

'Broken promises don't upset me. I just think,  
'Why did they believe me?'" **JACK HANDY, 1949-**

'These are my principles and if you don't like them -  
I have others.' **GROUCHO MARX, 1890-1977**

'Whenever I'm caught between two evils, I take the one  
I've never tried.' **MAE WEST, 1892-1980**

'I am human and therefore indifferent to nothing done  
by humans.' **TERENCE, 186-159 BCE**

'Everything has been figured out, except how to live.'  
**JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, 1905-80**

'Happiness is for idiots.' **CHARLES DE GAULLE, 1890-1970**

'Happiness is good health and a bad memory.'  
**INGRID BERGMAN, 1915-82**

'I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical  
values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with  
wanton cruelty is that I don't like it.' **BERTRAND RUSSELL, 1872-1970**

'There is no duty we so much underrated as the duty of being happy.'  
**ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, 1850-94**

'Man's brain lives in the twentieth century, the heart of most men  
still lives in the Stone Age.' **ERICH FROMM, 1900-80**

'Ethical axioms are found and tested not very differently from the  
axioms of science. Truth is what stands the test of experience.'  
**ALBERT EINSTEIN, 1879-1955**

'As I know more of mankind I expect less of them, and am ready now  
to call a man a good man, upon easier terms than I was formerly.'  
**SAMUEL JOHNSON, 1709-84**

'On the whole, human beings want to be good, but not too good, and  
not quite all the time.' **GEORGE ORWELL, 1903-50**

'When a stupid man is doing something he is ashamed of, he always  
declares it is his duty.' **GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, 1856-1950**

## Introduction

One of the ways in which dogs have an easier time of it than we do is that they never have to worry about ethics. We, by contrast, have to think about what is right and wrong and good and bad. This is because, unlike dogs, we are capable of asking the question 'What should I do?' Admittedly, we are not constantly troubled by this question, and much of our behaviour is guided by habit and custom. But from time to time we have to consider our options and think seriously about the best course of action. Should you keep your promise to help a friend when you are behind with your school work and need to revise for tomorrow's exam? Is it OK to make illegal copies of music? What should you do to help protect the environment? What should you do with your life?

We are also confronted by all kinds of controversial social questions which force us to think about our values:

- Is abortion ever justified?
- Should drugs be legalised?
- Are there limits to free speech?
- Is there such a thing as a just war?

The trouble with these kinds of question is that they do not always seem to have a straightforward answer. This may lead us to wonder how, if at all, we can justify our moral judgements and whether it makes sense to talk about 'moral knowledge'.

In this chapter, we will begin by looking at the nature and limitations of moral reasoning. We will then look at two threats to ethics - relativism and self-interest theory. The first claims that there is no such thing as moral knowledge, the second that, even if there is, we are incapable of acting on it. We will suggest that these threats are not as serious as they appear, and then go on to look at three different theories of ethics: religious ethics, duty ethics and utilitarianism. While none of these theories is entirely satisfactory, they are nevertheless useful tools for helping us to think about and make sense of our values.

## Moral reasoning

Some people who are sceptical about the possibility of moral knowledge claim that moral values and judgements are simply matters of *taste*. This implies that statements like 'abortion is acceptable' / 'abortion is unacceptable' are on a par with statements like 'I like spinach' / 'I don't like spinach'. But the very making of the comparison suggests that this is not right. For we take values more seriously than tastes, and, while there is no arguing about tastes, we expect people to justify their **value-judgements** and support them with reasons.

## A simple model

When we argue about ethics, we typically appeal to a commonly agreed **moral principle** and then try to show that a particular action falls under it. Consider, for example, the following argument:

Cheating on a test is wrong.

Tom cheated on the test.

Therefore what Tom did was wrong.

Given that cheating on a test is wrong, then if Tom cheated on the test, it follows that what he did was wrong. This is the way we reason about many moral issues – although, in practice, we usually take the underlying principles for granted.

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What moral principle is being assumed in each of the following arguments?

- Paula shouldn't have kept the money she found – it doesn't belong to her.
- James was caught bullying his classmates, so he deserves to be punished.
- Jenkins should be released from prison – he didn't receive a fair trial.
- Danny is malicious – he's been spreading false rumours about everyone.
- The president accepted bribes, therefore he should be thrown out of office.
- Simon shouldn't have told that joke – it wasn't funny, it was racist.

When we argue about ethical questions, there are two things we often look at: whether people are being consistent in their judgements, and whether the alleged facts on which those judgements are based are true.



## Consistency

We expect people to be consistent in their moral judgements just as we expect them to be consistent in their judgements in other areas of knowledge. If, for example, you think it is wrong for Tom to cheat on a test, then it is surely as wrong for Dick and Harriet to cheat on a test. The belief that people should be consistent in their judgements is closely connected with the belief that they should be *impartial*. If Tom, Dick and Harriet are all caught cheating on a test, then, other things being equal, we expect them to receive a similar punishment.

Trying to decide whether or not someone is being consistent is complicated by the fact that they might not only apply moral rules inconsistently, but also hold inconsistent principles.

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To what extent do you think the following individuals are morally inconsistent?

- An anti-abortionist who supports the death penalty.
- A vegetarian who buys leather shoes.
- A socialist who educates his children at a private school.
- A politician who advocates family values and has an extra-marital affair.
- An environmental activist who drives an SUV (sports utility vehicle).
- Someone who thinks stealing is wrong but makes illegal copies of computer software.

## Facts

All kinds of facts are likely to be relevant to our moral judgements, and many arguments that initially look like disputes about values turn out to be disputes about facts. For example, if we are arguing about whether or not Smith behaved badly at the party on Saturday night, our disagreement may turn on the question of whether or not Smith punched Jones on the nose. Similarly, if we are arguing about the pros and cons of capital punishment, our disagreement may turn on the question of whether or not it is an effective deterrent. In both cases, we can – in principle at least – settle our dispute by looking at the empirical evidence. This is not to say that all moral disagreements can be settled in this way. For there may be cases where we agree on all the facts but make different value-judgements. For example, we may both agree that capital punishment is an effective deterrent, and yet you might be in favour of it because you think it is good for society and I might be against it because I think that all life, including that of a criminal, is sacred.

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What facts, if any, are relevant in assessing the following value-judgements?

- Child labour should be outlawed.
- Cannabis should be legalised.
- Genetically modified food should be banned.
- Rich countries should give more financial aid to poor countries.

## Disagreements about moral principles

We began this section by setting up a simple model of moral reasoning: *moral principle – fact – value-judgement*. Our discussion has suggested that many arguments can be settled by looking at the background facts and at whether people are being consistent in their judgements. If we agree that cheating is wrong, and there is factual evidence to establish that Tom was cheating, then Tom himself may be willing to admit that what he did was wrong.

If we all share the same underlying moral principles, there is likely to be plenty of scope for moral reasoning. But what if we don't? What if Tom thinks there is nothing wrong with cheating? What if the president thinks it is OK to take bribes? What if Simon approves of racism? What if someone has a whole set of values that are diametrically opposed to our own? How, if at all, can we convince them that they are wrong? Perhaps we can't! Perhaps our values have no ultimate justification. Perhaps our moral rules are no more universal than the grammatical rules of the language we speak!



*"We've got to draw a line on unethical behavior and then get as close to that line as possible."*

Figure 12.2

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## Moral relativism

According to **moral relativism** our values are determined by the society we grow up in, and there are no universal values. Moral values are simply customs or conventions that vary from culture to culture. ('Ethics' and 'morality' are both derived from words that originally meant 'custom'.) Just as people drive on the left in some countries and on the right in others, so some cultures eat pork while others prohibit it, some are monogamous while others are polygamous, and some bury their dead while others burn them.

