Morality is one of the fundamental structures of any society, enabling complex groups to form, negotiate their internal differences and persist through time. In the first book-length study of Roman popular morality, Dr Morgan argues that we can recover much of the moral thinking of people up and down the Empire. Her study draws on proverbs, fables, exemplary stories and gnomic quotations to explore how morality worked as a system for Roman society as a whole and in individual lives. It analyses the content of sayings and stories to show which ideas and practices were central to Roman morality, which peripheral, which widely accepted or contested. It explores the wide range of authorities (natural and socially constructed, absolute and negotiable) which were invoked in support of moral ideas and actions, and shows how different ethics appealed to different authorities. It traces the relationship between popular morality, high philosophy, and the ethical vocabulary of documents and inscriptions. The Roman Empire incorporated numerous overlapping groups, whose ideas varied according to social status, geography, gender and many other factors. Nevertheless it could and did hold together as an ethical community, which was a significant factor in its socio-political success.

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POPULAR MORALITY IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

TERESA MORGAN
In Memoriam

Madge Jones (1909–2004)
Florence Kendall (1912–1990)
Harry Kendall (1912–1986)
Kathleen Morgan (1915–1997)
Donald Watson (1910–2005)
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Early versions of some of the material in this book were delivered as papers in Cambridge, Charlottesville, Helsinki, Jerusalem, Oxford, Princeton, Salamanca and Yale, and published in volumes edited by Leofranc Holford-Strevens and Amiel Vardi, José-Antonio Fernández Delgado and Antonio Stramaglia. Warmest thanks are due to the participants in all those seminars and conferences for their lively discussion of ideas and helpful suggestions.

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Many Oxford colleagues have contributed to the project in informal conversations, and it is a continuing pleasure to work among so many stimulating colleagues. Among those with whom, internationally, it is a pleasure to share an interest in ethics are Catalina Balmaceda and the economist Vivien Foster, who over the years has made me think harder and more constructively about more topics than anyone else.

Wishing the book to be accessible to those without Greek and Latin, I have translated primary sources throughout. Unfortunately, to include the many thousands of texts cited in the original as well would have made the text hopelessly bulky, so with considerable regret, they are omitted. I hope that readers will accept my apologies as they pursue the sources to their diverse original publications.

I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a family where what it means to live well – to live rightly – was a subject of constant and passionate debate. This book remembers Harry Kendall, a man of radiant loving kindness and integrity, who taught us to garden, maintain a bicycle and fill in a tax return, and used to say that ‘life is not a highway strewn with flowers’. It honours the exemplary lives of Madge Jones and Kathleen Morgan, who nursed
patients in hospital and their relatives at home, and Florence Kendall, who
preserved her family through bad and good times into prosperity and taught
us to cook and clean. It remembers Donald Watson, pioneering vegan (he
coined the word in the 1940s) and anti-nuclear campaigner, who in old age
made a collection of several hundred English proverbs which he thought
people should take more seriously. Millions of ordinary Greeks and Romans
like them must have used the sayings and stories that make up this study,
and are forgotten.
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Table

Number and distribution of stories about or sayings of philosophers in wisdom texts (with distribution of references in Aelian’s *VH*)  277
In addition to the standard abbreviations for ancient and modern works, the following abbreviations are used:

B Babrius, *Fables*


D Ps.-Diogenianus, *Popular Proverbs*

LDAB Leuven Database of Ancient Books

P Ps.-Plutarch, *Proverbs of the Alexandrians*

Perotti Perotti’s Appendix of Fables

Ph Phaedrus, *Fables*

PS Publilius Syrus, *Sententiae*

VM Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Words and Deeds*

Z Zenobius, *Epitome of Zenobius’ Proverbs*
How should we live? What kind of people should we be? What is it good or bad, necessary or right, sweet, absurd or impossible to do? Who decides for us, and on what grounds? These are fundamental human questions, and few people or societies pass a day without asking them. For a historian or an anthropologist, the question is framed in slightly different terms: what role does morality play in helping any group of people to create or maintain a society?

This book takes as its premise that morality matters. Like political, social and economic behaviour, moral behaviour is endemic in human societies. Like them, it helps groups to organize themselves, to negotiate their inevitable differences and to survive. Like them, it has a grammar, a structure, which is as distinctive of the group as is its language or religion. Unlike them, however, it is often overlooked as a constituent of history.

The focus of this study is what I shall call the popular morality of the Roman Empire in, roughly, the first two centuries of the common era. The early Empire has a number of attractions for a historian of ethics. More of the Greek and Roman world was then united (at least nominally) under one ruler than at any other time, giving us a vast field in which to work while remaining within the boundaries of one state.\(^1\) It is a period outstandingly rich in all kinds of evidence, literary and documentary, making a many-sided study possible within a manageable chronological scope. Surprisingly, in view of these advantages, the popular morality (as opposed to imperial virtues, for instance) of the early Empire has not attracted as much interest as that of some other parts of antiquity. A period so remarkable in other respects, however, seems likely to be interesting ethically, and I hope to show that it is.

