

Lesson 8

Morality and The Good Life

Moral Philosophy

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do.
Søren Kierkegaard

What should we do? What should we not do? How should we treat other people? How should we ourselves live? These are questions of *value* rather than of truth and reality, the topics we have mostly been discussing so far. Of course, it should already be obvious that our discussions of truth and reality were heavily steeped in values (we frequently referred, for instance, to the meaning of life or the existence of God), and any discussion of values presupposes a thoughtful and informed view of the world. But **moral philosophy**—the search for the best way to live and the right principles for our actions—nevertheless deserves a lesson of its own.

Morality is a set of principles, or rules, that guide us in our actions. Moral rules tell us what to do—for example, “Tell the truth,” “Treat others as you would like to be treated yourself”—and what not to do—for instance, “Do not cheat,” “Do not kill,” and “Do not steal.” The Ten Commandments, from the biblical Old Testament, and the injunction to love one another, from the New Testament, form the core of much of the morality of the Western tradition, which can therefore appropriately be called Judeo-Christian morality. Moral rules typically take the form of commandments, or orders, often with the words *ought* or *ought not* (or *Thou shalt* or *Thou shalt not*). Morality and moral rules—whether stated as law or not—form the basic structure of every society, defining the limits of what is not only permitted but also expected. The key to morality, according to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, is **duty**—doing what you *ought* to do.

But morality is part of a much larger quest, which gives morality its importance. Why shouldn’t we kill each other? Why should we help each other? What reasons can we give to defend one sexual ethic rather than another? And, in general, why should we be moral? The answer to this last question must be larger than morality itself, for it must supply us with the reasons for accepting moral principles and rules. That answer is, “the **good life**.” This is a phrase without precise meaning, but we all know quite well what it signifies. How should we live? What do we want? What should we want? What do we most enjoy? What should we most enjoy? What is worth working for? And what is not worth the effort? What should we accept? What should we try to change? These are questions for which we all have answers before we enter philosophy, but philosophy sometimes has surprising results in changing them or at least in giving us better arguments to support them.

The goal of moral philosophy is to develop a set of principles and a view of our aims in life that will allow us to live with clarity and confidence. This general quest, which includes morality as well as the search for the good life, is usually called **ethics**. We will begin our discussion of ethics by considering various suggestions about the basis of living well. We will then take up the possible roles that self-interest and concern for the interests of others play in our motivational structure and in living a good life. Next we will consider the meaning of “morality” and several

theories about what it involves (those focused on duty, consequences, virtue, and relationships, respectively). We will conclude with Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality and his suggestion that as opposed to conforming to universal norms, we should develop our unique virtues, each in our own fashion.

The Good Life

Hedonism

In Plato's dialogues in which Socrates is the leading character, the recurrent theme is the search for the good life. And from Socrates's discussions with his fellow Greeks, it is evident that this was not at all a new question but one about which virtually everyone had very strong opinions. And almost all of these opinions are still defended today. Most prominent among them is the philosophy called **hedonism**, the view that says the good life involves getting as much pleasure out of life as you possibly can.

Hedonism is an attractive candidate for the good life, but Socrates and people ever since have seen that it has certain limitations. You might notice that people talk a lot more about hedonism than they actually practice it. Students often talk about hedonism, but their ambitions and worries about school and careers show that they want something more than just pleasure—success, security, social standing, respect, power, money, freedom. This is not to deny that they also want pleasures, but more as distractions, entertainments, and enjoyments than as the goal of life. Compared with the average cat, for example, we are masters in self-denial. We put off meals when we are hungry because we have work to do or because we are on diets. We suppress our sexual impulses because it would be awkward or embarrassing to act on them in the middle of class or at the dinner table. We want much more than “just sex.”

Many people argue that the reason they deny themselves pleasures now is in order to get more pleasure later. But, if that is so, then most people are surely fooling themselves, for we all know that work and responsibility breed more work and more responsibility. Social respect and manners require further refinements, more respectable behavior and more manners, and the idea that we are simply delaying our pleasure is usually disproved by our own actions. People also argue that the work itself, the respect, or the success is what gives them pleasure, but here philosophers have pointed out a crucial distinction—between acting for the sake of pleasure and acting for some other goal whose achievement gives pleasure. Hedonism is the first, not the second.

The classic argument against hedonism as the good life was formulated by Aristotle 2,500 years ago. He argued, as we have suggested, that pleasure is not an activity in itself but rather something that accompanies satisfying activities. Thus, the key to the good life is to be found in the notion of “satisfying activities,” not in the pleasure itself. Our goal is not the pleasure but the activity, and the pleasure is more like a bonus, or what Aristotle called the “completion” of the activity. Forbidden activities or vulgar pastimes may be pleasurable, but the pleasure is more than balanced by the amount of pain and discomfort (for example, guilt) that they eventually produce. An activity may be extremely painful, on the other hand—running long distances or enduring a rigorous test—but, because the activity itself is admirable or challenging, it may

nevertheless produce pleasure of a meaningful variety. But this means that pleasure itself, even if it is an essential component of the good life, cannot be the good life itself.

There are actually very few hedonists among us. In one of our opening questions in Lesson 1, we discuss a certain imaginary invention (based on the research of a Cornell psychologist, James Olds), a box fixed with electrodes and capable of stimulating continuing waves of pleasurable sensations in the person strapped into it. The only hitch is this: Once you get into the box, you will never want to or have to get out of it (since arrangements have been made to take care of the bodily needs of the person who uses it). Here is the life of absolute pleasure, but in return for it you will give up your ambitions and your friends, sports, reading, sex, food, and television. Would you do it? When we have put this question to students over our many years of teaching, only a dozen or so have said they would. Most of us desire other satisfactions over and above sensory pleasures.

Success

The exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess Success is our national disease.

William James, 1842–1910

Success is counted sweetest/By those who ne'er succeed.

Emily Dickinson, 1830–1886

In our society, the good life is often equated with success. Success may mean money, but it does not mean only this. It involves social status and respectability as well (although these often go together). There are curious twists; for example, gangsters are sometimes admired as eminently successful, no matter how they acquired their wealth and status. Some creative people and hermits may be admired and idolized as successful despite the fact that they are, by any customary measure, total failures.

But once again, we must be careful not to confuse what people say they take to be the good life with the way they actually live. Many people who work very hard for success will say that they are working toward their retirement, to have enough security to enjoy themselves, or to have enough money to buy themselves lavish pleasures. But, again, their lives often demonstrate the opposite, as people work themselves into exhaustion long after they have “made it,” to such an extent that they are no longer capable of enjoying the simplest pleasures. You might say that they are success addicts, just as people become money addicts, working at first to get something else but ultimately working simply for the work itself. Money addicts start earning money like everyone else—to buy homes, cars, and TV sets—but they end up needing the money itself so much that they work only for it. Success addicts work hard for security, social status, or wealth but end up working just for the success alone.

The life of seeking success has its problems. There is always the real possibility of failure, of course, but this is equally an argument against almost every lifestyle. In any case, the threat of failure is not a good reason to reject a lifestyle—the problem is rather the threat of success. We all know stories of successful people in their mid-forties or fifties committing suicide, just when it would seem that they have achieved what they have been working for most of their lives. Why? Perhaps often because, once earned, their success proved not to be what they wanted after all. If a certain conception of the good life fails us, that doesn't mean that there is no good life,

much less that life isn't really worth living. It does not even mean that success is not worth having or that success is wrong. It only means that success, by itself, does not seem to give us the good life.

Asceticism

In recent decades in our society, dissatisfaction with this success conception of the good life, the "success ethic," has given rise to a reaction in precisely the opposite direction. In place of success, some people demand simplicity and even poverty—freedom from the burden of possessions. At the extremes, this manifests itself in our choice of folk heroes, off in the wilderness as pioneers or rebels. More moderately, it manifests itself in the return to the country, life on the farm or in a small commune, largely by people who have been brought up in big cities and nurtured on the success ethic.

It is worth noting that this is not at all a new philosophy. It was in reaction to the decadent success ethic of the Roman Empire, for example, that simple Christian asceticism began. **Asceticism** is the proper word for this life of simplicity and self-denial. And even before Christianity, around the time of Socrates, a group of philosophers who called themselves Cynics defended a similar lifestyle. The most famous of them was Diogenes (circa 400–circa 325 bce), who lived in a bathtub and owned little beyond a single lantern, with which he is said to have searched the faces of everyone, "looking for even one honest man." When Alexander the Great came to his city, he asked to see Diogenes, of whom he had heard much. On their meeting, Alexander asked Diogenes, "What can I do for you?" Diogenes turned to the ruler of most of the known world and said, "Move over, you're blocking the sunlight."