## Arguments for moral relativism

There are two main arguments for moral relativism: the diversity argument and the lack of foundations argument.

### The diversity argument

According to the diversity argument, the sheer variety of moral practices suggests that there are no objective moral values. The dietary, marriage and burial practices mentioned above might not seem to reflect any very serious differences in values. But you don't have to look very hard to find examples of more unsettling practices.

According to anthropologists, there are, or have been, cultures which have permitted such things as: keeping slaves; female genital mutilation; killing adulterers; burning widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands; slaughtering prisoners by ripping the hearts out of their bodies; killing unproductive members of society; and cannibalism.

The sheer diversity of such practices has been enough to convince some people of the truth of moral relativism. Of course, given the way we have been brought up, we are likely to find such practices barbaric; but since the people engaging in them presumably saw nothing wrong with them, it is tempting to conclude that morality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.



- 1 Do you think there is a difference between moral values and customs or conventions?
- 2 Which of the following would you say are morally wrong and which would you say are simply matters of convention?
  - a You should not burn your country's flag.
  - b A man should not go to work wearing a dress.
  - c You should not persecute minority groups.
  - d A woman should not have more than one husband.
  - e You should not torture the innocent.
  - f You should not have sex with an animal.
  - g You should not use dead people for dog food.
  - h You should not execute adulterers.
  - i You should not execute murderers.
  - j You should not eat meat.
- 3 To what extent do you think you can predict someone's moral beliefs from a knowledge of their cultural background?

### The lack of foundations argument

The second argument for relativism is that moral values are somehow ungrounded or lacking in foundations; for there does not seem to be an independent 'moral reality' against which we can test our values to see if they are true or false; and this suggests that they are simply the result of the way we have been brought up and conditioned by society.

We usually settle disputes in other areas of knowledge by appealing to perception or reason, but neither of these appeals seems to work when we are arguing about values. We cannot appeal to perception because we cannot see values in the way that we can see shapes and sizes and colours. And we cannot appeal to reason because there does not seem to be any logical way of getting from an *is* statement to an *ought* statement. Consider, for example, the following argument:

Some people in the world are starving.  
I have more food than I need.  
Therefore, I *ought* to give some of my food to the starving.

This argument may be emotionally appealing, but the conclusion does not follow from the premises. Indeed, from a purely logical point of view, it is no better than saying:

Some people in the world are starving.  
I have more food than I need.  
Therefore, lucky old me!

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) dramatised the gap between an 'is' and an 'ought' by observing that, 'tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger'. This may sound like an extreme example, but it is worth pointing out that most people worry more about their own minor problems than they do about world poverty.

We saw earlier that, *given* certain moral principles, we can use reason to derive a particular moral judgement (e.g. *given* that people with more food than they need ought to give some of it to the starving, and I have more food than I need, then it follows that I *ought* to give some of it to the starving). But if we cannot justify these principles themselves, then it might seem that we have no choice but to accept moral relativism.

## Does relativism imply tolerance?

One of the things that attracts some people to moral relativism is that it seems to encourage a tolerant 'live and let live' attitude to other cultures. Since different cultures have different beliefs, it would surely be arrogant to assume that *our* culture's values are right and everyone else's are wrong. Such a dogmatic attitude can easily lead to **cultural imperialism** – i.e. to one culture imposing *its* values on other cultures. (History suggests that conquering nations have routinely given the vanquished the choice between conversion and death.) Surely it is more reasonable to say that we have our values and they have theirs, and we have no more right to condemn their values than they have to condemn our values.

Despite the value of tolerance as an antidote to cultural imperialism, we cannot in fact conjure tolerance out of moral relativism. To see why not, imagine that you come across a culture – let us call them the Thugs – imposing their values on another culture. As a good relativist, you remonstrate with them and insist that they have no right to impose their values on other people. But what if they turn to you and say, 'In our culture it is OK to impose our values on other people, and you have no right to impose your value that you-shouldn't-impose-your-values-on-other-people on us!' What the Thugs are, in effect, saying is that while tolerance may be a value in *your* culture, it is not a value in *their* culture. As a consistent relativist, you are obliged to say that their intolerant values are no worse than your tolerant values. If, on the other hand, you want to insist that *everyone* should be tolerant, you are implicitly saying that there is at least one universal value – namely, tolerance – and you cannot then call yourself a relativist. What comes out of this example is that *the belief in universal tolerance is not consistent with moral relativism*.

Once moral relativism is uncoupled from the belief in tolerance, it becomes a much less attractive position. A well-known – and some would say compelling – objection to it is that it seems to leave us with no way of answering the committed Nazi who says that in *his* value system genocide is acceptable. The he's-got-his-values-and-I've-got-mine-and-who-am-I-to-say-he's-wrong response seems completely inappropriate in this case. For we surely want to say that the Nazi really is wrong – as wrong as anyone could be about anything.



- 1 Imagine that you arrive in a 'democratic' country in which adult women have the vote but men have no political power. When you interview them, the men tell you that they are quite happy with the situation, that public life is for women, and a man's place is in the home. To what extent would you accept the situation, and to what extent would you try to 're-educate' the men and make them see the extent to which they have been indoctrinated?
- 2 Which of the following 'cultural practices' should we tolerate and which should we seek to have banned?
  - a Punishing adultery by stoning to death
  - b Punishing murder by lethal injection
  - c Female genital mutilation
  - d Infanticide
  - e Imprisoning suspected terrorists without trial
  - f Discriminating against minority groups
- 3 Read 'Relative values: a dialogue' in the Reading resources and answer the following questions.
  - a According to Jack, our moral beliefs are simply the result of the way in which we have been brought up. Could the same be said about all of our beliefs?
  - b Assess the exchange between Jill and Jack concerning Nazi values. Who do you think gets the better of this exchange?
  - c If Jack is a relativist, then he must accept Jill's belief that values are objective as 'true for her'. To what extent does this weaken his own position?

## Arguments against moral relativism

There are two ways of responding to the threat posed by moral relativism. First it could be argued that, despite appearances, there are in fact some core values that have been accepted by all cultures. Since human beings have broadly similar needs and are confronted by broadly similar problems, it is plausible to think that they will come up with broadly similar rules to regulate communal life. Perhaps not surprisingly there is evidence to suggest that every society has some kind of rules to limit violence, protect property and promote honesty. For it is difficult to imagine how a society could survive and flourish if it inflicted needless suffering on its members, encouraged theft, and honoured deception.

But the worrying fact is that, for much of history, people have had no moral concern for outsiders who do not belong to their community and they have sometimes treated them with the kind of indifference we might treat lobsters. For example, the Wari tribe of the Amazon grouped under the heading 'edible' anyone who was not a member of the tribe. And the Spanish Conquistadors managed to convince themselves that the people they encountered in the New World were sub-human – and then proceeded to butcher them with a clear conscience.

There are clearly some dark and disturbing chapters in the moral history of the human species. But if it is true that all communities have regulated themselves by some recognisably moral values, then it could be argued that their treatment of

outsiders was in some sense a *factual error* which they could, in principle at least, be reasoned out of. The Wari were wrong to think that outsiders were nothing but potential meat; and the Conquistadors were wrong to think that American Indians were not fully human. The optimistic interpretation of our moral history is that we have gradually expanded the moral circle from the tribe to the nation to the race to the whole of mankind, as we have come to recognise our common humanity.

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- 1 Compare and contrast the moral codes of some of the world's great religions. How much overlap is there between them?
  - 2 Which five values would you say have the best claim to be universal and why?
  - 3 We have clearly made scientific progress over the last three hundred years. Does it also make sense to speak of moral progress? Give reasons.