By ‘popular morality’ or ‘popular ethics’ I mean ethical ideas which were in wide circulation around the Empire and widely shared up and down the

\(^1\) Insofar as it is appropriate to talk of boundaries, a question to which we shall return (pp. 183–4, Ch. Twelve).
Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire

social spectrum. These ideas are not, as we shall see, completely separate from ethical theories which were developed by philosophers, but I shall leave consideration of ‘high’ philosophy and its relationship with popular morality until the penultimate chapter. Meanwhile, I shall try to show that ‘popular’ is no misnomer. We can plausibly identify certain genres of ethical material as either originating in, or percolating to, the lower reaches of Roman society, even when our evidence for them comes from higher-level sources.

Not every moral value or practice will have been equally applicable to everyone, nor equally appealing. The Roman Empire – vast, patchwork and multicultural – was no more one indivisible community in ethics than in social structure, language or religion. We shall do better to think of multiple overlapping communities with overlapping moralities. I shall try to show, however, that the degree of common moral ground between socially and geographically different groups is considerable, and that we can often talk meaningfully of the ethics of the Empire as a whole.

I shall examine both the content and the structure of moral material and argue that they are remarkably coherent (about as coherent as one might expect a language or religious system to be, allowing for occasional anomalies). We shall see that Roman popular morality has well-defined areas of interest which are not identical to those of other societies, and that (in sharp contrast, for instance, to most modern systems) executive ethics predominate in Roman thinking, while ‘being good’ tends to mean being good of your kind.

The language of ethics tells us not only about the

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2 There is no general agreement as to when one should use the word ‘ethics’ and when ‘morality’. Some scholars prefer to use ‘ethics’ of the classical world, feeling that ‘morality’ has too many modern religious overtones. Others feel the opposite, and others again use both indistinguishably, in keeping with their semantic origins. I shall use both indistinguishably.

3 This study was conceived as the first of two, the second of which would focus on early Christian ethics. It does not, therefore, deal with religious minorities – most distinctively, Jews and Christians – but confines itself to the mainstream, which means not only the popular, but the ‘pagan’ (though I shall try to avoid using this unsatisfactory word).

4 In a few cases, the ethics of separate groups, such as Romans and Spartans (below, pp. 153, 174), converge substantially, and as it seems coincidentally (though we cannot rule out the possibility that by the imperial period, the portrayal of one group influenced that of the other). Since both groups are the subject of many sayings and stories, this gives an even stronger impression of ethics being shared across the Empire than is perhaps justified. I shall try to allow for such potential distortions of the evidence in drawing my conclusions.

5 Many of the ideas of the early Empire are not, of course, unique to it, since it is part of the wider Graeco-Roman world which is in continuous evolution over a long period of time. Nor is there room in this study thoroughly to compare the first and second centuries with the fifth century BCE or the fifth century CE, to see what changes occur. I shall, though, from time to time indicate what I think is distinctive about the shape of ethics at this period.

6 Below, pp. 179–90.
content of the system, but about its authorities and aims, both of which I shall investigate and connect to content and structure. From all this I shall draw a number of conclusions about the overall shape and significance of popular morality and what it tells us about its time and place.

It will emerge that in various ways the ethics of the early Empire and its social and economic structures suited each other. What I shall not try to do, however, is to show that ethics were designed to support (or problematize, or comment on) any particular political, social or any other structure. There is still a tendency among historians (not to mention archaeologists and literary critics) to treat cultural phenomena as ancillary to political, social or economic phenomena. I doubt that this is often justified, but in the case of ethics, it certainly is not. Ethics must, for the most practical reasons, be among the first systems to evolve in any developing human society. People cannot live together until they have agreed not to murder each other (and agreed what counts as murder); they cannot farm until they have agreed not to steal from one another; they cannot decide who belongs to an ongoing group without deciding who can legitimately breed with whom. There is as much justification for speculating that political and social structures come into being to encode, protect and enforce ethical structures as the other way around. We should therefore treat morality as an aspect of ancient society in its own right, to be assessed on its own terms. It contributes to the continued existence of its society, and interacts with other aspects of it in many ways, but it does not depend on them, and does not exist simply to shore them up.²

THE POPULARITY OF MORALITY

‘Popular’ is a word which makes classicists nervous, and with good reason. In a world with probably no more than 20 per cent male literacy, maybe much less, and certainly much lower female literacy, the written sources on which we depend so heavily can never be trusted to refer to the great majority of people.³ The high literature from which we mainly construct our picture of

