It analyzes and constructs grand systems of thought to explain and orient agents to the moral life. Included in this domain is a close analysis of concepts such as "right," "wrong," "permissible," and the like. The applied aspect, "applied ethics," deals with moral problems, such as questions about the morality of abortion, premarital sex, capital punishment, euthanasia, and civil disobedience. Ethical theory and applied ethics are closely related: Theory without application is sterile and useless, but action without a theoretical perspective is blind. There will be an enormous difference in the quality of discussions about abortion, punishment, sexual morality, and euthanasia when those discussions are informed by ethical theory as compared to when they are not. More light and less heat will be the likely outcome.

With the onset of multiculturalism and the deep differences in worldviews, as became strikingly apparent on September 11, 2001, the need to use reason, rather than violence, to settle our disputes and resolve conflicts of interest has become obvious to anyone who reflects on the world situation. Ethical awareness is the necessary condition for human survival and flourishing. If we are to endure, as a free, civilized people, we must take ethics more seriously than we have before. Ethical theory may rid us of facile dogmatism and emotionalism—where shouting matches replace arguments—and liberate us from what Bernard Williams refers to as "vulgar relativism." Ethical theory clarifies relevant concepts, constructs and evaluates arguments, and guides us on how to live our lives. It is important that the educated person be able to discuss ethical situations with precision and subtlety.

But, ethics is not only of instrumental value; it is valuable in its own right. It is satisfying to have knowledge of important matters for its own sake, and it is important to understand the nature and scope of moral theory for its own sake. We are rational beings who cannot help but want to understand the nature of the good life and all that it implies. You may become disturbed by the variety of theories discussed in this book, which seem mutually exclusive and so produce confusion when you desire guidance. But an appreciation of the complexity of ethics is valuable in offsetting our tendency to dogmatism and provincialism. It is also a challenge to use your reason to endorse or produce the best system or combination of systems possible.

I have written this book in the spirit of a quest for truth and understanding, hoping to excite you about the value of ethics. It is a subject that I love, for it is about how we are to live, about the best kind of life. I hope that you will come to share my enthusiasm for the subject and develop your own ideas in the process.

I would be delighted to hear your thoughts or questions on the ideas in this book, including any corrections and any suggestions for ways to improve the work. You can write to me at Lpojman@aol.com.

1

Introduction

What Is Ethics?

We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.

SOCRATES, IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

Some years ago, the nation was stunned by a report from Kew Gardens, Queens, in New York City. A young woman, Kitty Genovese, was brutally stabbed in her neighborhood late at night during three separate attacks while thirty-eight respectable, law-abiding citizens watched and listened. Her neighbors looked on from their bedroom windows for some thirty-five minutes as the assailant beat her, stabbed her, left her, and returned to repeat the attack two more times until she died. No one lifted a phone to call the police; no one shouted at the criminal, let alone went to Genovese's aid. Finally, a seventy-year-old woman called the police. It took them two minutes to arrive, but by that time Genovese was dead. Only one other woman came out to testify before the ambulance came, which was an hour later. Then, residents from the whole neighborhood poured out of their apartments. When asked why they hadn't done anything, they gave answers ranging from "I don't know" and "I was tired" to "Frankly, we were afraid."[1]

Who are our neighbors? What should these respectable citizens have done? What would you have done? If, with little inconvenience to yourself, you could save someone's life, or save someone from harm, would you be partly responsible for any harm done to that person if you chose not to act? Are such acts of omission morally blameworthy? How much risk should we undergo to help someone in danger? What kinds of generalizations can we make from this

episode about contemporary culture in America? What does the crime rate in our cities tell us about the moral climate of our society? Is the Genovese murder an anomaly, or is it quite indicative of a deeply disturbing trend?

What is it to be a moral person? What is the nature of morality? Why do we need morality? What function does it play? What is the good, and how shall I know it? Are moral principles absolute, or are they simply relative to social groups or individual decision? Is morality, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder? Is it always in my interest to be moral? Or, is it sometimes in my best interest to act immorally? How do we justify our moral beliefs? What is the basis of morality? Which ethical theory best justifies and explains the moral life? What relationship does morality have with religion, law, and etiquette?

These are some of the questions we shall look at in this book. We want to understand the foundation and structure of morality. We want to know how we should live.