A second possible response to moral relativism is to say that we can in fact justify our values. For it could be argued that some core values – such as the belief that it is wrong to inflict needless suffering on other people – are intuitively obvious, and that scepticism about such values is no more justified than any other form of scepticism. Admittedly, we cannot prove that our basic moral intuitions are true; but if you can't just see that, for example, random torture is wrong, there is probably nothing I can do to convince you. Fortunately, I think the vast majority of people believe that the statement 'random torture is wrong' is at least as obvious as  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

We should, however, be careful about appealing to intuition as a *general* way of justifying our moral beliefs. For when it comes to detailed questions of right and wrong, there is no consensus about what is intuitively obvious. (You cannot, for example, resolve the abortion debate by appealing to intuition.) Nevertheless, if we could at least agree on a small number of core intuitions, these would establish boundary conditions that any viable theory of ethics must satisfy.

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- 1 Just as a person who cannot distinguish red and green is said to be colour blind, can we say that a person who cannot distinguish right and wrong is values blind?
  - 2 To what extent can immorality be seen as a form of mental illness? Do you, for example, think that serial killers are best described as 'bad' or 'mad'?

## Self-interest theory

Having done something to defuse moral relativism, we now consider another idea that threatens to undermine our values. According to **self-interest theory**, human beings are always and everywhere selfish. Since selfish behaviour is usually seen as the opposite of moral behaviour, this theory suggests that, even if there are objective moral values, we are incapable of living up to them. We will consider four arguments for self-interest theory: the definitional argument, the evolutionary argument, the hidden benefits argument, and the fear of punishment argument. We will also look at criticisms of each of these arguments.

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Self

## The definitional argument

According to the definitional argument it is true by definition – i.e. *necessarily* true – that everyone is selfish. The idea behind this argument is very simple: you are being selfish when you do what you want to do, and you always end up doing what you most want to do – otherwise you wouldn't do it.

You might object that we often find ourselves doing things that we don't want to do; but, according to self-interest theory, this is not true. Imagine that one afternoon you have a choice between playing tennis – which you enjoy – and visiting an old lady – which you feel obliged to do, but do not enjoy. What do you do? We would normally say that if you decide to play tennis you are being selfish, and if you decide to visit the old lady, you are being *unselfish* or **altruistic**. But according to the definitional argument, even if you visit the old lady, there is a sense in which you are *still* being selfish. For once we take into account the fact that you will feel *guilty* if you don't visit the old lady, it turns out that overall you would rather visit the old lady than play tennis.

This simple, but apparently powerful, argument seems to mean that genuine altruism is not merely difficult, but *impossible*. To see this, compare Donald Trump – the American property developer – with Mother Teresa – the Catholic nun who devoted her life to helping the poor. At first sight, the contrast between these two people could not be greater; for while Donald Trump spends his time making money, Mother Teresa spent hers helping the poor. However, according to self-interest theory they are both doing what they want but merely have different tastes. Donald Trump gets his buzz out of making money, Mother Teresa got hers out of helping the poor. And while Donald Trump would hate doing what Mother Teresa did, Mother Teresa would have hated doing what Donald Trump does. Since both of them are doing what they most like doing, we seem forced to conclude that they are both equally selfish.

## Criticisms

The problem with the definitional argument is that it effectively robs the word 'selfish' of its meaning. For if people are selfish no matter what they do, then it can no longer be a criticism to describe someone as selfish. Since no evidence is allowed to stand against it, what initially looked like an interesting empirical claim collapses into an empty truism!

The Mother-Teresa-Donald-Trump example shows how counter-intuitive the definitional argument is. Even if we admit that people always do what they most want to do, common sense suggests that we should distinguish between **self-regarding desires** and **other-regarding desires** and use the word 'selfish' to describe only the former. We usually praise someone if they do nice things for other people, but not if they do nice things for themselves. If I buy myself an ice-cream, you are unlikely to think well of me, but if I buy *you* an ice-cream you might. The fact that I may get pleasure from buying you something does not mean that my action is selfish, but simply that I get pleasure from your pleasure. What could be nicer than a world in which everyone got pleasure from helping other people?

## The evolutionary argument

The second argument for self-interest theory takes its inspiration from the theory of evolution, and claims that human beings are naturally selfish creatures who are programmed to pursue their own interests. To succeed in the struggle for survival and get our genes into the next generation, we inevitably spend a huge amount of time looking after 'number one', and other people's interests usually concern us only to the extent that they affect our own. According to this view, the reason capitalism is a more successful political system than socialism is that it taps into our natural self-interest and competitiveness.

### Criticisms

The problem with this argument is that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that **empathy** and altruism are as much a part of our biological inheritance as selfishness. In one intriguing experiment, monkeys refused to pull a lever that would give them food if pulling it also gave an electric shock to one of their companions. They were, in other words, willing to sacrifice food to avoid causing pain to another monkey. With regard to our own species, empathy – which is the emotional basis for altruism – has been observed in babies as young as one year. For example, if a baby sees its mother crying, it may try to console her by giving her a security blanket, or a favourite toy. This suggests that empathy may be a natural part of our make-up. The bottom line is that traits such as empathy and helpfulness pay in evolutionary terms. As the biologist Edward O. Wilson observes: 'Cooperative individuals generally survive longer and leave more offspring.'

## The hidden benefits argument

The third argument for self-interest theory is that we get various hidden benefits – such as gratitude, praise and a positive image of ourselves – from being kind to other people. Furthermore, if we help other people when they are in trouble, then we can ask for their help when we are in trouble. Admittedly, we sometimes help other people who will never be able to 'repay the debt', and we may do socially useful things such as donate blood. But such activities not only make us feel good about ourselves, but also enhance our reputation as 'good people' and this, too, can be socially advantageous.

- 1 If you went out of your way to help someone in trouble, would it bother you if they showed no gratitude?
- 2 If you helped a friend when she had a problem, would you be annoyed if she refused to help you when you had a problem?
- 3 If you gave a lot of money to charity, would you rather your friends knew what you had done, or would you rather they did not know?

Consider, for example, a mother's love for her child, which is sometimes held up as the highest example of altruism. A supporter of self-interest theory might argue that, since a mother loves only *her* children and not *all* children, such love is still self-interested. Many parents are competitive on behalf of their offspring and are anxious for them to do better than other people's children. Such natural competitiveness turned into murderous rivalry in 1991 when a Texas 'cheerleader Mom' plotted the murder of her daughter's rival for a place on the cheerleader team! Fortunately, most parents do not go quite so far in trying to further their children's prospects!

What, then, of a hero who lays down his life for his friends or a martyr who sacrifices it for a noble cause? Well, even heroes and martyrs could be said to get some kind of satisfaction from their sacrifice. They may, for example, think of the posthumous fame they will achieve, or the joys that await them in heaven. Perhaps as a young child, you occasionally thought to yourself, 'I wish I was dead... And then they'd be sorry!' You may then have imagined your parents weeping at your grave, and saying: 'If only we had been kinder to our son when he was alive!' Such are the consolations of martyrdom!

### Criticisms

The problem with the argument from hidden benefits is that, although we do often help other people expecting that they will at some point return the favour, there are some situations in which this cannot be our motive. Consider the everyday example of someone leaving a tip in a restaurant they will never visit again. From a self-interested point of view, this is hardly rational behaviour; but people do it all the time – from, it seems, a sense of fairness. You may, of course, feel good about yourself if you leave a tip, but this hardly justifies our calling it selfish.

