MORAL CERTAINTY OR MORAL RELATIVISM?

Abstract

Are there objective criteria by which we can judge what is good or bad, right or wrong? If not, does this mean that moral choice is simply a matter of subjective judgement influenced primarily, perhaps, by our own feelings and emotions? If morality is essentially subjective are we then committed to moral relativism, avoiding judgements about people/societies with different value/ belief systems from our own? These and related moral issues are explored in this essay by examining and evaluating different approaches to ethics. The distinction between teleological and deontological approaches is explored together with the role of the emotions, reason, virtues and vices, aesthetic sensibility and religious beliefs. The final section of the essay suggests an approach that offers at least some moral certainty and that avoids moral relativism.

Introduction

Ethics can be defined as the study of morals, moral principles or rules of conduct. The central concern is with the nature of moral choice i.e. decisions about what we should or should not do. Not all choices, of course, are moral ones. For most people the choice of what to eat for supper, for example, would not be considered a moral one. Even here, however, moral choice may be involved. For vegetarians whether or not to eat meat is a moral issue and people with particular religious beliefs may also consider it wrong to eat certain foods. A key distinguishing feature of moral choices, it could be argued, is that they are choices that affect or concern not only ourselves but also other human beings or other conscious or sentient beings (including, for people with religious beliefs, 'divine' beings).

Ethical theory is a complicated and controversial subject. What is undeniable, however, is that we are repeatedly faced, both individually and collectively, with choices, most minor but some major, as to what we should or should not do. Scientific advance, moreover, has widened the possibilities and thus the scope of moral choice. An obvious example is the development of nuclear technology that has made possible the production of weapons capable of exterminating most, if not all, of the world's population. Other examples include the development of medical techniques and of genetic engineering that have made possible in-vitro fertilisation, cloning and genetic modification.

Certain areas of human activity seem to raise distinct ethical issues that merit special consideration. Reference is often made, for example, to business ethics, professional ethics, medical ethics and environmental ethics. Such distinctions are based not on the type of ethical principles involved but the type of issues to which those principles are applied. Examples of such issues include the following.

a) Should businesses concentrate simply on maximising their profits or do they owe something to the wider communities within which they operate?

b) Should employees subordinate their professional opinions and standards to the commercial, political or other interests of their employers?
c) What value should be put on different human lives when deciding priorities for medical treatment?
d) How far should the interests of future generations be taken into account when using scarce resources to meet present wants?

Two broad theoretical approaches to ethics can be distinguished.
1. Teleological approaches hold that the rightness or wrongness of actions depend upon their consequences. They can thus be described as ‘consequentialist’.
2. Deontological approaches hold that actions are right or wrong 'in themselves' and that we have a ‘duty’ to do those things that are right and avoid those that are wrong.

Teleological approaches

The prime example of a teleological or consequentialist approach to ethics is 'utilitarianism'. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) argued that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness". The aim of utilitarianism can be summed up as the achievement of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people'. The utilitarian approach raises a number of problems including the following.
a) How do we define and measure 'happiness' and 'unhappiness'?
b) Why should happiness rather than other ends be regarded as the ultimate aim of human existence?
c) Can actions that result in extreme unhappiness for a few people be justified if they result in an overall increase in happiness for most people?

Mill defined happiness as ‘pleasure and the absence of pain’ and unhappiness as ‘pain and the privation of pleasure’. With pleasure, he argued, quality is at least as important as quantity and people who experience a range of pleasures will tend to prefer the ‘higher’ to the ‘lower’ (hence his dictum: “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”). According to Mill, the fact that people in practice pursue happiness is evidence enough that happiness is an end of human conduct. He accepted that people pursue other ends (e.g. virtue or wealth) but argued that these have become ends only as a result of their association with the achievement of happiness (which is thus the ultimate end).

A variant of utilitarianism, known as ‘preference utilitarianism’, avoids the problem of defining and measuring ‘happiness’ by seeking instead to identify the extent to which choices will result in the fulfilment of people’s preferences or interests. However, this approach itself raises a number of problems. How in practice do we identify such preferences/interests and should we give them all equal weight? Should stronger ones outweigh weaker ones and, if so, how can we measure their relative strength? Are we bound to take into account preferences, even if those of a majority, that we

consider pernicious? What, for example, if a majority of people have a strong preference for discrimination against a racial minority?

Utilitarianism can be divided into two broad types as follows.

1. 'Act' utilitarianism holds that a separate 'happiness' or 'preference' calculation should be performed in respect of each individual moral choice that we make.
2. 'Rule' utilitarianism recognises that performing such calculations as each individual choice arises is impractical and that, therefore, we have to adopt and apply rules of conduct which have been found generally to achieve the happiest overall outcomes or generally to satisfy the widest range of preferences.

Utilitarianism has been criticised as implying that "the ends justify the means". This is incorrect. Utilitarianism holds that all the consequences of actions should be taken into account. This includes any consequences arising from the means used to achieve given ends. Cutting off the hands of thieves, for example, might prove an effective way of deterring theft but most people (although worryingly not all) would not consider that the achievement of such an end outweighs the appalling mutilation involved in the means.

A less superficial criticism of utilitarianism is that it fails to support the moral distinction conventionally made between 'acts' and 'omissions'. If behaviour is to be judged solely by its consequences, then an omission (e.g. the deliberate failure to save a human life) is on a moral par with an act (e.g. the deliberate taking of a human life), assuming the results are the same (e.g. the death of a human being). Some utilitarians have met this criticism head-on by contesting the validity of the acts/omissions distinction. The English philosopher Jonathan Glover (1941-), for example, argues that the "conventional difference of moral evaluation is defensible to the extent that it reflects differences of side-effects" (e.g. direct killing might have a worse impact, compared with allowing a preventable death, upon our sense of security or respect for human life) but should be rejected "in so far as it results from thinking that an act and deliberate omission with *identical* consequences can vary in moral value". He states: "The utilitarian does not deny that killing someone might have worst total consequences than letting someone die has. But he does claim that, in arguing which is morally worse, we should go directly to the different consequences rather than base our view on a general principle about acts and omissions". Glover recognises that "to deny the acts and omissions doctrine is to propose a radical and very demanding morality". Potentially, for example, it puts "failing to send money to Oxfam...in the same league as murder".

The English philosopher G.E. Moore (1873-1958), although himself a consequentialist (believing that actions are not right or wrong in themselves but have to be judged by their outcomes), accused utilitarians of committing what he called the 'naturalistic fallacy' i.e. of equating the 'non-natural' quality 'goodness' with the 'natural' quality 'happiness'. Goodness (like, for example, yellowness), he argued, is a quality in its own right which we recognise, when judging outcomes, through a form of 'moral intuition'. The nature of such 'goodness' and the human faculty by which we detect it, however, seem obscure.

Although utilitarianism has its critics, it could be argued that generally we do tend to use something like a utilitarian approach when deciding between alternative courses of action. It is usual to try to identify and then ‘evaluate’ the different consequences involved. Such evaluation is likely, at the very least, to take into account the resulting happiness or unhappiness for ourselves and others and the extent to which our own and other people’s preferences and interests would be met.

Deontological approaches

The most thoroughly developed example of a deontological approach to ethics is that of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He argued that acting morally involves acting from a sense of duty and in accordance with some universal principle which he called the 'Categorical Imperative'. The basic principle, he maintained, is that "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law". This would imply, for example, that we should not tell lies unless we were prepared to accept that telling lies should become a standard practice throughout society. 'Reason', he supposed, would cause us to reject such a conclusion. Another formulation of the Categorical Imperative put forward by Kant was: "So act that you use humanity ... always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means".

