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Chapter 1

Ethical Theories

Introduction

James Rachels: *Egoism and Moral Scepticism*

John Arthur: *Religion, Morality, and Conscience*

Saint Thomas Aquinas: *The Natural Law*

David Hume: *Morality Is Based on Sentiment*

William H. Shaw: *Ethical Relativism*

John Stuart Mill: *Utilitarianism*

Immanuel Kant: *The Categorical Imperative*

Aristotle: *Happiness and Virtue*

John Rawls: *A Theory of Justice*

Jean Grimshaw: *The Idea of a Female Ethic*

Problem Cases

Suggested Readings

Introduction

This chapter presents the basic moral theories that are the background for the subsequent readings in the book. For the sake of discussion, we can divide the theories into five types: theory of the right, theory of the good, virtue theory, social contract theory, and feminist theory.

Theory of the Right

A theory of the right tries to tell us what is morally right and what is morally wrong. Such a theory is obviously relevant to moral problems in the book, such as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and war and terrorism.

Theories of the right are usually subdivided into two types: teleological and deontological theories. Teleological theories focus on consequences; they can be said to be forward looking. Deontological theories do not do this but, rather, look backward at some nonconsequential feature, such as a motive or God's commands. One standard teleological theory is ethical egoism, the view that everyone ought to act in his or her rational self-interest. This view is often defended by an appeal to psychological egoism, the thesis that, as a matter of fact, everyone does act in a self-interested way. But if this is so, then it is impossible for us to act unselfishly; all we can do is act selfishly. It seems to follow that ethical egoism is the only option available to us.

James Rachels attacks both psychological and ethical egoism. He argues that psychological egoism is false and confused. It is false because people do act unselfishly, and in ways contrary to self-interest. It is confused because it fails to distinguish between selfishness and self-interest, it falsely assumes that every action is done either from self-interest or from other-regarding motives, and it ignores the fact that concern for one's own welfare is compatible with concern for the welfare of others.

As for ethical egoism, Rachels admits that it is not logically inconsistent and that it cannot be decisively refuted. But he thinks there are considerations that count very strongly against it. Most people do care about others; genuine egoists who really do not care about others are rare. And saying that an action will benefit others is giving a complete and sufficient reason for doing it. No further reason needs to be given.

Perhaps the most famous and widely discussed teleological theory is utilitarianism. The standard formulation of this theory is presented by John Stuart Mill. The most basic principle of utilitarianism is the Principle of Utility, which Mill states as follows: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." But what is happiness? Mill's answer is that happiness (or what is good) is pleasure and the absence of pain. Here Mill adopts a standard theory of the good, called hedonism, the view that the good is pleasure. We will examine this theory and alternatives to it in the next section.

In considering the happiness or unhappiness (or the good or evil) produced, utilitarianism counts everyone equally. But who counts? The answer of Mill and his followers is radical and important: We should consider everyone who is capable of suffering, including nonhuman animals. In Chapter 7 we see Peter Singer and others arguing that it is wrong to discriminate against animals. This is in sharp contrast to the conventional view (defended by John T. Noonan in Chapter 2 and Roger Scruton in Chapter 7) that only human beings count, or at least human beings count more than nonhumans.

Now let us turn to the other main kind of theory of the right, deontological theory. One popular view is the divine command theory, discussed by John Arthur. As Arthur explains it, the divine command theory says that an act is right if and because God commands it, and wrong if and because God forbids it. According to this view God is the source of morality because without God there would be no right or wrong. Just as a legislator enacts laws, God commands moral rules. According to Arthur, defenders of the divine command theory such as F. C. Copleston often add the claim that the objective difference between right and wrong rests on the existence of God as the foundation of morality. No doubt this theory is accepted by millions of religious people, but few philosophers are willing to defend it. One problem is that many philosophers think that morality can be founded on something other than God's commands, such as reason, human nature, culture, or natural sentiments. Another objection is that "right" and "commanded by God" do not mean the same thing. People in other cultures, in Japan and China for example, use moral concepts without understanding them as references to God's commands. It goes without saying that atheists will not accept the theory, but Arthur thinks that even theists should reject it because of the possibility that God might change the moral commands. Suppose tomorrow God commands us to be cruel. Since on the theory something is right just because God commands it, cruelty is now morally right. This would be like a legislature changing the law. Arthur thinks this is just absurd. It is absurd to think that the greatest atrocities might be morally right if God were to command them. This point is similar to the famous question posed by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*: Is something holy (or right) because God commands it, or does God command it because it is holy (or right)? As Arthur demonstrates in his discussion, this question raises some fundamental difficulties for the divine command theory. On the first alternative, morality seems arbitrary, since God could command anything at all and make it right. On the second alternative, God is not the source of morality after all, since it seems that God has to discover what is right rather than legislating it.

An influential deontological theory in Christian thought is the *natural law theory* of Saint Thomas Aquinas. On this view, God created the world following a divine plan that Aquinas calls the eternal law. According to this plan, everything in nature has a purpose—for example, eyes are designed for seeing and rain falls in order to nourish plants. The divine plan includes values; it includes a natural law that tells us what is right and what is good. This natural law can be discerned by humans using the natural light of reason, which humans have because they are made in the image of the rational God. The most basic precept of the natural law is the self-evident truth that one ought to do good and avoid evil. But what is good and what is evil?

Aquinas equates goodness with what is in accord with natural inclinations, and evil as that which is opposed by natural inclinations. For example, humans have a basic natural inclination to preserve life and to avoid death. This implies that actions that preserve life are right, and those that do not, such as abortion, suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment, and war, are wrong. Another basic instinct is the animal inclination to engage in sexual intercourse. But since the natural purpose of sex is reproduction, non-reproductive sex such as masturbation is wrong. (For a clear exposition of the natural law view of sex, see the Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics in Chapter 5.)

Few people outside the Catholic Church appeal to natural law theory. One problem is that modern science does not explain things in terms of purposes or values. The eye was not designed for seeing; it is simply the result of a long period of evolution and natural selection. Or at least that is the explanation given in biology. Rain does not fall in order to nourish plants. It falls because of the law of gravity. The laws of science merely describe what happens; they do not ascribe purposes or values to anything. Another problem is the equation of natural inclination with good and unnatural inclination with evil. Male humans have a natural inclination to be aggressive and to dominate females, but are these natural tendencies good? Feminists such as Mary Daly do not think so. (Daly's views are explained in the Jean Grimshaw reading.) Many people find celibacy to be unnatural, since it is opposed by natural desires, yet the Church teaches that total abstinence from sex is good, not evil. Finally, how do we know what the natural law says? Any rational person is supposed to be able to discern the natural law, but we find that rational people do not agree about values. Is it possible that some rational people are deceived when they try to discern the moral law? How can we be sure we are perceiving the true moral law, assuming there is such a thing? Even Catholics who accept natural law theory do not agree about everything. For example, some are pacifists who find war immoral, while others justify war using the just war theory. (For a discussion of pacifism just war theory see Chapter 9.)

Unlike Aquinas, David Hume denies that reason can tell us what is right and what is good. Hume argues that morality cannot be derived from reason. According to Hume, if you consider, for example, a case of intentional murder, you will find that the wrongness of murder is not found in your reasoning about objective facts or relations of ideas, but simply in your sentiment, in your feelings of disapproval of murder. The view that moral judgments are based on subjective feelings of approval or disapproval is called *ethical subjectivism*. Strictly speaking, this is a view about the factual basis of morality, not a deontological theory that tells us what is right. In the fifth reading, Shaw calls such a theory a *meta-ethical theory*. It tells us what morality is based on as a matter of fact, not what morality ought to be. In a famous passage, Hume suggests that it is a mistake to argue from "is" to "ought," that is, to argue that because something is the case, that therefore it ought to be the case. But Aquinas seems to make this very mistake when he says that what is natural ought to be done, for example, that since reproductive sex is natural, it ought to be done. It should be noted that Hume did have views about what ought to be done. He recommended following a sentiment of benevolence toward all humans. But he did not think that people ought to do this because they do have such a sentiment. The fact that people have such a sentiment only shows that acting benevolently is possible.

Hume's views are controversial. Some philosophers have maintained that arguing from "is" to "ought" is acceptable in some cases. For example, in the reading Mill claims that the only proof that can be given that happiness is desirable is that people desire it. Happiness is good because everyone wants it. Clearly Mill is arguing from a fact to a value, but is this a mistake? A problem with Hume's theory about morality is that it implies that people cannot be mistaken in their moral judgments. If moral judgments are just expressions of feeling, the equivalent of approving or disapproving of something, then as long as they are sincere, people cannot be mistaken when making a moral judgment. But it seems obvious to William H. Shaw that people such as sadists or Nazis can be mistaken in their moral judgments. A related problem is that Hume's theory doesn't seem to give an adequate account of moral disagreements. If the abortion controversy amounts to different people having different feelings about abortion, with some approving and others disapproving, then they do not really have a substantive disagreement. They are not contradicting each other. They just have different feelings. This hardly seems like a satisfactory account of the disagreement. After all, both sides defend their position using arguments and reasoning. They appeal to facts. No doubt emotions play a role in the controversy, but it is not just about feelings.

A deontological theory that takes moral disagreements seriously is *ethical relativism*. William H. Shaw distinguishes between two types of ethical relativism, cultural and individual. Cultural ethical relativism is the view that what is right is whatever a culture says is right. If our culture says that homosexuality is wrong, then it is wrong in our society. But if ancient Greek culture said that homosexuality is right, then it was right in that society. Individual ethical relativism is the view that what is right is whatever an individual thinks is right. Sometimes this popular view is expressed in the slogan that "Morality is just a matter of opinion," with the implication that one opinion is just as good as another.

Shaw rejects both types of ethical relativism. Like Hume's theory, the individual type makes moral judgments infallible, and this cannot be right in Shaw's view. Surely there is a difference between merely thinking something is right and its actually being right. Furthermore, the theory fails to provide an adequate account of ethical debate and disagreement, and it doesn't allow for moral deliberation.

Cultural ethical relativism has a different set of problems according to Shaw. First, it doesn't allow for valid moral criticism of other societies, for example, the slave society of the American South in the 19th century or Nazi Germany. Second, it is not clear how it should be applied. Is abortion wrong if 51 percent of the people in a society disapprove of it, and does the wrong flip-flop to right if the approval rate goes up to 51 percent? Is a culture defined by geography or class or what? Are the Hell's Angels a separate culture? Third, and most decisive in Shaw's view, is the fact that societies can make moral mistakes; they can say something is right when it is really wrong. To use Shaw's example, a society that approves of the torture of children is making a moral mistake, for in Shaw's view the torture of children is clearly wrong no matter what a society says.

The most influential deontological theory is Immanuel Kant's theory. Kant believes that by pure reasoning we can discover one supreme moral principle that is binding on all rational beings. By "pure reasoning" he means reasoning that does not

appeal to anything else, such as religious faith or popular opinion; it is like reasoning in geometry and mathematics. The category of “rational beings” excludes animals in Kant’s view (see his reading in Chapter 7); it includes not just human beings but also God and angels. The supreme moral principle uncovered by pure reasoning is called the *categorical imperative* because it commands absolutely, as distinguished from hypothetical imperatives that command only if you have certain desires.

Kant formulates the categorical imperative in several different ways, but commentators usually focus on two distinct versions. The first one is that you should “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” This principle gives you a way of deciding whether an act is wrong or not. You ask yourself what rule you would be following if you did something; this rule is the “maxim” of your act. If you are not willing to have this rule become a universal law that everyone follows, then the act is wrong. To take one of Kant’s examples, suppose you want to borrow money and not pay it back. To get the money you have to promise to pay it back even though you have no intention of doing so. The maxim of your act, then, would be something like this: “Whenever I believe myself short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, though I know that this will never be done.” According to Kant, this maxim could never be a universal law because it contradicts itself. If everyone followed this maxim, then the very practice of promising would be impossible because nobody would believe a promise. These considerations show that such false promising is wrong.

Many philosophers have thought that this first formulation of the categorical imperative is problematic. One problem is that you can formulate the rule under which an act falls in different ways. Some of these rules could be made universal and others not. To go back to borrowing money, suppose you need to borrow money to pay for expensive cancer treatment to save your infant son’s life. You do not have health insurance, and Medicaid will not cover the treatment. To get the money, you promise to pay it back even though you know you cannot do so. Now the maxim of your act is something like this: “Whenever I need money to save my baby’s life, then I will borrow money from the bank and promise to pay it back, even though I know this will never be done because I will never have that much money.” Would you be willing to have this be a universal law? If so, would it destroy the practice of promising?

Another objection attacks Kant’s notion of perfect duty, the idea that there are duties that admit no exceptions. The objection is that there are always possible exceptions, exceptions that arise when there is a conflict between duties. Suppose, for example, that there is a conflict between the duty to not lie and the duty to not harm others. A terrorist asks you for a loaded gun to use in killing innocent hostages. You know where there is a gun handy, but should you tell the truth? It seems obvious enough that you should not tell the truth in this case because the duty to not harm others overrides the duty to not lie.

Kant formulated the categorical imperative in a second way, which some commentators find more plausible. This second formulation, called the *formula of the end in itself*, recommends that you “act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” Treating others as a mere means is

to engage them in an activity to which they could not, in principle, consent—for example, a deception. Treating people as ends in themselves requires that we treat them not only as mere means, but that we help them with their projects and activities. This gives us a duty to help or a duty of beneficence, but this duty is only imperfect. That is, it is a duty that cannot always be satisfied, but requires us to exercise judgment and discretion.

Kant's theory has had an important impact on three of the moral problems covered in the book. First, Kant is a stern defender of capital punishment. In the reading in Chapter 4, Kant condemns the “serpent-windings of utilitarianism” and insists that the only appropriate punishment for murderers is death. They must be paid back for their crimes, and the consequences of the punishment are irrelevant. Kant is one of the main sources of the retributive theory of punishment, which holds that guilty people should be punished and that the punishment should fit the crime. Second, according to Kant, we do not have any direct duties toward animals. (See the reading in Chapter 7.) We have only indirect duties based on the effect the treatment of animals has on the treatment of humans. We should not be cruel to animals because this makes us likely to be cruel to humans. Animals are not subjects of direct moral concern because they are not rational beings. Kant's view, then, stands in sharp contrast to the utilitarians such as Mill and Singer, who believe that animals do have the status of moral subjects who deserve moral consideration. Third, there is the abortion controversy. Kant does not discuss abortion. But it seems clear that fetuses are not rational beings, and thus an implication of Kant's view is that they have no more moral status than animals. This is similar to the position that Mary Anne Warren takes in Chapter 2.

Theory of the Good

A theory of the good tries to tell us what is good and what is bad. Teleological theories seem to require some theory of the good in order to evaluate consequences. We noted previously that Mill accepts hedonism, the theory that the good is pleasure. Hedonism is usually defended by making two important distinctions. First, there is a distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. Something has intrinsic value if it is good or bad in itself apart from its use or consequences. By contrast, something has instrumental value if it is good or bad depending on how it is used. Hedonists allow that things such as knowledge and beauty can be instrumentally good but insist that only pleasure is intrinsically good. Similarly, things such as ignorance and ugliness can be instrumentally bad, but hedonists claim that only pain is intrinsically bad.