There are other more dramatic examples of altruism. During the Second World War, the people of Chambon in France risked their lives to hide Jews fleeing from Nazi persecution. Similarly, a German Czech called Oskar Schindler (1908–74) took huge personal risks to save the lives of hundreds of Jews. Again, these people doubtless got satisfaction from what they did; but perhaps what really matters is not so much their motives – which are often obscure – as their actions. As one survivor rescued by Schindler observed: 'I don't know what his motives were... But I don't give a damn. What's important is that he saved our lives.'

The existence of 'ordinary heroes' who have other-regarding rather than self-regarding desires, and who are sometimes willing to take great personal risks to help other people, effectively takes the sting out of self-interest theory. As David Hume (1711–76) observed:

I esteem the man whose self-love, by whatever means, is so directed as to give him a concern for others, and render him serviceable to society; as I hate or despise him who has no regard to anything beyond his own gratifications and enjoyments.

## The fear of punishment argument

The fourth argument for self-interest theory says that the main thing that keeps us in line and prevents our doing wrong is fear of punishment. When people are thinking of doing something wrong, they usually ask themselves, 'What if I get caught?' The fear of a fine, imprisonment, or even death is enough to deter most people. In situations where law and order break down and there is no longer any fear of getting caught, things can quickly revert to the law of the jungle. Imagine, for example, that the police and security guards in your town went on strike for a day, or a week, or a month. What do you think would happen? If past evidence is anything to go by, there would be pandemonium. Here is a brief description of what happened during a one-day strike by the Montreal police back in 1969:

At 8:00 AM on October 17, 1969... the Montreal police went on strike. By 11:20 AM the first bank was robbed. By noon most downtown stores had closed because of looting. Within a few more hours, taxi drivers burned down the garage of a limousine service that had competed with them for airport customers, a rooftop sniper killed a provincial police officer, rioters broke into several hotels and restaurants, and a doctor slew a burglar in his suburban home. By the end of the day, six banks had been robbed, a hundred shops had been looted, twelve fires had been set, forty carloads of storefront glass had been broken, and three million dollars in property damage had been inflicted, before city authorities had to call in the army... to restore order.

### Criticisms

Although law enforcement plays an important role in ensuring social order, there is no reason to think that *all* good behaviour is motivated by fear. We cannot really explain the behaviour of people like Mother Teresa in this way. A cynic might argue that religious people are motivated primarily by the fear of being punished in the afterlife. But God would probably take a dim view of people who did good simply to avoid punishment; and most of the world's great religions – at least in their more sophisticated form – in fact teach that virtue is its own reward.

In one of his dialogues, the Greek philosopher Plato (428–348 BCE) wrote about a fabled ring called the **ring of Gyges**, which enabled its bearer to become invisible at will. If you found such a ring, you might be tempted to transgress; but there are surely things you would still be unwilling to do. I imagine that most people would not want to harm the weak, deprive the needy, persecute the oppressed, corrupt the innocent, betray their friends, or dishonour their families – even if there was no danger of being caught. And that is surely enough to suggest that not *all* good behaviour is motivated simply by fear of punishment.

- 1 If you discovered the ring of Gyges, how, if at all, would it affect your behaviour?
- 2 If the perfect crime existed, would you be tempted to commit it? (Imagine you could break into the computer of a major bank, shave a few cents off each customer's account, and end up with millions of dollars for yourself. Further imagine that no one will ever notice what has happened, let alone be able to trace the crime to you.)

## How selfish are we?

We might conclude from our discussion that although we often pursue our own interests at the expense of other people, we are not *always* selfish and we are in fact capable of genuine altruism. However, this still leaves plenty of room for disagreement about the *extent* of altruism. According to one economist, 'the average human being is about 95 percent selfish in the narrow sense of the term'; but people who have experienced the kindness of strangers at first hand may well have a more positive view of human nature.



- 1 Do you think it makes more sense to say that people are basically good and corrupted by society, or that people are basically bad and must be kept in line by society?
- 2 Do you think society works best when each individual pursues his own best interest, or do you think this is a recipe for disaster?

## Theories of ethics

Our discussion in the last two sections has done something to neutralise the threats posed by moral relativism and self-interest theory. While it may be that *some* values are relative and that people are *often* selfish, we do not have to conclude that *all* values are relative or that people are *always* selfish. This leaves space for the idea that there is such a thing as moral knowledge and that people are capable of acting on this knowledge. We should now perhaps look for a more systematic and coherent approach to ethics which enables us to make sense of our various moral beliefs and intuitions. In what follows, we will briefly consider religious ethics, and then look in more detail at duty ethics and utilitarianism.

### Religious ethics

Perhaps the simplest approach to ethics would be to find an authoritative rule book which told us what moral principles to follow. Some people believe that such books are to be found in religion. The world's great religions have been, and continue to be, important sources of moral insight and guidance to millions of people. However, they do not settle all the questions, or free us from the responsibility of thinking about ethics. We still have to decide which sacred texts to follow and how to interpret and apply their rules. The Bible, for example, says that if anyone works on the Sabbath they should be put to death (Exodus 35:2). I imagine that no religious people would take this injunction seriously today, and they would doubtless point out that religious ideas change and develop over time. If we reject what some people have called the 'idolatry of literalism', this leads to the idea that we should follow the spirit rather than the letter of a moral code.

The Greek philosopher Plato (428–348 BCE) argued that we cannot derive ethics from religion. In one of his dialogues, he raised the following tantalising question: Is something good because God says it is good, or does God say that it is good because it is good? On the one hand, if something is good simply because God says it is good, then if God suddenly decided that murder was good, it would be good. Most people would reject this conclusion. On the other hand, if God says that something is good because it is good, then it seems that values are independent of God and we do not need to appeal to Him in order to justify them. This suggests that, rather than deriving our values from religion, we already have values by which we decide whether to accept or reject what religion tells us do. Since a religion based ethics is, in any case, not going to satisfy atheists, we will need to look at other ways of justifying our moral values.



"Jitters on Wall Street today over rumors that Alan Greenspan said, 'A rich man can as soon enter Heaven as a camel fit through the eye of a needle.'"

Figure 12.3

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two different sides of the same coin. If, for example, you have a duty not to steal, there must be a corresponding right to property; and if you have a right to life, there must be a corresponding duty not to kill.

- ?
- 1 Imagine that you and a group of colonists have just arrived on a fertile and uninhabited planet and decide to make a ten-point declaration of rights. What rights would you include in your declaration? How would you justify your choice?
  - 2 What difference do you think it would make if we replaced the UN Declaration of Human Rights with a UN Declaration of Human Duties?
  - 3 If everyone has the right to life, who exactly has a duty to keep alive the thousands of people that starve to death every day? Do you?

If duty ethics is to be viable, we will, of course, need to know what our duties are. One idea might be to consult a table of commandments which list all the *thou-shalt-nots*. But which table should we consult and how can the duties it imposes on us be justified? Perhaps we can appeal to intuition; but the problem is that people may have conflicting intuitions. Some people, for example, believe that we have a duty not to commit adultery; others do not. So if our list of duties is not to be arbitrary, we need to find a more compelling criterion for determining what they are.

According to the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) our duties are not arbitrary and we can determine what they are in an objective way by appealing to *reason*. Since Kant's approach to ethics has been so influential, we will devote the rest of this section to an exploration of his ideas.

## Kant's approach to ethics

Kant argued that the way to decide if something is your duty is to see whether or not you can consistently generalise it. Imagine that you are wondering whether or not it is OK to jump the lunch queue because you can't be bothered to wait in line. According to Kant, you should ask yourself what would happen if everyone did that. The answer is, of course, that there would be chaos. Indeed, if everyone jumped the queue, there would be no queue left to jump! So if you try to generalise the rule, 'Jump the queue whenever you feel like it', you end up with a contradiction. Therefore, it is your duty *not* to jump the queue whenever you feel like it.

