

## 4

# OUR KNOWLEDGE OF RIGHT AND WRONG

We have seen that the word ‘ought’, which, on the face of it, has a moral connotation, has, among other characteristics, a prudential implication: ‘ought’ in the sense that it would be in the person’s interests to act in a certain way. Some people believe, perhaps rather cynically, that all ‘ought’-statements fall into this category, with the exception of those which imply ‘living up to expectation’ which we noted in Chapter 3 (‘At your age you ought to be able to run a mile in five minutes’, etc.).

It is certainly the case that over many ought-statements there hangs an element of ambiguity. If I tell my son that he ought to go and dig a sick neighbour’s garden because she’s ill, I am not necessarily suggesting that he make a gratuitously altruistic gesture: she may well pay him for his trouble. Similarly, if I say that I ought to visit a sick (but not very likeable) relative from time to time, it could be argued that I do this only in the hope of being remembered in his will, or of obtaining kudos with my partner. If I advise a friend that he ought to give up alcohol, I may be bearing in mind only the state of his health, or his pocket, rather than any moral considerations, such as that one ought not to cloud one’s mind or alter one’s metabolism through use of drugs – though even if this is the prime intention, it could be argued that prudential factors underlie the matter: he might fall down (metaphorically or literally) on his job, or get himself involved in a road accident.

However, while it is clear that many of our forms of behaviour about which people are inclined to make a moral song and dance are undoubtedly motivated primarily by prudential considerations, it seems obvious that there are situations where this is not the case. Suppose, for instance, the above-mentioned relative lives in a council house with a few worthless pieces of furniture, and has nothing to leave in his will except his overdraft. And suppose that my partner, far from approving of my visiting him, does her best to discourage me from doing so, on the grounds that I could be spending my time more profitably (in more than one sense) elsewhere. What then is the relevance of prudential considerations? Or suppose that my son is a proud

person who would not dream of accepting money from a sick neighbour for work done out of the goodness of his heart (none of my sons reading this will identify with such a description, but such people do exist): have we not then a situation with a purely moral motive, even if it could be shown that the altruistic deed was performed primarily in order to gain an inner feeling of satisfaction through giving up time and energy on another person's behalf?

A host of examples spring to mind – and you can make your own list if you reflect for a few minutes – of non-prudentially motivated behaviour springing from a sense of obligation. Why did the elderly lady who found an expensive camera in a bag which had fallen off a friend's motorbike walk over a mile with this to the nearest police station, where the loss had been reported, then, at the request of the police officer, walk a further mile-and-a-half to my friend's house in order to return it, and then indignantly refuse any reward? We shall take a closer look at this question in Chapters 5 and 6, but at this stage it seems reasonable to conclude that, whatever her motive, it had no prudential component. What consideration other than moral lay behind the action of the person who anonymously returned a wallet to its owner with all its contents, including cash, untouched, and actually paid for its return by registered mail? What was prudential about the behaviour of the IRA officer, captured by the Black and Tans in County Cork in 1919 and about to be shot, who spent his last minutes pleading for the life of the young man (my father-in-law) who had been with him in his vehicle at the time of the capture?

It seems absurd to deny that much of our behaviour is motivated by ethical considerations. Why this is so is not the question here; at this stage our concern is not with the why but with the how. Where do we get our knowledge of right and wrong? What is the origin of our sense of 'ought'? We shall look at some of the most prominent answers to this question which have been offered by philosophers and others from time to time.

### **(a) Our parents**

There must be few people who can truthfully deny that, at least in their earliest years, their parents' attitudes, admonitions, and examples, played a major part in formulating their own awareness of right and wrong. Until a child begins to form associations with others outside the home, parental attitudes on virtually any issue that may arise are all that he is likely to experience. 'Show me the child, and I'll give you the man' – so runs the old saying; and this is illustrated by the frequency with which children's moral views in later life, probably after an intermission for a period of rebellion, reflect most of their parents' sense of values. (It is perhaps because of this obvious association that we are disturbed to read of political regimes which openly encourage children to report to local officers details of their parents' views and behaviour.) Speaking personally, I know how deeply embedded in me for

many years were my parents' firm Sabbatarian views; I still recall the Sunday morning when I spent on an icecream the money given me for the church collection: the sense of impending doom which descended on me as I ate it remains a powerful childhood memory. There are, however, obvious problems if we assert that this answer tells the whole story. In the first place, there are numerous parents who, in the eyes of most people around them, are wrong on certain moral matters; they may be Jehovah's Witnesses who, if allowed to act according to their own convictions, would refuse their children a blood transfusion, even in the most critical of circumstances; they may be members of a fascist group who instil in their children a hatred of all races other than their own; they may belong to a radical political group and teach their children the virtues of bloody revolution. Less tangibly, but equally insidiously, they may bring up their children to believe in some class-based superiority to others in the neighbourhood and beyond; or they may threaten their later chances of a happy sex life by teaching them that this activity is in some way 'dirty'; or, potentially most damaging of all, they may impose themselves on their children in so strongly authoritarian a way that for the remainder of their lives their offspring find it virtually impossible to enter confidently into relationships with others. 'Like father, like son': but what if father is a lying, thieving, bullying braggart who treats women like dirt? Are we to view with equanimity the continuing survival of such a macho male attitude because of some undefined sense of the divine right of families to bestow on successive generations whatever prejudices they will?

The second difficulty with this answer can perhaps ease our minds on the question just raised. Views of what forms of behaviour are right or wrong may vary from generation to generation. The phrase 'the generation gap' became popular in the 1960s and 70s, and perhaps at that time the force of this alleged divide was exaggerated. But it hardly needs arguing that, while some offspring faithfully reflect most of their parents' moral views and behaviour throughout their lives, others, even on the most major of issues, knowingly move in divergent directions. Many people will, if they are honest with themselves, acknowledge that on a range of moral issues they are no longer in step with their parents, even though they still hold them in love and respect. It would seem difficult to establish any causal link between parental attitudes and such departures.

Added to this is the fact that many parents themselves modify their views, perhaps as a result of their children's alternative emphases. Sometimes, the direction is from an 'anything goes' view of morality towards one with more rigour, from one where lines of distinction have tended to be blurred to one where 'right' and 'wrong' are clearly defined: yesterday's teddy boys have become today's upholders of strict standards. My own experience has been the reverse of this: the Victorian, moral-majority views of my parents were modified over the years (without being entirely dissipated) partly, I think, because on some issues none of their four children went along with them.

(It will be interesting to discover whether this more liberal approach is pursued by the next generation with their children, or whether there is a pendulum-like swing back to greater rigour.) Whatever the answer to that mystery, the fact remains that by designating parents as the possessors of a good deal of authority *vis-à-vis* their children's earliest appreciation of moral issues, we have been discussing the *means* by which this comes about, not the ultimate *source* of this awareness. Parents certainly constitute for most people the initial pipeline by which norms and attitudes are conveyed; but the same happened to them under their own parents' influence, and to them from theirs, and so on back through the generations. We are no nearer to solving the problem of the basic source of our knowledge of right and wrong.

### (b) The conscience

'Always let your conscience be your guide': how sound is that advice? Much depends on one's understanding of what precisely the conscience is. The assumption behind the quotation is that it constitutes some kind of inner self, pure and untainted by selfishness and all the vices of the person seen by others and with whom they must deal. It has been described as 'another man within me that's angry with me';<sup>1</sup> more cynically as 'the inner voice that warns us that someone may be looking'.<sup>2</sup> Either way, it is being described as an entity in its own right, inexorably linked with, but capable of judgment on, its owner.

Many people have spent their lives following the dictates of their consciences; some, by the same measure, have risked, and even surrendered, their lives. George Washington's conscience would not let him tell a lie; Martin Luther's led him to denounce the authorities whom he had been brought up to accept as of God, culminating in his speech at the Diet of Worms when he faced the possibility of death with the words 'Here I stand; I can do no other'; Dietrich Bonhoeffer's brought him back from the safety of North America to the menace of Nazi Germany where he was eventually executed because of his opposition to Hitler and all that he stood for. The pacifist in wartime may be described as a 'conscientious objector'; we speak today of 'prisoners of conscience'; on a more universal level, men have found themselves physically incapable of the act of adultery, despite intense sexual desire, because of a deep conscientious objection to marital infidelity.

