An Introduction to Ethics

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The study of what we should do and how we should lead our lives is closely connected to the study of religion. In the past, most moral philosophers assumed that the reason we have a concept of right and wrong is because God created us free but with a moral sense and wishes us to do some things and not others. Modern moral philosophers do not necessarily accept the idea of a divinely created human nature, or of absolute religious or natural laws. However, the study of applied ethics or "issues" still involves consideration of religious attitudes and the reasons for them.

Philosophers approach ethics in different ways. Some engage in descriptive ethics, surveying and describing how people behave and highlighting the characteristics of human choices and the principles we seem to follow. Some engage in meta ethics and consider the assumptions which underlie ethical discussions such as the nature of freedom, and ask whether it is possible to describe human nature and how to define commonly used words such as "good", "bad", "right" and "wrong". Other philosophers engage in normative ethics, developing systems for making decisions – ways of deciding what to do in any given situation, and it is to normative ethical systems that the majority of these notes will be devoted. Finally, there are those who engage in applied ethics, considering human dilemmas and how we should respond to them, for example questions over abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment or war.

Studying ethics usually involves some or all of the following topics:

1. Meta ethics

2. Normative ethics (systems)

3. Applied ethics (issues)

4. Descriptive ethics (which includes the study of how religion and ethics relate)

Meta Ethics

Meta ethics is the study of the issues that underpin all ethical discussions. What is the nature of ethical language? What do the words "good", "bad", "right" or "wrong" really mean? Are human beings free and responsible? What is a human being? Who counts as a person and who does not? What is the difference between a human being and any other animal? Is moral status dependent on DNA, on rationality, socialisation – or something else? All of these are matters of meta ethics.

Ethical language is beset by many of the same problems as religious language. This topic is given fuller treatment in the Philosophy section of this site under Language. Statements including claims about goodness, badness, rightness and wrongness are basically unverifiable. There is no empirical test to back up such claims, no probe whose readings will confirm that "murder is wrong", for example.

Plato and Aristotle

From the earliest times philosophers have sought to define goodness to support claims concerning it. Plato offered a metaphysical definition of goodness as a reflection of a mysterious "the form of the good", which exists beyond time and space in the realm of ideas and which we recognise in some things and actions but not in others, by bringing the assessment of goodness firmly within the realm of human experience. Aristotle reacted against the ambiguity of this. For him, goodness came in the degree to which something fulfils its nature. Aristotle saw that our understanding of the nature or form of things starts with our experience of them. For example, we might see a lot of trees, learn about them and become knowledgeable about what they should be like, and this enables us to judge some trees as better than others in terms of how well an individual specimen measures up to what a tree could and should be in our experience. Judgement is a rational process but it is based on categories which are derived from direct experience - Aristotle's approach does not rely on human beings having any mysterious understanding of metaphysical truths as Plato's did.

For Aristotle, reason dictates that a thing's nature is made up of four causes - its material, efficient, formal and final causes.

a. Material causes are the basic ingredients that make it up.

b. Efficient causes are the agents and accidents that bring it into being.

c. A thing's formal cause is what makes it what it is, its recipe or nature.

d. A thing's final cause is its purpose, what it aims towards.

Take an oak tree. Material causes would include carbon, oxygen etc. Efficient causes would include acorn, earth, sun and rain. The formal cause would be the oak's DNA (as opposed to that of elm, ash or wombat) and the final cause would be growing, reproducing and so on.

Aristotle argued that a good object fulfils its formal cause – i.e. it is a good example of what it is - and so achieves its final cause to the best degree. Basically, for Aristotle, goodness lies in flourishing. A "good" oak tree grows very tall, produces many acorns from which new saplings grow, and so on.

Conversely an "evil" oak tree ("evil" naturally, rather than morally, because the oak is a non-free and thus non-moral being) would be small, infertile and generally functioning poorly.

This applies to human beings as well as to all other things. A good human being is fully human, continues to live, grow, reproduce and otherwise flourish. An evil human being, either naturally or morally, fails to fulfil their humanity and falls short by living a short, poor, barren and insignificant life. This is the basis of Aristotelian natural law and has been used as the foundation of naturalistic ethics from Aquinas to Grisez and Finnis.

Applying Aristotle's definition to humans

Using Aristotle's definition of goodness would yield some grounds for claiming that something was good or that something else was better than it. Yet the criteria for making these judgements are arguably subjective. Can we really and conclusively define human nature? In the eighteenth century Hutcheson, Bentham and others looked for a simpler basis for making claims about good, bad, right and wrong. Building on Locke, Hume had argued that these judgements are simply expressions of opinion or emotion, and so had opened up the road towards radical relativism, postmodernism and the dominant emotivism of the twentieth century.

Naturalism

Bentham was not satisfied to accept Hume's argument, however. He observed that "*nature has placed mankind under two sovereign masters: the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain*". For Bentham, who first coined the term "utilitarianism", it was simply a matter of common sense to judge that good actions produced "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" and that bad actions produced pain.

Utilitarianism is one remedy against the problems with ethical language, though arguably it is just as difficult to define and measure pleasure and pain as it is to define and measure a broader concept of goodness. Nevertheless, utilitarianism had an air of scientific credibility and survives as a major school of ethics and one enduringly popular with politicians, lawyers and scientists for its ability to provide apparently verifiable data to support claims such as "murder is wrong".

Limitations of utilitarianism

However even from the earliest days utilitarianism has attracted harsh criticism. John Stuart Mill, Bentham's godson, argued that Bentham's understanding of pleasure was deficient and that the whole system was beset by the problem of prediction, that is, of accurately predicting the outcomes of actions, and of being influenced by self-interest. Immanuel Kant would have agreed with much of Mill's argument.

Kant's own approach to ethics rejected the simplistic notion that we are driven by raw pleasure and the avoidance of pain, as much as it rejected the traditional prescriptive definition of human nature and flourishing that had been handed down from Aristotle and the Church. Instead he argued that human nature lies in being rational and free and that we flourish when we act on principle and freely for principle's sake consistently.

3

Immanuel Kant's definition of human nature and goodness gets us no further towards a defence of the meaningfulness of statements relating to good, bad, right and wrong. There is no scientific tool to measure the rationality of the maxim of somebody's action, nor to measure the freedom or motivation of their will when they determined on the action. Kant claims that there is a single rational principle behind all good actions and that, though this principle would be known synthetically from experience, the goodness of maxims would be known analytically, by their logical relationship with the single categorical imperative.

Relativism

Among those who take issue with Kant's claims are those known as emotivists, such as AJ Ayer, who believe that moral statements are not objective but merely express the speaker's feelings. At the beginning of the twentieth century, developments in the philosophy of language led philosophers to class all statements which were not physically, empirically verifiable as essentially meaningless. This approach assumes that the only consistent point of reference for language is sensory experience and that any statement that does not refer to it can only be relative to the opinions or ideas of an individual.

This relativist approach cuts away the possibility of value judgements. Ethics, for the relativist, begins with meta ethics and then becomes simply an anthropological study, describing how people do behave, almost with a sense of incredulity, rather than trying to build logical foundations for judgements or prescribing how people should behave.

Emotivists would dispute Kant's idea that the principle of goodness may be known on the basis of experience - and therefore the rest of his ethics becomes redundant. Ayer does not just dispute the foundations for Kant's ethics; he disputes the foundations of any statement which contains claims about "emotive" terms such as good, bad, right or wrong.

A common absolutism

The relativist labels many other approaches to ethics "absolutist", a term which seems pejorative and carries connotations of being bigoted, refusing to engage with the facts, inflexible and not interested in individual people or situations. Natural law and Kantian ethics are often called "absolutist" but in reality the same sort of reasoning underpins rule utilitarianism and virtue ethics. Any system which defines terms such as "good" and "right" and which claims a common point of reference for these terms will have a consistent attitude to actions such as murder and theft, classing them as wrong for everybody in most situations (except possibly when they are the lesser of two evils). This contrasts with the relativist approach, which would see that any action could be right or wrong for some individuals or in some situations, there being nothing fundamentally good or bad about the action, only a general sense of approbation or disapprobation.

4

Normative Ethics

1. Natural Law

"*True law is right reason is agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting. It summons to duty by its commands and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions*." Cicero

In ancient Athens the philosopher Plato and his pupil Aristotle considered the question of how human beings should act. Both started by reflecting on the meaning of "goodness".

What is goodness?

