

**A HISTORY
OF
Western
Ethics**

SECOND EDITION

edited by
Lawrence C. Becker
Charlotte B. Becker

A History of Western Ethics Second Edition

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Second Edition

Lawrence C.Becker and Charlotte B.Becker

Editors

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A Note from the Editors

The chapters of this book were first published in the *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 2nd Edition (Routledge, 2001). They are republished here with minimal typographic and bibliographic changes. We extend our deep appreciation to the eleven distinguished authors who contributed these twelve articles for the *Encyclopedia*, and who have graciously consented to having them reprinted here. We believe this connected set of surveys is an elegant overview of the history of Western philosophical ethics.

In the *Encyclopedia*, of course, readers will find separate articles on most of the philosophers, philosophical movements, and ethical theories that are mentioned here in passing, and much more extensive bibliographic resources than these survey articles were meant to provide by themselves. For their stand-alone publication, we have provided two pieces of compensatory apparatus at the end of the book: a select bibliography drawn from other parts of the *Encyclopedia*, and a glossary of technical terms. But that is, of course, not an adequate substitute for the more specialized articles themselves, nor for the enrichment to be found in the *Encyclopedia's* many articles on non-Western ethical thought and theological ethics.

Our thanks to the staff at Routledge for proposing this 2nd edition of *A History of Western Ethics*. And for local editorial assistance and advice, our thanks to Joshua James Evans.

Lawrence C.Becker
Charlotte B.Becker

CHAPTER 1

Presocratic Greek Ethics

CHARLES H. KAHN

Philosophical ethics is often thought to begin with Socrates (c. 470–399 B.C.E.). There is no doubt that the example of Socrates, as represented in the writings of Plato (430–347 B.C.E.), helped establish moral philosophy as a distinct subject. But the age of Socrates is also the age of the Sophists. The debates we find in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes (c. 448–c. 388 B.C.E.), the tragedies of Euripides (c. 480–406 B.C.E.), and the *History* of Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400 B.C.E.) demonstrate that in the last decades of the fifth century B.C.E. the basic issues of normative ethics were under intense discussion. The philosophical roots of this discussion can be traced back as far as Xenophanes (c. 540–500 B.C.E.) and Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.E.) at the end of the sixth century. And before philosophy there was poetry. A survey of Presocratic ethics must at least take cognizance of this earlier, prephilosophical moral tradition.

The heroes of the Homeric (Homer: c. 800–700 B.C.E.) epics provided the Greeks with their predominant moral ideal. The code of the hero was summed up in the advice given to Achilles by his father: “Always be first and best [*aristeuein*] and superior to the others” (*Iliad* 11.784=6.208). The heroes of the two epics—Achilles first in battle and passion, Odysseus first in cunning and endurance—both embody the agonistic paradigm that Jakob Burckhardt (1818–1879) found to be so characteristic of Greek culture. But in Hesiod’s (c. 700 B.C.E.) *Works and Days* we meet a different view. Hesiod puts his trust in the justice of Zeus, which guarantees disaster for the man who is tempted down the path of wrongdoing and crime (*hybris*), but promises blessings for the one who perseveres along the more difficult, uphill road of Justice (*dike*). In Homer we have the fierce heroic aspiration to excel; Hesiod provides the counterpart warning against arrogance and excess. These two themes constitute the major topics of moral comment in the work of the early lyric poets and the Attic tragedians. The Greek moral tradition thus bears within itself two potentially conflicting conceptions of *arete*, or human excellence: on the one hand the heroic ideal of unlimited self-assertion; on the other hand the Delphic principle of *meden agan*, “nothing to excess,” the proverbial wisdom formulated in the aphorisms of the Seven Sages (Bias,

Chilon, Cleobulus, Periander, Pittacus, Solon, Thales). Of them, Thales (fl. 580 B.C.E.) was allegedly the first natural philosopher. Another, Solon (c. 640—c. 560 B.C.E.), was the founding father of the Athenian moral tradition. The poems of Solon, composed in the early sixth century just when philosophy and science were beginning to take shape in Miletus, aim at a careful balance between the two standards of success: “May the gods give me prosperity and good fame in the eyes of all men.... I want to have wealth, but not to acquire it unjustly; for punishment [*dike*] always comes later” (Solon 1, 3–8).

