How, then, can we reason our way through the contested terrain of justice and injustice, equality and inequality, individual rights and the common good? This book tries to answer that question.

One way to begin is to notice how moral reflection emerges naturally from an encounter with a hard moral question. We start with an opinion, or a conviction, about the right thing to do: “Turn the trolley onto the side track.” Then we reflect on the reason for our conviction, and seek out the principle on which it is based: “Better to sacrifice one life to avoid the death of many.” Then, confronted with a situation that confounds the principle, we are pitched into confusion: “I thought it was always right to save as many lives as possible, and yet it seems wrong to push the man off the bridge (or to kill the unarmed goatherds).” Feeling the force of that confusion, and the pressure to sort it out, is the impulse to philosophy.

Confronted with this tension, we may revise our judgment about the right thing to do, or rethink the principle we initially espoused. As we encounter new situations, we move back and forth between our judgments and our principles, revising each in light of the other. This turning of mind, from the world of action to the realm of reasons and back again, is what moral reflection consists in.

This way of conceiving moral argument, as a dialectic between our judgments about particular situations and the principles we affirm on reflection, has a long tradition. It goes back to the dialogues of Socrates and the moral philosophy of Aristotle. But notwithstanding its ancient lineage, it is open to the following challenge:

If moral reflection consists in seeking a fit between the judgments we make and the principles we affirm, how can such reflection lead us to justice, or moral truth? Even if we succeed, over a lifetime, in bringing our moral intuitions and principled commitments into alignment, what confidence can we have that the result is anything more than a self-consistent skein of prejudice?

The answer is that moral reflection is not a solitary pursuit but a public endeavor. It requires an interlocutor—a friend, a neighbor, a comrade, a fellow citizen. Sometimes the interlocutor can be imagined rather than real, as when we argue with ourselves. But we cannot discover the meaning of justice or the best way to live through introspection alone.

In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates compares ordinary citizens to a group of prisoners confined in a cave. All they ever see is the play of shadows on the wall, a reflection of objects they can never apprehend. Only the philosopher, in this account, is able to ascend from the cave to the bright light of day, where he sees things as they really are. Socrates suggests that, having glimpsed the sun, only the philosopher is fit to rule the cave dwellers, if he can somehow be coaxed back into the darkness where they live.

Plato’s point is that to grasp the meaning of justice and the nature of the good life, we must rise above the prejudices and routines of everyday life. He is right, I think, but only in part. The claims of the cave must be given their due. If moral reflection is dialectical—if it moves back and forth between the judgments we make in concrete situations and the principles that inform those judgments—it needs opinions and convictions, however partial and untutored, as ground and grist. A philosophy untouched by the shadows on the wall can only yield a sterile utopia.

When moral reflection turns political, when it asks what laws should govern our collective life, it needs some engagement with the tumult of the city, with the arguments and incidents that roil the public mind. Debates over bailouts and price gouging, income inequality and affirmative action, military service and same-sex marriage, are the stuff of political philosophy. They prompt us to articulate and justify our moral and political convictions, not only among family and friends but also in the demanding company of our fellow citizens.

More demanding still is the company of political philosophers, ancient and modern, who thought through, in sometimes radical and surprising ways, the ideas that animate civic life—justice and rights, obligation and consent, honor and virtue, morality and law. Aristotle,
Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls all figure in these pages. But their order of appearance is not chronological. This book is not a history of ideas, but a journey in moral and political reflection. Its goal is not to show who influenced whom in the history of political thought, but to invite readers to subject their own views about justice to critical examination—to figure out what they think, and why.

2. THE GREATEST HAPPINESS PRINCIPLE / UTILITARIANISM

In the summer of 1884, four English sailors were stranded at sea in a small lifeboat in the South Atlantic, over a thousand miles from land. Their ship, the Mignonette, had gone down in a storm, and they had escaped to the lifeboat, with only two cans of preserved turnips and no fresh water. Thomas Dudley was the captain, Edwin Stephens was the first mate, and Edmund Brooks was a sailor—all men of excellent character, according to newspaper accounts.

The fourth member of the crew was the cabin boy, Richard Parker, age seventeen. He was an orphan, on his first long voyage at sea. He had signed up against the advice of his friends, “in the hopefulness of youthful ambition,” thinking the journey would make a man of him. Sadly, it was not to be.

From the lifeboat, the four stranded sailors watched the horizon, hoping a ship might pass and rescue them. For the first three days, they ate small rations of turnips. On the fourth day, they caught a turtle. They subsisted on the turtle and the remaining turnips for the next few days. And then for eight days, they ate nothing.

By now Parker, the cabin boy, was lying in the corner of the lifeboat. He had drunk seawater, against the advice of the others, and become ill. He appeared to be dying. On the nineteenth day of their ordeal, Dudley, the captain, suggested drawing lots to determine who