

Celes' Most Important Question

by Eric Herboso

It was certainly the most important question of her entire life. How she would deal with this situation could easily change everything. But then again, that's why it made so much sense to postpone responding to it until she had given it more thought. Surely, if she gave herself enough time, the proper solution would come to her. After all, Celes always figured things out in the end.

Plus, circumstances even made it easy on her this time by sending her parents away on an emergency business trip. Not that Celes disliked having her parents around, but with them out of the way, she'd have plenty of time to think about what to decide when they got back. Yes, it was a very good thing that her parents had to leave so very suddenly.

"Now be nice to Mr. Scythe while we're gone, Celeste. He's being very kind by offering to look after you while we've left on such short notice, you know." Celes' dad always called her by her full first name. "Here's some pocket money in case you need it, but I don't expect you will. Keep it for emergencies. Mr. Scythe will take good care of you, I'm sure." She took the money, but her father walked away before she could even murmur a thank-you. He was still busy packing.

Really, Celes was too old to need a babysitter, being a teenager now, but since her parents would be gone for three whole days, they had to find somebody that could be there for her if she needed it. Mr. Scythe, their slightly eccentric but always quite polite neighbor, had volunteered as soon he was apprised of the situation. He was okay so much as slightly weird old neighbors go, but he had an

annoying habit of calling Celes by her full first name whenever they happened to be outside in their front yards at the same time. It was really irksome.

While her parents continued packing, Celes went over her plans for the next few days. School was out, and she would be allowed to go bike riding in the park well on into the day, so it was certain that she'd have plenty of time to think about what to do with her confusing situation. But she'd have to be back by dinnertime to eat with Mr. Scythe and sleep in his guest bedroom, which isn't as weird as it sounds at first, since Mr. Scythe used to have a niece-in-law (Tina) who would visit in the summers, and she often slept over there in years' past. But then Tina's family moved to England, and she never visited in the summers anymore. Celes hadn't seen Tina for something like three years now, except for one short occasion. She had been a wonderful friend, but it's hard to keep up with people when they move so far away.

Back then, there was a Mrs. Scythe, and when Celes would come over to see Tina, she was the most gracious host that you could ever imagine. Mrs. Scythe was nice, and sweet, and an excellent cook, and that one time that Celes became very sick during a sleepover, she looked over her while Mr. Scythe walked straight next door to tell Celes' parents what was happening. It was all very embarrassing, but no one else seemed to feel anything but sympathy for her. Yes, Mrs. Scythe was truly a great person, even as Tina was a great childhood friend. But whereas Tina had moved with her parents across the ocean, Mrs. Scythe had moved much further away: she died in a car accident a couple of years back. It was a sore memory for her, because she had wanted to go to the funeral, and her mother wouldn't let her. "It's not appropriate", she had maintained. But she did get to go to the wake, and Tina was there; but Celes could not think of what to say, and Tina did not look like she particularly wanted to talk. So they both said nothing, and they hadn't seen each other since.

Of course, all this happened back when Celes was just a kid. She was now a teenager, and would even be turning fourteen in another few months. So though the memories were still close by, they were at once far away, and she chided herself for having been so childish as to not say a thing to her friend at that wake.

Since then, Celes had not been into Mr. Scythe's house, except on those few times when she had come by to send a message to her dad. Celes' father, Mr. Scythe, and a couple of other men from the neighborhood would play cards there every once in a while, and Celes' mother was the kind of person who preferred sending her grown daughter out on messenger errands to simply using the telephone that would have been much easier (and faster). "Why bother calling when I can send you?", she would ask. "After all, I don't want to disrupt their card game by an annoying ringing when I can instead have you politely knock on their door." Celes never really bought this excuse; it seemed to her that knocking was just as much a distraction as ringing would be, and Celes suspected that her mother just preferred making her daughter do the same things that she had had to do when she was younger.

So when Celes' parents were finally done packing, and the two of them brought her by next door to formally leave her under Mr. Scythe's care for the two and a half days, Celes only felt slightly weird. The house was familiar, Mr. Scythe was familiar, everything was familiar--but she and Mr. Scythe had never talked much, and he was certainly going to expect conversation of some sort at dinnertime. She dreaded dinnertime. And since her parents were dropping her off in the late, late afternoon, she felt a strong unease in her throat, even while she was secretly glad her parents would be out of the way for a while. It was a difficult feeling to reconcile: on the one hand, Mr. Scythe would probably want to talk about Tina or Mrs. Scythe or both, and that would be bad in itself; but on the other hand, Celes desperately needed some time by herself to sort out this

problem of hers so that she would know what to do when her parents returned, and for that, she was extremely grateful for their extended absence.