The terms *moral* and *ethics* come from Latin and Greek, respectively ("mores" and "ethos"), deriving their meaning from the idea of "custom." Although philosophers sometimes use these terms interchangeably, many distinguish among *morality, moral philosophy,* and *ethics.* I generally use *morality* to refer to certain customs, precepts, and practices of people and cultures. This is sometimes called *positive morality* or *descriptive morality* (since it describes actual beliefs and customs). I use *moral philosophy* to refer to philosophical or theoretical reflection on morality. Specific moral theories issuing from such philosophical reflection I call *ethical theories,* in line with a common practice. I use *ethics* to refer to the whole domain of morality and moral philosophy, since these two areas have many features in common. For example, both areas concern values, virtues, and principles and practices, although in different ways.

Moral philosophy refers to the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories. It undertakes to analyze concepts and terms such as "right," "wrong," "permissible," "ought," "good," and "evil" in their moral contexts. Moral philosophy seeks to establish principles of right behavior that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups. It investigates which values and virtues are paramount to a worthwhile life or society. It builds and scrutinizes arguments in ethical theories and seeks to discover valid principles (e.g., "Never kill innocent human beings") and the relationship between valid principles (e.g., "Does saving a life in some situations constitute a valid reason for breaking a promise?").

MORALITY AS COMPARED WITH OTHER NORMATIVE SUBJECTS

Moral precepts concern norms; roughly speaking, they concern not what is, but what ought to be. How should I live my life? What is the right thing to do in this situation? Should I always tell the truth? Do I have a duty to report a coworker whom I have seen cheating our company? Should I tell my friend that his spouse

is having an affair? Is premarital sex morally permissible? Ought a woman ever to have an abortion? Morality has a distinct action-guiding, or *normative,*[2] aspect, which it shares with other practical institutions, such as religion, law, and etiquette.

Moral behavior, as defined by a given religion, is usually believed essential to that religion's practice. But, neither the practices nor precepts of morality should be identified with religion. The practice of morality need not be motivated by religious considerations. And, moral precepts need not be grounded in revelation or divine authority—as religious teachings invariably are. The most salient characteristic of ethics—by which I mean both philosophical morality (or *morality,* as I will simply refer to it) and moral philosophy—is its grounding in reason and human experience.

To use a spatial metaphor, secular ethics is horizontal, lacking a vertical or transcendental dimension. Religious ethics, being grounded in revelation or divine authority, has that vertical dimension, although religious ethics generally uses reason to supplement or complement revelation. These two differing orientations often generate different moral principles and standards of evaluation, but they need not do so. Some versions of religious ethics, which posit God's revelation of the moral law in nature or conscience, hold that reason can discover what is right or wrong even apart from divine revelation. We will discuss this subject in Chapters 3 (under natural law) and 10.

Morality is also closely related to law, and some people equate the two practices. Many laws are instituted in order to promote well-being, resolve conflicts of interest, and promote social harmony, just as morality does, but ethics may judge that some laws are immoral without denying that they are valid *laws.* For example, laws may permit slavery, spousal abuse, racial discrimination, or sexual discrimination, but these are immoral practices. A Catholic or antiabortion advocate may believe that the laws permitting abortion are immoral.

In a 1989 PBS television series, *Ethics in America,* James Neal, a trial lawyer, was asked what he would do if he discovered that his client had committed a murder some years earlier for which another man had been convicted and would soon be executed.[3] Neal said that he had a legal obligation to keep this information confidential and that, if he divulged it, he would be disbarred. It is arguable that he has a moral obligation that overrides his legal obligation and demands that he act to save the innocent man from execution.

Furthermore, some aspects of morality are not covered by law. For example, although, it is generally agreed that lying is usually immoral, there is no general law against it (except under special conditions, such as committing perjury or falsifying income tax returns). Sometimes, college newspapers publish advertisements by vendors who offer "research assistance," despite knowing in advance that these vendors will aid and abet plagiarism. Publishing such ads is legal, but its moral correctness is doubtful. The thirty-eight people who watched the attacks on Kitty Genovese and did nothing to intervene broke no New York law, but they were very likely morally culpable for their inaction.[4]

There is one other major difference between law and morality. In 1351, King Edward of England promulgated a law against treason that made it a crime merely to think homicidal thoughts about the king. But, alas, the law could not

be enforced, for no tribunal can search the heart and fathom the intentions of the mind. It is true that *intention,* such as malice aforethought, plays a role in determining the legal character of an act, once the act has been committed. But, preemptive punishment for people who are presumed to have bad intentions is illegal. If malicious intentions ("mens rea," in law) were illegal, wouldn't we all deserve imprisonment? Even if one could detect others' intentions, when should the punishment be administered? As soon as the offender has the intention? But, how do we know that the offender won't change his or her mind? Furthermore, isn't there a continuum between imagining some harm to X, wishing a harm to X, desiring a harm to X, and intending a harm to X?