Many people have accepted the ascetic life as the means to the good life, but not as the good life itself. A great many religious people, for example, have accepted asceticism as a way to salvation or "purification." It is not the self-denial itself that they praise, but self-denial as a means to the holy life. Some artists adopt the ascetic life, but only because it seems to them the best way to achieve what they really consider the good life—namely, creativity. And it is important not to confuse asceticism, with its extremes of self-denial, with that familiar belief that the "simplest" pleasures in life are not only the best but the easiest to obtain. Some people try to simplify their lives just because society makes life so bureaucratically and socially complicated. But they do this "in order to enjoy life more," not for purely ascetic reasons. Here, too, asceticism is a means or a corrective, not an end in itself.

Freedom

Freedom can be singled out as a separate conception of the good life. Usually, freedom is considered a means, the freedom to do what one wants: to yield pleasures or satisfy ambitions, create or worship, retreat from society or live as one wishes. But, like other means, freedom may become an end in itself. The person who throws over a promising career and takes to the open road might be said to value freedom more than any pleasures or successes. Freedom from ties and responsibilities may be seen as preferable to an intimate relationship or marriage just because it offers more "freedom."

The life of freedom need not be any particular way of life because one might, within it, be religious, hedonistic, or ambitious. The question is ultimately: which is more important—the freedom itself or these other concerns? The extreme of this conception is the peculiar and extravagant conception of freedom portrayed in Dostoevsky’s “underground man.” (See Lesson 7.) He was willing to give up everything, not only success and pleasure but also his health, just to realize his “most advantageous advantage,” his freedom.

Power and Creativity

There are many other conceptions of the good life. Indeed, there are as many possible conceptions as there are human goals. Some of the other most common conceptions of the good life are very close to those we have discussed so far; for example, the life in pursuit of great wealth or political power is very much like the life of the success ethic. But then there is another sense of power that is not political but personal. It is the power to grow as a person, to expand one’s consciousness, to develop one’s talents and to create. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, defended such a conception of the good life under the phrase the “will to power.” Arguing against those many philosophers, particularly the British moralists, who argued that humans act only for pleasure, Nietzsche sarcastically quipped: “Man does not live for pleasure; only the Englishman does.” What all people ultimately want, Nietzsche argued, is power:

Not need, nor desire—no, the love of power is the demon of man. One may give them everything—health, nourishment, quarters, they remain unhappy; for the demon insists on being satisfied. One may take away everything from them and satisfy this demon: they then are almost happy.

All other seeming conceptions of the good life, Nietzsche added, are in fact different ways of seeking power—even religion, as well as the contemporary scramble for wealth. But the highest sense of power, Nietzsche argued, is reserved for those people who live autonomously and creatively, as artists, philosophers, or saints. The composer Mozart, for example, probably considered the good life to be the life of artistic creativity, which is not to deny that he enjoyed a great many of the pleasures of life along the way. The good life for Socrates was a life in accordance with the moral principles he had defended in his philosophizing, though he, too, had more than his share of pleasure as well. For him, the good life was the life of wisdom, the life of principles and creative thinking. And these were worth holding onto even when they meant his death.

Religion

Religion is our ultimate concern.
Paul Tillich, 1957

The religious conception of the good life also deserves special consideration, not when it is simply intermingled with the other goals and ambitions of life and squeezed into Sunday mornings, but when it is truly the goal of life to which all other goals are subordinated. Still, it is never altogether clear how many people have completely endorsed this conception of the good life. There are millions of people who have said that they do, but whether their lives bear out their statements is something that we must always view, particularly in our own case, with a cautious eye.

The religious life is a life of devotion; in the Christian tradition, it is sometimes said to be “living with the fear of God in one’s heart.” The religious life need not be based on “fear,” but the truly religious person lives with an emotional attachment to his or her religion that permeates and dominates everything else. This is not to say that the religious person performs only religious acts, but religious behavior must have the primary place in his or her life. In practice, the religious life is often in conflict with other conceptions of the good life.

Each of the conceptions of the good life we have itemized is fairly specific; it singles out one goal or type of goal among the many that we desire, and it claims one goal as the mark of the good life. But, once we have begun thinking about it, all of these seem one-sided. Who wants pleasure if it means giving up all friends and social ties? Who wants power or success if it makes us miserable? Who would even want to be creative if nothing but misery came from it? Wouldn’t it be better to be both creative and enjoy life? Or be creative and successful as well? Wouldn’t religious people have a better life if they did not devote themselves to God exclusively but also enjoyed the blessings of the secular world, without diminishing religious faith? The good life, in other words, seems to be something more general than any single goal, no matter how grand that single goal may seem to many people. Yet we should not conclude that the good life is simply “the best of everything,” without further qualification. Even if we reject these one-sided views, we may still find that the good life has but a single goal.

Happiness

In the ancient world, Aristotle examined the different one-sided conceptions of the good life and rejected them in favor of a single conception with which most of us are probably in agreement—happiness. Happiness is the good life, claims Aristotle, although happiness itself is not a single activity but the result of a great many activities. Aristotle took personal development, or self-realization, as his goal. In his *Ethics*, Aristotle examined two one-sided conceptions of the good life, pleasure and success (which for him meant political success), and rejected them; yet he also insisted that they have their place in the good life. They are not the good life themselves; they are only necessary conditions for it.

Aristotle sees happiness as that which is wanted “for its own sake” and not “for the sake of anything else.” As it turns out, happiness as Aristotle understands it includes a large number of advantages and virtues, including wealth, power, and community status as well as military courage, the ability to drink wine without getting too obnoxious, a sense of justice, good friends, and a good sense of humor. Happiness, in other words, was not just a sense of well-being, as it is for us; happiness for Aristotle meant the good life as a whole, an integrated life with all the virtues and good fortune and the philosophical wisdom to appreciate it.

Happiness is nothing less than an entirely good life, with all of its parts in balance. Indeed, Aristotle tells us, it makes no sense at all to say that a person is happy for a few hours or days or even months or years. A person can be called happy only on the basis of his or her entire lifetime. Aristotle even suggested, at one point, that a person can be made unhappy after death—for example, if an individual’s children dishonor the family name.

These comments indicate an important difference between Aristotle's society and moral philosophy and our own. It seems to make perfectly good sense for us to say that a person could be happy for even ten minutes; for example, you can imagine waking one fine spring morning to the sun and the chirping of birds, feeling quite happy, only to find out ten minutes later that you have just been kicked out of school. But for Aristotle, happiness requires a lifetime of good living. Part of this might be attributed to a difference in language; Aristotle's word (*eudaimonia*) more accurately means "doing well" or objective "well-being."

But the difference in language reflects a profound difference in moral philosophy as well; we tend to think of the good life primarily in terms of inner satisfaction and a sense of well-being. Aristotle's Greeks would not have understood this at all (indeed, they would have considered a man who could keep a sense of well-being in the midst of misfortune to be insane, not happy). The good life for the Greeks was a public, social, objective life of achievement and good fortune; it had little to do with one's inner feelings. We, on the other hand, tend to believe a person to be happy if he or she is satisfied with what life has provided, whatever others may think—indeed, even if others think he or she is most unfortunate. So the ideal of happiness, which we would all agree is the key to the good life, nevertheless leaves a great many questions open. How important is inner satisfaction? How essential are our place in the community and our actual accomplishments? Is happiness available to everyone (as we like to think)? Or is happiness instead the privilege of the very powerful and very rich or very lucky, as the ancient Greeks thought? Would it be possible—in our sense—to be happy and to still not live the good life?

Egoism Versus Altruism

Of the various conceptions of the good life as pleasure, success, asceticism, freedom, power, creativity, religion, and happiness, some are available to virtually everyone (for example, the life of simple pleasures), and others are available only to a lucky few (the life of creativity). But it must have struck you by now that all of these conceptions of the good life have left something out. However radical the differences between hedonism and the religious life, the success ethic and the ascetic life, the life of seeking wealth and the life of freedom, creativity, or happiness in general, there is something that they all share. They are all self-centered; they make no mention of other people. They are all, in one form or another, varieties of egoism. This is not true of Aristotle's philosophy as he developed it, as we will see; nor is it true of Socrates's moral life. One might hesitate to include the religious life of an isolated monk or an ascetic as "selfish" in any sense, but the monkish life often does place its emphasis on the good life for a single person.

