My goal here is to review the material covered in class on Thursday, November 17th. This was the first class period devoted to our last topic in this course—the nature of morality. Rather than review the details of the two readings assigned for that class period, I wanted to give a more general overview of the larger issue, and I wanted to get students involved in class discussion. So I want to review that discussion here, to help you prepare for the next test.

Most of the class period was devoted to understanding the nature (or the very existence) of what we might call “moral truths.” My question was not with any specific moral claims (such as “killing is wrong,” or “it’s sometimes O.K. to lie”), but with whether or not any such claims could be understood as “objectively” true. Is morality a matter of personal opinion? Is it a matter of cultural norms? Or are moral claims true (or false) independently of what anyone does or doesn’t believe?

Before beginning this discussion, perhaps it would help to say explicitly that this discussion is not meant to presuppose any answer (one way or the other) about the existence of God. My guess (and this is just a personal guess) is that people with a belief in God may tend to think of moral claims as being objectively true, while those who don’t believe in God may think that morality is just a matter of personal opinion or cultural norms. But I’d like you to approach this as a separate issue. The questions may be related, but, even if they are, the connection might not be as straightforward as you think.

The Greek philosopher Socrates (who was eventually put to death for asking embarrassing question of important people) asked: Is something morally wrong because it is forbidden by the gods, or is it forbidden by the gods because it is morally wrong. (These aren’t quite his words, but it comes to the same thing.) Both possible answers create problems for customary beliefs about God and morality. To suggest that something is wrong simply because God says so makes morality appear arbitrary. Is the wrongness, say, of torturing babies only that God forbids it? What if God had, instead, commanded it? Would that make it wrong not to torture babies? If you think, “But God would never command such an evil thing!”, then what you are really saying is that doesn’t create morality, but instead recognizes it. (That would be why he would “never command such a thing.”) You are saying, that is, that God forbids something because it is (already, independently of God’s arbitrary choices) morally wrong.

Of course, that answer brings problems of its own. To say that God forbids things because they are (already) wrong is to say that morality is independent of God. But on the traditional view, God created everything, and so everything is dependent upon God. If morality is independent of God, then it looks like a pretty important part of “reality” exists independently of God, and that runs contrary to the view that God is the “source” of all reality.

I raise this question from Socrates partly (OK, mostly!) because I think it is interesting, but also because I think it helps to see that we need to consider questions about the nature of morality independently of whatever beliefs we may already have about the existence God.
OK, back to our question: Is morality just a matter of personal belief or social practices? Or does it make sense to say that claims about what is morally right or wrong can be true or false independently of what any individual or group thinks?

In class, I took some time to point out that this question is basically the same one we asked early in the class about philosophical questions. During our first class, when I first asked you what you thought philosophy “was about,” some of you said (something like) “philosophy is all about opinions.” And what some people meant by this was (again, something like) “there are no objective truths in philosophy.” On this view, philosophy is all about arguing for your own position, without any objective “fact of the matter” independent of those arguments. (At this point in the semester, this might sound like an accurate description!)

But I wanted you to resist that conclusion. We might have different opinions, for example, about the existence of God. But, once we agree on a description of what we mean by this being, then the existence of this being is either objectively true or objectively false. It may be, in cases like this, that we have no way of conclusively establishing what the “objective truth” might be, but that fact by itself does not imply that there is no “objective truth” to be found. And so maybe it is likewise with morality. It may be that we have different opinions about morality, and it may be that we don’t know how to conclusively establish the truth of one position versus another. But it doesn’t follow from this that there are no “moral truths” to be found.

Nevertheless, the view that morality is either personally or culturally relative remains appealing. And it may be that this is correct. But I spent some time trying to show that we generally don’t act as though we really believe that this is true. To show this, I asked us to consider some things that are either relative to what we individually or socially believe.

Consider the question: which is better, vanilla or chocolate? There is no objective fact of the matter here; there is only what each of us individually prefers. And so, if you like chocolate and I like vanilla, it doesn’t make sense for me to try to argue with you that you are mistaken—it doesn’t make sense for me to give you “reasons” for believing that “really” I am right and you are wrong. And it doesn’t make sense for me to criticize you for having a different preference than me. It’s just a matter of personal taste: there is no “fact of the matter” beyond that.

Now consider: which side of the road should we drive on? In the U.S., we drive on the right, and in Great Britten, they drive on the left. This is something that is determined by society, and so it would be silly to argue that one culture is “correct” and the other “mistaken.” And it would be silly to say that the British practice is “morally wrong.” There is no objective “right” or “wrong” here, but only what an individual society determines.