So it was with a mixed mind that she greeted Mr. Scythe, and she winced only slightly when he invited her in by her full first name. But he did not seem to notice, for Celes' parents were then leaving, and she hugged and kissed them both. "Be good, Celeste; we'll be back on Thursday", informed her father unnecessarily; "We'll miss you; and mind what Mr. Scythe tells you", instructed her mother, also unnecessarily. Even as she waved good-bye, she thought about how predictable her parents' parting words were. Her father, overly-informational as usual, betraying his engineer instincts to all the world; and her mother, telling her what to do (also as usual), betraying her status as VP in an engineering firm. Idly, Celes wondered how in the world they could get along as husband and wife when they had to work together all day in an unequal environment.

"So, Celeste, what shall we have for dinner tonight?" Celes turned to Mr. Scythe, wondering if his parting remarks would be as predictable as her parents. It's possible, of course, even if she could not herself predict what they would be. Suddenly she realized that she did not even know what Mr. Scythe did for a living. How could she predict his parting words if she did not even know something as basic as that? "I must confess that I had been planning on heating a microwave dinner for myself again tonight, but that surely won't do now that you'll be joining me. If you'll excuse it, perhaps we can order take-out for tonight, and tomorrow we can stop by the grocery store and find something more suitable for the next few days."

Celes halfway forced a smile. Not that it was a halfway smile, but that she involuntarily halfway smiled at Mr. Scythe's manner of speech, and an extra halfway forced smile ended up with her having a full smile as she responded to him. "That sounds great,

Mr. Scythe." But the reason she had to force half of that smile made this innocuous statement a minor fib: she had planned to go bike-riding all day tomorrow so she could think on her problem without any distractions, but if he expected her to go to the grocery store with him, that might take hours out of her day. Especially if he had extra errands to do while he was out, as grown-ups nearly always do.

"I'm not as good a cook as Sophie used to be, but I imagine I can still do a bit of justice to that fine kitchen back there. Especially if you're willing to lend an old man a bit of help on the morrow." Sophie must have been Mrs. Scythe's name. Odd that it would sound so strange to Celes' ear. Usually people's names tend to fit with their personalities, but Mrs. Scythe certainly didn't *feel* like a Sophie.

"I'll certainly help, Mr. Scythe. I'm pretty good in the kitchen myself, you know." That was no fib: Celes' cookies had even won honorable mention in the county fair last year, and that was in a competition against adults, not other teenagers. The prize ribbon that now hung in her room she considered far more valuable than the \$50 prize she got along with it; though of course the ribbon took second place to her signed poster of a certain famous singer she had met in person during a trip to Disney World earlier that summer. Now *that* had been a great concert.

Suddenly, with a bit more flourish than was absolutely necessary, Mr. Scythe had fanned out quite a number of restaurant menus, and presented them to Celes. "I'm afraid to admit that living alone has made me collect take-out menus a bit more zealously than is normally considered proper. But cooking just for oneself just isn't really worth the effort involved, if you know what I mean." The open drawer behind him hinted at where he had taken the menus from, though she had not noticed him getting them out at all. Perhaps he was a magician? That would certainly make things more interesting than she had expected. But no, if that were true, then surely Tina

would have told her long ago. He must be something exceedingly boring; were he anything rather exciting at all, Tina would have certainly told her what he was.

As she looked through the menus, she weighed the pros and cons of asking outright what he did. If he just told her, that would end the suspense, and she wouldn't have the pleasure of finding out for herself. But if it was something boring anyway, then what a letdown it would be to try hard to find out and be so disappointed!

"So what do you think, Celeste? Find anything you like?" Celes winced slightly as she looked through the menu.

"Celeste... Is it your name?" Celes looked up at him with a strange face. Maybe he *was* a magician, or a mind-reader at least. How did he guess what she was thinking?

Mr. Scythe smiled broadly, a smile she hadn't seen him make in a very long time. "It *is* your name, isn't it? That's what's making you make such a funny face every time I say it. Is it possible that I'm saying it incorrectly? Am I putting the accent on the wrong syllable?" As he said 'syllable', he indeed put the stress in the wrong place, and the result was so humorous that Celes could not help but to laugh.

