemned to roll a large boulder up a steep hill, only to see it roll back down, and then having to do the same thing again, and again. . . forever. But Camus sees Sisyphus as picking himself up each time and proudly marching back down the hill to roll the rock again in an act of defiance against the gods, refusing to be daunted by his fate. Camus recommends that, just like Sisyphus, we thumb our noses at the cold universe that refuses to meet our expectation for significance, and keep on living.

#### **NOTES**

1 11 14 41 41

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I should point out here that beauty is not the only aesthetic property that art and other things can have. We focus on beauty here, however, for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Here I follow the taxonomy of Joshua Seachris in *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. Joshua W. Seachris (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 10-13.

# 11

# Is Morality Relative?

# Gyges's Ring\*

## Plato

(For a brief biographical note on Plato, see chapter 3)

## **Study Questions**

- 1. What are the three kinds of good that Glaucon and Socrates identify?
- 2. Into which category does Socrates place justice? What is the multitude's view of justice?
- 3. What, according to Glaucon's description, is the nature and origin of justice?
- 4. What is the story of Gyges's Ring? What is the "moral" of the story according to Glaucon?
- 5. What is the comparison made between the just but-seemingly-unjust man and the unjust but-seemingly-just man? What is the point of the comparison?

When I had said this I supposed that I was done with the subject, but it all turned out to be only a prelude. For Glaucon, who is always an intrepid, enterprising spirit in everything, would not on this occasion acquiesce in Thrasymachus' abandonment of his case, but said, Socrates, is it your

<sup>\*</sup> From *The Republic*, Book II. Reprinted from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1961) by permission of the publisher.

desire to seem to have persuaded us or really to persuade us that it is without exception better to be just than unjust?

Really, I said, if the choice rested with me.

Well, then, you are not doing what you wish. For tell me, do you agree that there is a kind of good which we would choose to possess, not from desire for its aftereffects, but welcoming it for its own sake? As, for example, joy and such pleasures as are harmless and nothing results from them afterward save to have and to hold the enjoyment.

I recognize that kind, said I.

And again a kind that we love both for its own sake and for its consequences, such as understanding, sight, and health? For these I presume we welcome for both reasons.

Yes, I said.

And can you discern a third form of good under which fall exercise and being healed when sick and the art of healing and the making of money generally? For of them we would say that they are laborious and painful yet beneficial, and for their own sake we would not accept them, but only for the rewards and other benefits that accrue from them.

Why yes, I said, I must admit this third class also. But what of it?

In which of these classes do you place justice? he said.

In my opinion, I said, it belongs in the fairest class, that which a man who is to be happy must love both for its own sake and for the results.

Yet the multitude, he said, do not think so, but that it belongs to the toilsome class of things that must be practiced for the sake of rewards and repute due to opinion but that in itself is to be shunned as an affliction.

I am aware, said I, that that is the general opinion and Thrasymachus has for some time been disparaging it as such and praising injustice. But I, it seems, am somewhat slow to learn.

Come now, he said, hear what I too have to say and see if you agree with me. For Thrasymachus seems to me to have given up to you too soon, as if he were a serpent that you had charmed, but I am not yet satisfied with the proof that has been offered about justice and injustice. For what I desire is to hear what each of them is and what potency and effect each has in and of itself dwelling in the soul, but to dismiss their rewards and consequences. This, then, is what I propose to do, with our concurrence. I will renew the argument of Thrasymachus and will first state what men say is the nature and origin of justice, secondly, that all who practice it do so reluctantly, regarding it as something necessary and not as a good, and thirdly, that they have plausible grounds for thus acting, since for sooth the life of the unjust man is far better than that of the just man—as they say, though I, Socrates, don't believe it. Yet I am disconcerted when my ears are dinned by the arguments of Thrasymachus and innumerable others. But the case for justice, to prove that it is better than injustice, I have never yet heard stated by any as I desire to hear it. What I desire is to hear an encomium on justice in and by itself. And I think I am most likely to get that from you. For which reason I will lay myself out in praise of the life of injustice, and in so speaking will give you an example of the manner in which I desire to hear from you in turn the dispraise of injustice and the praise of justice. Consider whether my proposal pleases you.