Kant used a similar line of reasoning to argue that we should keep our promises and refrain from such things as stealing, murder and suicide. Consider promising. Imagine that you wish to break a promise because it is inconvenient to keep it. Using the generalisation test, you should ask yourself, 'What would happen if everyone broke their promises when they felt like it?' The result is again a contradiction. If you say to someone, 'I promise to do X unless I change my mind', then you have not made a promise at all. To promise to do X is to commit yourself to doing it even if it becomes inconvenient. That is *supposed* to be why people make marriage vows. After all, there would be little point in making a vow of the form,

- ?
- 1 According to the New Testament, 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Matthew 19:24). How do you think this statement should be interpreted?
  - 2 Since the Pope condemns birth control, can a person still be a good Catholic if they practise birth control?
  - 3 Can religious texts give us moral guidance on the use of genetic engineering and other technologies that were unheard of when such texts were written?
  - 4 The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) said that, 'if God is dead, everything is permitted'. What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree or disagree with him?

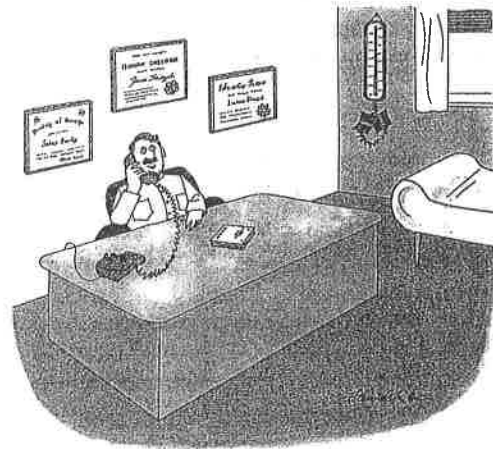
## Duty ethics

According to some philosophers, ethics is fundamentally a matter of doing your duty and fulfilling your obligations. Since the word 'duty' has sometimes been associated with mindlessly obeying orders, it has not always had a good press. But we do take seriously the idea that people have duties. You would, for example, probably agree that a teacher has a duty to help you pass your exams and a doctor has a duty to try to cure you. Admittedly, most people would prefer to talk about their **rights** rather than their duties. But it is worth noting that *rights* and *duties* are



'For richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health – unless someone better turns up!' Since you cannot consistently generalise the rule, 'Break your promises whenever you feel like it', it is your duty *not* to break your promises.

- 1 Using the above example as a model, construct arguments to show what our duty is with regard to each of the following:
- a Stealing
  - b Cheating on tests
  - c Polluting the environment
  - d Voting in elections
  - e Suicide
  - f Writing honest references for university applications
- 2 How convincing are these arguments?



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"Before we try assisted suicide, Mrs. Rose, let's give the aspirin a chance."

Figure 12.4

The reason Kant attached so much importance to the idea of consistency was, I think, because he was aware of the extent to which we engage in **special pleading** and make excuses to justify our own behaviour that we would not find acceptable if they came from someone else. Our natural egoism encourages us to think that while rules should *generally* be respected, we are special and they do not apply to us. Consider, for example, how some people casually lie to their friends without thinking anything of it, and yet are outraged if they discover that their friends have done the same thing to them. To counter this tendency, the great Muslim mystic Al Ghazali's (1058–1111) gave the following advice:

If you want to know the foulness of lying for yourself, consider the lying of someone else and how you shun it and despise the man who lies and regard his communication as foul. Do the same with regard to all your own vices, for you do not realize the foulness of your vices from your own case, but from someone else's.

At the heart of Kant's approach to ethics is the idea that we should each adopt a dual conception of ourselves as not only *me* but also *one among others*. For reason demands that we should at least *try* to be impartial and look at things objectively without making exceptions in our own case. This idea lies behind the so-called **golden rule**, 'Do as you would be done by', versions of which can be found in all of the world's great religions.



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"How would you feel if the mouse did that to you?"

Figure 12.5

A good way of trying to be objective is to imagine various situations through what philosophers have called a **veil of ignorance**. Imagine, for example, that person *X* does action *p* to person *Y*, and that you are either person *X* or person *Y*, but you do not know which one. How do you feel about the action? Do you think it is acceptable or unacceptable? (A good way of getting two children to share a cake fairly is to suggest that one of them cut the cake and the other one choose which half to take.) This method – which is really a generalisation of Al Ghazali's advice – can be an effective way of getting us to think more objectively about ethics.

## Values and dignity

Kant uses the dual conception of the self to argue not only that no individual should be given preferential treatment, but also that no individual should be discriminated against. For example, he claimed that it is never right to sacrifice one individual's life for the greater good. To explain why not, we can simply reverse the dual conception of the self. For an individual is not only *one among others* but also a *me*, and his life is the only one that he has. Therefore, he should never be treated as a mere means to some further end. In this respect, there is a crucial difference between objects and persons, which Kant marks by saying that, while the former

have *value*, only the latter have *dignity*. To see the difference between value and dignity, compare the following two situations.

- 1 A friend borrows your portable computer and accidentally drops it. The computer is broken beyond repair and you are furious. Being a decent fellow, your friend immediately goes out and buys you an identical computer to replace the one he broke. Assuming that he also replaces the software and copies the files that were on your old machine, you will probably conclude that no great harm has been done. You no longer have your original computer, but you have a replacement that is in every respect as good as the one that was broken.
- 2 You are in hospital dying of an incurable disease. Your parents come to visit you every day and weep at your bedside. They are devastated by the thought of your impending death. But you are incredibly brave and do what you can to comfort them. One day they arrive looking a great deal more cheerful. 'We have some good news for you', they say. 'The doctor tells us that although you are going to die, we can clone you, so that after your death we will be able to replace you. Although your clone won't actually be you, he will look like you and in many ways behave like you. We can give him your bedroom and your old toys. Isn't it wonderful news?' I imagine that your jaw would drop if you heard this speech. How dare they imagine that they can replace *you*! You are a unique individual and, unlike a broken computer, you cannot simply be replaced by someone genetically identical to you.

According to Kant, if something has value it can be replaced by something else of equal value, but if it has dignity it is irreplaceable. Since individuals have dignity rather than merely value, it is never right to sacrifice their lives for the greater good.

## The importance of motives

Another key aspect of Kant's ethics is that the moral value of an action is determined by the *motive* for which it is done rather than the *consequences* that follow from it. Many of our everyday moral judgements seem to reflect this principle. If you are trying to be helpful but things turn out badly, we do not usually blame you – after all, you meant well. On the other hand, if you intend to harm someone, but your efforts come to nothing, we will still think of you as a bad person. In practice, we tend to blame someone more for serious accidents than for minor ones; you are likely to be more annoyed if someone drops ten plates than if they break one plate – especially if they are *your* plates. But Kant would say that is an immature way of thinking, and insist that all that really matters is the motive for your action.

Kant not only focused on motives but also insisted that to be truly moral our actions should be motivated by *reason* rather than *feeling*. He had a low opinion of feelings because he thought that they are too unreliable to justify our values. If you only do good things when you *feel* like it, what happens if you feel like helping someone today but not tomorrow, or helping person A but not person B? Kant sought to avoid this problem by basing values on reason rather than feeling, and insisting that reason tells us that we have certain duties regardless of what we may feel.

