

WHO'S TO SAY WHAT'S RIGHT OR WRONG? PEOPLE WHO HAVE PH.D.S IN PHILOSOPHY, THAT'S WHO

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1. INTRODUCTION

IN PLATO'S DIALOGUE THE *Euthyphro*, the character Euthyphro is challenged by Socrates to define 'piety'. (The Greek term had connotations of 'right' and 'duty' in addition to what we think of as piety today.) Euthyphro's first definition is

piety = prosecuting wrongdoers

This is quite different from (i) 'prosecuting lawbreakers', and it is also quite different from (ii) 'prosecuting people believed to be wrongdoers'. But Euthyphro means what he says, and does not want either of these two variations. So, Euthyphro has tried to define piety as prosecuting those who actually do wrong.

When asked what is wrong with this definition, beginning philosophy students will shout 'Who's to say what's right or wrong?' with the predictability and regularity of a Swiss watch. The problem seems to be that the word 'wrong', an ethical term, has occurred on

RICHARD SHARVY (1942–1988) was an accomplished philosopher and teacher though he never held a tenured position, and was an American-style rugged individualist. He wrote his own obituary: "He made outrageous conclusions reasonable, he mocked the gods, and he corrupted the youth." This article has circulated for years among academic philosophers as an underground classic; it is published here with the kind permission of his son Benjamin Sharvy to whom the piece was dedicated. The present version combines three manuscript versions: versions A and B (provided by Benjamin Sharvy) and version C (provided by Reed Richter). B is a much shorter revision of A; A and C are nearly identical, though C appears to be later. The chronological relationship between B and C is unclear. Any significant variations are identified in the editor's footnotes.

the *right*-hand side of a definition. This seems to presuppose that we are all completely clear about what wrongdoing is—so clear about it that we can use the idea of wrongdoing to analyze the idea of piety. Of course the question is not triggered just by the conversation in the *Euthyphro*—it seems to come up at least once in any beginning philosophy course that deals with ethical ideas.¹ But it is not immediately obvious just what students are asking when they produce this inevitable question.

And it is not just naïve young students who ask this trite question. I had dinner recently with some historians, and someone produced the same question as what he apparently thought was relevant to a conversation that touched on various topics in ethics and morality. People in the so-called social “sciences” seem to produce this question as a knee-jerk reflex whenever they hear the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.²

But although the *first* reaction of most professional philosophers to that hackneyed question is just annoyance and a sigh, there really should be a logical and rational response to it. Yet professional philosophers seem to have a wide range of responses. The purpose of the present paper is to get the question out into the open and to give my own response.

One thing I often do is assign a 1,000-word essay:

Socrates believes (a) that propositions about right and wrong are objectively true or false, and (b) that there are no authorities whose determinations make things right or wrong. Are these consistent? Explain.

The point of the exercise is just to see that (a) and (b) are consistent. The best argument for their consistency is that most similar pairs of statements, with the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ replaced by ‘black’ and ‘white’ or almost anything else, are also not only consistent but both true.

¹This sentence is omitted in version B.—*Editor*.

²Both this paragraph and the following footnote are omitted in version B.—*Editor*.

The GRE guide ranks 98 areas of study by combined mean score on the graduate record examinations, 1977–1980 (see Herbenick). The top 10 percent includes physics, mathematics, classics, and philosophy; the bottom includes physical education, educational administration, communications, and, sociology; history comes right in the middle. This is just about what I would have expected. It also provides an explanation of why sociologists have such a passionate and irrational bias against intelligence tests.—*Author*.

'Who's to say what's right or wrong?' The whining tone with which this question is usually asked seems to suggest that there is only one possible answer: 'nobody'. And this then suggests that there are just no such things as right and wrong at all—that the words 'right' and 'wrong' are merely grunts like 'mmmm' or 'ecch' with which English-speaking human animals express personal subjective approval and disapproval, caused by custom, habit, and cultural bias that are purely conventional and have no basis in reason. (cp. 'Who's to say whether fat men are more attractive than skinny ones?') This rhetorical interpretation of the question, as containing its own answer of 'nobody', may just amount to the following unsound argument (using the (a) and (b) from above):

- (b) is true
- (b) is inconsistent with (a)
- Therefore, (a) is false

But whatever the asker of the question has in mind, it is the job of the philosopher to ask him the right sequence of questions so that the question becomes explicit and clear, and so that it can then be given a serious answer (or answers); or at least a good try can be made.

2. INTERPRETATIONS

Possibly the annoyance that philosophers feel when asked our question is due to its extreme ambiguity. It could mean

- (I1) Who must decide what an individual is to do?

This question seems to me to have exactly one correct answer: the individual himself. But this is an obvious truth, almost a tautology, and it certainly does *not* imply that whatever an individual decides that he must do is the *right* thing for him to do. Of course an individual must decide himself what he is to do; and of course he can make horrible mistakes and do actually wrong things as a result of bad decisions—bad decisions which, nonetheless, he made for himself. Who's to decide what you must do? You, of course. *But*, you will certainly want to make use of competent advice, sound reasoning, and accurate information.