Egoism is the thesis that everyone always acts for his or her own advantage, that the only reason why people act respectfully or kindly toward each other is that courtesy and generosity, too, for one reason or another, are to their advantage. It might be fear of punishment that makes them act "correctly"; some have ulterior motives—that is, they expect other things later on, perhaps a favor in return, a reward in heaven after they die, the avoidance of guilt, or a feeling of self-satisfaction. In popular language, the egoist position is often called "selfishness."

One of the most widely read contemporary egoists, Ayn Rand, has written of the “virtue of selfishness.” According to her, we all should act for our own interests. At this point, we must distinguish two very different forms of egoism, although people often confuse them. The first is the position that everyone in fact acts according to his or her own interests, that our psychology is such that we cannot help but act in this way. Accordingly, this position is called **psychological egoism**. The second position must be defended or attacked independently of the first: it is the thesis that people *ought* to act to satisfy their own interests, and this presupposes that they have a choice about whether to act that way or not. This position is **ethical egoism**.

Both egoist positions are contrasted with what is usually called **altruism**—that is, acting for the sake of other people’s interests. There are degrees of altruism. One may be altruistic because one recognizes an obligation to other people. Or one may be altruistic in actually taking another person’s interests as being as important as or even more important than one’s own interests; this is often the attitude of lovers or brothers and sisters. Altruism can also be divided into two distinct theses, although these are not so often distinguished. **Psychological altruism** is the view that people “naturally” act for each other’s sakes. **Ethical altruism**, on the other hand, holds that people *ought* to act with each other’s interests in mind. This is, of course, a basic statement of morality, best summarized in the so-called Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Altruism need not mean self-sacrifice, however. Altruism means acting for the (intended) benefit of others—but not necessarily *against* one’s own interests. So, too, acting in one’s own self-interest is not necessarily *selfish*—that is, acting contrary to or without regard for other people’s interests.

The most familiar and most difficult question is about psychological egoism: is it true that people only act for their own self-interest? A famous story about Abraham Lincoln is an apt illustration of the thesis. As he was arguing the psychological egoist position with a friend, his carriage was passing a mudslide, where a mother pig was squealing as her piglets were drowning. Lincoln stopped the carriage, saved the piglets, and then moved on. His friend asked him whether that wasn’t a clear case of altruism. Lincoln replied: “Why, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those piglets. I did it to get peace of mind, don’t you see?”

Many actions are based on self-interest and are selfish without any question. But are there also actions that are not based on self-interest? Lincoln’s response indicates that this can be hard to tell. It would seem as if his action is not for selfish reasons at all. Yet according to him, he had a selfish reason for his actions—his own sense of satisfaction and “peace of mind.” Could this be true of all our actions, as the psychological egoist claims?

Plato raised the question of whether psychological egoism is true in the *Republic*, when the character Glaucon tells the story of an ancestor of Gyges of Lydia who discovered a ring that would turn him invisible when he turned the setting inward and render him visible again when he turned it outward. Once he is convinced that he is really undetectable while the setting is pointed toward him, Gyges uses this new power to seduce the king’s wife, kill the king, and take over the kingdom. Glaucon asks how many, if certain of evading detection, would persist in good behavior. Wouldn’t anyone who had access to such a ring sooner or later take advantage of it and do wrong? And isn’t the reason that most people do not act immorally because they fear the

consequences of getting caught (itself a selfish motive)? Socrates' answer, which emerges after an extended discussion of the nature of goodness and the soul, is that being a just person, doing the right thing, actually benefits the individual and that Gyges's ancestor has a faulty idea of his own interests. Socrates does not, however, counter Glaucon's egoistic premise. In fact if one accepts psychological egoism, so much the better for Socrates's argument, since its purports to reveal what is truly in one's interests.

Among the many arguments that have been put forward against the view that all actions are essentially selfish, three in particular have been much repeated since they were formulated several hundred years ago by an English clergyman, Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752).

1. Many of our actions are motivated by desires that themselves are aimed at the good of others, whether or not they are of benefit to ourselves. Lincoln may have reflected beforehand and thought, "If I don't save those little pigs, I will be miserable all day." But it is unlikely that he did. At somewhat minimal inconvenience to himself, he acted out of a motive common to (almost) all of us, the urge to help another creature or person in trouble, or what we usually call **compassion**. In friendship and with those we love, in particular, we are often moved to act in such a way that it would be absurd to say that we acted for our own satisfaction or to avoid guilt. Of course, in every case in which we act out of desire, we satisfy a desire of ours to act. But this is not the same as being selfish or egoistic, which means not just satisfying my desire but satisfying my desire *with an eye to my interests alone*.
2. Many of our desires in life have to do with obtaining the approval and recognition of other people. Therefore, in acting to get what we want—namely, their approval—we act on their behalf and in accordance with their desires and needs as well. It is a tricky question, on occasion impossible to answer, to what extent we are moved by the urge for approval alone and to what extent we are truly motivated by the desire to serve others. But it is certainly not plausible to suggest that we *always* act just to get approval and not at all to help others. Indeed, one of the things most of us want most in life is self-respect, a sense of being a "good person," and this is utterly impossible unless we not only help others but also help them for their sake alone, even if, afterward, we may enjoy the self-satisfaction of having helped them.
3. Within all of us is a sense of right and wrong, or what we sometimes call conscience. It does not matter, for purposes of this argument, whether conscience is simply the voice of our parents within us (as Freud argued, calling this the superego), the voice of God (as many religious people believe), or simply the fear of punishment (as many psychologists have argued). The point is that we do have such a conscience, and to act in accordance with its demands is not to act in our own interests alone, even if we know that not obeying our consciences will very likely be followed by the pain of guilt. Further, it must be asked, why is this guilt so painful, except for reason of conscience and the fact that we do want to, or feel the need to, act on others' behalf without regard to (and sometimes even against) our own needs and desires? And even if, on rare occasions, some of us obey our consciences only with an eye to avoiding future selfpunishment, it is surely not the case that we all do this all the time. But this is what the psychological egoist argues, and this, we can see, is plainly false.

The argument against the psychological egoist, in a single statement, is this: merely acting in accordance with our own desires—assuming that we always do this—does not make an action selfish, for all actions are in some sense based on our desires, but at least some of those desires are desires to serve someone else's interests. Thus, the "object" of desire is what makes an act selfish or unselfish, not merely the fact that one's own desire is acted on. The satisfaction that accompanies good acts is itself not the motivation of the act. Here is the answer to Lincoln. His act was, despite his philosophical claims, an altruistic one; his satisfaction was not the motive of the act but only its consequence. And, if psychological egoism is not always true, then altruism is at least possible.

But even if altruism is possible, whether it is desirable is still an open question. An ethical egoist, for example, would admit that altruism is possible but would attack it all the same. Ayn Rand, in her polemics on the "virtue of selfishness," argued that the strict definition of this word is "concern with one's own interest." She then launched into a diatribe against altruism:

If it is true that what I mean by "selfishness" is not what is meant conventionally, then *this* is one of the worse indictments of altruism: it means that altruism *permits no concept* of a self-respecting, self-supporting man—a man who supports his life by his own effort and neither sacrifices himself nor others. It means that altruism permits no view of men except as sacrificial animals and profiteers-on-sacrifice, as victims and parasites—that it permits no concept of a benevolent coexistence among men—that it permits no concept of *justice*. (*The Virtue of Selfishness*, 1961.)

The argument here is extreme and utilizes the same kind of fallacy that the psychological egoist employs. The argument contrasts the notion of "acting in one's own interest" (that is, selfishness) with self-sacrificing and lack of self-respect. That is, if an act is for the benefit of others, then it cannot be to one's own benefit as well. Similarly, if an act is not in one's own interests, it is an act that denies one's self-respect. You can see how unjust this extreme contrast is, treating all human situations as if they must be either black or white. Our every action and intention is aimed at a large number of goals: some are immediate; others are long-range; some are means; others are ends. But to pretend that every action and intention can be simply defined by a single goal—either self-interest or other people's interest—is to treat human action as we might treat the actions of rats or bees, as utterly simple-minded.

