

Introducing  
MORAL  
THEOLOGY

True Happiness *and the Virtues*

William C. Mattison III



**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mattison, William C., 1971–

Introducing moral theology : true happiness and the virtues / William C. Mattison III.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-1-58743-223-1 (pbk.)

1. Christian ethics—Catholic authors. I. Title.

BJ1249.M195 2008

241'.042—dc22

2008025502

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## INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book as an exercise in hospitality. With it I invite readers into a conversation on the basic human question, what is a good life? The book strives for an intentionally welcoming tone in two ways. First of all, a good host listens to his or her guests and appreciates wherever they are in their lives. This book grew out of just such listening to over five hundred students in twenty course sections over six years at four American universities (University of Notre Dame, Mount St. Mary's University, Catholic University, and Georgetown University). It has grown and developed dramatically such that the present book, which follows this course's most recent version, is radically different from its first presentation to the students who took it and helped shape it. Its overall structure, the layout of individual chapters, and certain distinct points echo specific contributions of particular students over these past few years. It is born out of a conversation, and so its tone is one of walking with, rather than preaching at.

Second, a welcoming host does not simply listen, but also offers and contributes. By arranging space and furniture in a certain way, offering food and drink, and joining in conversation, a good host nourishes whatever venture he or she shares with the guests, be it the enjoyment of friendship, a better understanding of themselves and the world, support in times of trial, a common cause to make changes in the world, or all of these together. In this book I attempt to make a contribution to that ultimate adventure shared by readers and myself, that of understanding and living a good life. I offer my own experience (as a teacher), but more importantly share—in an accessible and relevant way—the wisdom of smart and holy people who have gone before us on this common quest. The manner this is done in is not a simple presentation of information. It is rather adding voices to our conversation, a conversation that includes renowned thinkers, but as importantly the voices of us today who

enjoy reflecting on and struggling with the question, what is a good life? I hope readers will join with me and past students in building a habit of reflection on this question as one component of the answer to that question.

Speaking of answers, this book is not a manual offering technical procedures and solutions to how to live a good life. This is largely due to that fact that this ultimate question defies technical solutions. It should not be placed in the how-to section of a bookstore next to books on home repair or writing a good resume. That is not to say there are no answers, or that this book makes no contribution to such answers. Given the nature and complexity of the question, no short synopsis is offered here by way of conclusion. Yet before proceeding to describe more specifically the goals and format of this book, allow me to note two foundational ideas of the book's response to this question.

First, simply put, the answer to the question of what constitutes a good life is happiness. A good life is a fulfilling, satisfying, rewarding, flourishing—in short, a happy—life. This may seem so obvious as to be no answer at all. But recall this is a book on moral theology. The word “moral” has not yet appeared in this introduction. Some people may connect morality with living a good life. But morality as being happy? That is exactly the contention of this book. It is by no means an innovative contribution of this particular book. Great thinkers throughout history—Christian and non-Christian alike—have understood the moral life to be one and the same as the happy life, even if this claim does not initially resonate with what many of us today think of when we say morality. We see already the benefit of inviting those historic voices into our conversation. A main claim of this book is that it makes no sense to say, “this will make you truly happy, but the morally right thing to do is something else.” There are plenty of obstacles to happiness in this life, but morality rightly understood is not one of them. This point is not uncontested. As seen in chapter 1, some people today and throughout history have not understood morality as constitutive of living happy lives. Nonetheless, one central idea of this book is that determining how to live morally is a matter of determining how to be genuinely happy.

The second foundational idea of this book is that living happily depends upon a truthful understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and anything beyond this world we live in. This is not to say that people with more schooling or higher SAT scores are therefore happier. Nor is it to say that happiness cannot be experienced in this life until we know everything. It is to say that determining how to live morally, and thus what constitutes genuine happiness, entails determinations of whether or not how we live our lives reflects accurately who we are, what the world around us is like, and what is true beyond the world around us. This claim permeates the entire book, but is addressed most directly in chapters 1, 5, 10, and 11. Having presented two cornerstone ideas of this book, and already begun to mention specific chapters, we turn now to the main goals of the book and its organization into different chapters.

## The Goals and Format of the Book

There are five large goals driving the tone and structure of this book's exploration of the central question, what is a good life? The first echoes what was said above: to present the riches of the Western (particularly Christian) traditions of moral thought in an accessible and hospitable manner. Our answers to everyday contemporary questions about how to live our lives can be nourished by seeking the guidance of the smart and holy people who have gone before us. Thus the starting point for this book is not an assumed knowledge of or even interest in traditional sources such as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, or St. Thomas Aquinas. The starting point here is our own lives and the questions that inevitably arise as we live our lives. Hence, examples are generally taken from everyday experiences. The thought and terminology of those who have gone before us is then only employed to the extent that it helps us better understand and answer the questions we face. As noted above, it is assumed here that everyone—however articulately or even consciously—is seeking how to live a happy, fulfilling life. This provides a common starting point for our reflection and a reason to appeal to classical sources in the tradition in a manner that applies to our experiences. When moral theology is understood in this way it is not only accessible but hospitable.

Second, this book presents moral theology as informing the common everyday questions of our lives primarily through the concept of virtue. The notion of virtue is explained more fully in chapter 3. Virtues (such as the seven that help structure this book: faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) are stable qualities a person has that enable him or her to live a good life. One benefit of approaching moral theology through the virtues is that living virtuously (which is the same as living morally) accounts for the importance of rules without reducing the entire moral life to rules. Furthermore, focusing on virtue enables us to attend to the sorts of persons we become, and not simply the sorts of acts we perform. Finally, describing the good life through the virtues provides both a way to describe the commonalities between people of varying or no religious tradition, and a way to delineate the distinctiveness of the virtuous Christian life. As seen below, the very twofold structure of the book reflects this latter concern.

The third goal for this text is to present a comprehensive account of moral theology. Despite its reliance on a virtue perspective of morality, this text boldly seeks to present all important topics in the field of moral theology. Reminiscent of the first goal, the purpose of this text is not to present an academic field of inquiry called moral theology. Its starting point is the set of questions that our lives pose to us. But that starting point provides the context for exploring all of the main concepts of which any student of the discipline moral theology should grasp.

Fourth, a foundational claim of this book is that living a good life requires a truthful grasp of the way things are in reality. This claim is true not only with regard to the necessity of having an accurate grasp of ourselves and the world around us, but also with regard to the moral importance of our answers to what are called here “big-picture” questions: is there a God and if so what is God like? What is the meaning of human life? What happens after death? Our answers to these ultimate questions have enormous impact on what we think constitutes living a good life. While the first half of the book demonstrates how our understanding of “the way things are” concerning worldly matters is morally important, the second half explains how critical for our lives are our big-picture beliefs about the way things are. Given this claim, a basic account of the Christian story of the way things are is offered here, along with more extensive treatments of key features of the Christian vision of the way things are.