Why, it could be asked, should we accept Kant's basic principle i.e. that we should act only in accordance with rules that we would be prepared to see universally applied? If we thought we could get away with it, for example, why shouldn't we act dishonestly towards other people whilst at the same time insisting they act honestly towards us? Kant would argue that to behave in this way would involve us in an inherent contradiction that offends against reason. It is certainly hard to see how we could openly justify such behaviour. We would be forced to become hypocrites, publicly advocating honesty whilst secretly acting dishonestly. In the words of the Duc de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680): "Hypocrisy is the homage paid by vice to virtue".

The role of the emotions and reason

Although we may agree with Kant that behaving morally involves acting consistently and in accordance with universal rules, we may differ widely in what we think those rules are. Kant, for example, thought it self-evident that murderers should be put to death. Clearly this is not universally accepted and many countries, including the United Kingdom, have abolished capital punishment.

The conflict of opinion on many moral issues suggests that moral principles are not self-evident nor can they be arrived at simply through a process of reasoning. This was recognised by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) when he wrote: "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions". By this he meant that, although reasoning may help us to explore the likely consequences of different choices, it is ultimately our feelings and emotions that determine our decisions about

what to do. This is not to say that our moral attitudes represent instant and unthinking emotional responses to specific events (sometimes referred to as Emotivism or the ‘Boo/Hooray’ theory of morality). Rather, they are developed and refined as we examine and explore our feelings about real and imagined situations. In this process we may identify inconsistencies that can be resolved only by modifying our moral position. We may also come to understand better the reasons for our emotional responses, distinguishing between 'ends' (i.e. things we value for their own sake) as opposed to 'means' (i.e. things we value purely because they lead to desired ends). It can thus be argued that our moral attitudes:

1. ultimately depend upon our emotional responses to different situations;
2. are developed into a set of more or less consistent principles through an on-going process of reasoning and imagination.

This dual nature of morality was recognised by the English philosopher R. M. Hare (1919-2002) when he argued that moral language is both prescriptive and descriptive. It 'prescribes' in the sense that it gives, or at least implies, advice. To say something is good is to recommend it. To say it is bad is to warn against it. At the same time moral language also 'describes' in the sense that the words used have to be applied consistently in accordance with set rules. If we describe something as ‘red’ we are committed to describing anything with the same colour also as ‘red’. In the same way, if we describe something as ‘good’ we are committed to describing anything with the same relevant characteristics also as ‘good’. This leads Hare to conclude that moral language embodies 'universalizable' prescriptive statements. If, for example, we say that it is right for ourselves to behave in a certain way then we are committed to saying it is right for others to behave in the same way (unless we can produce convincing reasons why we are different from them and that therefore different rules should apply to us).

It is possible to see similarities between the above and the Christian precept: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Matthew 7:12. See also Luke 6:31), sometimes paraphrased as: "Do as you would be done by". A negative version of this principle was expressed by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC) who said: "Do not do to others what you would not wish they should do to you". A clear assumption here is that we are not fundamentally different from other people and that their desires and needs are much the same as ours. ‘Do as you would be done by’ could be a dangerous thing to recommend to a masochist!

A key factor influencing our attitudes and behaviour towards others, it has been argued, is our ability to imagine their thoughts and feelings. Their pleasure and pain thus becomes, to an extent, our pleasure and pain. As David Hume commented, "No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathise with others and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own". The essential inter-relatedness of human beings is expressed powerfully by the poet John Donne (1571-1631): "No man is an island entire of itself....Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind: And, therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee". Another key

factor influencing our behaviour, arguably, is our psychological need for the esteem of others. If only from self-interest we are liable to do, within limits, what we think will please other people.

Although there is clear evidence of the propensity of humans to sympathise and co-operate with one another, there can be disagreement about whether its source is ‘nature or nurture’. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) believed that in a ‘state of nature’ humans are in a constant state of war against each other, their lives being consequently ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’. They can escape this condition only by forming themselves into a civil society based on a ‘social contract’ requiring acceptance of a sovereign authority. By contrast the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) claimed that: “Nature made man happy and good, and society depraves him and makes him miserable”. At the same time he believed that full human moral and rational development required a civil state which, if based on a ‘Social Contract’ enshrining the ‘General Will’ of the people, could avoid the abuses to which society was otherwise prone.

Virtue ethics

The distinct approach to ethics, known as 'virtue ethics', concerns itself with the character dispositions or traits that might be regarded as virtues or vices. The word 'ethics', in fact, derives from a Greek word meaning 'matters concerned with character'. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) in his ‘Nicomachean Ethics’ (possibly assembled from his lecture notes by his son Nicomachus), defines virtue as "a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions" and as "a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency". The virtue of courage, for example, is seen as the mean between the extremes of rashness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency). For Aristotle, virtuous conduct has to be cultivated through practice until it becomes a habit. It represents the means to achieve the fulfilment of ‘the human function’, which is above all to exercise reason (rather as the function of a knife is to cut). The ultimate goal is the achievement of ‘eudaimonia’, a state of well-being in which all aspects of human functioning are perfectly realised.

Even if it is accepted that humans possess an essential ‘function’, there may be disagreement as to what this might be. The biological function of humans, arguably, is simply to survive long enough to reproduce. The objective existence of virtues and vices, moreover, is not universally accepted and people who do accept their existence do not necessarily agree about what counts as a virtue or a vice. An obvious example is homosexuality which many societies have labelled a vice and, indeed, criminalised. In other societies (including Aristotle’s Greece) homosexual behaviour has been regarded as acceptable and, if not specifically a virtue, at least not a vice. Some virtues and vices thus appear to be culturally determined. The virtues discussed by Aristotle, for example, very much reflect the ethos of fourth-century BC Athenian society. Courage is viewed narrowly in terms of bravery in battle and some of the virtues identified by him (for example 'greatness of soul') would not be recognised today.

There are, of course, character traits that are widely regarded as virtues. Voted the UK's most popular poem in a 1995 BBC poll, 'If' by the English writer Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) provides an evocation of widely accepted human virtues including the ability to "trust yourself when all men doubt you, But make allowance for their doubting too", to "meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same", to let "all men count with you but none too much" and to "fill the unforgiving minute With sixty seconds' worth of distance run". These might be summarised as the virtues of judgement and fairness combined with the 'stoical' virtues of fortitude and firmness of purpose. A potential problem is that an undue concern with 'being virtuous', might be considered overly self-regarding and thus, paradoxically, a vice (hence, perhaps, Kipling's advice that we should not "look too good nor talk too wise").

The British philosopher Philippa Foot (1920-) has argued that the moral value attaching to recognised virtues such as prudence, temperance, courage and justice pertains to the attributes themselves rather than expressing any 'commendation', 'prescription' or 'pro-attitude' arising from a separate process of evaluation. We do not, the argument goes, identify behaviour as courageous and then separately judge whether or not courage is good thing. If we recognise a virtue like courage we are recognising something with intrinsic value which arises from its functional 'benefit' at least to the possessor and possibly to others.

Foot's approach can be seen as a direct challenge to the clear distinction Hare makes between the descriptive and prescriptive content of moral language. It is open itself, however, to challenge. The fact that we use abstract nouns such as 'courage' and 'prudence' does not mean that there are external 'entities' to which they correspond. We never, for example, observe 'courage'. All we actually observe is behaviour which we may, depending upon our assumptions about the intentions involved, choose to label 'courageous'. Such labelling may be descriptive, prescriptive or both. To illustrate this let us consider behaviour that we consider to be 'courageous' but also, at the same time, 'imprudent'. In this case the word 'courageous' is used descriptively to denote that we recognise the behaviour has involved a significant and perceived risk to the agent concerned. The word 'imprudent' is used prescriptively to indicate that, however courageous it might have been, the behaviour was, in our judgement, inadvisable. Our judgement will be influenced by our assessment of the context and likely consequences of the behaviour and our evaluation of these consequences (possibly, but not necessarily, related to their likely impact on happiness or the meeting of preferences).