"No, you're saying it perfectly well, Mr. Scythe." Her mirth was obvious, and Mr. Scythe's smile grew even broader, though it had not seemed possible only a moment before. "It's just that only my parents call me 'Celeste'; everyone else calls me 'Celes'."

"Ah, then that explains it, then! I had been wondering what I was doing wrong. Now that I know, I will call you Celes from now on—if that is alright with you, of course?"

"Oh, of course." There was no need to force even a quarter smile at

this point; she had a fully genuine smile without any effort at all.
"And thank you."

"You're perfectly welcome. But may I ask why? Is 'Celeste' really so terrible a moniker that you only let your parents use it? After all, if I remember aright, when Tina was here, she always called you 'Celeste' without you minding—though I'll admit that perhaps my mind is not what it once was." Of this, Celes was sure Mr. Scythe was exaggerating; sure he was old, but he still had not gone fully grey yet, and Celes was certain that his mind was quite apt indeed. Her father almost always complained of how he would usually dominate in their card games, and besides: he was right about Tina.

"Well, it wasn't so important back then. Tina didn't go to school over here, you know."

"What, if I may ask, does school have to do with who calls you what?"

"Well, at school there's another girl named Celeste, and she's *nothing* like me at all, though maybe she did look a little bit like me. But teachers would always confuse us for one another at the beginning of the year, and it was *so* annoying. So one day another girl came up with the nickname 'Celes' for me, and after that it was the only name I went by. But I guess when I was still a kid it didn't bother me if other people called me 'Celeste' so long as they didn't know that other 'Celeste' from school. Now, of course, I'm so used to my nickname that it's really become my real name, and only my parents still call me 'Celeste' anymore. Even though, strangely enough, that other Celeste left town years ago, and no one ever confuses me with anyone else anymore."

"Ah. I see." Though she was not quite certain that he did. "Well, Celes, have you decided on what you would like?"

She had, in fact, decided already, even without looking through more than a couple of menus, and within minutes their food had been ordered and would be on its way momentarily. While they waited for the food to arrive, Mr. Scythe served drinks and set the table, and Celes brought her small suitcase to the guest bedroom and unpacked her favorite alarm clock. She always brought that alarm clock with her, because its face (and hands) ran counter-clockwise rather than in the usual direction, and out of a long habit of reading time from it, she could never quite figure out the time on an ordinary faced clock. But this wasn't as large a handicap as it might at first seem, because most every clock is digital now anyway.

By the time she got back, Mr. Scythe was already sitting at the table, sipping from a mug of tea. The food had not yet arrived, but the table had already been set in as formal a fashion as Celes had seen in quite a while. Plainly, Mr. Scythe was making the most of this unexpected three-day visit. Certainly, he seemed to be enjoying it well enough.

Sitting at her place, she thanked him for the cola and remarked on the table settings. "Well, I have to use these dishes at some point, so I may as well bring them out for an occasion like this. I never bother while I'm by myself, and when your father comes by to play cards, it just never seems to warrant the attention of this fine china. But you, my fine lady, are as nice a guest as I've had in many years in this house, and I assure you that my poor neglected dishes are as grateful for your presence as I am. They exist, after all, to be used."

In that final sentence, Celes noticed a glint in his eye. It was the same glint her father had when he taught her how to fix her bike. The same glint her mother had when she wrote up a to-do list to add to Celes' chores for the summer each year. This was the kind of glint that told you something deep about a person. But why did it happen while he spoke of fine china? Was he a collector of dishes?

"Your dishes are really rather nice", Celes started, looking intently to see his reaction. But strangely he seemed no longer interested in dishes. Maybe he wasn't a dish-collector after all.

"Yes, they're nice enough. Would you like some more cola?" Without waiting for a response, he got up to refill her glass, which she had emptied rather quickly. Her parents didn't think cola was good for her health, so she only was allowed it on certain occasions.

When he got back, she thought of something else. His eyes had glinted when he said his dishes existed to be used; maybe it was not the dishes that interested him, but the *using* of those dishes. Maybe he loved to eat fine food. He might even be a professional food-taster. That seems like an odd enough profession to be interesting, but not so amazing that Tina would have told her about it. But if that were true, then why would he have planned on eating a microwavable dinner prior to her coming here? Still, she would try. "Maybe dishes exist to be used, but you might not use them for eating. You could hang them on your wall, like some people do." She watched closely for a reaction. Soon, it would be obvious what he did for a living. Celes could always figure things out, given enough time.