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² Making me in anthropological terms a culturalist or symbolic-culturalist (Geertz 1973: 142–6, Bell 1997: 61–2).
³ Harris 1989: 3–24 prefers an even lower estimate which is now widely felt to be too sceptical. Morgan 1998: 39–42, 50–89, 120–51 is not much more optimistic than Harris, but I am now rather more optimistic, at least about the Roman Empire, where at least minimal literacy was needed in a wide range of occupations, was regularly taught in the army and is evidenced by a vast body of graffiti Empire-wide. Horsfall 2003: 20–30 helpfully summarizes the difficulties of identifying Roman popular culture in literary sources, and this study as a whole shows how much can be done despite the difficulties.
Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire

Greek and Roman culture was written and read by a far smaller proportion of the population than that. Documentary and archaeological sources relate to a much wider range of people, but mainly to their social and economic lives. Of their beliefs, their attitudes, their language or culture, only scattered fragments of evidence survive, and their own voices are almost completely lost to us.

It would be premature, however, to despair. It is clear that some ‘literary’ works, though written by members of the social and cultural elite, had a mass audience from at least the sixth century BCE well into late antiquity. Foremost among them is Homer, followed by new comic playwrights, especially Menander, Plautus and Terence, farces and mimes. Oratory of all kinds was delivered to mass audiences in lawcourts, public assemblies and town councils. During the principate, epideictic oratory, delivered on behalf of a town in honour of visiting dignitaries, to honour local benefactors and politicians, or to mark a special occasion of almost any kind, by rhetors who were often paid by cities or emperors themselves to practise and teach their skill, was a prime form of public entertainment. In at least some places and times, it was common for the works of historians to be publicly read and honoured in their native or adopted towns. Even philosophers could become local celebrities.

Nor was the flow of culture all one way. Proverbs are a case in point: described by Aristotle as the earliest surviving form of philosophy and the particular property of ordinary people, proverbs were an object of interest to philosophers and scholars from the fourth century BCE to the end of antiquity and beyond. It is thanks to them that several collections of proverbs survive, as well as numerous individual proverbs scattered through literary works. Fables, too, were regarded as the special form of speech of slaves and the oppressed, but that did not stop authors of higher social status collecting and retelling them and inventing more of their own in the same style. Both fables and proverbs are widely described in literary texts as popular, vulgar, primitive or suitable for children as well as useful, moral and educational; evidently contemporaries regarded them as what we should call ‘popular’ morality. Mimes and farces, like much comedy, occupy an ambivalent position between the vulgar and the sophisticated: the examples that survive may have been written by the relatively highly cultured, but they derived from popular entertainment and continued to draw on it.

10 Below, pp. 57–62.
We should not underestimate, therefore, the degree to which groups up and down the social scale shared and exchanged aspects of their culture. More than that, we can, I think, identify certain sources of ethical material which are more likely than others to be widely shared, and sometimes to have risen from the ranks of popular culture to be enshrined in the writings of the elite. It is on four such groups of material that this study is based: proverbs, fables, gnomic quotations from famous authors, and exemplary stories.

**Proverbs, Fables, Gnomai and Exempla**

Chapters Two to Five will have more to say about the definition and terminology of these genres. A gnomic quotation (gnômê in Greek, sententia in Latin) is a moralizing fragment taken from a well-known author. It usually consists of a line of verse, less often a sentence of prose, and is complete grammatically and in meaning. Closely related to proverbs and gnomai are moralizing riddles, of which a few examples (and one short collection) survive on papyrus or embedded in other texts. I shall include these, too few to merit a chapter of their own, in discussions of proverbs and gnomai. An exemplary story (chreia in Greek, exemplum in Latin) is the short, pithy account of a saying or action of a famous man (or less often, woman). The heroes of exempla may be philosophers or ‘wise men’ such as the Seven Sages of archaic Greece, rulers, military commanders and occasionally orators or poets.

Proverbs, fables, gnomai and exempla are as widely distributed across our written remains as it is possible to be. They appear not only in independent collections and embedded in works of literature, but on papyrus in formal, scholars’ and school hands, and in inscriptions. Collections which consist only of gnomai, proverbs, fables or exempla are easily identified. Embedded

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12 I use the Greek term for a gnomic quotation and a Latin term for an exemplary story, not because those genres are distinctive of those languages (below, pp. 123–5), but because the largest body of each genre to survive to us in this period happens to be in that language. Since our sources are divided between both languages, it also seems reasonable to borrow terms from both. The words gnômê and exemplum are so common throughout this study that I have not italicized them (nor chreia and sententia), nor marked the long syllables.


14 Kindstrand 1978: 76 notes the relationship between proverbs and riddles, observed in antiquity at least by CLEarchus (Ath. 10.86 457c = fr. 63, Wehrli III); Kindstrand suggests that CLEarchus took this from Aristotle. Cf. Milner 1970 on the close relationship between proverbs and riddles across cultures and Hasan-Rock 1974 on the relationship between proverbs and riddles in Aramaic. In the *Life of Aesop*, Aesop solves a riddle (78–9) as well as telling fables and offering advice in proverbial style.