It can be argued that where our labelling of forms of behaviour as 'virtues' or 'vices' is evaluative (as it generally is) we are, in effect, externalising and objectifying out own value judgements. The advantage of this is that it diverts attention away from our ability or otherwise to support our own judgements through reasoned argument and openness about our own emotional positions and onto a spurious assertion of objective external fact. To extend a previous example, people who find homosexual behaviour objectionable and want it to be discouraged or criminalised might, rather than try to argue their case, simply claim that it is a vice. This creates an impasse in

terms of moral debate as the issue becomes purely a factual one (i.e. is it or isn't it a vice?). There is limited scope for argument other than over what we mean by 'vice' and how we would recognise it if we saw it.

The last point highlights the ambiguity about what exactly it is that makes particular forms of behaviour either virtues or vices. A possibility would be that they possess some inherent quality (e.g. of 'courageousness' or 'selfishness') that we detect through some form of moral intuition (rather as Moore argued we detect the non-natural quality of 'goodness'). This does not appear, however, to be the position of virtue ethicists. Rather they argue that the modes of behaviour we call 'virtues' have intrinsic value specifically because they promote 'human flourishing'. Such flourishing is associated with living or acting 'well'. Foot, for example, argues "If someone were to say that courage was not a virtue he would have to say that it was not a quality by which a man came to act well". The underlying belief of virtue ethics appears to be that humans can function 'well' only by acting in certain ways and that these, therefore, constitute virtues. Vices on the other hand are those forms of behaviour that impair such functioning (just as an injury to the eye impairs the function of sight).

Key arguments against the validity or usefulness of virtue ethics can be summarised as follows.

1. The concept of 'human 'flourishing' is hopelessly vague. In the social, as opposed to the biological, field no immutable set of 'human functions' can be identified requiring particular patterns of behaviour.
2. Virtue ethics fails to recognise the crucial descriptive/prescriptive dichotomy that in practice applies to moral discourse. It 'objectifies' what are, in fact, contestable human value judgements and presents them as 'givens' pre-determined by supposed human functional requirements. It thus diverts argument about what we consider should or should not be the case to fruitless speculation about what is or is not the case (e.g. whether something does or does not exemplify a virtue).
3. People can differ in what they count as virtues and vices. This reinforces the previous argument that virtues and vices have no objective reality but are simply projections of our own values and prejudices.
4. Many of the conventional virtues relate to abstract 'feel good' concepts with which we can express agreement. There is widespread disagreement, however, as to how they are to be evidenced in concrete situations. We are all in favour of 'justice' but in real life one person's justice is another's injustice. What in practice, for example, constitutes a 'just' distribution of income? We can all approve of 'generosity' in principle but in practice what proportion of our income do we have to give to the needy in order to qualify as 'generous'?
5. Virtue ethics provides no obvious basis or method for approaching many moral issues. How, for example, could notions of virtues and vices be applied to deciding how medical cases should be prioritised for treatment?
6. Virtue ethics appears strangely silent on many key moral issues. 'Human flourishing', it might be thought, requires above all the equal opportunity of every individual to participate fully in society. One might, therefore, expect there to be a cardinal virtue of treating all people equally regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability or belief. The cardinal virtue of 'justice', might be, but in

practice has not been, interpreted in this way. The absence of such a virtue in Aristotle's ethics, of course, is hardly surprising as the majority of the Athenian population were denied fundamental rights because they were either slaves or women.

The link that virtue ethics makes between the virtues and human flourishing could be seen as consequentialist in character. Aristotle's 'eudaimonia' can be translated as 'happiness' which is also the key concern of traditional utilitarianism. However virtue ethics is usually contrasted with consequentialist approaches such as utilitarianism, particularly in its concentration upon human behaviour and character. Utilitarians are generally held to be concerned only with the rightness or wrongness of the things we do (measured by 'happiness' or 'preference' outcomes) rather than the character traits or motivations involved. Most people, for example, would be more concerned with condemning the actions of suicide bombers than with praising their personal courage. It can be argued, however, that concern with character and motivation is consistent with and can be incorporated into a 'rule utilitarian' approach. We may come, for example, to associate character traits such as honesty, fairness and concern for the well-being of others with the achievement of greater happiness for all. They are thus to be actively encouraged. Character traits such as dishonesty, selfishness and contempt for the interests of others have the opposite effect and are thus to be discouraged.

The Australian philosopher Peter Singer (1946-) links the behaviour patterns encouraged or discouraged by specific societies to "the conditions under which they must live and work in order to survive." He argues that some ethical standards are 'universal' in the sense of being "beneficial to the community in virtually any conditions in which humans live", observing that "a society in which members of the community are permitted to kill each other with impunity would not last long" and that "conversely, the parental virtues of caring for children, and other virtues like honesty, or loyalty to the group, would foster a stable and lasting community." Non-universal standards, however, may need to change as conditions change. Over-population and the by-products of economic growth, Singer suggests, call for the development of a "new environmental ethic" which "would find virtue in saving and recycling resources, and vice in extravagance and unnecessary consumption."

Singer, a 'preference utilitarian', seems happy to employ the language of 'virtue ethics'. His argument that 'universal' ethical standards are those that are almost always 'beneficial to the community' parallels, it seems, the argument that the 'virtues' are behaviours that are intrinsic to human 'flourishing'. Singer's 'new environmental ethic', it should be noted, raises the issue of the extent to which preference utilitarianism can be based upon an assessment of <u>actual</u> preferences. What if the majority preference is for waste and conspicuous consumption? We may try to balance present with future preferences but how do we know what these will be and how far into the future do we try to go? At best we can only guess at the likely future preferences and interests of ourselves and of people yet unborn. It may be tempting to base our approach to environmental and other ethics not upon people's actual preferences and interests but upon what we think those preferences and interests 'ought to be'. This would, however, represent a fundamental departure from

the traditional utilitarian approach and would appear to have authoritarian implications. The issue, nevertheless, is a real one and will be returned to in later discussion.

Ethics and Aesthetics

Related to the impact of the emotions upon moral choice is the potential impact of aesthetic sensibility. We may be drawn to certain character traits such as loyalty and courage, for example, as much for their aesthetic attraction as for their social usefulness whilst we may find opposite traits such as disloyalty and cowardice aesthetically repellent. Considerations of 'beauty' and 'ugliness' appear thus to have some ethical significance. The words, or related words, are certainly used at times in moral discourse. We may, for example, commend an act of generosity as 'a beautiful thing to do' or describe someone's character as 'ugly'.

It is open to question why different character traits might produce different aesthetic responses within us (just as the basis for our aesthetic responses to different works of art is open to question). Are we responding to some inherent quality which we recognise through a form of aesthetic sensibility (compare this with Moore's argument that 'goodness' is an inherent quality recognised through a form of moral intuition)? An opposing view is that beauty exists only 'in the eye of the beholder', a sentiment traceable back to Ancient Greece and expressed in different ways by various writers including Shakespeare ("Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye") and Hume ("Beauty in things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them").

The variety of responses to given character traits and to the mentalities which they reflect suggests that the 'eye of the beholder' plays at least a part in determining our aesthetic reaction to different personality types. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) considered the pre-Socratic Greeks (as described in the poems attributed to Homer) to embody the 'life-affirming' attributes associated with the pursuit of power and wealth. By contrast he found the Christian preoccupation, as he saw it, with weakness and poverty to be 'life-denying' and the expression of a 'slave mentality'. Others have felt very differently about the relative attractions of self-assertion and self-effacement. In his play 'Troilus and Cressida', for example, Shakespeare portrays Ajax and Achilles not as heroic figures but as boastful and vain buffoons. In his 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', the English poet Thomas Gray (1716-71) finds nobility and moral worth in the lives of simple villagers who dwell "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife". However, although their simplicity clearly has some aesthetic attraction for him, Gray does recognise the limitations of their impoverished existence ("Chill Penury repressed their noble rage, And froze the genial current of the soul") and is perhaps more attracted by the utilitarian value of their quiet endeavour compared with the pursuit of fame and glory, asserting: "The thoughtless world to Majesty may bow, Exalt the brave and idolise Success; But more to innocence their safety owe Than power or genius e'er conspired to bless".