The minute she said it, the effect on him was unmistakable. He had been in the middle of pouring another glass of cola, and stopped halfway. His eyes glinted as he replied: "You're perfectly correct, of course. But maybe, just maybe, they may not exist to be used at all, however I might choose to use them." A humongous smile belied his tone as he finished pouring and walked back to the kitchen. He looked as though he had made a joke of the first order, although figuring out what that joke was was far more difficult than any joke Celes had ever heard.

While he put away the rest of the cola in the refrigerator, Celes tried

to parse his words. Dishes exist because people make them. People make them because they wish them to fulfill a use. Maybe the creator made the dish to be eaten upon, and maybe he made them to be displayed on a wall, but how is it possible for a dish to be made, yet not to be made to be used? Perhaps that *was* the joke: that it was a nonsensical thing to say. But if so, it wasn't a very clever joke; that would be like when you say to a kid: 'It's time to go to bed', and they respond by saying: 'Chicken Head!', and laugh uncontrollably. Nonsensical jokes are kids' stuff, and surely that is not what he meant to say at all. No, the joke must be that, at first, it seems obvious that no dish can exist without existing to be used, but that, after further thought, it turns out that there *is* a way that a dish can indeed exist without existing to be used. Like in *Alice in Wonderland*, where everything is completely nonsensical at first glance, but on further reflection it turns out that everything makes sense after its own fashion.

So when Mr. Scythe got back to the table, Celes knew exactly what to say. "The only way these dishes might exist without existing to be used is if they were made on a practice run. Then they would be made, but their purpose would be in their making, and not in their then being used."

The look in Mr. Scythe's eyes was then more than just a glint: it was a sparkle of pure joy. Now Celes had figured it out: he was a riddle-lover. Maybe he composed riddles for a living. "Celes, you're once again perfectly correct, though I had not before considered the idea of a practice run. I was, in fact, thinking of something else when I made my little joke, but I do believe you've one-upped me on it by making my thought seem silly in comparison."

"Then you had a different idea of how they might exist without existing to be used?" She was curious as to what alternative he had come up with, even while she was inwardly quite proud of having come up with an answer that he had not yet thought of.

"It's really quite embarrassing to mention after your beautiful example, but I was considering the idea that the dishes may have been popped into existence without a maker whatsoever."

At hearing his words, Celes frowned deeply. "But that's not a fair riddle. That's not realistic at all. An answer like that makes the riddle seem not worth it after it's been figured out." Only after she said this did she realize that what she was saying was quite rude, and she immediately apologized. "Uh, I'm sorry—I mean, that is, ..."

But Mr. Scythe only laughed. "Oh, don't apologize! You're right in that it was a very unfair riddle; but you see I hadn't thought of it as a riddle when I said it. I must admit that I'm a very poor riddler, when all is said and done. So please feel free to continue being honest with how poor a riddle I made. I fully agree with you, after all."

"Then you're not a riddle-maker?"

"Me? A riddle-maker? How funny! Is that what you think I do?"

"It would explain why you're free during the day to look after me. Riddle-makers can stay home and still make their riddles, after all. But no, I guess you're not a riddle-maker after all. But I did think I had it figured out; you see, I could tell by the look in your eye that you very much enjoyed speaking of the dish's purpose of existence, yet you didn't seem particularly interested in dishes, nor in food. I've been trying to figure out what you do for a while now. Will you give me a clue?"

Mr. Scythe found this all so amusing that he almost didn't hear the doorbell when the meal finally arrived. But after tipping the delivery person and carefully serving from the flimsy containers onto the formal place settings, he finally got around to responding to her.

"What I do, it turns out, is different from what I am. But I don't mean this as a riddle; it's just that—well, you'd never guess this from the behavior you've so far observed, but I just happen to be an editor."

"You mean like a newspaper editor?"

"Well, like a magazine editor, at least. I edit a journal of ethics."

This was a word Celes had not ever heard before. "Ethics?"

"Ethics is... Well, let me see how to put this." He put down his fork for a moment and thought before continuing. "Ethics is the study of the form of what is right and what is wrong."

Celes thought this a silly way of putting it, especially if he just meant ethics is the study of what's right and what's wrong—but then she realized, like the earlier joke, that there must be a reason he didn't put it so simply, and so it was important to say that it was the study of the 'form', rather than of right and wrong in itself. But the difference between the two was not immediately clear. And what kind of right and wrong did he mean? "Do you mean right and wrong like 'don't cross the street without looking both ways first', or like 'don't rob a bank'?"