Most of us could probably make our own list of behaviour we could not indulge in, acts we could not perform, because of the dictates of our consciences, and we could perhaps give a nod of approval to Mark Twain who wrote: 'I have noticed my conscience for many years, and I know it is more trouble and bother to me than anything else I started with.' But in that last phrase an important question is begged. The implication is that the conscience is something we inherit at birth, remaining a fellow traveller with us throughout our lives. Experience assures us that this cannot, however, be the

case because there are similar objections to this view as to that of parents as the source of moral awareness. In a word, the conscience lacks consistency, either between people in general or in any individual in particular.

Just think for a moment of what appalling acts of behaviour have been, and still are, performed with a clear conscience (and sometimes in the name of the conscience). At the time of the reformation, Catholics and Protestants cheerfully cut off each other's parts and burnt each other at the stake in the (not always insincere) belief that thereby they were giving the others' souls a last chance of redemption. In the name of the conscience, women have been executed as witches, nuns walled up in their convents because of indications of attraction to men, opponents of political regimes have been incarcerated for life, and a whole race faced extermination: as any reader of *Mein Kampf* will be aware, there was no more conscientious man in history than Adolf Hitler. That this kind of behaviour is not just an unfortunate historical transitional phase is indicated by the fact that in scores of countries today men and women are being imprisoned without trial, tortured to the point of insanity, and brutally executed, solely because of conscientious differences of opinion.

Leaving aside these momentous examples, it is obvious that in all kinds of humble, everyday matters, people's consciences vary as to the issues they feel conscientious about. For some it is the eating of flesh; for others the purchasing of goods from a particular country; for others using condoms. Some people could not conscientiously enter a public house (I know of one man, an able trades union shop steward, who gave up his position because that was where his union meetings took place); some people could not live with themselves if they did not give part of their income to the Third World; a man in my area went to prison because he persistently deducted from his income tax payments the proportion allocated for defence, and others risk the same penalty by protesting outside military establishments; while people whose consciences guide them differently sincerely believe that the one is insane and the others are traitors.

Even within one individual this so-called fellow traveller is inconsistent. Matters about which I had conscientious feelings years ago (such as Sabbath observance) no longer affect me; other matters have taken the place of these earlier ones, and I have already indicated enough of these without boring you with more. It appears that this conscience that travels with us is as changeable as an April day: how then can we possibly say that it is the final guide to moral behaviour? The question is whether we should personalise it in this way at all, since this process gives it an air of authority which, on close analysis, it cannot possibly possess. Need we say any more than that the conscience is the arrival in our conscious minds of the conclusion of debates which have occurred subconsciously over matters about which there are conflicting viewpoints and pressures? It represents our view on moral matters as we perceive them at any given moment. Pending the arrival of new

viewpoints and new pressures, we may well let our conscience be our guide, to be confirmed every time we face a similar problem; but new experiences will require us, so to speak, to reopen any investigation; and the conscience may well change. Sometimes, as we saw, discussing in Case Study 4 my colleague's first pint of beer, it may wrong.

The conscience may, then, be the means whereby we know, or are fairly sure of, what is right for us at any particular moment; but, again, we have done no more than establish a *means* whereby this knowledge is conveyed to us; we are still no nearer the *source* of this knowledge.

### (c) The law of the land

At one level this is the obvious answer to our dilemma. Our country's laws exist independently of us: they preceded our arrival and will proceed after our departure. Many facets of our behaviour – more, perhaps, than most people realise – reflect our acceptance of certain procedures on the grounds that they are legal, and the rejection of others because they are illegal. Most people, for instance, will do all they can to avoid paying income tax, even if this means hiring an expensive accountant: this is a perfectly legal activity; on the other hand, only those prepared to risk severe punishment will engage themselves in tax evasion, which is illegal. It seems that there is a strong element of truth in Aristotle's claim that the purpose and process of the law is to make citizens good (or make good citizens).

It would be fascinating and self-revealing to reflect on which laws of our country we would continue to observe if there were no longer any law enforcement; we should in effect be asking ourselves how far we behave as we do from a general conviction that such behaviour is 'right', and how far because of the fear of being found out and punished. How many shops, especially supermarkets, would be able to stay open? How many libraries would survive? What kind of order would there be on the roads, in the streets? Who would feel safe from the thug, the bully, the rapist? Locksmiths could well become millionaires and security guards the first essential in banks, museums, stores – probably in all public places: and what would then prevent them from assuming total control of the state? Without laws, what is there to prevent anyone from becoming an outlaw? (I will refrain from making any pun on in-laws.) It looks as if Aristotle is right, as far as he goes, and that we need the law to keep us on the right track; the alternative, a state of no law, or anarchy, would seem to be a recipe for chaos. This situation, if it is the case, also seems to confirm Hobbes's view that, human nature being inherently selfish, we need the agreed norms and sanctions of the law in order to keep everyone from turning against his neighbour. Some smaller communities throughout the world, possessed with an overriding ideal, have apparently managed to live together harmoniously without any formal laws: various

pacifist communities have been noteworthy examples of this. But there seems no hope of establishing this ideal in a world of massive populations and conflicting interests.

The issue we are dealing with, however, is that of the origin of our awareness of right and wrong, good and bad. The law no doubt instils into us certain habits of behaviour; but there are many obvious problems to be faced if it is presented as the source, as well as the definer and upholder, of morals. What, after all, is the law? It is not an independent impersonal entity; it is not a form of holy writ handed down from who-knows-where. It is a series of rules, regulations, which successive generations have concocted in their own interests. It expresses, or should express, the needs (as opposed to the wants, which are not necessarily fulfilled) of the people for whom it is made. In particular circumstances (such as in a state of war) particular and temporary laws must be made (such as blackouts and rationing); over the years, certain laws become irrelevant, and new laws become necessary because of new situations. The laws about Sunday trading in Great Britain have become, over the centuries, irrelevant to the point of absurdity: *Playboy* can be bought legally, but not a Bible; fresh vegetables, but not tinned. And in the State of Connecticut it used to be the case (and may still be so) that it was illegal for a man to kiss his wife in public on a Sunday. These laws were originally devised in order to facilitate obedience to the commandment to keep the Sabbath Day holy; those who have striven to change the laws have not denied the value of one day's break in seven, but rather have questioned whether the law as it has stood for centuries necessarily embodies the only, or even the ideal, means of achieving this.

Other new laws have become necessary because of changes in society; sometimes these have been no more than developments in technology, such as the invention of the internal combustion engine. The arrival of the motor car and its equivalents resulted in the making of new laws relating to its speed, noise, direction, place of parking, roadworthiness, safety, and the alertness of the driver; in Finland, for example, it is illegal to smoke and drive. Other new laws reflect society's more liberal outlook compared with that of, say, the Victorian age; the lord chamberlain, for instance, no longer censors manuscripts of plays before they are produced on stage.

These examples reinforce the objection to the idea of the law as an eternal entity, providing us with our sense of right and wrong. The clearer picture that emerges is that of the law as – and I don't use this word in a pejorative sense – a time-server. It reflects – or, at least, it ideally reflects – the attitudes, the priorities, even the values maintained by the majority of the community (few laws are likely to please everybody) in which it is observed or enforced. Thus the bill to allow abortion in certain circumstances, passed by the House of Commons in 1967, would hardly have been given a hearing much before that date; and future generations may modify it, either restrictively or liberally, or even abolish it altogether according to the extent and direction of society's

changing views on the issue. The law cannot be static, which it would be by definition if it were an 'eternal entity'. It must change in order to reflect changing values, and if it ever appears to be inconsistent, then this perhaps typifies human values. It is inconsistent (not to say hypocritical) to condemn and illegalise bull-fighting but to allow fox-, deer-, or hare-hunting; it seems a grave distortion of values to sentence a man to thirty years in jail for stealing banknotes (in the great train robbery) and another to ten years for grievous bodily harm. If these, and the legion of examples of misplaced priorities which you could no doubt cite, cause you to affirm with Dickens's Mr Bumble that 'the law is a' ass', then you may as well blame a parrot for using obscene language. If the above expressions of the law are wrong, they are wrong because people have revered property more than they have revered living creatures, human or animal. The law is no better, and certainly no worse, than its makers.

