Calvin and Hobbes

Whenever I need to do some serious thinking, I go for a walk in the woods.

There are always a million distractions out here.

I don't believe in ethics any more.

As far as I'm concerned, the ends justify the means.

Get what you can while the getting's good—that's what I say! Might makes right? The winners write the history books!

It's a dog-eat-dog world, so I'll do whatever I have to, and let others argue about whether it's "right" or not.

Hey!

Why'd you do that??

You were in my way. Now you're not, the ends justify the means.

I didn't mean for everyone, you dolt! Just me!
Bertrand Russell (1872–1970): “I think we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn’t wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy, not even mine.”

Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*: “The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.”

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970): “This is patently absurd; but whoever wishes to become a philosopher must learn not to be frightened by absurdities.”

Charles M. Schultz (1922–2000): “There’s a difference between a philosophy and a bumper sticker.”

Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC): “There is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it.”
Motivation

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE SECRET TO HAPPINESS? IS IT MONEY, POWER OR FAME?

I'D CHOOSE MONEY. IF YOU HAVE ENOUGH MONEY, YOU CAN BUY POWER AND FAME. THAT WAY YOU'D HAVE IT ALL AND BE REALLY HAPPY!

HAPPINESS IS BEING FAMOUS FOR YOUR FINANCIAL ABILITY TO INDULGE IN EVERY KIND OF EXCESS.

I SUPPOSE THAT'S ONE WAY TO DEFINE IT.

THE PART I THINK I'D LIKE BEST IS CRUSHING PEOPLE WHO GET IN MY WAY.
While the logician deals with the nature of argument,
and the epistemologist with the nature of knowledge,
the moral philosopher speculates about
  the nature of the good life,
  the ultimate worth of the goals people seek,
  and the supposed propriety of certain courses of action.
What is Ethics?

Ethics is partly a “normative” or “hortatory” discipline and partly an “analytical” or “meta-ethical” one.

- *Hortatory speculation* tends generally to issue in theories which recommend, appraise, and justify the selection of certain goals or certain courses of conduct as being morally worthwhile.

- *Meta-ethics* is concerned with understanding or explaining the meaning of the key terms which appear in such recommendations, appraisals, and evaluations.

Meta-ethics should be thought of as a supplement to hortatory ethics, or perhaps as a preliminary to it.
Philosophers who put forth hortatory theories can be thought of as “moralists”; that is, as individuals offering advice for living, while philosophers engaging in meta-ethical speculation clarify the advice given in these hortatory theories so that this advice will be better understood.

Classical moral theorizing emphasized hortatory ethical speculation over meta-ethics, while this emphasis is reversed in contemporary moral theorizing, the stress now being placed on meta-ethical or analytical speculation.
H. L. Mencken (1880–1956): “Philosophy consists very largely of one philosopher arguing that all others are jackasses. He usually proves it, and I should add that he also usually proves that he is one himself.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951): “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.”

Rene Descartes (1596–1650), ‘Le Discours de la Methode’ (1637): “One cannot conceive anything so strange and so implausible that it has not already been said by one philosopher or another.”

Richard Feynman (1918–1988): “Philosophers say a great deal about what is absolutely necessary for science, and it is always, so far as one can see, rather naive, and probably wrong.”
Motivation

Howard: How are you doing on your New Year's resolutions?

Sam: I didn't make any.

Calvin: See, in order to improve oneself, one must have some idea of what's "good". That implies certain values.

But as we all know, values are relative. Every system of belief is equally valid and we need to tolerate diversity. Virtue isn't "better" than vice. It's just different.

I don't know if I can tolerate that much tolerance.

I refuse to be victimized by notions of virtuous behavior.
The Moral Views of Socrates

The history of hortatory ethical speculation can be interpreted in the light of the attempt to answer two questions:

1. What is the good life for humankind?
2. How ought humans, insofar as they are moral beings, to behave?

Socrates’ answers to these questions are as follows:

1. People ought to act in such a way as to achieve the good life.
2. The good life can be discovered if and only if people have knowledge.

The “Socratic paradox”: although people in fact act immorally, none do so deliberately.

Socrates believed that if a person knows what is good, then they will always act in such a way as to try to achieve it.

- “virtue is knowledge”
- “nobody errs willingly”
The more you know, the harder it is to take decisive action.

Once you become informed, you start seeing complexities and shades of gray.

You realize that nothing is as clear and simple as it first appears. Ultimately, knowledge is paralyzing.

Being a man of action I can't afford to take that risk.

You're ignorant but at least you act on it.
Plato differs from Socrates not only in believing that knowledge of the good is possible, but also in specifying how one can go about achieving it.

Plato’s contention is that discovering the nature of the good is an intellectual task analogous to that required in order to uncover a fundamental scientific principle.

The search for the good life is then tied to the theory of knowledge.
For Plato, goodness is a form (an ideal or universal).