For the earliest philosophers, the Milesians, at least one ethical concept is attested. The sense of inevitable punishment for excess and crime, illustrated above in the quotation from Solon, also serves Anaximander (fl. c. 550 B.C.E.) as his figure for the immutable order of nature: “They [the constituents of the world, probably the elemental opposites] pay the penalty [*dike*] and make retribution to one another for their injustice, according to the ordering of time” (DK 12. B 1). A moral conception of natural order is also implicit in the very designation of the world as a *kosmos*, a well-ordered structure. The word *kosmos* has both aesthetic and political overtones. The natural philosophers reinterpreted the justice of Zeus as the rational governance of the world of nature. Some tension inevitably results with the older conception of the gods. As Heraclitus put it, the one wise principle, who is steersman of the universe “is both unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus” (DK 22.B 32; cf. B 41 and 64). The natural order is conceived as a moral order as well: “The sun will not overstep his measures. If he does, the Furies handmaids of Justice [*Dike*] will find him out” (Heraclitus B 94).

Xenophanes spelled out the ethical implications of the new cosmic theology. “Homer and Hesiod have assigned to the gods everything that is a reproach and blame among men: stealing, adultery, and cheating one another” (DK 21. B 11). Xenophanes rejected Hesiod’s tales of battle between gods and giants and between different generations of gods; hostility and conflict, he claimed, have no place in the realm of the divine (B 1, 20–24), which must be a realm of justice and harmony. Xenophanes challenged not only the accounts of the immorality of the gods, but also the cultural standards that exalt athletic prowess over the new learning. An Olympic victory, he insisted, is less valuable for the city than the wisdom of the philosopher-poet; the latter, but not the former, can contribute to civic peace and *eunomia*—good government (B 2).

Alongside this rationalistic conception of nature and the gods, we find, again at the end of the sixth century, a new view of the human psyche, a view which was influenced by the doctrine of transmigration. Pythagoras (c. 560–500 B.C.E.) is the first thinker known to have introduced this doctrine into Greece. By the middle of the fifth century, in the *Purifications* of Empedocles (fl. c. 450 B.C.E.), transmigration provides the background

for a picture of the human condition as a fall into this world of misery from a primeval state of bliss. We do not know exactly what moral conclusions were originally implied by this mystic view of the soul, but they seem to have included vegetarianism and a general distaste for violence and bloodshed. (See Empedocles B 124–125, 128, 130.) In the works of both Pindar (c. 520–c. 440 B.C.E.) and Empedocles, the fate of the soul after death was a matter of serious moral concern. Something like the Indian doctrine of karma seems to have been preached by Pythagorean and Orphic sectaries throughout the fifth century; but again the details are obscure. This tradition found its full literary expression only much later, in the judgment myths of Plato. There are early echoes of the new view in some mysterious utterances of Heraclitus: “Immortals mortal, mortals immortal; living the others’ death, dead in the others’ life” (B 62); “You will not find out the limits of the psyche by going, even if you traverse every path; so deep is its *logos*” (B 45). And similarly in a famous quotation from Euripides: “Who knows, if life is really death, but death is regarded as life in the world below?” (Euripides frag. 638, cited by Plato in *Gorgias* 492e).

Heraclitus is the first philosopher to have left us substantial, if enigmatic, reflection on the nature of moral experience and moral excellence. “It is not better for human beings to get all they want. It is disease that makes health sweet and good, hunger satiety, weariness rest” (B 110–111). “Sound thinking [or moral restraint, *sophronein*] is the greatest excellence and wisdom, to speak the truth and act according to nature, knowingly” (B 112). Heraclitus owed to the earlier cosmologists this concept of nature (*physis*) as a model for truthful speech and virtuous action. The moral interpretation is his legacy to later thinkers, particularly the Stoics. The most decisive innovation is Heraclitus’s notion of cosmic law as the source and sanction for human laws: “The people must fight for their law as for their city wall” (B 44). “Those who speak with understanding must hold fast to what is common to all things [or to all men?], as a city holds to its law and even more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by a divine one. It dominates as much as it wants; it is enough for all and more than enough” (B 114). Heraclitus’s conception of law (*nomos*) as the foundation of civilized life prepared the way for the Stoic theory of natural law.

