

Pathways to Philosophy

PROGRAM E: MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Reason, Values and Conduct: Unit One

(a) our knowledge of right and wrong

1. 'WHAT is the difference between right or wrong?' – Can anyone really *know* the answer to that question, or do our ethical views rest on an illusion of objectivity? Can philosophy give any valid guidance about the way we should live, or the things we should value, or what is a good action? What does one *mean* by 'right', or 'value', or 'good' anyway? – The questions of ethics provide the strongest case for the practical justification of philosophy. Since Socrates, philosophers have sought 'not just to understand the world but to change it', by presenting their vision of better worlds, painting a picture of the lives we would choose, as individuals and collectively, if we thought rationally about the choices facing us. To be sure, one does not need to be a philosopher in order to recommend rules of conduct or promote a certain way of life. The unique contribution of philosophy has been to seek to persuade solely by means of rational argument. Its tools are the tools of logic.

2. Today, philosophers sit on government committees debating such diverse issues as euthanasia and abortion, reform of the legal system, or the treatment of animals. University departments of philosophy are now more than ever expected to justify their existence in terms of tangible benefits that their subject can offer, not least of which is the practical contribution made by philosophers in grappling with the ethical issues facing contemporary society. This tendency for moral philosophers to be seen as experts to whom we turn for advice has positive and negative aspects. Thinking about the problems of ethics can be difficult and demanding. For those whose time is

taken up with other activities, it is comforting to know that there are persons who are glad to take on the job full time. Yet the danger in deferring to experts is of losing the desire or the capacity to think for oneself. To lose interest in thinking about the way one ought to live is – or so Socrates would have argued – a moral failure.

3. We seek understanding of ethical problems in the first place because we are faced with urgent moral choices. Yet the desire to understand purely for the sake of understanding cannot so easily be denied. Right from the beginning of philosophical inquiry into morals, it was recognised that ethics presents the greatest challenge to our understanding of the very nature of reality. As Socrates' pupil Plato argued in his dialogue the *Republic*, ethics is the gateway to metaphysics. Amongst the things that make up reality we seem to recognise entities of a most peculiar kind we call 'values' – in Plato's terms, the Forms or Ideas of justice, courage and the other virtues – objects which can be 'perceived' only by the mind, such knowledge somehow being sufficient to bring about right action, to lead us into doing what we *ought* to do. How is that possible? How can knowledge necessitate action? – 'No-one,' Socrates had said, 'does wrong knowingly', all-too conscious of the paradox that he was propounding, a paradox that would trouble philosophers for the next two and a half thousand years.

4. On the face of it, it is hard to see knowledge of a mere fact or object can leave us with *no option* regarding the way we are to act. Surely, one might think, what we do ultimately depends on what we desire, what we want. Having appreciated the facts, it is up to us to decide what *attitude* we are to take towards them. – Then again, if that really is so, then, as the philosopher Hume pointed out (*Treatise On Human Nature* Book III, Pt I, §I), we can never discover from the minutest examination of the fact, say, of a murder, that one *ought not* to murder people. Thinking of that example, one recoils in horror. Surely anyone with eyes, or a conscience to see can perceive that deliberately taking an innocent person's life is a heinous act for which only the sternest punishment is appropriate. – But what is it that we actually *see*? The question can be put another way: Why is it, as Hume asked, that we do not similarly 'see' felling a tree as murder, as the ultimate crime?

5. 'Why should I not kill this man?' – As if I would! The truism that like it

or not we are moral beings, that we are committed to a way of life that recognises that certain acts are forbidden easily blinds us the fact that each of us stands on the edge of a precipice. 'You do not see an alternative,' says the *nihilist*, 'only because you do not dare to look.' That realisation can bring upon a mind-numbing vertigo. 'Thou shalt not...'. But what if I do, all the same? If I take this life, I risk getting caught and punished, or, failing that, perhaps God will punish me. That still leaves me free to decide. Perhaps in this one case the risk, or even the punishment, is worth it. It follows that there nothing *in reality*, save what I myself desire and will, that stands between me and deeds of the most unspeakable depravity and evil. Is it a solution to say, 'But after all is said and done, I trust myself. I know I cannot ever do such things'? How do I know that? – It is perhaps fortunate for those of us who have the leisure to pursue philosophy, for whom the full horror of what human beings can do to one another makes little impact on our own day-to-day existence – where the images of evil and brutality flickering across a small screen in the corner of the living room could just as well indeed be from another planet – that it is possible to live out one's whole life never once being put to the test.