"Like both, actually. What I study is less about which things are right or wrong than about how I might go about finding out which things really are right or wrong." The confusion on Celes' face made him smile and explain further. "A boat builder might be interested in building boats, while a boat philosopher is more interested in how a boat might be built. Similarly, there are moralists who are interested in what is right and what is wrong; but I am more of a philosopher who is interested in *how* a thing is right or wrong."

"Like someone who designs a new kind of boat?"

"Well... no. A boat innovator is kind of halfway between the boat builder and the boat philosopher. The innovator looks to improvements that can be made and then gives instructions to the builder to follow. But the philosopher is not interested in improving things or even in whether or not they get built at all. He is more interested in how a boat might be built, even if no one builds it (or *can* build it). Similarly, there are moralist-builders, and moralist-innovators, but philosophers are not moralists at all—or, if they are, they are only so in addition to being a philosopher. I'm one of these: a philosopher of ethics. An ethicist."

"But I still don't know what you mean by the 'form' of what is right. If something is right, then it is right. I don't get the distinction you are making when you say 'form'."

Mr. Scythe paused for a few seconds while he chewed his food and thought. Finally, he said: "I like to look at how we might recognize a thing is right, and know that we're correct in declaring it right."

Now Celes paused before answering, trying to let it sink in. After all, even though the words seemed innocuous enough, he had clearly given effort into deciding to phrase it that way, so he must mean something in using those particular words. "You mean because, um, just because someone says something is right, doesn't mean that it *is* right."

Mr. Scythe smiled at her double 'because', obviously appreciating its presence. "That's exactly correct."

"So you try to figure out how to go about recognizing what is right?"

"Yes."

Celes smiled in between chewing, thinking, and drinking. It was rare to have such an adult conversation. Usually people talked down to

teenagers her age. "I know that just because someone says something is right doesn't make it right. They might be lying, after all. But I can think of lots of things that are right. Like loving my father. I know that that is at least right, even if I don't know everything that is right."

"It's certainly possible that you might know a few right things, even if you don't know all of them. But tell me: how do you know it's right to love your father?"

Celes expected that question, and was immediately ready with an answer. "I know that it's right because it *feels* right. Don't you feel that it's right, too?"

Mr. Scythe smiled. "You certainly have me there. I do happen to feel that it's right, too. And you've hit upon a major method of going about looking for what is right. Lots of ethicists believe feelings have a lot to do with what is right. But sometimes feelings can be rather deceiving, you know." He took another bite before continuing. "Like when you feel like drinking cola too much even if it's bad for you." (And so Celes knew that Mr. Scythe knew that he was giving her a special treat by serving cola.) "But more importantly, not everyone feels the same way. You have bullies at school, yes?"

Of course there were bullies at school. Like Rene, who was held back a grade, and was much bigger than the other boys, though not all the girls. But what had that to do with how one feels? "...yes, we have bullies."

"I thought you might. There are always bullies at school, just like everywhere else in life. But when your bully does something that's against the rules—"

"Like pick on someone else."

"—yes, like picking on someone else, then he feels he's doing something right, even while the person being picked on feels the bully is doing something wrong. But things can't be both right and wrong at the same time, so at least one of their feelings must be mistaken. And if feelings can be mistaken, then we cannot adequately rely on feelings alone to figure out what is right or wrong."

"But surely bullies know they're doing the wrong thing. I mean, I don't suppose they bully others around while thinking they're being quite kind. Then you'd have to feel sorry for them, rather than think they were mean bullies."

Mr. Scythe smiled again. "You're right, of course. Perhaps my bully example was not so well chosen. But knowing something is against the rules is quite different from knowing something is wrong. He might recognize it being wrong rules-wise, yet not right-&-wrong-wise. But perhaps another example where people genuinely feel they are right on opposing sides would make things more clear."

"Like two sides of a war."

"Exactly. Or even between a person who thinks that war may be justified and a person who thinks that war is not ever right."

"So I can't entirely trust that my feelings are leading me to what is truly right." She paused, thinking for a moment. "But I still know it's right to love my father for another reason."

"What's that?"

"Because my mother taught me to always love my father. But I don't just mean her. Her mother taught the same thing, and all my friends' mothers. Even your mother, I bet. Even the bullies' mothers."