The fifth goal of this book is to examine several particular moral issues. Many texts on moral theology (or Christian ethics) begin with, and perhaps rest exclusively with, particular contested moral issues. This is understandable, since any fruitful discussion of moral theology must eventually engage concrete issues. However, particular cases are purposely not the starting point of this book. They are treated only after extensive discussion of the virtues. The purpose of the four “test case” chapters in this book is not to offer an exhaustive treatment of each of those four issues (drinking alcohol, the use of the atomic bomb in 1945, when to have sex, and euthanasia). The purpose is twofold. First, each test case does indeed aim to offer practical guidance as to each of these actions or decisions. But second, this is done in a manner that attempts to illustrate the important difference it makes to attend to virtue in moral theology. It is hoped the discussion of cases in this book accomplishes that, in addition to (in fact, as a means of) offering persuasive positions on each of the issues.

The structure of the book flows directly from these goals. The book is divided into two halves based upon two types of virtue: cardinal virtues and theological virtues. The first half focuses on cardinal virtues, which are qualities that enable persons to do well those worldly activities that are part of any human life in any time or culture, including eating, drinking, sex, making decisions, relating with others, and facing difficulties. This half of the book describes simply how human persons function regarding such activities, and what qualities enable us to function well. The first three chapters address how human persons think and act in practical matters by addressing the topics: “why be moral?” (chapter 1), intentionality and freedom (chapter 2), and the nature and types of virtue (chapter 3). There is also a chapter on each of the four cardinal virtues: temperance (chapter 4), prudence (chapter 5), justice (chapter 7) and fortitude (chapter 9). Finally, both in order to demonstrate how the claims of these chapters play out and to offer practical guidance on

particular issues, there are chapters on drinking alcohol (chapter 6) and the dropping of the atomic bomb in World War II (chapter 8).

The second half of this book begins with an explanation of how big picture beliefs are important for shaping practical reasoning in worldly matters, and how the Christian story in particular shapes the life of virtue (chapter 10). It then proceeds with chapters on each of the three theological virtues of the Christian life: faith (chapter 11), hope (chapter 13), and love (chapter 15). These are interspersed with chapters on key themes in the Christian story which, if a central claim of this book is true, are enormously important for living a life of Christian virtue: sin (chapter 12), Jesus Christ (chapter 14), and grace (chapter 16). Finally, there are two chapters on specific moral issues, again, both to offer practical guidance and to demonstrate how the claims of the chapters in this part of the book impact the questions of when to have sex (chapter 17) and how to best make end of life decisions, particularly concerning euthanasia (chapter 18).

As should be clear, the second half of the book is far more distinctively Christian than the first half. But for reasons mentioned in the following section and explained more fully in chapter 16, this should by no means be taken to imply that how we live out the cardinal virtues has nothing to do with Christianity and the theological virtues. The twofold division of this book does indeed signify an importance difference between the cardinal and theological virtues. But that difference should not lead one to conclude that the material of the second half has no bearing on the first half of the book. To the contrary, Christianity and the theological virtues transform and perfect how we live the cardinal virtues.

Finally, the epilogue addresses an otherwise neglected topic in this book: the importance of prayer, liturgy, and the sacraments for living the virtuous Christian life. Since this topic is way beyond the scope of a single chapter, the epilogue simply provides an example of the seamless integration of prayer and the virtuous Christian life by demonstrating how words of the Lord's Prayer, or the Our Father, both exemplify and further illuminate the seven virtues that help structure this book.

## Caveats and Suggestions for Using the Book

### *(Especially for Moral Theologians)*

The primary audience for this book is people who are not trained in the academic discipline of moral theology. Though the fruits of that discipline make up the content of the book, every attempt is made to start not from the methods and debates of the academic discipline, but rather from the more common everyday questions and experience that engender those academic debates. In sum, though this is a book of moral theology, its primary goal is



not to help train people in the discipline of moral theology, but rather to enable people to understand and utilize their practical reasoning better so as to live more virtuous lives. That said, this present section is the only one in the entire book addressed primarily to teachers and practitioners of the field of moral theology. Its goal is to explain why the book has been written as it has, to enable this particular audience to better understand why (and possibly to critique so as to improve how) it appears in the form it does. Though all are of course welcome to read on within this section, be aware that the tone and content of the remainder of this introduction is not replicated in this book. The disparate topics addressed warrant a list.

1. As mentioned above, the book proceeds in two parts. What this distinction reflects is the relationship between nature and grace. This topic is treated directly in this book, but climactically in chapter 16. This could leave the reader to think for fifteen chapters that the importance of the topic is unrecognized or, even worse, that grace floats above, without transforming and perfecting nature. This would be a mistaken impression. In fact, each chapter on a theological virtue attempts to show how the natural capacities and longings of human persons are fulfilled and even elevated by grace. Furthermore, chapter 16 explains in detail how grace transforms human nature and the worldly activities of the cardinal virtues. The structure of this book as a whole actually makes an argument on how this question can be fruitfully addressed with the target audience of this book. In a manner reflective of chapter 11's read of John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*, it starts from common human experiences to show how grace perfects nature. Another approach would be to start with the theological virtues and grace. The reasons for the approach adopted here are primarily strategic, given the target audience of the book. For a large majority of American university students today the claims of Christianity are at least somewhat alien. Christianity is thus most intelligible and compelling when presented as the completion and perfection of common human experiences, even though the person of Christian faith affirms that human nature originates in, and is only fully understood in the context of, grace.

2. Those familiar with traditional thought on virtues, and especially that of St. Thomas Aquinas, know that there is a particular order of the virtues. That order is respected in the second half of the book on theological virtue: faith, then hope, then love. It is not respected concerning the cardinal virtues, which in the Thomistic tradition are ordered: prudence, justice, fortitude, then temperance. Temperance is treated first among cardinal virtues for two reasons. First, its object of sensual pleasure is a particularly accessible one for contemporary readers and so it is a helpful way to start analysis of particular virtues. Second, temperance provides a perfect occasion to examine the moral importance of emotions, which continues the theme of the previous two chapters on the importance of interiority for the moral life. This chapter on temperance thus serves as the perfect transition from action theory to particular virtues.

3. Speaking of action theory, the primary task of this book is not to inaugurate its readers into technical debates among practitioners of the discipline of moral theology. Thus there is no adjudication of important debates between virtue ethicists and either consequentialists or deontologists, or on the existence of intrinsic evils, or on the distinctiveness of Christian ethics. One's positions on these debates obviously shape how one presents an accessible vision of moral theology. In fact, though the guiding task of this text is not to address these more technical debates, the vision presented in this book clearly takes positions on each of these, and other, debates. In other words, there is indeed an underlying argument in this book concerning the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, the existence of intrinsic evils, and other such questions. Nonetheless, the task of this book is not to explain the different sides of those debates or substantiate this book's stance on them.