Aesthetic sensibility may play a part not only in our response to different personality types but also in our attitude towards specific modes of behaviour. The distaste that most people appear to have for dishonesty might be as much aesthetic as related to a utilitarian assessment of the consequences of lying and deceit. Asserting as true what we know to be false is likely, at the very least, to generate an uncomfortable mental tension. Linked to this may be a variety of physiological changes that can be measured by so-called 'lie-detectors'. Issues of honesty are relevant to the intellectual as well as the personal sphere. It is possible to see intellectual endeavour as an attempt to resolve the mental tensions inherent in a world of incomplete and incompatible explanations. Some scientists have linked the search for 'truth' with the identification of aesthetically pleasing models of reality, the expectation being that these will display both elegance and simplicity. The Indian/American astrophysicist Subramanyan Chandresekar (1910-1995) argued that "Beauty is not essential to make a theory useful. But it does make us take seriously a theory's pretension to represent a deep insight worthy of a place at the heart of our world view." There are echoes here of the assertion by the English poet John Keats (1795-1821) in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' that "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty". An alternative and less elevated view is that the 'truth', whether aesthetically pleasing or not, is whatever best fits the current available evidence. In our daily affairs, at least, we may be more inclined to agree with the assertion in the play 'The Importance of Being Earnest' by the Irish writer Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) that "The truth is rarely pure and never simple".

Religion and morality

Perhaps a majority of people regard religion as the primary source of moral instruction. Deriving moral rules in this way, however, raises significant problems. In listing such problems below, reference is made, for the sake of convenience, to the type of 'God' to be found in monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam but they apply to any religion that seeks to derive moral guidance from the supposed existence of one or more 'gods' or 'divine spirits'.

1. The putative words of God are not conveyed to us directly but through human intermediaries (e.g. through prophets such as Moses and Mohammed) who claim to be the chosen vehicles for divine communication. Why should we believe such claims? Even if we accept the existence of prophets, how do we distinguish true from false ones?
2. God's commandments can be ambiguous. How, for example, should Jews and Christians interpret the sixth commandment: 'You shall not kill' (Exodus 20:13)? With a few exceptions (notably Quakers) they do not take it to mean that killing is wrong under all circumstances and that we should therefore be pacifists. Most, for example, believe that killing one's enemies in times of war, although regrettable, is justified.
3. Different messages within the recognised texts of a religion may conflict with each other. How, for example, can the revengeful Old Testament precept of "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:23-24) be reconciled with the forgiving approach of Jesus in the New Testament when he urges "Love your

enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also". (Luke 6: 27-29. See also Matthew 5: 38-45). Choices have to be made and in practice people are liable to adopt a 'pick and mix' approach selecting the precepts they find most attractive or perhaps most convenient.

4. A fundamental objection to religion as a source of morality is a 'conceptual' one. Are God's commandments about the ways in which we should behave simply arbitrary or are there reasons behind them? If reasons exist then it is the reasons (which potentially we could discover for ourselves) that require us to behave in those ways. God becomes a moral irrelevance. This has been referred to as the 'Euthyphro' dilemma. In the dialogue of the same name the Greek philosopher Socrates (469-399 BC), according to his pupil Plato (427-347 BC), questions whether it is the fact that the gods love something that makes it good or whether it is the fact that it is good that makes it loved by the gods.
5. Related to the above is the argument that an 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is'. We cannot conclude that we ought to behave in certain ways simply from the fact that God tells us to behave in those ways.
6. A further related point is that it is possible to imagine disagreeing with God. Suppose, for example, that two Christians with opposing interpretations of the sixth commandment (i.e. one believing that killing is wrong under all circumstances and the other that it is justified under certain circumstances) are able to ask God which is correct. Whatever the answer, one Christian is bound to disagree. If we accept that what is right is what God says is right then such disagreement should not be possible.
7. To behave in certain ways just because God so commands can be seen as morally repugnant. We are reduced, in effect, to abandoning our own judgement and simply 'obeying orders'. Was Abraham, for example, acting morally when he blindly obeyed God's instructions and prepared to sacrifice his only son Isaac (see Genesis 22)? He passed the test of faith but surely failed to act as a moral agent.

It can be seen from the above that religious belief does not provide an assured and uncontentious source of moral guidance. The large minority of non-believers who may find the various 'god hypotheses' to be unclearly formulated, internally contradictory, morally repugnant or simply lacking any evidential basis have, in any case, to look elsewhere.

Evaluating different moral approaches

It may be tempting for us, when faced by an apparent maze of ethical approaches, to seek a path that combines a bit of each. A problem here is that different approaches can lead us in different directions. The Scottish economist Adam Smith (1723-1790), for example, argued that, through the 'invisible hand' of a free-market competitive system, the wealth of society will be maximised if we all pursue our own narrow economic self-interests. This could be seen as a teleological justification for selfishness based on the utilitarian principle of maximising human happiness

(assuming this is to be achieved by maximising the output of goods and services). Most people, however, would regard selfishness as a vice rather than a virtue.

If combining together different ethical approaches is problematic can we choose between them and can we identify objective criteria to guide our choice or is any evaluation bound to be subjective i.e. determined by our already existing value systems? The problem of 'circularity' cannot be ignored here. It is illustrated by David Hume's previously quoted assertion that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions". The 'is' element of the assertion is objective in the sense that, potentially at least, factual evidence might be assembled either for or against it. The 'ought' element, however, is subjective and problematic. What is its basis? Are Hume's passions telling him that the passions ought to predominate over reason? If so, circularity is clearly involved.

Issues of objectivity and subjectivity are inescapable in any consideration of the basis for ethics. On the one hand there is a natural desire for moral certainty. Some people, indeed, are convinced they have found it and that other people are simply wrong. On the other hand, there is the unavoidable recognition, despite many areas of agreement, of major divergences of moral outlook. Some people respond to this by considering all moral outlooks to be equally valid, at least within the context of given societies and at given stages of history. Can we find a middle way between 'absolutist' and 'relativist' positions; between, in the words of the English philosopher Simon Blackburn (1944-), "the soggy sands of relativism and the cold rocks of dogmatism"?

Evaluating different moral approaches can be objective if this means simply identifying and comparing their key characteristics and examining the extent to which they fulfil identified 'performance criteria', reserving the moral relevance of such criteria for separate judgement. Specifically, moral approaches can be compared in respect of:

1. the assertions of fact upon which they are based;
2. how they derive moral conclusions from their factual assertions;
3. the scope they provide for moral argument, challenge, accountability and development (leaving aside whether these are necessarily 'good things').

These aspects are examined in turn below.

Factual assertions

All the moral approaches discussed in this essay involve factual assertions, the nature and extent of which vary widely.

Any religious approach to morality is clearly based on the claimed existence of one or 'gods'. Unless such existence is accepted the approach simply does not get off the ground. Even if accepted, there are differing views (and arguably some vagueness) about the nature of any 'divine being' and what he or she (or it) might expect from us. The best that can be said about the existence of a god or gods, however defined, is 'not proven'.