Although almost a tautology, there is a certain significance to (I1) that Sartre has made much of: if you *pretend* that what you are doing in some particular case was decided not by you, but by someone else, you can create the appearance that you are not responsible. But to say that you are acting in a certain way because of someone else's decision is always a lie. It just cannot happen. It is impossible.

To say such a thing is to lie to oneself and to others, in a fairly obvious way.

Another interpretation of the question might be

(I2) Who are the officials with the power to make things right or wrong by issuing rulings, findings, or determinations?

Answer: nobody could possibly have the power to do this, so there just are no such authorities. But that is quite consistent with many things actually being right and many other things actually being wrong.

Question: if the state legislature passed a law saying that a person would be considered dead if he were missing for seven years, and if Jones were missing for eight years, would he be dead? Answer: not enough information has been given to answer the question, and some irrelevant information about the state legislature has been given which misdirects our attention.³ However, we do know that the law would not *cause* him to be dead: even if he is in fact dead, it is not *because* of any state law. Question: if we called tails 'legs', how many legs would a normal horse have? Answer: a normal horse would still have four legs, although it would have five things called 'legs'. A tail wouldn't become a leg, certainly; it would only come to be called by the word *el-ee-gee*.

A more sophisticated interpretation of our question is

(I3) Are attributions of right or wrong to things capable of justification? Can ethical statements be justified?

This is also an interpretation of the question 'Can you say that anything is right or wrong?'

Before discussing interpretation (I3), I would like to comment on a point of linguistic sloppiness that even professional philosophers are guilty of every day. Of course anybody *can* say that anything is right or wrong; this is as easy as opening your mouth and saying 'Good morning' or anything else. The locution 'can say' is often misused to mean 'is justified': 'You can't say that there is life on other planets'; 'You can't say who the next President will be'.

I find this sloppy and deserving of discouragement. Philosophy students should be taught to scream at such locutions as an automatic reflex.⁴ The point is to learn to use the word 'justified', and

³In version A: "which muddies things up."—*Editor*.

⁴They should also be taught to scream at 'in some sense. . . .' In some sense, everyone in New Zealand is walking around upside-down; in some sense,

drop the locution 'can say'. Since it is easy enough to find professional philosophers saying ridiculous things like 'We cannot predict which way the electron will go', I cannot complain too much about philosophy students and laymen here. Of course I *can* predict anything: I predict that it will rain in Auckland on my birthday in the year 2001. Predict *truly* you now demand: all right, I also predict that it will not rain there on that day. Now, one of my two predictions is true; thus, I *can* accurately predict the weather twenty years in the future; it's easy; I have just done so.⁵

But the answer to question (I3) is just *yes*: ethical statements are capable of justification. This answer then raises another question, which itself is another interpretation of my title question:

(I4.1) What justifies calling things right or wrong?

Answer: this one is a very difficult question. But the sciences are full of difficult questions. Nobody expects a physicist to explain in three minutes to an untrained layman the big bang theory, quarks, relativity theory, or quantum mechanics. The same is true for interpretation (I4.1). To answer this question requires years of study of philosophy, especially of the science of ethics. It just cannot be answered in two or three minutes.

My real feeling is that something like interpretation (I4.1) deserves to be taken as the most serious possible interpretation of the question 'Who's to say what's right and wrong?' For the locutions 'who's to say . . . ?' and 'who can say . . . ?' are often just awkward ways of asking 'what justifies . . . ?'

Notice also how much progress we make by eliminating the personal presupposition contained in the word 'who' by changing it to 'what'. Compare 'Who makes the sun rise?', which we improve with the same change. Much scientific progress has begun with this simple shift away from religious and superstitious assumptions that something like a person is behind things.⁶

nothing exists but atoms and the void; in some sense *p*, for any false *p* that you like.—*Author*.

⁵Perhaps 'can't say' and 'can't predict' really mean 'can't *know*'. But the reason, I presume, that I can't know something is that I lack sufficient justification. So let's just say so, explicitly. Indeed, when I myself just said that I "cannot complain. . . .", I should have said that such a complaint would be unjust or unjustified.—*Author*.

⁶This paragraph is omitted in version B.—*Editor*.

A variation on this theme would be to read the question as asking

(I4.2) What determines what's right or wrong?

This is the result of taking our original question, and just changing 'who' to 'what', and changing 'is to say' to 'determines'. But this small change in wording reveals that we have a serious causal question.

(I4.3) What makes things right or wrong?

These three versions of my fourth interpretation are quite similar to each other. But since none of them can be answered in two or three minutes, I will not even attempt to try. I can say only that ethics, like physics, requires substantial study. If you want easy answers, you are just out of luck, because there aren't any.

Similarly, there is probably no answer to this variation:

(I4.4) What is the precise algorithm or formal procedure for deciding of anything whether it is right or wrong?

I wouldn't know how to *prove* that there is no such formal decision procedure, but its lack wouldn't stop ethics any more than Gödel's Theorem stops arithmetic.⁷

But this does lead to another interpretation of our question:

(I5) Who are the experts whose judgments about right and wrong are the most reliable? Who has made a special study of the subject?