6. Yet one should not forget that the mystery of the ethical, the metaphysical dimension of the question of right and wrong, is present just as much in everyday acts done out of a sense of duty, or kindness, or plain decency. – The following examples would hardly be judged exceptional. An old man falls down in the station, and a young woman stops to help him, missing a train that was to take her to a job interview. There were other passengers on the platform who might have helped, but she does not have time to wait to see whether they will or not. Or, to take a second example, while out shopping for a birthday present for his little boy, a unemployed man finds a bank note worth two hundred German Marks down a side-street next to a Currency Exchange, enough to pay for a memorable birthday. No-one sees him pick it up. Most likely, he thinks, the note was carelessly dropped by a rich tourist, who won't even think to claim it. Yet he cannot bring himself to commit an act of dishonesty, and hands the money in. – Perhaps one is wrong in calling examples such as these 'everyday'. The dutiful, kind or decent acts that we do without thinking usually *cost* little. It is not every day that one finds oneself faced with a genuine *dilemma* whether or not to do what is held to be 'the right thing', or indeed which of two alternatives would be the right

thing to do.

7. The two examples we have cited have been deliberately left open-ended. How important was that job interview? Just how many people were standing on the platform? Suppose the money found in the street was sufficient to pay for a much needed operation? – It is no easy matter to reach agreement even on such simple cases as these. Even so, faced with points of view that conflict with our own moral judgements, we are not content to say, ‘Well, it’s a matter of opinion after all.’ We feel strongly that our view is the correct one to take. Questions of right or wrong conduct are matters of conviction, upon which we feel justified – at least, in those cases which do seem clear cut in our eyes – in passing judgement upon others. What is the source of that sense of conviction? Perhaps if we knew, or so one is tempted to think, then we could tap into it when faced with a case where we do not feel convinced, but urgently wish to be.

8. ‘Why should I do what is right?’ – The question is wrongly formed. If I have come to the conclusion that a certain course of action is the right one to take – that is to say, not simply that certain other persons think it is right but that *I* judge it to be so – then no further reasons need to be, or indeed can be given. There is no alternative but to act. Why does this seem so hard to accept? In our everyday lives we often think or act as if morality were an institution that we more or less agreed to, while every so often allowing ourselves to take a rest from the burden of moral obligation. So one might find oneself saying, ‘I accept that it would be right to hand in the bank note, but in this case my son is more important to me.’ However, if consideration of one’s son’s need really is the decisive factor, then what one is in effect saying is that keeping the note is, after all, the right thing to do *in this case*. Suppose, on the other hand, that one were to say, ‘I accept that it would be right to hand in the bank note, but I need the money to keep up the payments on my three-piece suite.’ What is implied here is a choice between moral considerations and non-moral considerations. But there can be no such choice. Moral considerations *override* all other considerations. To intend to do ‘the right thing’ only because it suits me to do so is *not* to intend to do the right thing, but only to intend to do what suits me.

9. ‘How is it then that, knowing what is the right thing to do, I can still fail

to do it?' – If you really *know* then you cannot fail to act accordingly, Socrates believed. Failure to act is proof of a lack of knowledge. But what about cases where one really does seem to see clearly what is to be done, yet it is one's *will* that fails? The paradox of weakness of the will presents a serious obstacle to an account of moral knowledge. On the one hand, if we allow the necessary connection between knowledge and action to be severed, then we are no longer able to account for the *motivating force* of moral considerations. An agent can know all the 'moral facts', but still be faced with the choice of what to do in the face of them (cf. 4). The only alternative, therefore, is to argue that the experience, however vivid, of *seeming* to see what is to be done is not equivalent to really seeing, fully appreciating the significance of the facts that are there to be seen. At least, that is what one has to say. But that is hardly to begin to address the problem. How is it that we are capable of being so thoroughly deceived into thinking that the failure is not one of our knowledge as such, but rather of our capacity to act on that knowledge?

(b) the challenge of amoralism and the problem of relativity

10. The realisation that moral considerations are overriding is the first, necessary step in our philosophical inquiry, indeed our first discovery. In seeking the source of our knowledge of right and wrong, we now have a clearer picture of what we are looking for, and what problems we are up against. Are there reasons for action of a special sort, capable of *trumping* all reasons based on our personal likes or dislikes, our own needs and desires – on 'what suits me'? We cannot assume that there are, simply on the basis of analysing what it means for something to be a 'moral' reason. – Perhaps our sense of morality is, after all, founded on an illusion. There might still be a point in recognising 'good' and 'evil' people, a person would still face the choice of behaving 'virtuously' or 'viciously'. Or, at least, so one would speak. If morality is an illusion then these terms ultimately have no other

significance than simply to signal the things that *we* like or dislike.