In his defense of human *nomoi* Heraclitus seems to be reacting against an early version of cultural relativism, provoked by the extensive Greek contacts with older civilizations that began in the Orientalizing period (eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.). In Heraclitus’s own time, the historian and geographer Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550–480 B.C.E.), brought home strange tales of the customs of foreign lands and published some of them in his *Travels around the World*. In the same period Xenophanes knew that Ethiopians make their gods snubnose and black,

while Thracians make them blue-eyed and red-haired (B 16). A generation or two later, in the mid-fifth century, this awareness of cultural diversity received a philosophical articulation in the Man-the-Measure formula of Protagoras (c. 490–c. 421 B.C.E.). If Plato's account can be trusted, Protagoras said in effect: "Whatever each city judges to be just and honorable really is just and honorable for that city, as long as this remains that city's custom and belief" (*Theaetetus* 172 A-B). On this view there can be no standard of right and wrong other than *nomos*, the social norms of a given community. It is just this positive, conservative version of cultural relativism that is endorsed by Protagoras's contemporary, the historian Herodotus (c. 485–425 B.C.E.), in his quotation of a famous verse from Pindar: "*Nomos* is king over all." Thus Herodotus interpreted King Cambyses's (d. 522 B.C.E.) deliberate violation of the religious customs of the Egyptians as proof that the Persian monarch was mad. "If one offered all men the chance to select the finest *nomoi* from all that there are, each group would choose its own *nomoi*" (Herodotus III.38).

This conservative relativism of Protagoras and Herodotus reflects the political insight of Heraclitus without its metaphysical foundation: *nomos* and *dike*, the accepted standards of right and wrong, may vary from place to place; but they make possible a civilized human life in society. (Without any reference to relativism, this is essentially the view assigned to Protagoras in Plato's dialogue that bears his name.) But such conservative relativism exists in an unstable equilibrium; it tended to disappear in the so-called Enlightenment of the last three decades of the fifth century. A much more skeptical attitude to Greek moral and religious tradition found expression in the popular opposition between *nomos* and *physis*, where *physis* stands for the hard facts of human nature (such as sensuality, greed, and the lust for power) in contrast to the more artificial restraints of *nomos* or convention. Behind this negative view of *nomos* lies an epistemological tradition going back to Parmenides (fl. c. 500 B.C.E.), according to which the customary views of mortals can represent only falsehood or at best mere appearance, whereas *physis* designates reality, the way things really are. Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 B.C.E.) stands in this Eleatic tradition when he says "By *nomos* there is sweet, by *nomos* bitter, by *nomos* hot, by *nomos* cold, by *nomos* color; but in truth there are atoms and the void" (B 9). The freethinkers of the late fifth century utilized this negative view of *nomos* in their attack on the virtues of restraint (namely, temperance and justice) as repressive social restrictions on the freedom and self-interest of the individual. The most important documentation for this radical view is in the fragments of Antiphon the Sophist (possibly identical with the oligarch executed in 411 B.C.E. and praised by Thucydides). These texts claim that "the demands of nature (*physis*) are matters of necessity, those of *nomos* are matters of agreement or convention [*homologethenta*]." "Most of what is just according to

nomos is hostile to nature.” Life and pleasure are naturally advantageous, but our pursuit of these goals is restricted by law and moral convention. “What is established by the laws as advantageous are chains upon our nature; but what is established by nature as advantageous is free” (Antiphon B 44A. 1–4). The popular impact of such teaching is brilliantly parodied by Aristophanes in the *Clouds*; a character known as the Unjust Argument comes on stage to represent the New Education in debate with a representative of traditional virtue: “Think what pleasures morality [*sophronein*] would deprive you of: boys, women, gambling, delicacies, drinking, fun and games.... Respect the necessities of nature [e.g., sex and adultery].... Follow me, obey nature, kick up your heels and laugh, hold nothing shameful” (*Clouds* 1071–1078).

Plato was to take this challenge more seriously. The antimoralist’s case is formulated repeatedly in his dialogues, first by Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias*, then by Thrasymachus in *Republic* I, and finally by his own brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus in *Republic* II. The great speech assigned to Callicles makes eloquent use of the ideas attested in the fragments of Antiphon. Some things are “honorable by *nomos* but not by nature; in most cases nature and convention are opposed to one another,” argues Callicles. The weak have made laws in their own interest, and so they have established the principles of fairness and equality as conventional justice. On the contrary, what is just by nature is that the stronger should rule over the weaker and that superior men should have a greater share of wealth and power (*Gorgias* 482E–483E). It is clear that Plato did not invent these notions, but assigned to Callicles ideas that were current in the late fifth century. Thus in the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides has the Athenians say: “Of gods we believe and of men we certainly know that in every case, by a necessity of their nature, they rule wherever they are strong enough to do so” (Thucydides V. 105.2; cf. V. 89).