It is true that people who follow the rules of morality without any exceptions may hurt themselves and other people as well. A person who refuses to tell a lie under any circumstances may well be self-sacrificing in just this way. However, from the fact that unnecessary self-sacrifice is undesirable it does not follow that acting for the benefit of others is equally undesirable. Even the paragon of self-sacrifice, the martyr, sees himself or herself as gaining at least self-respect. And the paragon of action in one's own interest, according to Rand's own ethic, the businessperson who dedicates everything to personal achievement, may end up "sacrificing" self *and* self-respect most of all.

To act strictly according to "your own self-interest" is to rob yourself of the richness of goals for both self and others that gives human action its complex social and personal textures. This is not to say that we should always—or even ever—act against our self-interests. Rather, it is to say that any philosophy of human life will have to begin with a far richer conception of morality and

human motivation than this limited ethical egoism. This is the main thrust of Bishop Butler's arguments.

To make her thesis more palatable, Rand argued that acting in one's own selfinterest, in an enlightened way, will result in the mutual benefit of us all. Now, in one sense, the notion of enlightened self-interest is an extremely respectable idea, and we will discuss it at length under the name *utilitarianism* later in this lesson. But it is important to distinguish the two positions, for the utilitarian is perfectly aware that the general welfare may require the sacrifice of personal self-interest in a great many cases. The utilitarian argument is that making such sacrifices is, in the long run, actually in one's own interests. Rand refused to acknowledge this. To suppose that acting in our exclusive self-interest without sacrifice or attention to the welfare of others will in fact turn out to be to our mutual benefit is so contrary to our very experience that it cannot be made into a convincing thesis, even in fiction. Psychological egoism is a problem; if it is true, then we have to teach people to consider other people's interests to be their own. But straightforward ethical egoism is more than a problem; as an ideology, telling us all to be even more selfish than we usually are, it may be a social disaster.

Psychological altruism in a universal sense has never had much of a following. The view that people always act for other people's benefit has never even been defended. At most, it is argued that we have the psychological capacity for altruism, that we at least sometimes feel pangs of sympathy for the other person, and that if certain misunderstandings and unnecessary social pressures are corrected, then people will act altruistically. But we must distinguish the claim that we *can* act altruistically from the claim that we *ought* to do so.

In any case, morality is not, strictly speaking, action for the sake of others, although that is typically a part of it. Morality is action for the sake of principle. And because moral principles are those we recognize as overriding our own interests, it makes little sense to suppose that morality itself is selfish. Of course, it may still be that people are moral only because of selfish reasons—out of fear of being punished, for example, or because they believe it will bring them reward in heaven. And we all know people who use morality to further their self-interests. But whether or not this is so, morality must be discussed in its own terms, even if there may be egoistic or selfish motivation behind it as well.

Morality and Theories of Morality

An action done from duty derives its moral worth, not from the purpose which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is to be determined, and therefore does not depend on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the principle of volition by which the action has taken place, without regard to any object of desire.

Immanuel Kant, 1785

Morality gives us the rules by which we live with other people. It sets limits to our desires and our actions. It tells us what is permitted and what is not. It gives us guiding principles for making decisions. It tells us what we ought and what we ought not to do. But what is this morality that sounds so impersonal and “above” us? It is important to begin with an appreciation for the metaphor that so well characterizes moral rules. Nietzsche described it this way: “A tablet of virtues hangs over every people.”

This “tablet of virtues” is morality. Morality consists of the most basic values and rules of behavior. The prototypes of morality, in this sense, are those ancient codes, carved in stone, with commands that are eternal and absolute. Many of us in the West know best the two tablets allegedly inscribed by God and given to Moses, which we call the Ten Commandments. And they are indeed *commandments*. They are absolute rules that tell us what we must do or not do, no matter who we are, no matter what we want, and regardless of whether our interests will be served by the command or not. “Thou shalt not kill” means, even if you want to, even if you have the power to, and even if you can escape all punishment, you are absolutely forbidden to kill.

The image of morality as coming “from above” is appropriate. First, moral laws are often said, and not only in our society, to come from God. Second, we learn these laws from our parents, who do indeed stand over us and indoctrinate us with them through their shouts, commands, examples, threats, and gestures. Finally, and most important, morality itself is above any given individual or individuals, whether it is canonized in the laws of society or not. Morality is not just another aid to getting us what we want; it is entirely concerned with right and wrong. And these considerations are above tampering by any individual, no matter how powerful.

This characteristic of morality as independent of individual desires and ambitions has led many people to characterize morality simply in terms of some absolute and independent agency. Most often, this absolute and independent agency is God. But whether or not you believe in God, it is clear that something further is needed to help us define morality. Even assuming that there is a God, we need a way of determining what his moral commands must be. One might say that God has given these commands to various individuals, but the fact is that different people seem to have very different ideas about the morality that God has given them. Some, for example, would say that it explicitly rules out abortion and euthanasia. Others would argue that God does not rule these out, but makes it clear that they are, like other forms of killing (a “holy war,” for example), justifiable only in certain circumstances. And in view of such disagreements, we cannot simply appeal to God but must, with reasons that we can formulate and defend, define our morality for ourselves.

There is the further question of whether we should follow God’s laws just because they are God’s commands or, rather, whether we recognize that God is good through the fact that his laws are good. Though expressed in polytheistic terms, this is the question raised in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, a dialogue between Socrates asks his interlocutor, Euthyphro (a self-styled expert on piety). Socrates gets Euthyphro to admit that the goodness of the gods’ commands is not based on the mere fact that it is the gods who give them; instead the gods command what is good. If this is the case, the question of what is good must be answered on some other basis than simply saying that God (or the gods) command it.

Even if one disagrees with Socrates and maintains that God’s commanding certain rules is what’s important, this doesn’t settle the matter. We may have to decide whether to believe in God (or what is alleged to be God) precisely on the basis of whether we can accept those commands. (We would presumably not believe in a god, for example, who ordered that we kill innocent people.)

Either way we answer Socrates's question, we have to decide for ourselves what laws of morality we find acceptable.

Similar considerations hold true of that familiar appeal to conscience in determining what we ought to do or not do. Even if one believes that conscience is God-given, the same problems emerge again. Should we follow our conscience just because "conscience tells us to"? Or do we follow our conscience just because we know that what our conscience commands is good? And if we believe that conscience is simply the internalization of the moral teachings of our parents and society, then the question takes an extra dimension: should we accept or reject what we have been taught? Because our consciences often disagree, we must still decide which rules of conscience one ought to obey. Conscience doesn't determine what we ought to do; it only reminds us of rules we have already accepted.

We have talked about morality thus far as being defined in terms of rules and principles, but there is another conception of ethics and of "morals" that places its primary emphasis not on rules and principles but on questions of *character*—that is, the ethics and personality of the individual (and, perhaps, of an entire culture). Of course, one aspect of having a good moral character is obeying the rules of one's society, but there are several **virtues** of character that seem not to be governed by rules at all—for example, courage and kindness. A general rule to the effect "be courageous" or "be generous" not only seems uninformative and unnecessary but also seems to contradict the spirit of the virtues themselves, which are best displayed through spontaneous action and not deliberation and obedience. One of the questions that has become prominent in modern moral philosophy is how distinct and how important such questions of character and virtue are, as opposed to the concern with rules and principles in morality.

Whether it is a matter of principles or virtue, the basis of morality is an attempt to get straight about how we should lead our lives. How do we want to live? How *ought* we to live? But here we confront a problem that, since the days of Plato and Aristotle, has challenged moralists and morality alike—namely, why should one be moral? It is clear that moral principles—for example, "Do not lie") sometimes go against our self-interests. Why, then, should we obey them? So, too, a virtue such as courage may, in certain circumstances, place one in severe danger. Why, then, should we be virtuous? When moral rules and virtues serve our self-interests, there is of course an easy answer to such questions: one acts morally because it is (perhaps in the long run) in one's own best interests to do so. But what of those cases in which such an appeal to self-interest is not even plausible (for example, when one is morally required to sacrifice one's life or career)?

What, in other words, is the justification of morality? What rules count as *moral* rules, and what sort of people should we be? These are the questions that define much of the work of moral philosophy. At the core of our concern, of course, are those central principles of morality taught by the Judeo-Christian tradition and many other traditions as well—"Don't kill," "Don't steal," "Honor your parents," and so on. We might disagree about what counts as killing, of course (or more precisely, what counts as *murder*—that is, intentional, wrongful killing). But we might also disagree about the reason behind the principle. Should we not kill because ultimately not killing is in our own best interests? Should we not kill because morality or being moral is desirable for its own sake, whether or not it is in our interests? Could it be that this principle is just one of the

curiosities of our own society, a rule that we consider extremely important but that other societies may not?