"So if it is taught by a mother, then it is right?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. Some things that some mothers teach are wrong, I'm sure. But *most* mothers teach people to love their father. And fathers teach it, too, of course."

"So if most people of the previous generation teach it, then it must be right?"

"Well, they can't all be wrong, can they? If most of them think it is true..."

"So if most people think something is true, then it *is* true?"

"No, of course not. I'm not talking about what most people think. People can be wrong. But most *teachers* teach that loving one's father is right. By 'teacher', I mostly mean mothers and fathers, but you get the idea. I'm not talking about what the whole world believes; I'm talking about what the teachers teach."

"Ah, you mean specialists. The mass of humanity may be mistaken, but the ones in the know must know better."

"Yeah, something like that."

"But they may be mistaken as well, you know. In fact, throughout most of history, most teachers—even the best of teachers—have been supremely incorrect about many different things."

"Like what?"

"Like the shape of the world. There was a time when everyone's mother taught that the world was flat."

"But then we learned better, and now mothers teach that it is round."

With each passing generation, teachers teach more and more correctly. That's what makes them good teachers."

"Not all teachers are good. But I see what you mean. Yet keep in mind that in order to make the switch from teaching that the world is flat to teaching that the world is round, at some point the daughters had to ignore what their mother told them and instead listened to another voice that made more sense."

"Who did they listen to, if not other teachers, and thereby proving my point?"

Mr. Scythe smiled widely. "I can tell that you're used to winning arguments. But your point will not yet be proven by me. For they listened not to other teachers as you mean it to be, but to the best teacher of them all: the best and most sensible voice to ever be heard in all of history."

"Who?"

"Why, to reason, of course!" At that, Mr. Scythe laughed heartily. Celes smiled, though she felt more than a little bit duped at this response. He was certainly a very eccentric man.

After his laughter died down and she had taken a few more bites, she continued her questioning. "So what does reason say when it comes to what is right? If we can't rely on our feelings, nor on what our parents teach us, then what else is there? God?" Celes's parents were not very religious, and thus Celes was not very religious. But she knew some friends at school who believed in an all-powerful being looking over the world. It did not make much sense to her, but maybe it might explain how to find out what is right or not.

Mr. Scythe's face took a serious turn at the suggestion. "Well, that's certainly a possibility. But if there is a god, and if that god tells us

what is right, then is it right because he tells us it is, or does he tell us it's right because it *is* right?"

Of all the things Mr. Scythe had yet said, this was by far the most confusing. "...I know that you must be meaning to say something important with that question, but I just can't figure out what it is. I mean, what's the difference *why* God may tell us? In the end, it's still whatever is right that we're trying to discover, and listening to him may show us whatever that is."

Mr. Scythe grew thoughtful at the remark before responding. Without asking, he got up to refill Celes' cola while he spoke: "I'm not a moralist, so it's less important to me, but you do make a good point. Yet remember that we don't know whether or not a god even exists. And even if we hear something that sounds like a god telling us what is good, then how do we know it really *is* a god? After all, it could be a devil trying to deceive us."

Celes thanked him with a nod for the drink as she responded. "I don't really believe in any of that sort of thing." Then she thought of something. "Though... I guess I don't believe in it mainly because my parents taught me not to. So I might be mistaken."

Mr. Scythe's face lost the serious look and went back to his now usual smile. "Yes, you're catching on quite quickly! Personally, I don't believe in that claptrap either, but you never know: we might both be mistaken!"

But Celes still didn't understand. "What did you mean by reminding me that you aren't a moralist? And that earlier question still doesn't make much sense; what did you mean by asking whether God tells us something is right because it is, or something is right because God tells us?"

"I reminded you that I'm not a moralist because you asked what

difference it made so long as a god tells us what is good. To a moralist, it wouldn't matter, I suppose, but I care about something deeper than whether or not a specific thing is good."

"You care about *why* it's good."

"Exactly. As to your second question..." Pausing, he looked off into the distance, seemingly collecting his thoughts into a good reply. "If a thing is right because a god tells us that it is right, then it wasn't right prior to his saying so. Presumably, he could have said anything at all and declared that it is right, and it would then be right." After a moment, he added another comment. "By 'prior', I mean not to say 'before' in terms of time, but 'due' in terms of requirements."

Celes frowned. "I have no idea as to what you mean by 'prior', I think. Or, rather, I have an idea, but only out of context, and this is despite your attempt to explain it. What do you mean by 'due'?"