Antiphon, in speaking of laws based on agreement, and Callicles, in speaking of laws established by the weak, both alluded to some theory of social contract as the origin of law and morality. In *Republic* II Glaucon says explicitly that men created *nomoi* and principles of justice by some sort of compact or covenant (*synthekei*; 359A). We do not know the original form of this theory, but we do have a fifth-century parallel in a fragment of a *Sisyphus* play assigned variously to Euripides and to Critias the tyrant (c. 465–403 B.C.E.): “There was a time when the life of mankind was without order and like the life of beasts, subject to the rule of strength, and there was no reward for the good nor any punishment for evil men. And then, I think, men set up laws [*nomoi*] for punishment, so that justice would rule and violence [*hybris*] would be her slave” (DK 88. B 25). The author goes on to derive belief in the gods from a similar device designed to curb criminal actions and produce decent behavior out of fear of divine punishment.

Like early social contract theory with which it is closely connected, the origins of the *nomos-physis* antithesis in ethical discussion are undocumented and obscure. What is clear in the fully developed antimorality of figures like Callicles and Thrasymachus is that their ideal of ruthless self-assertion represents the old heroic conception of *arete* stripped of the restraints of justice and temperance, since these are now thought of as mere human conventions deprived of any basis either in nature or divine decree. The social and political climate of the late fifth century, with violent class conflicts reinforced by thirty years of nearly continuous warfare, must also have contributed to the decay of traditional morality. Such at least was the judgment of Thucydides. (See Thuc. II. 52–53 on the moral effects of the plague in Athens; III. 81–83 on stasis in Corcyra; V. 87–105 for the cynicism of the Melian Dialogue.)

The Sophists were of course blamed for this moral decline, and with them Socrates as well. Socrates is a separate topic, but we may properly ask how far men like Protagoras and Gorgias (c. 470–380 B.C.E.) were responsible for the intellectual revolt against the traditional virtues of justice and restraint. Protagoras was certainly an outspoken agnostic with regard to the existence of the gods (B 4). But in matters of morality he seems to have been a conservative like Herodotus. Plato represents him as offering to make his pupils better men and better citizens (*Protagoras* 318A, 319A). The case is different for Gorgias. According to Plato, Gorgias was careful not to claim to teach virtue; he promised only to make men good public speakers (*Meno* 95C). This indifference to the moral or immoral ends served by powers of persuasion is no doubt one of the reasons that Plato constructed his *Gorgias* so as to imply that “Gorgias’ teaching is the seed of which the Calliclean way of life is the poisonous fruit” (E.R.Dodds). And in Gorgias’s written work we find that he is willing to play with words and ideas in ways that seem both morally and intellectually irresponsible. His treatise *On Nature or on Not-being* undertakes to prove (a) that nothing is real or true; (b) that if there is anything, it is unknowable; and (c) that if it is knowable, it is unsayable. This brilliant inversion of Parmenides’s argument for Being was no doubt designed to be entertaining rather than seriously nihilistic. And the same can be said for Gorgias’s *Defense of Helen*, on the grounds that she was either (a) compelled by the gods; or (b) carried off by force; or (c) persuaded by the irresistible power of speech (*logos*), and hence is not to be held responsible in any case. Gorgias describes his *Defense of Helen* as a game or plaything (*paignion*). But there could hardly be better ammunition for the standard charge against the Sophists: they make the weaker argument the stronger, and hence they pervert justice by their powers of persuasion.

Nevertheless, the professional Sophists were probably too dependent on public favor to become open enemies of traditional morality. In Plato’s

dialogue it is the ambitious politician Callicles, not the Sophists Gorgias or Polus, who formulates the extreme antimoralist position. (The corresponding position taken up by Thrasymachus in *Republic* I is not confirmed by any independent evidence concerning this Sophist.) The same phenomenon holds for Antiphon “the Sophist,” if he was in fact Antiphon the oligarch of 411 B.C.E., as many scholars now believe. If the *Sisyphus* fragment was not written by Critias the tyrant, it was written by Euripides—in either case not by a Sophist. The antimoralism of the late fifth century is essentially the work of practical men, willing to act ruthlessly and happy to learn from the New Education that the traditional restraints of *dike* and *nomos* are only a conventional artifice, the invention of men more timid than themselves.