Theories of morality are formulated to answer these questions of interpretation and justification. What is it for a principle to be a *moral* commandment in the first place? Is its purpose to make us happier and healthier? To guarantee a more orderly society? To please God and not have our city destroyed, like the biblical Sodom or Gomorrah? If the commandment not to kill, for example, is interpreted according to the theory that morality is a set of principles imposed upon us by God, then the interpretation of that principle is to be filled out, presumably, by looking for further information about God's intentions, whether in the scriptures or by appealing to the current authorities in whom such opinions are vested (the pope, a priest, an imam, a rabbi, or a guru, perhaps, or perhaps the church in general).

If, on the other hand, moral principles are taken to be efficient guides to promoting human happiness and the general welfare, then the law against killing has to be interpreted and defended by showing that obedience to such a law does indeed make more people happier and fewer people miserable than they would be if there were no such law. Abstract moral theories and the substantial principles and activities of morality are intimately connected. We often talk as if moral principles appear from nowhere. But in fact, all our moral principles are embedded in an enormous network of theory and practical observations, and that network allows us to interpret and make sense of what otherwise would be empty commands subject to any interpretation one pleases. (It was more or less clear to the Hebrews, for example, how the Ten Commandments were to be interpreted because those were the key principles of morality that they had more or less been following for centuries already.)

Over the 2,500 years or so in which scholars, preachers, and philosophers of all kinds have been formulating their moral theories, it has become evident that theories of morality tend to fall into a number of precise but overlapping categories. For our purposes here, we will classify moral theories into four groups: duty defined moralities, consequentialist theories, virtue ethics, and feminist ethics.

Duty-Defined Morality

The least complicated example of a duty-defined morality would be the Ten Commandments, which list our duties. Immanuel Kant presents another when he asserts that all our moral duties can be summed up in a single principle that he calls the **categorical imperative**—an *imperative* simply being an order or a commandment and *categorical* meaning “without qualification.” It is categorical or without qualification because it offers no reasons or conditions; it just tells us what it is that we must do or not do. We shall presently get the content of Kant's principle (actually, he presents several formulations), but first, let us note that it is the authority of the principle itself—or the authority by which it is given to us—that is the sole reason needed to obey it. In addition, of course, obeying the principle might in fact be good for us; indeed, it might even be the precondition for the stability of our society. But any **duty-defined morality** insists that it is the status of the principle itself, whatever its consequences and whatever personal reasons we might find in addition for obeying it, that is its justification for us.

Duty-defined morality (which is also termed “deontological” morality) may appeal to a number of authorities, and these authorities may be either within us or outside of us. Traditional Judeo-Christian moral theory understands the authority and the source of morality (God) as being wholly outside of us (although there may be some inner reminder as well, such as conscience). But duty-defined morality may be secular as well as religious, and the king, the president, the state in general, or the local oracle or prophet may serve as the source and authority of moral principles. When people say, “You must obey; it’s the law,” they are appealing to the state (or the law) as an authority to be obeyed, even if the consequences of the law in question are such that we might all be better off if it were eliminated. And within families, it is often the case that, without understanding the purpose or the consequences of an order, young children are expected to obey the authority of their parents just because the parents are, in that small context, the authorities who define the rules, presumably in accordance with the established rules and values of their society.

Immanuel Kant and the Authority of Reason

The most complex and sophisticated theories of moralities of principles, however, are the ones that make the authority *internal* to us. According to such theories, moral rules and principles are not imposed upon us by God or by society but are to be found within us, as *conscience*, for example, or as the voice of *reason*. Kant insists that morality, whatever else it might be, is first of all a matter of reason and rationality, and that the source and justification of moral principles—however we might learn them as children—are ultimately in ourselves. He calls this **autonomy**, which means that every one of us is capable of figuring out what is right or wrong on his or her own, without appeal to external authority, just by using the faculty of reason. This does not mean that morality is whatever each of us decides it to be, a mere matter of personal, or subjective, opinion. Reason is an authority that is “in” us but yet transcends us. It is objective and prescribes universal and necessary laws and duties.

The authority of reason is what justifies moral principles, according to Kant. He adds the intriguing suggestion that the laws of God are justified because they, too, are clearly rational. Here he sides with Plato’s Socrates as opposed to the traditional view that the laws of God are justified just because they are from God. Kant believed devoutly in God, but he also believed that morality has to be a matter of autonomy for us. This means that God cannot *give* us laws, that God can only tell us what our reason is already capable of justifying.

Kant’s morality of principles theory begins with the insistence that it is always the rationality of the principles, not the consequences of our actions, that is morally relevant. Accordingly, he said, it is not so much our actions that are of moral interest (because any number of circumstances or events can interfere with them) but rather our *intentions*, which are completely within our control. (Someone who has good intentions is described by Kant as having a good will.) A person is moral insofar as he or she tries to be moral, tries to obey moral principles, and tries to do his or her duty. And though obeying these moral principles and trying to do our duty will, in most cases, benefit both us and other people, this is in no way relevant to their justification. The justification for being moral is simply that it is the rational thing to do. Nothing else.

If, as Kant maintains, consequences themselves are irrelevant, how are we to decide what the moral thing to do *is*? First of all, Kant doesn't say that consequences are in no way to be considered; what he says is that our acts are to be judged on the basis of our intentions (which includes a concern for the *intended* and *expected* consequences) and not on the basis of the *actual* consequences of our action, which in the case of an unpredictable accident may have nothing to do with the rightness of our intentions. Moreover, Kant holds that in a moral principle it is always the *type* of action that is in question (for example, a case of cheating) rather than the particular action as such.

For example, let's imagine that we want to know whether it would be moral to tell a lie in certain circumstances. Suppose I need \$15 immediately, but I know that I cannot pay it back. I now consider, "Should I lie to you and tell you that I will pay you back when I know very well that I won't?" Because what concerns us here is the rationality of such action, rather than the consequences of this particular transaction, what I must ask myself, according to Kant, is whether such action should be carried out *generally*, by everyone in similar circumstances. Thus, I ask myself, "What if everyone were to borrow money under false pretenses, by lying about being able to pay it back?" Kant's answer is clear: if everyone were to lie about paying back money, it would be a very short time until no one would believe anyone else who promised to pay back money. If someone said to you, "Could you lend me \$5? I'll pay you back tomorrow," you would simply laugh and consider it some kind of joke. This, Kant argued, is enough to show that the intended action is immoral and irrational. If it's not possible or clearly unacceptable for everyone to act similarly, then the action in question is immoral and should not be taken. (Some of Kant's examples can be found on pp. 388–389.)

Now we get a clear view of what is perhaps the most important feature of Kant's morality of principles theory. The test of a moral principle's rationality is its **universalizability**—that is, its capacity to be generalized for everyone, everywhere. What this also means is that one and the same *set* of specific moral principles (which amount to applications of the categorical imperative in specific types of cases) will apply to every person, in every society, at every time in history, regardless of the particular circumstances and interests of individuals or different societies. Of course, this is also sometimes said to be true of God-given moralities (though not, usually, of moralities whose authority resides within a particular society). Customs may differ, of course, but morality must be the same everywhere. Reason's authority, for Kant, was as powerful and as universal as God's when he gave us the Ten Commandments. Indeed, Kant said, these are ultimately one and the same authority.

Consequentialist Theories

"The road to Hell," we are told, "is paved with good intentions." What good is a good will, we might ask, if it does not produce good consequences—that is, if it does not make people (in general) happy or, at least, protect them from pain and suffering? Of course, because people usually do what they intend to do, even allowing for mistakes and the usual amount of stupidity in the world, good intentions usually lead to good consequences. But are the intentions good because of the consequences, or do the consequences count as good (at least in part) because of the goodness of the intentions? Kant insists on the priority of the good intentions. Consequentialist moral theorists, however, insist that it is what actually happens that makes an

act (and its consequences) good or bad. A good act, whatever its intentions, is one that has the happiest (or at least the least miserable) results.

Utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill

The clearest case of a consequentialist moral theory in the modern Western world is the still-dominant view called **utilitarianism**, first formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by several British philosophers and social thinkers, including **Jeremy Bentham** (1748–1832) and **John Stuart Mill** (1806–1873). Utilitarianism is a goal-oriented moral theory because it places all of its emphasis on the actual consequences of moral rules and principles, and insists that they be justified only by appeal to how happy they make us. The duty-defined morality theorists, on the other hand, do not ask whether being moral will make us happier; they insist that we ought to be moral for the sake of being moral. Of course, duty-defined morality theorists also want to be happy and want us all to be happy, too. Still, they separate, as the utilitarians do not, moral questions of what is *right* from merely practical questions of what will benefit or harm us.

For utilitarians, however, questions of what will benefit or harm us count for everything; as Mill said succinctly, “The sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people actually do desire it.” The goal of morality, according to Mill, Bentham, and almost all other utilitarians, is to make people happy, to give them pleasure and spare them pain. Indeed, Bentham developed a **happiness calculus** precisely to calculate, for any action or policy, the consequences in terms of pleasure and pain. He considers several factors, such as how intense and how lasting the pleasure (or pain) produced by an action would be, how certain it is that we would attain it, how quickly it would result, how much ongoing pleasure (or pain) would result, how many people would be affected, and the extent to which pleasure and pain are likely to be mixed. Thus, if we wanted to evaluate the previously described action that Kant rejected as immoral and irrational, we would not ask, “What if everyone were to lie?” but rather, “What would be the actual consequences of my lying in this situation?” Bentham would essentially add up the beneficial results of the action, using a quantitative point system, subtract the painful consequences from this, and see whether the action was therefore relatively desirable or not. Because this system is quantitative, it could also be used to compare the relative merits of alternative courses of action.

John Stuart Mill qualified Bentham’s calculus in at least one important way. Mill claims that there were different *qualities* of pleasure and pain as well as differences in *quantity*. He insists that it is better to be only slightly satisfied with a higher pleasure than to be very satisfied with a lower pleasure—or, as Mill put it in his work *Utilitarianism*:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

Mill’s qualification makes purely quantitative calculation virtually impossible. However, the basic principle is still the same: seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people, the most happiness and the least pain for as many people as possible, in every act and every law or principle.

Why is Mill's alteration of Bentham's utility principle so important? Doesn't it unnecessarily complicate the question and make the elegant simplicity of Bentham's happiness calculus unworkable? Bentham himself said that "pushpin [a simple game of the time, a bit like shuffleboard] is as good as poetry," indicating that one activity was as good as any other if it provided as much net pleasure (or as little net pain). But Mill's qualification is not just a matter of defending his love of fine literature and philosophy against philistines who would just as soon drink beer or wallow in the mud. There is a much more serious objection to Bentham's purely quantitative calculus than its refusal to give adequate respect to the "finer things in life."

Morality, as we have noted, sometimes goes against our interests. Morality sometimes prohibits pleasures, and being moral sometimes causes pain. But if morality is not just a set of general rules for making people happy (and Kant, for one, certainly denied that morality had this ultimate purpose), then we can expect that there will be some cases, at least, in which the principle of utility will contradict even the most basic moral values. For example, suppose a sadistic dictator derives so much pleasure out of torturing his subjects that his pleasure outweighs their collective pain. Or suppose a group of rich people in a community devise a way to get even richer by legally depriving a great many poor and middle-class people of just a small amount of their income—and get more pleasure from their considerable gains than the others suffer from their modest losses. (They might not even know about the losses.)

In such cases, many of us will think that the principle of utility should be abandoned in favor of considerations of fairness. The greatest good of the greatest number is not the only important consideration. There are also moral concerns, like those Kant defended, that constrain utility and provide rules that shouldn't be violated, *even if* more people suffer than prosper as a result. Mill's qualification of the utility principle allows us to build such notions as justice and virtue into the notion of "quality" and thereby into the idea of utilitarianism—even if this means that we must give up the simplicity of Bentham's quantitative calculus. The pleasures of the sadist or the group of wealthy exploiters are not among the higher pleasures, and even if the happiness calculus would show that the numbers come out in their favor, these are not the kind of pleasures that utilitarians should use as a touchstone for what to do.

Mill does not resolve another problem with utilitarianism's quantitative approach to everyone's satisfaction, however. According to the principle of utility, the greatest good for the greatest number trumps the good of individuals or smaller numbers of individuals. What is to guarantee that this principle will not promote outcomes in which the minority or even one single individual pays dearly for the greatest good of the majority? Is it obvious that utilitarianism has a principled way to rule out slavery in cases, such as that of the antebellum American South, where the economic viability of the region depends on it? And even if economic survival is not a specifically "higher" pleasure, the activities that yield these higher pleasures surely depend on it. Shouldn't there be some protections for the minority against mistreatment, regardless of how much the majority may benefit? Mill, taking the criticism seriously, responds that the principle of utility can help us determine which arrangements are, but this doesn't answer whether some burdens imposed on the minority are unjustifiable even when they result in the greatest benefit to the majority.

Some empirical studies have tested subjects' moral intuitions about whether the good of the majority should be actively pursued even at great expense to the minority, and the evidence suggests that most of us do think this is morally appropriate. Some studies have focused on what is dubbed "the trolley problem," a thought experiment originally proposed by philosopher Philippa Foot that asks whether it is appropriate to harm someone to save a larger number of people. In the basic version of the problem, we are asked to imagine seeing a runaway trolley that will kill five people if nothing is done to redirect it. You are in a position (and have just enough time) to pull a switch that will divert the trolley onto another track, but if you do so, one person will be killed. Most people who were asked in studies what should be done think that diverting the trolley car would be morally acceptable. This might suggest that we are "naturally" consequentialists—perhaps even utilitarians—because we think that the number of people who are saved is relevant to whether harming another person is morally permissible. (What would we think about redirecting the trolley if only one person would be saved?)

Responses to another, related case, however, cast doubt on the idea that we are naturally consequentialists. When given an alternative version of the trolley problem, in which subjects were asked whether it would be morally permissible to push a heavy person onto the tracks from a bridge to stop the trolley and save the five people, most responded that this would be morally wrong. Some philosophers have interpreted this as an indication that we are naturally inclined toward views, such as Kant's, that take some types of actions (such as killing or otherwise violating the rights of an innocent person) to be morally wrong regardless of the greatest good for the greatest number. Others have said that the different responses reflect the fact that one is more emotionally distant from the person harmed when one pulls a switch than when one pushes a person to his or her death. Still others conclude that we consider it worse to harm someone directly than to harm them indirectly by *allowing* harm to befall them.

The fact that such different conclusions can be drawn from the trolley case studies raises the question of whether the results of empirical studies can justifiably be used as support for philosophical views. Do studies of our unexamined intuitions about what is right and wrong have any relevance to the question of how we should determine what is right to do? Even if they reveal something about our moral psychology, we should be concerned with whether or not our moral views are justified. We should not just rely on our preconceptions; we should defend our views with reasons and abandon them if we find they are not well-grounded.

Aristotle and the Ethics of Virtue

The function of man is a certain kind of life, and this is an activity of the soul embodying a rational principle, and the function of the good man is the good and noble performance of these.
Aristotle, fourth century BCE

We have already mentioned (in our discussion of "The Good Life") Aristotle's view that happiness (or *eudaimonia*) is the ultimate good in human life. Aristotle, like Bentham and Mill, thought that what is good and right in human activity are those actions that aim at happiness. But Aristotle, unlike Bentham and Mill, did not equate happiness with pleasure; he insisted that the happy life is the life of *virtuous action*, a life filled with pleasure, too, admittedly, but not good *because of* the pleasure. For Aristotle, pursuing happiness would always further the well-being of the entire community. Bentham calculated the greatest good for the greatest number of people by

adding up the individual advantages and disadvantages of an action or rule. But this seems to leave out the actor's intentions and character entirely. Kant, on the other hand, gives generous attention to the intentions but little attention to the consequences, and he says little about the community in which these actions take place. Aristotle assumes that the ultimate advantage of the individual is identical to the well-being of the community in which he or she lives. In fact, if one looks over Aristotle's list of virtues, it becomes clear that every one of them is aimed at strengthening and protecting the community as well as adding to the status and happiness of the individual.