Such forms, being unchanged and eternal, are never apprehended by the senses, which grasp only changing things. Instead, they are apprehended through the use of reason.

Insofar as reason dispenses with props derived from sensory experience, it moves more and more toward an awareness of such forms. When a person finally apprehends them, then they possess knowledge.

Plato’s blueprint for an ideal social organization contained two highly dissimilar proposals for educating people, depending upon whether or not they have the capacity to acquire knowledge.
Plato’s Ethics

Platonism (Plato’s claim that knowledge of the good life is possible) constitutes one of the classical bulwarks against a commonly held point of view called “moral skepticism”.

The oft-quoted remark by Protagorus that “man is the measure of all things” is a succinct expression of this point of view.

Advocates of this doctrine of “moral skepticism” maintain that moral standards or moral principles are basically the products of arbitrary human decisions.

Plato argued that moral standards are just as objective as the principles of physics or the theorems of mathematics. Those who think morality is merely a matter of opinion think so because they lack the knowledge to judge otherwise.
Plato’s ethics relies upon two basic assumptions:

1. If an individual knows what is right or good in certain circumstances, then they will never act immorally in those circumstances.

2. Moral rules have an objective validity which is in no way dependent upon one’s tastes, opinions, or preferences.

Criticism of Assumption 1: Assumption 1 leads one to the so-called “Socratic paradox”: evil conduct falls into the class of involuntary acts so that no one can properly be held responsible for the evil that they do. “The devil made me do it!” Flip Wilson.

Criticism of Assumption 2: Plato’s mistake lay in thinking that moral problems and scientific problems are fundamentally analogous when, in fact (according to his critics), they are radically dissimilar.
I read this ethics book you got me. What did you think of it?

It really made me see things differently. It's given me a lot to think about.

I'm glad you enjoyed it. It's complicating my life. Don't get me any more.
Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679): “Leisure is the mother of philosophy.”

Victor Cousin (1792–1867): “True philosophy invents nothing; it merely establishes and describes what is.”

Samuel Butler (1835–1902): “All philosophies, if you ride them, are nonsense, but some are greater nonsense than others.”

William James (1842–1910): “There is only one thing a philosopher can be relied upon to do, and that is to contradict other philosophers.”

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio.”
Aristotle’s ethics are an attempt to answer two questions:

1. What is the good life?
2. How ought a person, insofar as they are moral, to act?

Aristotle’s ethics form a far more empirical theory than Plato’s, less hostile to pleasure as a component of the good life, and positively opposed to the Platonic conception that moral laws have a validity independent of human interests, attitudes, desires, and tastes.
Relevance of Aristotle’s “Metaphysics” and “Politics” to Ethics

**Metaphysics:** theoretical philosophy of existence and knowledge.

**Doctrine of the Four Causes:** change always proceeds “from potentiality to actuality”.

Within limits, the entity which anything will become is determined at the beginning of the developmental process by its innate constitution.

For Aristotle, no specification of the good life will be adequate which does not take into account a person’s unique nature. The good life must be one which is good for humans, and since humans are, above all, rational beings, the good life will be one which must be conducted under the governance of reason.
A person is essentially a *social animal*, and it is only within the larger framework of a community that one’s full development can take place. As Aristotle said, “*He who is unable to live in society or who has no need, because he is sufficient for himself, must either be a beast or a god.*”

As far as what the “good life” for a person is, Aristotle adopts an empirical approach to the problem, with the answer that “*the good life is a life of happiness.*”
THE CHARACTERS

Margo Magee
Life has been somewhat of a bumpy road for this lovely brunette talent agent. And although she's considered the hothead of this close-knit trio, she most often has been the anchor of calm for her roommates, Tommy and Lu Ann.

Tommy Thompson
The redhead Tommy, who began her career as a nurse, is really the brains of the trio. Though often down, Tommy is never out, and her resiliency takes her to her next adventure.

Lu Ann Powers
This glamorous blonde schoolteacher has always had a craving for experiencing life to its fullest. When her Air Force pilot husband was shot down and killed, Lu Ann was able to use her widow's benefits to further a number of important causes, including the natural environment and troubled teens.

Professor Aristote Papagoras
Kindly Prof. Papagoras befriended Margo, Tommy and Lu Ann at the very beginning of their lives in Apt. 3-G. The three women have come to rely on his quiet wisdom and vast experience, regarding him as their unofficial "father." Though he never tries to intrude - too much - on their lives and affairs, he sometimes works for their benefit anonymously.
These considerations then lead to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (one of the earliest examples of analytical philosophy): “Happiness is an activity of the soul in accord with perfect virtue.”

That is, happiness is not a thing. Instead, it is something which accompanies the ordinary (and extraordinary) activities of daily life. Happiness is a concomitant of the things we do and not a position we are trying to reach by doing them.
The other key word in *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* is “virtue”.