The eternal verity which the law should at all times be trying to enshrine, preserve, and enforce, is that of justice. But this, as we have seen, is one of those supremely evaluative words which render themselves incapable of definition (if you don't believe me, try, as I suggested in Chapter 1, to define the word). How far any law reflects justice, when this is itself indefinable in terms acceptable to any legal expert, and how far justice can ever be said to have been done, let alone seen to have been done, are matters for speculation. The Midwest judge Roy Bean, who habitually called out in his court 'Bring the guilty bastard in and let's give him a fair trial', may be an extreme example of human foibles clouding the idea of justice, but to this observer (as to certain legal experts with whom I've discussed the matter) the connection between justice and the administration of the law is at best tenuous. Luck seems to play a major part in the proceedings – the quality of one's lawyer, the mood of the judge and/or the jury, the demeanour of the accused, the 'current mood' nationally so far as the alleged offence is concerned: with all these to contend with, justice often appears like Keats's knight at arms: 'Alone, and palely loitering'. (See Case Study 12, pp. 93–5.)

A final objection to the idea of the law as the source of our knowledge of right and wrong springs from the fact that our sense of what is morally right or wrong, and what the law declares to be right or wrong, may not coincide. It is illegal, but hardly immoral, for me to drive my car over a nearby bridge which is being preserved as part of a beauty spot, or to drive through a red traffic light late at night, or to dump garden rubbish on some nearby disused land. It is not illegal, but some would view it as immoral, to commit adultery, to engage in homosexual activities, to traffic in women's bodies, or to exploit other people for financial gain. (A fellow student of mine in Bonn, Germany, described as 'immoral' the fact that the then British prime minister, Winston Churchill, and the leader of the opposition, Clement Attlee, used regularly, after a vituperative debate in the House of Commons, to have a cordial meal together.)



The first set of examples – activities which are illegal but not necessarily immoral – would lead a rule utilitarian to ask: what if everybody did the same? We shall discuss this issue in Chapter 6. The second set gives rise to a much more important question: how far is any citizen justified in deliberately and consciously breaking the law where he feels this to be immoral? We shall return to this issue in Chapter 11.

It appears that we are still no further forward in our quest for the source of moral awareness in people. It has been suggested that perhaps we should acknowledge the primacy of the ‘spirit of the law’ in this connection, and recognise that the law itself is inevitably an inadequate and incomplete embodiment of this. The trouble then is like that which we have with the idea of justice: it is impossible to define. Few people are sent to prison for breaking the spirit, as opposed to the letter, of the law.

### **(d) Society, or one’s peers**

Those who hold the view that a man is known by the company he keeps may well go on to maintain that it is in this same context that his views of acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour are established. It is certainly the case that in many respects our behaviour reflects the attitudes of the peer group in which we happen to find ourselves. Many a parent will testify to this, after they have experienced radical changes in their children when they begin to develop relationships outside the home. ‘He’s got in with the wrong set’ is the excuse commonly made by such parents to friends and relatives who note how the child seems to be setting aside the moral standards accepted in the home. Even when we are older, after, presumably, becoming more set both in our ways and in our values, it is difficult and perhaps pointless to avoid being influenced by the moral attitudes of those with whom we mix: even our choice of leisure pursuits is likely to be so influenced. The same process occurs, inevitably, in areas of moral concern. The racist who is thrown, for a period of time, among people with more liberal views runs the risk, if so it may be termed, of being forced to modify his views, as happened to a fellow climber on a week-long expedition in which I, with a number of other friends, was once involved. And the person who lives for a time within an enclosed community must be very thick-skinned indeed to be untouched by the ethos of that community – whether this be a communal home, a monastery, or a boarding-school. Most of us, if we examine our moral attitudes with honesty, will be able to pinpoint a particular group who either enforced or reinforced one or more of them.

It would therefore be foolish, and in many cases demonstrably wrong, to deny the fact of the influence of the values held by people around us on those which we express as our own. We may not go as far as a certain lady of my acquaintance whose every expression of opinion on moral matters – from the

case for capital punishment to that against gambling – began with the phrase ‘like x says’ (x being her husband), but it’s a reasonable supposition that most of our expressions of opinion were either heard or read elsewhere. That we have not, however, solved the problem raised in this chapter is indicated by two facts, the first being a simple acknowledgment of most people’s experience, the second rather subtler.

It is a fact that the majority of people divide their time among a number of groups. To begin with, they have their home and their school, college, or place of work. In addition, they have their friends, who may belong to any of these, but may be found in neither. They could be members of a club, or political organisation, of a pressure group or evening class or church, or a combination of some of these. And while this is not inevitable, it is eminently possible that some conflict of values will exist between groups of this sort. The secretary who engages in anti-nuclear activities may find that her work colleagues are, for political reasons, out of sympathy with such activities, her fellow church members on religious grounds, and her family for domestic reasons. Which group is doing the influencing in this situation? Her fellow activists all came together independently of the other groups, not encouraged by any of them: even her daily newspaper expresses a different line. Are we to take it that people are like chameleons, changing their values as they move from group to group? If this is universally the case (as it admittedly is in certain instances) then our quest is as pointless as that for the end of the rainbow, and as impossible to locate as the nucleus of an atom when studying its velocity. Yet, somewhere along the line, the jumble which constitutes most people’s minds occasionally straightens itself out, and an idea becomes crystal clear, so that the person can state boldly ‘this is right’ or ‘that is bad’.

This brings us to the second problem concerning the social explanation for human behaviour. How, if all our moral views are taken from our peers – whichever section of acquaintances and friends these happen to be – has any change in moral attitudes over the centuries come about? That changes in this field have occurred over the centuries has already been illustrated several times in this and earlier chapters. But for any change to occur, someone must have said for the first time, or, antecedently to any discussion, someone must have thought along the lines of ‘we can do better than this’. If this had never happened, no group would or could have ever revised its views; without the innovator, it must have remained static. Bees have organised their lives efficiently for millions of years, and are a fascinating object of study; but there is no evidence that bees have changed in any appreciable way over this period. The bee of today is not greatly dissimilar to that of ancient Egypt; modern human societies differ in many respects from those of our ancestors, and these changes have taken place because someone, somewhere, objected to the accepted norms. Whether the resultant changes can always be characterised under the generic term ‘progress’ is a moot point, and not relevant here. The fact is that, for better or for worse, movement has occurred throughout history

because of the stand taken by the rebel, the pioneer, the critic, the prophet. Where the group comes to accept the proposals of such individuals, radical changes in that group's attitudes can occur, as we have seen, for instance, in the attitude to single-parent families, and the status of marriage, over one generation in the west. What, then, is the source of the reformer's insights and zeal, and where does society's willingness to accept proposed changes originate?

### (e) God

Throughout history, few societies have lacked among their members those who have believed that the ultimate inspiration for all human appreciation of right and wrong lies not in man himself but in his creator – the almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing Being whom he calls God. Today, in the western world at any rate, there are probably fewer people who would be prepared to make such an affirmation, but the point of view persists, and, in the United States is vociferously, not to say belligerently, expressed in the media and by politicians. (It is doubtful whether any person would be nominated for the US presidency, much less be elected, if he professed himself an atheist. It is significant that all presidents in recent years have made a point of emphasising their religious affiliation and of publicly socialising with well-known religious leaders.) Many less exalted people, faced with the question posed at the end of the previous section, are quite likely to state that, in the absence of any more satisfactory explanation, God must be the source of our moral awareness.

For those who do not wish to examine this explanation in greater depth, this conviction can remain with them throughout their lives, giving them confidence in defending their lifestyles in general, and directing them amid situations fraught with moral dilemmas in particular. Maybe as you read this you are agreeing with this point of view; certainly we must all be acquainted with people for whom God is both the instigator and guardian of their moral standards, and who evince a serenity, as a result of the confidence which this belief often gives, not expressed by those who are more aware of the pitfalls in this theory.

We shall be considering in Chapter 9 the logical problems associated with the attempt to link one's sense of moral obligation with the commands of God. All that is necessary at this stage is the adumbration of some of the more obvious problems which arise with this viewpoint.

The first question relates to the receiver of God's commands: why should it be this person rather than another, or perhaps a number of others? The answer given by an upholder of the God theory may well be that this matter constitutes no problem at all. Since God is all-wise, He knows best whom to choose, as the wise foreman, or military officer, or politician knows whom to appoint as his second-in-command.