Nothing could please me more, said I, for on what subject would a man of sense rather delight to hold and hear discourse again and again?

That is excellent, he said, and now listen to what I said would be the first topic—the nature and origin of justice.

By nature, they say, to commit injustice is a good and to suffer it is an evil, but that the excess of evil in being wronged is greater than the excess of good in doing wrong, so that when men do wrong and are wronged by one another and taste of both, those who lack the power to avoid the one and take the other determine that it is for their profit to make a compact with one another neither to commit nor to suffer injustice, and that this is the beginning of legislation and of covenants between men, and that they name the commandment of the law the lawful and the just, and that this is the genesis and essential nature of justice—a compromise between the best, which is to do wrong with impunity, and the worst, which is to be wronged and be impotent to get one's revenge. Justice, they tell us, being midway between the two, is accepted and approved, not as a real good, but as a thing honored in the lack of vigor to do injustice, since anyone who had the power to do it and was in reality "a man" would never make a compact with anybody neither to wrong nor to be wronged, for he would be mad. The nature, then, of justice is this and such as this, Socrates, and such are the conditions in which it originates, according to the theory.

But as for the second point, that those who practice it do so unwillingly and from want of power to commit injustice, we shall be most likely to apprehend that if we entertain some such supposition as this in thought—if we grant to both the just and the unjust license and power to do whatever they please, and then accompany them in imagination and see whither desire will conduct them. We should then catch the just man in the very act of resorting to the same conduct as the unjust man because of the self-advantage which every creature by its nature pursues as a good, while by the convention of law it is forcibly diverted to paying honor to "equality." The license that I mean would be most nearly such as would result from supposing them to have the power which men say once came to the ancestor of Gyges the Lydian. They relate that he was a shepherd in the service of the ruler at that time of Lydia, and that after a great deluge of rain and

an earthquake the ground opened and a chasm appeared in the place where he was pasturing, and they say that he saw and wondered and went down into the chasm. And the story goes that he beheld other marvels there and a hollow bronze horse with little doors, and that he peeped in and saw a corpse within, as it seemed, of more than mortal stature, and that there was nothing else but a gold ring on its hand, which he took off, and so went forth. And when the shepherds held their customary assembly to make their monthly report to the king about the flocks, he also attended, wearing the ring. So as he sat there it chanced that he turned the collet of the ring toward himself, toward the inner part of his hand, and when this took place they say that he became invisible to those who sat by him and they spoke of him as absent, and that he was amazed, and again fumbling with the ring turned the collet outward and so became visible. On noting this he experimented with the ring to see if it possessed this virtue, and he found the result to be that when he turned the collet inward he became invisible, and when outward visible, and becoming a aware of this, he immediately managed things so that he became one of the messengers who went up to the king, and on coming there he seduced the king's wife and with her aid set upon the king and slew him and possessed his kingdom.

If now there should be two such rings, and the just man should put on one and the unjust the other, no one could be found, it would seem, of such adamantine temper as to persevere in justice and endure to refrain his hands from the possessions of others and not touch them, though he might with impunity take what he wished even from the market place, and enter into houses and lie with whom he pleased, and slay and loose from bonds whomsoever he would, and in all other things conduct himself among mankind as the equal of a god. And in so acting he would do no differently from the other man, but both would pursue the same course. And yet this is a great proof, one might argue, that no one is just of his own will but only from constraint, in the belief

that justice is not his personal good, inasmuch as every man, when he supposes himself to have the power to do wrong, does wrong. For that there is far more profit for him personally in injustice than in justice is what every man believes, and believes truly, as the proponent of this theory will maintain. For if anyone who had got such a license within his grasp should refuse to do any wrong or lay his hands on others' possessions, he would be regarded as most pitiable and a great fool by all who took note of it, though they would praise him before one another's faces, deceiving one another because of their fear of suffering injustice. So much for this point.