Although it is impractical to have laws against bad intentions, these intentions are still bad, still morally wrong. Suppose I buy a gun with the intention of killing Uncle Charlie to inherit his wealth, but I never get a chance to fire it (for example, suppose Uncle Charlie moves to Australia). Although I have not committed a crime, I have committed a moral wrong.

Finally, law differs from morality in that there are physical and financial sanctions[5] (e.g., imprisonment and fines) enforcing the law but only the sanction of conscience and reputation enforcing morality.

Morality also differs from etiquette, which concerns form and style rather than the essence of social existence. Etiquette determines what is polite behavior rather than what is *right* behavior in a deeper sense. It represents society's decision as to how we are to dress, greet one another, eat, celebrate festivals, dispose of the dead, express gratitude and appreciation, and, in general, carry out social transactions. Whether people greet each other with a handshake, a bow, a hug, or a kiss on the cheek depends on their social system. People in Russia wear their wedding ring on the third finger of the right hand, whereas we wear it on the left hand. People in England hold their fork in the left hand, whereas people in other countries are more likely to hold it in the right hand. People in India typically eat without a fork at all, using the forefingers of the right hand to convey food from the plate to the mouth. Whether we uncover our heads in holy places (as males do in Christian churches) or cover them (as females do in Catholic churches and males do in synagogues), none of these rituals has any moral superiority. Polite manners grace our social existence, but they are not what social existence is about. They help social transactions to flow smoothly but are not the substance of those transactions.

At the same time, it can be immoral to disregard or flout etiquette. Whether to shake hands when greeting a person for the first time or put one's hands together in front as one bows, as people in India do, is a matter of cultural decision. But, once the custom is adopted, the practice takes on the importance of a moral rule, subsumed under the wider principle of Show Respect to People. Similarly, there is no moral necessity to wear clothes, but we have adopted the custom partly to keep warm in colder climates and partly to be modest. But, there is nothing wrong with nudists who decide to live together in nudist colonies. However, for people to go nude outside of nudist colonies, say, in classrooms, stores, and along the road may well be so offensive that it is morally insensitive. Recently, there was a scandal on the beaches of south India, where American tourists swam in bikinis, shocking the more modest Indians. There was nothing

immoral in itself about wearing bikinis, but given the cultural context, the Americans willfully violated etiquette and were guilty of moral impropriety.

Although Americans pride themselves on tolerance, pluralism, and awareness of other cultures, custom and etiquette can be—even among people from similar backgrounds—a bone of contention. A friend of mine, John, tells of an experience early in his marriage. He and his wife, Gwen, were hosting their first Thanksgiving meal. He had been used to small celebrations with his immediate family, whereas his wife had been used to grand celebrations. He writes, "I had been asked to carve, something I had never done before, but I was willing. I put on an apron, entered the kitchen, and attacked the bird with as much artistry as I could muster. And what reward did I get? [My wife] burst into tears. In *her* family the turkey is brought to the table, laid before the [father], grace is said, and *then* he carves! 'So I fail patriarchy,' I hollered later. 'What do you expect?'"[6]

Law, etiquette, and religion are all important institutions, but each has limitations. A limitation of law is that you can't have a law against every social malady, nor can you enforce every desirable rule. A limitation of etiquette is that it doesn't get to the heart of what is vitally important for personal and social existence. Whether or not one eats with one's fingers pales in significance with the importance of being honest, trustworthy, or just. Etiquette is a cultural invention, but morality claims to be a discovery. A limitation of religious injunction is that it rests on authority, and we may lack certainty or agreement about the authority's credentials or how the authority would rule in ambiguous or new cases. Since religion is founded not on reason but on revelation, you cannot use reason to convince someone from another religion that your view is the right one. I hasten to add that, when fundamental moral principles cause moral differences, philosophical reasoning is unlikely to settle the matter. Often, however, our moral differences have their roots in worldviews, not moral principles. For example, a pro-life and pro-choice advocate may agree that it is wrong to kill an innocent person, but they differ about the facts. The pro-life advocate's religion may state that a fetus has an eternal soul and thus a right to life, whereas the pro-choice advocate may believe that no one has a soul and only self-conscious, rational beings have a right to life.