For Plato an object or action is good if it reflects something of the "form of the good", a metaphysical essence which we somehow know through reason though we cannot experience it through our physical senses. We don't encounter the number "2" when walking down the high street but understand what "2" is and can see manifestations of the concept all around us, when we see a pair of swans in the park or a couple walking on the beach. Think about yellowness. How could you describe it without giving specific examples of yellow things? We cannot experience pure yellow in the physical world but we know what yellowness is and can judge things we experience to be more or less yellow, to reflect the idea or form of yellow to a greater or lesser extent.

Plato thought this also applied to goodness. We cannot experience pure goodness in this world but we understand the idea or form of goodness through our reason and can see when goodness is reflected in things and people around us. Sometimes it is difficult to explain why a thing, a person or an action is good.

A painting might be good despite being inaccurate, even incomplete – think about Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. Nobody thinks that Jesus and his disciples really looked or dressed as da Vinci has them in the painting, nor does it reflect the seating arrangements recorded in any gospel or book of Roman customs, nor is it technically well finished, having been the subject of constant conservation efforts since it was painted using an experimental paint. Yet The Last Supper is still one of the most famous paintings in the world and da Vinci one of the best known artists; The Last Supper has been credited with inspiring many people down the ages, most recently Mel Gibson and author Dan Brown.

A person might be good even though they are not physically perfect and might even do things that are generally disapproved of – think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a plump, balding and bespectacled priest who was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. An action might be good even if it is not strictly rational, legal or likely to produce the most happiness. Think about a pilot landing his helicopter in a minefield to save an injured soldier. It doesn't make sense but somehow we know that the pilot does something right in making the attempt and we rejoice when it pays off and lives are saved.

Plato and Aristotle

So, for Plato, ideals like goodness are metaphysical – they are above and beyond experience and are only reflected in the world we live in. Reason can aspire to understand what goodness is, but it may

5

always elude our grasp and certainly will be impossible to explain definitively. Unsurprisingly, while Plato's philosophy has always been appealing, it has not been the starting point for many attempts at normative or applied ethics. Plato argued that human beings have innate ideas which are confirmed through experience, i.e our understanding is not formed by experience but exists independently of it. Aristotle did not accept this. For Aristotle metaphysical discussion can only be speculation. The root of our understanding is in experience, what we sense through taste, smell, feel, hearing and sight. The only way that we can understand things is by observing them, by collecting and inducing from data. Whereas Plato thought of the "forms" existing in another world, metaphysically, Aristotle saw them as concepts, categories of understanding in this world. Everything is defined by its formal cause, this is what makes a cat a cat and not a stick of rhubarb and is a mark of order in the world, but formal causes have no independent existence, they are made real by things fulfilling their form to a greater or lesser extent. Goodness comes from something fulfilling its form, its nature.

A good cat is sleek, furry, purry and is fond of fish – a cat that is missing some of its cattiness is deficient, naturally evil. A good stick of rhubarb is red, straight and sharp-tasting. Limp tasteless rhubarb is bad rhubarb. This also applies to human beings; a person who fulfils human nature is good and one who falls short is evil, either naturally or (if by choice) morally. The question, of course, is what is human nature?

Defining human nature

Plato defined humanity in terms of reason. As human beings we have instincts and emotions but above all the potential to think, to control our feelings and animal urges. Reason gives us the freedom to choose how to behave, to be selfish or altruistic, to act on principle or thoughtlessly. Aristotle expanded upon this definition, drawing on his experience of life and society. For Aristotle human beings and human societies flourish when people live peacefully, work and prosper, learn and develop wisdom, reproduce and pass on wisdom to the next generation. A fulfilled and good person is living, healthy, peaceable, prosperous, engaged in philosophy (the love of wisdom) in that they are curious about the world they live in and seek understanding of it, and are engaged in passing on understanding to the next generation. Evil originates in naturally or morally failing to fulfil part or all of human nature so defined.

This is the basis for natural law. Aristotle and all those Philosophers who have followed in his tradition see ethics as the business of defining human nature and from that definition deriving laws, principles of behaviour which either support or prevent human flourishing. Clearly not all philosophers agree on the definition of human nature, nor on the laws that depend on it, but the pattern of reasoning is the same for all naturalistic systems of ethics.

Aquinas' view of natural law

In the thirteenth century St Thomas Aquinas saw in Aristotle's philosophy a rational foundation for Christian doctrine. In his Summa theologica and other works he set out, systematically, a new approach to the philosophy of the Christian religion, based on Aristotle, which saw all aspects as interconnected and necessary, to all other aspects. Like one of the great Gothic cathedrals which were being built as Aquinas wrote, he saw the great weight of the Christian concept of God as being distributed equally onto many pillars of doctrine, among them analogy and the specific

interpretation of terms such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence and the interpretation of scripture, of the relationship between faith and reason, of natural law and morality. Each doctrinal pillar was integral to the structure of Aquinas' philosophy: undermine one and the whole edifice is in danger.

From Aristotle, Aquinas drew the belief that human beings can use reason to discover how they should behave, to appreciate the existence and the nature of natural laws and the human ability to choose to follow them and flourish, to go against them and fall short. While Aristotle was noncommittal about the existence of God as creator or sustainer, for Aquinas this had been revealed through Christ and the scriptures, therefore using reason to understand natural laws was using reason to gain insight into God's will. It was possible, for Aquinas, for a heathen to live a naturally good life, though as might be expected from a Catholic writer, he believed Christian education, baptism and sacraments are necessary for a person to achieve salvation. Like Aristotle, Aquinas understood goodness as something fulfilling its nature; for Aquinas this meant doing God's will in being what he created it to be, fulfilling its divinely willed potential.

Living well

For Aquinas, reason dictates that a good life is lived long, peacefully, productively, in the pursuit of wisdom and with a commitment to passing it on to the next generation. He only differs from Aristotle in seeing the necessity of religious practice, seemingly as part of philosophy, in allowing people access to the revealed truths that are necessary for salvation and encouraging in them a sense of awe and humility, of thankfulness for the gifts of life and reason, rather than suggesting pride in human achievements.

Think about it: a dead person cannot be a good person. They cannot fulfil any aspect of their human potential to move, think, act or decide. Life must therefore be the first requirement for goodness and a person who is alive cannot be all bad because they are still a person, fulfilling some of their divinely willed potential if not any of the aspects of that potential that are under their control. This supports the Christian belief in the sanctity of life; even Hitler or Pol Pot are human beings and worthy of respect and love as such. We all deplore their moral choices but fundamentally human life is still life and is an inherently good thing, not to be destroyed lightly.

Fulfilling potential

Aquinas characterises the qualities of a fulfilled existence: life, peace, prosperity, procreation, philosophy, praise, pedagogy as the primary precepts of natural law. Some people may be prevented from leading such a life by a physical or mental impairment, or for some other reason beyond their or anyone else's control. Obviously they are still good and incredibly valuable, even if we regret the "natural evil" that prevents them from being all that they might wish to be. Aquinas suggests that such natural evil is an occasional falling short in God's creation, allowed by the creator in order that the existence and nature of true goodness may be facilitated, understood and appreciated.

A person naturally prevented from fulfilling human potential in some aspect can always try to compensate in other aspect; somebody who for some reason cannot have children of their own could find fulfilment through adopting and giving a home to a child who has no parents; or they could find fulfilment by devoting themselves to study or business or teaching, perhaps being more

able to succeed because of the single-minded application they are able to give than those who have families to balance with work.

Indeed, sometimes fully actualising human potential in one aspect requires focus and concentration which may be made easier by choosing not to pursue another aspect. For example, Catholic priests and monks are expected to devote themselves to prayer, study and working to make life better for others. Pursuing worldly wealth and having families tends to get in the way of this. Jesus himself chose to remain single and to abandon the family business in order to spread God's message. In the Middle Ages, around the time that Aquinas wrote, the Church began to enforce celibacy for all priests and to prevent them from engaging in many other kinds of work they were doing, from medicine to soldiery. This was justified, according to Aquinas, because the conscious choice of some people not to actualise some aspects of their potential made human beings in general more able to be fulfilled.

Aquinas' characterisation of a fulfilled existence - life, peace, prosperity, procreation, philosophy, praise, pedagogy - are the ends which all naturally good actions will serve and the ends which no naturally good action will prevent or hamper. It follows from this that some types of actions will generally be categorised as positive and some negative. Murder will always curb the "potential" of someone living and therefore is naturally evil, always wrong. If a primary precept involves achieving full potential, it is a secondary precept of natural law that murder is wrong because murder prevents someone from achieving their potential.