Kant's deontological approach is based on the alleged existence of 'categorical imperatives' that place specific duties upon us. The 'ontological' status of these, however, is problematic i.e. where and how do they exist? They are not, presumably, floating around in space. Are they then somehow 'hard-wired' into our mental apparatus along with other perceptual and conceptual faculties (as Kant appeared to believe)? If so, at what stage in human evolution (and why) did the hard-wiring take place? There is also the question why, if categorical imperatives and duties have objective existence (either outside or within us) are they not equally apparent to us all? Why, to repeat an earlier example, do some people find it self-evident that murderers should be put to death whilst others do not?

The claim of virtue ethics that some forms of human behaviour are commonly (if not universally) considered virtues or vices is, in itself, uncontentious. However, it remains open to question why and how they are so perceived. Are we recognising some innate quality in the forms of behaviour themselves? Are we just describing our own emotional responses to them, linked, perhaps, to an awareness of their usual consequences? Or, as virtue ethicists claim, are we recognising the functional necessity of given modes of behaviour to the achievement of 'human 'flourishing'? This is presented as an empirical matter. Supposedly the nature of such 'flourishing' can be identified objectively and independently of personal value judgements about what 'to flourish' should or should not entail. The functional utility of virtuous behaviour is equally seen as being identifiable objectively. No such objective identification meeting with general acceptance, however, is apparent.

Moral approaches that give primacy to the role of the emotions clearly have no problem demonstrating the existence of such emotions and giving examples of their impact on human behaviour. Examples can also be provided of the tendency of people to empathise and co-operate with one another. However, it is important to provide a full picture. Human empathy can be weakened in proportion to physical and social distance. Crucially, people are quite capable of hating rather than loving others and of perpetrating against them the most appalling acts of violence and cruelty. It may be significant that such acts seem to become possible mainly when people see others as of lesser worth than themselves. It may also be significant that an apparent feature of psychopaths is their inability to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others.

The consequentialist position 'per se' is not obviously based on any particular factual assertion. We will return to this point in the next section. However, utilitarianism, the leading example of a consequentialist approach, is based on the factual assertion that humans (and arguably many other sentient beings) experience mental states that can be described as ones of happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and pain. These states can vary both in duration and intensity. Other things being equal, people seek happiness and pleasure and try to avoid unhappiness and pain; although a 'trade-off' may be involved such as when people accept pain in order to achieve an objective (e.g. sporting success) that will bring them pleasure (the 'no pain - no gain' syndrome). Preference utilitarianism posits that at any given time people possess a range of identifiable desires, preferences and interests of varying intensities.

All of this might seem uncontentious. However, significant conceptual and definitional issues are involved. Our current mental states might be described as happy or unhappy in the sense that we can report a specific feeling (e.g. one of euphoria, sadness or, perhaps more commonly, mild contentment). The cause of the feeling is an important issue. There is clear evidence that our mental experiences (including feelings of happiness and unhappiness and of pleasure and pain) are associated with electro-chemical activity within our brains. Feelings of extreme sadness (or indeed elation) may result from imbalances in this activity and may be diagnosed as 'clinical depression'. Feelings of euphoria or contentment may be induced by using drugs to alter brain activity. In his novel 'Brave New World' the English author Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) describes how members of an imagined future society are encouraged to take the drug 'soma' in order to keep them happy and compliant. For the most part, however, feelings of pleasure seem to be associated with activation of centres of the brain through:

1. direct stimulation of the physical senses (e.g. eating and drinking, making love, sun-bathing, swimming or even, for some, bungee jumping);
2. a combination of sensory experience and aesthetic appreciation (e.g. listening to music, observing a beautiful sunset or contemplating a work of art);
3. mental activity (e.g. solving a crossword puzzle, playing chess, reading poetry or exploring a subject that provides intellectual interest and challenge).

Many activities that give pleasure, of course, do not fit neatly into just one of the above categories. Many sports, for example, offer a combination of physical and mental challenge requiring tactical judgement as well as physical skill or endurance. In sport, moreover, pleasure may be obtained from the mere fact of winning or being on the winning side. This applies to both participants and spectators. The pleasure derived from success and the associated sense of achievement is important in other areas. Arguably most general feelings of happiness and unhappiness arise from awareness of the extent to which our desires have been, are being, or are likely to be, fulfilled. Such awareness, presumably, triggers the brain activity associated with the feelings. Because different desires are fulfilled to different extents it is not unusual for people, if asked if they are happy or unhappy, to report mixed feelings. They might say, for example, that they feel happy with their personal relationships but unhappy with their jobs.

This connection between happiness and unhappiness and the perceived fulfilment or non-fulfilment of desires provides a link between 'traditional' and 'preference' utilitarianism. Three important points follow from it.

1. If the extent of happiness or unhappiness depends upon the gap between aspirations and their fulfilment then people who have modest ambitions and achieve them are more likely to report happiness than people who, although perhaps seeming 'better off' in absolute terms, have set themselves impossibly high targets.
2. People's aspirations will reflect the societies in which they live and the people with whom they compare themselves. A society obsessed with conspicuous consumption and celebrity, for example, is likely to produce people who seek

happiness through the acquisition of expensive ‘things’ or through becoming ‘famous’.

3. People’s desires, preferences and interests need not be confined to their own personal advancement. We can be ‘ambitious’ for others as much as for ourselves. One of our preferences, for example, may be to devote some, at least, of our energy and resources to helping improve the living standards of others.

Deriving Moral Conclusions

Let us now turn to the question of how different approaches derive moral conclusions from factual assertions. A key issue is how they overcome the problem of deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ (i.e. how the fact that something is the case can entail that anything necessarily ought to be the case). With deontological approaches, it could be argued, the ‘ought’ is, in a sense, built into the ‘is’. In others words if we accept the objective existence of universal duties that demand particular patterns of behaviour then we are automatically accepting that we ought to behave in those ways. The problem appears to be more one of accepting the factual premise than its logical consequences. In a similar way if we accept the premise of virtue ethics that there are objectively identifiable ways of behaving that are essential to human flourishing then we can hardly reject the conclusion that we ought to behave in those ways. The problem, again, is accepting the premise rather than its behavioural implications once accepted.

With religious approaches the position appears slightly different. A one-to-one correspondence between acceptance of the existence of a God and acceptance of her moral rulings is not immediately apparent. As suggested earlier, it is possible to imagine disagreeing with God. It could, of course, be argued that if we define God as an all-knowing and all-powerful being (assuming meaning and coherence can be attached to these terms) then such disagreement becomes inconceivable. Any apparent disagreement will disappear in a flash if God provides us with the necessary revelatory experience. All this amounts to saying, however, is that we may, for some reason, disagree with a recognised pronouncement of God but must, as a matter of faith, trust that God knows best. Rather than providing a basis for moral choice, this could be seen simply as an abandonment of moral judgement.

For broadly emotivist approaches, it could be argued, the problem of deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, far from presenting a problem, lends positive support. The emotivist can argue that it is precisely because moral conclusions cannot be derived logically from facts that we have nothing else to go on but our emotions. The problem for emotivists arise when they try to move from factual assertions about such emotions to particular conclusions about how we ought to behave e.g. from the assertion that humans are naturally disposed to empathise with each other (and perhaps with some other sentient beings) to the conclusion that such empathy ought to govern our behaviour. Might it not equally be argued that humans are also naturally disposed to kill each other (an assertion to which twentieth century history lends plenty of weight) and that therefore we should accept mutual aggression as the basis for our behaviour? A less disturbing but commonly held belief is that people

are naturally competitive and that competition rather than co-operation should therefore characterise our behaviour, at least in the economic sphere.

