

**THE STUDY OF
ETHICS: A
SYLLABUS. PP.1-143**

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The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus. pp.1-143 by John Dewey

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JOHN DEWEY

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A SYLLABUS

BY JOHN DEWEY

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PREFATORY NOTE.

The edition of my *Outlines of Ethics* having been exhausted, I have prepared the following pages, primarily for the use and guidance of my own students. The demand for the former book seems, however, to justify the belief that, amid the prevalence of pathological and moralistic ethics, there is room for a theory which conceives of conduct as the normal and free living of life as it is. The present pages, it may be added, are in no sense a second edition of the previous book. On the contrary, they undertake a thorough psychological examination of the process of active experience, and a derivation from this analysis of the chief ethical types and crises—a task, so far as I know, not previously attempted.

ERRATA.—Page 91, for 'Chapter VI,' read 'Chapter VII.'

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SYLLABUS—ETHICAL THEORY.

CHAPTER I.—NATURE OF ETHICAL THEORY.

SECTION I.—SUBJECT-MATTER OF ETHICS.

Subject-matter of ethical theory is judgment concerning the *value* of conduct. Three stages. (1) Practical encouragement and discouragement of certain acts. Reward and punishment primary forms of such judgments. Next stage, urging and restraint through speech. (See Plato, Protagoras, 325-26.) Third stage, reflective judgment as to reason for such acts.

✓ Ethical theory is simply (1) a *systematic* judgment of value. The way is prepared for this through the fact that primitive judgments relate not to isolated acts, but to *habits* of action, and to the types of character which are disposed to induce those habits. Necessary spontaneous generalizations. Codes, customary and legislative.

Demand for more systematic generalization arises when, through an extension of the area of life, former habits begin to conflict with each other. Illustrated by Athenian life; by Roman; by modern since the Renaissance. Ethical theory is thus (2) a *critical* judgment upon conduct. Not systematic in the sense that it simply catalogues previous judgments, but in the sense that it attempts to reconstruct them on the basis of a deeper principle. (See Sec. 2.)

It is a matter of indifference whether we say ethical theory attempts to systematize (in the above sense) *judgments* about the value of conduct, or attempts to systematize *conduct itself*. Every act (consciously performed) is a judgment of value: the act done is done because it is thought to be *worth while*, or valuable. Thus a man's real (as distinct from his nominal or

symbolic) theory of conduct can be told only from his acts. Conversely, every judgment about conduct is itself an act; it marks a practical and not simply a theoretical attitude. That is, it does not lie outside of the matter judged (conduct), but constitutes a part of its development; conduct is different after, and because of the judgment. III, in education, where the main point is not so much to get certain acts done, as to induce in the child certain ways of valuing acts, from which the performance of the specific deeds will naturally follow. That is, the best education aims to train *conscience*. Ethical theory is only a more conscious and more generalized phase of conduct. Analogy with place of theory in modern (*experimental*) science. A theory not a fixed or abstract truth, but a standpoint and method for some activity. It is in this (the activity as directed by theory) that the value of the theory comes out and is tested. (See Sec. 3.)

References: Definitions of ethics will be found in Murray, *Introduction to Ethics*, pp. 1-7; Porter, *Elements of Moral Science*, Introductory; Muirhead, *Elements of Ethics*, chs. 1 and 2; Mackenzie, *Manual of Ethics*, Introduction; Bowne, *Principles of Ethics*, Introduction.

SECTION II.—RISE OF ETHICAL THEORY.