After Aquinas

Since the time of Aquinas most moral philosophers who have engaged in describing natural moral law as a normative system of ethics have agreed with this basic structure. Some have developed slightly different interpretations of the primary precepts, which in turn may give slightly different secondary precepts, but there has been a general consensus. This consensus has had the effect of making the focus of discussions of natural moral law the detail of how it should be applied; it has become very legalistic. This may not be particularly helpful or even true to Aquinas. Aquinas followed Aristotle in arguing that ordinary people through ordinary reason have the power to understand the difference between right and wrong; the more complex a system is developed out of natural law, the less it can serve as a basic and universal system for determining values.

Today, ethicists who use the natural law approach differ in their interpretation of:

1. What the universal human nature (formal cause) and purpose (final cause) is. They each have slightly different lists of primary precepts, sometimes called "basic goods". For example:

a. Germain Grisez (1983): self-integration, practical reasonableness, authenticity, justice and friendship, religion, life and health, knowledge of truth, appreciation of beauty, playful activities

b. John Finnis (1980): life, knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, play, friendship, practical reasonableness, religion – introduced 'the marital good' in 1996

c. TDJ Chappell (1995): friendship, aesthetic value, pleasure and avoidance of pain, physical and mental health and harmony, reason, reasonableness and rationality, truth and knowledge of it, the natural world, people, fairness, achievements

2. How we should deal with a situation where an action seems to contribute to one but takes away from another of the primary precepts or basic goods? Most scholars operate a "master rule" approach, holding that there is a single essential principle which underpins all the others and takes priority or that one of the primary precepts takes priority in a dispute.

a. Aquinas, for example, held that the primary precepts could be summarised in the Christian Golden rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you)– in other words – always want to do what is right and consider the impact on everybody else before acting, trying to act in everybody's best interests, not just selfishly.

b. Grisez suggested that the "first principle of morality is voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those possibilities whose willing is compatible with a will towards integral human fulfilment."

c. Finnis now affirms Grisez's master-rule approach, though in the 1980s he felt that any "master rule" approach was likely to suffer from not being able to answer the simple question "Who says this is the master rule?" satisfactorily. In the past Finnis argued that all basic goods are known through practical reason (i.e. experience and common sense) equal and that it would always be wrong to intend the destruction of an instance of a basic good i.e. no lying as knowledge is one of his basic goods, no murder as life is a basic good etc. If there really is a clash that can't be reasonably worked out, there is something wrong with our list of basic goods, our interpretation of experience.

Some natural law theorists adopt a "virtue" approach however – and argue that we should focus less on specific actions and precepts and more on the character traits which will help us to achieve our ultimate fulfilment, individually and as a people. Virtue ethicists who develop the natural law approach include Alistair Macintyre and Philippa Foot.

Paradigmatic approaches

Most of those who follow a new natural law approach also adopt a paradigmatic approach, i.e. they accept a single explanation for why the world is the way that it is. The most common paradigm for a natural law ethicist to belong to is the religious paradigm: God created the world and everything in it and wills us to fulfil his plan. Aquinas is one example of a religious paradigmatic approach to natural law, Grisez is another. There are those who adopt a non-religious paradigm or explanation for things being the way that they are. Evolution and natural selection may be one paradigm which would enable a non-believer to follow natural law Some humanists, for example Richard Dawkins, would belong to this approach. However, other scholars are non-paradigmatic in their approach i.e. they don't explain why things are the way they are; they just accept it and argue that it seems common-sense. Aristotle was such.

Most followers of natural law ethics accept that:

a. Human reason is a reliable tool for determining what the final cause of human beings and other beings/things is.

b. When people choose to do bad things it is usually because they are pursuing an apparent good – i.e. they think it will be better for them if they murder, lie, steal etc. it will contribute towards the good of their continued peaceful life, their prosperity maybe. If they reconsidered they would realise

that they are being mislead and would instead choose the real good of not murdering, stealing or lying as the general flourishing of mankind is the condition upon which individual flourishing rests.

c. We should try to act with a good motive as well as to produce good results – this because the motive comes out of and informs the character and a character can be made un-virtuous if it allows itself to act from poor motives, even if the general results are not bad. This is what Aquinas called the importance of interior as well as exterior acts.

New natural law is used as the basis for a philosophy of law as well as normative ethics by some scholars. Some see the civil law as valid or invalid in terms of whether it reflects universal natural laws of mankind. Cicero wrote: "True law is right reason is agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting. It summons to duty by its commands and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions." Aquinas believed that what is morally and what is legally right ought to be the same thing. Blackstone argued the same. Thus they are both followers of what is known as the overlap thesis, most famously expressed by Augustine, who wrote that "an unjust law is not really a law at all". They are also called conceptual naturalists.

Other scholars, conceptual non-naturalists, argue against this and suggest that what is morally right and wrong has little to do with the law, which reflects pragmatism and short-term particular political ends and is justified either by democratic mandate or the power of the government to enforce it. The utilitarian John Austin wrote: "Now, to say that human laws which conflict with the divine law are not binding, that is to say, are not laws, is to talk stark nonsense. The most pernicious laws, and therefore those which are most opposed to the will of God, have been and are continually enforced as laws by judicial tribunals"(1995). Brian Bix (1999) has argued against Austin and others who reject the overlap thesis by saying that Austin's criticism implies that we may as well accept that any law that can be enforced by a court is just – something which even Austin would dispute, as would most sensible people.

John Finnis (1980) and Brian Bix (1996) attempted to show that this is a non-dispute, however, by pointing out the difference between claiming that a law has no status in theory and arguing that it does not exist in practice.

Neo-naturalism

John Finnis is a neo-naturalist or founder/follower of new natural law and sees himself developing the conceptual naturalism of Aquinas and Blackstone. He sees both of them as providing an argument which would enable people to see that following the law is morally right and that the law has the moral authority to coerce people (i.e. use prison and even death as a punishment). Ronald Dworkin agrees on this point. Finnis claims that a law can be legally valid, even if unjust, but that there can be no moral justification for enforcing an unjust law.

Finnis' neo-naturalism is both an ethical theory and a theory of jurisprudence. Human beings share a common nature and purpose, which are fulfilled by the pursuit of common basic goods. The function of moral and civil rules is to enable the pursuit of basic goods and thus contribute to the flourishing of the human race. "The conceptual point of law is to facilitate the common good by providing authoritative rules that solve the coordination problems that arise in connection with the common pursuit of these basic goods."

Proportionalism

In recent decades there has been a move to simplify natural moral law and to make it more applicable to everyday life. Proportionalists such as Bernard Hoose have suggested that natural moral law is not just lists of absolute "thou shalt not"s but a system of guidelines which individuals must navigate for themselves.

For example, we know that disobeying a parent is wrong, it generally goes against the primary precept of pedagogy, however in some circumstances it may be right to disobey the order 'don't run inside', such as when there has been an accident and an ambulance is needed. It may sometimes be right to do a wrong thing.

Take another example: within natural law it is generally wrong to have an abortion; it goes directly against the primary precept of life for the unborn child and may undermine other primary precepts as well. However, when a woman has an ectopic pregnancy there is no hope that the child will be born. The developing embryo will cause the fallopian tube to rupture, probably killing the woman and at least making her infertile. Lasering the embryo will kill it but will save the mother and allow her to have children in the normal way in the future. Surely it should be for the individual to decide that, given the circumstances, it would be right to do a wrong thing? However there are those who argue that as the side-effect of the abortion is known and certain, it is wrong to see the principle of double effect as any justification for the operation.

Ignorance, self-delusion, short-termism

Aquinas argued that people don't usually choose to do something in the knowledge that it is wrong. Rather, they pursue an apparent good rather than a real good. That is to say that they rationalise their choice so that they think they are doing the right thing, even though they are not. For example, Hitler was persuaded that Jews were not really human beings and were evil, and rationalised the murder of six million people. He thought his actions supported the good of creating a better Germany, one in which more people would be fulfilled more of the time. Unpalatable as it may seem to say it, most Nazis would have been horrified at the suggestion that they were engaged in cold-blooded mass-murder on grounds of irrational prejudice. They believed they were pursuing an apparent good. They were horribly mistaken in their reasoning of course, but there was reasoning.