We can in fact distinguish at least three different motives for doing good: (i) you expect something in return; (ii) sympathy; (iii) duty. According to Kant, your action has moral value only if you act on motive (iii). You might agree that if you help someone only on an 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine' basis, then, although this might make pragmatic sense, it does not deserve moral praise. But it is harder to understand why Kant thinks that being motivated by sympathy has no moral value. I think Kant would say that to the extent that someone is a *naturally* friendly and sympathetic person they do not deserve any praise for it. After all, they can't *help* being like that, any more than someone who is naturally anti-social can help being the way they are. Somewhat paradoxically, this suggests that a naturally anti-social person deserves more moral praise for being kind and friendly than a naturally sociable person.



"I told him it wouldn't kill him to try to be nice once in a while, but I was wrong."

Figure 12.6

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**?**

- 1 If a cat jumps into a pram and attacks a baby, who deserves more praise for removing it, someone who likes cats, or someone who is frightened of cats?
- 2 Who deserves more praise, a person who helps another person because they like them, or a person who helps another person even though they don't like them?
- 3 How does Kant's view differ from the view attributed to Hume in our discussion of self-interest theory?

## Criticisms of Kant

Despite its positive features, Kant's approach to ethics can be criticised on a number of grounds.

### Rule worship

To start with, some critics have pointed out that it leads to **moral absolutism**. This is the belief that certain moral principles should *always* be followed irrespective of context. To see the problem, consider the ethics of lying. Using the universalisability test, Kant said that you cannot consistently will that people lie whenever they feel like it, because if they did, language would no longer be an effective means of communication. Kant concluded that it is *always* wrong to lie. This is, however, counter-intuitive. Imagine that an axe-wielding maniac rushes into your school

screaming that he is going to kill your teacher, Mr Clark – who promptly hides in the cupboard. The maniac bursts in to your classroom and demands to know where Clark is. Reasoning that you should never lie, you calmly reply 'He's hiding in the cupboard!' Something has clearly gone wrong here, and no one is going to congratulate you for telling the truth. For in this situation you surely *ought* to lie to save the life of your teacher. Kant might say that you can avoid lying by refusing to answer the maniac's question. However, if I were the person in the cupboard, I would *want* you to lie and send the maniac off in the wrong direction!

The problem with Kant's approach to ethics, then, is that it seems to lead to **rule worship** – i.e. to blindly following a moral rule without regard to the consequences. Many people would say that rather than mechanically applying moral principles irrespective of the context, we should try to be sensitive to the details of a situation and make a *judgement* about when it is appropriate to make an exception to a generally agreed principle.

- If a terrorist group takes a civilian hostage and threatens to kill them unless the government releases five convicted terrorists, should the government give in to their demands?

It is difficult to see how Kant's approach can help us to resolve these kinds of dilemma, for it seems to give us no criterion in accordance with which our duties can be ranked.

**?** 1 Explain which two moral principles are in conflict in each of the above dilemmas.

2 Take one of the above dilemmas and give as many arguments as you can for resolving it one way and then as many arguments as you can for resolving it the other way.

**?** Which of the following is a special case that justifies breaking a generally accepted rule?

- 1a You should respect the highway code, but it's OK to drive through a red light if you are late for work.
- 1b You should respect the highway code, but it's OK to drive through a red light if you are taking a critically ill person to hospital.
- 2a You should keep your word, but it is OK to break a social engagement if something more interesting comes up.
- 2b You should keep your word, but it is OK to break a social engagement if you have just contracted an infectious disease.
- 3a You should pay your taxes, but it is OK not to pay them if you are short of money this year.
- 3b You should pay your taxes, but it is OK not to pay them if they are being spent on a nuclear arms programme.
- 4a Murder is wrong, but it would have been OK to assassinate Hitler in 1942.
- 4b Murder is wrong, but it would be OK to kill someone planning a terrorist attack.

**Conflicts of duty**

A related problem is that Kant's ethics leaves us no way of resolving conflicts of duty. Consider, for example, the following dilemmas:

- If a person has been unfaithful to their partner, should they confess and make their partner unhappy, or say nothing and deceive them?
- If your grandmother and a world-famous doctor are trapped in a burning building and you only have time to rescue one of them, should you save your grandmother because she is a family member, or the doctor because she is more useful to society?
- If your wife is dying of a rare disease and you cannot afford to buy the drugs that will cure her, are you justified in stealing the drugs?

**Moral coldness**

A final problem with Kant's approach to ethics is that it seems to be too focused on reason at the expense of feelings. Allowing that we should try to be consistent in our moral judgements, what outrages most people about, say, Nazi war criminals, is not their *inconsistency* but their *inhumanity*. Kant is unable to accommodate this common-sense intuition because he refuses to give any place to feelings in his moral philosophy. As we saw above, he rejected feelings on the grounds that they are unreliable; but, in practice, appeals to reason might be equally ineffective. For just as you cannot appeal to people's sympathy if they have none, so you cannot appeal to their reason if they don't mind being called irrational. (It is, for example, hard to imagine a seasoned torturer being too bothered by such an accusation.) Furthermore, taking feelings out of moral consideration seems to lead to a cold and heartless ethics. Many people would say that it is better for a husband to help his wife because he *loves* her and *wants* to help her than because it is his *duty* to help her.

We might even reverse Kant's position and argue that feelings are what connect us with other people, and reason is what isolates us. When you see someone in distress, your natural impulse is to help them, but once reason kicks in you might start weighing costs and benefits. In reflecting on what motivated him, one of the inhabitants of Chambon who helped the Jews during the Second World War said: 'The hand of compassion was faster than the calculus of reason.' What I think he meant was that if he had stopped and thought too much about what he was doing, he would probably never have done it. This suggests that reason has its limits and that we would sometimes do better to follow our hearts.



- 1 'The advantage of following moral rules is that it helps to avoid special pleading; the disadvantage is that it leads to rule-worship.' What role do you think rules should play in moral reasoning?
- 2 What relevance do the following two quotations from the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) have to our discussion of Kant's moral philosophy? Do you agree or disagree with them?
  - a 'Don't do unto others as you would have them do to you – their tastes might be different.'
  - b 'When a stupid man is doing something he is ashamed of, he always declares that it is his duty.'
- 3 'What if everyone did that?' 'But they don't!' To what extent does this response undermine Kant's approach to ethics?

## Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a deceptively simple theory of ethics, which says that there is one and only one supreme moral principle – that we should seek *the greatest happiness of the greatest number*. This slogan can be reduced to two words: *Maximise happiness!*

The theory of utilitarianism was developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), who wanted to establish ethics on a scientific foundation. Just as Newton had explained natural phenomena in terms of the principle of gravity, so Bentham and Mill tried to explain ethical phenomena in terms of the principle of utility. According to this principle, the only thing that is good in itself is happiness, and *actions are right in so far as they tend to increase happiness and wrong in so far as they tend to decrease it*. If we ask 'what is happiness?', Bentham tells us that it is the sum of pleasures, and that a happy life is one that maximises feelings of pleasure and minimises feelings of pain.

To get a sense of how utilitarianism might work in practice, imagine that you are living at the beginning of the twenty-second century. While people still wear wrist-watches on their left arms, on their right arms they now wear something called a *utilitometer*. This has a needle and dial going from 0 to +100 on half of its face and from zero to –100 on the other half. The details of how a utilitometer works need not concern us, but it plugs in to your central nervous system and measures your pleasure: If, for example, you are at a party and want to know how good you are feeling, you can consult your utilitometer: 'Wow! Plus 92 – ecstasy.' And if you are bored in class on a Friday afternoon, you can determine just how bad things are: 'Minus 70 – seriously dull'.