11. Admittedly, amongst the things that *I like* may be to do things that benefit others. Hume believed that human beings are motivated by a 'natural sympathy'. Or the ultimate explanation may be more brutal: 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.' It is a mistake, however, to think that unselfish action, whether its ultimate motivation be genuinely sympathetic or selfish, is simply equivalent to moral action. For one thing, as Kant pointed out in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, that ignores the possibility that I have moral obligations to myself, to do purely for my own sake things that I do not necessarily 'like'. (For example, to improve my knowledge, or to develop my natural talents, rather than spend hours in front of the television set.) In any case, the sympathetic impulse to do things that benefit others, described in such terms, has to compete on the same ground with the desire to do things that benefit myself. It is a matter for my decision in each case, after weighing the pros and cons, whether or not I choose to put myself first. Genuinely moral motivation, as we have seen, is not like that.

12. What we have been arguing is that there is something *at stake*, when the philosopher inquires into the possibility of objective moral knowledge. The question is whether one can find a motivation for our conduct towards others or indeed towards ourselves, not based on what we subjectively like or dislike – on what merely 'suits' us, either as individuals or as a society – a motivation that is somehow capable of impressing itself upon us by the light of reason. It is no easy matter to *see*, to fully grasp the significance of this question, let alone devise a means of answering it. All one can do is approach the question from different sides, to build up a picture of what is involved, what is 'at stake'. For it is not as if the question made perfectly good sense, and the only problem was to discern the answer, Yes or No. The sober fact remains that, in the eyes of a considerable number of contemporary philosophers who take a more sceptical view of morality, the question whether there might be such objective reasons for action, reasons that dictate what one ought to do irrespective of what one's subjective likes or dislikes, is simply not intelligible. – The animal we are hunting, in other words, has according to the sceptical view the attributes of a round square: it cannot exist.

13. To be a moral *subjectivist* is not necessarily to be a nihilist (cf. 5). The subjectivist accepts, more or less, the *institution* of morality as a fact, as something that does in practice succeed in commanding respect, however partial. From the point of view of the institution of morality, certain reasons for action are regarded as overriding all others, as not being simply a matter of what one likes. Yet at the same time the institution itself is held in place by nothing other than what members of a given society 'like' or 'dislike'. In effect, the subjectivist would say, we are dealing with two different *levels* of thinking about morals. One can reason about moral questions within the given framework, within the institution as it stands with its prohibitions and rules of conduct, or, alternatively, one can seek to question the validity of the framework itself. If the only basis for that framework is ultimately what is acceptable to those who use it, then the only form of justification the subjectivist is prepared to recognise is one that shows that the rules we have instituted do in fact serve the purposes we wish them to serve. We are, as individuals, prepared to throw our lot in with the institution of morality because it works: because it keeps us happy, or because it helps us survive and prosper. – For the nihilist, by contrast, that admission is tantamount to an *unmasking* of all our moral convictions.

14. It is as if a ghost were stalking amongst us. Picture a human being stripped of any sense of obligation towards himself or others, a being for whom the assertion 'I will' is sufficient to confer value on any object, 'I will not' sufficient to strip value away. There are no rules guiding his conduct other than those he himself lays down, which he is free to change or revoke at any time, as it pleases him. The nearest equivalent in human experience might be the psychopath, but it is of no consequence whether or not such a hypothetical individual has ever actually appeared amongst human society. All that matters, in the eyes of the nihilist, is the thought, *That could be me*. To the nihilist, the subjectivist denying an objective basis to morality who sees nothing amiss with that denial is like someone balancing on the cliff's edge, thinking all the while that one is standing miles inland. – 'But can't you see!' cries the nihilist. – 'I see ground beneath my feet, and that's enough for me,' comes the reply.