If you lie, you may well do it to save someone's feelings, avoid an unnecessarily awkward situation or gain some advantage which you don't think will really hurt anybody. You are pursuing an apparent good of short-term personal happiness, not the real good of contributing to a better, more truthful world. This is just the point which Immanuel Kant made in the eighteenth century. While he rejected Aristotelian natural law approaches to ethics, seeing them as overly prescriptive in their understanding of human nature and in the very specific and authoritarian guidance they give to individuals, Kant approached ethics in a naturalistic way

2. Kantian Ethics

Like Aristotle, Kant believed that knowledge begins with experience, or what he calls practical reason. Moral principles can be understood by studying human experience: reality can tell us how things ought to be. Like Plato, Kant defines human nature in terms of reason and the freedom that reason makes possible. Because of this definition of human nature, Kant resisted Aristotle's prescriptive definition of what it means to be fulfilled and the detailed laws which hinge on that definition. He saw that if human beings are presented with a list of laws, this actually limits the freedom which is a distinctive part of their nature and makes the exercise of reason unnecessary. To be a fulfilled human being is to be a free, rational human being, not to follow lists of laws mindlessly, fit in with convention and take the easiest route through life.

Allowing people their own choices

For Kant the role of the moral philosopher must be to help people to reason out the principles which they should follow and then to choose to follow those principles freely, not to tell people what to do specifically. Think about it – is the better teacher the one who enables students to do things themselves so they are capable when teachers are no longer around, or the one who just gives the students the answers to fill in on the exam papers? Aristotle's approach to moral philosophy could be seen as almost controlling, undermining the essential roles of reason and freedom and preventing people from finding the fulfilment he wants them to find. For Kant the role of the moral philosopher is difficult, similar to the role of a good teacher or a good parent. It involves helping people only at a distance, allowing them to make their own decisions and accepting the risk that they might make a mistake, even in the knowledge that that mistake might be catastrophic and irreversible.

Think about learning to drive, or teaching somebody to drive. How hard is it to allow an inexperienced teenager to take the wheel for themselves, risking the health and lives of numbers of people in the process? When does the good instructor allow the learner driver to go solo?

a. On the first lesson, to see what happens?

b. After a good grounding in theory and some sessions in a car park?

c. Never – it is safer that way?

Kant's categorical imperative

The moral philosopher can suggest the basic principles which might guide rational, free decisions. For Kant all free, moral decisions should be guided by the categorical imperative, a single simple principle derived from human experience, which, it seems, really does command all free, rational beings. This principle is, however, all too easy to describe in ways that can be misunderstood and misapplied, wilfully or otherwise. In the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (1785), Kant put forward more than six wordings of the principle, which can be explained in terms of three different ways of describing it. It is important to remember that Kant never intended these wordings to be considered, let alone applied, separately. He believed that they were ways of gesturing towards the same essential law, not a law which he had invented or which could be formulated and applied mindlessly. He believed they together made up a command which is inherent in the nature of human

12

beings but which resists being codified because doing so would remove that which is also inherent in human nature – freedom.

Seeing others as lesser or equal

In other words Kant asks people to consider what would happen if everybody's actions set a precedent for others to copy. What would happen if some people through their actions use people as a means to an end, effectively assuming that some people are worth less than others, even nothing at all? It is irrational to think that we can allow some people to do things which others are not allowed to do, that doing something will not give others licence to do the same and that equals should be treated as more, or less, important than each other. Reason dictates that humanity must be respected for itself, that selfish urges or emotional preferences must come second to a basic respect for human life. Reason dictates that we must act fairly, consistently, according to principle and not unjustly, instinctively or without sense.

When expressed like this Kant's moral philosophy ceases to seem so complicated and alien. The American philosopher Allen Wood pointed out that many people's reaction to Kant's ethics resembles an allergic reaction: they reject Kant really without rational consideration and argument. He goes on to speculate that this might be because most people, particularly in the English-speaking world, first engage with Kant through the Groundwork. The Groundwork is short, but it is not an easy work to begin a study of Kant with. Many short works conceal difficult core theses – think about Animal Farm, which is not a simple introduction to Orwell; Jude the Obscure is shorter than many of Hardy's great novels but it is certainly not easier, the poems of William Blake, ee cummings and RS Thomas are often short, but their apparent simplicity is misleading.

MacIntyre's criticism

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his 1985 book *After Virtue*, accuses Kant of being action-centred rather than agent-centred, of being too worried about the rights and wrongs of little things and not worried enough about people's broader moral character. We all know that someone can seem bad despite keeping the law and that another can seem good despite having done something bad. Who was better, Anne Frank's neighbours who, like good citizens, turned the family over to the Gestapo, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who risked everything in an assassination attempt on Hitler?

In fact, the broader virtue ethic that MacIntyre proposes is based on the ethic that Kant developed through the Metaphysics of morals (1797), the Critique of Judgement (1790) and the essay Towards perpetual peace (1795). As was said earlier, the Groundwork was just intended to get people asking the right questions. Kant had no easy answers to what we should do with our lives; in his view it is for every individual to use their reason and their freedom to work out how to be good for themselves by reflecting on their experience of other people's lives. He accepted that mistakes are bound to be made, and that regret would temper the satisfaction of even the best person, yet he never despaired of the possibility of human beings living up to their natures and being good. He was never obsessed with rules in the way that MacIntyre suggests; the Groundwork, which MacIntyre uses to support this view, aims to work out how a virtuous person would act, not to railroad anyone into following a code first and being human second.

Character as the sum of a person's choices

One important point to take from Kant into the discussion of virtue ethics is that the general moral character is built up of every choice it has made. Modern virtue ethics tend to shy away from offering definite advice about right and wrong and are unclear about the virtues we should aspire to; in the confusion it would be easy to justify most behaviour. Kant is clearer and more demanding, not afraid to pin down his virtues of rationality and freedom or to describe how they would be enacted.

The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals was produced to elicit discussion and controversy related to themes which Kant was handling at more length in the Metaphysics of morals and the Critique of practical reason. Kant often produced essays or short works whilst he was working up major books, so that many of the issues with and criticisms of his ideas would be flushed out whilst he still had time to respond to them. Unfortunately, Kant's major books became so long and complicated as a result that many people never got as far as to read them, relying instead on the shorter works.

The Groundwork begins by arguing that the only inherently good thing is a good will. What does Kant mean by this? Kant uses two German words for "will", Wille, which refers to the universal principles of reason, and Willkur, which is the moral character within every one of us. Human nature, our character, is to be rational, but also to be free, therefore the Willkur is not programmed to follow the Wille, but must choose to do so. When faced with a moral decision the Willkur has to weigh up the apparently competing desires of the animal self (the Bestimmung), of the social/emotional self, and of reason, and freely choose to follow reason, subordinating the emotions and instincts to it. Only when somebody freely chooses to follow reason are they good and only that character which has always freely chosen the rational is truly good and deserving of any metaphysical reward that there may be.

Truly free actions

This is the beginning of a problem for Kant. Who among us can claim to have always acted freely? Never to have acted out of habit, fear, thoughtlessness? Who among us can claim to have always acted rationally? Never to have followed baser instincts, to have been selfish, to have preferred friend or family member, to have done something bad on the basis that nobody would ever know, to have done something of which we are ashamed? Obviously, particularly given some behaviour typical even in childhood, nobody can measure up to the standard of goodness that Kant describes, that of a moral character which has always freely chosen what is rational for its own sake, and therefore everybody is imperfect to some extent. This does not seem problematic, it seems true to human experience, so why is it a problem for Kant?

The problem lies in the irrationality of asking people to do, or to try to do, something which we all know that they cannot achieve. Why try to be good when you know that you can't? It can't be for the immediate rewards of good actions – because there often aren't any. Kant's broader worldview depends on the assumption that things are ordered, predictable, fair. What we experience is how things are and the universe is indeed governed by rational laws as it seems to be. In order to explain why the universe is fair, to suggest why things are ordered and rational and to account for bad things happening to good people, Kant had to suppose the existence of God and an afterlife. Kant could not account for why a good God would reward bad people by allowing them into heaven and yet there could be no other reward for the good actions that bad people do, so why should bad

14

people try to overcome their shortcomings and try to be good? If there is no reason for any of us to make a moral effort, what is the point? The universe is not fair if everybody in it is condemned for not doing something that they cannot do. If the universe is not fair in this, then what reason is there to suppose that it is free in other ways, that what we experience really is how things are and that anything really is predictable?