This differs from interpretation number (I2) in that there is no suggestion here that the experts are *causing* things to actually *become* right or wrong by issuing encyclicals, findings, determinations, or rulings. Furthermore, the question in (I5) presupposes that many things actually are right or wrong. This presupposition is just the opposite of what seems to be believed by many askers of our initial question—namely, that there just are no such things as right and wrong in the objective actual world. Interpretation (I5) assumes that some things really are right and that other things really are wrong; it then goes on to ask the natural question of whether or not there are people who are experts at discovering such facts.

(I5) is the question to which Socrates himself often seemed to suggest a negative answer: 'nobody'. In the *Protagoras*, for example,

⁷This paragraph is absent from version A. —*Editor*.

he points out that Athenians consult architects when they need to put up a building, ship-builders when they need to build ships, etc., but that they view everyone as equal when the question is one of what is right or wrong. So, in what I am going to say next, I am squarely in opposition to Socrates.

I am also squarely in opposition to one wind in recent philosophy: the one which says that the job of philosophy is the clarification of concepts, and that philosophy does not give answers to the questions that laymen think of as philosophical questions. I think that that notion of philosophy is completely perverted. Philosophy is a science—that is, philosophy involves *knowledge*, not merely belief, and this is *systematic* knowledge. (The word 'science' comes from a root that simply means 'systematic knowledge'.) Philosophers know a great many things as absolute scientific fact not open to question. I will discuss some of these things in the last half of this talk.

People who say that the job of philosophy is to clarify concepts are just mistaken. Furthermore, this attitude is responsible for the recent death of philosophy in the universities. A Socratic question seems appropriate: think clearly about what subject? If you want to learn to think clearly about organic chemistry, you should take courses in organic chemistry. If you want practice in clearly organizing logical thought, don't take a logic course in the philosophy department—these are all fifty years out of date. Take a course in computer programming. Since everybody knows this, and since philosophy courses themselves get catalogue descriptions that talk about clarifying concepts, obviously nobody will take such courses. Philosophy, by the way, is the science that studies the foundations of everything, from physics to music theory to philosophy itself.

In any case, this last reading of our question as (I5), 'Who are the experts?', is also quite annoying. If the question is who the experts are, surely I am one. I have spent years studying these problems, and naturally I am annoyed at the suggestion that I am not an expert in my own field. While the suggestion that (I4) can be answered in a few minutes in a manner understandable by laymen is offensive because it suggests that philosophy is trivial, (I5) seems to suggest that philosophy just doesn't exist at all! The answer to question (I5) is quite obviously that people with Ph.D.s in philosophy are the moral experts.

Who's to say how to build a bridge? A trained engineer, of course. Who's to say what treatment to use for a medical problem? A trained physician, of course. These are plain obvious truths. Engineers are experts on engineering, and physicians are experts on medicine.

However, many people are unaware of the fact that there are any experts on right and wrong. Other people think that there are, but also think that *these* experts are clergymen or members of Congress or “the majority.” How anyone could pick these groups as moral experts is completely beyond me. But, in any case, the fact of the matter is that it is professional philosophers who are the experts on right and wrong.

This does not mean that we are the *only* experts—just that we know much more about right and wrong than clergymen, lawyers, doctors, and other laymen. But this happens with any specialty—most intelligent people have some medical knowledge and some legal knowledge, but the specialists generally have much more.

Everyone has some knowledge of right and wrong. Everyone knows, for example, that it is wrong to kill people just to obtain fat to make candles. (In the Middle Ages, many professional thieves believed that if they lighted their way during night-time burglaries with candles made from human tallow, then they could not be caught. This belief resulted in many people, especially of course fat ones, being killed merely to get fat to make candles.)

The fact that it is people with Ph.D.s in philosophy who are the moral experts, the authorities on what is really right and wrong, is not threatened by occasional disagreements among them either. Take one set of symptoms to a dozen doctors, and you are likely to get a half-dozen different diagnoses. This hardly means that medicine is not a science, or that after further study of the symptoms, physicians could not come closer to agreement. Experts often disagree, including professional philosophers. But philosophers do agree about a large number of ethical facts.

3. SOME THINGS THAT WE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHERS KNOW ABOUT RIGHT AND WRONG

Philosophers know many things about right and wrong that most other people do not know. Here are some examples of things that we know:

- (F1) Women do not have the right to do whatever they choose with their own bodies.
- (F2) There is no right to life.
- (F3) Murder is not wrong because God forbade it; rather, even if God did forbid murder, he did so because it was wrong.

- (F4) The most valuable things in life are useless.
- (F5) Not every individual is the best judge of what is right or wrong for himself.
- (F6) Cultural-ethical relativism is false.
- (F7) It's false that only God has the right to decide when a human life shall end
(Hume, cited by Rachels, p. 36).