15. It will do, at least as a first approximation, if we pose our question concerning the existence of an objective basis for moral conduct in the

following terms. Is it in fact the amoral psychopath who sees things as they *truly* are – the institution of morality as an illusion that the majority willingly subject themselves to because they happen to ‘like’ it, a system of ultimately baseless rules that one might just as well decide that one does not ‘like’ – or is there some aspect of reality to which the amoral individual remains blind? Do I see, for example, in the face of the distressed stranger pleading to me for help, or the face of the frightened civilian pleading with me to hold fire, something that the amoral individual somehow fails to see?

16. Imagine a meeting between an ‘objectivist’, seeking an objective basis for morality and the subjectivist. ‘Undoubtedly when you look at the distressed stranger or the frightened civilian you *feel* something, says the subjectivist, ‘but feelings are not knowledge. The fact that you feel the way you do shows something about the way *you* are. It shows nothing about what is out there. Another person might feel nothing at all, or might even experience sadistic pleasure.’ – ‘But surely you, for all your scepticism, feel exactly the same way I do.’ – ‘That is correct.’ – ‘Yes, but the difference between us is that you must accept that for all you know, it is possible that tomorrow you might feel differently.’ – ‘I do not accept that. This is the way I am, the way I have always been. It is simply my nature. I am not going to lose a moment’s sleep over your hypothetical “possibility” that has no basis whatsoever in the real world.’ – ‘Then you have nothing to say about the case of the amoral psychopath?’ – ‘I am certain that such a monster could never be me, even though so far as the objective facts are concerned what he knows and what I know are exactly the same. If there was any chance of getting through at all, I would try to awake his feelings for the plight of others. That would be the first stage in admitting him as a member of the moral community.’ – ‘But a racist would say exactly the same as you are saying about an individual who lacked the feeling of hatred towards a certain ethnic group, a feeling shared by all members of the racist community.’ – ‘I am not a racist and never have been. Racists are morally despicable.’ – ‘Aha! No doubt racists think that moralists are racialistically despicable!’ – ‘I am not the slightest bit concerned with what a racist thinks!’

17. The argument quickly reaches an impasse. The subjectivist accepts that his moral judgements are ultimately based on a way of seeing things that other subjects conceivably might not share. But, in the end, the subjectivist

would say, one can only think for oneself. We can only take things the way we take them, and merely imagining other ways in which things might appear in the eyes of others is not to change the way we take them. You can imagine someone who did not see murder, or racialism as wrong. That is certainly not the same as 'seeing' what could be right about being a racist or a murderer. – Now it might seem that all the objectivist has to do in order to break out of this impasse is find reasons that would be sufficient to persuade the amoral individual to embrace morality, by getting them to *really* see, by means of rational argument, the moral facts that are objectively there to be seen. It is far more likely, however, that were we faced with a living example of such an individual, our 'reasons' would be laughed to scorn. A valid reason is not necessarily a reason that would persuade any rational being. It is a contingent fact whether a person is persuaded or not; the fault need not necessarily lie in the argument used to persuade them. Whether or not someone chooses to *listen* depends upon whether they really care that there may be something they do not know. The amoral man is happy as he is, knowing all that he does know. He does not need or wish to 'know' any more.

18. These thoughts do, however, indicate a way forward. We can discern different approaches to the question posed by the possibility of an amoral individual. Both the objectivist and the subjectivist are concerned to show what it is about the institution of morality (and indeed what it is that an 'institution of racialism' would lack) that gives others the *right* to expect moral behaviour from us. (The nihilist waiting in the wings, meanwhile, will only accept that there exists such a 'right' if the objectivist's case can be proved.) In other words, the question is what basis there could be for allegiance to rules for ethical conduct. For the objectivist, this right is founded upon the dictates of reason, while for the subjectivist, the right arises merely out of our feelings and attitudes. The objectivist can therefore pursue a two-pronged strategy. One can seek to demonstrate the reasons for being moral which are objectively there to be grasped, reasons that are not contingent upon the existence of certain subjective feelings or attitudes, even though there may well exist individuals who remain blind to such reasons. Or, failing that, one can attack the subjectivist account, by showing that it is in fact incapable, even on its own terms, of accounting for our sense of morality. If subjectivism cannot give a coherent account of the existence of moral feelings

and attitudes, then the way is clear for the pursuit of an objective basis for moral conduct, even though we might be uncertain at the start just what such a basis might be.