4. Related to these debates, trained moral theologians will immediately note that three of the four test case chapters (8, 17, and 18) address absolute norms on different issues. People who deny the existence of absolute norms could reject this approach out of hand, or more subtly argue that the approach presented here is not truly a virtue ethic, but an old-fashioned (perhaps natural law) approach to moral theology that is simply dressed up with chapters on different virtues while actually being driven by the norms themselves. This particular criticism reflects a poor understanding of virtue ethics as unable to account for absolute norms. Each of these three chapters attempts to demonstrate that an absolute norm (such as no intentional killing of the innocent) is justified by the incompatibility of the action prohibited with the good goals of the activity at hand, be it waging war, having sex, or caring for the dying. Obviously these are hard cases (and chosen for that reason), so many will disagree with the conclusions drawn, and perhaps the approach employed here. But it is not an accurate critique to claim the positions herein are only extrinsically related to the methodology espoused in other chapters.

5. As for the test case chapters, the order they appear in the book basically reflects the order they are taught in the class. It would be ideal to have all the material in the other chapters assimilated before treating any one case, but this seems to lose students and readers, so the test cases are interspersed throughout the book. The chapter on drinking alcohol has limited treatment of justice and fortitude since it precedes chapters on those two virtues for precisely this reason. But students and readers benefit from examining an issue earlier on in the class. The chapter on the atomic bomb fits logically after that on justice, and thus precedes the discussion of fortitude in the following chapter. The two test case chapters in the second half of the book are placed after chapter 16 so readers can benefit from that chapter's material on grace and infused cardinal virtues while engaging questions of sex and end-of-life decision-making. In sum, while the order or presentation of the non-test case

chapters is part of the underlying argument of this book, the order of the test cases is intentional but not part of that underlying argument.

6. Finally, the tone of this book is purposely casual to make it accessible and inviting. This is a danger with regard to the precision of terminology. Some crucial terms in this book have common usages that are close in meaning to, but not exactly the same as, their meaning in this book. Examples include morality, intention, habit, passion, prudence, temperance, and so on. The confusion which may result from this reveals why some academics are drawn to devising technical terms which purposely do not relate to common usage. For both readability and methodological reasons, that step is not taken here and commonly used terms are employed technically, with every attempt made to be precise about their meaning in this context, often with attention to how that is similar to, yet different from, the meanings of more common usage.

Furthermore, sometimes in this book more casual terms are used as technical terms. The best examples are “big picture beliefs” and “innerworldly” activities. The former term refers to beliefs concerning what *Fides et Ratio* has called “ultimate” (or “big picture”) questions. The latter term comes from *Veritatis splendor* and designates activities that people of any time and culture engage in since they are accessible to unaided human reason. This topic is taken up in chapter 3.

# 1

## MORALITY, HAPPINESS, AND THE “GOOD LIFE”

*How Do I Live My Life,  
and Why Do I Live That Way?*

In the opening lines of his autobiographical book *Confessions*, African bishop and theologian St. Augustine of Hippo describes the human heart as restless. We are restless, longing to be satisfied, to have our desires fulfilled and to be content in perfect happiness.<sup>1</sup> Italian friar and theologian St. Thomas Aquinas similarly begins his examination of morality with the observation that people long to be happy.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary priest and spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser picks up this consistent theme and describes the longing that all people have. He claims that spirituality, far from some esoteric interest for New Age folks who burn incense in their rooms, is simply how we live out that restlessness, or longing, in our actions. It is what we do with our desires. Put

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, OSB (New York: Random House, 1997), I.1.

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, English Dominican trans. (New York: Benziger, 1948), I-II 1.

in this way, Rolheiser makes it clear that everyone has a spirituality. Everyone has some set of desires and some way of living out those desires.<sup>3</sup>

In one sense of the term, morality is simply spirituality, the having and living out of desires in life. In this general (descriptive) sense of the term, everyone has some sort of morality. Rolheiser makes this point by looking at the lives of Mother Theresa, Princess Diana, and 1970s rock 'n roll rebel Janis Joplin. He shows how each of these women had identifiable sets of desires in life, and distinct ways of living out those desires. Thus they each had a distinct spirituality, or what is called here morality.

Of course, this use of the term “morality” is more descriptive than normative. In other words, saying that all people have some identifiable ways of living their lives (the descriptive sense) is not the same as saying all people live the way they should live their lives (the normative sense). Consider any organized crime movie or television program (*The Godfather*, *The Sopranos*, or *Goodfellas*). There are usually very clear and defined ways to live, or rules, that dictate what one who lives the life of organized crime should and should not do. One of the oddly appealing things about such stories is the way the individuals' lives are so thoroughly integrated or ordered by their involvement in the mob. There is a clear mob morality, or set of rules, that dictates what should and should not be done, and it completely governs the lives of those involved. But with a moment's reflection we see how warped these lives are. The goals they are oriented toward include violence, exploitation, theft, and corruption. Though there is a clear morality here in the descriptive sense of the term, normatively speaking we may say things like, “These people have no morals!”

The fact that everyone has some morality, in the descriptive sense of the term, is an important point that will be revisited again later in this chapter. It also leads us immediately to ask normative questions: which ways of living are better than others? Are there some ways of living that should always be avoided? Awareness that there are different moralities in the descriptive sense invites analysis as to how to adjudicate them, to figure out which ones (surely there are many) are good ways to live, and which are not. This is what we normally think of when we think of morality—determining which ways to live are good. This book obviously engages in such analysis. But in order to be able to do so, some reflection is first necessary on a more basic question: why be moral? in the normative sense of the term. Why be morally good? We all know certain basic rules in life that we should follow: do not kill, do not betray your friends, do not lie, do not use others for your own purposes, and so on. Where does the “should” come from? Many of these are codified into civil law, and the reasons for obeying such rules may seem more obvious. But even beyond civil statutes, what is the origin or source of the moral rules, or

3. Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 3–19.

norms, to which we so frequently conform our lives? Identifying where these rules come from will help us to realize why we do (or do not) follow them, and help us to better adjudicate which ones are best to follow.

Much of moral theology is concerned with specifying exactly what the rules are. Is drinking alcohol OK, and if so under what conditions? Is killing by the state ever justified, as in warfare? When should one become sexually active with another person? Is it ever OK to purposely end a dying person’s life at their request to put them out of tremendous suffering? The rules concerning these specific questions will all be discussed later in this book. But in this first chapter it behooves us to explore why we have any such rules at all. Why “should” we do anything? Where do these rules come from, and why follow them?

The first part of this chapter considers two answers to the question, why be morally good? and the resulting two approaches to morality. It begins with a famous text from Plato as an entry point to this question. The second section of this chapter relies on the lessons from the first half and attempts to more precisely define terms such as “morality” and “rules” in order to prepare the reader for how these topics are approached in the rest of this book.

## Why Be Morally Good?

This may be one of those questions that is so basic you have never thought about it. “Why be morally good? Because that’s what you do! Because you have to!” OK, but *why*? In the Western tradition of moral philosophy and theology there are two basic answers to the question of why be moral. Though there are important differences among the thinkers who represent each of the two answers, all representatives of each answer agree in their basic approach to this question. The two basic answers to this question then engender two basic approaches to morality. The famous *Ring of Gyges* story discussed below helpfully exemplifies these two basic approaches. After examining this story (which it would be helpful to read on your own), this section goes on to delineate what are called here a “morality of obligation” vs. a “morality of happiness.” It then briefly explores the relationship of each to religion before asking you to reflect on which approach you espouse in your own life.