Very well: granted that God's method of correcting false ideas of what is right and wrong is to select a worthy person to be the mouthpiece of any necessary change and the instigator of progress in the moral field, it seems fair to ask why this laborious process has been needed at all. Assuming that God is unchanging, immutable, it follows that His assessment of certain forms of behaviour as good, and others as bad, of certain actions as virtuous and others as vicious, has been for ever the same. (To believe in a fickle God, inconstant in opinion and irresponsible in behaviour, would make philosophical discussion of the matter quite futile. If it is the case, as Gloucester lamented in *King Lear*, that 'as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport', then such a being or beings is/are unworthy of our consideration, since human beings rise, morally, higher than this.) Why didn't this eternally wise God bestow this wisdom upon homo sapiens from the very beginning, and thus reduce the risk of human misery consequent on human wickedness?

Again, the defender of the God theory is likely to counter with the argument that this is to prejudge, and therefore misjudge, God's intentions. It was, so they argue, not His will that human beings should possess all knowledge of good and evil from the very beginning. This would be like surrounding a child from his earliest years with every conceivable object of desire, with the result that he never really appreciates them. Only by experiencing the rewards of goodness, and enduring those of wickedness, has the real value of following the path of virtue, or the straight-and-narrow – call it what you will – been not only read, marked, and learned by man, but also, more to the point, inwardly digested: and this is a continuing process.

This sounds reasonable enough but for three major problems. The first is simply a fact of life – sad or otherwise. If there is any degree of fairness and consistency in God's nature (and, as was mentioned above, there seems little point in continuing the discussion if the case is otherwise) then one seems to be justified in looking for some kind of correlation between virtue and reward, between vice and punishment. Any study of human societies will indicate that no such correlation exists. It may happen, but just as likely it may not. The experience of suffering, whether through material loss, tragic bereavement, disabling disease, or foreshortening of life, is shared by good and bad – however these people may be defined – alike. There is in my morning newspaper an article about a man who has treated his employees with venom, his colleagues with contempt, and his rivals with derision: he is a multi-millionaire, and one of the most powerful men in the world. He will probably die lauded with honour and effusive obituary notices. In the same issue of the newspaper is a short note about the death of a man in another country who spent the final third of his life enduring imprisonment and torture at the hands of a political régime condemned by most of the world. These are, of course, extreme examples, and in any case no argument should be based solely on individual samples: others could tell a different story. But they are typical enough of a good deal of human experience to make it impossible to

substantiate the case for correlating virtue with happiness, vice with misery. Virtue may be its own reward, but, if the general argument of this section is sound, it should normally be expected to have desirable bi-products: and this is manifestly not the case. (We shall return to the problem of suffering in Case Study 29, pp. 219–22.)

The second problem concerns the inconsistency of God as found in those writings and pronouncements through which He has made known the nature of good and bad. He has allegedly spoken through such holy books as the Old and New Testaments and the Qu'ran and, throughout succeeding centuries, through the minds of those claiming to interpret these writings. To state this is to expose the problem. Throughout these writings and affirmations there is a range of moral views so varied that virtually any action or attitude can have its precedent quoted from one authoritative source or another. Shall we give up alcohol? Turn to Jeremiah 35. Shall we drink wine? Turn to John 8, and drink it instead of water. How many wives should we have? Solomon numbered his in three figures, though his additional mistresses nearly reached the four-figure total; Mohammed settled for four; St Paul preferred to recommend celibacy. Should one kill one's enemies? Saul was commanded by the prophet Samuel (the former temple boy) to slaughter the Amalekites, and was removed from the kingship because he spared one of them; Jesus said, 'Love your enemies', but he also condemned them as 'snakes . . . vipers' brood . . . condemned to hell' (Matthew 23:33); Mohammed preached the virtues of Holy War.

It may be argued that, throughout the scriptures, there is a progression in the appreciation of right and wrong: maybe, but this has not happened chronologically (the book of Hosea in the Old Testament, for instance, seems more morally advanced than that of Revelation in the New, and more advanced still than much of the Koran), and it is in any case a subjective judgment when a certain form of behaviour is deemed 'higher' than another. (An incredible amount of pure unalloyed hatred towards those who beg to differ can show itself through a careful selection of passages in any of these three holy books, and this hatred is seen nightly on the religious channels on American TV.)

The third problem with the theory of progression in morals linked with a growing appreciation of the divine will is, quite simply, that it does not accord with historical facts as we read them. It would be comforting for us, living as we do at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to feel that we have now attained certain moral heights from which we can both look back on the foibles of our ancestors, and forward to nobler things to come. Experience teaches us that this is a fond illusion. Some of the civilisations of the past – in India, China, Greece, and Rome, for example – displayed, during certain phases, forms of behaviour, especially in their treatment of the less fortunate members of the community, which compare favourably with any we may put forward today.

After two thousand years of Mass  
We've got as far as poison gas

wrote Thomas Hardy in 1924. One dare not contemplate the extent to which man's ability to inflict untold agony on his fellows – all in the name of God, according to numerous national leaders – has multiplied since then. In a world of environmental destruction, mass starvation, and wars in the name of religion, all overshadowed by man's capacity to destroy every living entity a hundred times over, how can anyone rationally speak of moral progress under the influence of a belief in God?

While, then, for some people the idea of God as the source of moral awareness gives an answer to the dilemma discussed in this chapter, it is an answer as intangible as that of the conscience: on analysis, it moves further away, leaving us none the wiser. The equation of God with certain forms of behaviour may, for some people, give those forms a sanction they would not otherwise possess; but this whole procedure seems artificial, an unfair exploitation of human irrationality.

## **(f) Reason**

We have already seen, in Chapter 3, that, where two people disagree on a moral issue – about how convicted murderers should be treated, for instance, or whether censorship is necessary in the media – the *modus operandi* which seems to offer most hope of reaching a consensus is that of seeking out and examining the facts of the situation; to put aside, as far as possible, the emotions, prejudices, and habitual ways of looking at the issue as pursued by both individuals and their peer groups. In other words, it was suggested that the only way forward lay in the application of reason to the problem. Thus the supporter of capital punishment may argue that, because the criminal has taken a life, it's 'only reasonable' that he should lose his. Similarly, if a connection could be established scientifically between violence depicted on the screen and violent behaviour in real life, it would be reasonable to pass a law which banned such scenes from public viewing; and the deprivation of freedom to choose, on the part of those viewers who are unlikely to be thus affected by them, would be, reasonably speaking, a small price to pay. The whole gamut of moral dilemmas could be similarly considered, with the same conclusion following: in the end, altruism, by whatever forms of behaviour it is expressed, is more reasonable than its alternatives – greed, selfishness, malevolence. It is therefore human reason, the factor of life which, supremely, exalts us among the various species, which should be acknowledged as the major, if not sole, source of our knowledge of right and wrong: the very word 'knowledge' in that phrase implies this.

At first sight this seems an acceptable argument. It *must* be reasonable to treat everyone equally and to act logically and consistently; irrational behaviour *must* be judged to be bad. Surely, anyone who disagrees with this requires only to be shown the error of his ideas and ways: he *ought* to agree, even if he doesn't. Those who are impressed by analogies between human and animal behaviour can support altruism on the grounds that it is the herd instinct become conscious in a rational animal, and that to reject this idea in favour of any other is to abandon our birthright; those who view homo sapiens as the creature of God can support it on the grounds that it accords with the wisdom of God – and so on, through all the theories of human nature.

*Reason and altruism* Now all this may be true; but the question is, is it an argument for altruism? It may be the case that individuals tend to pay some regard to the interests of groups, but this does not prove that they *should* do so. Much less does it prove that a human being should pay as much regard to the interests of every other human group as to his own; it could just as plausibly be argued that man shares with animals an overwhelming preoccupation with individual survival, even at the expense of others. Even the argument that the world would be a better place for everyone if everyone behaved altruistically is not as certain as it may appear at first glance. A wife might not find the world a better place if a husband started to count everyone else's welfare as of equal importance to her own; and a world where spontaneity – even spontaneous selfishness – was replaced by rational calculation could sound too much like some of the nightmares depicted in science fiction and certain horror films. The contention that altruism is reasonable because it would make the world a better place for everyone is a vicious circle, because the point at issue is precisely whether it *is* reasonable to aim at making the world a better place for everyone.