Critics of Mill and hedonism argue, however, that other things besides pleasure can be intrinsically good—for example, unexperienced beauty that is not instrumentally good because no one experiences it. And things besides pain can be intrinsically bad—for example, the injustice of punishing an innocent person. Indeed, the fact that utilitarianism does not seem to give a satisfactory account of retributive or distributive justice is seen as a serious defect. This has led modern philosophers to formulate theories of justice that are independent of utilitarianism—for example, Rawls's theory of justice in the readings for this chapter. Another criticism of hedonism

(which can be found in the reading by Aristotle) is that pleasure is an appropriate goal for animals but not for humans. According to Aristotle, the highest good for humans is found in contemplation because this involves the use of reason, and reasoning is what humans are naturally suited to do. The reply that Mill makes in the reading rests on the second distinction made by hedonists, a distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Roughly, higher pleasures involve the use of the intellect, whereas lower pleasures involve the senses. The higher pleasures are better than the lower pleasures, Mill argues, because the person who has experienced both will prefer the higher pleasures. Whether this is true or not is a matter of debate. In any event, Mill's view about the good life turns out to be not much different from Aristotle's view; on both views intellectual activities have a central role.

There are alternatives to hedonism. One is Kant's position that the only thing that is good without qualification is the good will, the desire to do one's duty for its own sake. Kant denied, by the way, that pleasure is always intrinsically good. He thought that the pleasure of a wicked person is not good; for example, in Kant's view the pleasure the sadist gets from torturing others is both instrumentally and intrinsically evil.

Another main source of alternatives to hedonism is religion. The monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) agree that the highest good involves God in some way. It might be obedience to God's will (emphasized in Islam), or love of God (recommended by Jesus), or a mystical union with God in this life, or a beatific vision of God in heaven. Aristotle says that the highest good for humans is found in the contemplation of God. Although we will not be concerned with religion as such, there is no doubt that religion has played an important role in ethics. Arthur discusses some of the connections between ethics and religion in the reading. We have already discussed the divine command theory, which is tacitly adopted in the monotheistic religions. (There are, of course, religions that do not worship God—for example, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.) Other religious doctrines come up in various contexts. In Chapter 2, Noonan mentions ensoulment, the doctrine that the immortal soul enters the fetus (or technically, the zygote) at the moment of conception. Traditionally, philosophers have defended our lack of moral concern for animals by maintaining that animals do not have souls (although it should be mentioned that in Hinduism and Jainism, animals are believed to have souls; indeed, some of them have the reincarnated souls of humans!).

Virtue Theory

Virtue theory is included in this chapter because it offers an important alternative to the theories that dwell on moral rightness and duty. The classical source of virtue theory is Aristotle. Aristotle makes several important points about virtues. First, there is a distinction between intellectual and moral virtue. Intellectual virtue involves the use of what is best in humans—namely, reasoning—and the highest form of reasoning is self-sufficient, pure contemplation of God. Moral virtues involve a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency. This is sometimes called the *doctrine of the golden mean*. To use one of Aristotle's examples, courage is a mean between the excess of foolhardiness and the deficiency of cowardliness.

Second, Aristotle claims that some actions do not involve any means but are always wrong. This is an important point, for if there are such actions, then it seems to follow that some of the theories we have just discussed are problematic. Consider, for example, the action of torturing a small child to death. As Shaw suggests in the reading, it seems obvious that this is wrong even if a person or a culture believes it is right, and even if God commands it, and even if it produces good consequences for others or the person doing the torturing. If so, then egoism, cultural relativism, the divine command theory, and utilitarianism all have a serious problem.

Social Contract Theory

Many of the readings in the book do not appeal to virtues or to duties, but to rights. We find references to the rights of fetuses, newborn infants, the terminally ill, animals, and even the environment. Most often mentioned are the rights to life and liberty.

The traditional basis for moral rights is that they are created by God. John Locke and Thomas Jefferson talk about humans being endowed by their Creator with certain basic rights that are inalienable, that cannot be taken away by other people or the government. But most philosophers today do not want to make God the source of rights; they want a different foundation. The traditional secular view that is used to provide a foundation for rights is the *social contract theory* of Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau. According to this theory, it is in everyone's self-interest to live together in a society rather than alone in a state of nature. Life in a state of nature would be short, nasty, and brutish. But to live in a society, people must agree to follow certain rules (don't steal, don't murder, etc.), and these rules imply corresponding rights. Every citizen tacitly makes such an agreement (the social contract) to get the benefits of living in society. Without this social contract, society would be impossible.

John Rawls's theory of justice is a type of social contract theory. We are asked to imagine what rules free, rational, and informed people would accept for a society. To make sure that the contractors are fair and unbiased, we are to imagine them operating under a "veil of ignorance" that hides from them personal facts such as their gender, race, and class. The rules such contractors would accept in the hypothetical original position, according to Rawls, are a principle giving people an equal right to liberty and a principle concerning social and economic inequalities.

Feminist Theory

In general, feminist theory is critical of the male theories discussed so far. They display a male bias that ignores the experience of women and contributes to the oppression of women in a male-dominated society. According to Jean Grimshaw, the male preoccupation with war, politics, and capitalistic economic domination has harmed women and the natural environment, and part of the blame can be placed on the male theories that are used to justify the violence and destruction. For example, the emphasis on the value of freedom we find in Mill, Rawls, Kant, and the other male philosophers is of little help to poor and oppressed women who lack basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care. The justice perspective of

Kant, Rawls, and other male philosophers is irrelevant to the experience of women who care for children. The experience of these women involves emotions such as love and not reasoning about abstract principles such as the categorical imperative. But what is the feminist alternative to the male theories? Grimshaw discusses the idea of a female ethic, that is, moral thinking and moral theory that is unique to women and superior to male thinking and theories. According to feminists such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, for example, women do not tend to appeal to abstract rules and principles in the same sort of way as men; rather they appeal to concrete and detailed knowledge of the situation, and they are more likely to consider the personal relationships involved. Sara Ruddick argues that the activity of mothering generates a concept of virtue that is the basis for a critique of the male values of contemporary life such as the militarism we see in the United States. Caroline Whitbeck argues that the practices of caring for others can provide an acceptable ethical model of mutual realization, which is an alternative to the competitive and individualistic model we see in male-dominated society.

A problem with the feminists theories is that they seem to apply to the private world of domestic life, where women care for children, and not to the male-dominated public world of war, politics, and the market. Male theorists argue that when it comes to the marketplace and war, for example, the feminist ethic of caring does not make sense. The very concept of the market or war precludes the sort of caring or mothering behavior recommended by the feminists. Grimshaw replies that there is no clear distinction between the public male world of the market and the private female world of domestic relations. Women work outside the home, and men have a domestic role. But she admits that the distinction between the public and the private has shaped social reality, and explains the differences between men and women in their moral thinking. This is not to say, however, that the experiences of women in the private domestic world cannot provide a valuable source of criticism of the male-dominated public world and a basis for reform.

Egoism and Moral Scepticism

JAMES RACHELS

James Rachels (1941–2003) was University Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He was the author of *The End of Life: Euthanasia and Morality* (1986), *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (1991), *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (4e, 2002), and *Can Ethics Provide*

Source: James Rachels, "Egoism and Moral Skepticism," from *A New Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Harper & Row, 1971). Reprinted with permission.

Answers? And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy (1997). In addition, he published more than 60 articles in philosophy.

Rachels examines psychological egoism and ethical egoism, two popular views used to attack conventional morality. Psychological egoism holds that all human actions are self-interested, whereas ethical egoism says that all actions ought to be self-interested. After discussing two arguments used to defend psychological egoism, Rachels concludes that it is both false and confused. Although he is unable to decisively refute ethical egoism, he finds that it has serious problems. Genuine egoists are rare, and that it is a fundamental fact of human psychology that humans care about others and not just about themselves.

1. OUR ORDINARY THINKING about morality is full of assumptions that we almost never question. We assume, for example, that we have an obligation to consider the welfare of other people when we decide what actions to perform or what rules to obey; we think that we must refrain from acting in ways harmful to others, and that we must respect their rights and interests as well as our own. We also assume that people are in fact capable of being motivated by such considerations, that is, that people are not wholly selfish and that they do sometimes act in the interests of others.

Both of these assumptions have come under attack by moral sceptics, as long ago as by Glaucon in Book II of Plato's *Republic*. Glaucon recalls the legend of Gyges, a shepherd who was said to have found a magic ring in a fissure opened by an earthquake. The ring would make its wearer invisible and thus would enable him to go anywhere and do anything undetected. Gyges used the power of the ring to gain entry to the Royal Palace where he seduced the Queen, murdered the King, and subsequently seized the throne. Now Glaucon asks us to determine that there are two such rings, one given to a man of virtue and one given to a rogue. The rogue, of course, will use his ring unscrupulously and do anything necessary to increase his own wealth and power. He will recognize no moral constraints on his conduct, and, since the cloak of invisibility will protect him from discovery, he can do anything he pleases without fear of reprisal. So, there will be no end to the mischief

he will do. But how will the so-called virtuous man behave? Glaucon suggests that he will behave no better than the rogue: "No one, it is commonly believed, would have such iron strength of mind as to stand fast in doing right or keep his hands off other men's goods, when he could go to the market-place and fearlessly help himself to anything he wanted, enter houses and sleep with any woman he chose, set prisoners free and kill men at his pleasure, and in a word go about among men with the powers of a god. He would behave no better than the other; both would take the same course."¹ Moreover, why shouldn't he? Once he is freed from the fear of reprisal, why shouldn't a man simply do what he pleases, or what he thinks is best for himself? What reason is there for him to continue being "moral" when it is clearly not to his own advantage to do so?

These sceptical views suggested by Glaucon have come to be known as *psychological egoism* and *ethical egoism* respectively. Psychological egoism is the view that all men are selfish in everything that they do, that is, that the only motive from which anyone ever acts is self-interest. On this view, even when men are acting in ways apparently calculated to benefit others, they are actually motivated by the belief that acting in this way is to their own advantage, and if they did not believe this, they would not be doing that action. Ethical egoism is, by contrast,

1 *The Republic of Plato*, translated by F. M. Cornford (Oxford, 1941), p. 45.

a normative view about how men *ought* to act. It is the view that, regardless of how men do in fact behave, they have no obligation to do anything except what is in their own interests. According to the ethical egoist, a person is always justified in doing whatever is in his own interests, regardless of the effect on others.

Clearly, if either of these views is correct, then “the moral institution of life” (to use Butler’s well-turned phrase) is very different than what we normally think. The majority of mankind is grossly deceived about what is, or ought to be, the case, where morals are concerned.

2. Psychological egoism seems to fly in the face of the facts. We are tempted to say: “Of course people act unselfishly all the time. For example, Smith gives up a trip to the country, which he would have enjoyed very much, in order to stay behind and help a friend with his studies, which is a miserable way to pass the time. This is a perfectly clear case of unselfish behavior, and if the psychological egoist thinks that such cases do not occur, then he is just mistaken.” Given such obvious instances of “unselfish behavior,” what reply can the egoist make? There are two general arguments by which he might try to show that all actions, including those such as the one just outlined, are in fact motivated by self-interest. Let us examine these in turn:

A. The first argument goes as follows. If we describe one person’s action as selfish, and another person’s action as unselfish, we are overlooking the crucial fact that in both cases, assuming that the action is done voluntarily, *the agent is merely doing what he most wants to do*. If Smith stays behind to help his friend, that only shows that he wanted to help his friend more than he wanted to go to the country. And why should he be praised for his “unselfishness” when he is only doing what he most wants to do? So, since Smith is only doing what he wants to do, he cannot be said to be acting unselfishly.

This argument is so bad that it would not deserve to be taken seriously except for the fact

that so many otherwise intelligent people have been taken in by it. First, the argument rests on the premise that people never voluntarily do anything except what they want to do. But this is patently false; there are at least two classes of actions that are exceptions to this generalization. One is the set of actions which we may not want to do, but which we do anyway as a means to an end which we want to achieve; for example, going to the dentist in order to stop a toothache, or going to work every day in order to be able to draw our pay at the end of the month. These cases may be regarded as consistent with the spirit of the egoist argument, however, since the ends mentioned are wanted by the agent. But the other set of actions are those which we do, not because we want to, nor even because there is an end which we want to achieve, but because we feel ourselves *under an obligation* to do them. For example, someone may do something because he has promised to do it, and thus feels obligated, even though he does not want to do it. It is sometimes suggested that in such cases we do the action because, after all, we want to keep our promises; so, even here, we are doing what we want. However, this dodge will not work: if I have promised to do something, and if I do not want to do it, then it is simply false to say that I want to keep my promise. In such cases we feel a conflict precisely because we do *not* want to do what we feel obligated to do. It is reasonable to think that Smith’s action falls roughly into this second category: he might stay behind, not because he wants to, but because he feels that his friend needs help.

But suppose we were to concede, for the sake of the argument, that all voluntary action is motivated by the agent’s wants, or at least that Smith is so motivated. Even if this were granted, it would not follow that Smith is acting selfishly or from self-interest. For if Smith wants to do something that will help his friend, even when it means forgoing his own enjoyments, that is precisely what makes him *unselfish*. What else could unselfishness be, if not wanting to help others?

Another way to put the same point is to say that it is the *object* of a want that determines whether it is selfish or not. The mere fact that I am acting on *my* wants does not mean that I am acting selfishly; that depends on *what it is* that I want. If I want only my own good, and care nothing for others, then I am selfish; but if I also want other people to be well-off and happy, and if I act on *that* desire, then my action is not selfish. So much for this argument.

B. The second argument for psychological egoism is this. Since so-called unselfish actions always produce a sense of self-satisfaction in the agent,² and since this sense of satisfaction is a pleasant state of consciousness, it follows that the point of the action is really to achieve a pleasant state of consciousness, rather than to bring about any good for others. Therefore, the action is “unselfish” only at a superficial level of analysis. Smith will feel much better with himself for having stayed to help his friend—if he had gone to the country, he would have felt terrible about it—and that is the real point of the action. According to a well-known story, this argument was once expressed by Abraham Lincoln:

Mr. Lincoln once remarked to a fellow-passenger on an old-time mud-coach that all men were prompted by selfishness in doing good. His fellow-passenger was antagonizing this position when they were passing over a corduroy bridge that spanned a slough. As they crossed this bridge they espied an old razor-backed sow on the bank making a terrible noise because her pigs had got into the slough and were in danger of drowning. As the old coach began to climb the hill, Mr. Lincoln called out, “Driver, can’t you stop just a moment?” Then Mr. Lincoln jumped out, ran back, and lifted the little pigs out of the mud and water and placed them on the bank. When he returned, his companion remarked: “Now, Abe, where does selfishness come in on this little episode?”

2 Or, as it is sometimes said, “It gives him a clear conscience,” or “He couldn’t sleep at night if he had done otherwise,” or “He would have been ashamed of himself for not doing it,” and so on.

“Why, bless your soul, Ed, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don’t you see?”³

This argument suffers from defects similar to the previous one. Why should we think that merely because someone derives satisfaction from helping others this makes him selfish? Isn’t the unselfish man precisely the one who *does* derive satisfaction from helping others, while the selfish man does not? If Lincoln “got peace of mind” from rescuing the piglets, does this show him to be selfish, or, on the contrary, doesn’t it show him to be compassionate and good-hearted? (If a man were truly selfish, why should it bother his conscience that *others* suffer—much less pigs?) Similarly, it is nothing more than shabby sophistry to say, because Smith takes satisfaction in helping his friend, that he is behaving selfishly. If we say this rapidly, while thinking about something else, perhaps it will sound all right; but if we speak slowly, and pay attention to what we are saying, it sounds plain silly.