### *Glaucon vs. Socrates and the Ring of Gyges Story*

Though a wide variety of answers to this question have been offered throughout history, Greek philosopher Plato’s classic dialogue *Republic* features a debate between the characters Socrates and Glaucon that helpfully illustrates

two basic answers to the question of why be morally good.<sup>4</sup> These two answers are still evident in how we think of morality today. In articulating his position, Glaucon first argues why he thinks people are morally good, or just (as in justice), and then tells the famous *Ring of Gyges* story to support his claim.

Glaucon claims that an ideally good life is getting whatever you want. Someone who had the power to get whatever he or she wanted would not worry about what is just, or what one should do. Why, then, do people worry about being moral, in the normative sense of the term (i.e., morally good)? Glaucon claims that though the best thing in life would be to do and get whatever you want even at the expense of others, the worst thing would be to have others who are stronger than you do and get whatever they want at your expense. He claims that the suffering involved in the latter far exceeds the good gained by the former. Therefore, people enter into agreements to neither do nor suffer injustice. These rules are enforced not only by laws but also by societal expectations and pressures, upbringing, and the like. This is the origin of laws and moral norms, and the reason why people generally obey them.

Therefore, being morally good is not what everyone wants, according to Glaucon. Morality is a second-best compromise. It is a sort of compromise between the best and worst extremes; it does protect us from suffering injustice at the hands of others (which would be the worst), but the cost is sacrificing the fully good life that we all *really* desire (which would be the best). As evidence of this claim, Glaucon cites the legendary *Ring of Gyges* story. The story serves as a sort of thought exercise to prove his point. In this tale, a shepherd finds a magical ring that gives him the power to become invisible. He can therefore do whatever he wants without suffering the consequences. Sure enough, Glaucon claims, the shepherd kills the king, seduces the queen, and takes over the kingdom. In short, he does whatever he wants because now he can.

Glaucon argues that if there were two such rings, one found by a just person and another by an unjust person, the two people would not act any differently once they had the ring. No one, he claims, is so incorruptible that she would continue to live in a morally good manner when she could take whatever she wanted, have sex with whomever she wished, harm whomever she wished, or “do all the other things that would make her like a god among humans.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if a person with such power did not exercise it to her benefit, Glaucon claims, people would secretly think her stupid, even though they would publicly praise her in order to maintain the facade of their belief in morality to hopefully avoid suffering future injustices.

4. Plato, *The Republic* II.359–60, in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Eric Warmington and Philip Rouse (New York: Signet, 1984). Note that the book is by Plato, but it is the protagonist Socrates whose view is presented as opposed to Glaucon (though scholars claim Plato would agree with Socrates here).

5. Plato, *The Republic* II.359–60. The gender of the pronouns in this passage has been changed to fit with the rest of the paragraph.

This may seem shocking to us. We may say to ourselves, “I would never kill, rape, and steal even if I could do so without suffering consequences.” Perhaps, but maybe this is because the very societal conditioning of which Glaucon speaks works so well. It does seem that at times we knowingly break the rules if we know we can get away with it. This may happen on small everyday matters, or on an even larger scale with drastic consequences. If you have ever asked a friend, “If you knew no one could find out and you could get away with it, would you . . .” then you have basically asked them whether or not they would behave as Glaucon suggests people would. Could it be that Glaucon is right, that we all really desire a good life constituted by getting whatever we want, and acting morally good is something we all do simply as a compromise, or because we fear suffering the legal or societal consequences of acting immorally?

In response to Glaucon, the character Socrates offers another view on the question, why be morally good? Socrates argues that the just, or moral life, *is* the good life. The most fulfilling and happy life is the virtuous life. In fact, our word “virtue” comes from the Latin (and ultimately Greek) word for excellence. As Socrates famously says in the *Crito*, the most important question is not simply how to live, but how to live well.<sup>6</sup> How can we have excellent, happy lives? For Plato, his student Aristotle, and later, Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, the answer to this question is by living virtuously, or in a morally good manner. From this perspective, contrary to Glaucon, it simply makes no sense to speak of the good life as impeded by or distinct from the morally good life. The two are one and the same.

How would Socrates respond to Glaucon’s *Ring of Gyges* story? We can imagine that he would say one of two things. First of all, if a just person did indeed turn to injustice once there was no threat of suffering consequences for such injustice, then he was not truly just in the first place. He was simply performing just acts so as not to get caught doing otherwise. Second, a truly just person would continue to act justly, even with the newfound power. A good example of this would be the movie *Superman 2*. Superman has powers akin to the ring bearer in that he can do practically whatever he wants and suffer no consequence for it. And yet he still protects justice. The three other people who arrive from Krypton dressed in black, however, would be more akin to Glaucon’s ring bearer. Once they realize their powers on earth, they set out doing whatever they want. Socrates would not deny this possibility, of course, but would say both that these three characters were not just and that therefore they were not actually living fulfilling, satisfying lives.

6. Plato, *Crito* 48–49.



### *Two Different Visions of Morality*

Socrates and Glaucon offer two strikingly different responses to the question, why be morally good? They offer radically different visions of the origin and purpose, if you will, of morality (in the normative sense) and moral rules. According to Glaucon, morality is a set of externally imposed obligations that we may agree to, but ultimately is not what we truly want. According to Socrates, living a moral life is actually what we all want (or should want), since it is the way to live the most satisfying, fulfilling, good life.

The approach to morality envisaged by Glaucon is called by one contemporary thinker a *morality of obligation*.<sup>7</sup> This is not simply a claim that being morally good at times feels like a burden, or an obligation. No one would contest that. Rather, the claim is that following moral rules is experienced as an obligation because following the rules is not what we really want to do since it is not the path to true happiness. We may obey willingly, to get a future reward or avoid punishment. But even in these cases it is not living morally that we want, but what living morally gets us, which is good enough to prompt us to endure following the rules in the meantime.

Socrates' view of morality is called here a *morality-of-happiness* approach. The main claim here is not necessarily that we feel happy whenever we act morally. Rather, the claim is that following genuine moral rules is what we all truly want since it itself constitutes living a good, truly satisfying life. From this perspective, it would make no sense to say, "Yes, that will make you happy, but you are not allowed to do that." The rules given by God—and by just governments, families, institutions, and the like—are themselves guides to living a good and happy life.

Consider an example to see how these two different visions play out in real life. Any college student knows that you should not cheat on your boyfriend or girlfriend if you are in a committed relationship. But why not? According to Glaucon, you may very well want to cheat on him or her, and there is nothing inherently "wrong" with that. The problem is, you may also be the one who gets cheated on. And you really do not want that. In order to protect ourselves from such suffering, there are societal expectations about being a faithful boyfriend or girlfriend. You can defy them, but you will suffer consequences. In this case, perhaps people will look down on you. Or it may be tough to get a future date. Of course, if you are sure you can get away with it, with no one finding out, all those reasons to restrain yourself disappear. You would be like the wearer of the invisible ring in Glaucon's *Ring of Gyges* story. In that case, you would be foolish not to do whatever you want, though publicly we would all praise you for doing the moral thing.

7. Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 14–22.

Socrates would approach this quite differently. He would say that there is a better reason for the rule not to cheat on your boyfriend or girlfriend. Living in right relationship with others is not some externally imposed obligation that impedes the good life. It *is* the good life. Being unfaithful may be alluring at times, but it is not the way to live a satisfying good life. It is not what you really want, because it is ultimately not the path to a good life. Of course, there are times when what we do want is not ultimately most fulfilling for us, like when we are tempted to cheat in a relationship. That is why good moral rules are there, to guide us when our own desires would lead us astray. Such rules are not impediments to, but aids toward, the happy life.

### *Religion and the Two Approaches to Morality*

It may be tempting to think that one of these two perspectives is religious and one is not. But that is not true. For instance, the debate outlined above happens within pagan Greek culture. On which side does Christian morality fall concerning this question? Historically, and even today, Christians can be found on both sides of the question, why be morally good? For instance, believers who think that they should follow moral rules solely because God tells them to do so are reminiscent of Glaucon. In their case, the rules come from God and not simply from people’s attempts to protect themselves from others. This is an important difference from Glaucon. But the similarity is that moral rules are externally imposed obligations that exist in tension with our wills, which are actually fulfilled when doing whatever we want. Perhaps there is some reward for following the rules, like going to heaven. But this reward is not intrinsically related to following the rules. Following the rules is not the good life. At best it is something we do to get rewarded. Whether it is held by religious or non-religious people, this approach to morality is rightly labeled a morality of obligation.

Similarly, both pagan and Christian thinkers alike have—and do—adopt a morality-of-happiness approach. It is Socrates’ view of morality. Aristotle began his most famous book on ethics with a reflection on happiness.<sup>8</sup> It is also how most Christian thinkers through history have understood the Christian moral life. St. Augustine assumes in his main discussions of morality that the starting point for such reflection is how to live a happy life, and explains why the love of God and neighbor that Christ commands in all four gospels is the true path to happiness.<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle in be-

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. ed. Richard McKeon, 935–1112 (New York: Random House, 1941), I.

9. Augustine’s *On the Way of Life of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1966). There Augustine arrives at the great commandment to love God and neighbor as the summation of the happy life. Recall Augustine’s opening lines of the *Confessions*, that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Finally, for a more complicated

gining his most famous discussion of morality with a treatise on happiness, and concludes with Augustine that God alone can fulfill the restlessness and longing that marks all human persons.<sup>10</sup>

What unites these thinkers who hold a morality-of-happiness approach is the assumption that reflection on human happiness leads naturally to morality and ethics as a path to that good life, rather than some impediment to it. Living morally (in the normative sense) is not an instrumental path to something else. Living morally is itself a response to the natural human longing for happiness and fulfillment. Of course, there is great diversity among these and other morality-of-happiness thinkers as to what exactly constitutes living a good life, and therefore what moral rules serve as the path to that happiness. Those differences are not dismissed here. Indeed they will be a major focus of the second half of this book.

But the twofold division between morality of happiness and morality of obligation is emphasized at the start of this book because people are sometimes surprised to hear that the dominant strain of the Christian moral tradition essentially addresses the question, how can we be happy? Or, as phrased in the Christian scriptures, how can we “live abundantly” (John 10:10) or gain “eternal life” (Mark 10:17; Matt. 19:16; Luke 18:18)?<sup>11</sup> To many people discussions of morality, and especially religious discussions of morality, tend to sound onerous and focus on obligation rather than happiness. We often simply assume that acting in a morally good manner is not what we really want to do! There are historical and theological reasons for the rise of a morality of obligation approach, reasons which we need not engage here. Much recent scholarship on both non-Christian and Christian morality laments this turn and suggests that a morality of happiness approach is more fruitful.<sup>12</sup> The main point here is that although discussions of morality can indeed take on a tenor of obligation, they need not.

Some people also wonder if and where the Bible speaks of living a happy life. Passages are actually not difficult to find, as indicated by the scriptural references in the last paragraph. Consider first the New Testament. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus tells his disciples he has come “that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Any rules Jesus offers are given so that people may live more fully. In fact, he enjoins his disciples the

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examination of how different schools of thought seek happiness, see *The City of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), xix.

10. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II 1-5.

11. The latter quotation comes from the story of the rich young man in the synoptic Gospels. Pope John Paul II began the major moral theology encyclical of his pontificate, *Veritatis Splendor* (Encyclical Letter, 1993. Available online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)), with a reflection on this very passage.

12. From a Christian perspective see Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*. For related themes concerning Greek ethics, see Julia Annas’s *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

night before his death to follow his commandments “so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete” (John 15:11, cf. 1 John 1:4). In Matthew, Jesus begins the famous Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, each of which begins, “happy are those who . . .” (Matt. 5:3–10; cf. Luke 6:20–22). In Mark, Jesus responds to the rich young man’s question about how to live a good life by offering him the commandments (Mark 10:17–19). In sum, the life of discipleship to which Jesus invites his followers in the gospels entails rules and commandments, but all in the service of living more abundantly, more joyfully.

As for the Old Testament, it is the book of Deuteronomy where God’s commandments are most extensively presented. There we find several reasons why the Lord has given the Israelites the law, and why the Israelites should follow it (see Deut. 5–6). We do find injunctions to avoid the wrath of God (5:9; 6:2; 6:15) and obtain his mercy (5:10; 6:3). The Lord also contextualizes the commandments there as part of an ongoing relationship between the Israelites and their God who took them out of slavery (5:6; 5:15; 6:21–23). But the most common reason given here for why the Israelites should obey the commandments is to live a long life and prosper (5:16; 5:29; 5:33; 6:3; 6:18), and even to have a happy life (6:24).

### *Why Am I Morally Good?*

Before proceeding in this book, it would be helpful to pause here and reflect on whether you hold a morality of obligation or morality of happiness perspective. Recall that those who take a morality of happiness perspective follow the rules they do because they think that doing so will lead to a most fulfilling, satisfying life. They know, of course, that living morally may often be experienced as an obligation: they may not feel like working out at times, or visiting a sick family member, or doing some service work, or holding their tongues while in an argument. But they know that they follow these rules, which can at times feel obligatory, ultimately because living according to such rules is the most fulfilling, happy life. In my own life, I know at times I do not feel like praying, but am always more fulfilled when I do. I know at times I do not feel like patiently listening when my wife is distressed, but know that when I do our relationship, and therefore my own life, is more genuinely happy.

Those who live out a morality of obligation are also trying to live a good life that is most satisfying and fulfilling. They, too, are willing at times to follow rules that they do not feel like following. So they do not cheat on exams (even though it would be nice to get better grades) because they might get caught or, worse yet, because if everyone could cheat maybe they’d be even lower on the curve! They follow laws not because living justly is actually good for them, but because as part of society they will play by the rules everyone does so as not to be punished, or so as not to suffer injustice at the hands of

others. They listen to parents or respected people in life not because it is a better way to live, but for some other purpose (free college tuition? to look like a good son or daughter? simply because it is the right thing to do?). They go to church not because nourishing one's relationship with God within a community is inherently part of a fulfilling life, but rather because it is respectable, or what their parents or grandparents would want. Note that in all of these cases one may follow the rules willingly. But doing so is still living a morality of obligation (rather than a morality of happiness) because there is no inherent connection between the rules and the happiness one seeks. Rather, one follows rules because it is what one ought to do, or because it will get one something that one really seeks, reasons unrelated to living according to the rules themselves.