It may be argued that we know this intuitively, but this is both factually wrong and logically irrelevant. The comparative study of civilisations reveals that the ideal of counting all human beings as having equal rights is an 'erratic boulder rather than a dominant mountain range' in the geography of human thought. Even if the facts were quite otherwise, and it could plausibly be held that everyone really knew that altruism was right, an intuition, however universal, is not a rational argument. The advocate of altruism can in theory appeal to intuition or to reason or to both. What he cannot do is to count intuition as proof that altruism is reasonable.

The argument that moral issues can be resolved in the court of reason and rationality seems, therefore, to be falsified by the realities of the human situation. Some of the noblest acts in the history of human behaviour have been quite irrational. I have spoken to a man who won the highest award for gallantry which Britain can give – the Victoria Cross – who can recall nothing of the events leading up to his award because his mind had ceased to function at the time, owing to the incredible amount of adrenalin pumping through his

system. Reason would no doubt have told him that what he was attempting to do was wrong because it couldn't be done. Still in the sphere of war, reason surely shows that the best way to treat prisoners is to kill them: that way, you don't have to waste human and material resources in looking after them. The American Indians, in earlier times, followed this path of reason: when one tribe conquered another they simply wiped out all their males: not very altruistic, perhaps, but a reasonable way of ensuring that they weren't troubled by them again.

Reason suggests to me that if I've made my packet through hard work and self-sacrifice I shouldn't be expected to squander it on the feckless who've done neither of these: the ant must outlive the grasshopper. If, as reason suggests, everyone has the same rights as everyone else, then we should acknowledge this not only for bankers, bishops, and bricklayers, but also for persistent rapists, necrophiliacs, potential suicides, and homicidal maniacs. And if the idea of equality of rights is established only by reason, we must exclude from consideration the subnormal, the senile, and babies.

Unless some argument can be put forward which has not been considered above, it does not seem that the thesis that reason tells us what is good and bad can be substantiated. Reason may tell us how to proceed when we decide what our behaviour in a certain situation should be: it will not provide us with the decision itself. It may provide us with supporting evidence for a moral viewpoint, but that will not prove that that viewpoint is 'right'. In other words, while reason can be used in evaluating the correctness of arguments, it does not seem to have a place in other types of discourse. One can, obviously, reason about poetry, or love, or commands, but the language of poetry, of love, and of commands is not itself subject to rational criticism. To treat phrases like 'truth is beauty', or 'with my body I thee worship', or 'thou shalt not commit adultery' as propositions, even when they have the same verbal form as propositions, is to misunderstand the language.

If one looks at the kinds of contexts in which reasoning is commonly acknowledged to be appropriate it seems undeniable that reason is a tool, useful for certain purposes, but that it cannot stand alone or claim to judge all causes. The formal validity of a syllogism is no guarantee of its factual accuracy. ('All people have the right to freedom; murderers are people; therefore . . .', etc., is formally valid, but is it right?) Thus it is appropriate to discuss whether a man who loves a girl should make love to her, or marry her first, or leave her; it is ludicrously inappropriate to seek a rational justification for loving her in the first place. As Molière remarked in *Le Misanthrope*: 'Ce n'est pas la raison qui règle l'amour.' There is no need for and no prospect of finding rational justification for fearing pain, for struggling to survive, for laughing at jokes, for sympathising with suffering or for any of the fundamental human activities which anybody but a psychologist would call instinctive. A mother loves her child because she loves it; the hungry man's problem is not to know if he is rationally justified in eating, but to find food.



It may be that the most important use of reason is to help individuals to realise the extent to which their well-being is inextricably tied up with the well-being not only of their immediate family and friends or groups with which they identify themselves but of the whole human race. If a meeting of Arab oil sheiks in Cairo can put 50,000 British immediately out of work, insularity, whether interpreted figuratively or literally, does not seem very sensible. That much can be conceded: but it does not seem justifiable to proceed from there and affirm that reason demands altruistic morality. If this were the case, it would be reasonable to expect to find some kind of consensus on moral issues, particularly among those, such as philosophers or clergymen, who have a high regard for the powers of reason and who wish to persuade people to be less selfish. The absence of any such consensus suggests, though of course it does not prove, that an agreed rational basis for morality has not been found because there is no such basis.

### **(g) Feelings (see also pp. 36–7)**

If reason is to be judged as no more than a tool of morality, a means of getting us along the road, so to speak, the question still remains as to how we come to know which road to take in the first place. An alternative answer is that this assurance is provided by our feelings or emotions. It is feelings, so the argument goes, which regulate the lives of people, and, at least in ideal circumstances, lead them to the making of their most important decisions. It is feelings which direct us towards our job in life: a feeling of warmth, perhaps, towards one vocation compared with that of boredom about other possibilities; our feelings play a major part in choosing whom we shall live with and, given the choice, where we shall live. Feelings determine who our friends shall be and, with them, what activities will rank high in our estimation. When moral issues confront us, we know what is right or wrong because we can feel the answer deep within ourselves. We may provide others with reasons why we consider certain forms of behaviour to be wrong, but basically our decisions are arrived at through a 'gut' reaction, just as our assessment of other people – whether to trust them, or whether we like or dislike them, for instance – generally comes about through what we feel when we meet them.

Obviously, there is a good deal of truth in this. Those forms of behaviour about which we speak most ardently, whether in support of or against them, are quite likely to be those to which our emotional reactions are strongest. Some people denounce single-sex relationships not because they have anxieties about the relationship itself, nor because their holy book does so, but because they are repelled by the way love is expressed in such relationships. Racist attitudes develop in some people because they feel antipathy towards anybody with a different pigmentation from themselves; others oppose any form of torture because they are literally sickened by such – to them – bestial activity.

Empathy with animals makes many people vegetarians or anti-vivisectionists, or opponents of blood sports; the feeling of horror brought about by contemplating both the effect and after-effects of nuclear war makes a public demonstrator out of many an otherwise retiring citizen. Few people make moral pronouncements on matters about which they don't *feel* strongly.

It is therefore valid to state that feelings play a part in the process of making a moral decision, in some people more than in others. There are however several problems facing anyone who concludes from this that he has answered the problem posed in this chapter. In the first place, he will have committed himself to a facet of life which is at best changeable, at worst capricious or fickle. Just as one can modify one's first impression of another person, so feelings, or moods, can change – and much more rapidly and dramatically. Some people are more volatile than others, of course, but few people's feelings remain constant for any great length of time: people change their moods with the hour of the day. Consequently, a person whose moral stance is founded entirely on what he feels at the time is likely to be an unreliable supporter of any cause which demands continuous commitment. Few books would be written, scientific discoveries made, battles won, or injustices removed if writers, researchers, soldiers, or reformers operated only when they felt like it.

Leading from this is the fact that feelings can harden into prejudices, by a process of inductive reasoning. Just as one can assess another person on the basis of what is felt at the first encounter and allow that assessment – quite possibly, in the long term, a completely false one – to control all later dealings with that person, so people can reach life-long conclusions about issues with grave significance for human behaviour based solely on the circumstances of the first encounter with them. People have prejudices against whole nations simply because of a single unfortunate meeting with one of their representatives; attitudes to people of a different colour from their own are similarly formed; causes are supported or neglected on the basis solely of a happy or unhappy first meeting with other protagonists of these causes. Some people even seem to take pride in this way of judging issues. 'I know I'm prejudiced', one will say, 'but I just don't like/trust the French.' A multiplication of those who reach conclusions in this way can and does cause untold misery in the long term.

Following on from this is the fact of the danger involved if feelings are allowed to be the sole, or even just the dominant, guide when making moral decisions. No doubt the relative of a murderer's victim would be likely to feel passionately that the criminal should suffer the same fate as the victim. Some people, looking at the matter dispassionately, may well agree with this: but the victim's relatives are the last people who should have the authority to declare what should be done with the guilty party; if the penal system of the land were settled by people's immediate emotional reactions to crime, many injustices would be committed, and the penal system replaced by a process not far different from mob law.

The behaviour of a mob when roused is itself a fitting condemnation of the belief that feelings should govern issues of right and wrong. In these situations, as Shakespeare showed in *Julius Caesar* when the mob was moved one way and another by the speakers' oratory, feelings expand and intensify to the point where reason ceases to function, and acts of great wickedness are performed, often by people who, recollecting events in the privacy of their homes – or their cells – can scarcely believe that they acted as they did. There are in all people feelings which have no place in a civilised community: feelings of cruelty, and the urge to destroy. It were better, surely, that these feelings be kept under control; but the case for this is weakened if it is accepted that feelings and emotion are the sole arbiters of moral conduct.