Aristotle's List of Virtues

- Courage—particularly courage in battle.
- Temperance—which includes the enjoyment of pleasure as well as moderation; a man who abstained from sex, food, and drinking would not be considered virtuous by the Greeks, as he might be by some people today.
- Liberality—what we would call charity.
- Magnificence—spending lavishly and entertaining well.
- Pride—being and feeling oneself to be deserving of great things, and of honor in particular.
- Good temper—but it is important to get angry when appropriate. Friendliness—a very important virtue for the Greeks, not just a personal
- pleasure or necessity. Truthfulness—even when nothing major is at stake.
- Wittiness—People who can't tell or take a joke aren't virtuous. Aristotle would not equate "seriousness" with being moral, as some people do.
- Shame—being sensitive to one's honor and feeling appropriately bad when it is besmirched. "Feeling guilty," on the other hand, did not even seem to be worth talking about.
- Justice—the sense of fair treatment of others.

For Aristotle, the most essential virtue of all, not named on the list but rather presupposed by all the other virtues, was *honor*. We still use the word, but what we mean by it is a much watered-down version of what was in ancient Greek society the most important thing in life, even more important than life itself. Honor reflects the fusion between the individual citizen and the community. Because honor was bestowed on the individual by the whole of the community—and we must be careful to distinguish this general sense of honor from the occasional honors (medals, citations, commendations) that a person might receive—and because honor was the most important ingredient in the good life, it followed that it was wholly in the interest of every individual to maintain his or her honor. Individual interests and society's interests were therefore impossible to separate.

Aristotle is clearly concerned with consequences, but he includes within his theory elements that might rightly be considered part of a duty-defined theory. For example, like Kant, he considers reason and rationality essential to morality and the good life, and rationality, for him, includes the understanding and contemplation of principles. Moreover, the justification for these principles is authority (both the authority of reason and the authority of society as a whole). Ultimately, however, Aristotle defends as the best life one that is centered in the further virtue of wisdom. In his view, the good life is essentially the life of the philosopher, the "life of contemplation," and one of its main ingredients (as for Kant) is the wisdom of thinking about, as well as acting upon, the virtues.

Feminist Ethics: The Ethics of Care

Aristotle intended his list of virtues to apply to his specific audience: the free male citizens of Athens. He was not concerned to tell the slave population how they could be virtuous; nor did he theorize about the good life for women. Historically, his insinuation that *eudaemonia* was the province of (free) men is not atypical; nor is his idea that women are less capable of virtue than men because they, to a greater degree than men, are controlled more by their emotions than by reason. Much of the Western tradition followed him in the belief that men are better able to make moral decisions than women, and more capable of acting on them. Over the last two centuries, this view and others that denigrate the moral status of women have been challenged explicitly by feminists. Empirical evidence has in recent times been drawn in to support these feminist views, beginning with work pioneered in the early 1980s by Harvard psychologist **Carol Gilligan**.

Armed with experimental evidence, Gilligan countered the views of her former teacher, the well-known psychologist **Lawrence Kohlberg**, who had studied the development of moral reasoning in children. Kohlberg concluded that as people mature, their method of moral decision-making goes through certain stages. Moral thinking, he claimed, develops from the self-absorbed, purely personal, or “egocentric” framework of infants and very young children to become the completely abstract and principled framework of the mature adult. This last stage, as Kohlberg described it, is very much akin to Kant’s version of moral reasoning. To the philosopher, it sounds as though Kohlberg is claiming that we develop from pure egoists to Aristotelians to utilitarians and finally to Kantians.

Lawrence Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development

- Stage Six--Universal Ethical Principles (internalized principles, respect for human dignity and justice, willingness to challenge unjust rules).
- Stage Five--Social Contract (legalistic and utilitarian).
- Stage Four--Law and Order (authority-based and duty-oriented)
- Stage Three--Good Boy/Girl Orientation (geared to social norms).
- Stage Two--Instrumental Relativist Orientation (self-interested, concerned with reciprocity).
- Stage One--Punishment and Obedience (geared to avoiding punishment).

Few people, according to Kohlberg, matured in their moral reasoning to the point of this Kantian level. But experimental data involving women suggested that women hardly ever did so.

According to Kohlberg’s criteria, most women remain “stuck” at the fourth stage, in which they make moral decisions according to social or familial norms. In her groundbreaking book, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan takes a stand against Kohlberg (and so, indirectly, against Kant). She suggests that women make moral decisions according to different but equally mature and morally upright reasoning. Gilligan conducted her own studies, using many more women as subjects, and concluded that mature women, on the whole, understand moral problems differently from men and from the way described by Kohlberg and Kant.

Rather than thinking of ethics in terms of impersonal, abstract moral principles of right and wrong, Gilligan claimed, women tend to think of ethics in terms of personal moral responsibility. Whereas men commonly understood a moral dilemma posed by the experimenter as a problem

with a right-or-wrong answer, women often understood such a dilemma as the result of an interpersonal conflict in need of resolution, not as a right-versus-wrong answer. Gilligan hypothesized that, in addition to the moral reasoning grounded in abstract principles of right and wrong described by Kant and Kohlberg, there is also a more “feminine” but equally valid type of moral reasoning that is grounded in maintaining the stability of interpersonal relationships.

Gilligan claimed that both types of moral reasoning are important to a fully developed person and society. Some detractors claim that Gilligan’s data and her interpretations are dubious and that she cannot justify her claim to such a pervasive difference between the sexes.

Some of Gilligan’s defenders have gone further than she has. Philosophers such as **Nel Noddings** and **Sara Ruddick** argue that the *ethics of care*, more typical of women’s moral reasoning than men’s, is a superior, more mature type of moral reasoning than that which appeals to abstract principles. They cite the failure of “masculine” moral reasoning and the moral theories that advocate it to resolve moral dilemmas. Some of these feminists have drawn a comparison between this ethics of care and Aristotle’s **virtue ethics**. However, the specific virtues promoted by the ethics of care are *relational* virtues, geared to promoting good relationships between particular individuals, not the individualistic virtues that Aristotle defends. According to both Noddings and Ruddick, the virtues characteristic of good mothering are conducive to good relationships in general. Attentive love that respects the uniqueness of the other individual and is concerned with that person’s specific needs, Ruddick claims, is the supreme virtue of mothering and a virtue that can guide us in all relationships and help us build a more peaceful world.

Morality—Relative or Absolute?

The content of ethics and morality seems to mean different things to different philosophers. Kant strictly defines morality by equating it with duty and “the dictates of practical reason,” whereas utilitarians tend to focus on the consequences of action. Aristotle did not even have a conception of morality as we know it (morality as a code of rules). Still, he certainly believed both that reason played a major role in ethics and that the consequences of our actions were just as important as our good intentions. Other cultures—some even more different from ours than was ancient Greece—display even greater differences in their conceptions of morality. Does this mean that there is no single set of absolute values, certain fundamental values that are essential to every system of ethics? Does this mean that all values are relative to a particular society or people?

Traveling around the world—or reading novels and books on anthropology—we quickly discover that people do believe in, and have believed in, very different moral and ethical systems. One culture believes an action is right that another believes is wrong. A society suffering from a severe food shortage and overpopulation may believe it permissible to abandon newborn babies, who will almost certainly die; another, like our own, finds this practice horrible and condemns it in the strongest moral terms. Are we right and they wrong, or are they right, too? Who is to judge? (If we call in a third party, an “impartial” judge, wouldn’t that open up the possibility of a three-way rather than a two-way disagreement?)

Many of the differences between us, of course, are merely superficial—for instance, differences in custom or etiquette (dress, table manners). Some are profound—such as differences in religion and philosophy—yet most cultures manage to coexist with others whose beliefs are startlingly different. Where the differences become something more than ethnic peculiarities and matters of tolerance, however, they become serious disagreements over basic ethical questions—questions about life and death, questions about the very nature of society. But even then, we can ask whether the differences are, in fact, rock-bottom disagreements or are premised on some more basic, shared value. For example, the overpopulated culture that abandons newborns presumably does so for the wellbeing of the already mature or maturing members of society. And this—the wellbeing of the society—is a value that we share with them even if we are horrified by their practice of abandoning babies.

But suppose that there are fundamental differences between our society and its morality and others—does this mean that morality must be relative? Let's distinguish two very different theses. **Cultural relativism** is the thesis that people around the world (and even within the same society) hold different values and adhere to different moral codes. This leaves open the question as to which (if any) is correct. **Ethical relativism** is the thesis that whatever a culture or a society holds about right and wrong *is* therefore correct, at least for them. From an extreme individualist view, this could be interpreted as meaning that you are right if you sincerely think you are. Ethical relativism raises deep questions for philosophers. Cultural relativism—the thesis that different people have different moral beliefs—can be accepted as true without concluding from it that different people are correct in their different beliefs. It could still be that every society but one is wrong or even that every society is wrong.