For emotivists, it can be argued, the only way out of the apparent impasse identified above is to back-track and avoid any attempt to draw direct moral conclusions from observations about human nature, however psychologically or sociologically interesting and even valid these might be. The crucial point is to recognise that any moral position has to be the moral position of someone (assuming we do not accept the existence of such a thing as 'collective consciousness', an issue considered later). However much we may imagine the thoughts and feelings of others, it is a matter of inescapable fact that, at any given time, the only emotions and aesthetic sensibilities that can directly impinge on our moral decisions and judgements are our own. We can, of course, try, through argument and persuasion, to change the emotional position of others, as they can try to change ours. Perhaps the most important (and sometimes worrying) fact about human nature is its sheer malleability and openness to change (upon which activities such as advertising and 'politicking' thrive). There are limits, however, to the possibilities for change. There may come a point when we have to recognise that our own emotional/perceptual outlook is radically different from someone else's and that there can be no 'meeting of minds' (a problem recognised by Hare when he discusses the issue of 'ideals'). We may find ourselves in this position, for example, when faced with a convinced fascist or racist. Although the stuff of science fiction, it is interesting to speculate how we would cope with other advanced sentient beings that do not share our own emotional/perceptual outlooks, for example with a consequentialist Dalek who judges all outcomes by the extent to which they contribute to the supremacy of the Dalek species or, perhaps, a Kantian Dalek who feels a self-evident duty to exterminate anything and everything that poses a threat to Dalek control of the universe.

The tentative conclusions here are as follows.

1. The only moral positions that exist are the moral positions of individuals.
2. The moral position of each individual is determined ultimately by her own emotional/perceptual outlook.
3. in the last resort all an individual can do is trust her own moral judgement even if this means insisting that she is right and everyone else is wrong.

It could be argued that this has unacceptable authoritarian and coercive implications and potentially makes morality not only a metaphorical but a literal battleground. An immediate riposte is that this is simply a fact of life. We did not defeat Hitler and the Nazis through force of moral argument and Doctor Who has yet to overcome the Daleks by engaging them successfully in philosophical debate. There are, nevertheless, justified concerns here and the concluding section of this essay considers how far we can insist that we are right (i.e. that we possess moral certainty) whilst avoiding authoritarianism. It also considers the extent to which some degree of moral coercion in society is unavoidable.

Consequentialism, as suggested in passing earlier, does not obviously involve any factual assertions and thus avoids the problem of translating an 'is' into an 'ought'. It represents, rather, a direct appeal to reason. It argues that in making personal decisions there is no rational alternative but to make a judgement based upon our

best assessment of the totality of likely outcomes given the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It thus makes no sense to tell the truth if we consider this will have worse overall consequences than telling a lie. In the circumstances we should lie regardless of how distasteful (perhaps for 'aesthetic' reasons) this might be to us. Equally when contributing to collective moral choices we should argue for whatever, in our judgement, is likely to produce the best overall outcomes. When arguing for or against capital punishment for murder, for example, we should base our arguments upon what we judge will be most likely, on balance, to achieve identified desirable results. Consequentialism rejects, as being factually unsupported, the deontological position that some things are just right or wrong 'in themselves' (e.g. that lying is intrinsically wrong and that therefore we should never, under any circumstances, tell a lie). It questions, for example, the rationality of hanging murderers because it is supposedly 'self-evident' that this is the 'right thing to do' even when we assess the total consequences involved to be far worse than the alternatives available to us. If anything is 'self-evident', it argues, it is that we should choose whatever, in the circumstances and in the light of available evidence, is likely to produce the best overall outcomes. 'In the circumstances' is an important qualification. Consequentialism recognises that we are bound to resent finding ourselves in situations where the right thing to do is something (e.g. telling a lie) with which we are not comfortable. In a dictatorship, for example, we will resent having to tell a lie in order to protect someone we are hiding from the secret police. We should therefore seek, through collective action, to produce a society in which such situations do not arise.

A key issue for consequentialism, which the above discussion leaves open, is the basis upon which outcomes are to be evaluated. Traditional utilitarianism holds that they should be evaluated in relation to the achievement of happiness. In doing this it becomes vulnerable to accusations of trying to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. From the fact that people want to be happy and don't want to be unhappy we cannot necessarily conclude that maximising happiness or minimising unhappiness should be the ultimate goals of human endeavour. Utilitarians might respond to this by simply challenging us to identify better goals. Superficially at least, asking "what's so good about happiness?" or "what's so bad about unhappiness" seem strange questions.

Arguably, if a choice has to be made, most people would prioritise minimising unhappiness over maximising happiness. This is certainly true for so-called 'negative utilitarians'. However, as we have already seen, definitional issues arise. If we accept Mill's definition of unhappiness as 'pain and the privation of pleasure' then two separate targets are involved. Reducing, and ideally removing, pain appears an uncontentious goal. 'What's so bad about pain?' is a particularly strange question to ask, especially if directed at someone experiencing significant pain. Physical pain serves a vital function i.e. it warns of harm and triggers a protective response (e.g. removing a hand from a flame). The ability to feel pain is thus not itself bad, quite the reverse. When we experience pain, however, we seek, by its very nature, to stop it. Usually this involves action that removes, or at least alleviates, not only the pain but also the harm causing it. The second target for reducing unhappiness (i.e. reducing 'the privation of pleasure') can only imply taking action to increase pleasure. Thus if

negative utilitarianism seeks to reduce suffering and if the absence of pleasure constitutes a form of suffering then negative utilitarianism must be concerned with promoting pleasure. Conversely utilitarians whose prime concern is to increase happiness must, if they accept Mill's definition of happiness as 'pleasure and the absence of pain' be as much concerned with reducing pain as with increasing pleasure. Any distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' utilitarianism thus turns out to be specious.

Reducing physical pain, at least, appears to be one goal upon which there is likely to be general agreement. This might be extended to some forms of mental 'pain' or suffering. Although some might serve a useful purpose (e.g. anxiety about an exam might stimulate us to get on with preparing and revising) others (e.g. phobias) might be wholly negative in their effects and best treated clinically. Much mental 'suffering', of course simply arises from awareness of a disjunction between our desires and their fulfilment. Two alternative 'treatments' are possible here:

1. help people to realise their desires;
2. persuade them to moderate or even abandon their desires.

It can be seen from this that the goal of reducing unhappiness or, conversely, of increasing happiness does not imply any unique course of action.

A fundamental problem for utilitarianism, if we agree with Mill that pleasures vary in quality, is how to judge their relative 'value'. Do we simply accept people's own evaluations at face value or do we make our own values judgements. If we lived in a society populated almost entirely by male and female equivalents of Jeremy Clarkson no doubt they would report that the height of pleasure for them was to drive high-powered sports cars as fast as possible. This clearly raises a problem for preference utilitarianism as much as for traditional utilitarianism. What if we find ourselves in disagreement with majority preferences and indeed, consider them to be pernicious? What if we live in a society where most people are obsessed with the immediate satisfaction of their physical desires regardless of the impact of resource exploitation upon the environment and the well-being of future generations? One response is to argue that the preferences of people living in the future must also be taken into account and that these will clearly outweigh the selfish preferences of current majorities. Although we cannot ask people who do not yet exist about their preferences, it is a pretty safe bet that they would prefer us not to bequeath to them a legacy of resource depletion and environmental degradation. In other areas, however, it is not so easy to appeal to the assumed wishes of currently non-existent people. What, for example, if (as is probably the case in the United Kingdom) the majority of adults want the restoration of capital punishment for certain categories of murder? Whatever we might personally wish to be the case, we cannot make legitimate assumptions about future preferences on this subject.

An alternative approach to making assumptions about the preferences of people yet unborn is to claim that existing people's 'real' preferences and interests are somehow different from what they themselves think they are. The implication is that:

1. they suffer from 'false consciousness' and are consequently deluded about their 'real' preferences and interests;

2. we, on the other hand, are not deluded and through some form of privileged insight understand best what their preferences and interests 'really' are.

