

and be understood by all. Those two elements—applicable to all and understandable by all—are fundamental to moral philosophy. They are the two basic points to remember as you begin the study of this often infuriating discipline.

Definition of Moral Philosophy

The universal principles that will be described in this chapter have been derived over the centuries from the study of moral philosophy. What is moral philosophy? Generally philosophy is the study of rational thought and conduct; that is, how people *descriptively do think* about issues that are important to them and to their society. Moral philosophy is the study of proper thought and conduct; that is, how people *descriptively should think* about issues that are important to themselves and to our society. Moral philosophers have been looking at these issues of normative thought and conduct for more than 2,500 years, since the time of Protogoras who lived from 490 to 420 BC. They have attempted to establish a logical thought process, based upon an incontrovertible first principle, that would *absolutely* determine whether a given decision or action is right or wrong, just or unjust, fair or unfair.

They have not been successful in that there is no agreement on which of the proposed first principles is best, which one comes closest to *absolutely* determining the rightness or wrongness of a given decision or action. But, you will find that many of the proposed first principles from moral philosophy will help you to more clearly understand and more easily apply the earlier constructs of economic outcomes and legal requirements because they will help you to more accurately estimate the degree of rightness or wrongness of a given decision or action.

Let me provide an example here. One of the sales representatives of a health care consulting firm was reported to have received cash payments totaling \$517,138 over a two-year period from one of the health care insurance companies. I think that was wrong because it was (1) not openly and proudly acknowledged and (2) not economically efficient in that it raised the costs of health care for the employees of the small companies and public organization who purchased those policies. You may or may not agree. But, let us say that the health care insurance company sent that consultant a case of quite elegant wine and a handwritten thank-you note at the end of the year instead of the cash payments. Was that right in a moral sense? In my view, maybe—if openly acknowledged. Again, you may agree or disagree.

The point that I am trying to make here is that all moral problems consist of situations in which there are benefits for some and harms for others, and in which there are rights recognized for some and denied for others. Hopefully, that idea is clear because that statement has been repeated numerous times in this book. But, *all moral solutions involve compromises on the nature and extent of those benefits and harms, and of those rights recognized and rights denied.* No one likes compromises. There should be a right, just, and fair way of doing things for all situations, but there just plain isn't. We have to make do with what we have: economic outcomes, legal requirements, and ethical duties.

Moral philosophy provides additional help in making those compromises through the universal principles that moral philosophers have developed over the centuries to define our ethical duties to each other, but that help is not as extensive or as exact as one might wish. Here, however, is a summary of those universal principles that, once again, *have to be applicable to all and understandable by all to be considered as "universal."* There are in my mind eight of these, one of which overlaps markedly with the previously discussed concept of legal requirements and another one may not overlap but certainly supports the earlier described idea of economic outcomes. All eight are explained below in the historical sequence of their development:

The Principle of Self-Interests (Protogoras, 490–420 BC, and Democritus, 460–370 BC)

The issue addressed by these early Greek philosophers was the question: "What constitutes a good life, what should a man (women were not considered important enough in Athenian society to be included in their political discussion which normally took place in a public forum) strive for?" Only fragments of their original writings remain, but these twin questions were clearly predominant. The most famous surviving quotation of Protogoras was "Man is the measure of all things." This referred to man, not men, and the usual interpretation is that the only measure that matters is the life of the individual, and the means by which that life can be made to be satisfying and fulfilling. The most famous surviving quotation of Democritus (though the accreditation and even accuracy of this statement has been questioned for years) is "Better a good life than a pleasant dinner," and the common interpretation here is that it is only the long-term goal of a good life, to be evaluated just prior to death, that matters.

Both writers agreed that the evaluative goals for that good life had to be a combination of comfortable conditions and cheerful companions and that such untroubled happiness could be achieved only by a moderation in personal lifestyles and an acceptance of public standards. Both were thought to be necessary in order to avoid irritating or provoking others. Justice was thus seen as a contract in which each citizen agreed not to harm other citizens, either by acting adversely to them or by creating envy among them, and it was proposed that all parties would accept this contract because it was in everyone's *long-term self-interests* to live in a peaceful, orderly society with little probability of retribution and harm.

Here we find that 2,500 years ago two very early moral philosophers were discussing a universal principle that would be the good personal conduct to the goal of a stable, cooperative society, and they were using the *long-term* consequences of that conduct as the basis for this principle. Hopefully, it is now clearer what was meant by the earlier statement in this chapter that ethical principles have to be clearly applicable to all, and logically understandable by all. In my view, this ancient principle clearly would have been seen as applicable to every Athenian citizen attending one of the public forums within that city, and also understandable by everyone there. It can be expressed in modern terms as "Never take any decision or action that is not in the long-term, or *enlightened*, self-interests of yourself, and of the organization to which you belong, in order to avoid the possibility of future retribution and harm from others."