

Phil 161 Topics in the History of Ethics

Professor Don Rutherford

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The aim of this course is to examine the relationship between two influential conceptions of ethics. On the first, ethics is centrally concerned with “living well”—living a *good* life, especially one that an agent can endorse as good. In ancient philosophy, this is described as a “happy” (*eudaimon*) life, but that does not mean simply a life that is subjectively pleasing; most ancient philosophers believe that there are objective factors that make some lives good and others bad, above all, the cultivation of a virtuous character. On the second conception, ethics is primarily concerned with *morally right* action: living as we ought to live, especially in relation to other people. Ethics is concerned with analyzing and justifying what we owe others by way of respect and consideration—what are often described as our “duties” or “obligations” to others.

Many philosophers see these conceptions of ethics as supporting one another: one lives well if and only if one lives rightly. Yet one can imagine cases in which they appear to diverge: one might live well even if one doesn’t live rightly, or one might live rightly and fail to live well. A tyrant with the power to do everything he wants may seem to have the best life, even if it involves harming innocent people. Conversely, the virtuous or moral person may be a paragon of correct conduct, while suffering greatly in her life. Problems of this sort have been a focus of ethics going back to antiquity and they remain relevant to understanding our own lives.

We will explore these topics through several foundational texts from the history of Western philosophy: Plato’s *Gorgias*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas’ *Treatise on Law*, Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and Mill’s *Utilitarianism*. Our five authors disagree with each other on many points, but they share the conviction that philosophy can support us in a deeper understanding of what matters in a human life. It is not necessary to accept this, but it is important to appreciate why such a view might be held and the costs of abandoning it.