The following table characterizes the relationship among ethics, religion, law, and etiquette:

Subject	Normative Disjuncts	Sanctions
Ethics	Right and wrong, as defined by conscience or reason	Conscience—praise and blame; reputation
Religion	Right and wrong (sin), generally as defined by religious authority	Conscience—eternal reward and punishment, because of a supernatural agent or force
Law	Legal and illegal, as defined by a judicial body	Punishments determined by the legislative body
Etiquette	Proper and improper, as defined by the culture	Social disapprobation and approbation

In summary, morality differs from law and etiquette by going deeper into the essence of our social existence. It differs from religion by seeking reasons, rather than authority, to justify its principles. The central purpose of moral philosophy is to secure valid principles of conduct and values that can guide human actions and produce good character. As such, it is the most important activity we know, for it concerns how we are to live.

TRAITS OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

A central feature of morality is the moral principle. We have already noted that moral principles are practical action guides, but we must say more about the traits of such principles. Although there is no universal agreement on the traits a moral principle must have, there is a wide consensus about five traits:

1. Prescriptivity
2. Universalizability
3. Overridingness
4. Publicity
5. Practicability

Prescriptivity

Prescriptivity refers to the practical, or action-guiding, nature of morality. Moral principles are generally put forth as injunctions or imperatives (e.g., "Do not kill," "Do no unnecessary harm," and "Love your neighbor"). They are intended for use: to advise people and influence action. Prescriptivity shares this trait with all normative discourse. Retroactively, this trait is used to appraise behavior, assign praise and blame, and produce feelings of satisfaction or guilt. We will discuss this further in Chapter 9.

Universalizability

Moral principles must apply to all who are in the relevantly similar situation. If one judges that act X is right for a certain person P, then it is right for anyone relevantly similar to P. This trait is exemplified in the Golden Rule, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you (if you were in their shoes)," and in the formal Principle of Justice:

> It cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment.[7]

Universalizability applies to all evaluative judgments. If I say that X is a good Y, then I am logically committed to judge that anything relevantly similar to X is a good Y. This trait is an extension of the principle of consistency: One ought to be consistent about one's value judgments, including one's moral judgments. Take any act you are contemplating doing and ask, "Could I will that everyone act according to this principle?" I am writing this chapter on April 23, 2004, the day the following story, which illustrates the importance of the Principle of Universalizability, appeared in *The New York Times:*

> A few days after a terrorist suicide bombing killed five people and destroyed the police station in Riyadh, many Saudis, including college students wearing T-shirts flaunting Osama bin Ladin's picture, who supported the jihad terrorism in Iraq against Americans and the Iraqi officials supporting them, were morally outraged by the suicide bombing in their city. An engineer, Abdullah al-Enezi said of his brother Majid who was killed in a battle with the Americans, "He went to Iraq seeking martyrdom because of the recent events there . . . America's unjust policy toward the Muslims."[8]

Abdullah and other Saudis praised the jihad against the Americans, including the suicide bombing of the World Trade Center and the suicide bombings of police stations (which kill mainly noncombatants, including schoolchildren) in Iraq. But, they didn't approve of terrorism when it was directed against their police department. Their attitudes are contradictory. If it's permissible for your group to kill civilians in the World Trade Center and Iraq when you don't approve of their governments' policies, then by parity of reasoning, it's permissible for terrorists to bomb your buildings and kill your citizens when they have a grievance against your government. If terrorism is not permissible against you, then it's not permissible against me, unless you can find a relevant difference between us. The principle of universalizability shows that your attitude is contradictory. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. I suppose the Islamic fundamentalist terrorists on 9/11 acted on the principle, "Whenever you can harm an enemy nation, do whatever is necessary to kill its leaders and citizens." But, then their supporters should approve of Western nations bombing Muslim cities and villages, killing leaders and civilians. We will look further at this trait in Chapters 6, 7, and 9.

Overridingness

Moral principles have hegemonic authority, *overridingness.* They are not the only principles, but they take precedence over other considerations, including aesthetic, prudential, and legal ones. The artist Paul Gauguin may have been aesthetically justified in abandoning his family to devote his life to painting beautiful Pacific island pictures, but morally, or all things considered, he probably was not justified. It may be prudent to lie to save my reputation, but it probably is morally wrong to do so—in which case, I should tell the truth. When the

WHY DO WE NEED MORALITY?