(F1) is true, because one thing that a woman might choose to do with her body is to strangle me or stomp on my face, yet the fact that this is something she does with her body does not give her any special privilege to do either of these things. *Possibly* people who disagree with (F1) mean something else when they affirm what (F1) seems to deny. I have never been able to figure out what; when someone claims that women do have such rights, we should do him the courtesy of taking him to mean precisely what he says, and of noting that what he has said is an ethical claim which is just plain false. I disapprove of trying to rewrite what someone else has claimed.⁸ To say that nobody “really” believes that women have the right to do what they please with their own bodies is just arrogant; people do *say* such things. Such people should be forced at the very least to *speak more carefully*. In any case, (F1) is a moral fact that every philosopher knows, which many laymen do not know.

What of number (F2)? Suppose that you will die unless you receive a kidney transplant; suppose that I am the only compatible donor available; suppose that I have two good kidneys. Question: do you have a *right* to one of my kidneys? That is, do you have a justified, true, enforceable claim to one of them? Answer: No. It would be *nice* if I offered to give you one, but you may not take one by force. That is, you must resign yourself to death, rather than use force against me to maintain your life. One person's having a right involves another person or persons' having a duty—but I have no duty to give you one of my kidneys. A right is something that may be enforced (“may” legally for legal rights; “may” morally for moral rights); the word ‘force’ in ‘enforce’ is crucial.

Of course you have a right to the *free exercise* of life; you have a right not to be actively deprived of your life without substantial justification; you may use force to continue the free exercise of your life. But you just have no such thing as a right to life.

⁸This sentence and the next two are omitted in version B.—*Editor*.

Some philosophers have denied what I have said. However, they are confused about the difference between a right to something, a privilege, and a right to the free exercise of something. I have a right *to* free speech and publication; I have no right *of* publication.⁹ If I had a right of speech and publication, then an editor who refuses to publish my writings would be violating my rights. I have no right to the *resources needed* to publish; nobody has the duty to furnish such resources; therefore, I have no right of publication. However, I have the right of *free* publication—nobody may actively interfere with my publication without violating that right.

It is interesting that many lawyers and also newspaper publishers seem confused about this. Newspeople will argue loudly against closing certain criminal proceedings to the press, on the grounds that this violates freedom of the press. Of course it violates no such thing. The press is free to publish almost anything that it can get its hands on, and I can prevent your publishing the truth about X if I can prevent your *learning* the truth about X – but I do not thereby violate any right of free publication.

For similar reasons,

(F8) Article 25 of the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which says that everyone has a right to food, clothing, and housing, is simply false.¹⁰

If this were true, then a state that failed to furnish such things to someone would be violating his rights. After all, if a person accused of a crime has a right to a speedy trial, then that right is violated if the state does not give this to him.

Some people have rights to food and clothing, and other people do not. That is just a fact about the world. I, for example, have a right to a certain quantity of food and clothing, namely, the food in my refrigerator and on my shelves, and the clothing on my back and in my closet. There is no other food or clothing to which I, at the present moment, have any rights at all.

4. AUTHORITIES

What of (F3)? Many people in today's troubled world—which frankly does not seem to me to be significantly more or less troubled

⁹Following version C. In version A the italicization differs: "I have a right to *free* speech and publication; I have no right of publication." This paragraph and the next one are omitted entirely in version B.—*Editor*.

¹⁰This sentence is treated as a separate item, F8, only in version B.—*Editor*.

than any other world we have had or are likely to have—many people in today's troubled world feel bewildered and confused by an apparent lack of firm standards that they can rely on. One response is to look for a strong external authority, such as the Pope, or Reverend Moon, or the Ethics Committee of the American Bar Association, who will do the work of deciding or determining what is right and wrong, and then tell us about it so we can be safe. We are "safe," because if someone complains about our conduct, we can point to the sign on the wall and say, "See, it says right here that it's all right to _____."

The degree to which human beings are willing to suspend their own judgment and pretend to hand their own real responsibilities over to external forces or authorities is really very frightening. In a number of well-known experiments, the social psychologist Stanley Milgram put subjects in situations where they believed that they were administering powerful electric shocks to other people. Two-thirds of the subjects giving the "electric shocks" continued all the way through the series of (supposedly) stronger and stronger shocks, through levels labeled 'Very Strong Shock', 'Intense Shock', 'Extreme Intensity Shock', 'Danger: Severe Shock' on to the last, labeled '450 volts: XXX'. These subjects administered the entire series of "shocks," despite pleas to stop and agonized screams from the "victims," as long as the "authorities" directing the experiment told them that they were "required" to continue (see Milgram 1974).

I am quite confident that when *homo sapiens* destroys itself in a nuclear holocaust, most of the individuals pushing the buttons will say that they were "forced to", that they "had no choice but to", and, of course, that they were "just following orders." A brighter hope is that a superior species will evolve that lacks this perverted tendency to worship authority, and that it will wipe out *homo sapiens* without too much bloodshed or violation of our rights. Perhaps this benign genocide could be carried out by paying each of us to be voluntarily sterilized.

In any case, let me repeat my earlier claim about authoritarian ethics: there just cannot be anyone with the power to cause things to be right or wrong by issuing rulings. The hope for an authority to do such a thing is vain.