### Why Everyone Lives Some Sort of Morality, and Why That Matters

This reflection from Plato's *Republic* on "why be moral?" perfectly sets the stage for the way morality is approached in this book. The *Ring of Gyges* story makes it clear that everyone—even the shepherd with the power of the ring—has some vision of what it means to live a good life that results in some way of living to best achieve that good life. The diversity of visions of the good life leads to basically two types of reasons why people are moral. The story prompts us to reflect on where we have derived the moralities we live by and, relatedly, why we follow the rules we do. In particular, it prompts us to reflect on whether we live by a morality of happiness or a morality of obligation. The second half of this chapter frames these questions a bit more precisely in preparation for the rest of the book's discussion of morality and theology.

#### *Everybody Has a Morality—Yes, Even That Guy*

Why bother asking the basic questions "what is morality?" and "why be morally good?" to start this book? One of the main goals of this chapter is to expand the sense of terms such as "morality" and "rules" beyond the narrower, and in many ways limited, ways we may now understand them. By doing so, it becomes clear that everyone has a stake in discussing morality, whether they know it—or like it—or not. In the broad descriptive sense of the term, *morality* just means some identifiable way to live one's life, evident through the myriad of choices one makes. We decide to act or not to act. We decide when and how to act. We have to decide how to treat our friends or parents, whether or not to be loyal to a significant other, if and how to use alcohol, and if and how to become sexually active. Since everybody in life makes such decisions in one way or another, everyone has some morality in this descriptive sense of the term. Note this is as true of the shepherd in Glaucon's story as it is the people who obey the rules out of fear of the

consequences of breaking them. Though only the latter are moral in the normative sense of the term we are accustomed to (i.e., morally good), all in the story have some sort of morality in the descriptive sense (and some form of morality of obligation at that!).

If we take a moment to examine the way we normally do things in different areas of our lives, we will be able to identify basic rules or guidelines we follow, even if these rules are not explicitly articulated, and/or we generally follow them unconsciously. Whatever guides our decision-making in those moments are the rules we live by. Much as we often think of morality in the too narrow sense of a set of obligations that limits us from doing what we really want (i.e., Glaucon’s view), we too often understand rules simply as constraints that cramp our style and limit our fun. Though this can be the case, it is not necessarily so. When you want to be healthy, and thus decide to work out a few times a week, you are following a rule: work out in order to be healthy. If you want to be a loyal friend, you decide not to talk behind a friend’s back. You are following a rule here. A *rule* is simply some sort of principle that guides our action. Note that in this broader (descriptive) sense, rules can be (normatively) good or bad. Even people whose rules we may disdain as deplorable nonetheless follow them. Hitler guided an entire society according to rules we now see as wretchedly wicked. On a less drastic and more everyday level, if you want to be healthy but also do not want to work out when you do not feel like it, your rule is do what you feel like doing at the moment. It may be a bad rule, but it is a rule. You may be willing to take something that is not yours if you really want it and deem it would not be missed by its owner. You are following a rule here: take what I want. Of course, people may look down on you, and depending on the situation you may be prosecuted for breaking the law. But in any case you are following some sort of rule; it simply may be a bad rule.

In these senses of the terms “morality” and “rules,” everyone lives by rules and everyone has some sort of morality that describes their set of rules. Some claim that they would prefer to opt out of the whole morality conversation altogether. “Why can’t we just eat, drink, and be merry?! What if I do not want to live by any rules? *Carpe diem*—seize the day! Live and let live! Of course you can approach life in this way. Many people do. But do not delude yourself that you are not living by rules. They are just different rules. For instance, the carefree perspective just described means that you should do what you feel like doing at any moment. (That’s a rule.) It means you should not subject other people’s acts and decisions to scrutiny. (That’s a rule too.) It probably means you should not listen to any authority (parents, school administrators, law enforcement officers, church officials, etc.) that you do not want to heed (another rule). The point here is, there is simply no opting out of morality and rules in life, in the descriptive senses of those terms. There is plenty of variation as to what type of moralities we espouse, and what rules we follow.

But that's simply a different way of living out a morality, and not an opting out of morality.

Understanding morality and rules in these broader senses has the effect of getting everyone into the conversation about morality. This is an essential point for this book. For instance, when we debate the use of military force in a later chapter, we will see that the debate is not between people who attend to morality in warfare, and those who do not. The debate is between rival sets of rules, or moralities, in warfare. Some may say, "do not intentionally kill innocent people." Others may say, "win at all costs." But in the descriptive senses of the terms, both these sides have rules and moralities. Debate between them is not whether there should be morality in warfare or not; it is between what morality a person or society follows. The same could be said of those who support euthanasia (note it is always under very specific conditions, or rules) vs. those who do not, or those who think sexual activity belongs solely in marriage vs. those who think it can be done well outside marriage (but only under such conditions as consent, some sort of commitment or exclusivity—more rules!). For reasons discussed in the next chapter on intentionality and freedom, human persons are the sorts of creatures who operate according to rules of one sort or another.

Another effect of such a broad understanding of morality and rules is that it expands the conversation to include not only those who may be decried as immoral or amoral (in the normative sense), but also those activities in our lives that many do not see as in the realm of morality. One of the most important teachers in my life, Fr. James Keenan, SJ, taught me that morality is not simply about when you have sex, if you do drugs, whether you'd have or support an abortion, or whether or not you support the death penalty. These typical moral issues are indeed important, and are helpful to examine, as this book will, because as debated issues they illuminate the important points of difference between people whose rules differ from one another.

But if this is what morality were all about, over 90 percent of our lives would be morally irrelevant! What about the ways we treat our immediate friends and families? What about the ways we use and pursue financial resources? What about the host of daily practices and habits that we engage in? It is the claim of this book that these are morally important. Notice some of the examples above regarding the broader sense of morality and rules: how we pursue our health, how we talk to others about our friends, and how we use alcohol. These are very ordinary, everyday activities. But for reasons and in ways described more extensively in the following two chapters, how we conduct ourselves in these matters—in other words, the rules we live by in such matters—is crucial to shaping the types of persons we become and the types of moralities we live by. So this section concludes by noting not only that everyone has some sort of morality and rules they live by, but also that the scope of actions considered moral is far more broad than many of us imagine.