The word “virtue” is used by Aristotle in much the same way we use the word “function”.

The virtue of a human being is to be rational. Accordingly, a person is fulfilling their natural function, *their virtue*, when they live in accordance with the dictates of reason.

They may do this in two ways: either through speculation of a philosophical sort or in conducting the affairs of their daily life. The former use what Aristotle called “*intellectual virtue*”, and the latter “*moral virtue*”.
The doctrine of the mean is Aristotle’s answer to the question: “How ought people, as moral beings, to act?”

His answer, in effect, is that a person ought to live moderately, in accordance with the dictates of practical reason.

This is a break from Plato because Aristotle is saying that ethics is not an a priori discipline.

Notice that the term “mean”, as used by Aristotle, is not to be identified with “average”.
For Aristotle, the proper mode of conduct for any given individual will depend upon the kind of person that individual is. Nevertheless, any attempt to lead any good life must follow the dictates of practical reason; that is, it must be conducted in accordance with the doctrine of the mean.

“Virtue” thus always denotes a mean which lies between extremes.

- Courage is a virtue which lies between cowardice & rashness.
- Liberality is a virtue which lies between prodigality & frugality.
- Pride is a virtue which lies between vanity & humility.
The doctrine of the mean does not provide an accurate analysis of the concept of “virtue”. In particular, there seem to be virtues which do not lie between extremes, they are extremes. For example, there is no middle course between keeping a promise and not keeping it (doesn’t this depend on the promise?). The same applies to telling the truth (doesn’t this rely on memory and recall?).

The doctrine of moderation is not a creed to which everyone can subscribe. Throughout his “Ethics”, Aristotle assumes that moderation in conduct will provide happiness, but never offers any evidence to support this thesis.
There is something unduly smug and comfortable about Aristotle’s speculations on human affairs; everything that makes men feel a passionate interest in each other seems to be forgotten. Even his account of friendship is tepid. He shows no sign of having had any of those experiences which make it difficult to preserve sanity; all the more profound aspects of the moral life are apparently unknown to him. He leaves out, one may say, the whole sphere of human experience with which religion is concerned. What he has to say will be useful to comfortable men of weak passions; but he has nothing to say to those who are possessed by a god or a devil, or whom outward misfortune drives to despair.

Motivation

OK, YOU'VE ALL READ THE CHAPTER, SO WHO CAN TELL ME WHAT'S IMPORTANT ABOUT ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS?

ANYONE?

CALVIN, HOW ABOUT YOU?

HARD TO SAY, MA'AM. I THINK MY CEREBELLUM JUST FUSED.
Aristippus of Cyrene, an older contemporary of Plato and student of Socrates, is the founder of the *hedonic school*. Not only is pleasure the sole good, but also since the past is gone and the future uncertain, the only pleasures worth having are those of the moment.

On the other hand, *Epicurus of Samos (341–270BC)* - from which the word “epicure” originates - strongly advocated abstemious living - living moderately but pleasantly. Like Aristippus, he considered pleasure the sole good, but unlike him, he did not identify pleasure with positive enjoyment of any sort. The good life, as he saw it, is mainly a life which contains as few painful experiences as possible and which is devoted to repose and intellectual pursuits.
A Criticism of Hedonism

*Psychological hedonism* is the doctrine that people in fact pursue pleasure, and only pleasure, in their lives.

*Ethical hedonism* maintains that whether people do so or not, this is what they ought to do.

**Criticism:** Hedonism, even though theoretically attractive, violates our ordinary feelings about what constitutes moral behavior.

The ordinary person is, with regard to pleasure, more an Aristotelian than an Epicurean.
**Motivation**

**Calvin and Hobbes**

Today at school, I tried to decide whether to cheat on my test or not.

I wondered, is it better to do the right thing and fail... or is it better to do the wrong thing and succeed?

On the one hand, undeserved success gives no satisfaction... but, on the other hand, well-deserved failure gives no satisfaction either.

Of course, most everybody cheats some time or other... people always bend the rules if they think they can get away with it... then again, that doesn't justify my cheating.

Then I thought, look, cheating on one little test isn't such a big deal... it doesn't hurt anyone.

...but then I wondered if I was just rationalizing my unwillingness to accept the consequence of not studying.

Still, in the real world people care about success, not principles.

Then again, maybe that's why the world is in such a mess. What a dilemma!

So what did you decide? Nothing. I ran out of time and I had to turn in a blank paper.

Anyway, simply acknowledging the issue is a moral victory.

Well, it just seemed wrong to cheat on an ethics test.
The difference between cynicism and stoicism is more one of emphasis than doctrine.

“The cynic differs from the stoic only by his cloak,” Juvenal.

Both schools were influenced by the Socratic teaching that virtue, not pleasure, is the goal that one should strive for.