Moreover, suppose we ask *why* Smith derives satisfaction from helping his friend. The answer will be, it is because Smith cares for him and wants him to succeed. If Smith did not have these concerns, then he would take no pleasure in assisting him; and these concerns, as we have already seen, are the marks of unselfishness, not selfishness. To put the point more generally: if we have a positive attitude toward the attainment of some goal, then we may derive satisfaction from attaining that goal. But the *object* of our attitude is *the attainment of that goal*; and we must want to attain the goal *before* we can find any satisfaction in it. We do not, in other words, desire some sort of “pleasurable consciousness” and then try to figure out how to achieve it; rather, we desire all sorts of different

3 Frank C. Sharp, *Ethics* (New York, 1928), pp. 74–75. Quoted from the Springfield (Ill.) *Monitor* in the *Outlook*, vol. 56, p. 1059.

things—money, a new fishing-boat, to be a better chess-player, to get a promotion in our work, etc.—and because we desire these things, we derive satisfaction from attaining them. And so, if someone desires the welfare and happiness of another person, he will derive satisfaction from that; but this does not mean that this satisfaction is the object of his desire, or that he is in any way selfish on account of it.

It is a measure of the weakness of psychological egoism that these insupportable arguments are the ones most often advanced in its favor. Why, then, should anyone ever have thought it a true view? Perhaps because of a desire for theoretical simplicity: In thinking about human conduct, it would be nice if there were some simple formula that would unite the diverse phenomena of human behavior under a single explanatory principle, just as simple formulae in physics bring together a great many apparently different phenomena. And since it is obvious that self-regard is an overwhelmingly important factor in motivation, it is only natural to wonder whether all motivation might not be explained in these terms. But the answer is clearly No; while a great many human actions are motivated entirely or in part by self-interest, only by a deliberate distortion of the facts can we say that all conduct is so motivated. This will be clear, I think, if we correct three confusions which are commonplace. The exposure of these confusions will remove the last traces of plausibility from the psychological egoist thesis.

The first is the confusion of selfishness with self-interest. The two are clearly not the same. If I see a physician when I am feeling poorly, I am acting in my own interest but no one would think of calling me “selfish” on account of it. Similarly, brushing my teeth, working hard at my job, and obeying the law are all in my self-interest but none of these are examples of selfish conduct. This is because selfish behavior is behavior that ignores the interests of others, in circumstances in which their interests ought not to be ignored. This concept has a definite evaluative flavor; to call someone “selfish” is not just

to describe his action but to condemn it. Thus, you would not call me selfish for eating a normal meal in normal circumstances (although it may surely be in my self-interest); but you would call me selfish for hoarding food while others about are starving.

The second confusion is the assumption that every action is done *either* from self-interest or from other-regarding motives. Thus, the egoist concludes that if there is no such thing as genuine altruism then all actions must be done from self-interest. But this is certainly a false dichotomy. The man who continues to smoke cigarettes, even after learning about the connection between smoking and cancer, is surely not acting from self-interest, not even by his own standards—self-interest would dictate that he quit smoking at once—and he is not acting altruistically either. He *is*, no doubt, smoking for the pleasure of it, but all that this shows is that undisciplined pleasure-seeking and acting from self-interest are very different. This is what led Butler to remark that “The thing to be lamented is, not that men have so great regard to their own good or interest in the present world, for they have not enough.”⁴

The last two paragraphs show (*a*) that it is false that all actions are selfish, and (*b*) that it is false that all actions are done out of self-interest. And it should be noted that these two points can be made, and were, without any appeal to putative examples of altruism.

The third confusion is the common but false assumption that a concern for one’s own welfare is incompatible with any genuine concern for the welfare of others. Thus, since it is obvious that everyone (or very nearly everyone) does desire his own well-being, it might be thought that no one can really be concerned with others. But again, this is false. There is no inconsistency

4 *The Works of Joseph Butler*, edited by W. E. Gladstone (Oxford, 1896), vol. II, p. 26. It should be noted that most of the points I am making against psychological egoism were first made by Butler. Butler made all the important points; all that is left for us is to remember them.

in desiring that everyone, including oneself *and* others, be well-off and happy. To be sure, it may happen on occasion that our own interests conflict with the interests of others, and in these cases we will have to make hard choices. But even in these cases we might sometimes opt for the interests of others, especially when the others involved are our family or friends. But more importantly, not all cases are like this: sometimes we are able to promote the welfare of others when our own interests are not involved at all. In these cases not even the strongest self-regard need prevent us from acting considerably toward others.

Once these confusions are cleared away, it seems to me obvious enough that there is no reason whatever to accept psychological egoism. On the contrary, if we simply observe people's behavior with an open mind, we may find that a great deal of it is motivated by self-regard, but by no means all of it; and that there is no reason to deny that "the moral institution of life" can include a place for the virtue of beneficence.⁵

3. The ethical egoist would say at this point, "Of course it is possible for people to act altruistically, and perhaps many people do act that way—but there is no reason why they *should* do so. A person is under no obligation to do anything except what is in his own interests."⁶ This is really quite a radical doctrine. Suppose I have an urge to set fire to some public building (say, a department store) just for the fascination of watching the spectacular blaze: according to this view, the fact that several people might be burned to death provides no reason whatever why I should not do it. After all, this only concerns

their welfare, not my own, and according to the ethical egoist the only person I need think of is myself.

Some might deny that ethical egoism has any such monstrous consequences. They would point out that it is really to my own advantage not to set the fire—for, if I do that I may be caught and put into prison (unlike Gyges, I have no magic ring for protection). Moreover, even if I could avoid being caught it is still to my advantage to respect the rights and interests of others, for it is to my advantage to live in a society in which people's rights and interests are respected. Only in such a society can I live a happy and secure life; so, in acting kindly toward others, I would merely be doing my part to create and maintain the sort of society which it is to my advantage to have.⁷ Therefore, it is said, the egoist would not be such a bad man; he would be as kindly and considerate as anyone else, because he would see that it is to his own advantage to be kindly and considerate.

This is a seductive line of thought, but it seems to me mistaken. Certainly it is to everyone's advantage (including the egoist's) to preserve a stable society where people's interests are generally protected. But there is no reason for the egoist to think that merely because *he* will not honor the rules of the social game, decent society will collapse. For the vast majority of people are not egoists, and there is no reason to think that they will be converted by his example—especially if he is discreet and does not unduly flaunt his style of life. What this line of reasoning shows is not that the egoist himself must act benevolently, but that he must encourage *others* to do so. He must take care to conceal from public view his own self-centered method of decision-making, and urge others to act on precepts very different from those on which he is willing to act.

The rational egoist, then, cannot advocate that egoism be universally adopted by everyone. For he wants a world in which his own

⁵ The capacity for altruistic behavior is not unique to human beings. Some interesting experiments with rhesus monkeys have shown that these animals will refrain from operating a device for securing food if this causes other animals to suffer pain. See Masserman, Wechkin, and Terris, "Altruistic Behavior in Rhesus Monkeys," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 121 (1964), 584–585.

⁶ I take this to be the view of Ayn Rand, in so far as I understand her confusing doctrine.

⁷ Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651), chap. 17.

interests are maximized; and if other people adopted the egoistic policy of pursuing their own interests to the exclusion of his interests, as he pursues his interests to the exclusion of theirs, then such a world would be impossible. So he himself will be an egoist, but he will want others to be altruists.

This brings us to what is perhaps the most popular “refutation” of ethical egoism current among philosophical writers—the argument that ethical egoism is at bottom inconsistent because it cannot be universalized.⁸ The argument goes like this:

To say that any action or policy of action is *right* (or that it *ought* to be adopted) entails that it is right for *anyone* in the same sort of circumstances. I cannot, for example, say that it is right for me to lie to you, and yet object when you lie to me (provided, of course, that the circumstances are the same). I cannot hold that it is all right for me to drink your beer and then complain when you drink mine. This is just the requirement that we be consistent in our evaluations; it is a requirement of logic. Now it is said that ethical egoism cannot meet this requirement because, as we have already seen, the egoist would not want others to act in the same way that he acts. Moreover, suppose he *did* advocate the universal adoption of egoistic policies: he would be saying to Peter, “You ought to pursue your own interests even if it means destroying Paul”; and he would be saying to Paul, “You ought to pursue your own interests even if it means destroying Peter.” The attitudes expressed in these two recommendations seem clearly inconsistent—he is urging the advancement of Peter’s interest at one moment, and countenancing their defeat at the next. Therefore, the argument goes, there is no way to maintain the doctrine of

ethical egoism as a consistent view about how we ought to act. We will fall into inconsistency whenever we try.

What are we to make of this argument? Are we to conclude that ethical egoism has been refuted? Such a conclusion, I think, would be unwarranted; for I think that we can show, contrary to this argument, how ethical egoism can be maintained consistently. We need only to interpret the egoist’s position in a sympathetic way: we should say that he has in mind a certain kind of world which he would prefer over all others; it would be a world in which his own interests were maximized, regardless of the effects on other people. The egoist’s primary policy of action, then, would be to act in such a way as to bring about, as nearly as possible, this sort of world. Regardless of however morally reprehensible we might find it, there is nothing *inconsistent* in someone’s adopting this as his ideal and acting in a way calculated to bring it about. And if someone did adopt this as his ideal, then he would not advocate universal egoism; as we have already seen, he would want other people to be altruists. So, if he advocates any principles of conduct for the general public, they will be altruistic principles. This would not be inconsistent; on the contrary, it would be perfectly consistent with his goal of creating a world in which his own interests are maximized. To be sure, he would have to be deceitful; in order to secure the good will of others, and a favorable hearing for his exhortations to altruism, he would have to pretend that he was himself prepared to accept altruistic principles. But again, that would be all right; from the egoist’s point of view, this would merely be a matter of adopting the necessary means to the achievement of his goal—and while we might not approve of this, there is nothing inconsistent about it. Again, it might be said: “He advocates one thing, but does another. Surely *that’s* inconsistent.” But it is not; for what he advocates and what he *does* are both calculated as means to an end (the *same* end, we might note); and as such,

⁸ See, for example, Brian Medlin, “Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 35 (1957), 111–118; and D. H. Monro, *Empiricism and Ethics* (Cambridge, 1967), chap. 16.

he is doing what is rationally required in each case. Therefore, contrary to the previous argument, there is nothing inconsistent in the ethical egoist's view. He cannot be refuted by the claim that he contradicts himself.

Is there, then, no way to refute the ethical egoist? If by "refute" we mean show that he has made some *logical* error, the answer is that there is not. However, there is something more that can be said. The egoist challenge to our ordinary moral convictions amounts to a demand for an explanation of why we should adopt certain policies of action, namely policies in which the good of others is given importance. We can give an answer to this demand, albeit an indirect one. The reason one ought not to do actions that would hurt other people is: other people would be hurt. The reason one ought to do actions that would benefit other people is: other people would be benefited. This may at first seem like a piece of philosophical sleight-of-hand, but it is not. The point is that the welfare of human beings is something that most of us value *for its own sake*, and not merely for the sake of something else. Therefore, when *further* reasons are demanded for valuing the welfare of human beings, we cannot point to anything further to satisfy this demand. It is not that we have no reason for pursuing these policies, but that our reason *is* that these policies are for the good of human beings.

So: if we are asked "Why shouldn't I set fire to this department store?" one answer would be "Because if you do, people may be burned to death." This is a complete, sufficient reason which does not require qualification or supplementation of any sort. If someone seriously wants to know why this action shouldn't be done, that's the reason. If we are pressed further and asked the sceptical question "But why shouldn't I do actions that will harm others?" we may not know what to say—but this is because the questioner has included in his question the very answer we would like to give: "Why shouldn't you do actions that will harm

others? Because, doing those actions would harm others."

The egoist, no doubt, will not be happy with this. He will protest that *we* may accept this as a reason, but *he* does not. And here the argument stops: there are limits to what can be accomplished by argument, and if the egoist really doesn't care about other people—if he honestly doesn't care whether they are helped or hurt by his actions—then we have reached those limits. If we want to persuade him to act decently toward his fellow humans, we will have to make our appeal to such other attitudes as he does possess, by threats, bribes, or other cajolery. That is all that we can do.

Though some may find this situation distressing (we would like to be able to show that the egoist is just *wrong*), it holds no embarrassment for common morality. What we have come up against is simply a fundamental requirement of rational action, namely, that the existence of reasons for action always depends on the prior existence of certain attitudes in the agent. For example, the fact that a certain course of action would make the agent a lot of money is a reason for doing it only if the agent wants to make money; the fact that practicing at chess makes one a better player is a reason for practicing only if one wants to be a better player; and so on. Similarly, the fact that a certain action would help the agent is a reason for doing the action only if the agent cares about his own welfare, and the fact that an action would help others is a reason for doing it only if the agent cares about others. In this respect ethical egoism and what we might call ethical altruism are in exactly the same fix: both require that the agent *care* about himself, or about other people, before they can get started.

So a nonegoist will accept "It would harm another person" as a reason not to do an action simply because he cares about what happens to that other person. When the egoist says that he does *not* accept that as a reason, he is saying something quite extraordinary. He is saying that

he has no affection for friends or family, that he never feels pity or compassion, that he is the sort of person who can look on scenes of human misery with complete indifference, so long as he is not the one suffering. Genuine egoists, people who really don't care at all about anyone other than themselves, are rare. It is important to keep this in mind when thinking about ethical egoism; it is easy to forget just how fundamental to human psychological makeup the feeling of sympathy is. Indeed, a man without any sympathy at all would scarcely be recognizable as a man; and that is what makes ethical egoism such a disturbing doctrine in the first place.

4. There are, of course, many different ways in which the sceptic might challenge the assumptions underlying our moral practice. In

this essay I have discussed only two of them, the two put forward by Glaucon in the passage that I cited from Plato's *Republic*. It is important that the assumptions underlying our moral practice should not be confused with particular judgments made within that practice. To defend one is not to defend the other. We may assume—quite properly, if my analysis has been correct—that the virtue of beneficence does, and indeed should, occupy an important place in “the moral institution of life”; and yet we may make constant and miserable errors when it comes to judging when and in what ways this virtue is to be exercised. Even worse, we may often be able to make accurate moral judgments, and know what we ought to do, but not do it. For these ills, philosophy alone is not the cure.

Review Questions

1. Explain the legend of Gyges. What questions about morality are raised by the story?
2. Distinguish between psychological and ethical egoism.
3. Rachels discusses two arguments for psychological egoism. What are these arguments, and how does he reply to them?
4. What three commonplace confusions does Rachels detect in the thesis of psychological egoism?
5. State the argument for saying that ethical egoism is inconsistent. Why doesn't Rachels accept this argument?
6. According to Rachels, why shouldn't we hurt others, and why should we help others? How can the egoist reply?