### *Who’s Your Daddy? Or Where Does Your Morality Come from?*

Having established that everyone has a morality, or ways of living out their lives that entail rules to guide their behavior, it is worth pausing a moment to ask where we get our moralities. Again, this will ultimately facilitate the task of adjudicating which moralities and rules are best. The rules we live by may be provided by parents, a religious community, a nation, a peer group, and/or other significant influences in our lives. College students are generally very attentive to the fact that the way they live their lives is greatly influenced by particular, contingent influences such as the parents they have, the religion they were brought up in, and the broader American culture in which they have been raised. (Interestingly, they are often all too oblivious of the at least as strict ways that their peers’ expectations structure their lives!) All of these influences may be called *authorities* in that they shape how we live our lives, either formally or informally. Especially when we are growing into adulthood, but really at any point in our lives, we simply do not have all the answers we seek as to how to best live our lives. Thus we consciously or unconsciously (usually the latter) invest certain persons and institutions in our lives with authority, allowing them to shape how we live our lives under the assumption, even trust, that they present good ways to live.

Of course, we know that oftentimes authoritative influences like those mentioned above shape us in ways that are not good. They can corrupt us with their influence. Parents can be abusive rather than nurturing. Religious communities can foster bias or arrogance rather than virtue. Nations can lead their citizens to atrocities and injustice rather than justice. Historical and contemporary examples of all of these are easy to find. In reaction against both the at times corruptive nature of authorities, and even the fact that our lives are so powerfully influenced by such historically contingent forces as being born to particular parents with a particular religious tradition in a particular nation, young adults commonly respond in better or worse ways.

What sort of reaction is described here as “worse?” Sometimes people resist the very fact *that* their lives are so powerfully shaped by authoritative influences. Such people point to the very existence of authority itself as evidence that anyone who is so influenced is brainwashed, or simply conforming to societal (or religious, or family) expectations. There is at least an implicit suggestion here that if you do not strike out on your own and do things the way you want to, without the guidance of any authorities, you are not truly free. In fact, it almost seems that unless you end up opposed to influences commonly regarded as authoritative, you are simply a conformist.

But this is wrong on a couple of different counts. First, it seems to assume the problem is not how one is influenced by an authority, but that one is so influenced. There is, ironically, a very particular vision of morality latent here. It assumes that people are all first and foremost individuals who autonomously generate their rules, and only then possibly share their lives with others who



have similar rules. But this is not right. People who hold such a view only do so because they themselves were influenced by different authorities who led them to see the attractiveness of this view, be it a particular set of parents, college professor, and/or peer group that revels in being countercultural. Note that the point here is not proving that these people are wrong in how they live. It merely demonstrates that what they should be reacting against are the specific rules and moralities their former authorities presented them with, rather than the fact that as social creatures we derive and sustain our moralities from some sort of social framework.

Second, this approach fails to consider that what an authority presents as a good way to live may actually be a good way to live! It may not be of course, but it also may be. Therefore, the better response to the fact that we are powerfully influenced by authorities is not to reject their influence completely, but rather to scrutinize the ways they influence us to ensure to the best we can that they are indeed offering good ways to live rather than destructive ones. This is a difficult task precisely because we are so influenced by our particular communities. But for that reason it is all the more important we do so. This leads us to the next claim about the purpose of this book on morality.

### *Why Bother with All This Reflection?*

Perhaps by now your head is spinning and you are wondering, “why bother with all this?” Don’t most people in our time and in past ages simply go through life without worrying about moral theology and all this reflection on morality and rules? Enough!

It is certainly the case that many do go through life unreflectively. It is even true that granting some very fortunate influences in your life, this may work out OK and lead you to a good life. But it is more likely that Socrates was right in his famous dictum that the “unexamined life is a life not worth living.”<sup>13</sup> It may be a bit drastic to say that such a life is not worth living. But the basic claim that it is better to live a reflective life—that it is better to think about the ways we act and why we act that way—is wholeheartedly affirmed here. Why?

First of all, sometimes we have indeed been formed in corrupt ways, and without being challenged to reflect on our lives we will remain in the dark. Education serves this function superbly, illuminating unquestioned assumptions we hold as members of particular families, communities, and nations that may indeed need to be questioned because they are actually distorted ways of seeing things, resulting in distorted ways of acting. The growing realization over the past few decades of the ways racial biases distort our thinking and behavior is a perfect example of this.

13. Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

Second, there are many moments in one’s life where big decisions have to be made that have everything to do with the sorts of moralities we espouse, the rules we want to follow, and the sorts of persons we want to be. What sort of career should I pursue, or is it time to switch to another? Do I want to be married, and if so is this the right person? What are my religious and spiritual convictions, and how is it best for me to live them out? These are important questions in our lives that are tough to answer. One of the reasons for that difficulty is that our answers to these questions will engender or reaffirm all sorts of specific rules about how we live our lives. Often the best data for discerning the answers to these questions is reflecting on ways we are already living, and asking which option to a question at hand enables us to continue those ways of living that we find life-giving, or truly happy, and to embark on new ones that we are attracted to as life-giving. But you have to have some sense of why you do what you do in order to make decisions well.

In fact, these comments on making important decisions accurately describe the methodology, or approach, of this entire book on morality. The basic goal of this book is to equip you to better understand the ways you act (your rules) and why you act that way, whether it be in everyday matters or in more drastic or dramatic situations. This will enable you to decide whether that is the way you *want* to live your life or not. God willing, in many areas of your life you will find your reflection consoling, affirming that you have indeed been living the way you would hope. In others arenas, you will likely become aware of ways you are unable to live up to the good rules you hold yourself to, and ways that the rules you have been living by are not most life-giving.

### *How the Rules We Live by Reflect How We “See” Things*

As may already be clear from Glaucon’s *Ring of Gyges* story, determining the best rules for living our lives is usually not simply a choice among options with no basis for choosing. The rules we live by generally point to certain things we think are true about the world we live in. This is why thinkers from the Greeks through Aquinas and beyond have consistently claimed that the good life is a life lived in accordance with reason. With the possible exception of Stoic and Kantian morality, this is not an injunction to live rationalistic lives devoid of passion and imagination. It is rather a plea to live in a manner that reflects an accurate grasp of the “way things are” around us, which our capacity to reason helps us to grasp. It is seen in Christ’s injunction to “know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

As an example of living in accordance with the truth, or reason, consider the racism example mentioned above. If people of different races really are unequal and differ in dignity, then what we call “racism” is an appropriate rule to live by. Of course, thankfully, we have increasingly come to realize this is *not* the case. Racial differences, while culturally important for how we live

our lives, do not differentiate levels of human dignity. There is equality among different races. So if I were to reflect on how I live and realize that I do judge people unequally based upon race, deciding whether to commit myself to live by a different rule or not is actually a judgment—explicit or implicit—that I think people of different races are equal or not. In this case, as with so many of the rules we live by, the best rule reflects the most truthful judgment about the “way things are” in the world around us.

This is certainly true of Glaucon in the story above. Recall that Glaucon thinks morality, or justice, consists of that set of rules we live by not because we think it the path to a good life, but rather because it is the best we can hope for given the sorts of persons we are and the sort of society we live in. After all, we all really desire to get whatever we want. And since that is true of everyone else, then the best we can hope for is a society where people live by rules that protect us from being victims of others’ desires, even if that means we can never fully achieve our own. Note the assumptions here. People are most fulfilled in satisfying their every desire, whatever that may be (which in his story consists of murder, seduction, and theft). Society is a fragile balance of self-indulgent egos living in the uneasy tension of restrained rivalry. And, of course, there is no God offering any guidance or final judgment that might impact why and how people do what they do.