But to come now to the decision between our two kinds of life, if we separate the most completely just and the most completely unjust man, we shall be able to decide rightly, but if not, not. How, then, is this separation to be made? Thus. We must subtract nothing of his injustice from the unjust man or of his justice from the just, but assume the perfection of each in his own mode of conduct. In the first place, the unjust man must act as clever craftsmen do. A first-rate pilot or physician, for example, feels the difference between impossibilities and possibilities in his art and attempts the one and lets the others go, and then, too, if he does happen to trip, he is equal to correcting his error. Similarly, the unjust man who attempts injustice rightly must be supposed to escape detection if he is to be altogether unjust; and we must regard the man who is caught as a bungler. For the height of injustice is to seem just without being so. To the perfectly unjust man, then, we must assign perfect injustice and withhold nothing of it, but we must allow him, while committing the greatest wrongs, to have secured for himself the greatest reputation for justice, and if he does happen to trip, we must concede to him the power to correct his mistakes by his ability to speak persuasively if any of his misdeeds come to light, and when force is needed, to employ force by reason of his manly spirit and vigor and his provision of friends and money. And when we have set up an unjust man or this character, our theory must set the

just man at his side—a simple and noble man, who, in the phrase of Aeschylus, does not wish to seem but to be good. Then we must deprive him of the seeming. For if he is going to be thought just he will have honors and gifts because of that esteem. We cannot be sure in that case whether he is just for justice' sake or for the sake of the gifts and the honors. So we must strip him bare of everything but justice and make his state the opposite of his imagined counterpart. Though doing no wrong he must have the repute of the greatest injustice, so that he may be put to the test as regards justice through not softening because of ill repute and the consequences thereof. But let him hold on his course unchangeable even unto death, seeming all his life to be unjust though being just, so that, both men attaining to the limit, the one of injustice, the other of justice, we may pass judgment which of the two is the happier.

Bless me, my dear Glaucon, said I. How strenuously you polish off each of your two men for the competition for the prize as if it were a statue!

To the best of my ability, he replied, and if such is the nature of the two, it becomes an easy matter, I fancy, to unfold the tale of the sort of life that awaits each. We must tell it, then, and even if my language is somewhat rude and brutal, you must not suppose, Socrates, that it is I who speak thus, but those who commend injustice above justice. What they will say is this, that such being his disposition the just man will have to endure the lash, the rack, chains, the branding iron in his eyes, and finally, after every extremity of suffering, he will be crucified, and so will learn his lesson that not to be but to seem just is what we ought to desire. And the saying of Aeschylus was, it seems, far more correctly applicable to the unjust man. For it is literally true, they will say, that the unjust man, as pursuing what clings closely to reality, to truth, and not regulating his life by opinion, desires not to seem but to be unjust,

Exploiting the deep furrows of his wit

From which there grows the fruit of counsels shrewd,

first office and rule in the state because of his reputation for justice, then a wife from any family he chooses, and the giving of his children in marriage to whomsoever he pleases, dealings and partnerships with whom he will, and in all these transactions advantage and profit for himself because he has no squeamishness about committing injustice. And so they say that if he enters into lawsuits, public or private, he wins and gets the better of his opponents, and, getting the better, is rich and benefits his friends and harms his enemies, and he performs sacrifices and dedicates votive offerings to the gods adequately and magnificently, and he serves and pays court to men whom he favors and to the gods far better than the just man, so that he may reasonably expect the favor of heaven also to fall rather to him than to the just. So much better they say, Socrates, is the life that is prepared for the unjust man from gods and men than that which awaits the just.

# **Questions for Reflection**

- Glaucon proposes that everyone, given the opportunity, would choose to act as Gyges does.
   Do you agree? Why?
- 2. How would you answer the challenge that Glaucon lays down for Socrates? Why be moral or just even when it's not in your interest?