Hobbes's Account

Why do we need morality? What is its nature and purpose? What does it do for us that no other social arrangement does? There are many philosophical replies to these questions, but a classic reply is from the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in his book *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes believed that human beings always act out of perceived self-interest; that is, they invariably seek gratification and avoid harm. His argument goes like this. Nature has made us basically equal in physical and mental abilities, so that, even though one person may be somewhat stronger or smarter than another, each has the ability to harm, even kill, the other, if not alone, then in confederacy with others. Furthermore, we all want to attain our goals, such as having sufficient food, shelter, security, power, wealth, and other scarce resources. These two facts, equality of ability to harm and desire to satisfy our goals, lead to an unstable state:

> From this equality of ability arises equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two people desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end, which is principally their own preservation and sometimes their enjoyment only, endeavor to destroy or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass, that where an invader hath no more to fear, than another man's single power; if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labor, but also of his life or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another.

Given this state of insecurity, people have reason to fear one another. Hobbes calls this a "state of nature," in which there are no common ways of life, no enforced laws or moral rules, and no justice or injustice, for these concepts do not apply. There are no reliable expectations about other people's behavior—except that they will follow their own inclinations and perceived interests, tending to be arbitrary, violent, and capricious:

> Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is for *every man, against every man*. For war consists not in battle only or in the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend in battle is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of *time,* is to be considered in the nature of war; as it is in the nature of weather. For as the nature of foul weather lies not in the shower or two of rain, but in an inclination thereto of many days together; so the nature of war consists not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no disposition to the contrary.

Hobbes described the consequence of the state of nature, this war of all against all, as follows:

> In such a condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no cultivating of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the comfortable buildings; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no literature; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

But this state of nature, or more exactly, state of anarchy and chaos, is in no one's interest. We can all do better if we compromise, give up some of our natural liberty—to do as we please—so that we will all be more likely to get what we want: security, happiness, power, prosperity, and peace. So, rational egoists that we are, according to Hobbes, we give up some of our liberty and agree to a *social contract* or *covenant*. It sets a ruler and rules over us, which we are to obey, since the rules are enforced by a mighty ruler, the state, the *Leviathan*. Only within this contract does morality arise and do justice and injustice come into being. Where there is no enforceable law, there is neither right nor wrong, justice nor injustice.

So morality is a form of social control. We all opt for an enforceable set of rules such that if almost all of us obey them almost all the time, almost all of us will be better off almost all the time. A select few people, conceivably, may actually be better off in the state of nature, but the vast majority will be better off in a situation of security and mutual cooperation. Some people may cheat and thus renege on the social contract, but as long as the majority honors the contract most of the time, we will all flourish.

Hobbes does not claim that a pure state of nature ever existed or that humanity ever really formally entered into such a contract, although he notes that such a state actually exists among nations, so a "cold war" keeps us all in fear. Rather, Hobbes explains the function of morality. He answers the question, "Why do we need morality?" Why? Because without it existence would be an unbearable hell in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

William Golding's classic novel *Lord of the Flies* brilliantly portrays the Hobbesian account of morality.

A Reflection On *Lord Of The Flies*

Which is better—to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill?[11]

In the last section, we asked, "Why exactly do we need moral codes?" What function do they play in our lives and in society in general? Rather than continue my discursive essay on the benefits of morality, let me draw your attention to a book every young person has read (or should have read): William Golding's classic novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954). This modern moral allegory may provide a clue about the nature and purpose of morality.

A group of boys ages six to twelve from an English private school, cast adrift on an uninhabited Pacific island, create their own social system. For a while, the constraints of civilized society prevent total chaos. All the older boys recognize the necessity of substantive and procedural rules. Only he who has the white conch, the symbol of authority, may speak during an assembly. They choose the leader democratically and invest him with limited powers. Even the evil Roger, while taunting little Henry by throwing stones near him, manages to keep the stones from harming the child.

> Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law. Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins. (p. 78)

After some initial euphoria in being liberated from the adult world of constraints and entering an exciting world of fun in the sun, the children come up against the usual banes of social existence: competition for power and status, neglect of social responsibility, failure of public policy, and escalating violence. Two boys, Ralph and Jack, vie for leadership, and a bitter rivalry emerges between them. As a compromise, a division of labor ensues in which Jack's choirboy hunters refuse to help the others in constructing shelters. Freeloading soon becomes common, as most of the children leave their tasks to play on the beach. Neglect of duty results in their failure to be rescued by a passing airplane. The unbridled lust for excitement leads to the great orgiastic pig kills and finally, at its nadir, to the thirst for human blood.