On this basis we might tell Jeremy Clarkson that his 'true self' (which we can see but to which he is somehow blind) really hates gas-guzzling sports cars and derives the greatest pleasure from travelling on public transport, or, ideally, a bicycle. This intellectual device, although patently dishonest, has a long provenance. Rousseau, it was mentioned earlier, claimed that there was such a thing as the General Will of the people distinct from the actual wills of individual people. The implication is that enlightened people, amongst whom Rousseau clearly numbered himself, are justified in imposing upon non-enlightened people anything that the General Will (as interpreted by the enlightened people) demands. An entity called 'the people' possessing its own 'will' is, of course, a complete fiction. We meet people but never 'the people'. The concept, nevertheless, has persuasive force and has been popular not only with dictators but also with democratic politicians.

The conclusion to which the above discussion has led is that any utilitarian assessment of outcomes cannot avoid value judgement on the part of the individual making the assessment. Inevitably this involves 'discounting' some pleasures and preferences. Pleasures derived from pursuits that the individual considers trivial or wasteful might be totally discounted. In identifying the best means to promote happiness, moreover, the individual will be influenced by 'ideals' relating to how 'things might best be'. We don't have to be Buddhists to consider that the best way to remove the unhappiness caused by frustrated aspirations might be to remove the aspirations themselves. By ending personal striving and ambition, perhaps, we will all achieve a state of calm contentment.

A more radical conclusion follows if we recognise that it is possible to be a non-utilitarian consequentialist (although not necessarily along the lines suggested by Moore). Judging moral choices by their outcomes does not require such outcomes to be evaluated in terms of maximising happiness or the fulfilment of preferences. Although the happiness and preferences of others are likely to be taken into account they do not have to be given pre-eminence (we have seen above that they will in any case be subject to a process of 'discounting'). We might be influenced at least as much by 'aesthetic' considerations e.g. might simply find conspicuous consumption 'in bad taste'. Whilst not wanting anyone to be in pain we might be suspicious of the value of 'being happy', particularly if this is associated with self-satisfaction. We may consider that the absence of any feeling of happiness is better than what we consider to be 'false' happiness (e.g. the drug-induced happiness of a Brave New World society). We may be deeply suspicious, indeed, of nirvana-like states of passive contentment and consider that the human condition should be one of endlessly striving for understanding and intellectual truth even if the price of this is an underlying, albeit low-level, feeling of discontent. If we are followers of 'Gaia', we might care more about the survival of the whole planet (including all animals, trees, plants, rocks and stones) than of the human species, particularly given the nature of human environmental impact. In short, we are free to bring to our evaluation of the outcomes of moral choices whatever considerations we wish, giving full reign to our rational, emotional, aesthetic and imaginative faculties. Such an approach might be described as individualist consequentialism.

Scope for moral argument, challenge, accountability and development

Before developing the conclusions of the previous section further, let us look briefly at the third strand of our comparison between different ethical approaches. As far as the scope for moral argument, challenge, accountability and development is concerned a broad distinction can be made between approaches that regard moral values as having some form of external existence and those which see them as being internally generated. If values exist externally (e.g. in the mind of God, as a set of 'hard-wired' categorical imperatives or functionally determined as a set of 'virtues') then our moral choices can be challenged only on the basis that we have somehow failed to identify them correctly. Moral argument becomes focussed on supposedly factual matters (e.g. is or isn't God opposed to abortion). The absence of factual evidence, however, then provides a 'field day' for people (including religious 'experts', 'prophets', clairvoyants, charlatans and even philosophers such as Plato) who claim to have privileged insights which, for some reason, others lack. The next step, of course, is for the 'privileged' few to convince enough people that they are right and then to impose their beliefs, by force if necessary, on everyone else. Approaches, on the other hand, that base themselves on stated goals and that make clear the emotive positions of their proponents provide full scope for challenge, not just in relation to these goals/emotions but also to factual matters (especially the likely consequences of alternative courses of action). Such approaches make us fully accountable for everything we do. We cannot disclaim responsibility by saying that we were simply obeying God's or Hitler's orders. Existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) put particular emphasis on the acceptance of such individual responsibility or 'authenticity'. Scope is clearly provided, moreover, for moral development, particularly through interaction with other moral agents and through learning by our mistakes.

A way forward offering partial certainty and avoiding relativism

The broad conclusion of this essay is that there is no viable alternative but to accept as an unavoidable fact that each one of us has to decide individually what we consider to be 'right' or 'wrong'. If we agree with Hare, moreover, that moral assertions involve universalizable prescriptive statements then what we prescribe for ourselves we are inevitably prescribing for others (and vice-versa). In this process we will, of course, be affected by our own psychological make-up including any components we were born with as well as those that have been subsequently acquired through social experience. In making our decisions we can be aware, at least to some extent, of these background factors and take them into account. We can be aware of, and explore, the thoughts, feelings and aesthetic sensibilities that lead us to our moral conclusions. In other words we can engage in the process of thought, feeling and imagination described earlier when discussing the 'role of the emotions and reason'. This process is bound to take into account likely consequences for the happiness of other people and the meeting of their preferences. However, the weight we give these will depend upon our own subjective judgement of their relative value. As suggested earlier we might regard some preferences as relatively trivial or, indeed, pernicious. In judging

consequences, factors other than people's happiness or preferences may weigh at least as heavily with us. In the last resort we may feel bound to insist, even if in a minority of one, that we are right and everyone else is wrong.

An objection to such an approach is that, if we all decide individually what is right or wrong, there will be no moral certainty. The objection is partly based on the false assumption that the alternatives (such as obtaining our moral guidance from the 'word of god', pre-existent 'duties' or a set of functionally determined 'virtues') offer any such certainty. We have already seen that all they offer are rival claims to 'privileged insight'. A related objection is that if morality is a just matter of individual choice then potentially 'anything goes' and we lapse inevitably into moral relativism. Nothing could be further from the truth. The approach under discussion represents, in fact, the very opposite of relativism. The fact that we know that other people think differently does not stop us believing what we believe, any more than knowing we think differently stops them from believing what they believe. I, for example, am absolutely certain that the denial to women of rights available to men is wrong. The knowledge that in some societies a majority of people (or at least of males) think differently in no way weakens my conviction.

All this, some might argue, smacks of arrogance. Such an objection, however, confuses two quite separate issues:

1. what we individually think is right and wrong;
2. what we think we are justified in doing to change others to our way of thinking.

To honestly disagree with someone is neither intolerant nor arrogant as long as we are prepared to give other people's views full and serious consideration and accept that our own views, as much as anyone else's, are open to scrutiny and challenge. To try to change other people's views through argument and persuasion is clearly not arrogant. It represents as much a challenge to the strength of our own position as to theirs. Morality is essentially a dialectical process involving argument and negotiation. We not only engage in an internal process of thought, feeling and imagination but argue with and respond to the views of others. It is only through the struggle of competing thoughts and feelings that progress, we hope, can be made. The scope for such a dialectical process will depend, of course, upon the moral approaches of the parties involved. If someone argues that women should be subjugated because 'God wants it that way' we can only insist that God needs reasons as much as anyone else and demand to know what they are. It is hard to believe that anything coherent or relevant would be forthcoming.