Discussion Questions

1. Has Rachels answered the question raised by Glaucon, namely, “Why be moral?” If so, what exactly is his answer?
2. Are genuine egoists rare, as Rachels claims? Is it a fact that most people care about others, even people they don't know?
3. Suppose we define ethical altruism as the view that one should always act for the benefit of others and never in one's own self-interest. Is such a view immoral or not?

Religion, Morality, and Conscience

JOHN ARTHUR

What is morality? Does it need religion in some way? Or is it purely social? In this essay, John Arthur first discusses, and rejects, three ways morality has been thought to depend on religion: that without religious motivation people could not be expected to do the right thing; that religion is necessary to provide guidance to people in their search for the correct course of action; and that religion is essential for there even to be a right and wrong. Arthur then considers another conception of morality, suggested by John Dewey, which claims “morality is social.” He concludes with some brief comments on the importance of these reflections for moral deliberation and for education.

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MY FIRST AND PRIME CONCERN in this paper is to explore the connections, if any, between morality and religion. I will argue that although there are a variety of ways the two can be connected, in fact religion is not necessary for morality. Despite the lack of any logical or other necessary connection, I will claim, there remain important respects in which the two are related. In the concluding section I will discuss the notion of moral conscience, and then look briefly at the various respects in which morality is “social” and the implications of that idea for moral education. First, however, I want to say something about the subjects: Just what are we referring to when we speak of morality and of religion?

I. MORALITY AND RELIGION

A useful way to approach the first question—the nature of morality—is to ask what it would mean for a society to exist without a social moral

code. How would such people think and behave? What would that society look like? First, it seems clear that such people would never feel guilt or resentment. For example, the notions that I ought to remember my parents’ anniversary, that he has a moral responsibility to help care for his children after the divorce, that she has a right to equal pay for equal work, and that discrimination on the basis of race is unfair would be absent in such a society. Notions of duty, rights, and obligations would not be present, except perhaps in the legal sense; concepts of justice and fairness would also be foreign to these people. In short, people would have no tendency to evaluate or criticize the behavior of others, nor to feel remorse about their own behavior. Children would not be taught to be ashamed when they steal or hurt others, nor would they be allowed to complain when others treat them badly. (People might, however, feel regret at a decision that didn’t turn out as they had hoped; but that would only be because their expectations were frustrated, not because they feel guilty.)

Such a society lacks a moral code. What, then, of religion? Is it possible that a society such as

Source: John Arthur, “Religion, Morality, and Conscience,” from *Morality and Moral Controversies* 4th ed., ed. John Arthur (Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 21–28. Reprinted with permission.

the one I have described would have religious beliefs? It seems clear that it is possible. Suppose every day these same people file into their place of worship to pay homage to God (they may believe in many gods or in one all-powerful creator of heaven and earth). Often they can be heard praying to God for help in dealing with their problems and thanking Him for their good fortune. Frequently they give sacrifices to God, sometimes in the form of money spent to build beautiful temples and churches, other times by performing actions they believe God would approve, such as helping those in need. These practices might also be institutionalized, in the sense that certain people are assigned important leadership roles. Specific texts might also be taken as authoritative, indicating the ways God has acted in history and His role in their lives or the lives of their ancestors.

To have a moral code, then, is to tend to evaluate (perhaps without even expressing it) the behavior of others and to feel guilt at certain actions when we perform them. Religion, on the other hand, involves beliefs in supernatural power(s) that created and perhaps also control nature, the tendency to worship and pray to those supernatural forces or beings, and the presence of organizational structures and authoritative texts. The practices of morality and religion are thus importantly different. One involves our attitudes toward various forms of behavior (lying and killing, for example), typically expressed using the notions of rules, rights, and obligations. The other, religion, typically involves prayer, worship, beliefs about the supernatural, institutional forms, and authoritative texts.

We come, then, to the central question: What is the connection, if any, between a society's moral code and its religious practices and beliefs? Many people have felt that morality is in some way dependent on religion or religious truths. But what sort of "dependence" might there be? In what follows, I distinguish various ways in which one might claim that religion is necessary for morality, arguing against those who claim morality depends in some way on religion. I will

also suggest, however, some other important ways in which the two are related, concluding with a brief discussion of conscience and moral education.

2. RELIGIOUS MOTIVATION AND GUIDANCE

One possible role which religion might play in morality relates to motives people have. Religion, it is often said, is necessary so that people will DO right. Typically, the argument begins with the important point that doing what is right often has costs: refusing to shoplift or cheat can mean people go without some good or fail a test; returning a billfold means they don't get the contents. Religion is therefore said to be necessary in that it provides motivation to do the right thing. God rewards those who follow His commands by providing for them a place in heaven or by ensuring that they prosper and are happy on earth. He also punishes those who violate the moral law. Others emphasize less self-interested ways in which religious motives may encourage people to act rightly. Since God is the creator of the universe and has ordained that His plan should be followed, they point out, it is important to live one's life in accord with this divinely ordained plan. Only by living a moral life, it is said, can people live in harmony with the larger, divinely created order.

The first claim, then, is that religion is necessary to provide moral motivation. The problem with that argument, however, is that religious motives are far from the only ones people have. For most of us, a decision to do the right thing (if that is our decision) is made for a variety of reasons: "What if I get caught? What if somebody sees me—what will he or she think? How will I feel afterwards? Will I regret it?" Or maybe the thought of cheating just doesn't arise. We were raised to be a decent person, and that's what we are—period. Behaving fairly and treating others well is more important than whatever we might gain from stealing or cheating, let alone seriously harming another person.

So it seems clear that many motives for doing the right thing have nothing whatsoever to do with religion. Most of us, in fact, do worry about getting caught, being blamed, and being looked down on by others. We also may do what is right just because it's right, or because we don't want to hurt others or embarrass family and friends. To say that we need religion to act morally is mistaken; indeed, it seems to me that many of us, when it really gets down to it, don't give much of a thought to religion when making moral decisions. All those other reasons are the ones that we tend to consider, or else we just don't consider cheating and stealing at all. So far, then, there seems to be no reason to suppose that people can't be moral yet irreligious at the same time.

A second argument that is available for those who think religion is necessary to morality, however, focuses on moral guidance and knowledge rather than on people's motives. However much people may want to do the right thing, according to this view, we cannot ever know for certain what is right without the guidance of religious teaching. Human understanding is simply inadequate to this difficult and controversial task; morality involves immensely complex problems, and so we must consult religious revelation for help.

Again, however, this argument fails. First, consider how much we would need to know about religion and revelation in order for religion to provide moral guidance. Besides being aware that there is a God, we'd also have to think about which of the many religions is true. How can anybody be sure his or her religion is the right one? But even if we assume the Judeo-Christian God is the real one, we still need to find out just what it is He wants us to do, which means we must think about revelation.

Revelation comes in at least two forms, and not even all Christians agree on which is the best way to understand revelation. Some hold that revelation occurs when God tells us what he wants by providing us with His words: The Ten Commandments are an example. Many even

believe, as evangelist Billy Graham once said, that the entire Bible was written by God using thirty-nine secretaries. Others, however, doubt that the "word of God" refers literally to the words God has spoken, but believe instead that the Bible is an historical document, written by human beings, of the events or occasions in which God revealed himself. It is an especially important document, of course, but nothing more than that. So on this second view, revelation is not understood as *statements* made by God but rather as His *acts*, such as leading His people from Egypt, testing Job, and sending His son as an example of the ideal life. The Bible is not itself revelation, it's the historical account of revelatory actions.

If we are to use revelation as a moral guide, then, we must first know what is to count as revelation—words given us by God, historical events, or both? But even supposing that we could somehow answer those questions, the problems of relying on revelation are still not over since we still must interpret that revelation. Some feel, for example, that the Bible justifies various forms of killing, including war and capital punishment, on the basis of such statements as "An eye for an eye." Others, emphasizing such sayings as "Judge not lest ye be judged" and "Thou shalt not kill," believe the Bible demands absolute pacifism. How are we to know which interpretation is correct? It is likely, of course, that the answer people give to such religious questions will be influenced in part at least by their own moral beliefs; if capital punishment is thought to be unjust, for example, then an interpreter will seek to read the Bible in a way that is consistent with that moral truth. That is not, however, a happy conclusion for those wishing to rest morality on revelation, for it means that their understanding of what God has revealed is itself dependent on their prior moral views. Rather than revelation serving as a guide for morality, morality is serving as a guide for how we interpret revelation.

So my general conclusion is that far from providing a short-cut to moral understanding,

looking to revelation for guidance often creates more questions and problems. It seems wiser under the circumstances to address complex moral problems like abortion, capital punishment, and affirmative action directly, considering the pros and cons of each side, rather than to seek answers through the much more controversial and difficult route of revelation.

3. THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

It may seem, however, that we have still not really gotten to the heart of the matter. Even if religion is not necessary for moral motivation or guidance, it is often claimed, religion is necessary in another more fundamental sense. According to this view, religion is necessary for morality because without God there could BE no right or wrong. God, in other words, provides the foundation or bedrock on which morality is grounded. This idea was expressed by Bishop R. C. Mortimer:

God made us and all the world. Because of that He has an absolute claim on our obedience. . . . From [this] it follows that a thing is not right simply because we think it is. It is right because God commands it.¹

What Bishop Mortimer has in mind can be seen by comparing moral rules with legal ones. Legal statutes, we know, are created by legislatures; if the state assembly of New York had not passed a law limiting the speed people can travel, then there would be no such legal obligation. Without the statutory enactments, such a law simply would not exist. Mortimer's view, the *divine command theory*, would mean that God has the same sort of relation to moral law as the legislature has to statutes it enacts: without God's commands there would be no moral rules, just as without a legislature there would be no statutes.

Defenders of the divine command theory often add to this a further claim, that only by assuming God sits at the foundation of morality can we explain the objective difference between

right and wrong. This point was forcefully argued by F. C. Copleston in a 1948 British Broadcasting Corporation radio debate with Bertrand Russell.

Copleston: . . . The validity of such an interpretation of man's conduct depends on the recognition of God's existence, obviously. . . . Let's take a look at the Commandant of the [Nazi] concentration camp at Belsen. That appears to you as undesirable and evil and to me too. To Adolph Hitler we suppose it appeared as something good and desirable. I suppose you'd have to admit that for Hitler it was good and for you it is evil.

Russell: No, I shouldn't go so far as that. I mean, I think people can make mistakes in that as they can in other things. If you have jaundice you see things yellow that are not yellow. You're making a mistake.

Copleston: Yes, one can make mistakes, but can you make a mistake if it's simply a question of reference to a feeling or emotion? Surely Hitler would be the only possible judge of what appealed to his emotions.

Russell: . . . You can say various things about that; among others, that if that sort of thing makes that sort of appeal to Hitler's emotions, then Hitler makes quite a different appeal to my emotions.

Copleston: Granted. But there's no objective criterion outside feeling then for condemning the conduct of the Commandant of Belsen, in your view. . . . The human being's idea of the content of the moral law depends certainly to a large extent on education and environment, and a man has to use his reason in assessing the validity of the actual moral ideas of his social group. But the possibility of criticizing the accepted moral code presupposes that there is an objective standard, that there is an ideal moral order, which imposes itself. . . . It implies the existence of a real foundation of God.²

Against those who, like Bertrand Russell, seek to ground morality in feelings and attitudes, Copleston argues that there must be a more solid foundation if we are to be able to claim truly that the Nazis were evil. God, according to Copleston, is able to provide the objective basis for the distinction, which we all know to exist, between right and wrong. Without divine commands at the root of human obligations, we

1 R. C. Mortimer, *Christian Ethics* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), pp. 7–8.

2 This debate was broadcast on the Third Program of the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1948.

would have no real reason for condemning the behavior of anybody, even Nazis. Morality, Copleston thinks, would then be nothing more than an expression of personal feeling.

To begin assessing the divine command theory, let's first consider this last point. Is it really true that only the commands of God can provide an objective basis for moral judgments? Certainly many philosophers have felt that morality rests on its own perfectly sound footing, be it reason, human nature, or natural sentiments. It seems wrong to conclude, automatically, that morality cannot rest on anything but religion. And it is also possible that morality doesn't have any foundation or basis at all, so that its claims should be ignored in favor of whatever serves our own self-interest.

In addition to these problems with Copleston's argument, the divine command theory faces other problems as well. First, we would need to say much more about the relationship between morality and divine commands. Certainly the expressions "is commanded by God" and "is morally required" do not *mean* the same thing. People and even whole societies can use moral concepts without understanding them to make any reference to God. And while it is true that God (or any other moral being for that matter) would tend to want others to do the right thing, this hardly shows that being right and being commanded by God are the same thing. Parents want their children to do the right thing, too, but that doesn't mean parents, or anybody else, can make a thing right just by commanding it!

I think that, in fact, theists should reject the divine command theory. One reason is what it implies. Suppose we were to grant (just for the sake of argument) that the divine command theory is correct, so that actions are right just because they are commanded by God. The same, of course, can be said about those deeds that we believe are wrong. If God hadn't commanded us not to do them, they would not be wrong.

But now notice this consequence of the divine command theory. Since God is all-powerful, and since right is determined solely by

His commands, is it not possible that He might change the rules and make what we now think of as wrong into right? It would seem that according to the divine command theory the answer is "yes": it is theoretically possible that tomorrow God would decree that virtues such as kindness and courage have become vices while actions that show cruelty and cowardice will henceforth be the right actions. (Recall the analogy with a legislature and the power it has to change law.) So now rather than it being right for people to help each other out and prevent innocent people from suffering unnecessarily, it would be right (God having changed His mind) to create as much pain among innocent children as we possibly can! To adopt the divine command theory therefore commits its advocate to the seemingly absurd position that even the greatest atrocities might be not only acceptable but morally required if God were to command them.

Plato made a similar point in the dialogue *Euthyphro*. Socrates is asking Euthyphro what it is that makes the virtue of holiness a virtue, just as we have been asking what makes kindness and courage virtues. Euthyphro has suggested that holiness is just whatever all the gods love.

Socrates: Well, then, Euthyphro, what do we say about holiness? Is it not loved by all the gods, according to your definition?

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: Because it is holy, or for some other reason?

Euthyphro: No, because it is holy.

Socrates: Then it is loved by the gods because it is holy: it is not holy because it is loved by them?

Euthyphro: It seems so.

Socrates: . . . Then holiness is not what is pleasing to the gods, and what is pleasing to the gods is not holy as you say, Euthyphro. They are different things.

Euthyphro: And why, Socrates?

Socrates: Because we are agreed that the gods love holiness because it is holy: and that it is not holy because they love it.³

³ Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. H. N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947).

This raises an interesting question. Why, having claimed at first that virtues are merely what is loved (or commanded) by the gods, would Euthyphro contradict this and agree that the gods love holiness *because* it's holy, rather than the reverse? One likely possibility is that Euthyphro believes that whenever the gods love something, they do so with good reason, not without justification and arbitrarily. To deny this and say that it is merely the gods' love that makes holiness a virtue would mean that the gods have no basis for their attitudes, that they are arbitrary in what they love. Yet—and this is the crucial point—it's far from clear that a religious person would want to say that God is arbitrary in that way. If we say that it is simply God's loving something that makes it right, then what sense would it make to say God wants us to do right? All that could mean, it seems, is that God wants us to do what He wants us to do; He would have no reason for wanting it. Similarly, "God is good" would mean little more than "God does what He pleases." The divine command theory therefore leads us to the results that God is morally arbitrary, and that His wishing us to do good or even God's being just mean nothing more than that God does what He does and wants whatever He wants. Religious people who reject that consequence would also, I am suggesting, have reason to reject the divine command theory itself, seeking a different understanding of morality.