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CHAPTER 2

Classical Greek Ethics

JOHN M.COOPER

Beginning in Hellenistic times (322–86 B.C.E.), orthodoxy held that Greek philosophical ethics was originated by a single person—Socrates. (See, for example, Cicero, *Tusculan disputations* 5. 10–11.) But this verdict was motivated in large part by a characteristic Greek preference for a single founder for every intellectual movement, and there is no good reason to accept it. In fact, the surviving literary evidence, taken as a whole, points rather to a sizable group of people, all active in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E. This group includes Socrates, but also Democritus and, as well, a number of the itinerant teachers (especially Protagoras) who later became known pejoratively as sophists and were aligned with the tradition of rhetoric rather than philosophy. Before that time, Greeks who sought beyond the customs and traditions of their local communities for guidance in living their lives as private persons and as citizens looked to the traditional wisdom of poets, and especially to Homer (850?–800 B.C.E.), for precepts and for models of good living. Such philosophers as Heraclitus (c. 551–c. 470 B.C.E.), Parmenides (fl. fifth century B.C.E.), Zeno of Elea (fl. fifth century B.C.E.) and Anaxagoras (500–428 B.C.E.) had claimed to follow reasoned analysis and disciplined argument in establishing the truth about other matters of general interest and concern, and had developed distinctive methods of reasoning for doing this. But Socrates and his contemporaries were the first to undertake by reasoned analysis and argument to investigate how one ought to lead one's life and, on that basis, to reject uncritical reliance on the traditional authorities in these matters. The claim that they are to be regarded as the first moral philosophers rests on their self-conscious appeal to the authority of reason in determining how one ought to lead one's life, and their attention to devising methods appropriate for the employment of reason in investigating the questions that arose in this connection.

No complete writing of any of this first generation of moral philosophers survives. Socrates himself wrote no philosophical work. His philosophical activity was known to later generations through the published writings of a number of the young men who had gathered round him in Athens in the last quarter of the century, including Xenophon (c. 435–354 B.C.E.)

(*Apology*, *Memorabilia*) and Plato, as well as through the oral tradition. However, as early as Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) it became established practice among philosophers to treat the methods of argument and the opinions of the character named Socrates in certain dialogues of Plato (now generally agreed by scholars to be early compositions) as authoritative presentations of the historical Socrates's methods and views. For the purposes of this article we need not express an opinion about the historical accuracy of Plato's representation of Socrates. But since, whether correctly or not, the later philosophers we shall be concerned with based their discussion and criticism of the philosophy of Socrates on Plato's early dialogues, in what follows "Socrates" should be understood to refer to the character named Socrates in those dialogues (that is, *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*, *Hippias Minor*, and *Ion*).

Democritus(c.460–c. 370 B.C.E.)

Democritus's work is known to us only through quotations from his writings and discussion of his views in later authors, together with excerpts (many of doubtful authenticity) in anthologies prepared centuries after his death. This evidence leaves it doubtful as to the extent to which he developed a full-blown theory of ethics, with arguments aimed at providing an account of the good life for a human being in terms of some basic good—a good from which the goodness of any other good thing derives. But he seems to have made a certain subjective state of mind (best captured in English by "good spirits" or simply "tranquillity") the controlling objective for a well-lived life. His somewhat archaic word for this, *euthumia*, gave the title to his best-known work in this field, *On Good Spirits*. One late ancient author quotes him as using the word *ataraxia* to describe this state of mind. Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) was later to use *ataraxia* for the goal that he holds makes for a completely happy life, achievable if, besides being rid of bodily pain, one is free of mental upset of all kinds. In antiquity, there were already debates about whether Democritus identified this condition with the condition in which a person enjoys the purest and greatest pleasure. But there is no doubt that (even if he did not say it explicitly) Democritus regarded the most fundamental human good as simply consisting in a subjective condition of mind, the condition in which a person is free from all distress. He urged as the most reasonable means of achieving this goal a conservative strategy of limiting one's desires and ambitions, not attempting more than one's powers permit, and, in general, avoiding exposure to the sources of frustration. Some modern scholars have seen evidence in one excerpt that Democritus thought of his ethical views as deriving in some way from his atomic physical theory; he explained the good condition of the souls of those who have achieved

euthumia as depending on “smooth motions” allowed by the orderly arrangement of their constituent soul-atoms. But the mention in this passage of “smooth motions” seems best interpreted as metaphorical only. There seems no good reason to think Democritus derived the goodness of *euthumia* from premises drawn from the atomic theory of matter. His ethical views appear to have been developed by independent reflection on the conditions of human life.