This is clearly not a Christian vision of reality. It is not even the view of non-Christians such as Plato and Aristotle. It rests on certain assumptions about the “way things are” concerning ourselves, society, and God. If Glaucon is right that this is how things are, the vision of morality he presents makes perfect sense. If people really are most fulfilled doing whatever they want, and society really is a balance of competing interests, and if there is no God to consider in these questions, then Glaucon is right as to where moral rules come from and why we follow them. If you or I found a ring of Gyges, we would indeed be fools not to act as the shepherd did! But of course, if Glaucon is wrong in his vision of the way things are, this way of life is not only sadly unfulfilling, but actually false.

Christians, as well as non-Christian opponents like Socrates, must take seriously the fact that Glaucon could be right. If he is, the way of life he espouses follows naturally. Of course, on this question Christians (with Socrates) argue Glaucon is wrong. Here is a great example of how our moralities are shaped not only by how well we see visible things around us (like race), but also how we understand the answers to big-picture questions about the nature of the person, society, God, the afterlife, and so on. Demonstrating the connection between morality and those big-picture questions is the main task for the second half of this book, and thus we leave it aside for the moment. For now we can simply take away the point that determining the best rules to live by in matters such as race relations, drinking alcohol, having sex, going to war, and the like, entails making judgments concerning what is true about the world around us.

### *Adjudicating Different Moralities and Different Rules*

This chapter began with the claim that everyone has some sort of morality and rules to guide them in living that morality. That observation led to an obvious question: how do we evaluate and adjudicate between different moralities? If a simple answer to the basic question, how should I live? could be offered at this point, there would be no reason to read any further. Only through more detailed examination of different virtues and particular issues can we answer that question with any specificity. Nonetheless, some basic insights on adjudicating different moralities can be offered from this chapter’s analysis.

Determining the best way to live depends a great deal on why you think you should be moral in the first place. If you hold a morality-of-obligation perspective, then determining which rules should be followed is a matter of determining who or what the proper authority is in some situation, and what that authority says to do. It may be God, the church, one’s family, the nation’s laws, or (for someone like Kant) one’s pure practical reason. Whatever their source, the rules are imposed on us as obligations according to this perspective because they are not inherently connected to the further goal of human happiness and flourishing. Therefore, determining which rules are best is less a matter of demonstrating their connection to human flourishing than it is an issue of who or what has proper jurisdiction in the area under consideration, and what does that authority dictate.

Yet from a morality-of-happiness perspective, living morally is simply living a most fulfilling, happy life. Rules that we follow not only point us toward that further goal, but are a very participation in that goal, rather than simply a means to some extrinsically related end. So different moralities and rules are adjudicated by determining which one, or ones, best lead to true human happiness or flourishing. In this approach, authorities are indeed important. We heed them because we do not know fully by ourselves the best way to live. But authorities are heeded not simply due to their status (as my God, my church, my family, or my nation), but as conduits to a better life. And they are able to lead us in such a way to the extent that they represent a truthful grasp of the way things are in the world, and thus what constitutes true human happiness.

Of the two paths described here, the one endorsed in this book is clearly the morality of happiness. For reasons explained more fully in the following chapter, this approach seems to best explain why people do the things they do, even when they seek happiness poorly. Nonetheless, it should be recognized at the outset that this is not to say there is no room in a morality-of-happiness perspective for rules that are experienced as obligations. Particularly with children, and even for us adults who are less mature in certain areas of our lives, sometimes we follow the rules at moments when their connection to happiness is not at all clear. Yet even when this occurs, from a morality-of-happiness

perspective the hope is that our following the rules (likely in deference to some trusted authority) will lead us to eventually see and experience how doing so is indeed constitutive of true happiness.

## Concluding Thoughts

We now end where we started, with the two different approaches to morality suggested by the *Ring of Gyges* story. Given that all have some sort of morality, why are we moral in the particular way we are? The second half of this chapter has gotten us to the point where we may fruitfully apply the lessons of Plato's story to our own lives. We now see that everyone has a morality, some set of rules that they live by. We are more attuned to how different communities and persons influence us in obtaining and sustaining these rules. We hopefully see the value in reflecting on the way we live our lives so as to realize how we live, how we learned to live that way, and whether or not we want to keep living that way in the future. How we determine the way we want to live will be in large part shaped by what we think is true about the world around us.

## Study Questions

1. Does everyone have a "morality?" Use the terms "descriptive" and "normative" to explain your answer.
2. According to Glaucon, what does the "good life" that all people really want look like? Is it the same or different than the "moral" (or "just") life? How does he use the *Ring of Gyges* story to make his point?
3. According to Glaucon, why are there laws and moral norms? Why does he call justice a "mean between two extremes"?
4. Why does Socrates think people are moral? How does he understand the relationship between morality and the good life? Imagine how he would tell the *Ring of Gyges* story to make his point.
5. Describe the similarities and differences between a person who lives a "morality of obligation" and one who lives a "morality of happiness."
6. Which of these two approaches do religious people hold? Explain.
7. Why is it the case that everyone lives according to certain rules? Use the terms "normative" and "descriptive" to explain.
8. Where do people learn their moralities (in the descriptive sense)? What problems does this pose, and what is the best way to address such problems?
9. What do most classical thinkers mean when they say it is best to live "in accordance with reason"? Give an example to explain it.

## Terms to Know

Glaucon, *Ring of Gyges* story, morality of happiness, morality of obligation, morality (descriptive vs. normative sense), moral rules (descriptive vs. normative sense), authority

## Questions for Further Reflection

1. Early in the chapter it is claimed that the recognition that there are many moralities, in the descriptive sense, invites normative analysis of which moralities are better or worse. How would you respond to someone who said they did not want to judge which ones are better or worse? What drives this impulse in people? What dangers are there in failing to identify certain moralities that are worse?
2. If everyone has some sort of morality, in the descriptive sense of the term, does that mean there is no way to adjudicate which moralities are better or worse (in the normative sense of the term)? If it can be done, how so?
3. What are some concrete examples of how authorities in our lives can be questioned in a manner that is not simply dismissive?
4. What would you say to someone who says that everyone really follows a morality of happiness approach, since they follow the rules they do ultimately to pursue their own happiness?

## Further Reading

It would certainly help to read the brief *Ring of Gyges* story from Plato’s *Republic* in conjunction with this chapter. (I have used the excerpt of it from the Guignon text cited below.) More broadly, the work of Fr. Servais Pinckaers, OP, is the driving force behind the chapter. Of course, his claim is that the morality of happiness approach is actually most true to great Christian and non-Christian thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas, and thus he is simply helping us read these authors the way they intended to be read. For a significantly shorter version of the extensive argument he presents in *Sources of Christian Ethics*, see his brief *Morality: A Catholic View*. Any of the classic texts cited in this chapter can then be read with Pinckaers’ argument in mind. A fine collection of relevant texts from throughout the Western tradition and beyond can be found in Editor Charles Guignon’s *The Good Life*.