This now raises another problem, however. If God approves kindness because it is a virtue and hates the Nazis because they were evil, then it seems that God discovers morality rather than inventing it. So haven't we then identified a limitation on God's power, since He now, being a good God, must love kindness and command us not to be cruel? Without the divine command theory, in other words, what is left of God's omnipotence?

But why, we may ask, is such a limitation on God unacceptable? It is not at all clear that God really can do anything at all. Can God, for example, destroy Himself? Or make a rock so heavy

that He cannot lift it? Or create a universe which was never created by Him? Many have thought that God cannot do these things, but also that His inability to do them does not constitute a serious limitation on His power since these are things that cannot be done at all: to do them would violate the laws of logic. Christianity's most influential theologian, Thomas Aquinas, wrote in this regard that "whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is more appropriate to say that such things cannot be done than that God cannot do them."⁴

How, then, ought we to understand God's relationship to morality if we reject the divine command theory? Can religious people consistently maintain their faith in God the Creator and yet deny that what is right is right because He commands it? I think the answer to this is "yes." Making cruelty good is not like making a universe that wasn't made, of course. It's a moral limit on God rather than a logical one. But why suppose that God's limits are only logical?

One final point about this. Even if we agree that God loves justice or kindness because of their nature, not arbitrarily, there still remains a sense in which God could change morality even having rejected the divine command theory. That's because if we assume, plausibly, I think, that morality depends in part on how we reason, what we desire and need, and the circumstances in which we find ourselves, then morality will still be under God's control since God could have constructed us or our environment very differently. Suppose, for instance, that he created us so that we couldn't be hurt by others or didn't care about freedom. Or perhaps our natural environment were created differently, so that all we have to do is ask and anything we want is given to us. If God had created either nature or us that way, then it seems likely our morality might also be different in important ways from the one we now

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q. 25, Art. 3.

think correct. In that sense, then, morality depends on God whether or not one supports the divine command theory.

4. “MORALITY IS SOCIAL”

I have argued here that religion is not necessary in providing moral motivation or guidance, and that the religious person should not subscribe to the divine command theory’s claim that God is necessary for there to be morality. In this last section, I want first to look briefly at how religion and morality sometimes *do* influence each other. Then I will consider briefly the important ways in which morality might correctly be thought to be “social.”

Nothing I have said so far means that morality and religion are independent of each other. But in what ways are they related, assuming I am correct in claiming morality does not *depend* on religion? First, of course, we should note the historical influence religions have had on the development of morality as well as on politics and law. Many of the important leaders of the abolitionist and civil rights movements were religious leaders, as are many current members of the pro-life movement. The relationship is not, however, one-sided: morality has also influenced religion, as the current debate within the Catholic Church over the role of women, abortion, and other social issues shows. In reality, then, it seems clear that the practices of morality and religion have historically each exerted an influence on the other.

But just as the two have shaped each other historically, so, too, do they interact at the personal level. I have already suggested how people’s understanding of revelation, for instance, is often shaped by morality as they seek the best interpretations of revealed texts. Whether trying to understand a work of art, a legal statute, or a religious text, interpreters regularly seek to understand them in the best light—to make them as good as they can be, which requires that they bring moral judgment to the task of religious interpretation and understanding.

The relationship can go the other direction as well, however, as people’s moral views are shaped by their religious training and their current religious beliefs. These relationships are often complex, hidden even from ourselves, but it does seem clear that our views on important moral issues, from sexual morality and war to welfare and capital punishment, are often influenced by our religious outlook. So not only are religious and moral practices and understandings historically linked, but for many religious people the relationship extends to the personal level—to their understanding of moral obligations as well as their sense of who they are and their vision of who they wish to be.

Morality, then, is influenced by religion (as is religion by morality), but morality’s social character extends deeper even than that, I want to argue. First, of course, the existence of morality assumes that we possess a socially acquired language within which we think about our choices and which alternatives we ought to follow. Second, morality is social in that it governs relationships among people, defining our responsibilities to others and theirs to us. Morality provides the standards we rely on in gauging our interactions with family, lovers, friends, fellow citizens, and even strangers. Third, morality is social in the sense that we are, in fact, subject to criticism by others for our actions. We discuss with others what we should do, and often hear from them concerning whether our decisions were acceptable. Blame and praise are a central feature of morality.

While not disputing any of this, John Dewey has suggested another important sense in which morality is social. Consider the following comments about the origins of morality and conscience taken from an article he titled “Morality Is Social”:

In language and imagination we rehearse the responses of others just as we dramatically enact other consequences. We foreknow how others will act, and the foreknowledge is the beginning of judgment passed on action. We know *with* them; there is conscience. An assembly is

formed within our breast which discusses and appraises proposed and performed acts. The community without becomes a forum and tribunal within, a judgment-seat of charges, assessments and exculpations. Our thoughts of our own actions are saturated with the ideas that others entertain about them. . . . Explicit recognition of this fact is a prerequisite of improvement in moral education. . . . Reflection is morally indispensable.⁵

So in addition to the three points I already mentioned, Dewey also wants to make another, and in some ways more important suggestion about morality's social character. This fourth idea depends on appreciating the fact that to think from the moral point of view, as opposed to the selfish one, for instance, demands that we reject our private, subjective perspective in favor of the perspective of others, envisioning how they might respond to various choices we might make. Far from being private and unrelated to others, moral conscience is in that sense "public." To consider a decision from the moral perspective requires envisioning what Dewey terms an "assembly of others" that is "formed within our breast." In that way, conscience cannot even be distinguished from the social: conscience invariably brings with it, or constitutes, the perspective of the other. "Is this right?" and "What would this look like were I to have to defend it to others?" are not separate questions.⁶

It is important not to confuse Dewey's point here, however. He is *not* saying that what is right is finally to be determined by the reactions of actually existing other people, or even by the reaction of society as a whole. To the contrary,

5 John Dewey, "Morality Is Social," in *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, rev. ed., ed. James Gouinlock (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), pp. 182–4.

6 Obligations to animals raise an interesting problem for this conception of morality. Is it wrong to torture animals only because other *people* could be expected to disapprove? Or is it that the animal itself would disapprove? Or, perhaps, that duties to animals rest on sympathy and compassion while human moral relations are more like Dewey describes, resting on morality's inherently social nature and on the dictates of conscience viewed as an assembly of others?

what is right, and accords with the true dictates of conscience, might in fact not meet the approval of others. Conscience is "social" not in the sense that morality is determined by surveying what others in society think. Understood as the voice of an "assembly" of others within each of us, conscience cannot be reduced to the expected reaction of any existing individual or group. But what then does Dewey mean? The answer is that the assembly Dewey is describing is not an actual one but instead an hypothetical, "ideal" one; the actual "community without" is transformed into a "forum and tribunal within, a judgment seat of charges, assessments and exculpations." Only through the powers of imagination can we exercise our moral powers, envisioning with the powers of judgment what conscience requires.

Morality is therefore *inherently* social, in a variety of ways. It depends on socially learned language, is learned from interactions with others, and governs our interactions with others in society. But it also demands, as Dewey put it, that we know "with" others, envisioning for ourselves what their points of view would require along with our own. Conscience demands we occupy the positions of others.

Viewed in this light, God might play a role in moral reflection and conscience. That is because it is unlikely a religious person would wish to exclude God from the "forum and tribunal" that constitutes conscience. Rather, for the religious person conscience would almost certainly include the imagined reaction of God along with the reactions of others who might be affected by the action. So it seems that for a religious person morality and God's will cannot be separated, though the connection between them is not as envisioned by the divine command theory.

This leads to my final point, about moral education. If Dewey is correct, then it seems clear there is an important sense in which morality not only can be taught but must be. Besides early moral training, moral thinking depends on our ability to imagine others' reactions and to imaginatively put ourselves into their shoes.

“What would somebody (including, perhaps, God) think if this got out?” expresses more than a concern with being embarrassed or punished; it is also the voice of conscience and indeed of morality itself. But that would mean, thinking of education, that listening to others, reading about what others think and do, and reflecting within ourselves about our actions and whether we could defend them to others are part of the

practice of morality itself. Morality cannot exist without the broader, social perspective introduced by others, and this social nature ties it, in that way, with education and with public discussion, both actual and imagined. “Private” moral reflection taking place independently of the social world would be no moral reflection at all; and moral education is not only possible, but essential.

Review Questions

1. According to Arthur, how are morality and religion different?
2. Why isn't religion necessary for moral motivation?
3. Why isn't religion necessary as a source of moral knowledge?
4. What is the divine command theory? Why does Arthur reject this theory?
5. According to Arthur, how are morality and religion connected?
6. Dewey says that morality is social. What does this mean, according to Arthur?

Discussion Questions

1. Has Arthur refuted the divine command theory? If not, how can it be defended?
2. If morality is social, as Dewey says, then how can we have any obligations to nonhuman animals? (Arthur mentions this problem and some possible solutions to it in footnote 6.)
3. What does Dewey mean by moral education? Does a college ethics class count as moral education?

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Morality Is Based on Sentiment

DAVID HUME

David Hume (1711–1776), the great Scottish philosopher and historian, wrote his most famous work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, before he was 24 years old. His other important philosophical work, the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, was published posthumously.

Hume argues that moral judgments are not based on reason but on sentiment, feelings of approval or disapproval. According to Hume, reason deals with relations of ideas or matters of fact. But an examination of common moral evils reveals neither relations of ideas nor matters of fact, but only sentiment. He uses three examples to support his argument: incest, murder, and ingratitude. Why is it that incest in humans is wrong, while the very same action in animals is not? There is no difference in the relations of ideas or in the basic facts. The only difference is that we disapprove of incest in humans and not in animals. Hume finds this argument to be entirely decisive. Or consider a deliberate murder. Is the wrongness of murder to be found in any objective fact or any reasoning about relations of ideas? Hume thinks not. The wrongness is a matter of fact, but it is the fact that you disapprove of intentional murder. Examine the crime of ingratitude. Is the crime an observable fact? Is it found in relations of ideas? No, it is found in the mind of the person who is ungrateful; specifically, it is a feeling of ill-will or indifference. Hume's conclusion is that morality is determined by sentiment, not reasoning.

Source: From David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), bk. 3, pt. 1, sec. 1; and *An Inquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals* (1751), app. 1.

THOSE WHO AFFIRM THAT VIRTUE is nothing but a conformity to reason; that there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, which are the same to every rational being that considers them; that the immutable measures of right and wrong impose an obligation, not only on human creatures, but also on the Deity himself: All these systems concur in the opinion, that morality, like truth, is discern'd merely by ideas, and by their juxta-position and comparison. In order, therefore, to judge of these systems, we need only consider, whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction.

If morality had naturally no influence on human passions and actions, 'twere in vain to take such pains to inculcate it; and nothing wou'd be more fruitless than that multitude of rules and precepts, with which all moralists abound. Philosophy is commonly divided into *speculative* and *practical*; and as morality is always comprehended under the latter division, 'tis supposed to influence our passions and actions, and to go beyond the calm and indolent judgments of the understanding. And this is confirm'd by common experience, which informs us, that men are often govern'd by their duties, and are deter'd from some actions by the opinion of injustice, and impell'd to others by that of obligation.

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. . . .

But to make these general reflexions more clear and convincing, we may illustrate them by some particular instances, wherein this character of moral good or evil is the most universally acknowledged. . . .

I would fain ask any one, why incest in the human species is criminal, and why the very same

action, and the same relations in animals have not the smallest moral turpitude and deformity? If it be answer'd, that this action is innocent in animals, because they have not reason sufficient to discover its turpitude; but that man, being endow'd with that faculty, which *ought* to restrain him to his duty, the same action instantly becomes criminal to him; should this be said, I would reply, that this is evidently arguing in a circle. For before reason can perceive this turpitude, the turpitude must exist; and consequently is independent of the decisions of our reason, and is their object more properly than their effect. According to this system, then, every animal, that has sense, and appetite, and will; that is, every animal must be susceptible of all the same virtues and vices, for which we ascribe praise and blame to human creatures. All the difference is, that our superior reason may serve to discover the vice or virtue, and by that means may augment the blame or praise: But still this discovery supposes a separate being in these moral distinctions, and a being, which depends only on the will and appetite, and which, both in thought and reality, may be distinguish'd from the reason. Animals are susceptible of the same relations, with respect to each other, as the human species, and therefore wou'd also be susceptible of the same morality, if the essence of morality consisted in these relations. Their want of a sufficient degree of reason may hinder them from perceiving the duties and obligations of morality, but can never hinder these duties from existing; since they must antecedently exist, in order to their being perceiv'd. Reason must find them, and can never produce them. This argument deserves to be weigh'd, as being, in my opinion, entirely decisive.

Nor does this reasoning only prove, that morality consists not in any relations, that are the objects of science; but if examin'd, will prove with equal certainty, that it consists not in any *matter of fact*, which can be discover'd by the understanding. This is the *second* part of our argument; and if it can be made evident, we may conclude, that morality is not an object of reason.

But can there be any difficulty in proving, that vice and virtue are not matters of fact, whose existence we can infer by reason? Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind: And this discovery in morals, like that other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advancement of the speculative sciences; tho', like that too, it has little or no influence on practice. Nothing can be more real, or concern us more, than our own sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness; and if these be favourable to virtue, and unfavourable to vice, no more can be requisite to the regulation of our conduct and behaviour.

I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence.

For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason. . . .

Examine the crime of *ingratitude*, for instance; which has place, wherever we observe good-will, expressed and known, together with good-offices performed, on the one side, and a return of ill-will or indifference, with ill-offices or neglect on the other: anatomize all these circumstances, and examine, by your reason alone, in what consists the demerit or blame. You never will come to any issue or conclusion.

Reason judges either of *matter of fact* or of *relations*. Enquire then, *first*, where is that matter of fact which we here call *crime*; point it out; determine the time of its existence; describe its essence or nature; explain the sense or faculty to which it discovers itself. It resides in the mind of the person who is ungrateful. He must, therefore, feel it, and be conscious of it. But nothing is there, except the passion of ill-will or absolute indifference. You cannot say that these, of themselves, always, and in all circumstances, are crimes. No, they are only crimes when directed towards persons who have before expressed and displayed good-will towards us. Consequently, we may infer, that the crime of ingratitude is not any particular individual *fact*; but arises from a complication of circumstances, which, being presented to the spectator, excites the *sentiment* of blame, by the particular structure and fabric of his mind.

This representation, you say, is false. Crime, indeed, consists not in a particular *fact*, of whose reality we are assured by *reason*; but it consists in certain *moral relations*, discovered

by reason, in the same manner as we discover by reason the truths of geometry or algebra. But what are the relations, I ask, of which you here talk? In the case stated above, I see first good-will and good-offices in one person; then ill-will and ill-offices in the other. Between these, there is a relation of *contrariety*. Does the crime consist in that relation? But suppose a person bore me ill-will or did me ill-offices; and I, in return, were indifferent towards him, or did him good-offices. Here is the same relation of *contrariety*; and yet my conduct is often highly laudable. Twist and turn this matter as much as you will, you can never rest the morality on relation; but must have recourse to the decisions of sentiment.