Civilization's power is weak and vulnerable to atavistic, volcanic passions. The sensitive Simon, the symbol of religious consciousness (like Simon Peter, the first disciple of Jesus), who prophesies that Ralph will be saved and is the first to discover and fight against the "ancient, inescapable recognition" of the beast in us, is slaughtered by the group in a wild frenzy. Only Piggy and Ralph, mere observers of the orgiastic homicide, feel vicarious pangs of guilt at this atrocity.

The incarnation of philosophy and culture—poor, fat, nearsighted Piggy, with his broken spectacles and asthma—becomes ever more pathetic as the chaos increases. He reaches the nadir of his ridiculous position after the rebels, led by Jack, steal his spectacles to harness the sun's rays for starting fires. After Ralph, the emblem of not-too-bright but morally good civilized leadership, fails to persuade Jack to return the glasses, Piggy asserts his moral right to them:

> You're stronger than I am and you haven't got asthma. You can see. . . . But I don't ask for my glasses back, not as a favour. I don't ask you to be a sport . . . not because you're strong, but because what's right's right. Give me my glasses. . . . You got to. (p. 211)

Piggy might as well have addressed the fire itself, for in this state of moral anarchy moral discourse is a foreign tongue that only incites the worst elements

to greater immorality. Roger, perched on a cliff above, responds to moral reasoning by dislodging a huge rock that hits Piggy and flings him to his death forty feet below.

The title *Lord of the Flies* comes from a translation of the Greek "Beelzebub," which is a name for the devil. Golding shows that we need no external devil to bring about evil, but that we have found the devil and, in the words of Pogo, "he is us." Ubiquitous, ever waiting for a moment to strike, the devil emerges from the depths of the subconscious whenever there is a conflict of interest or a moment of moral lassitude. As E. L. Epstein says, "The tenets of civilization, the moral and social codes, the Ego, the intelligence itself, form only a veneer over this white-hot power, this uncontrollable force, 'the fury and the mire of human veins.'"[12]

Beelzebub's ascendancy proceeds through fear, hysteria, violence, and death. A delegation starts out hunting pigs for meat. Then, they find themselves enjoying the kill. To drown the incipient shame over bloodthirstiness and take on a persona more compatible with their deed, the children paint themselves with colored mud. Their lusting for the kill takes on all the powerful overtones of an orgiastic sexual ritual, so that, being liberated from their social selves, they kill without remorse whomever gets in their way. The deaths of Simon and Piggy (the symbols of the religious and the philosophical, the two great fences blocking the descent to hell) and the final orgiastic hunt with the "spear sharpened at both ends" signal for Ralph the depths of evil in the human heart.

Ironically, it is the British navy that finally comes to the rescue and saves Ralph (civilization) just when all seems lost. But, the symbol of the navy is a Janus-faced omen. On the one hand, it symbolizes that a military defense is, unfortunately, sometimes needed to save civilization from the barbarians (Hitler's Nazis or Jack and Roger's allies), but on the other hand it symbolizes the quest for blood and vengeance latent in contemporary civilization. The children's world is really only a stage lower than the adult world from whence they come, and that shallow adult civilization could very well regress to tooth and claw if it were scratched too sharply. The children were saved by the adults, but who will save the adults who put so much emphasis on military enterprises and weapons systems—in the euphemistic name of "defense"? To quote E. L. Epstein:

> The officer, having interrupted a man-hunt, prepares to take the children off the island in a cruiser which will presently be hunting its enemy in the same implacable way. And who will rescue the adult and his cruiser?[13]

The fundamental ambiguity of human existence is visible in every section of the book, poignantly mirroring the human condition. Even Piggy's spectacles, the sole example of modern technology on the island, become a bane for the island as Jack uses them to ignite a forest fire that will smoke out their prey, Ralph, and burn down the entire forest and destroy the island's animal life. It is a symbol both of our penchant for misusing technology to vitiate the environment and our ability to create weapons that will lead to global suicide.

The Purposes of Morality

What is the role of morality in human existence? What are little boys and girls and big men and women made of that requires ethical consciousness? Ralph answers these questions at the end of the tale.

> And in the middle of [the children], with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy. (p. 248)

In this wise modern moral allegory, we catch a glimpse of some of morality's purposes. Rules formed over the ages and internalized within us hold us back and, hopefully, defeat "The Lord of the Flies" in society, whether he be inherent in us individually or an emergent property of corporate existence. The moral code restrains the Rogers of society from doing evil until untoward social conditions open up the sluice gates of sadism and random violence. Morality is the force that enables Piggy and Ralph to maintain a modicum of order within their dwindling society, first motivating them to compromise with Jack and then keeping things in a wider perspective.