Cynicism offered that all the fruits of civilization are worthless. Salvation is then to be found in a rejection of society and its values. Virtue then consists in having a character which is unaffected by the vicissitudes of daily life. The Cynics thus advocated a rejection of worldly goods, arguing that this would lead to happiness.
Cynicism & Stoicism

Cynicism gradually gave way to Stoicism, which also stressed the value of developing a character immune to the influences of the material world but without making the same practical demands upon its followers. Like Cynicism, Stoicism is a philosophy which offers consolation in time of stress: "Learn to be indifferent to external influences!"

The Stoics believed that whether something is good or not depends upon one’s attitude toward it: "virtue resides in the will - only the will is good or bad." In addition, Stoics believed in a deterministic world, one in which everything happens in accordance with a predetermined plan.

The main effect of Stoicism and Cynicism was to place the burden for being good or bad directly upon the individual.
A Criticism of Cynicism & Stoicism

Doctrine of Indifference: Although a person of common sense believes that moral rectitude is a matter of character, it is hard to accept the thesis that such rectitude is identical with, or somehow connected with, being indifferent to the affairs of the world.

Stoic Notions of Freedom & Determinism (Problem of Free-Will): man is capable, and yet not capable, of revising the master plan of the world.

Like Cynicism and Stoicism, Christianity is in part a philosophy of consolation, but it also possesses constructive features which are appealing to those who wish to overcome the social mire in which they are enmeshed.
Motivation

Calvin and Hobbes

Once you know things, you start seeing problems everywhere...

...and once you see problems, you feel like you ought to try to fix them...

...and fixing problems always seems to require personal change...

...and change means doing things that aren't fun! I say phooey to that!

But if you're willfully stupid, you don't know any better, so you can keep doing whatever you like!

The secret to happiness is short-term, stupid self-interest!

We're heading for that cliff!

I don't want to know about it.

I'm not sure I can stand so much bliss.

Careful! We don't want to learn anything from this.
Spinoza is considered as the most admirable person among the great philosophers. His life was a model of integrity, unselfishness, and consideration of others.

Like Descartes and the Stoics before him, Spinoza was a determinist: 
“All choices are determined by antecedent events.”

In addition, like Aristotle, Spinoza advocated a form of relativism in moral theory: “Nothing is inherently good or bad.”

The two notions of relativism and determinism play fundamental roles in Spinoza’s moral theory.
Spinoza’s Ethics

On the basis of his relativistic conception of goodness, Spinoza is led to infer that the things people ordinarily strive to attain (fame, riches, glory,...) become valuable only in terms of the attitudes we take toward them. Human happiness is thus a matter of attitude. The mistake we make is in attributing value to things which are inherently neutral.

A happy life can be achieved by developing an attitude of self-reliance.

A person can liberate themself by understanding that the course of nature is a necessary course and also that nothing that happens is “good or bad in itself”, but is so depending on how we view it. We need to develop a state of mind that consists in “the knowledge of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature.”
Spinoza, like the Stoics, did not effectively resolve the conflict between determinism and freedom.

Spinoza’s suggestion of liberating oneself from “nature” suffers from the same defects as the Stoic suggestion that one ought to view the world with an attitude of indifference.

Spinozism is essentially a philosophy on consolation, stressing a way of life that is introspective and asocial.
Motivation

How are you doing on your New Year's resolutions?

I didn't make any.

See, in order to improve oneself, one must have some idea of what's "good," that implies certain values.
According to Immanuel Kant, what determines a person to be morally worthy is not what they do, but why they do it.

For Kant, the rightness or wrongness of an action has nothing to do with its consequences. An action is right if it ought to be done in those circumstances, and wrong, given the same circumstances, it ought not to be done.

Like Aristotle, Kant maintains that everyone aims at achieving their own happiness. Happiness consists in a sense of well-being and is a concomitant of behavior, not a consequence of it.
The Moral Theory of Kant

As a consequence, Kant maintains that it can never be anyone's duty to promote their own happiness, but rather it is the duty of each person to promote the happiness of others.

Secondly, Kant does not maintain that the purpose of being moral is to attain happiness, but rather that the essence of morality consists in our fulfilling certain obligations which are binding us as rational beings.

An action's rightness or wrongness is determined by Kant's "categorical imperative": An action is morally right if one can will that it become a universal law which all should follow; otherwise it is wrong.
Motivation

The traditional single viewpoint has been abandoned. Perspective has been fractured.

The multiple views provide too much information! It's impossible to move! Calvin quickly tries to eliminate all but one perspective!

It works! The world falls into a recognizable order!

Oh no! Everything has suddenly turned neo-cubist!

It all started when Calvin engaged his dad in a minor debate! Soon Calvin could see both sides of the issue! Then poor Calvin began to see both sides of everything!

You're still wrong, dad.