When it is affirmed that two and three are equal to the half of ten, this relation of equality I understand perfectly. I conceive, that if ten be divided into two parts, of which one has as many units as the other; and if any of these parts be compared to two added to three, it will contain as many units as that compound number. But when you draw thence a comparison to moral relations, I own that I am altogether at a loss to understand you. A moral action, a crime, such as ingratitude, is a complicated object. Does the morality consist in the relation of its parts to each other? How? After what manner? Specify the relation: be more particular and explicit in your propositions, and you will easily see their falsehood.

No, say you, the morality consists in the relation of actions to the rule of right; and they are denominated good or ill, according as they agree or disagree with it. What then is this rule of right? In what does it consist? How is it determined? By reason, you say, which examines the moral relations of actions. So that moral relations are determined by the comparison of action to a rule. And that rule is determined by considering the moral relations of objects. Is not this fine reasoning?

All this is metaphysics, you cry. That is enough; there needs nothing more to give a strong presumption of falsehood. Yes, reply I, here are metaphysics surely; but they are all on your side, who advance an abstruse hypothesis, which can never be made intelligible, nor quadrate with any particular instance or illustration. The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary. We then proceed to examine a plain matter of fact, to wit, what actions have this influence. We consider all the circumstances in which these actions agree, and thence endeavour to extract some general observations with regard to these sentiments. If you call this metaphysics, and find anything abstruse here, you need only conclude that your turn of mind is not suited to the moral sciences.

Review Questions

1. According to Hume, how do morals have an influence on action?
2. Explain Hume's argument about incest.
3. What is Hume's point about "is" and "ought"?
4. How does Hume explain ingratitude?

Discussion Questions

1. Suppose I say, "I disapprove of abortion, but it is not wrong." Does this make any sense? Why or why not?
2. Some philosophers have claimed that arguing from facts to values is not always a mistake. Can you construct an acceptable argument with a fact as a premise and a value as a conclusion? For example, what about Mill's argument that if something is desired, then it is desirable?

Ethical Relativism

WILLIAM H. SHAW

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Shaw discusses normative ethical relativism that tells us what is right and wrong. There are two kinds of normative ethical relativism. First, *cultural* ethical relativism makes right and wrong relative to one's culture. What is right is what one's culture says is right, and what is wrong is what one's culture says is wrong. For example, if Catholic Spain condemns abortion, then it is wrong (in that culture). But if abortion is approved in Japan, then it is right (in that culture). Second, *individual* ethical relativism says that right and wrong are relative to the individual's opinion, what she thinks is right and wrong. If an individual thinks something is right, then it is right (for her); and if she thinks something is wrong, then it is wrong (for her).

Shaw quickly dismisses individual ethical relativism. It collapses the common distinction between merely thinking something is right and its actually being right. It makes ethical debate pointless, and fails to explain how moral deliberation is possible.

Shaw takes cultural ethical relativism more seriously, but in the end he finds it to be false. It does not allow valid moral criticism. For example, we cannot truly say that slavery in a slave society like that of the American South in the 19th century was immoral and unjust. It is not clear how it should be applied, and worst of all, it flies in the face of Shaw's certainty that some things are wrong even if a society accepts them. For example, Shaw claims it is clear that a society that applauded the random torture of children would be immoral, even if it thought such a practice were right. If a society can make moral mistakes like this, then cultural ethical relativism is false.

1. ETHICAL RELATIVISM

THE PEOPLES AND SOCIETIES of the world are diverse; their institutions, fashions, ideas, manners, and mores vary tremendously. This is a simple truth. Sometimes an awareness of this

Source: William H. Shaw, "Relativism and Objectivity in Ethics," from *Morality and Moral Controversies*, ed. John Arthur (Prentice-Hall, 1981) pp. 31–38, 46–50. Used by permission.

diversity and of the degree to which our own beliefs and habits mirror those of the culture around us stimulates self-examination. In the realm of ethics, familiarity with strikingly different cultures has led many people to suppose that morality itself is relative to particular societies, that right and wrong vary from culture to culture.

This view is generally called "ethical relativism"; it is the normative theory that what is

right is what the culture says is right. What is right in one place may be wrong in another, because the only criterion for distinguishing right from wrong—the only ethical standard for judging an action—is the moral system of the society in which the act occurs. Abortion, for example, is condemned as immoral in Catholic Spain, but practiced as a morally neutral form of birth control in Japan. According to the ethical relativist, then, abortion is wrong in Spain but morally permissible in Japan. The relativist is not saying merely that the Spanish believe abortion is abominable and the Japanese do not; that is acknowledged by everyone. Rather, the ethical relativist contends that abortion is immoral in Spain because the Spanish believe it to be immoral and morally permissible in Japan because the Japanese believe it to be so. There is no absolute ethical standard, independent of cultural context, no criterion of right and wrong by which to judge other than that of particular societies. In short, morality is relative to society.

A different sort of relativist might hold that morality is relative, not to the culture, but to the individual. The theory that what is right and wrong is determined by what a person thinks is right and wrong, however, is not very plausible. The main reason is that it collapses the distinction between thinking something is right and its actually being right. We have all done things we thought were right at the time, but later decided were wrong. Our normal view is that we were mistaken in our original thinking; we believed the action to have been right, but it was not. In the relativist view under consideration, one would have to say that the action in question was originally right, but later wrong as our thinking changed—surely a confused and confusing thing to say! Furthermore, if we accept this view, there would be no point in debating ethics with anyone, for whatever he thought right would automatically be right for him, and whatever we thought right would be right for us. Indeed, if right were determined solely by what we took to be right, then it would not be at all clear what

we are doing when we try to decide whether something is right or wrong in the first place—since we could never be mistaken! Certainly this is a muddled doctrine. Most likely its proponents have meant to emphasize that each person must determine for himself as best he can what actually is right or to argue that we ought not to blame people for acting according to their sincere moral judgments. These points are plausible, and with some qualifications, perhaps everyone would accept them, but they are not relativistic in the least.

The theory that morality is relative to society, however, is more plausible, and those who endorse this type of ethical relativism point to the diverseness of human values and the multiplicity of moral codes to support their case. From our own cultural perspective, some seemingly “immoral” moralities have been adopted: polygamy, homosexuality, stealing, slavery, infanticide, and the eating of strangers have all been tolerated or even encouraged by the moral system of one society or another. In light of this, the ethical relativist feels that there can be no nonethnocentric standard by which to judge actions. We feel the individuals in some remote tribe are wrong to practice infanticide, while other cultures are scandalized that we eat animals. Different societies have different rules; what moral authority other than society, asks the relativist, can there be? Morality is just like fashion in clothes, beauty in persons, and legality in action—all of which are relative to, and determined by, the standards of a particular culture.

In some cases this seems to make sense. Imagine that Betty is raised in a society in which one is thought to have a special obligation to look after one’s maternal aunts and uncles in their old age, and Sarah lives in a society in which no such obligation is supposed. Certainly we are inclined to say that Betty really does have an obligation that Sarah does not. Sarah’s culture, on the other hand, may hold that if someone keeps a certain kind of promise to you, you owe him or her a favor, or that children are not

required to tell the truth to adults. Again, it seems plausible that different sorts of obligations arise in Sarah's society; in her society, promises really do owe their promisors and children are not wrong to lie, whereas this might not be so in other cultures.

Ethical relativism explains these cases by saying that right and wrong are determined solely by the standards of the society in question, but there are other, nonrelativistic ways of accounting for these examples. In Betty's society, people live with the expectation that their sister's offspring will look after them; for Betty to behave contrary to this institution and to thwart these expectations may produce bad consequences—so there is a reason to think she has this obligation other than the fact that her society thinks she has it. In Sarah's world, on the other hand, no adult expects children to tell the truth; far from deceiving people, children only amuse them with their tall tales. Thus, we are not required to be ethical relativists in order to explain why moral obligations may differ according to the social context. And there are other cases in which ethical relativism seems implausible. Suppose Betty's society thinks that it is wicked to engage in intercourse on Sundays. We do not believe it wrong of her to do so just because her society thinks such conduct is impermissible. Or suppose her culture thinks that it is morally reprehensible to wear the fur of rare animals. Here we may be inclined to concur, but if we think it is wrong of her to do this, we do not think it so because her society says so. In this example and the previous one, we look for some reason why her conduct should be considered immoral. The fact that her society thinks it so is not enough.

Ethical relativism undermines any moral criticism of the practices of other societies as long as their actions conform to their own standards. We cannot say that slavery in a slave society like that of the American South of the 19th century was immoral and unjust as long as that society held it to be morally permissible. Slavery was right for them, although it is wrong for us today. To condemn slave owners as immoral, says the relativist, is to attempt to extend the standards

of our society illegitimately to another culture. But this is not the way we usually think. Not only do we wish to say that a society is mistaken if it thinks that slavery (or cannibalism, cruelty, racial bigotry) is morally permissible, but we also think we have justification for so saying and are not simply projecting ethnocentrically the standards of our own culture. Indeed, far from mirroring those standards in all our moral judgments, we sometimes criticize certain principles or practices accepted by our own society. None of this makes sense from the relativist's point of view. People can be censured for not living up to their society's moral code, but that is all; the moral code itself cannot be criticized. Whatever a society takes to be morally right really is right for it. Reformers who campaign against the "injustices" of their society are only encouraging people to be immoral—that is, to depart from the moral standards of their society—unless or until the majority of society agrees with the reformers. The minority can never be right in moral matters; to be right it must become the majority.

This raises some puzzles for the theory of ethical relativism. What proportion of a society must believe, say, that abortion is permissible for it to be morally acceptable in that society—90 percent? 75 percent? 51 percent? If the figure is set high (say 75 percent) and only 60 percent of the society condone abortion, then it would not be permissible; yet it would seem odd for the relativist to say that abortion was therefore wrong, given that a majority of the population believes otherwise. Without a sufficient majority either way, abortion would be neither morally permissible nor impermissible. On the other hand, if the figure is set lower, then there will be frequent moral flip-flops. Imagine that last year abortion was thought wrong by 51 percent of the populace, but this year only 49 percent are of that opinion; that means, according to the relativist, that it was wrong last year, but is now morally permissible—and things may change again. Surely, though, something is wrong with majority rule in matters of morality. In addition one might

wonder what is to count, for the relativist, as a society. In a large and heterogeneous nation like the United States, are right and wrong determined by the whole country; or do smaller societies like Harlem, San Francisco, rural Iowa, or the Chicano community in Los Angeles set their own moral standards? But if these are cohesive enough to count as morality-generating societies, what about such “societies” as outlaw bikers, the drug culture, or the underworld? And what, then, does the relativist say about conflicts between these group moralities or between them and the morality of the overall society? Since an individual may be in several overlapping “societies” at the same time, he may well be receiving conflicting moral instructions—all of which, it would seem, are correct according to the relativist.

These are all questions the relativist must answer if he is to make his theory coherent. To raise them is not to refute relativism, of course, since the relativist may be able to explain satisfactorily what he means by “society,” how its standards relate to those of other groups, and what is to count as moral approval by a given

society. However the relativist attempts to refine his theory, he will still be maintaining that what is right is determined by what the particular society, culture, or group takes to be right and that this is the only standard by which an individual’s actions can be judged. Not only does the relativist neglect to give us a reason for believing that a society’s own views about morality are conclusive as to what is actually right and wrong, but also his theory does not square with our understanding of morality and the nature of ethical discourse. By contending that the moralities of different societies are all equally valid, the relativist holds that there can be no nonethnocentric ground for preferring one moral code to another, that one cannot speak of moral progress. Moralities may change, but they do not get better or worse. If words mean anything, however, it seems clear that a society that applauded the random torture of children would be immoral, even if it thought such a practice were right. It would simply be mistaken, and disastrously so. Since this is the case, ethical relativism must be false as a theory of normative ethics.

Review Questions

1. Explain Shaw’s distinction between the two types of ethical relativism.
2. Why does he reject the second type, the theory that makes morality relative to the individual?
3. Shaw thinks the theory that morality is relative to society is more plausible. Why?
4. According to Shaw, what are the problems facing cultural ethical relativism? Why does he think it is false?

Discussion Questions

1. Does Shaw succeed in refuting both types of ethical relativism? Does the relativist have any reply?
2. Is religion relative to society? Shaw suggests that you will be a Baptist if born in Tennessee, a Jew if born in Tel Aviv, and a Muslim if born in Tehran. If so, what does this imply about the nature of religion?
3. Consider Mill’s principle of liberty: You should be free to do whatever you want as long as you don’t harm others. Is this an acceptable moral principle? Why or why not?
4. Shaw says that if it is going to work, a moral code has to be acceptable to everyone. But how could there be such a code if there are fundamental disagreements in morality? Is there any way to get agreement?

Utilitarianism

JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was one of the most important and influential British philosophers. His most important works in ethics are *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1861), from which the reading is taken.

Mill sets forth the basic principles of utilitarianism, including the Principle of Utility (or the Greatest Happiness Principle) and the hedonistic principle that happiness is pleasure. He explains the theory by replying to various objections and concludes with an attempt to prove the Principle of Utility.

THE CREED which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

Now, such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and groveling; as a doctrine

worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparison by its German, French, and English assailants.

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then be no longer an imputation; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. I do not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoic, as well as Christian elements require to be included.

Source: John Stuart Mill, from *Utilitarianism* (1861), chapters 12 and 17.

But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties.

Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes. A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable; we may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power, or to the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it: but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them. Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness—that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior—confounds the two very different

ideas, of happiness, and content. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low, has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

It may be objected, that many who are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgence to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good. It may be further objected, that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity

in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both.

From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgment declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.

I have dwelt on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of human conduct. But it is by no means

an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian stand; for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. But the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation. . . .

I must again repeat what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be

as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbor as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as, speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes; so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence. If the impugners of the utilitarian morality represented it to their own minds in this its true character, I know not what recommendation possessed by any other morality they could possibly affirm to be wanting to it; what more beautiful or more exalted developments of human nature any other ethical system can be supposed to foster, or what springs of action, not accessible to the utilitarian, such systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates. . . .

OF WHAT SORT OF PROOF THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY IS SUSCEPTIBLE

It has already been remarked, that questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptance of the term. To be incapable of

proof by reasoning is common to all first principles; to the first premises of our knowledge, as well as to those of our conduct. But the former, being matters of fact, may be the subject of a direct appeal to the faculties which judge of fact—namely, our senses, and our internal consciousness. Can an appeal be made to the same faculties on questions of practical ends? Or by what other faculty is cognizance taken of them?

Questions about ends, in other words, question what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end. What ought to be required of this doctrine—what conditions is it requisite that the doctrine should fulfil—to make good its claim to be believed?

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the cases admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as one of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality.

But it has not, by this alone, proved itself to be the sole criterion. To do that, it would seem, by the same rule, necessary to show, not only that people desire happiness, but that they never desire anything else. Now it is palpable that they do desire things which, in common language, are decidedly distinguished from happiness. They

desire, for example, virtue, and the absence of vice, no less really than pleasure and the absence of pain. The desire of virtue is not as universal, but it is as authentic a fact, as the desire of happiness. And hence the opponents of the utilitarian standard deem that they have a right to infer that there are other ends of human action besides happiness, and that happiness is not the standard of approbation and disapprobation.