Kant's view of Jesus Christ

Kant never satisfactorily extricated his philosophy from this problem of what he called "radical evil" although he (surprisingly for some people) argued for the need for God and particularly Christ, the proof that it is possible to be good (despite all appearances to the contrary) and that the world is indeed ordered and fair as Kant assumes it must be. For Kant, Jesus' example shows that human beings are able to overcome radical evil and fulfil all their potential to be rational and free, enacting the categorical imperative in every moral action and not being influenced by selfish impulses or the fear of pain and death. The effects of Jesus' life show, for Kant, the effects of people choosing the good for its own sake in building a better world, the **summum bonum**, which Kant uses as a justification for calling on individuals to do good without hope of personal reward. Kant does not focus on the identity of Jesus; it is sufficient that he is fully human and fully good and as such is a sign from God that salvation is possible and things will come right in the end. In Kant's view Jesus existed through the grace of God and believing in him enables us to be good as God wills us to be. Unsurprisingly this was not sufficiently close to orthodox Lutheran doctrine for Kant's book *Religion within the bounds of reason alone* (1793) to be acceptable to the church authorities at the time.

Building a better world

However one of Kant's suggestions went on to inspire philosophers to take his ideas in a new direction. In his essay Towards perpetual peace Kant suggested that the reward for good behaviour would not be for individuals but would come in the effects of improving society, in the satisfaction every one of us would have in knowing that in every promise kept and every truth told we had done our bit in building a better world. A generation of philosophers took this idea and ran with it, developing systems from Mill's utilitarianism to Marx's communism – ways of defining and prescribing the good without bringing God into the discussion.

Some people suggest that the value Kant placed on reason as the defining feature of human nature would have made him unlikely to see those with no or less rational potential as fully human. Indeed this quote from the Groundwork seems to confirm this view of Kant – at least for those who read no further: ''*Now I say that … every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will … [B]eings … if they are not rational [have] only a relative value as means and are therefore called things*'' (8:428).

This might mean that Kant would accept the euthanasia of people who are brain-damaged or mentally disabled – even of criminals. Certainly, some Nazis interpreted Kant's writings in this way. In his early years this criticism would have been true – Kant, as a man typical of his age thought that women and members of other races were less rational and thus only to be treated as human out of charity – but his understanding of human value changed when he read the writings of the Swiss philosopher and novelist Rousseau (the only time when Kant interrupted his daily walk was when his copy of Rousseau's treatise on education Emile arrived). He wrote to a friend, "there was a time

when I believed that [reason] constituted the honour of humanity, and I despised the people who knew nothing. Rousseau set me right about this. This blinding prejudice disappeared. I learned to honour human beings" (quoted in Allen Wood's *Kant's Ethical Thought*, page 5).

3. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, the ethic of the "greatest happiness principle", is probably the best known system of making decisions. Basically, according to the utilitarian, those actions are good which maximise happiness and those actions are bad which minimise happiness and cause pain. But utilitarianism is not really as simple as this.

The pursuit of happiness as an aim has a long history. The ethics of the pre-Socratic philosopher Epicurus are a form of egoistic hedonism, i.e. he says that the only thing that is intrinsically valuable is one's own pleasure. Anything else that has value is valuable merely as a means to securing pleasure for oneself. However, Epicurus has a sophisticated and idiosyncratic view of the nature of pleasure, which leads him to recommend a virtuous, moderately ascetic life as the best means to securing pleasure. This contrasts Epicurus strongly with the Cyrenaics, a group of ancient hedonists who better fit the stereotype of hedonists as recommending a policy of "eat, drink and be merry".

Ethics based purely on human experience

Jeremy Bentham was the founder of modern utilitarianism. He called the idea of human rights "nonsense on stilts" and his attitude to rights philosophies was shared by his godson John Stuart Mill. Both men sought to take moral philosophy back to basics, back to what we can know from experience, and build from that a simple system to guide moral decision making, on both individual and societal levels. They rejected any assumptions or postulations that could not be supported by ordinary experience. Believing in the authority of religious values, the reality of God or an afterlife, the inequality of human beings or the existence of inherent "rights" was all deemed irrational. Ethics concerned how human beings should behave towards other human beings in this world; it should be guided by observation and measurable fact, not by prejudice, unfounded belief or wishful thinking.

Pleasure and pain, 'mankind's two masters'

Bentham began by observing that "nature has placed mankind under two sovereign masters, the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain". He noted that the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus had come to this conclusion, one which was still held to in the nineteenth century; it chimed with ordinary human experience. From the observation that human beings do seek pleasure, Bentham then moved to argue that they should seek pleasure, that such was natural to them. The utilitarian maxim he devised exhorted people to "*always act so as to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number*". Bentham moved another step in arguing that people should seek to maximise pleasure for people in general, rather than just for themselves.

Nobler than hedonism

In fact, utilitarianism is radically different from the hedonism or egoism that the foundational observations of people's pleasure-seeking characters might suggest because some decisions which maximise the number of people made happy would make the decision-maker very unhappy. For example, a couple are in love but one is married with children. The hedonist might have an affair or even divorce. The utilitarian, on the other hand, must weigh up the pleasure and pain caused to all the people involved and, on balance, would probably have to walk away. High standards of

rationality and altruism are expected of the utilitarian and it is just wrong to reject the system as one that just panders to baser human desires and enables us to justify doing as we please.

Bentham's way of assessing pleasure

Bentham immediately saw the difficulty with using the utilitarian maxim as the basis for a normative approach to ethical decision-making. How could pleasure be quantified effectively, let alone ranked according to quality? The measurement of pleasure, pain, happiness or sadness is incredibly difficult and Bentham was aware of this. He suggested various criteria for assessing pleasures. In one essay he listed seven criteria by which to evaluate pleasure produced by an action, namely:

1. extent (the number of people affected)
2. duration (how long it lasts)
3. purity (does pleasure depend on pain in some way?)
4. fecundity (the likelihood of producing further pleasures),
5. intensity (how strong a sensation)
6. nearness / remoteness (how close at hand it is)
7. certainty (is it definitely going to be this way?)

Push-pin and poetry

Unusually for his time Bentham argued that "*Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry*." In other words, pleasures from any source can be assessed side by side and "intellectual pleasures" for example should not be counted as inherently superior to a children's game. This meant that Bentham's utilitarianism was egalitarian; people from any social class, race, religion or gender could be counted as equals before his calculations.

The problem with Bentham's system was the problem that has always dogged another egalitarian system: democracy. It tended to level down rather than level up; in other words it was easily prepared to sacrifice rare and extraordinary pleasures if it meant a small increase in the everyday pleasures of a majority of people.

An example from state-funded education

Think about universities. They are elitist and expensive; not everybody gets to go to one, let alone for very long, and yet they have been, until now, paid for out of everybody's taxes, regardless of the benefit taxpayers do or don't receive. Bentham might argue that those who want to go to university should pay the full cost themselves and that public money should go on projects which benefit more people, for example on schools. That is, it is better that 100 per cent of people have a good primary education than that 35 per cent of people can study at university.

This argument is familiar. In cutting spending, Western governments aim to minimise pain rather than to maximise pleasure - but the effects are the same and so are the calculations. Bentham devised a "hedonic calculus" to expedite decision-making and it would be surprising if some version of it is not being used in every government department today.

Pleasure / pain x number of people affected = numerical "score" (which is compared to other scores to determine the right action)

Of course, the business of assigning values to the pleasure or pain caused by any course of action is difficult, and further, it is always tricky to know how many people will be affected by a decision and how wide the assessment should be. Nevertheless, by using research coupled with the criteria outlined above, it will be possible to provide a defensible rationale to underpin decision-making. Once various courses of action have been scored it is even relatively easy to make "objective" comparisons.

John Stuart Mill - prodigy, breakdown, recovery

John Stuart Mill was born in 1806. His father was James Mill, a strongly committed Benthamite. John Stuart Mill began to learn arithmetic and Greek at the age of three. Between four and seven he was reading works by David Hume and Edward Gibbon. He began Latin at eight. At 12 he was learning theoretical chemistry. Mill's father was described by his son as a stoic who had contempt for the passions and emotions; he seems to have showed no tenderness to Mill at all.

When Mill had a breakdown in 1826 his father was the last person to whom he could turn for support. He was therefore left on his own to sort out his emotional crisis. For three years Mill said that he was merely a "Benthamite reasoning machine" and had left out all aspects of feeling and emotion. He condemned the followers of Bentham for "their neglect both in theory and practice of the cultivation of feeling" and their "undervaluing of poetry and of imagination generally as an element of human nature". Mill's feeling that there must be "something more" than the Benthamite approach of cold reasoning led him to the poetry of Wordsworth (in 1828) and Coleridge. Mill said of the poetry of Wordsworth: "*What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind was that they expressed - not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty*."