One immediate problem with ethical relativism is that it seems to render meaningless any moral judgments about another culture's behavior. If morality were truly relative, how could we continue to condemn the horrors committed against innocent civilians in Nazi Germany, or how could we have condemned apartheid in South Africa in the last century? We need some standard or standpoint from which we can affirm one morality and reject another, whether or not it is the generally accepted morality of the other society. Naturally, atrocities never are acceptable to all members of any society. The Jews, Catholics, and Gypsies who were herded into the Nazi death camps did not share their persecutors' moral values; nor did the large majority of black and other people of color in South Africa share the government's view of racial separation and privilege. On what basis did they criticize the views of their own society? Presumably they based their judgment on values that differed from those of (the majority within) their society, quite possibly values they held to be right regardless of societal views or contexts. Moral relativism appears to make such dissension from the dominant values within one's culture unjustified, but this hardly seems plausible. If any kind of moral relativism is defensible, it cannot be the simple-minded relativism that claims that whatever a society believes is right.

To defend moral absolutism, we should add, is not necessarily to affirm one culture-bound set of moral rules as applicable to everyone else on earth (sometimes called *moral imperialism*). At its most defensible, moral absolutism affirms a set of standards (possibly extremely broad ones) that transcend any one culture and apply equally to all cultures. It is at least possible, accordingly, that our shared sense of morality is inadequate or less moral than the values of some other people. To be a moral absolutist is not necessarily to be a moral imperialist.

Tolerance is one of the central values of our multiracial, multiethnic, polydimensional society. Ours is a **pluralistic** society, which means that we are not so much a “melting pot” as a “mixed salad” of a society, in which different groups have very different values, different religions, and different customs. For us to get along together, we must tolerate these differences. We force ourselves to tolerate—which means that we must accept—behavior very different from our own and perhaps very different from what we think is right. Sometimes, though, we may feel that to be tolerant would be to abdicate our responsibilities. Consider issues such as human trafficking, genital mutilation, or sweatshop labor conditions. At some point, many people will start to argue that a certain practice is so reprehensible that the good of suppressing it overrides the imperative to be tolerant.

The question of moral relativism asks whether there is a tolerance limit, an endpoint to how far differences are acceptable. Is it the case that even the most basic moral values will inevitably be points of contention and conflict? We should note that even to advocate tolerance is to defend at least one value as absolute (for example, the value of getting along with one another) and so to reject strict relativism.

Friedrich Nietzsche and the Attack on Morality

By morality the individual is taught to become a function of the herd, and to ascribe to himself value only as a function . . . Morality is the herd instinct in the individual.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882

The theories of morality that take morality to be primarily a matter of duties and the consequentialist theories that take moral rules to be mainly guidelines for human happiness share most of their substantial moral principles. Indeed, John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant would probably have agreed on most major issues, though their reasons may have been quite different. Even Aristotle would have agreed with most of their recommendations.

But there is a further step that may be taken in moral theorizing, which is far more skeptical and far less respectful of our ordinary moral sentiments than any of the theories we have discussed thus far. Suppose we were to return to our initial question of this section and ask, once again, why an individual should act against his or her own self-interests and obey a moral principle. According to duty-defined moralities, the answer would be something like, “Because of the authority vested in the principle” (whether by God, by society, or by reason). The answer of consequentialist moralities would be something like “Because it will be best for most of us in the long run.” But suppose a philosopher comes along who asks why he or she *should* personally respect the authority of God, or society, or reason. What would happen if it turned out in the long run that what is best for a single individual is not best for more of us? Why, then, should that person be moral?

Friedrich Nietzsche led an attack on morality—more precisely, Judeo-Christian morality. Nietzsche attacked the authority of the Ten Commandments; in fact, he declared that “God is dead,” thus leaving traditional morality devoid of its divine justification, source, and sanctions. Nietzsche pointed out that societies of modern times were decadent, falling apart, and that their moral authority need no longer bind a creative individual who rejected that decadence and

disintegration. And as for reason, he claimed, there are other things of importance in human life besides reason—passion, the love of adventure, and artistic creativity. Mere pleasure and happiness are not of ultimate importance either, he argued. Rather, our primary goal in life is, in every case, what Nietzsche calls “power,” but what might better be understood as “self-expression” or “making one’s mark” on the world. The meaning of human life, according to Nietzsche, is creativity; to live a good life is to construct one’s life as an artwork. But this ideal, he argued, is incompatible with what is now called morality, which dampens creativity, which tries to make all of us the same, which prevents us from being daring and inventive.

Interpreters have pictured Nietzsche in two entirely different ways, both probably partly correct. On the one hand, Nietzsche uses the most belligerent language imaginable. He sounds very much like an ancient barbarian out to destroy everything in modern civilized life, with all its comforts and conveniences, to return to a world in which the strongest, most creative people flourish and the weak tend to perish. This is the Nietzsche who outraged his contemporaries and has terrified some undergraduates and most Sunday school teachers ever since.

But Nietzsche himself, according to all reports, was a perfectly civilized, shy, witty gentleman. The other Nietzsche, accordingly, is a mild-mannered but outspoken defender of creative ideas, a critic of those who hid behind moral principles as an excuse for doing nothing and making nothing of themselves, an enemy of hypocrisy, laziness, and cowardice, but not of civilization and sanity. In fact, what Nietzsche envisions is a society more exciting and more civilized than our own, a society led by dynamic individuals rather than (according to his favorite metaphor) a herd of sheep. He calls the members of this ideal future society *Übermenschen*, or “superhumans.” But to clear the way for this superior civilization, it will first be necessary to remove the false justifications of the reigning morality, Judeo-Christian morality.

Nietzsche’s moral theory is, therefore, an attempt to undermine morality, to get rid of it, to show it to be fraudulent. One part of his attempt is his rejection of God as “dead,” by which Nietzsche means, essentially, that people no longer really believe in God as the center of their lives; they go to church and say a few prayers, but belief in God does not structure the way they actually conduct their lives. But if belief in God has died, why do people still endorse the morality that traditionally was associated with God? Morality, according to Nietzsche, is a kind of trick; it is a trick to gain power, a trick not needed by strong, creative souls (who already have power), but rather a trick perpetuated by the weak, as a way of protecting themselves against the strong.

If we consider once again the various rules of morality—for example, “Don’t kill,” “Don’t steal,” “Don’t cheat”—we might notice that a significant proportion of such rules are *prohibitions*—that is, rules forbidding us to do something. Why is this? Suppose we change our approach to these questions and ask, “Who benefits from these prohibitions?” The answer is not “Everyone” but rather “Those who cannot protect themselves”—in other words, the weak. Now we can see why so many of the rules are prohibitions rather than positive virtues (as in Aristotle): the rules benefit the weaker members of society by preventing the stronger members from taking advantage of their strength. The strong can take care of themselves; morality is the protection of the weak.

We can understand, too, according to Nietzsche's view, why the idea that moral rules must be universal has been so important. Moral rules would not protect anyone if those people against whom the rules were formulated did not obey them, or if they thought that the rules did not apply to them. But once this has been pointed out, Nietzsche claims, those who are strong and creative will realize that, contrary to the utilitarian promises, obedience to the rules may not be advantageous to everyone—specifically, not to them. And ultimately, the rules are harmful to everyone, in that they obstruct precisely those who have most to contribute to culture. Nietzsche expects such arguments to hold sway, thereby undermining traditional morality eventually.

Yet Nietzsche did not relish the prospect that civilization as we know it might soon break down and give way to an orgy of violence and political chaos. In fact, he predicted such a future (that is, the twentieth century) with considerable horror. Nietzsche's idea seems to be that the creative hero for whom his philosophy is intended should be concerned primarily not with being a "good person" and being moral in a conventional sense, but rather with living life as an adventure, with making our own individual contributions to culture, and with each of us "giving style to one's character." We should develop our virtues in our individual ways, which would require discipline and commitment to our own exacting standards, though not to universal moral principles. The problem Nietzsche has left us is this: how can we justify the rules of morality for all of us without quashing the individual creativity in the best of us? "Why should we be moral?" is no longer an immoral question to ask. In fact, it has become an essential part of the moral life itself.