We *can* have authorities to whom we refer to settle disputes, and we can agree to act *as if* his rulings were the truth of the matter. A person to whom one refers is called a *referee*. If we are playing football, we might choose someone as a referee, to whom we will refer close calls. The referee does not, however, decide or determine whether someone has stepped out of bounds! He does not make it a

fact that you stepped out of bounds by ruling that you stepped out of bounds. He only makes it the case that you will be *considered for the purposes of continuing the game as if* you had stepped out of bounds.

If you were out at first base, and if the referee said that you were, then the referee said so because he thought you arrived after the ball. You were not out because the referee said so; you were out because you arrived after the ball, and you were actually out regardless of what the referee ruled.

So (F3) above, about God's forbidding murder because it was wrong, is an instance of a much more general principle. Other instances of the principle are

X is not wrong because it is illegal; it's illegal because it's wrong.

X is not wrong because your conscience forbids it;
your conscience forbids it because it's wrong.

Even your conscience lacks the power to *make* something right or wrong by approving or disapproving of it.

Now "standards" can be created by authorities, but only for matters of convention—not for matters of fact. And there are ethical facts. For example, suppose that many of us are confused and troubled by a lack of firm reliable standards about . . . what should be called a "large egg." Well, we can create a state egg board that will make a ruling that egg dealers must call an egg "large" just if it is between x and y grams in weight. Have they made any eggs large? No, they have made a convention about what things will be called, and that's all.

Standards can be created only for matters of custom and convention, such as which side of the road to drive on, or what size egg may be labelled "large." But murder was made illegal *because* it was *already* wrong. If right and wrong, good and bad, were matters of custom, cultural practice, law or convention, it would never make any sense to call something a *bad* custom, practice, law, or convention.

What *does* make murder wrong? That is a very deep question, and it is hard to answer.¹¹ It is also hard to explain what makes the

¹¹Murder is not wrong "because it is defined" as wrongful killing of a human. Even supposing that murder is so defined, the serious question remains: what *makes* wrongful acts wrongful?

One explanation of why murder is wrong is given by Kant, and seems good as a start: it's always wrong to treat rational beings as means rather than as ends in themselves.—*Author*.

sun work. It is obvious that murder is wrong; it is obvious that the sun radiates lots of energy. To understand what the *causes* are of these facts, that murder is wrong, and that the sun radiates energy, requires substantial study of ethics in one case, and physics in the other.

You don't need a weatherman to tell which way the wind is blowing, but you do need one to tell you *why* it blows.

In any case, the fact that something is illegal does not make it wrong. And all philosophers know this, although many laymen—clergymen, members of Congress, lawyers, doctors, etc.—do not know it. So we can add this fact to our list of ethical facts that we philosophers know:

(F9) The fact that something is illegal does not make it wrong.

Recalling murder and wrongful killing, we can also observe that the words 'right' and 'wrong' are used systematically in two very different ways. A *wrongful* killing is a killing that is *unjustified*; it is *unjust*; it is *a* wrong; it *wrongs* someone; a wrongful killing is one that violates someone's *rights*. The important difference here is between what is "right" and what is *a* right; the difference is the same between what is "wrong" and what is *a* wrong.

I suspect that one reason many people feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in discussing ethical questions is that talk of things being right and wrong reminds them of boring clergymen or boring parents trying to preach at them. But there is a world of difference between saying that something is "wrong" in this vague, boring, moralistic sense, and saying that it is *a* wrong. Perhaps masturbation, smoking marijuana, homosexuality, and prostitution violate the standards of "morality" of numerous prudes and busybodies. But that means only that they violate their own customs and habits. Perhaps there is a weak sense of "wrong" that does just mean fitting or in accordance with convention. Indeed, many things are wrong in this weak sense, such as spelling a word wrong, buying a shirt of the wrong size, putting the wrong key in your door, and so forth. But please do note that we can all agree on another fact—doing such things is very different from robbery and murder, in that things like smoking marijuana or being promiscuous do not involve doing *wrongs* to anyone; they do not involve *wronging* anyone; they do not involve violating anyone's *rights*. Thus, we can add another ethical fact to our list:

(F10) Doing something wrong is not the same thing
as wronging someone.

Furthermore,

(F11) Harming someone is not the same thing as wronging someone.

John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty*, sometimes confused wronging with harming. Vigorous competition by me for some scarce resource might result in harm to you; would Mill's principles allow me to be restrained? No. His principle is that harm to others is a necessary but not sufficient condition for restraint; and he cites competition as something special, which escapes restraint because it is generally beneficial. But I would prefer a different principle to prohibit such restraint: my competitive acts, although they might harm you, do not violate your rights; they do not wrong you (see also Sharvy 1983).

Mill does improve his harm principle in chapter 4, observing that being harmful often falls short of violating rights. But it is not clear to me that he fully appreciated his own point here. Why, after observing this, did he not go back and rewrite his "one very simple principle" of chapter 1, which was stated in terms of preventing harm rather than preventing violations of rights?¹²

Anyhow, as one more example, consider a person on the other side of the planet who died by starvation last week, but who would not have died had I sent ten dollars to a relief organization. He has been harmed by my omission, but that omission did not violate his rights. Therefore, I may not justly be forcibly restrained from such omissions; that is, I may not justly be forced to make such contributions.