But now think about how we feel about moral debates. When we differ, say, about the morality of abortion or of assisted suicide, we do try to convince those who disagree with us that there are reasons for preferring our position to theirs. We don’t treat these issues as simply matters of differing individual tastes. And when we consider the practices of other cultures or societies (or of our own culture, for that matter), we do make moral criticisms: we say that slavery was wrong, even when it was accepted by society. We don’t act as if we believed that whether or not slavery is wrong is the same sort of question as whether or not driving on the left side of the street
is wrong. In both of these cases, we offer reasons for accepting one belief rather than
the other, and think that it makes sense to criticize those who don’t act the way we
believe is right. And so if we really believed that morality were either individually or
socially determined, it would be hard to understand why we argue about such things.
Now, this by itself does not prove that there are “matters of fact” about morality in
the same way there are “matters of fact” about whether or not the world is flat or round.
But it does show that it is not obvious that morality is either individually or socially
determined. If we think, for example, that slavery really is wrong, or that assisted
suicide really is permissible, then we seem to be saying that there really is a fact of the
matter about moral claims. In (most of) the rest of this chapter, we will be looking at
various positions about what the nature of morality really is.

We spent most of the class talking about the above, but we did spend some time
at the end discussing the two positions advocated in the readings assigned for that day.
In those two readings, we found discussions of the pro’s and con’s of two similar
sounding, but still very different positions: psychological egoism and ethical egoism. Let
me briefly address each of these here.

Psychological egoism is not really a moral theory at all. That is, it is not a theory
about the nature of morality or about what we morally “should” or “should not” do.
Psychological egoism is an empirical (“scientific”) theory about human behavior. It is
the view that all human action is motivated only by the desire to advance one’s
own “egoistic” goals. More simply put, it is the claim that people always act selfishly,
and never act for any other reason. If this position is correct, moral questions never
even arise: it makes no sense to talk about what people “should” do when what they will
do is determined by a universal law. In the last chapter we noted that moral
responsibility presupposes free will. But if psychological egoism is true, no one has free
will: we are incapable of acting in an un-selfish way.

So, psychological egoism is an empirical theory, not a moral theory. Just like
gravity, it’s a “law” that we believe in (if we do) because it best accounts for the empirical
evidence. But it certainly looks as though there are lots of counter-examples to the
claim that people always act selfishly. It certainly seems like there are occasions where
people act for the good of others, and not out of selfish reasons. In the assigned
reading, Feinberg notes that there is something “funny” about how the advocates of
psychological egoism react to apparent cases of unselfish behavior. They always have
an alternative explanation, where the “real” motivation was a selfish one after all.
Sometimes these alternative explanations seem plausible. (Maybe the reason I
stopped and helped that stranded motorist I saw on the highway was that I wanted to
show off what I “good” guy I was, etc.) But the fact that advocates of this position seem
committed in advance to always finding some alternative, “selfish” explanation suggests
that they don’t hold this position because of the empirical evidence (in favor of it), but
instead believe it in spite of the empirical evidence (against it). And this suggests a kind
of confusion in their position: they advocate it as empirical position, but defend it as
though they believed it was some kind of “conceptual” (or “definitional”) truth.

Ethical egoism, on the other hand, is indeed a moral theory. It is not a theory
about how people in fact do act (like psychological egoism), but instead a theory about
how, morally speaking, people should act. According to ethical egoism, people ought to
act selfishly. **On this view, it is morally right to pursue your own interests, and **morally wrong **to do anything that is contrary to your individual selfish interests. So, on this view, not only is it *not morally required* for those who are wealthy to help those who are less well-off, it would be morally wrong of them to do so (unless by doing so, they someone helped themselves even more). On this view, it is never right (in fact, it is always wrong!) to do anything that doesn’t advance your own selfish interests.

I didn’t spend much time talking about this position in class, and so I won’t do so here either, other than to say that this position is, at least in modern times, usually associated with the 20th century political philosopher Ayn Rand. (You may have heard the name: she is sometimes quoted by various economic or political figures in the news.) In the assigned reading, James Rachel offers various arguments for and against ethical egoism. I won’t review those arguments here. In the end, I find this view inconsistent with the feeling I have that sometimes “doing the right thing” is *hard.* Sometimes, it seems to me, morality requires that I act in a way that is contrary to my selfish interests. (For example, keeping my promises, even when breaking them would be more convenient.) But I won’t pursue that here.

For the purposes of the test, you should understand what it would *mean* to say that morality is (either) individually or socially determined, and why it *seems* that we don’t really believe this. And you should also understand both psychological and ethical egoism, what they each say, how they are similar, and how they are different.