Protagoras(c.490–c. 421 B.C.E.)

Protagoras is known to us mainly through the dialogues of Plato, whose *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus* deal extensively with his views. The *Theaetetus* focuses on Protagoras’s relativism (“man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not” 152 a). This is first introduced in connection with perceptual characteristics such as the felt heat and cold of a wind, and applied to each individual percipient. Later in the dialogue (172 a-b), however, we find a specifically moral relativism, concerning justice and apparently all other moral values and applying to each civic community, rather than to each individual person. What is just, courageous, temperate, religiously proper, and so on, is whatever conforms to the general opinion about these matters in the city in question. In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras presents himself as a teacher of human virtue (*arete*), which he specifies as the ability to reason well about how to manage one’s personal affairs and the affairs of one’s city. This, he thinks, is a preeminent good, one that any well-informed person should wish to have above all else. He thinks, however, that this virtue already exists to some degree in all mature citizens, having been taught to them in the course of their upbringing in much the same way as they acquire their language: anyone who totally lacked virtue could not live together with other people at all. The virtue Protagoras teaches is simply a development of this preexistent virtue. But since the virtue that everyone possesses must consist, in large measure, of willing obedience to traditional and conventional standards of behavior, it follows that the virtue Protagoras professes to teach is simply a refined and self-conscious ability to reason about practical matters, beginning from and staying within the limits of the conventional norms of the particular city one lives in. Thus the position ascribed to Protagoras in the dialogue named after him is closely akin to the moral relativism discussed in the *Theaetetus*.

Unlike Democritus, Protagoras emphasized that central to a good human life were the recognized virtues of justice, courage, temperance (or self-discipline), loyalty to gods and parents, and (especially) wisdom or knowledge. In this, Protagoras reflected a tendency, deeply seated in the social attitudes prevalent even in the democracies of the Classical period, to think of the best life for a human being simply as the life led by the “best

people”—the life that those having full possession of the virtues (*aretai*) lead just insofar as they express these virtues in their way of life. Even on the original aristocratic conception of who the best people are, of course, this way of life involved due consideration of communal values and a sense of responsibility to one’s fellow citizens. But for Protagoras, speaking in democratic Athens, the “political” or citizenly orientation of the virtues and the way of life they define assumes a more prominent position. For Protagoras, one qualifies in these virtues not by family inheritance and aristocratic upbringing, but by the ability to reason well—something not in principle restricted to any particular social group. In thus making the “best people” the ones who both possess the virtues of a common citizen and have reasoned knowledge about how to exercise and apply the virtues in private life and in the public affairs of the city, Protagoras posed a radical challenge to the moral and political prestige of traditional elite groups in the Greek cities.

Socrates(c.470–399 B.C.E.)

Socrates agreed with Protagoras in accepting the primacy of the recognized virtues of justice, courage, and so on, in fixing the structure and substance of the best life for a human being—the overall human good. But he developed this common starting point in a fundamentally different direction, away from Protagoras’s flattering (and self-satisfied) affirmation of the essential correctness of any and every city’s established moral and political norms. He promoted an ambitious program of philosophical construction which would, at the limit of ideal completion, provide a grounding in reason itself, independent of traditionally established norms, for a virtuous way of life. At this limit one would have achieved full knowledge of everything that is good for human beings—knowledge of the ways in which and why anything is good, and how to weigh and measure its goodness in comparison with other good things (and with all the things that are bad for us, in whatever way). Socrates vigorously denied that he had achieved this comprehensive knowledge, and insisted that any wisdom he did possess was limited to the knowledge that he did *not* possess it. Nonetheless, he was convinced he knew the right way to advance toward its attainment: by constant discussion with other people in a spirit of sincere mutual inquiry into the truth, examining together their opinions, and thereby one’s own as well, about what was good and bad for human beings, and about how one ought to conduct one’s life—the method of *elenchus*. Such examination would bring to light and put to the test the best arguments, the ones that, if one were honest with oneself, one would see carried the weight of reason and so possessed the only authority a human being can acceptably be subject to. In this way one would collect an interconnected set of moral opinions, supported by argument tested many

times over in discussion with a wide variety of other persons, under many different circumstances and contexts. However novel and even counterintuitive these opinions might first appear to the average person, this experience would give legitimate confidence in their truth. It would, however, be arrogantly dogmatic, even unphilosophical, to rule out the possibility that—in some future discussion, under some new situation, and in the light of what some as yet unexamined person might say in explanation and defense of his contrary views—one might uncover some previously unsuspected reason for doubt, and so reconsider or revise one's opinions, even radically. To be sure, the knowledge Socrates was seeking would guarantee that this would not happen, since it would give us the ability to produce convincing solutions to all apparent difficulties, and show to the satisfaction of everyone prepared to think matters through what is the right thing to do in any situation. But we cannot know in advance that we have that knowledge: the only proof that one has it is in continued success in argument.