So far as moral philosophy is concerned, the prime difficulty experienced when a person proclaims something to be right or wrong simply because he feels this to be the case is that communication and discussion with that person are consequently wellnigh impossible. It is as pointless to discuss the rights and wrongs of abortion with a person who beats his heart and declares that it must be wrong because he feels so 'deep in here' as it was for me to debate the truth of Christianity on a BBC programme with the man quoted in Chapter 1 who said, 'I know Jesus is alive today: he was speaking to me in my car this morning.' There is, quite simply, no answer to that.

Emotion, left to itself, will declare reason redundant; yet while, as we have seen, reason will not on its own reveal the good and the bad, it has its part to play in the human process of reaching moral conclusions, even if not so central a part as has been claimed for it by certain philosophers and others. We may perhaps say that reason often tells us what needs to be done; emotion gives the motivation. 'Passion', the American philosopher Emerson, wrote, 'though a bad regulator, is a powerful spring.' To make moral decisions irrationally would be subhuman; to make them unfeelingly would be inhuman. Without reason, morality is blind; without emotion, it is lame.

It would be a gross misunderstanding of human nature, whatever interpretation of this we adopt, if we excluded the place of emotion in the moral decision-making process. But the fact that we do judge certain emotions to be more desirable than others, and some emotions, perhaps, not desirable at all, indicates that we engage ourselves in a process of continuous assessment of the emotions. So where does the knowledge originate on which such assessments are based? The problem remains unsolved.

### **(h) Evolution: morality as a process of natural selection<sup>3</sup>**

The word evolution is commonplace today, but a century ago it was not to be used in polite society. Even today in many parts of the United States – not least in so-called enlightened California – it is treated as a dirty word used,

like the words communist or liberal, only by degenerates. It may seem odd to a modern student in the west that a theory which seems to explain so much scientifically should be treated with such animosity, yet the fact is that your chance of getting a teaching job in many American states would be minimal, if not non-existent, if you didn't at least prevaricate on the issue.

Charles Darwin's book *On The Origin of Species*, which lifted the theory out of the scientific journals and into the public eye, was published in 1859, and the first edition sold out in a single day. In it, Darwin denied the soundness of the 'immutability' theory – the belief that there occurred a single act of creation – and offered instead the idea of continuous creation over the billions of years of life on our planet. The central feature of this theory is the influence of the environment on the evolution of species. Those species which, sometimes over many generations, adjusted themselves to their environment – such as the ants – survived; those that did not or could not do so – such as, perhaps, the dinosaurs – became extinct. Homo sapiens evolved and survived because of his ability to use the environment to his advantage.

The major element in this process is the obtaining of an adequate supply of food; this each creature achieves by consuming lower, or smaller, or less agile forms of life than its own: the preying mantis devours a fly, is itself consumed by a lizard, which is eaten by a stoat, which is then carried off by a hawk. This chain continues unbroken until an environmental change occurs – such as an alteration of atmospheric conditions – which decreases, or entirely removes, one of the links; this occurrence could then bring about an 'unnatural' multiplication of the species immediately lower in the chain, and threaten the survival of those further up. The picture that Darwin depicts is therefore very different from the view of nature presented, for instance, in the story of the Garden of Eden, and illustrated in the hymn 'All things bright and beautiful . . . the Lord God made them all': hence the animosity of the Church. Darwin argued that if it were not for this endless process of predator and prey, any single species could multiply until it covered the earth. The cohabitation of species on the planet is possible only because of this constant warfare, in which even the cooperation which can be observed among creatures of the same species must be acknowledged as just one form the competition takes.

Darwin summed up the central theme of his theory in these words:

Can it, then, be thought improbable, seeing that variations useful to man have undoubtedly occurred, that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life, should occur in the course of many successive generations? If such do occur, can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of

favourable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest. (Chapter Four)

You may feel that the use of capital letters in that last sentence is somewhat pretentious, but for over a century those phrases have been slogans or rallying calls for an entire view of life, comparable to ‘Allah be Praised’, ‘Up the Workers’, or even ‘Beer is Best’.

In his next and, so far as his contemporaries were concerned, even more controversial book, *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin related his theory specifically to homo sapiens – our evolution from the ape, and the development of the features which, on the whole, distinguish us from all other species. He discussed the development of language, of musical and other artistic skills, of reason and religion, and illustrated the role these played in human survival. Our concern is with the development of our sense of right and wrong. Darwin’s theory is that, just as we learned skills, like tool-making, by a process of trial and error, so we learned which forms of behaviour had what may be described as an inbuilt survivability factor, and which did not. Forms of behaviour which threatened a group’s existence, such as murder, robbery, treachery, and the like, were forbidden, often on penalty of death, for no group which condoned such crimes could long endure. In general, however, the same offences, when committed against another group or tribe, were permitted and even approved. The more scalps a Plains Indian collected from other tribes, the greater his reputation. (The continuance of tribalism, by whatever name it may be called, throughout human history presents a problem for moral theorists, which will be taken up later, specifically in Chapter 6.)

This evolutionary theory of ethics seems to accord with a good deal of human moral awareness if we examine carefully how we came to experience this. Just as we learn not to put a finger into a naked flame, so we discover that certain forms of behaviour meet with approval from those around us while others are treated with antagonism. Life is a good deal more comfortable, in consequence, if we follow the former rather than the latter. Anybody who has experienced, say, an outbreak of theft in a community knows how painful this can be for all its members: where mutual trust and cooperation had been the norm, doubt and suspicion take over. In extreme instances an attitude of mutual hatred can develop in such a community, putting at risk the survival of that community in its original form, with its ethos of goodwill. We could well be described as like Pavlov’s dogs, discovering how to behave by this process of trial and error. It may explain why, with the increasing speed of communication between peoples, our sense of tribal affiliation has had to change from a sense of belonging only to an extremely localised group to one that is considerably larger and broader. It may explain why soldiers take prisoners of war and don’t exterminate the vanquished: all soldiers hope to survive into a post-war period, and fewer would do so if no prisoners were

taken. It explains the greed of people in times of shortages in particular commodities; the cooperation between people in times of natural hazard; and changes in social attitudes, such as towards male and female roles in communities which no longer depend on male brawn for survival.

The evolutionary theory of ethics will explain much; the question is whether it is the correct explanation. For any of the examples used, one or more of the earlier theories could be substituted. More significant are certain facts of life which don't seem to fit into the evolutionary pattern at all. Darwin speaks of the survival of the fittest: we accept that by this he did not mean (as it is popularly misinterpreted) the joggers and slimmers and early-to-bed-early-to-rise brigade (though these are not necessarily excluded!) but those people (as, in earlier millennia, those species) who most successfully adapted to or fitted in with their environment. For the human species, this has meant the use of particular skills, such as manual dexterity, and over the centuries this has increasingly meant the development and application of intellectual skills. One would expect, therefore, if the theory is sound, to see some correlation between the possession of such skills and fertility, even though this is no guarantee of the handing-down of such skills (bright parents have dim-witted children and vice versa). Ironically, the present situation in the west is the reverse of this. The intelligent tend to take safeguards and strictly control the size of their families, while the feckless have the large broods. The 'dumb blonde' is a good deal more likely to get pregnant than the career-minded woman, and the male whose main attributes lie elsewhere than between his ears more likely to make her so. If it is the case that the whole planet is threatened by over-population, then the breeding of large numbers of offspring must be viewed as anti-social, creating an ever-increasing demand on limited resources: yet the majority of the current representatives of the human species don't seem to have got this message. Is the evolutionary process engaging itself in some comprehensive form of hara-kiri? In the past, offspring were important for their economic value: with the increasing mechanisation and computerisation throughout the world, this is generally no longer the case, yet the urge to reproduce one's kind continues virtually unabated. Only a policy of compulsory sterilisation on the part of government is likely to halt the trend: but that very policy would be judged by most observers to be immoral because it is unnatural. Evolution has landed us in a catch-22 situation. (See Case Study 41, pp. 277-8.)

(The 'catch' in Joseph Heller's novel of that name related to a procedure which ostensibly allowed American servicemen to quit the armed forces: by proving that they were insane. However, in order to establish that they were in this condition, they were required to fill in a form. But the fact that they were capable of filling in the form proved, at least to the expressed satisfaction of the authorities, that they were not insane.)