But does the utilitarian doctrine deny that people desire virtue, or maintain that virtue is not a thing to be desired? The very reverse. It maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself. Whatever may be the opinion of utilitarian moralists as to the original conditions by which virtue is made virtue; however they may believe (as they do) that actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue; yet this being granted, and it having been decided, from considerations of this description, what *is* virtuous, they not only place virtue at the very head of the things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but they also recognise as a psychological fact that possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond it; and hold, that the mind is not in a right state, not in a state conformable to Utility, not in the state most conducive to the general happiness, unless it does love virtue in this manner—as a thing desirable in itself, even although, in the individual instance, it should not produce those other desirable consequences which it tends to produce, and on account of which it is held to be virtue. This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the Happiness principle. The ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate. The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as for example health, is to be looked upon as means to a collective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are

a part of the end. Virtue, according to the utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but it is capable of becoming so; and in those who love it disinterestedly it has become so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part of their happiness.

To illustrate this farther, we may remember that virtue is not the only thing, originally a means, and which if it were not a means to anything else, would be and remain indifferent, but which by association with what it is a means to, comes to be desired for itself, and that too with the utmost intensity. What, for example, shall we say of the love of money? There is nothing originally more desirable about money than about any heap of glittering pebbles. Its worth is solely that of the things which it will buy; the desires for other things than itself, which it is a means of gratifying. Yet the love of money is not only one of the strongest moving forces of human life, but money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself; the desire to possess it is often stronger than the desire to use it, and goes on increasing when all the desires which point to ends beyond it, to be compassed by it, are falling off. It may, then, be said truly, that money is desired not for the sake of an end, but as part of the end. From being a means to happiness, it has come to be itself a principal ingredient of the individual's conception of happiness. The same may be said of the majority of the great objects of human life—power, for example, or fame; except that to each of these there is a certain amount of immediate pleasure annexed, which has at least the semblance of being naturally inherent in them; a thing which cannot be said of money. Still, however, the strongest natural attraction, both of power and of fame, is the immense aid they give to the attainment of our other wishes; and it is the strong association thus generated between them and all our objects of desire, which gives to the direct desire of them the intensity it often assumes, so as in some characters to surpass in strength all other desires. In these cases the means have become a part of the end, and a more important part of it than any of the things which they are means to.

What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness, has come to be desired for its own sake. In being desired for its own sake it is, however, desired as *part* of happiness. The person is made, or thinks he would be made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it. The desire of it is not a different thing from the desire of happiness, any more than the love of music, or the desire of health. They are included in happiness. They are some of the elements of which the desire of happiness is made up. Happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts. And the utilitarian standard sanctions and approves their being so. Life would be a poor thing, very ill provided with sources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature, by which things originally indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures, both in permanency, in the space of human existence that they are capable of covering, and even in intensity.

Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed, it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good; and with this difference between it and the love of money, of power, or of fame, that all of these may, and often do, render the individual noxious to the other members of the society to which he belongs, whereas there is nothing which makes him so much a blessing to them as the cultivation of the disinterested love of virtue. And consequently, the utilitarian standard, while it tolerates and approves those other acquired desires, up to the point beyond which they would be more injurious to the general happiness than promotive of it, enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to the greatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness.

It results from the preceding considerations, that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. Those who desire virtue for its own sake, desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for

both reasons united; as in truth the pleasure and pain seldom exist separately, but almost always together, the same person feeling pleasure in the degree of virtue attained, and pain in not having attained more. If one of these gave him no pleasure, and the other no pain, he would not love or desire virtue, or would desire it only for the other benefits which it might produce to himself or to persons whom he cared for. . . .

Review Questions

1. State and explain the Principle of Utility. Show how it could be used to justify actions that are conventionally viewed as wrong, such as lying and stealing.
2. How does Mill reply to the objection that epicureanism is a doctrine worthy only of swine?
3. How does Mill distinguish between higher and lower pleasures?
4. According to Mill, whose happiness must be considered?
5. Carefully reconstruct Mill's proof of the Principle of Utility.

Discussion Questions

1. Is happiness nothing more than pleasure, and the absence of pain? What do you think?
2. Does Mill convince you that the so-called higher pleasures are better than the lower ones? What about the person of experience who prefers the lower pleasures over the higher ones?
3. Mill says, "In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility." Is this true or not?
4. Many commentators have thought that Mill's proof of the Principle of Utility is defective. Do you agree? If so, then what mistake or mistakes does he make? Is there any way to reformulate the proof so that it is not defective?

The Categorical Imperative

IMMANUEL KANT

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a German, was one of the most important philosophers of all time. He made significant contributions to all areas of philosophy. He wrote many books; the most important ones are *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Prolegomena*

Source: Immanuel Kant, "The Categorical Imperative," from *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1948).

to *All Future Metaphysics, Critique of Practical Reason, Critique of Judgment*, and *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, from which the reading is taken.

Kant believes that our moral duty can be formulated in one supreme rule, the categorical imperative, from which all our duties can be derived. Although he says that there is just one rule, he gives different versions of it, and two of them seem to be distinct. He arrives at the supreme rule or rules by considering the nature of the good will and duty.

THE GOOD WILL

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and any other *talents* of the mind we may care to name, or courage, resolution, and constancy of purpose, as qualities of *temperament*, are without doubt good and desirable in many respects; but they can also be extremely bad and hurtful when the will is not good which has to make use of these gifts of nature, and which for this reason has the term "*character*" applied to its peculiar quality. It is exactly the same with *gifts of fortune*. Power, wealth, honour, even health and that complete well-being and contentment with one's state which goes by the name of "*happiness*," produce boldness, and as a consequence often overboldness as well, unless a good will is present by which their influence on the mind—and so too the whole principle of action—may be corrected and adjusted to universal ends; not to mention that a rational and impartial spectator can never feel approval in contemplating the uninterrupted prosperity of a being graced by no touch of a pure and good will, and that consequently a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of our very worthiness to be happy.

Some qualities are even helpful to this good will itself and can make its task very much easier. They have none the less no inner unconditioned worth, but rather presuppose a good will which sets a limit to the esteem in which they are rightly held and does not permit us to regard them as absolutely good. Moderation in affections and passions, self-control, and sober reflexion are not only good in many respects: they may

even seem to constitute part of the *inner* worth of a person. Yet they are far from being properly described as good without qualification (however unconditionally they have been commended by the ancients). For without the principles of a good will they may become exceedingly bad; and the very coolness of a scoundrel makes him, not merely more dangerous, but also immediately more abominable in our eyes than we should have taken him to be without it.

THE GOOD WILL AND ITS RESULTS

A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes—because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end: it is good through its willing alone—that is, good in itself. Considered in itself it is to be esteemed beyond comparison as far higher than anything it could ever bring about merely in order to favour some inclination or, if you like, the sum total of inclinations. Even if, by some special disfavour of destiny or by the niggardly endowment of step-motherly nature, this will is entirely lacking in power to carry out its intentions; if by its utmost effort it still accomplishes nothing, and only good will is left (not, admittedly, as a mere wish, but as the straining of every means so far as they are in our control); even then it would still shine like a jewel for its own sake as something which has its full value in itself. Its usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add to, nor subtract from, this value. Its usefulness would be merely, as it were, the setting which enables us to handle it better in our ordinary dealings or to attract the attention of those not yet sufficiently expert, but not to commend it to experts or to determine its value. . . .

THE GOOD WILL AND DUTY

We have now to elucidate the concept of a will estimable in itself and good apart from any further end. This concept, which is already present in a sound natural understanding and requires not so much to be taught as merely to be clarified, always holds the highest place in estimating the total worth of our actions and constitutes the condition of all the rest. We will therefore take up the concept of *duty*, which includes that of a good will, exposed, however, to certain subjective limitations and obstacles. These, so far from hiding a good will or disguising it, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth more brightly.

THE MOTIVE OF DUTY

I will here pass over all actions already recognized as contrary to duty, however useful they may be with a view to this or that end; for about these the question does not even arise whether they could have been done *for the sake of duty* inasmuch as they are directly opposed to it. I will also set aside actions which in fact accord with duty, yet for which men have *no immediate inclination*, but perform them because impelled to do so by some other inclination. For there it is easy to decide whether the action which accords with duty has been done *from duty* or from some purpose of self-interest. This distinction is far more difficult to perceive when the action accords with duty and the subject has in addition an *immediate inclination* to the action. For example, it certainly accords with duty that a grocer should not overcharge his inexperienced customer; and where there is much competition a sensible shopkeeper refrains from so doing and keeps to a fixed and general price for everybody so that a child can buy from him just as well as anyone else. Thus people are served *honestly*; but this is not nearly enough to justify us in believing that the shopkeeper has acted in this way from duty or from principles of fair dealing; his interests required him to do so. We cannot assume him to have in addition an

immediate inclination towards his customers, leading him, as it were out of love, to give no man preference over another in the matter of price. Thus the action was done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination, but solely from purposes of self-interest.

On the other hand, to preserve one's life is a duty, and besides this every one has also an immediate inclination to do so. But on account of this the often anxious precautions taken by the greater part of mankind for this purpose have no inner worth, and the maxim of their action is without moral content. They do protect their lives *in conformity with duty*, but not *from the motive of duty*. When on the contrary, disappointments and hopeless misery have quite taken away the taste for life; when a wretched man, strong in soul and more angered at his fate than faint-hearted or cast down, longs for death and still preserves his life without loving it—not from inclination or fear but from duty; then indeed his maxim has a moral content.

To help others where one can is a duty, and besides this there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no genuinely moral worth. It stands on the same footing as other inclinations—for example, the inclination for honour, which if fortunate enough to hit on something beneficial and right and consequently honourable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for its maxim lacks moral content, namely, the performance of such actions, not from inclination, but *from duty*. Suppose then that the mind of this friend of man were overclouded by sorrows of his own which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, but that he still had power to help those in distress, though no longer stirred by the need of others because sufficiently occupied with his own; and suppose that, when no longer moved by any inclination, he tears himself out of this

deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination for the sake of duty alone; then for the first time his action has its genuine moral worth. Still further: if nature had implanted little sympathy in this or that man's heart; if (being in other respects an honest fellow) he were cold in temperament and indifferent to the sufferings of others—perhaps because, being endowed with the special gift of patience and robust endurance in his own sufferings, he assumed the like in others or even demanded it; if such a man (who would in truth not be the worth product of nature) were not exactly fashioned by her to be a philanthropist, would he not still find in himself a source from which he might draw a worth far higher than any that a good-natured temperament can have? Assuredly he would. It is precisely in this that the worth of character begins to show—a moral worth and beyond all comparison the highest—namely, that he does good, not from inclination, but from duty. . . .

Thus the moral worth of an action does not depend on the result expected from it, and so too does not depend on any principle of action that needs to borrow its motive from this expected result. For all these results (agreeable states and even the promotion of happiness in others) could have been brought about by other causes as well, and consequently their production did not require the will of a rational being, in which, however, the highest and unconditioned good can alone be found. Therefore nothing but the *idea of the law* in itself, *which admittedly is present only in a rational being*—so far as it, and not an expected result, is the ground determining the will—can constitute that preeminent good which we call moral, a good which is already present in the person acting on this idea and has not to be awaited merely from the result.

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

But what kind of law can this be the thought of which, even without regard to the results expected from it, has to determine the will if this

is to be called good absolutely and without qualification? Since I have robbed the will of every inducement that might arise for it as a consequence of obeying any particular law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions to universal law as such, and this alone must serve the will as its principle. That is to say, I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law*. Here bare conformity to universal law as such (without having as its base any law prescribing particular actions) is what serves the will as its principle, and must so serve it if duty is not to be everywhere an empty delusion and a chimerical concept. The ordinary reason of mankind also agrees with this completely in its practical judgements and always has the aforesaid principle before its eyes. . . .

When I conceive a *hypothetical imperative* in general, I do not know beforehand what it will contain—until its condition is given. But if I conceive a *categorical imperative*, I know at once what it contains. For since besides the law this imperative contains only the necessity that our maxim¹ should conform to this law, while the law, as we have seen, contains no condition to limit it, there remains nothing over to which the maxim has to conform except the universality of a law as such; and it is this conformity alone that the imperative properly asserts to be necessary.

There is therefore only a single categorical imperative and it is this: “*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*”

Now if all imperatives of duty can be derived from this one imperative as their principle, then even although we leave it unsettled whether what we call duty may not be an empty concept, we

1 A *maxim* is a subjective principle of action and must be distinguished from an *objective principle*—namely, a practical law. The former contains a practical rule determined by reason in accordance with the conditions of the subject (often his ignorance or against his inclinations): it is thus a principle on which the subject *acts*. A law, on the other hand, is an objective principle valid for every rational being; and it is a principle on which he *ought to act*—that is, an imperative.

shall still be able to show at least what we understand by it and what the concept means. . . .

ILLUSTRATIONS

We will now enumerate a few duties, following their customary division into duties towards self and duties towards others and into perfect and imperfect duties.²

1. A man feels sick of life as the result of a series of misfortunes that has mounted to the point of despair, but he is still so far in possession of his reason as to ask himself whether taking his own life may not be contrary to his duty to himself. He now applies the test “Can the maxim of my action really become a universal law of nature?” His maxim is “From self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if its continuance threatens more evil than it promises pleasure.” The only further question to ask is whether this principle of self-love can become a universal law of nature. It is then seen at once that a system of nature by whose law the very same feeling whose function (*Bestimmung*) is to stimulate the furtherance of life should actually destroy life would contradict itself and consequently could not subsist as a system of nature. Hence this maxim cannot possibly hold as a universal law of nature and is therefore entirely opposed to the supreme principle of all duty.

2. Another finds himself driven to borrowing money because of need. He well knows that he will not be able to pay it back; but he sees too that he will get no loan unless he gives a firm promise to pay it back within a fixed time. He is inclined to make such a promise; but he has still

enough conscience to ask “Is it not unlawful and contrary to duty to get out of difficulties in this way?” Supposing, however, he did resolve to do so, the maxim of his action would run thus: “Whenever I believe myself short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, though I know that this will never be done.” Now this principle of self-love or personal advantage is perhaps quite compatible with my own entire future welfare; only there remains the question “Is it right?” I therefore transform the demand of self-love into a universal law and frame my question thus: “How would things stand if my maxim became a universal law?” I then see straight away that this maxim can never rank as a universal law of nature and be self-consistent, but must necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law that every one believing himself to be in need can make any promise he pleases with the intention not to keep it would make promising, and the very purpose of promising, itself impossible, since no one would believe he was being promised anything, but would laugh at utterances of this kind as empty shams.

3. A third finds in himself a talent whose cultivation would make him a useful man for all sorts of purposes. But he sees himself in comfortable circumstances, and he prefers to give himself up to pleasure rather than to bother about increasing and improving his fortunate natural aptitudes. Yet he asks himself further “Does my maxim of neglecting my natural gifts, besides agreeing in itself with my tendency to indulgence, agree also with what is called duty?” He then sees that a system of nature could indeed always subsist under such a universal law, although (like the South Sea Islanders) every man should let his talents rust and should be bent on devoting his life solely to idleness, indulgence, procreation, and, in a word, to enjoyment. Only he cannot possibly *will* that this should become a universal law of nature or should be implanted in us as such a law by a natural instinct. For as a rational being he necessarily wills that all his powers should be developed,

² It should be noted that I reserve my division of duties entirely for a future *Metaphysic of Morals* and that my present division is therefore put forward as arbitrary (merely for the purpose of arranging my examples). Further, I understand here by a perfect duty one which allows no exception in the interests of inclination, and so I recognize among *perfect duties*, not only outer ones, but also inner. This is contrary to the accepted usage of the schools, but I do not intend to justify it here, since for my purpose it is all one whether this point is conceded or not.

since they serve him, and are given him, for all sorts of possible ends.