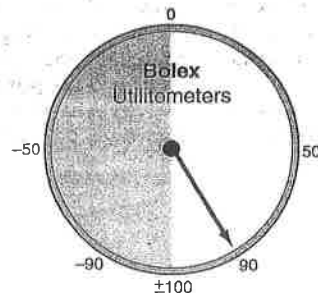


Figure 12.7

Your utilitometer also has a little button on the right which you can press to find your total net happiness for the day (sum of pleasures minus sum of displeasures). And at the end of each day, it automatically sends this figure to a central computer which calculates the total for the whole country – the *gross national happiness*, or GNH. We can now say that utilitarianism comes down to the claim that a higher GNH means a morally better world and a lower GNH means a morally worse world.

## Arguments in favour of utilitarianism

As a moral theory, utilitarianism has a number of attractive features:

- 1 Utilitarianism is a simple and coherent theory which is able to explain all of our beliefs about right and wrong in terms of the greatest happiness principle. This gives us a simple way of solving moral dilemmas which are such a problem in duty ethics. If you are faced with a conflict of duties, all you need to do is see which course of action has the greatest effect on GNH.
- 2 Utilitarianism is a democratic theory because each individual is considered to be the best judge of what makes him or her happy, and every individual's happiness is taken into account in determining GNH.
- 3 Utilitarianism is a rational theory because it encourages us to take into account not only the short-term but also the long-term consequences of our actions. For example, although smoking gives some people short-term pleasure, a utilitarian might argue that you shouldn't smoke because in the long term it is likely to give you more pain than pleasure.
- 4 Finally, it could be argued that utilitarianism is an egalitarian theory because it can, for example, justify redistributing money from the rich to the poor. Since a dollar means more to a poor person than to a rich person, a progressive system of taxation which takes some money away from the rich and gives it to the poor will increase GNH.



- 1 How might a utilitarian try to justify or criticise the following actions?
  - a Eating ice-cream every day
  - b Wearing seat-belts in cars
  - c Forcing a reluctant child to learn the piano
  - d Voluntary euthanasia
- 2 How do you think a utilitarian would try to resolve the various moral dilemmas on pages 383–4? What problems arise in trying to use the greatest happiness principle to resolve them?
- 3 Take any moral dilemma from a novel or play that you have studied and explain how a utilitarian and a Kantian would analyse it.
- 4 When calculating GNH, do you think the happiness and suffering of animals as well as human beings should be included in the calculation?

## Practical objections to utilitarianism

Despite the theoretical attractions of utilitarianism, it is not so easy to put into practice. To start with, how do we measure happiness? Although Bentham defines happiness as the sum of pleasures, it is difficult to see how different pleasures can be measured on a common scale. Imagine, for example, that someone gets pleasure from eating ice cream, listening to opera, and spending time with their friends. How can we attach numbers to such pleasures and compare them with one another? 20 scoops of ice-cream =  $\frac{1}{2}$  an opera = 1 afternoon spent with friends? An economist might say that we can measure different pleasures by seeing how much people are willing to pay for them. But is it really possible to put a price, or a 'happiness value', on such things as health or love or friendship?

Furthermore, we might question the idea that a constant stream of pleasures makes for a happy life. You only have to think of the lives of some of the idle rich to see that someone can have a great deal of pleasure at their disposal and still be bored and unhappy. Although we all want to be happy, the strange fact is that most of us are unable to say what it is that we really want; and it sometimes seems as if, the more we actively pursue happiness, the more difficult it is to find.

- ?
- 1 What do you think is the relationship between pleasure and happiness? Is happiness just the sum of pleasures, or can you have many pleasures and still be unhappy?
  - 2 What connection, if any, do you think there is between money and happiness?
  - 3 Which of the following two situations would you prefer? A world in which you earn \$50,000 a year and all your friends earn \$25,000, or a world in which you earn \$100,000 a year and all your friends earn \$250,000? What does this suggest to you about the nature of happiness?
  - 4 'I thought I was happy at the time, but now I realise that I was wrong.' Do you think that we are always the best judges of whether or not we are happy? Could the men in the 'democratic' country described on page 370 be wrong in thinking they are happy?
  - 5 According to Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), 'To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness.' What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree with him?

A final practical problem concerns how we can predict the consequences of our actions. Imagine that a married woman falls passionately in love with a colleague at work and is wondering whether or not to leave her husband. What should she do? In theory, utilitarianism gives a straightforward solution to the problem. The woman should compare the consequences of staying with her husband with the consequences of leaving him and do whatever maximises the happiness of the people involved. The trouble is that, in practice, it is very difficult to know what the consequences of our actions will be. A utilitarian might say that we usually have some idea of the consequences of our actions, but they may still be difficult to

predict in any detail. To take an extreme example, in a short story by Roald Dahl, called *Genesis and Catastrophe*, a doctor saves a mother and child in a difficult birth. The story ends with the doctor saying 'You'll be alright now, Mrs Hitler.'



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Figure 12.8

## Theoretical objections to utilitarianism

As well as practical objections, utilitarianism is also open to a number of theoretical objections. Three common criticisms are: that pleasure or happiness is not always a good thing; that actions should be judged by their motives rather than their consequences; and that utilitarianism is incompatible with the belief that we have moral obligations and individual rights.

### Bad pleasures

As we have seen, utilitarianism is based on the assumption that the only things that are good in themselves are pleasure and happiness. But a critic might argue that there are in fact many bad pleasures – such as *malicious pleasures* and *empty pleasures*.

- a *Malicious pleasures* are pleasures that are derived from the suffering of other people. Imagine, for example, that a sadist meets a masochist (someone who wants to be hurt) and obligingly beats him up. On utilitarian principles, the world has become a better place because GNH has gone up. But many people would argue that, far from the world becoming a better place, the world has in fact become a worse place, and that any well-adjusted human being ought not to get pleasure from sado-masochism.

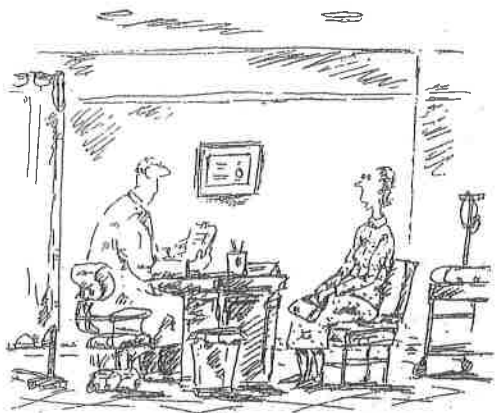
To take another example: imagine a mugger who assaults someone in the street and gets a buzz out of doing it. A utilitarian would no doubt say that the mugger's

action is wrong because it has a negative effect on GNH. However, he would seem committed to saying that the more pleasure the mugger gets from his action the less serious his crime because the smaller its negative effect on GNH. Against this, many people would say that the fact that a criminal enjoys his crime and gets pleasure from it makes it worse not better.

- b *Empty pleasures* are pleasures that do not help us to develop our potential, or flourish as human beings. While pleasures such as shopping or eating chocolate may have their place, a critic would say that a life devoted exclusively to their pursuit is unworthy of a human being.

In the novel *Brave New World*, the writer Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) imagined a world where people are genetically engineered and conditioned to be happy and where a drug called soma is freely available so that everyone can live on a permanent high. If you are familiar with this novel you might agree that what Huxley describes is not so much a perfect world, or utopia, as a perfectly awful world, or dystopia. A world of happy junkies does not seem like the best of all possible worlds.

- 1. What problems does the idea that some pleasures are better than others create for utilitarianism? How might a utilitarian try to respond to these problems?
- 2. Do you think that there are other things apart from pleasure and happiness that are good in themselves?



"I think the dosage needs adjusting. I'm not nearly as happy as the people in the ads."