I would note that although the ancient Greeks did not seem to have our notion of *rights* as metaphorical private property, they did have the notion of wronging someone that I am using here. Aristotle gave a definition of wronging (*adikeîn*): voluntary harming contrary to law (*Rhetoric* I 10 1368b6). Thus, only some harming is wronging. And the word 'law' includes more than just the various written local ordinances, which Aristotle calls particular law. Law includes general law: those unwritten principles which are supposed to be acknowledged everywhere (1368b9–10).

In Plato's *Protagoras*, part of a myth about the evolution of human society involves the claim that early societies collapsed because men *wronged* (*ēdikoun*) each other (322b–c). It is a serious mistake to translate this as ' . . . men harmed each other'. People can harm or injure each other by accident or in self-defense or through competition, and this does not cause societies to collapse.

¹²This paragraph is omitted in version B.—*Editor*.

And in the *Crito*, Socrates says that one must never *adikeîn* anyone (49a^{ff.}). The verb in both places consists of *a* (negation) plus a stem from *dikē, dikaios*: right, just. This word does not mean 'to harm' or to 'injure' (except in an archaic or etymological or legal sense of 'injure'); not does it mean 'to do something wrong' (which would include spelling a word wrong or buying a shirt of the wrong size). *Adikeîn* means to *wrong* someone—to violate his rights. If I strike you in self-defense, I may harm you and cause an injury, but I have not *wronged* you (unless I used excessive, i.e., *unjustified*, force). Socrates is not saying that we should never use force in self-defense; he is saying that we should never *wrong* anyone, even if we have been wronged ourselves.

There is some reason to interpret the command by Jesus of Nazareth to "turn the other cheek" in this same way. In Matthew's version, Jesus says "if a man slaps you upon the right cheek, then turn the other to him as well" (5:39). John Fitzgerald has pointed out to me that this means that if someone *insults* you, don't return the insult. For a slap upon the right cheek is not an assault or an attack.

Assuming that your opponent is right-handed, an actual punch thrown as an attack would land on your left cheek, not on your right. Given that it is described as a slap, and that it lands on your right cheek, the situation described is one where your opponent has given you a symbolic insult—the *back* of his right hand. He has not attacked or assaulted you. Jesus is not forbidding us to defend ourselves when attacked; he is urging us to ignore insults and to forswear revenge. His command comes in the specific context of an injunction against revenge and retaliation. It would be perfectly consistent for Jesus to go on to say "Of course if you do happen to be attacked, use whatever force is necessary to defend yourself. A justified blow struck in self-defense is not a wrong; it does not violate the attacker's rights."

It is also worth noting that the word usually mistranslated as "righteousness" in the New Testament is Plato's friend *dikaïosynē*. Try scratching out every occurrence of 'righteousness' and writing in 'justice', and then see if those biblical passages don't make more sense.¹³

Anyhow, one way to avoid the embarrassment that people often feel in discussing ethical questions is just to avoid talking of right and wrong altogether, and talk instead of rights and wrongs. This

¹³This paragraph is omitted in version A.—*Editor*.

gets away from fruitless cultural comparisons and into more serious ethics. (See also my 1983 article in *Playboy*.)

5. THE MOST VALUABLE THINGS ARE USELESS

All philosophers know that the most valuable things are useless, but again, very few laymen are aware of this fact. Indeed, many seem to believe the opposite. But I believe that I can explain why this is true in a fairly quick way. There are two parts to the proof.¹⁴

The first part of the proof is a First Cause argument.¹⁵ (a) Some things are valuable just because they are useful—useful as a means to getting something else. The something else must of course be valuable, or the means of getting it would not have been valuable in the first place. A car is useful for getting to work, work is useful for a feeling of accomplishment and for money, money is useful for obtaining various things. (b) But some things must be valuable for their own sake; the chain cannot go on forever; we cannot *only* have things that are valuable because they are useful for getting other things. For why are these other things valuable? Suppose that they themselves were valuable only because they were useful for getting yet other things. Then why are those next things valuable . . . ?

$x \longrightarrow y \longrightarrow z \longrightarrow$
 x is a means to y, which is a means to z, which is a means . . .

The chain cannot go on forever; it ends at things which are valuable, but not useful for getting anything.

Furthermore, notice that as we go along the chain, the things we come to get less and less useful, but more and more valuable. If the only reason that you value \$100 in your pocket is that it is a useful means to obtaining a certain bicycle, it must be that you value that bicycle *more* than you value the \$100—otherwise, you just would not exchange the money for the bicycle.

Ultimately, if we keep asking what makes things valuable, and if we keep getting as answers that they are useful for getting other things, we will eventually come to items like happiness and a good

¹⁴The following argument, or at least its essential idea, is found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* I 2, 5–7, and in Mill's *Utilitarianism* I, IV. My version here, with its stress on the useless, owes something to a talk given by John Cronquist in Auckland in 1980.—*Author*.

¹⁵For a detailed discussion of First Cause Arguments, see my paper on the Third Man Argument (1986).—*Author*.

This footnote is absent from version A.—*Editor*.

life. Why is education valuable? Because it is the principal necessary condition for freedom. Why is freedom valuable? It is part of a good life. Why is a good life valuable? Don't ask ridiculous questions.