By this means Socrates became convinced of a considerable body of moral theory. First and foremost he was convinced that the recognized virtues, when correctly understood, were the most important good a human being could aspire to possess, incomparably better than pleasure or wealth or health or political influence or the good opinion of others or any other kind of conventional success in life. These conventional goods are good for a person only if they are put to some good use, and the virtues determine what use of them *is* good. Any choice of these goods entailing either the loss of virtue or damage to one's moral character could never be rationally justified. Hence Socrates insisted that it was always personally better for anyone to be unjustly deprived of such goods than to do injustice oneself, and that a good person cannot be harmed by a bad person's mistreatment. He held also, contrary to common opinion, that the virtues cannot be acquired independently of one another. We cannot be truly courageous or pious without at the same time being just and self-disciplined and wise—in short, without having full and perfectly formed moral characters, sufficient to see us correctly through difficulties arising not just in some specified set of contexts, but in whatever situation might arise that calls for decision and action. Furthermore, because voluntary acts are all done for reasons (considerations about what is good and bad), and acting for reasons entails acting for what we take at the time (implicitly or explicitly, rightly or wrongly, consistently or not with what we think at other times) to be the best reasons, he thought that whenever we act voluntarily we act as and because we think it best to act. Only our thoughts about what it is good and bad to do are psychological causes of our voluntary behavior. Accordingly, since the moral virtues are preeminently causes of good behavior, they must be conditions of our minds, in which we consistently think the truth about what is good and

bad for us to do. In short, each and every moral virtue must be the same as the knowledge of what is good and bad for a human being to do. It is this knowledge, and nothing else, that can save our lives, by causing us to make all the right decisions and so live in the best way possible. It is for these so-called Socratic paradoxes that Socrates has become best known in modern times: virtue is one, virtue is knowledge, no one does wrong knowingly and willingly.

Fifth-Century Moral Theory: Summary

The principal lines of the later debate were shaped by this first generation of moral theorists. Democritus introduced the subjectivist conception of the human good that Epicurus was to take over and develop into a flexible philosophical hedonism of considerable depth. Protagoras initiated the sort of relativistic and conventionalistic ethic—one which eschewed all possibility of getting behind or beyond ordinary views and ordinary ways of thinking to some philosophically grounded ultimate truth—that the Greek skeptics would later make their own. And Socrates inaugurated the rationalist, virtue-centered theory that became the dominant form of moral theory in the Greek tradition, one taken up successively by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics.

Plato (c. 430–347 B.C.E.)

Socrates made a sharp distinction between the sort of knowledge about what is good and bad for human beings that a human being could aspire to, and that which a god might have. A human's knowledge was simply the ability to discuss these matters effectively together with other human beings, from the point of view of one engaged in actually living a human life. God's knowledge, of course, would not be situated and contextualized in this way. The knowledge Socrates strove for was specifically intended for use in the give and take of discussion with all and sundry, and assumed only their willingness to think carefully and say what they really believed, in light of the arguments advanced during the discussion. The ultimate test of this knowledge was its ability to yield arguments that would persuade any and every human being who would attend honestly to their own thoughts and their consequences.