19. Let us meanwhile look at some of the other hurdles that our defence of the objectivity of morality will have to face. One we have already come across (9). If moral conduct is based on knowledge of some objective fact, or on reasons that are independent of our subjective attitudes, then it follows that anyone who acquires that knowledge or grasps those reasons cannot fail to act accordingly. Yet it is surely a matter of common experience that we sometimes fail to do things that we fully acknowledge we ought to do. How can that be? If the recognition of an 'ought' were simply a matter of recognising a command that one can either obey, or, alternatively, disobey and face the consequences, then there would be no problem. In giving my allegiance to the institution of morality, the subjectivist will say, I recognise the authority of moral rules. If I disobey, then I must accept whatever punishment is meted out to me. On the other hand, if recognition of an 'ought' is recognition of some kind of fact, then failure to act can only be taken as proof that one lacks sufficient knowledge of that fact. The objectivist certainly faces a hard – some would say, impossible – task here. The only consolation is the possibility that approaching the question of the objectivity of morality from this angle might yield some clue about what kinds of strange objects moral facts might be.

20. Another problem we shall come up against is the problem of *freedom* of the will. Genuine cases of free action, it has been argued, are impossible on the grounds that freedom implies *self*-determination – of appreciating the reasons why one should do a certain action, then acting upon them – but the determination of any act places it within a chain of causes and effects over which the agent ultimately has no control. Thus the argument is divided into two stages. First, one points out that my character and all that goes up to making me the person that I am is the product of a process that began at my birth, where each stage along the path of my life can be fully accounted for in terms of the stages that went before, that is to say, the impacts I received from my environment, and the responses determined by those impacts. The only room for 'freedom', therefore, is some degree of *latitude* or *indifference* in the determining causes of action that allows me to choose A rather than B, where

my mental or physical state at the time just prior to making that choice was equally consistent with my choosing B rather than A. This is what seems to be implied when free will is contrasted with determination; as if genuine freedom of action is only possible to the extent that there exists a degree of *indeterminism* in the springs of human action.

21. However, on reflection, that kind of 'freedom from determination' is the randomness of a roulette wheel, not the genuine freedom that we imply when, in blaming someone, we say, 'You *ought not* to have done what you did.' To be sure, given one's desires and character and all the relevant circumstances, one might still have acted differently. But that is tantamount to saying that the cause that initiated the action was something that simply *happened* to the agent. The agent did not make it happen. – It would seem to follow, irrespective of whether or not determinism holds, that it is irrational ever to blame, or praise, anyone, for anything that they might do, or fail to do. This is one of the truly perennial problems of philosophy, and one has an obvious impact on an account of the nature of morality. – Yet, in the light of our discussion of weakness of the will, the impact may indeed prove less damaging than might first appear. If right or wrong action is ultimately a matter of knowledge of the moral facts or lack of it, then moral praise and blame *are* irrational. It is solely the moral knowledge possessed by the agent that determines right action, and solely the lack of moral knowledge that accounts for wrong action. Punishment may legitimately be used as a means of instruction, but never retribution.

22. There are more hurdles to come. We shall finish by considering what is, for many, the most obvious, knock-down refutation of the very idea that there could be objective moral facts. The study of history and anthropology, it will be said, make us only too aware of the great variety of moral beliefs, some of which contrast strikingly with our own. This *relativity* of values and mores to different cultures was indeed already recognised as a problem at the time of Socrates. The idea took hold that, in the words of the Sophist Protagoras, 'Man is the measure of all things.' Just as the same basin of water can appear hot to one person and cool to another, so the same action can appear 'good' to one person and 'bad' to another. No action is good or bad, right or wrong in itself, but only in relation to the moral beliefs embodied in a particular culture or society.

23. On the face of it, recognition of such relativism has a devastating impact on the search for an objective basis for moral conduct. There appear just three lines one can take. The first is to brave out the onslaught of examples of 'alternative moralities' and claim that there is only one *true* morality (just as the religious zealot might claim that there is only one true way to God). Logically, such a strategy may be beyond criticism. Yet it would seem to imply an in insufferable degree of self-righteousness and arrogance. The second line is to deny the claims of anthropologists and explain the apparent relativity of morals as based on a misunderstanding. Basically, all human societies share the same moral ideas, but these ideas are *applied* differently in different circumstances. The more we understand of another culture, the less distance separates our own conception of morality from theirs. To some, however, that view might seem naively optimistic. The third, more radical line would be to admit that there can, after all, be alternative 'truths', alternative 'realities'. Moral beliefs can be objective *and* relative at one and the same time. To which the sceptic might justifiably respond that such a task is indeed about as easy as demonstrating that a shape can be square and circular at one and the same time. – We shall see.