Mr. Scythe smiled again. "That's what I get for not thinking it through before I tried clarifying the word 'prior'. It's a difficult term to use, when you mean to use it in the second sense, and not the sense of the word that deals with time."

"It's okay. I think I understand, from context, at least. You mean God could have said killing people is right, and then it would be right, right?" She smiled at her phrasing.

"Yes, if things are right because he says so. Not killing people was just as neutrally objective a concept as killing people before he chose one of them to call right and the other wrong."

"So if things are right because God says so, then the only way you can discover what is right and what is wrong is by looking at what God says—and what He says is completely arbitrary, since He could have chosen anything to be right, and anything to be wrong!" The

thought frightened her.

"Exactly. But, of course, there is another possibility."

"Oh, yes, the other half of your original question. The other possibility is that God says things are right because they *are* right. Which means...." She thought for a moment. "Because God knows everything, He knows that specific things are right and specific things are wrong, and then He can tell us which is which."

"You have it down perfectly."

"And in that case, God doesn't explain the *why* of what is good! Because He has nothing to do with whether a thing is right or wrong; He is just able to see what is right and what is wrong more efficiently than we can."

Mr. Scythe smiled, even while he was sipping his tea.

"In which case, it might be helpful for someone who wants to know what is right (such as a moralist) to listen to God; but what *you're* interested in is not which things are right and which are wrong, but *why* they're right or wrong." Celes seemed rather excited at having fully understood the idea. "And if God *caused* what is right, then what is right is arbitrary, and you have nothing left to study; but if God just *noticed* what is right, then God has nothing to do with why it's right. And either way, talking about God just muddles the issue!"

Mr. Scythe nodded thoughtfully. He was finished eating, though he was still pecking through his dessert. Celes, on the other hand, had quite a bit more food to go.

"I don't think my religious friends would like realizing that God has nothing to do with ethics."

"Perhaps not."

"But, ..."

"Yes?"

"...it seems like listening to reason has only told us what *can't* tell us what is right. We can't trust our feelings, or our parents, and if we turn to God, we either find that what is right makes no difference, or that God isn't the reason behind what is right. Where else is there to turn in order to find out the truth about what is right?"

"Now that is a question that has haunted many a philosopher. In even asking it, you mark yourself as a true philosopher of ethics, just like me, even if you haven't realized it before now." Celes was startled to think of herself as a philosopher of ethics. "Thankfully, what with all the philosophers who have worked on this question for thousands of years, there are lots of intriguing possibilities that have been thought up."

"Like what?"

"Well, maybe what is right depends on how we act. In which case the way we do things determine whether it is right or not."

Celes thought for a moment. "Hmm.... It sounds like you've just given a loose description of where what is right is determined. But you used the word 'maybe', which is a bit confusing. It seems to me like the only thing it depends on is how we act. Is there a different possibility?"

"Yes, there are other possibilities. But thinking of them all took many different philosophers many long years of thought, and we still have probably not found them all. Here, I'll give one example: Maybe it

has to do with intention. In which case, it doesn't really matter what you do, so long as you intend to do the right thing."

"I see. Yes, that makes sense. Or it could be a bit of both, I guess."

"Good guess. But there's yet another possibility: maybe it has to do with the results. In which case it doesn't matter what you do nor what you intend, so long as the results are good."

"But if the results matter, then surely what you do matters also? Because what you do determines what happens."

"Very astute! But what I mean by saying the results are what matters is that the *only* reason one choice is better than another is if the consequences of that choice are better."

Celes finished three bites before replying. "I think I understand. So if how we act matters, then it may be true that looking both ways before crossing the street could be right. And if intentions matter, then no matter how we cross, if we intend to not get hit, then that could be right. And if consequences matter, if we get across safely, then however we did it would be right. Right?"

"Exactly. Though despite not being a moralist, I feel compelled to say that you should of course always look both ways before crossing the street, no matter what."

"But for a different reason each time! If action matters, then it is because looking both ways is important. If intention matters, then it's because looking both ways is the best way to accomplish what you want. And if consequences matter, then looking both ways is the best method for getting across safely."

Mr. Scythe's smile could not get any broader.

"It's odd that so much thought can go into this, but no matter what we still end up with the same conclusion."

He nodded. "That's why I said earlier that I'm not so much interested in what happens to be right or not, but more about *why* it's right. Most people agree that looking both ways before crossing the street is the right thing to do."

"Only most people?"