A good life is certainly the most valuable thing that there is; if other things are valuable, it is only because they contribute toward a good life; but a good life is certainly totally useless. What is a good life useful for? Absolutely nothing at all. A good life is the most valuable thing that there is; it is what makes other things valuable; it itself is completely and utterly useless.

6. ETHICS, SCIENCE, AND THE A PRIORI¹⁶

By *a priori* I mean anything that can be proven with thought-experiments. All science is *a priori*. For the word 'science' comes from a Latin word that means knowledge. Similarly, the Greek word *epistēmē* is best translated as 'scientific knowledge'—not just 'knowledge' in any looser sense. The essence of a science is not that it deals with physical phenomena, for mathematics is a science. What makes something a science is that it is a systematic body of knowledge. But something which is a belief supported by empirical data is not knowledge; it is too uncertain. We want proofs and certainty, not just statistics and probability.

There is a myth that Galileo refuted the belief that heavier bodies fall faster than lighter ones by dropping weights from the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Actually he never did any such thing; he used thought-experiments. (Suppose heavier things fall faster; drop a pair of shoes; the left shoe and the right shoe each weigh one pound, so each falls at the same speed; the *pair* of shoes weighs two pounds, yet does not fall any faster than the one-pound left shoe; Q.E.D.)

How can ethics be a science? The same way that anything is a science. We begin with ordinary things and obvious facts, and uncover their causes and first principles. These are then put together to form a theory that explains these facts. That's what Aristotle says on the first page of the *Physics*; that's what Quine says on the first page of *Word and Object*. Albert Einstein said

The supreme task of the physicist is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built up by pure deduction. (Quoted in Katz, p. 208)

Ethics, then, is much closer to being a real science than something like sociology is. Indeed, nothing whose methodology is empirical can be a science.

¹⁶This entire section is omitted in version B.—*Editor*.

One ethical fact is that it is wrong to kill people to get fat to make candles. Now start giving an explanation why and you are engaged in the science of ethics.

7. CULTURAL RELATIVISM IS FALSE

It is true that different cultures have different customs. It is true that the word 'moral' comes from a Latin word that merely means customs. It is true that it is usually good to be as tolerant as possible of different customs.

But a custom is not the same thing as an ethical fact, a fact about right and wrong. A custom, such as driving on the left side of the road, is at worst inefficient or tasteless; if it is a matter of rights and wrongs, it is other than a custom, and does not have any claim to our tolerance.

The Story of Al and Cal

Al is a devout Moslem who grew up and lives in a strict Islamic theocracy. Cal is a promoter of rock groups and lives in California, a bit north of San Francisco. One day, Al is magically transported to California for a party at Cal's. Dozens of people are drinking wine, eating barbecued pork, and taking off their clothes and jumping into Cal's hot tub. Al is outraged.

Then Cal is transported to Al's home, and is taken to watch an adulteress get stoned to death. Cal is outraged.

Are the situations parallel? No. Stoning people to death for adultery is objectively wrong; it violates their objective natural rights. But consuming wine and pork is merely distasteful to certain people. One is a matter of right and wrong, of rights and wrongs; the other is a matter of taste.

I can hear many of you now thinking that I am being very arrogant and chauvinistic, when I say that Al's culture is morally bad, but that Cal's is not. Don't you really want to shout 'Who's to Say What's Right and Wrong?' at me? I hope not, because I've already answered that question. I am; I have a Ph.D. in philosophy. I am an expert on what is really right and wrong. So restrain yourselves. Ask instead 'What justifies my claims about the two cultures in the story of Al and Cal?'

In asking this, you are not suggesting that I am mistaken, I hope. You are not suggesting that merely because some people believe the opposite, there is no correct answer. You are not suggesting that there is any remote reason to think that stoning people to death merely for adultery is perfectly just. We have already solved those problems. If

you truly believe that you do not *know* whether or not mass murder for example is really wrong, then you are just a very sick person and I cannot help you. You are just like a person who *really believes* that everyone else might be a robot, or an agent of the CIA.

But how would I convince *Al* that stoning adulteresses is wrong? With a lot of rational argument about individual rights, the history of women-as-property that underlies unequal recognition of claims of females, questions about how he might view things if he were a woman, and so forth. And if rational argument fails, we can try stoning him.

People do, after all, change their minds about what they think is right or wrong; they often go against their own culture and upbringing; it happens all the time. In fact to *deny* that people are capable of changing their moral outlook, to claim that they are all “programmed” by their culture (except of course for objective social scientists who can transcend such things by avoiding ethical language altogether) is demeaning and arrogant.

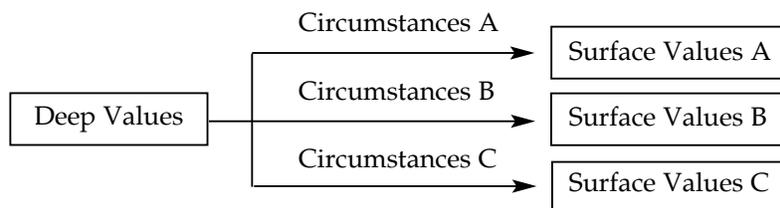
8. PEOPLE HAVE DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF RIGHT AND WRONG

This is a canard. What is the evidence for this claim? That people disagree about various particular cases? But that fact just does not support the claim.