For our present purposes, the significance of this situation is that we seem to be making a moral judgment independently of the evolutionary process.

This process seems to be sadly lacking in its ability to preserve moral qualities we admire above those we hold in contempt. In time of war, it is the hero who stands his ground who faces annihilation more surely than the coward who flees, while back at home is the wealthy character with connections who thereby avoided being enlisted in the first place. In the increasingly ruthless war of the business jungle, it is the bully and the exploiter of others who tends to come out on top of the gentle, compassionate soul who takes seriously the commandment not to covet his neighbour's customers. There are even those who make this into a definable policy, or philosophy, under the title 'social Darwinism'. In both the United States and Great Britain (to look no further) this has been exalted to the status of a national virtue, with honours showered on the victors while the losers are left to cope as best they can. Darwin was ambivalent about such an outlook, but there is a cruel logical link between the ideas of that gentle seeker after truth and the rapaciousness of monetarist policies, supported philosophically in our time by Ayn Rand, who called selfishness a virtue and commended aggressive competition as the law of life. (See her novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, where her philosophy of objectivism is characterised.)

It may be argued that the goal of evolution is not the survival of the individual, as just described, but of the group, or species; and the key to progress is the struggle for power between groups. The implication of this is that the value of a person lies not in any quality he may possess *per se* but in his contribution to the success of the class, the state, or the race. For a philosophical backing for this theory, you may choose between the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels, with its modifications by Lenin and Trotsky, and the doctrines of a master race and emerging superman deriving, however unjustifiably (see Chapter 7), from Nietzsche's existentialism. In each case there remains the problem, mentioned earlier, of the ability of the individual to step back and make a moral assessment of the theories, based on an independent perception of their worth or otherwise. It is hardly likely that evolution will lead a person to criticise, and possibly reject, that same evolutionary process.

Even if we study the development of cultures chronologically, it is not possible to prove that there is any ascending order of moral merit. We may be tempted to arrange them like this:

Twenty-first century top people  
(morally mature)  
|  
The Roman Empire  
(civilised, but not very)  
|  
Cave men (and women)  
(unspeakable)

But what if you choose different examples?

Nazi Germany  
|  
The Renaissance  
|  
Classical Athens

It is really not very plausible to rate the conquistadores higher than the Incas on the moral evolutionary scale, nor to put the Vandals and Goths above the Romans whom they overcame, or to admire the China of Mao more than that of Confucius. The fact is that, if evolution is to be traced in history, the time-scale must be quite different from the time-scale biologists talk about. If, on the other hand, human evolution is believed to be as slow as the evolution of other species (for which, as Darwin remarked, nature has ‘all the time in the world’) then it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the development of morality, because we can know nothing at all about the morality of people living hundreds of thousands of years ago. (See also pp. 75–6.)

A more mystical doctrine, linking evolution with religion, is found in the writings of Father Teilhard de Chardin, particularly in *The Phenomenon of Man*. He stressed the critical importance of discontinuous leaps in evolution, and looked forward to the transformation of human consciousness, and ultimately of the whole cosmos, in initiatives which will create a new harmony and synthesis of values. If man is at the start of a stage of what Teilhard called ‘ultra-hominisation’, it may be that the significance of evolution for morality will emerge clearly only from some future vantage point; if this is so, speculation at this stage as to what the outcome will be would be futile (though, admittedly, fascinating; after all, it may appear that the evolutionary theory is no more than an incidental aberration, rooted in a misapprehension of the true significance of time; but that is another matter).

Whatever version of the evolutionary theory is held (and there are many to choose from) it seems that, however much biologists may depend upon it, those seeking the ultimate basis of our moral sense must look elsewhere. One further theory must be discussed, if only because it has found a good deal of acceptance in the past, not least by some of the moral philosophers.

### **(i) A natural progression from the facts of the case: ‘ought’ derives from ‘is’**

On the face of it, this answer appears to be, as its designation suggests, the most natural of all. Is it not the common experience of people that, faced with a moral issue, they know, apparently instinctively, what they ought to do? Are not all the agonisings involved in the alternatives presented in this



chapter really quite superfluous? Why not just behave in the way that comes naturally?

Consider, for instance, the following syllogisms:

- (a) It is not desirable to surrender control of one's mental faculties.  
     Alcohol causes a lowering of control in this area.  
     The drinking of alcohol should be avoided.
- (b) Everyone naturally wants to be as healthy as possible.  
     Cigarette smoking can be injurious to one's health.  
     One should refrain from smoking cigarettes.
- (c) The world needs to eliminate deaths by violent means.  
     The sale of arms internationally means that such deaths will go on happening.  
     Trafficking in arms should be made illegal.

In all of these arguments we appear to be deriving a statement of moral obligation from statements of fact. (It may be argued that, in each of the above examples, the first statement is more a value judgment than a statement of fact, but this is a quibble, because, so far as the vast majority of people are concerned, those statements are held to be self-evidently true.) And it is through thought processes like this that most people reach conclusions about what is good or bad, and how they should behave in various circumstances. If your child isn't vaccinated it could get whooping cough; naturally, you don't want it to get whooping cough, so you ought to get it vaccinated; if you don't revise you might fail your exam; obviously, you wouldn't want to fail, so you ought to revise.

Straightforward enough though these examples appear, illustrating the link between what is the case and what ought to be done about it, none of the final judgments can be defined as moral in the sense discussed in Chapter 3. They are all examples of the prudential use of 'ought': it would be in one's best interests to act in a certain way (for one's health's, or safety's, or pocket's sake). If it is true that x is 'good' for you (physical exercise, a non-fat diet, a daily bath/vitamin pill/orgasm) then, for your own good, you should be doing what you can to ensure that these are part of your daily routine; but the reasons for doing so are founded on expediency rather than morality (unless you assert that, because all these things help to keep you healthy, you are thereby taking steps to avoid being ill and becoming a burden to others – not the reason usually given for these forms of behaviour).

It may seem that the distinction I am here making between the prudential and moral use of 'ought' is one that is so fine that one cannot possibly determine the category into which any particular statement can be slotted. This is indeed often the case: many a person has made a moral issue, and gained kudos with his fellows, from basically self-interested behaviour. Firms gain a name for possessing a social conscience by donating to charity money

that would in any case be otherwise grabbed by the Inland Revenue; nephews and nieces are kind and generous to detestable Uncle George because he's loaded, he can't have long to go, and they're his next of kin. But fine though this distinction may often be, so that the observer cannot be absolutely sure of the basic motive, there is a distinction between action motivated by prudence and behaviour based on a purely moral sense of what is right or wrong.

I'll illustrate this by first giving the same kind of syllogism as earlier in this section:

It is a fact that hanging is (not) a deterrent to murder.  
 We all want to deter potential murderers.  
 So, we ought (not) to bring back hanging.

We leave to case study 18 the vexed issue, long debated by penologists, as to whether capital punishment is or is not a deterrent in these circumstances: we will assume that the matter has been incontrovertibly resolved one way or the other. Is the matter then settled once and for all? Can we say that we have finally resolved whether hanging is morally right or morally wrong? We most certainly have not, as can be shown by two possible reactions to such conclusive evidence. On the one hand, a person could argue that the taking of another person's life is so obscene a crime that the murderer has forfeited the right to go on living. Whether his execution will deter other would-be murderers from behaving as he did is irrelevant: he did a grave wrong and must suffer the consequences. On the other hand, a person may argue that the cold-blooded execution of a man by state decree is nothing more than official murder, as obscene as the crime for which it is being administered. Two wrongs don't make a right, therefore the criminal should not be hanged, whatever the statistics may 'prove' about the deterrent effect of this. In the first case, hanging is supported even if the statistics indicate that such punishment in fact encourages others to commit murder; in the second case it is opposed even if the statistics prove the opposite. In both cases, the decision is reached despite, not as a result of, the facts: an appeal is made, tacitly at least, to a sense of right and wrong which is quite independent of the factual situation. The 'ought' is simply not derived from the 'is': considerations other than prudential take precedence.