"Well, for example, some people think humans are destroying the environment so badly that they think any action which results in the deaths of more humans is always a good thing. They would say looking both ways is wrong because they'd rather you get hit by oncoming traffic."

"That's horrible!"

"I agree. But to them, it seems right. And other people think that the word 'right' has no meaning unless it's in reference to a stated goal. For example, they might think that it is perfectly okay to talk about saying it is right to study if you want to do well on your test, but it is meaningless to say that it is right to study without regard to a reason why. So if you ask them whether looking both ways before crossing the street is right, they would ask: what do you want to accomplish by looking both ways first? If you answer: 'I want to avoid getting hit by traffic', they will then be very glad to say it is right. But notice that the concept of right loses all of its universal meaning that way. They are effectively abolishing the concept of what is 'right' in isolation." Celes loved how he talked to her like any other grown-up. It was very empowering.

"How does it 'abolish the concept'?"

"Hmm...." Mr. Scythe got up to refill her glass again. "I see you're

enjoying your cola well enough."

"Quite." Celes smiled.

Refilling her glass, he continued. "Well, let's say you asked them if it is right to kill someone. They would refuse to answer until you told them what you intended to accomplish by killing them. They would say something like: 'It is right to kill them if your intent is to have them die, but if the goal is to not let humans die unnecessarily, then killing them is wrong'."

The only drawback to having him talk to her like any other grown-up is that he could be very unclear at times. "You're being a bit confusing with the way you're talking, but I think I get what you're saying. You mean they do what my mother does whenever I ask her about something she'd rather not answer. She just replies by answering a different question."

Mr. Scythe laughed. "Yes, I guess you're right."

"So there are really two different 'right thing to do' concepts: the right thing to do, and the right thing to do in order to accomplish something."

"Call them right-one and right-two, for short."

Celes thought the names sounded weird, but went with it anyway. "Okay. So Right1 is the right thing to do, period. This is what you and I have been talking about all this time with feelings and mothers and god and action and intent and results. But right2 is something different entirely, though it has the same name. Right2 is like a completely different word that just happens to sound the same, and be spelled the same way; it has to do with what the right thing to do is in order to accomplish some goal."

"Just like that classmate of yours who had the same name as you."

"Yeah.... We had the same name, and looked a bit similar, but we're completely different people."

"So when you say these people are like your mom in answering a different question...?"

"Oh, I mean that you ask them 'is it right1 to do this?', and they respond by acting as though you used the word 'right2' by asking what you want to accomplish by doing it. They're answering a different question than the one that was asked."

"Yes, I believe you're quite right. They are. But, perhaps unlike your mother, they're not trying to avoid the question; they just think that the word 'right1' doesn't make any sense at all, and so assume you must be meaning 'right2' instead."

"So they don't believe there's any such thing as right and wrong."

"I guess you could say that. Right1 and wrong1, anyway."

Celes smiled.

By this point, both had finished their meals, and they were quite happy with one another. It was obvious that even after these three days ended, Celes would be visiting Mr. Scythe regularly in the future.

"Well, I haven't had such an enjoyable dinner in a very long time! You're a very interesting dinner companion, young lady."

"Thank you; I enjoyed it as well. But I still have so much more to ask!"

"Oh, do you really?" He chuckled lightly to himself. "I had no idea you'd be so interested in the philosophy of ethics."

"Well, it's very interesting, and I'm quite enjoying myself," Celes prefaced, "but actually there's another reason why I'm so interested, too."

Curiosity piqued Mr. Scythe's ears, which sounds strange, but really isn't. It consisted mostly of a slight head tilt. "What's that?"

"Well, it's a problem I have. I guess you'd call it an ethical problem."

"Ah, I see. I can't promise that I can help you with it, what with me not being a moralist and all, but I can promise that I'll try." When she paused overly long, he added: "And I promise to not tell anyone else about it, unless I have to in order to save someone else from harm—save Sophie, of course, who can't blab it on to anyone else in the state she's in."

Celes looked at him in a new light. Before, it was the pleasure of talking on ideas that made her enjoy his presence. Now she also marveled at the strict honesty he gave her. "I like the way you promised that. You're not overpromising, and you're letting me know in advance what you're willing to keep secret, and you're reminding me who you can't keep secrets from."

"Well, I certainly don't want to lie to you, after all." He smiled in his now quite familiar way. "After all, where would that get me? But what is this problem that's got you all worked up?"

Celes took a deep breath. "Well, ..."