4. Yet a *fourth* is himself flourishing, but he sees others who have to struggle with great hardships (and whom he could easily help); and he thinks, “What does it matter to me? Let every one be as happy as Heaven wills or as he can make himself; I won’t deprive him of anything; I won’t even envy him; only I have no wish to contribute anything to his well-being or to his support in distress!” Now admittedly if such an attitude were a universal law of nature, mankind could get on perfectly well—better no doubt than if everybody prates about sympathy and goodwill, and even takes pains, on occasion, to practise them, but on the other hand cheats where he can, traffics in human rights, or violates them in other ways. But although it is possible that a universal law of nature could subsist in harmony with this maxim, yet it is impossible to *will* that such a principle should hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will which decided in this way would be in conflict with itself, since many a situation might arise in which the man needed love and sympathy from others, and in which, by such a law of nature sprung from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the help he wants for himself. . . .

THE FORMULA OF THE END IN ITSELF

The will is conceived as a power of determining oneself to action *in accordance with the idea of certain laws*. And such a power can be found only in rational beings. Now what serves the will as a subjective ground of its self-determination is an *end*; and this, if it is given by reason alone, must be equally valid for all rational beings. What, on the other hand, contains merely the ground of the possibility of an action whose effect is an end is called a *means*. . . .

Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, *exists* as an end in himself, *not merely as a means* for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed

to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed *at the same time as an end*. All the objects of inclination have only a conditioned value; for if there were not these inclinations and the needs grounded on them, their object would be valueless. Inclinations themselves, as sources of needs, are so far from having an absolute value to make them desirable for their own sake that it must rather be the universal wish of every rational being to be wholly free from them. Thus the value of all objects that can *be produced* by our action is always conditioned. Beings whose existence depends, not on our will, but on nature, have none the less, if they are non-rational beings, only a relative value as means and are consequently called *things*. Rational beings, on the other hand, are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves—that is, as something which ought not to be used merely as a means—and consequently imposes to that extent a limit on all arbitrary treatment of them (and is an object of reverence). Persons, therefore, are not merely subjective ends whose existence as an object of our actions has a value *for us*: they are *objective ends*—that is, things whose existence is in itself an end, and indeed an end such that in its place we can put no other end to which they should serve *simply* as means; for unless this is so, nothing at all of *absolute* value would be found anywhere. But if all value were conditioned—that is, contingent—then no supreme principle could be found for reason at all.

If then there is to be a supreme practical principle and—so far as the human will is concerned—a categorical imperative, it must be such that from the idea of something which is necessarily an end for every one because it is an *end in itself* it forms an *objective* principle of the will and consequently can serve as a practical law. The ground of this principle is: *Rational nature exists as an end in itself*. This is the way in which a man necessarily conceives his own existence: it is therefore so far a *subjective* principle of human actions. But it is also the way in which every other rational being conceives his existence on the same rational ground which is valid

also for me; hence it is at the same time an *objective* principle, from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws for the will. The practical imperative will therefore

be as follows: *Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end. . . .*

Review Questions

1. Explain Kant's account of the good will.
2. Distinguish between hypothetical and categorical imperatives.
3. State the first formulation of the categorical imperative (using the notion of a universal law), and explain how Kant uses this rule to derive some specific duties toward self and others.
4. State the second version of the categorical imperative (using the language of means and end), and explain it.

Discussion Questions

1. Are the two versions of the categorical imperative just different expressions of one basic rule, or are they two different rules? Defend your view.
2. Kant claims that an action that is not done from the motive of duty has no moral worth. Do you agree or not? If not, give some counterexamples.
3. Some commentators think that the categorical imperative (particularly the first formulation) can be used to justify nonmoral or immoral actions. Is this a good criticism?

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Problem Cases

1. *The Myth of Gyges' Ring*

(The myth about Gyges is found in Book II of Plato's *Republic*. The story is told by Glaucon, who is having an argument with Socrates and his companions.) Gyges is a poor shepherd who one day finds a magic ring, a ring that makes the wearer invisible, so that the wearer can go anywhere and do anything undetected. Gyges uses the ring to his advantage. He goes into the royal palace, seduces the queen, murders the king, and seizes the throne. Just how he does all this is not explained; apparently the ring has other powers besides making the wearer invisible.

Now suppose there are two such rings. One is given to a wicked man and another to a virtuous man. No doubt the wicked man will act like Gyges. He will commit

crimes to gain wealth and power, and since he cannot be caught and punished, he will do this without being constrained by morality, by considerations of right and wrong. But what will the virtuous man do? Glaucon argues that the virtuous man will behave no better than the wicked man. If he can commit crimes like stealing and killing with no fear of punishment, then why wouldn't he do them? Why should he care about morality? Why should he worry about what is right and wrong?

How would you reply to Glaucon? Why should you care about morality if you can do whatever you want without getting caught and punished? Why be moral?

2. *A Lost Wallet*

You are taking a walk in Central Park in New York City. It is very early in the morning. Nobody else is around at the moment. Off the path and under a tree you see a black object. You go over and pick it up. It is an expensive-looking wallet. You open it up and find credit cards, a driver's license, and various other cards including a business card with a business address, e-mail address, fax number, and telephone number. Apparently the wallet belongs to a vice president at Merrill Lynch named Parker Borg. There is money, too, lots of one hundred dollar bills. You look around, but there is nobody in sight. You count the money. It adds up to \$1500 in cash. You could take the money and leave the wallet where you found it. Maybe Parker Borg will come looking for it. You could call him up and tell him you found his wallet. If he is grateful, maybe he will give you a reward. Or you could just put the wallet back where you found it and forget about it. What would you do? Explain your choice.

3. *Lying*

Many philosophers have held that lying is morally wrong. Kant thought that lying is "a crime of man against his own person" and should be avoided at all costs. St. Augustine said that when regard for truth has broken down, then everything is open to doubt, and little by little lies grow in size. On the other hand, Nietzsche thought that "lying is a necessity of life" and is "part of the terrifying and problematic character of existence." Goethe asserted that lying is part of human nature; truth is not.

Certainly, lying seems to be very common in our society. As the saying goes, people tell lies in love and war. There are professions that seem to require lying, such as espionage agents and politicians. Or at least these people cannot stay in business very long if they tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Consider the list of public figures caught lying in recent years: Representative Gary A. Condit, Democrat of California, lied about his affair with Chandra Ann Levy. President Bill Clinton lied under oath about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, and then argued that distorting the truth in testimony is not necessarily illegal. Edmund Morris, the author of a so-called biography of President Ronald Reagan, lied about his participation in Reagan's life. The Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu lied about her life in Guatemala. The historian Joseph J. Ellis lied about his heroic service in Vietnam. Jayson Blair, the New York Times reporter, wrote more than 600 articles with misleading information and false quotes. George W. Bush lied when he said (in his state

of the union speech) that Iraq had tried to buy yellowcake uranium from Africa to make nuclear weapons. Dick Cheney lied when he said there was no doubt that Saddam Hussein was building a nuclear device. The list goes on and on with no end in sight. But is lying always wrong? Is it wrong to give people misleading information? Explain your view.

4. The Colt Sporter and Handguns

The Colt Sporter is one of the most popular semiautomatic assault rifles. A semi-automatic weapon fires one bullet with each pull of the trigger, as distinguished from a fully automatic weapon, which fires a stream of bullets with one trigger pull. Fully automatic weapons are banned by the federal government, but semiautomatic weapons are legal in most states. In 1993, a Connecticut law banned thirty kinds of semiautomatic guns, including the Colt Sporter. The Sporter is made by Colt's Manufacturing Company, based in Hartford, Connecticut. Even though it looks just like a Colt-made M16 (a standard military weapon), Colt officials say the Sporter is made for target practice and hunting. Furthermore, the Colt officials insist that people have a right to own and use rifles such as the Sporter. Critics claim that the Sporter can be converted into a fully automatic weapon and that it is used mostly in urban gang and drug shootings.

Do citizens have a right to own and use semiautomatic weapons? What about fully automatic weapons? What is your position?

Most gun owners have handguns, not semiautomatic or fully automatic weapons. It is estimated that there are 70 million handguns owned by private citizens in the United States. Those who support more gun control or even the elimination of all these guns point to statistics. Each year about 39,000 Americans are killed with guns: There are 19,000 suicides, 18,000 homicides, and some 2,000 people killed in gun accidents. In addition, there are about 40,000 injuries from accidents with guns each year, and probably millions of crimes committed using guns. By contrast, countries with strict handgun control have much lower rates of homicide. In 1990, there were 87 people killed by handguns in Japan, 13 in Sweden, 10 in Australia, and 22 in Great Britain.

Given these facts, why not have strict gun control in the United States? What would Mill say? How about Kant?

The opposition to gun control comes mainly from the National Rifle Association and its members. The NRA defends each person's right to own and use handguns in self-defense. The NRA claims that the homicide statistics are inflated and that the most important statistic is that there are 645,000 defensive uses of handguns each year. As for accidental deaths and injuries, the NRA solution is to teach principles of safe use of weapons.

Do you agree with the NRA position? Why or why not?

5. A New Drug

Suppose you are a poor and uneducated person from Chicago. Your only chance for success in life is through athletics, particularly distance running. You have trained

hard, and you have placed high in 10-kilometer and marathon races, but you have never won a major race. You need to be just a little faster to win. In one month, there is the Chicago Marathon, with a cash prize of \$100,000 for the winner. There is a good chance that the winner will also get a lucrative contract with a major shoe company, such as Nike. A friend who is an athletic trainer tells you she has obtained a limited supply of a new drug that dramatically improves endurance by preventing the buildup of lactic acid in the muscles. The drug is the result of genetic research on human growth hormones, and thus far it has been tested on animals with no bad side effects. It seems to be much safer and more effective than steroids or the human growth hormones used by some runners. Your friend offers you a month's supply of the drug. She assures you that it is not on the list of banned drugs and that it will not show up on drug tests, or at least the drug tests currently used. In return for giving you the drug, your friend wants \$5,000, but only if you win the race and collect the \$100,000 cash prize. If you do not win, you owe her nothing.

Should you take the drug or not? Why or why not?

6. *The Equal Rights Amendment*

This amendment was originally proposed by Alice Paul in 1923, just three years after women in the United States received the right to vote. It was approved by Congress in 1971, but it has not been ratified by the required three-fourths of the state legislatures and is now considered dead. The proposed amendment reads as follows:

Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Section 2. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

Should this amendment be ratified or not? Why or why not?

Suggested Readings

1. James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1999), is a good introduction to the standard moral theories. *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991) is a useful anthology that includes short articles on egoism, natural law theory, relativism, subjectivism, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue theory, and rights theory. A reliable source of on-line information on philosophers, terms, and theories, with essays written by experts, is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu>).
2. Joseph Butler makes the classical attack on egoism in *Fifteen Sermons upon Human Nature* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1970). Ayn Rand explains and defends egoism in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964). Paul W. Taylor argues that ethical egoism contains an inconsistency in *Principles of Ethics: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1975).
3. *The Divine Command Theory of Ethics*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), contains several articles on the divine command theory. Robert M. Adams defends the theory in "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Philip L. Quinn gives a sophisticated

- defense and explanation of the theory using deontic logic in *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Kai Nielson, *Ethics without God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), argues that ethics can exist without belief in God.
4. John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), gives a sophisticated defense of natural law theory; basically Finnis argues that following natural law is necessary for human flourishing. J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Chicago: Intervarsity Press, 1997), explains and defends natural law theory as it is found in Aristotle, Aquinas, and Locke. Anthony J. Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytical Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), argues that the problem with natural theory is its assumption that all humans have a common nature or essence.
 5. James Baillie, *Hume on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2000), gives a clear and well-organized introduction to Hume's moral philosophy. J.L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1980), presents a classic discussion of Hume's views on morality. *The Is-Ought Problem*, ed. W. D. Hudson (Macmillan, 1969) is a collection of papers on Hume's famous problem on reasoning from "is" to "ought."
 6. *Ethical Relativism*, ed. John Ladd (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973), has readings on cultural relativism. James Rachels criticizes cultural relativism and subjectivism in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1993). William H. Shaw dismisses subjectivism as implausible and raises objections to cultural relativism in "Relativism and Objectivity in Ethics," in *Morality and Moral Controversies*, ed. John Arthur (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), pp. 31–50. J. L. Mackie presents a subjectivist theory in *Ethics* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977). Gilbert Harman defends a version of relativism in *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
 7. J. J. C. Smart defends utilitarianism and Bernard Williams attacks it in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. A. Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), is a collection of articles on utilitarianism. *Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), has a selection of classical and modern readings on utilitarianism.
 8. Kant's work on ethics is difficult. A good place to begin is his *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). His ethical theory is developed in *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956); *The Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, trans. John Ladd (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); and *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, trans. James Ellington (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964). For commentaries on Kant's moral philosophy, see H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), and H. B. Acton, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).
 9. W. D. Ross explains Aristotle's ethics in his *Aristotle* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), chapter 7. John M. Cooper defends Aristotelian ethics in *Reason and the Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). For articles on virtue theory by classical and contemporary philosophers, see *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*, 3rd ed., ed. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993). James Rachels raises objections to virtue theory in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993). Peter Geach discusses classical virtues such as courage in *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
 10. *Human Rights*, ed. Ellen Paul, Fred Mill, and Jeffrey Paul (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), is a collection of articles on rights. Another anthology on rights is *Theories of Rights*, ed. Jeremy

Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), argues that the basis of rights in the Constitution of the United States is the Kantian idea of treating people with dignity as members of the moral community. Judith Jarvis Thomson, in *The Realm of Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), develops a systematic theory of the nature and foundation of rights. John Locke's classical theory of God-given natural rights is found in his *Two Treatises* (1690).

11. The classical formulations of the social contract theory are Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), John Locke's *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762).
12. Since it first appeared in 1971, Rawls's theory of justice has been widely discussed. One of the first books on the theory to appear was Brian Barry, *The Liberal Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Another useful critical discussion is Robert Paul Wolff, *Understanding Rawls* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). The journal *Ethics* devoted its entire July 1989 issue to a symposium on developments in the Rawlsian theory of justice.
13. Feminist theory has been much discussed in recent years. A big anthology that covers the application of feminist theory to current issues such as affirmative action, abortion, reproductive technology, meat-eating, militarism, and environmentalism is *Living with Contradictions*, ed. Allison M. Jaggar (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1994). Another recent collection of readings on feminist theory and its applications is *Woman and Values*, 2nd ed., ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993). For a comprehensive introduction to different feminist theories, see *Feminist Thought*, ed. Rosemarie Tong (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989). Another comprehensive anthology is *Feminism and Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995). This book covers liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, ecological, phenomenological, and post-modern feminist perspectives.

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