The issue of what we are justified in doing to change the behaviour of others is, of course, itself a moral one. We have to recognise that not all disagreements can be resolved through argument and that in many areas it is not possible simply to 'agree to disagree'. Parents may try to influence their children's behaviour through persuasion or bribery but at times have to resort to coercion (e.g. banishment to 'the naughty step'). In the workplace we may argue with our line-manager but are likely to find ourselves in difficulties if we suggest to her that 'we'll just have to agree to differ'. At the level of society, in particular, some recognised and accepted system is needed for making decisions. A 'democratic' system gives people a degree of equality at least in the choice of the representatives who make decisions on their

behalf. Whatever the system, however, once decisions are made they can and do involve coercion through a range of sanctions including fines and imprisonment. There is no room here for moral relativism. We don't, for example, ignore violent crime on a housing estate on the basis, for example, that guns and knives are just part of their 'culture'. The use of coercion also arises at the international level. Nations may resort to war if they cannot reach agreement (e.g. Britain declared war on Germany when it refused to withdraw from Belgium in 1914 and from Poland in 1939).The United Nations provides a forum for the reconciliation of disagreements but itself uses force, where necessary, to impose its resolutions. Anarchists such as the Russian Peter Kropotkin (1842-1912) and the English artist and writer William Morris (1834-1896), it should be noted, have believed that people, if freed of all institutions of government and control, will naturally behave co-operatively and peacefully. Attractive as this prospect might appear the response of most is likely to be 'dream on'.

Legal systems are clearly moral systems in the sense that they reflect decisions about how we should and shouldn't behave. Pre-determined obligations are placed upon citizens to:

1. act in defined ways (e.g. drive carefully and observe health and safety rules);
2. not act in defined ways (e.g. not commit murder and theft).

Thus legal and moral opprobrium can be attached to both acts and omissions. This appears to lend support to the position of utilitarians such as Glover. However, it is generally the case, when it comes to the application of legal sanctions, that omissions are treated more leniently that deliberate acts even where the physical consequences are identical. Whether someone kills me by failing to drive with due care and attention or by taking out a gun and shooting me in the head I am equally dead. In the first case, however, the perpetrator might at worse get a few years in prison whereas in the second would probably get life imprisonment (which usually involves at least many years in prison) and, not so long ago, would have gone to the gallows. This disparity seems to apply even where an omission results in the death of many people (e.g. as in the Bhopal and Zeebrugge disasters). The attribution of 'intention' appears to be a key factor here. Although the moral significance of intention has been questioned (e.g. by utilitarians) it undoubtedly plays a key role the application of the law (e.g. in deciding whether someone is guilty of murder or manslaughter or of reckless or careless driving). Some moral confusion may arise from a failure to distinguish between our assessments of:

1. the consequences of behaviour;
2. the mental processes (including intentions) that caused the behaviour.

Separate judgement on the latter is necessary if, taking into account the seriousness of the consequences, we are to identify appropriate 'treatment' for the persons held responsible. A key issue is the probability of their repeating the behaviour and the scope for reforming the mentality involved. If the consequences are sufficiently serious, the probability of repetition sufficiently high and the scope for reform sufficiently doubtful then indefinite confinement in a prison (or, for someone deemed not mentally capable of acting as a moral agent, in a mental institution) might be required.

Moral and legal systems clearly overlap but are not coterminous and, as is considered below, may even come into conflict. Many forms of behaviour are deemed undesirable but not sufficiently serious to be made illegal. They may nevertheless be the target of 'sanctions' ranging from expressions of displeasure to social exclusion. Many forms of behaviour are deemed highly desirable but are not made legal requirements. Giving to charity is generally considered commendable. Making it compulsory, however, would render meaningless the very notion of charitable giving. The reality, of course, is that the legal means already exist (via government taxation and spending on domestic benefits and overseas aid) for the compulsory redistribution of income. This (together with considerations relating to intentions) may go some way to explaining why, to take up an earlier example, we are likely to view a failure to donate to Oxfam as less serious than committing murder.

As societies become more complex and people more interdependent the greater the likely use of legal sanctions to enforce desired patterns of behaviour. The central focus of the law, arguably, is to limit the harm that people can do to each other (reflecting, perhaps, a negative utilitarian approach). Growing recognition of the negative impact of particular behaviours (e.g. smoking) has increased pressure for these to be tackled by legal rather than social sanctions. A particularly difficult area is the use of legal sanctions aimed ostensibly at preventing people from harming themselves (the main aim, for example, of bans on the use of some mind-altering drugs). The key point being made here is that any approach to moral choice has to differentiate between behaviours that are simply to be encouraged or discouraged and those that are to be legally required or banned. The whole field of 'human rights', of course, is concerned with the boundaries between individual freedom and collective coercion. Although too big an area to discuss here, it might be suggested that the concept of human rights represents an attempt to 'objectify' our own value judgements about where these boundaries should be drawn. It suffers potentially from the danger discussed earlier of diverting arguments into questions of alleged fact (i.e. that certain rights either do or do not exist) and away from an examination of the values upon which our own moral positions are based.

The existence within any community of a system, whether democratic or not, for deciding what is to be deemed legally right or wrong does not change individuals' views about what is morally right or wrong. Within limits, of course, people simply have to accept what they don't like. The survival of any society depends upon such general acceptance, however grudging it may be. Major social change, nevertheless, has often come about only when individuals are prepared to challenge prevailing orthodoxies regardless of whether these might claim majority adherence. Obvious examples are the struggles for the emancipation of slaves and of women. Campaigners for change clearly rejected the 'relativist' view that slavery and the subjugation of women were just part of prevailing 'cultures' and therefore immune from moral criticism or challenge. In some circumstances, particularly where democratic processes do not exist, breaking the law may be deemed necessary in pursuit of change. Extreme circumstances can call for extreme action. Had they succeeded, the German officers who tried to blow up Hitler would have been technically guilty of murder but clearly considered their action to be morally justified.

As a final comment, it is important to emphasise that, although the moral approach under discussion here provides scope for individual moral certainty, such certainty is inevitably limited. We may feel sure about some things (e.g. women's rights) but unsure about others. In some areas we may not have had the time to think things through whilst in others, even after considerable thought, may still feel confused and pulled in different directions. Much of the problem may be uncertainty about consequences and practicalities (e.g. about the extent to which voluntary euthanasia would be open to abuse and the feasibility of introducing adequate safeguards). A further point is that, however certain we may feel about something now, we may change our minds in the future. This is has to be the case if we accept that all moral positions are open to challenge and revision in the light of argument, experience, changing circumstances and fresh evidence. The challenge may be internal as much as external. We do not possess fixed 'unitary' personalities and consciousnesses. We can and do engage in internal dialogues whereby we can explore our own competing thoughts and feelings. Through this process we may come to revise our own moral positions and adapt our future patterns of behaviour accordingly.

Acting as a moral agent, it may be concluded, involves identifying behaviours that we can prescribe consistently both for ourselves and others. This requires interaction and dialogue with other people and a questioning/self-questioning approach. An essentially dialectical and creative process is involved that provides scope for both self-development and self-discovery.

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Relevant Texts:

Aristotle	Nicomachean Ethics	c. 325 BC
Baldwin, Thomas	Contemporary Philosophy (Chapter 10: Questions of Value)	2001
Blackburn, Simon	Being Good: A Short Introduction To Ethics	2001
Chandresekar, Subramanyan	Truth and Beauty: Aesthetics and Motivations in Science	1987
Foot, Philippa	Virtues and Vices	1978
Glover, Jonathan	Causing Death and Saving Lives	1977
Hare, R. M.	The Language of Morals Freedom and Reason Moral Thinking	1952 1963 1981
Hobbes, Thomas	Leviathan	1651
Hume, David	A Treatise of Human Nature An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals	1739 1751
Kant, Immanuel	Critique of Practical Reason Metaphysics of Morals	1788 1797
Mill, John Stuart	Utilitarianism	1863
Moore, G. E.	Principia Ethica	1903
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques	The Social Contract	1762
Sartre, Jean-Paul	Being and Nothingness	1943
Singer, Peter	Practical Ethics	1993
Plato	Euthyphro Dialogue	c. 400 BC
Warburton, Nigel	Philosophy: The Basics (Chapter 2: Right and Wrong)	2004