Wordsworth gave him access to a range of feelings that his Benthamite background had denied him. Through Wordsworth's poems, Mill came to a conviction that "I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which has no connection with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical of social condition of mankind." Wordsworth's poems also made Mill sensitive to the feelings of others.

Mill's religion of humanity

Mill advocated a "religion of humanity" not unlike the secular humanism advocated by Dawkins, Grayling et al today. Influenced by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, he saw the purpose of such a religion as being primarily practical - it had to have a utility function. His lack of concern for ontology is seen in his rejection of any grounding for this religion except seeing it as an abstraction comprising those who "in every age and variety of position have played their part worthily in life".

For Mill, the golden rule is altruism. It is the best a human being can be. Becoming this is fostered by everyone seeking the good of others. Although Mill does not seem aware of it, there are Aristotelian links here with the idea of a common human nature that all should aspire to fulfil - all humans share a common human potential. However while Aristotle grounds this in our common human nature, Mill is not concerned with ontology and ignores this line of thought. The nature of a given thing, for Mill, is "*the aggregate of its powers and properties*" - which is very Aristotelian.

Mill, although a utilitarian, developed a much broader understanding of utilitarianism than did Bentham - indeed he rejected Bentham's narrow vision. Mill's version is grounded in our common humanity and the good of society as a whole: "*A theory which considers little in an action besides that action's own consequences ... will be most apt to fail in the consideration of the greatest social questions ... for these... must be viewed as the great instruments for forming the national character, or carrying forward the members of the community towards perfection or preserving them from degeneracy.*" The last phrase is vital and Bentham could never have said it. It shows that Mill had an almost Aristotelian view of the telos or purpose of human life.

Considering religion's usefulness rather than its veracity

Mill is not concerned about truth - in other words he shows no interest in the truth of his ideas. His interest is in their utility or usefulness. One of his important essays was on The Utility of Religion - in other words the usefulness of religion to society. In many ways Mill is both a philosopher and a sociologist - he is interested in what works for society more than the truth of his theories. Nevertheless he has some interests that point to a concern with "what it is to be human" and this is the closest he gets to an ontology.

Mill: awareness of feelings and the happiness of others

Mill rejected a basic principle held by Bentham when he said: "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." Mill's breakdown caused him to amend his original Benthamite position. "I never wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy... who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness ... The cultivation of the feelings becomes one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed."

Mill rejected personal happiness as an aim and, indeed, said that if it became an aim it would not be achieved: "Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life. Let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, exhaust themselves on that and, if otherwise fortunately circumstanced, you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe". Mill even has no difficulty in defining what it is to be human. This includes: "... the desire for perfection, the accusing or approving conscience, the sense of honour and dignity, the love of beauty, order, power as an instrument of good and the love of action."

Mill, therefore, unlike Bentham, accepted the idea of a common human nature that all people share - in this he has much in common with Aristotle and differed markedly from Bentham. Commitment to altruism was the key to human fulfilment, but this meant forgetting one's happiness and acting in the best interests of others.

Act utilitarianism vs rule utilitarianism

During the twentieth century many different versions of utilitarianism have been proposed. Some of the most well known can be described as "preference utilitarianism", which seeks to overcome the difficulty of defining pleasure by arguing that we should just seek to act in the interests (whatever

they may be) of the majority. First amongst the preference utilitarians was RM Hare, who also proposed so-called "two-level utilitarianism"; that is, a compromise between the extremes of act utilitarianism (choosing the course of action that will generate the most pleasure) and rule utilitarianism (considering the consequences of consistently following a rule regarding what action to take) that were being discussed at the time he wrote.

Rule utilitarianism tries to simplify the decision-making process and protect against people misusing the felicific calculus to justify selfish decisions in the "heat of the moment" by adopting some rules, which though based on general utility, do not take account of the particular situation. For example, a country which respects the human rights to life and liberty is likely to be happier than one which permits the abuse of the weak.

Rule utilitarians would suggest following the rule "do not take human life"; strong rule utilitarians would always follow the rule; government-house utilitarians (e.g. Sidgwick) would usually follow it unless there emerged a pressing case not to, which would prompt a new specific rule to be formulated; weak-rule utilitarians would use the rule as a guide but would review it in the particular situation. Act utilitarians see that rules are not helpful as they take away from the point of utilitarianism, to be situationally relevant and not perpetuating taboos, dogma and unnecessary legalism.

According to Hare we should form rules to follow every day on the basis of the utilitarian maxim, but in more extreme situations we should try to rise above the situation and evaluate things on the specifics. Of course it is difficult to predict consequences and this can lead to partial and biased decisions being made, but Hare felt that when a particular higher-level calculation was being made, we should try and think of ourselves as an archangel, detached from selfish human concerns, to overcome this.

Joseph Fletcher, the author of *Situation Ethics*, a groundbreaking and controversial book of the 1960s, made the case for calculating the best action in each situation and never allowing rules, however convenient, from getting in the way of individuals rationally evaluating a situation and being morally responsible for their chosen action. However, the responses to Fletcher from the Catholic and Anglican Churches made a point which is equally applicable to act utilitarianism as situation ethics - it places unreasonable expectations on individuals both in terms of their ability to predict the outcomes of specific actions and in terms of being able to think rationally and altruistically – i.e this approach is idealistic, impractical and wide open to abuse.

Negative utilitarianism

During the 1960s and 70s, negative utilitarianism (NU) was much discussed. This is a system which seeks to minimise pain, which is easier to define and measure than pleasure. NU was particularly associated with the writings of Karl Popper. By the last decade NU had been heavily criticised, perhaps most effectively by RN Smart, who suggested that the most virtuous act for the negative utilitarian would be to cause nuclear Armageddon, to ensure the end of the world and the quick termination of all future suffering. NU came to be associated with nihilism, but lived on in transhumanist and abolitionist philosophies, commonly adopted by geneticists and other scientists rather than by moral philosophers.

The transhumanist view of the future

Transhumanism is a broad association of thinkers across many different disciplines, from poetry to cosmology, medicine to particle physics, all of whom share the belief that it is right to seek to minimise human suffering by using science and technology to overcome the causes of suffering, i.e. physical limitations, boredom, depression, hard work etc. Research is being carried out on the "ethics" of fields from nanotechnology (creating clothing that never needs washing, micro-surgery to reverse aging) to computer games (creating permanent stimulation and virtual sensations to combat boredom and loneliness). The philosophers David Pearce and Nick Bostrom are most associated with this movement through their work with the James Martin 21st Century School [sic] at Oxford University.

Preference utilitarianism

Peter Singer is an Australian who is now professor of bio-ethics at Princeton in the US. His parents were Jewish and three of his relatives died in the Holocaust. He repudiates all religion and refused to have a bar mitzvah. Singer is passionately committed to the view that ethics must be about how life is lived: "There would be something incoherent about living a life where the conclusions you came to in ethics did not make any difference to your life. It would make it an academic exercise. The whole point about doing ethics is to think about the way to live. My life has a kind of harmony between my ideas and the way I live. It would be highly discordant if that was not the case."

Singer: some animals have equal value to humans

Singer is a preference utilitarian. They argue that the consequences to be promoted are those which satisfy the wishes or preferences of the maximum numbers of beings who have preferences. In other words, the more people get what they want, the better, from a moral point of view, the world is. The more people's desires are frustrated, the worse the world is. It is only morally right to frustrate the preferences of others if by so doing we enable more beings to satisfy their preferences. Actions should not be judged on their simple pain-and-pleasure outcomes, but on how they affect the interests, the preferences, of all beings involved. Singer asks an important additional question - "What sort of beings should we include in the sum of interests?" Singer argues that this question is not addressed by Christians - they assume that humans are more valuable than animals. Singer rejects this assumption.

Why should humans be valued more than animals? What is the intellectual basis for experimenting on animals rather than a person in a persistent vegetative state? Singer argues that humans have no inherent right to better treatment than animals - instead their ability to suffer and their rationality need to be evaluated. A dolphin or a chimpanzee may be more rational and be able to suffer more than a newborn baby. Beings that have rationality or self-consciousness are more important than mere sentient beings. If you had to choose to save a child or a dog, you should save the higher "person" - the child. For Singer, not all persons are humans, and some humans are definitely not persons. An adult chimpanzee can exhibit more self-consciousness, more personhood, than a newborn human infant. If the choice was between saving a newborn baby who had no family and a mature chimpanzee and could only save one of them, the chimp should be saved. "Killing them [babies], therefore, cannot be equated with killing normal human beings, or any other self-conscious beings. No infant - disabled or not - has as strong a claim to life as beings capable of seeing

22

themselves as distinct entities existing over time" (Practical Ethics). Singer has proposed a post-natal 28-day qualification period during which infants - non-persons at that stage – could be killed.