Figure 12.9

### Judging actions

According to utilitarianism, the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on its consequences: an action is right if it increases happiness and wrong if it decreases it. But, as we saw in our discussion of Kant's ethics, it could be argued that actions should

be judged by their motives rather than their consequences, and that we should praise a well-intentioned bungler whose clumsy efforts accidentally reduce general happiness, and condemn a malicious person whose evil intentions accidentally increase it.

- 1. Most legal systems punish attempted murder less severely than actual murder. Do you think this is right? What would a Kantian say? What would a utilitarian say?
- 2. What good utilitarian reasons might there be for generally praising people who have good motives and condemning people who have bad motives?

### Obligations and rights

A final criticism of utilitarianism is that it does not seem to leave any room for respecting moral obligations or human rights. When we discussed Kant's ethics we saw that it is too inflexible in its approach, but critics of utilitarianism argue that it suffers from the opposite weakness and is too unprincipled. For example, while Kant said you should *never* lie, utilitarianism would seem to justify lying to people whenever it makes them happy. However, many people would feel uncomfortable with the idea of shamelessly flattering or systematically deceiving someone just to make them happy.

- 1. Imagine that you are at a dinner party and the food is awful. Your host asks you if you are enjoying your meal. What would you reply?
- 2. If someone asks you what you think of them, how honest would you be in your response? How honest *should* you be?

Furthermore, since utilitarianism is only concerned with maximising happiness, it does not seem to pay sufficient attention to individuals' rights. To see the problem, imagine that Smith, who is an orphan with no family and few friends, is in hospital for a cataract operation, and that the man in the bed on his left is dying of kidney failure, and the man in the bed on his right is dying of heart failure.

- 1. What do you think a utilitarian would say you should do in this situation, and what difficulties does this create for utilitarianism?
- 2. What response, if any, could a utilitarian give to these difficulties?

Here is another example. Jones is a malicious individual who devotes his time to making life as difficult as possible for everyone in your community. You are a good utilitarian and one day you decide that it is time to do something to increase happiness. You hide behind the door and when Jones comes in you hit him on the head with a baseball bat and throw his unconscious body in the river. Good-bye Jones, hello happiness!

What is troubling about each of the above examples is that utilitarianism seems to justify sacrificing an individual to increase general happiness. A utilitarian doctor pillages a healthy body for 'spare parts'; and a community kills an individual whom everyone hates. In reality, of course, the doctor and the community would probably feel *guilty* about killing someone, and such feelings might reduce general happiness. Nevertheless, on purely utilitarian grounds, such guilt would seem to be irrational. If you are sure that you have done the right thing, why feel bad about it?

Despite appearances, a utilitarian is not obliged to say that the above killings are justified. In practice, there may be good utilitarian reasons why it is a bad idea to kill innocent people. If you live in a society where people who go into hospital with minor ailments are sometimes killed and used for spare parts, you will probably keep postponing that cataract operation! And if in your community unpopular people are sometimes killed, you may begin to worry if you get the impression that people don't like you any more. The point in both cases is that killing innocent people is likely to create an atmosphere of *fear* and this is likely to have a negative effect on GNH. In practice, then, there are probably good utilitarian reasons for protecting people's rights.

## The place of rules

The above line of thinking has led some people to adopt a position known as **rule utilitarianism**. According to this we should judge the rightness or wrongness of an action not by whether it promotes general happiness but by whether it conforms to a rule that promotes general happiness. Since it is impossible to calculate the consequences of each individual action, rule utilitarianism says that in practice it makes more sense to let our actions be guided by rules which experience has shown tend to promote happiness. So with respect to something like promising, the question is no longer 'what will the effect on the general happiness be if I break this particular promise?' but rather 'what will the effect on general happiness be if we abandon the rule that people should keep their promises?'. On this approach, it is not difficult to see that the world will generally be a happier place if we have rules against such things as lying, theft and murder, and we are likely to end up with the kinds of rules that can be found in many moral codes. ★

This emphasis on rules pushes utilitarianism closer to duty ethics – with the advantage that the rules can be more flexible than allowed by Kant. For example, rather than say 'never tell lies', we could instead adopt the rule, 'Never tell lies unless you can save a great deal of suffering by doing so.' This rule is admittedly rather vague, but it enables us to deal with the axe-wielding murderer example considered earlier (pages. 382–3), and is more in keeping with the way we normally think about ethics. Thus rule utilitarianism might seem to be a good compromise between rule worship on the one hand and unprincipled behaviour on the other. However, we might still wonder why on a particular occasion we should follow a rule if we can increase GNH by breaking it. But perhaps this just shows that we must sometimes weigh the negative effects on happiness of following a rule against the dangers of weakening respect for the rule. There is, it seems, no substitute for good judgement.



1. Imagine that you are the sole heir to your great-uncle's fortune of \$5 million. On his deathbed, he makes you swear to use the money to establish a butterfly farm. After his death, and without telling anyone, you decide to ignore your promise and give the money to an AIDS charity. Is your action right or wrong?
2. People sometimes talk about the ends justifying the means. When, if ever, do you think that this is true?
3. What light can the moral theories we have looked at in this chapter shed on the questions we raised at the beginning?
  - a. Is abortion ever justified?
  - b. Should drugs be legalised?
  - c. Are there limits to free speech?
  - d. Is there such a thing as a just war?



"But on the positive side, money can't buy happiness — so who cares?"

Source: www.cartoonstock.com

Figure 12.10

## Conclusion

Since we are, during the course of our lives, bound to be confronted by all kinds of moral dilemma, there is a sense in which ethics is inescapable; and, since we can never be sure that we are doing the right thing, there is a sense in which ethics is insoluble. Such dilemmas are typically the stuff of novels and films. For example, in a film called *The Bridges of Madison County*, an unfulfilled Iowa housewife meets the man of her dreams while her husband is out of town. He asks her to go away with him, but in the end she refuses. Did she make the right decision or not? What would a Kantian say? What would a utilitarian say? How much use are such theories in practice? Perhaps they do help to illuminate things; but in the end we cannot pass the moral buck, and no matter how thick our rule book is, we have to make our own decisions about what to do. The fact that we can never be sure that we have done the right thing, or that we are painfully aware that we could have done better, is perhaps part of the tragedy of the human condition.

**Key Points**

- When we argue about ethics we typically appeal to various moral principles, but we might wonder how these principles can be justified.
- According to moral relativism, our values are determined by the society we grow up in, but it could be argued that some core values are universal.
- Some people claim that human beings are always and everywhere selfish, but since this robs the word 'selfish' of its meaning, it makes more sense to say that we are sometimes capable of altruism.
- We might try to derive moral values from religion, but Plato put forward an argument against this, and such an approach is in any case not going to satisfy an atheist.
- According to Immanuel Kant, ethics is a matter of doing your duty, and the test of whether something is your duty is whether or not it can be consistently generalised.
- Despite its attractions, Kant's approach to ethics is too absolutist and leaves us with no way of resolving moral dilemmas.
- According to utilitarianism, happiness is the only thing that is good in itself and we should seek 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.
- Two objections to utilitarianism are that some pleasures seem to be bad, and that the greatest happiness principle is inconsistent with our belief in human rights and moral obligations.
- Some form of rule utilitarianism might be a good compromise between the extremes of duty ethics on the one hand and act utilitarianism on the other.
- In ethics, as in other areas of knowledge, there is in the end no substitute for good judgement.

**Terms to remember**

altruism  
 cultural imperialism  
 duty ethics  
 egoism  
 golden rule  
 moral absolutism  
 moral principle  
 moral relativism  
 other-regarding desires

relativism  
 rights  
 rule worship  
 self-interest theory  
 self-regarding desires  
 special pleading  
 utilitarianism  
 value-judgement  
 veil of ignorance

**Linking Questions**