In Golding's allegory, morality is "honored more in the breach than in the observance,"[14] for we see the consequences of not having rules, principles, and virtuous character. As Piggy says, "Which is better—to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill [each other]?" Morality consists of a set of rules such that, if nearly everyone follows them, then nearly everyone will flourish. These rules restrict our freedom but only in order to promote greater freedom and well-being. More specifically, morality seems to have these five purposes:

1. To keep society from falling apart
2. To ameliorate human suffering
3. To promote human flourishing
4. To resolve conflicts of interest in just and orderly ways
5. To assign praise and blame, reward and punishment, and guilt

Let us elaborate on these purposes. First, morality is a social activity. It has to do with society, not the individual in isolation. If Robinson Crusoe is the only person on an island, no morality exists, but as soon as Friday appears, morality also appears. In a world in which there is only one person there would be prudential concerns, some behavior would be better for you than others, but there would not be morality in the full meaning of that term. Morality is analogous to prudence—prudence on a social scale. It is a set of *norms,* or rules, set forth to enable us to reach our collective goals. Imagine what society would be like if everyone, or nearly everyone, did whatever he or she pleased without obeying moral rules. I would promise to help you with your philosophy homework tomorrow if you fix my car today (would there even be the production of cars without basic morality?). You believe me. So you fix my car, but you are deeply angry when I laugh at you tomorrow as I drive away to the beach instead of

helping you with your homework. Or, you loan me money, but I run off with it. Or, I lie to you or harm you when it is in my interest, or even kill you when I feel the urge.

Parents would abandon children, and spouses would betray each other whenever it was convenient. Under such circumstances, society would break down. No one would have an incentive to help anyone else, because reciprocity (a moral principle) was not recognized. Great suffering would go largely unameliorated, and, certainly, people would not be very happy. We would not flourish or reach our highest potential.

Let me comment on the fourth purpose, to resolve conflicts of interest in orderly and just ways. A sense of fairness is so universal, observed in every culture as well as in primates, that it probably is hardwired in us, either by God or evolution, or both. People everywhere believe that one ought to reciprocate favors done, that good deeds deserve gratitude and praise—and, sometimes, reward—and that only the guilty should be punished for crimes. Legal systems institutionalize some of these instinctive judgments, but they seem more basic than the written law. They seem to be a set of laws written on the human heart: we ought to reap as we sow. The ideal is embedded in the Hindu/Buddhist doctrine of karma and the Judeo-Christian idea of divine justice.

Some parts of morality seem to be inventions of human ingenuity, but most universal aspects have to do with common needs, interests, and deep universal values. If it is an invention, it is a rational one based on the discovery of what will serve human needs and interests. It is an invention like the wheel, which is a phenomenal invention that obeys physical laws and transforms energy more efficiently. Wheels can have diverse purposes. The water wheel is different from the wheel barrow, which is different from the wheel of a bicycle or a car. A wheel can be constructed out of diverse materials, wood, steel, stone, or rubber, but there are constraints. You can't make a square or triangular wheel or wheels disproportionately heavy. But, different kinds of wheels serve different purposes in different situations. In another sense, morality is a discovery, a discovery of those principles and strategies that best promote a good individual and communal life. Our most fundamental moral principles are both a rational invention and a rational discovery.

In the mid-1990s, I visited the former Soviet republics Kazakhstan and Russia, which are undergoing a difficult transition from communism to democracy. In this transition (hopefully, it will turn out favorably), with the state's power considerably withdrawn, crime is increasing, and distrust is prevalent. At night, trying to navigate my way up the staircases in the apartment building where I was staying, I was in complete darkness. I asked why there were no lightbulbs in the stairwells, only to be told that the residents stole them, believing that, if they did not take them, their neighbors would. Absent a dominant authority, the social contract has eroded, and everyone must struggle alone in the darkness.

We need moral rules to guide our actions in ways that light up our paths and prevent and reduce suffering, enhance human well-being (and animal well-being, for that matter), resolve our conflicts of interests according to recognizably fair

rules, and assign responsibility for actions, so that we can praise, blame, reward, and punish people according to how their actions reflect moral principles. In a world becoming ever more interdependent, with the threat of terrorism and the use of weapons of mass destruction, we need a sense of global cooperation and a strong notion of moral responsibility. If we are to survive and flourish in the twenty-first century, we will need a set of universally acceptable moral rules. Is such a set possible? This book is an attempt to begin the task of providing such a set.