Singer puts forward arguments that, while rational, go against fundamental human intuitions. Perhaps most significantly, however, he does not take potential into account. A baby has the potential to become an adult human being and destroying this potential may be an evil act. On this basis, the value of beings should be measured by their potential - and a disabled baby may still have more potential than a dolphin.

The great attraction of Benthamite utilitarianism is that it seems to appeal to common sense in that most people think that happiness is the main aim in life and, in addition, it is often held to be measurable in financial terms.

Happiness and fulfilment

For the great Greek philosophers, what it means to live a fulfilled human life cannot be measured, and what matters does not depend on funding or "measurable outcomes". Also, what many people want may not be what is in their best interests in terms of human fulfilment. GE Moore said "you cannot get an ought from an is" – the fact that many men enjoy watching football, having too much to drink on a Saturday night and looking at pornography does not mean that this is what they should desire – philosophy holds there is more to life than this.

The search for personal happiness may take people away from the importance of a search for meaning and understanding what a fulfilled human life should be life. The growing tide of utilitarianism, however, threatens to sweep aside ideals like justice, goodness, truth or, indeed, the distinctiveness and importance of each individual, so its influence and importance is likely to increase. Mill's approach is far more sophisticated than Bentham's because it recognises that fulfilling human potential is essential for ethics and that happiness is not something personally chosen but is directly linked to the common human nature that we all share.

Recently there has been a coming together of utilitarianism with virtue ethics through the work of Robert Merrihew Adams. Since 1976 Adams advocated "motive utilitarianism", i.e a utilitarianism which starts with the individual, demanding that they cultivate the character traits and skills which are likely to yield the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This utilitiarianism does not just focus on acts and consequences, but also considers the character and motivations, in this it shares a great deal with virtue ethics, a subject which Adams has also written on in the last couple of years.

23

Applied Ethics

We an agree that whether a social or political policy is right or wrong, good or bad, depends on whether it affects people in a fair and beneficial way. But what constitutes a person? A baby in the womb is clearly human. Is he or she also a person? And what about humans who have no ability to reason? We can agree also that all human beings have equal rights – but can animals or the earth also have rights?

There are many different applied ethical issues, far too many to explore in detail here. The Tablet has a substantial archive of articles on issues ranging from contraception to capital punishment, cloning to conservation, which outline the different perspectives that people have and the reasons for them.

When considering applied ethical issues it is important to understand that there are some underlying philosophical problems which will always affect discussions, though they may not be referred to explicitly. The most important such question is "What is a human person?" Most ethical systems and religions seek to protect human persons, but it is very difficult to establish what a person is, when humanity begins and ends, if and when quality of life is so low that it no longer qualifies as human and if somebody's inhuman actions can disqualify them from being treated as a person.

Defining personhood

Catholicism accepts that it is difficult to define human personhood, but teaches that the sin of harming or destroying a person is so great that people should be generous in including all potential human persons as if they are full persons. Because of this the Church teaches that a person should be treated as a person from conception, no more or less important than any other person. Embryo-experimentation and abortion (however early or for whatever reason) are just as unacceptable as medical testing on humans or murder. Not all Christian denominations agree with this approach, though all uphold the sanctity of life and tend towards a generous definition of personhood.

The value of those who suffer

The commonality of the Christian approach is perhaps better seen in relation to attitudes towards the elderly, sick and dying. The vast majority of Christians believe that these vulnerable human beings must be protected, even when this means refusing to help them when they call for an end to their suffering. While over 80 per cent of the general public in some Western countries support the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, the Churches are steadfast in opposing such a move. Christianity teaches that there is value in suffering but more that there is value in those who suffer, which must be recognised and respected in principle and action.

Singling out humanity

Christian ethics tend to be influenced by natural law, as do the ethics of Judaism and Islam. Religions are wary of defining humanity in terms of reason and freedom (as does Kant) or in terms of happiness (as does utilitarianism) because this allows for a division between those who are fully human and those who are not, who may have potential to be human or not, but certainly do not

possess the qualifying characteristics now. Princeton Professor Peter Singer is the best-known critic of a broad definition of humanity, such as is adopted by Catholicism. He accuses this approach of being "speciesist" and inconsistent, protecting the rights of "human" infants or dying people above those of primates with more ability to suffer or think. He has even said publically that he wishes he could euthanatise his elderly mother (who has Alzheimer's disease) and use the money spent on her nursing on the Third World. Unsurprisingly, his views are controversial.

Becoming less human

Attitudes are split over whether inhumane actions can disqualify people from full moral status. Immanuel Kant was quite traditional in supporting the capital punishment of murderers and the possibility of just war on the grounds that if humanity is measured in rationality then murderers and supporters of corrupt regimes are clearly irrational and sub-human. His views would be supported by many religious people, though they may give different justifications. On the other hand there are those who see that Kant's philosophy leads naturally to a system of human rights. If we defines humanity more inclusively than Kant did (at least in his earlier writings) then in principle all people have a right to life and liberty, regardless if we approve of their actions or not.

Human rights and a creator God

Theories of human rights have been around for a long time, but it is important to remember that not all philosophers using the term "rights" does so in the same way. The origins of human rights theory should probably be seen in monotheism, the belief in a single creator God who is responsible for everything and human beings in particular, who has an equal interest in each human life and its outcomes that is not affected by gender, race, age and abilities - even religion. The belief in the sanctity of human life made the assumptions that human life is substantially different to other forms of life and that human life is valuable in itself seem reasonable. In the Old Testament basic protections were given to all people, even foreigners, slaves and women, on the grounds that all people are God's creations.

Claims about rights were closely associated with claims about God from the earliest times. Even in the US Declaration of Independence and the bill of rights, which can be seen as the first flowering of human rights theory, it is claimed that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Human rights without God

Kant made it possible to separate the concept of human rights from monotheism. His system allows for God to be a postulate but shows how the existence of God cannot be demonstrated and how accepting reports of miracles, revelations, the authority of sacred texts and accepted mores would be irrational and therefore wrong. Arguably, being a member of an organised religion would be difficult for a Kantian. Nevertheless, the assumption that all human beings are or should be treated as if they are equal in their potential to be free and rational and equal in value (ends in themselves or law-making members of a kingdom of ends) is fundamental to Kant's approach. From first principles he shows how and why it is both logical and necessary to accept the superiority and equality of the human race. Then he demonstrates how all people must be treated with respect by

virtue of their humanity. For Kant every human being must be allowed to live and have their interests considered on an equal footing with everybody else's interests. They deserve the truth, to be treated fairly, to have the opportunity to learn from example in a just society and to have the liberty to make their own moral decisions and be responsible for them.

Kant's system is certainly idealistic, but he saw that by aiming for how things should be, we can gradually build a better world, even if it sometimes seems a long way off. Human rights theorists have shared this vision ever since. Newspapers are full of stories about how human rights legislation has cost the government huge amounts, has inconvenienced people in one way or another. Advocates of human rights would say that this is not the point. Obviously standing up for the rights of individuals and minorities is going to upset the majority and shake the status quo. This is an unavoidable part of building a society with principles that value people for their own sake, which doesn't allow people to be used, ignored or hurt.

Rising above one's own needs

Most people are fundamentally selfish. As infants our whole lives are about satisfying our hunger and other basic needs and many people never progress far beyond this, especially when nobody challenges them, when nobody causes them to reflect and consider their behaviour objectively. Just as Kantian ethics called people to break habits, to act freely and rationally as full human beings rather than as automatons, human rights advocates call people to put themselves in another's shoes and start to act out of humanitarian rather than selfish interests. Martin Luther King Jr wrote that "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

Rawls - human rights as a yardstick

Today there are several different ways of understanding human rights. Perhaps most common is that advocated by John Rawls, who was Professor of Moral and Political Philosophy at Harvard University until his death in 2002. Rawls argued that the basic human rights to life and liberty should be extended inclusively (to include the broadest possible definition of personhood) and should be understood positively (that is that they infer responsibilities on other individuals and governments). By this definition the human rights of the poor require the wealthy to provide them with the basics needed to sustain life (housing, nutrition, healthcare etc.) and political protection sufficient to enable them to be free. Controversially, Rawls saw human rights as a minimum standard and a yardstick against which regimes around the world could be objectively measured. He argued that the abuse of human rights might be justification for other regimes to intervene, with military force if necessary, to protect basic rights. Rawls ideas have clearly influenced foreign policy in recent years, notably the thinking of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton.