Origin of reflective morality was in Greece. Other ethical codes were either customary or else conceived to be absolute emanations from a divine will. The Greek was in the habit of discussing questions regarding ends and means of life. This strengthened by growth of democracy. Also by methods of education, which (in Athens) relied upon appeal to individual's own intelligence rather than upon conformity to fixed rule. (Davidson, *Aristotle and Greek Education*, pp. 11, 70, 86-87.) Development of commerce, and more general social intercourse among the Greeks, with growth of science and art, resulted in Sophist, who undertook to teach virtue and methods and aims of political influence; he also discussed the moral standard, some denying any moral criterion whatever, holding it possible

to prove arbitrarily an act either right or wrong; others holding the source of moral law to be the superior power of the ruler. Thus they raised the question whether moral distinctions exist in the nature of things, or simply by arbitrary enactment, or for convenience and expediency. While the Sophists themselves tended to answer the question in one of the two latter senses, the dramatists (*Æschylus* and *Sophocles*) had, amid the disintegration of the lower religious beliefs, attempted to maintain an eternal and intrinsic moral law and ideal. *Socrates* took the latter position, and attempted to uphold it by means of the weapons of the Sophists themselves, i. e., by inquiry and reflection. He attacked the ideas that morality is based upon the will of the stronger, that it rests upon custom, and that it is adequately expressed in the more or less haphazard and external conclusions of the poets and ordinary moral teachers of the times. (See *Plato*, *Republic*, Books 1-3.) He insisted that the only adequate and sure basis for morality is knowledge of the Good, i. e., true end of life, and ability to refer the value of particular acts and aims to this supreme end. He thus became the founder of conscious ethical theory.

See *Sidgwick*, *History of Ethics*, esp. ch. 2; *Grant*, *Ethics of Aristotle*, ch. 2; *Paulsen*, *Ethik*, bk. I, ch. 1; *Grote*, *History of Greece*, chs. 57 and 58; *Hegel*, *History of Philosophy* (trans. by *Haldane*), vol. 1; *Fairbanks*, on *Sophocle's Ethics*, *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 2, 77; and *Butcher*, *Aspects of Greek Genius*; *Hellenica*, essays by *Myers* and *Abbott*. Consult also histories of philosophy by *Erdmann*, *Windelband*, and *Ueberweg*, portions treating of Sophists and *Socrates*.

SECTION III.—RELATION OF MORAL THEORY TO PRACTICE.

As already said, ethical theory arises from practical needs, and is not simply a judgment about conduct, but a part of conduct, a practical fact. (See *Aristotle*, *Ethics*, Book I, chs. 2 and 3; ch. 6; Book X., ch. 9.) The inference sometimes

drawn from this is that ethics is not a science but an art. (For two strong statements of this view, see Mill, *Logic*, Book 6, ch. 12, and Martineau, *Essays*, vol. 2, pp. 6-9; strong statement of contrary view, see Bradley, *Logic*, pp. 247-249.) We have to ask, therefore, whether ethics is practical in value, because it is, or is not, a science. The former position will be taken.

1. Moral value not equivalent to preaching or *moralising*. Truth has its own moral value, all the greater because not deflected to serve some immediate end of exhortation.

2. Current antithesis between science and art not tenable. Science does not *teach* us to know; it is the knowing; art does not *teach* us to do, it is the doing. Art of morality is practice of it, not rules laid down. Same of art of dyeing, of mensuration, etc. Rules give basis for mechanical routine, not for art. Art is based upon insight into truth, or relations involved.

3. Question whether word 'science' or word 'art' is to be applied to ethics is of very little account. But question is as to whether ethics is to be regarded as helpful to morals because of scientific insight into truth afforded, or because of its formulation of precepts for action. In the latter case, it "helps" the moral life, only by depriving it of its freedom. Ill. by physiology and hygiene. In former case, helps by freeing it: by making it more significant and effective—as knowledge of mechanics helps a bridge builder. Importance of distinction illustrated by moral value of teachings of Jesus: Did he lay down rules for life, or did he give insight into nature of life? That is, is "salvation" conformity to some scheme laid down, or is it the freeing of life reached through knowledge of its real nature and relations?

Summary. So far as agent needs rules, or fixed precepts, he does not perform his deeds from full personal preference, and hence is only imperfectly moral: so far as he understands and is personally interested in the acts demanded, he needs no rules. Hence the absurdity of defining ethical theory from the standpoint of rules. Casuistry. Difference between a