Even though these five purposes are related, they are not identical, and different moral theories emphasize different purposes in different ways. Utilitarianism fastens upon human flourishing and the amelioration of suffering, whereas contractual systems rooted in rational self-interest accent the resolution of conflicts of interest. A complete moral theory would include a place for each of these purposes. The goal of such a theory is to internalize in each moral person's life the rules that promote these purposes, thus producing the virtuous person, someone who is "a jewel that shines in [morality's] own light," to paraphrase Kant. The goal of morality is to create happy and virtuous people, the kind that create flourishing communities. That's why it is the most important subject on earth.

CONCLUSION

Let us return to questions I asked at the beginning of this chapter. You should be able to answer each of them.

What is the nature of morality, and why do we need it? Morality concerns discovering the rules that promote the human good, as elaborated in the five purposes discussed above. Without morality, we cannot promote that good.

What is the good, and how shall I know it? The good in question is the human good, specified as happiness, reaching one's potential, and so forth. Whatever we decide on that fulfills human needs and helps us develop our deepest potential is the good that morality promotes.

Are moral principles absolute, or are they simply relative to social groups or individual decision? It would seem that moral principles have universal and objective validity, since similar rules are needed in all cultures to promote human flourishing. So, moral rules are not justified by cultural acceptance and are not relative. But, neither are they absolute, if "absolute" means that one can never break or override them. Most moral rules can be overridden by other moral rules in certain contexts. For example, it is sometimes justified to lie to save an innocent life.

Is it in my interest to be moral? Yes, in general and in the long run, for morality is exactly the set of rules most likely to help (nearly) all of us if nearly all of us follow them nearly all of the time. The good is good for you—at least most of the time. Furthermore, if we believe in the superior importance of morality, then we will bring children up so that they will be unhappy when

they break the moral code. They will feel guilt. In this sense, the commitment to morality and its internalization nearly guarantee that, if you break the moral rules, you will suffer—both because of external sanctions and internal sanctions (moral guilt).

What is the relationship between morality and religion? Religion relies more on revelation, and morality relies more on reason, on rational reflection. But, religion can provide added incentive for the moral life, offering the individual a relationship with God, who sees and will judge all our actions.

What is the relationship between morality and law? Morality and law should be very close, and morality should be the basis of the law, but there can be both unjust laws and immoral acts that cannot be legally enforced. The law is shallower than morality and has a harder time judging human motives and intentions. You can be morally evil, intending to do evil things, but as long as you don't do them, you are legally innocent.

What is the relationship between morality and etiquette? Etiquette consists in the customs of a culture, but they are typically morally neutral in that the culture could flourish with a different code of etiquette. In our culture, we eat with knives and forks, but a culture that eats with chopsticks or fingers is no less moral.

To go any further, we must examine the very status of moral principles. Are they wholly relative to culture—socially approved habits—or do some of them enjoy universal validity regardless of whether societies recognize them? We turn to this problem in Chapter 2.

NOTES

1. Martin Gansberg, "38 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call Police," *New York Times,* March 27, 1964.
2. The term *normative* means seeking to make certain types of behavior a norm, or a standard, in a society. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines it as "of, or relating or conforming to, or prescribing norms or standards."
3. *Ethics in America,* PBS, 1989, produced by Fred Friendly.
4. In Anglo-American law, there is no general duty to rescue a person in need. In 1908, James Barr Ames proposed that a person should be required to "save another from impending death or great bodily harm, when he might do so with little or no inconvenience to himself." The proposal was defeated, as its opponents argued: Would a rich person to whom $20 meant very little be legally obliged to save the life of a hungry child in a foreign land? The rule was seen as confusing charity with law. Only Vermont and Minnesota have Good Samaritan laws, requiring that one come to the aid of a person in grave physical harm but only to the extent that the aid "can be rendered without danger or peril to himself or without interference with important duties owed to others."
5. A *sanction* is a mechanism for social control, used to enforce society's standards. External sanctions may consist in rewards or punishment, praise or blame, and approbation or disapprobation. The chief internal sanction is *conscience.* Sigmund Freud defined conscience as "the inner perception of objections to definite impulses that exist in us; and the emphasis is put upon the fact that this rejection does