Suppose that two societies exist, which I shall call the Tens and the Ones. In Tenland, the sex ratio in the population is ten females for each male. In Oneland, the ratio is one to one. One of these societies develops polygamy, and the other develops monogamy. (Do I have to tell you which one does which? Why not? How did you guess?) Question: do these two societies have different values?

If we look deeply enough, we see that each is responding to the *same* value: the principle that everyone has a good chance of being able to belong to a family. Because the circumstances were different, this single deep value that *both* societies share gets expressed by different customs.

We need to distinguish *Deep Values* from *Surface Values*.



The terms 'deep value' and 'surface value' are adopted from terminology used in linguistics. Seventy years ago, the music theorist Heinrich Schenker developed an analysis of Western tonal music, in which a piece of music is thought of as being *derived* from a *deep structure* via various *transformations*. Forty years later, linguists began applying similar techniques to the study of natural languages. To a trained musician two pieces of music may be obviously alike—alike in their deep structure. This may be the case even if they "sound" quite different to an untrained ear; even if, that is, they are very different on the surface. (The extreme form of the claim is that all Western tonal music is derivable via various transformations from a deep structure which looks pretty much like 'Three Blind Mice'.)

A professional philosopher likewise is able to see the relations and differences between deep values and surface values in a culture. Deepest are the *real* values; on the surface, are the mere *customs*.

Two cultures may seem to have different values. But this is almost always explainable as a case of having different surface values produced by different circumstances but based on the same deep values. So it is just not obvious that every individual, or even every culture, has different values.

The distinction here is similar to Aristotle's distinction between particular law (that which each community lays down) and universal law. Universal law is the law of natural rights and wrongs, natural justice and injustice, and is binding on all men (*Rhetoric* I 13). I would stress that particular law (surface value) is based on and derived from universal law (deep value).

9. RESPONSIBILITY

People want to avoid making decisions; they want to avoid responsibility. People are afraid of being blamed for a bad decision; they do not expect to be given credit for a good decision. At work, they have a set of rules, and if they follow those rules, they feel that they are safe from being blamed, scolded, demoted, or fired. 'I know it's stupid, but it's the policy' feels safe.

Away from their jobs, people want something similar to the company handbook. They want something they can rely on; something *external*. We all know about the huge numbers of people drawn to religious cults like the Moonies, the Scientologists, and of course the Roman Catholic Church, whose main appeal seems to be that they are authoritarian. I would include all "fundamentalist" religious sects as well—Christian, Jewish, Moslem—they are all the same.

But this just does not work. If you choose to follow a religion that requires you to dye your hair green, then you cannot point to the doctrine of that cult as the explanation why you have dyed your hair green. For *you* decided to accept that cult in the first place.

The only way out is to seriously study the science of ethics yourself. If you do not have the time or inclination for this, your next best strategy is to take your ethical problems to a professional philosopher. This of course is expensive—but so is any professional advice.¹⁷

You will be physically healthier if you learn something about medicine, live in a healthy way according to this knowledge, and consult a physician only when you have a serious problem. Similarly, you should learn as much of the science of ethics as you can, and only consult a professional when you need to.

If you want a house designed, consult a good architect, have plans drawn, and make your own decision. If you don't like the plans, get a second opinion—from another professional architect. If you have a medical problem, see a physician for advice. If you don't like his advice, get a second opinion—from another expert.

Who's to say what's right and wrong about the strengths of bridge supports? A professional engineer. Who's to say what medical treatment is right or wrong? A physician. Who's to say what is morally or ethically right or wrong? A professional philosopher.

If you have a question about what is right or wrong, consult a professional philosopher. In fact this is what legislators do when they are trying to frame legislation on such things as abortion and euthanasia. But you are still responsible for your own final decision. A professional philosopher is not able to relieve you of this responsibility, but that is just because nobody can. If you don't like the advice your philosopher gives you, get a second opinion—from another philosopher. Philosophers, incidentally, will treat you much better than medical "doctors" do. They will not give you "orders"; they will not make recommendations without giving you the reasons; they will assume that you are intelligent enough to understand the reasons.

We thus have a place for philosophers as advisers of individual clients. But I would stress their role as theorists even more, in which they would advise legislators on what the public policy should be on such things as abortion law, the use of extraordinary medical measures to prolong the lives of deformed babies or the terminally ill, etc.

¹⁷At this point version C contains an editor's note, probably by Reed Richter: "Sharvy's own standing rate was \$75/hr."—*Editor*.

It is outrageous that national commissions on “ethics” and “morality” often consist mostly of unqualified laymen: physicians, priests, lawyers, etc., rather than professional philosophers (see Singer 1976).

Professional philosophers are the people who are experts on questions about what is right and wrong.¹⁸

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¹⁸I thank Fred Westphal for his lively comments when I presented this as a public lecture in 1981.—*Author*.