One more example may clarify this issue further. It derives from a situation where the facts are clear but the judgment about what ought consequently to be done varies according to the values of the people making the decision. It is a fact that some children and some adults learn more slowly than others; in this respect, at least, it is not the case that we are all equal, and nobody in his right mind will dispute it. The question which arises in this situation is, what is the imperative which follows from this fact? What should be done educationally about the slow learner? A range of divergent answers can be

given to this, each claiming to follow from the facts of the situation. One person may argue that, since the education system cannot possibly adjust to the speed of every individual learner, the same length of education should be given to all, and the slower take their chances with the quicker. Another may say that, since everyone is entitled to the same post-education opportunities as everyone else, the slow learner should be given more years of formal education than the rest, since otherwise he will suffer throughout his life from a handicap not of his choosing. A third person, on the basis of precisely the same facts, may argue the case that, since the slow learner will always be left behind in any learning group of which he is a member, it is pointless, and even unkind to the individual concerned, to attempt to give him more than the basic skills in literacy and numeracy: he should therefore receive less education than the others.

It is of no significance to the present discussion which of the above proposals seems 'right'; the point is that each proponent can defend his point of view as following naturally from the facts: each can claim to be deriving an ought from an is. What is clear, however, is that, though the claim may be made, in Thomas Gray's phrase, with 'words that burn' that a logical connection has been established between the two, this claim is fallacious. The whole theory is in fact known in philosophy as the *naturalistic fallacy*. Some philosophical writers have attempted to prove it otherwise and you can follow up the whole debate in a symposium entitled *The Is-Ought Question*<sup>4</sup> if you feel so inclined. It is not denied that people do often, as a matter of fact, make the connection in their own minds and to their own satisfaction. What is demonstrably the case, however, is that, obvious though the connection may seem to be, the moral agent is actually taking his moral cue, so to speak, from another, quite independent, source.

What this source is remains an enigma. We can list and discuss the multifarious answers which have been presented over the centuries, and some may seem to you more realistic than others. But no final solution is possible, even though many people find it convenient to proceed as though this were not the case. Perhaps some people need the security they feel when committing themselves to a particular theory as to the source of their awareness of right and wrong. The philosopher can offer no such security.

## CASE STUDY 10: Why be moral?

In this chapter we have discussed possible sources of moral awareness without reaching any conclusion except that there is no definitive conclusion. A question which may occur to you as a result is, if I don't know where my moral sense comes from, why be moral at all? Why bother myself with a problem that will, as far as anyone can tell, remain for ever elusive? This case study allows you to think through this question – or debate it with colleagues – in a

systematic way. It includes examples of issues already discussed, and of answers which will be presented in the next section of this book.

- 1 The answer depends on what you think 'being moral' means. It could mean doing what promotes the greatest good of the greatest number (utilitarianism); obeying your conscience; keeping God's law; acting in line with the *mores* of your society; striving for the victory of the working class; or living a life of deliberate self-denial, particularly in the sexual field. Anyway, there are difficulties.
- 2 If you mean choosing the greatest good of the greatest number, the reason for being moral could be that it is 'natural' to work for the survival of the species and its welfare.  
But – is it? What counts as 'welfare'?  
How do we measure competing claims (e.g., Jews or Palestinian Arabs)?
- 3 If you mean obeying conscience, the reason could be that, if you don't, you feel remorse and unhappiness.  
But – are you sure you can distinguish conscience from subconscious wishes, repressed fantasies, internalised parental commands *pace* Freud?  
And – is conscience more reliable than reason, emotion, tradition, or habit?
- 4 If you mean keeping God's law, the reason could be (a) God is almighty, or (b) what God commands is what is good for us.  
But – how do you choose between the 57 varieties of God's law (Koran, Talmud, Zend Avesta, Vedas, Bible, etc.), and, if you pick the Bible, which of the thousands of interpretations do you accept?  
And – if (a), is might right?  
if (b), how do you know? And if you do know, why do you need God? (See further in Chapter 9.)
- 5 If you mean going along with the ways of your society, the reason could be that if you don't (more or less) you get clobbered.  
But – what if you can get away with breaking social conventions? Why not?  
And – which society: your ethnic group, nation, class, occupational group, peer group, family, church, voluntary association? What if they conflict?
- 6 If you mean serving a political cause (e.g., socialism, patriotism) the reason could be that you are serving the destiny of humanity.  
But – why care about the oppressed masses, or national honour, or future generations?
- 7 If you mean what the puritans on both sides of the Atlantic (the so-called moral majority) mean, your reason for being moral could be prudential

(you could get VD, or AIDS, and in any case what would the neighbours say?)

But – sexual morals vary: how do you choose?

- 8 One answer is that people make moral (or any other) decisions to try and fulfil their own purposes (being happy, doing their own thing).  
If this is so, what most of us need is better information about ourselves and the world, not sermons and regulations.  
Dare one say: forget being moral – be natural?

## CASE STUDY 11: Authority and autonomy

One issue which arises from the discussion in this chapter is that of the extent to which our knowledge/awareness of right and wrong in morals depends on the strength or wisdom of others outside ourselves, and how far moral awareness is a faculty which we build in and for ourselves. Are moral convictions based on external authority or on internal autonomy, and, whatever the answer, *should they be*? In the first category are included: parents, the law, society, and God; and in the second, conscience, feelings, reason, and (to the extent that all people are dominated by the will to survive) evolution. (The is–ought question discussed on pp. 86–9 is neutral on this issue.) How far do you think it is enough for individuals to base their moral perspective on received authority? How far is it essential, in your view, for individuals to work through issues for themselves, autonomously? (Note: that last word literally means ‘having one’s own laws’, i.e. speaking for oneself on the basis of one’s own experience, rather than unquestioningly following guidelines laid down by others.)

Reflect on this dilemma with the following three examples of external authority in mind (a separate case study on the law follows this one.)

### 1 Autonomy *vis-à-vis* one’s parents

- (a) How essential is it that, in order to achieve autonomy, any child must eventually challenge the expression of moral values received from its parents? If you agree with this, how would you answer a person who said that they had never felt the need to rebel in this way because they were in total sympathy with their parents’ outlook?
- (b) The psychologists Laing and Janov argued that most people are restricted by compulsions which result from their early upbringing. Those who follow the teachings of this school (see *Psychological Libertarianism*, pp. 177–8) believe that the most healthy procedure is to undergo so-called ‘insight’ or ‘primal’ therapy by which, over a long period of time, the client/patient can rid him/herself of parental influences. Is this a desirable procedure? And does your answer depend on whether the influence of the parents

concerned was regarded as good, or bad? How do you react to the middle-aged woman who, after years of primal therapy, wrote to her elderly parents criticising the way she had been brought up, and asking them never to communicate with her again, thereafter returning all correspondence and presents, and refusing to attend their eventual funerals?

## 2 Society

How far is it (a) possible and (b) desirable to be totally autonomous in any western society, short of disappearing into a hermitage? Consider this apropos of some of the following situations:

- (i) Believing the wearing of suits to be insidious ('power dressing') one decides always to wear casual gear. (Why would this be less of a problem in California, say, than in an English provincial city?)
- (ii) You live in an area whose inhabitants hold covert, if not overt, racist views ('blacks lower the tone of the place', etc.). You deliberately take on a black couple as lodgers.
- (iii) A neighbour lives as though he is a law unto himself. He holds noisy late-night parties, revs up his motorbike at all times of the day or night, and laughs at any suggestion that he should conform to the lifestyles of his neighbours.
- (iv) The tree in one person's garden overshadows the people next door so that they can seldom sit in the sun. They request that the tree be removed, even offering to share the expense of this, but their neighbour likes the tree and rejects their request.
- (v) Two females sunbathe topless in their garden whenever possible. Their neighbours argue that this is not done, what with impressionable children on either side, and ask them to show more respect.
- (vi) Two men openly live together as lovers.

## 3 God

- (a) A Jesuit priest remarked: 'Give me a child till he's 7 and I'll keep him for life.' Having experienced the strength of this early teaching, an ex-Catholic campaigns to have religious instruction banned in schools, on the grounds that it is wicked to indoctrinate children with religious dogmas.
- (b) Should blasphemy – taking God's name in vain (e.g. by denouncing or belittling religious convictions arising from belief in Him) cease to be a punishable offence? Does the fourth of President Roosevelt's freedoms – freedom of worship – mean freedom to be overtly (and perhaps outrageously) irreligious?
- (c) Should the use of God's name be removed from public places and events, e.g. swearing an oath in court by 'Almighty God'?
- (d) Should the Church of England be disestablished, and Britain declared to be a secular, rather than a Christian, nation?