A contemporary of Rawls at Harvard, Robert Nozick, had a very different concept of human rights. In his most famous book Anarchy, State and Utopia, Nozick argued that rights should be understood negatively i.e. people have a right not to be interfered with, to live and get on with their lives without hindrance, but that should not infer responsibilities on anyone else to provide support. Further, he suggested that humanity should be defined more tightly, to include only those capable of participating in society and perhaps to exclude those who either cannot participate or who choose

26

not to. Clearly Nozick's ideas have had a significant influence on the thinking of right-wing politicians who favour "small government".

Rights and cultural relativism

Today there are many attempts at finding a "middle way" between the ideas of Rawls and Nozick. Rawls' acceptance of human rights as an objective standard or yardstick is embarrassing to some, who would rather accept that some matters are culturally relative and should not be judged or intervened in from outside. Take, for example, female circumcision. It is seen as a terrible mutilation and tantamount to abuse in the West but in areas of Africa it is a necessary part of being accepted as an adult woman. Rawls would argue that female circumcision and the culture which requires it is wrong and that all measures should be taken to protect the rights of women and stop it. Others would argue that we are in no position to make such a judgement, saying that if we accept male circumcision, which is also destructive, unnecessary, painful, so why not female circumcision? They might suggest that we reject female circumcision as a human rights abuse just because it is a culturally alien practice which we do not understand. They might even add that we should stand up for the rights of people to express their culture, whatever that may be, rather than standing for Western cultural imperialism in the guise of human rights.

Rawls' suggestion that human rights might be a justification for "humanitarian intervention" has been taken up enthusiastically by some politicians. Whereas those on the left-of-centre, often identified as "Christian Democrats", identify human rights with a missionary duty to export democracy and Western values to oppressive parts of the world, supporting this with aid payments and investment in social engineering. Those on the right-of-centre, often identified as neo-conservatives, identify human rights with the capitalist democracy that they see as good-in-itself and worthy of exporting by force around the world. For them, if people are free and encouraged to engage in enterprise then they will be enabled to look after themselves by the market and will naturally vote for politicians whose policies will support free trade. The duty to export human rights is thus likely to yield an economic reward to the countries that do the exporting...

The challenge of environmentalism

Today the hot topic in applied ethics is the environment. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most difficult issues for traditional ethical systems and religions to deal with. Most ethical systems and religions focus on human beings as the only beings with moral status and naturally prioritise the interests of human beings over those of other animals, let alone other organisms, landscapes and resources. This is why most discussions of environmental ethics tend to display what is called "shallow ecology", an approach which values the environment only insofar as it benefits human beings.

There are those who reject shallow ecology and instead advocate a "deep ecology", one which would assign moral status to all beings. Peter Singer leans towards this in allowing that animals may have rights in the same way as adult humans have rights. Arnae Neiss, the Norwegian utilitarian, was famous for suggesting that numerical values be assigned to mountains and lakes when they are affected by moral calculations. Scientist James Lovelock's popular books promote the idea that the whole earth is a living, dynamic organism with ultimate moral status - "Gaia".

27

Within the Christian community deep ecology has always been a minority movement. Even St Francis of Assisi's ecology was justified by the need for gratitude to animals, plants and their creator - because of what they do for us humans. However the "Process theology" movement, which began in the nineteenth century, developed a strain of Christian panentheism which has fostered value being placed on the environment for its own sake. From Teilhard de Chardin to modern scholars such as Andrew Linzey of Oxford University, there have always been those who have associated spirituality with protecting the diversity of the environment. Of course, deep ecology has a more natural home within the Eastern religious tradition, with many environmentalists being inspired by Hindu or Buddhist teachings about interconnectedness, Karma and non-harming, Ahimsa.

What the Credit Crunch uncovered

Environmental ethics and business ethics are closely connected, of course. Since the mid-twentieth century the impact of unregulated and irresponsible business has been plain to see - from Bhopal to the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. Both ethical systems and religions teach that businesses should consider the wider impact of their decisions on people, both in the immediate vicinity and on a worldwide longterm basis, and that they should be held accountable by the courts when they fail to do so. Gone are the days when the dominant argument was that free pursuit of the profit motive would naturally raise the sum total of human happiness.

The recent Credit Crunch and subsequent recession has demonstrated the stakes involved in business decisions. The huge unemployment, home repossessions and food-bank queues that have been seen in hitherto prosperous parts of the US have strengthened resentment towards bankers and those who failed to regulate them. The problem stemmed from short-termism - people justifying their decisions on the basis of a very basic utilitarian calculus that failed to account for the long term or the big picture. Of course the structure of business actually encourages this by paying people on the basis of short-term results and so fostering a high staff-turnover where nobody is around long enough to experience the long-term implications of their work. Governments have tried to counter this by forcing government-controlled businesses to reward staff with shares, not cash bonuses, by trying to cap pay and rewards and by reducing opportunities for businesses to profit from excessive risk-taking. Unfortunately this natural policy has had the effect of stifling the economic recovery, which has hurt the people governments are trying to protect through such regulation. Striking the right balance is never easy - and much comes down to the old problem with decision-making, the problem of prediction? How often do things turn out as we expect them to? Can we ever account for all the variables or calculate the extent of effects? To what extent can we be held responsible for secondary, even unforeseen consequences of our actions?

Problem of unforeseen consequences

This is a problem that affects the ethics of science and technology particularly severely. Often decisions must be made about which lines of research to pursue, with very hazy knowledge of what might be discovered or what the potential consequences of applying these discoveries might be. Of course many of the most beneficial breakthroughs have also yielded destructive applications and vice versa; for example the technology behind SatNavs for cars is the same as that behind guided weapons systems, the technology for remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) that enables people to work underwater by remote control is the same as behind military drones.

Costing the quality of life

The same applies to medical technology. Advances in life-support have saved many people but also create appalling dilemmas for the parents of premature babies and the relatives of those in a persistent vegetative state. Battlefield medicine now saves nine out of every ten soldiers who suffer life-threatening injuries in war - but condemns these men and women to a life of severe disability and associated hardship. Should doctors decide who to treat and how? On what basis should these decisions be made? Currently many healthcare decisions are driven by the utilitarian QALYs approach - where quality of life is balanced against length of life in a cost-benefit analysis. Many people, not least the patients themselves, find the implications of this approach terrifying.

Bodies such as NICE in the UK have the unenviable task of ruling that certain drugs or treatments are not cost-effective or that they should be limited to those who fulfil strict criteria. In practice this means that women over 70 are not screened for breast cancer although their risk of developing the disease is much higher than the younger women, who are invited to have regular mammograms. It meant that until 2010, drugs that arguably lengthened lucid life were denied to Alzheimer's patients until their disease was so far advanced that they benefited far less from them. On the one hand it can be argued that the NHS can save money by starting to treat people later; on the other hand it can also be argued that drugs that enable people to look after themselves for longer reduce the care bill. Of course it is a difficult decision to make, balancing the effectiveness of the treatment, the overall bill to the NHS, all the many priorities and the possible precedent a decision may set. Sometimes controversial decisions are overturned after public outcries, but other times they remain in force. It would support the argument that smokers, drinkers and the obese be relegated to the bottom of transplant lists.

Clearly these decisions may be supported by utilitarian calculations, but this does not mean that they strike many people as right. Naturally many people feel that using people as a means to an end or treating people differently, some as if they were more or less valuable than others, is wrong. The Christian principle of the sanctity of life suggests that God loves and values each person equally, regardless of age, ability or any other factor and Christians believe that it is right to 'love one another' as God loves us.

Suggested Reading

Fuller treatments of these topics may be found in "The Puzzle of Ethics" by Peter vardy and Paul Grosch (HarperCollins, 1997) and in "The Puzzle of Ethics and Moral Philosophy" by Peter and Charlotte Vardy (SCM Press, forthcoming for the 2013 academic year)

For more background on Meta-Ethics please see "What is Truth" by Peter Vardy

For more detail on topics in Applied Ethics, please see "Being Human" and "The Puzzle of Sex" by Peter Vardy as well as "Applied Ethics" by Peter Singer.

Activities

Suggested questions to test and develop your understanding of each topic, along with links to useful web-based resources, may be found at student.thetablet.co.uk in text-boxes alongside the main text of each section. Worksheets, which take you through a range of applied ethical issues and encourage you to apply your knowledge and understanding of meta ethics and normative ethics, may be downloaded from the teachers' page of student.thetablet.co.uk.