In the *Republic* and other dialogues of his middle period, Plato sought a philosophically adequate grounding for Socrates' rationalist ambitions. How can the comprehensive knowledge of human good that Socrates worked toward be achieved? Plato concluded that it is not possible actually to know any such partial and limited good except in the light of a prior knowledge of the good (or goodness) itself—what it is in general for anything to be good, the universal source to all other good things of their

being good in their partial and limited ways. Knowing this good, the Form of the Good, would enable a person, in principle, to judge infallibly about the goodness of anything whatsoever—about what is good for human beings and other animals and plants, about the goodness of the world order as a whole, about the goodness of certain mathematical harmonies and ratios, and so on. By thus enormously expanding the scope of the knowledge that Socrates was pursuing, Plato obliterated the distinction Socrates had taken such pains to preserve between the sort of knowledge a god could have of the human good and the limited, contextual knowledge that was the most he thought a human being could aspire to. According to the scheme of education spelled out in the *Republic*, the knowledge of the Good-itself could be achieved only at the age of fifty, after fifteen years of philosophical dialectic engaged in exclusively by and among trained philosophers—a far cry from Socrates' commitment to carrying on his inquiries in the marketplace, and to persuasiveness in such discussions as the ultimate test of the knowledge being sought.

A second momentous change concerned the psychology of action. Whereas Socrates had held that only reasoned thoughts about what is good and bad can ever motivate our actions, Plato introduced a tripartite theory of human motivation. On Plato's account, reasoned thoughts are only one source of motivation. In addition, emotions (like anger) and appetites (such as hunger and thirst, conceived not as feelings of bodily discomfort but as fully completed wants for food and drink) are causes of voluntary bodily movement as well, working independently of one's reasoned judgments about good and bad. No longer, therefore, can moral virtue be conceived of simply as a condition of one's mind, the condition in which one consistently thinks the truth about what is to be done. Virtue also requires that emotions and appetites be properly controlled, so that they do not prevent or interfere with reason doing its job of directing our decisions and actions, and so our lives. The virtue of wisdom remains, as for Socrates, a virtue of the reasoning part of the soul. But courage no longer resides in the reasoning mind at all, but in the emotions—it is the condition of the emotions in which they contribute their motivating force in support of reason and reason's decisions. Temperance and justice coordinate the parts of the whole soul. Temperance is the condition in which the two lower parts yield to reason, giving reason authority over themselves for the determination of what is to be done. Justice makes each of the three parts positively and appropriately contribute its own special force in generating the actions that make up a person's life. Nonetheless, despite this sharp differentiation of the virtues, Plato maintained the Socratic unity of the virtues. He held that the knowledge of the Good required by the virtue of wisdom will not be attained except by one who has first disciplined the two lower parts of the soul by imposing on them conditions of obedience which, once wisdom is present in addition, will constitute the virtues of justice,

courage and temperance. Hence the virtues, though disparate in nature and function, are either possessed all together or not at all.

In ethics Plato is best known for his views in the *Republic* and other middle-period dialogues, such as *Phaedo* and *Symposium*. But he showed his continued concern for ethical topics in the *Laws*, which is noteworthy especially for its discussions of the moral basis for punishment (Book IX) and of the connection between religious belief and morality (Book X). In another late dialogue, *Philebus*, Plato investigated in a highly original and influential way the nature and value of pleasure, and argued for a new conception of the human good as involving a harmoniously mixed life of pleasure and knowledge. This ideal has pronounced affinities to the conception of *eudaimonia* (happiness, human flourishing) developed by Aristotle.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.)

Three treatises on ethics survive under Aristotle's name: *Magna moralia*, *Eudemian Ethics*, and the well-known *Nicomachean Ethics*. Our texts go back only to the first century B.C.E., when Aristotle's works were collected and edited at Rome by Andronicus of Rhodes (fl. 70–50 B.C.E.). It is not known to what extent or in what form they circulated before that time. They probably derive from three sets of lectures given by Aristotle at different periods, in the order listed above (though many scholars think the *Magna moralia* was composed in Aristotle's school after his death). All three treatises deal with much the same topics in much the same order. There are instructive differences, however, and the two less well-known ones deserve careful attention. The following summary relies primarily on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (E.N.).

Aristotle's ethical theory can best be seen as a judicious blend of Plato's moral psychology (he recognizes the same three independent sources of motivation argued for in the *Republic*) and Socrates's insistence on the situated and contextual character of human knowledge of the human good. Aristotle rejects as logically, metaphysically, and ethically misguided Plato's idea that knowledge of the human good should be made dependent on some abstract and universal knowledge of good in general. There is no such thing as a substantive universal nature of goodness; the human good must be understood wholly on its own terms, through intimate knowledge of the conditions of human life and insight into the interconnected capacities making up human nature. This knowledge requires personal experience; it responds to and respects the claims about what is valuable for us that are presented in the mature person's feelings, as well as the claims presented by abstract and general reasoning.

Just as with the good of any other species of living thing, the human good consists in the full development, and exercise under favorable