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About Ethics

This book is about practical ethics, that is, about the application of ethics or morality – I shall use the words interchangeably – to practical issues. Though the reader may be impatient to get to these issues without delay, if we are to have a useful discussion within ethics, it is necessary to say a little *about* ethics so that we have a clear understanding of what we are doing when we discuss ethical questions. This first chapter, therefore, sets the stage for the remainder of the book. To prevent it from growing into an entire volume itself, it is brief and at times dogmatic. I cannot take the space properly to consider all the different conceptions of ethics that might be opposed to the one I shall defend, but this chapter will at least serve to reveal the assumptions on which the remainder of the book is based.

WHAT ETHICS IS NOT

Ethics is not Primarily About Sex

There was a time, around the 1950s, when if you saw a newspaper headline reading RELIGIOUS LEADER ATTACKS DECLINING MORAL STANDARDS, you would expect to read yet again about promiscuity, homosexuality and pornography, and not about the puny amounts we give as overseas aid to poorer nations or the damage we are causing to our planet's environment. As a reaction to the dominance of this narrow sense of morality, it became popular to regard morality as a system of nasty puritanical prohibitions, mainly designed to stop people from having fun.

Fortunately, this era has passed. We no longer think that morality, or ethics, is a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex. Even religious leaders talk more about global poverty and climate change and less about promiscuity and pornography. Decisions about sex may involve considerations of honesty, concern for others, prudence, avoidance of harm to others and so on, but the same could be said of decisions about driving a car. (In fact, the moral issues raised by driving a car, both from an environmental and from a safety point of view, are much more serious than those raised by safe sex.) Accordingly, this book contains no discussion of sexual morality. There are more important ethical issues to be considered.

Ethics is not 'Good in Theory but not in Practice'

The second thing that ethics is not is an ideal system that is all very noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse of this is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice.

People sometimes believe that ethics is inapplicable to the real world because they assume that ethics is a system of short and simple rules like 'Do not lie', 'Do not steal' and 'Do not kill'. It is not surprising that those who hold this model of ethics should also believe that ethics is not suited to life's complexities. In unusual situations, simple rules conflict; and even when they do not, following a rule can lead to disaster. It may normally be wrong to lie, but if you were living in Nazi Germany and the Gestapo came to your door looking for Jews, it would surely be right to deny the existence of the Jewish family hiding in your attic.

Like the failure of a morality focused on restricting our sexual behavior, the failure of an ethic of simple rules must not be taken as a failure of ethics as a whole. It is only a failure of one view of ethics, and not even an irremediable failure of that view. Those who think that ethics is a system of rules – the deontologists – can rescue their position by finding more complicated and more specific rules that do not conflict with each other, or by ranking the rules in some hierarchical structure to resolve conflicts between them. Moreover, there is a long-standing approach to ethics that is quite untouched by the complexities that make simple rules difficult to apply. This is the consequentialist view. Consequentialists start not with moral rules but with goals. They assess actions by the extent to which they further these goals. The best-known, though not the only, consequentialist theory is utilitarianism. The classical utilitarian regards

an action as right if it produces more happiness for all affected by it than any alternative action and wrong if it does not. Two qualifications to that statement are necessary: 'more happiness' here means net happiness, after deducting any suffering or misery that may also have been caused by the action; and if two different actions tie for the title of producing the greatest amount of happiness, either of them is right.

The consequences of an action vary according to the circumstances in which it is performed. Hence, a utilitarian can never properly be accused of a lack of realism or of a rigid adherence to ideals in defiance of practical experience. The utilitarian will judge lying as bad in some circumstances and good in others, depending on its consequences.

Ethics is not Based on Religion

The third thing ethics is not is something intelligible only in the context of religion. I shall treat ethics as entirely independent of religion.

Some theists say that ethics cannot do without religion because the very meaning of 'good' is nothing other than 'what God approves'. Plato refuted a similar claim more than two thousand years ago by arguing that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods' approval that makes them good. The alternative view makes divine approval entirely arbitrary: if the gods had happened to approve of torture and disapprove of helping our neighbours, torture would have been good and helping our neighbours bad. Some theists have attempted to extricate themselves from this dilemma by maintaining that God is good and so could not possibly approve of torture; but if these theists want to maintain that good means what God approves, they are caught in a trap of their own making, for what can they possibly mean by the assertion that God is good – that God is approved of by God?

Traditionally, the more important link between religion and ethics was that religion was thought to provide a reason for doing what is right, the reason being that those who are virtuous will be rewarded by an eternity of bliss while the rest roast in hell. Not all religious thinkers have accepted this: Immanuel Kant, a most pious Christian, scorned anything that smacked of a self-interested motive for obeying the moral law. We must obey it, he said, for its own sake. Nor do we have to be Kantians to dispense with the motivation offered by traditional religion. There is a long line of thought that finds the source of ethics in our benevolent inclinations and the sympathy most of us have for others. This is, however, a complex topic, and I shall not pursue it here because it is the subject

of the final chapter of this book. It is enough to say that our everyday observation of our fellows clearly shows that ethical behaviour does not require belief in heaven and hell and, conversely, that belief in heaven and hell does not always lead to ethical behaviour.

If morality was not given to us by a divine creator, from where did it come? We know that, like our close relatives the chimpanzees and bonobos, we have evolved from social mammals. It seems that during this long period of evolution, we developed a moral faculty that generates intuitions about right and wrong. Some of these we share with our primate relatives – they too have a strong sense of reciprocity; and in their sometimes outraged responses to a flagrant failure to repay a good turn, we can see the beginnings of our own sense of justice. Observing a group of chimps living together, Frans de Waal noticed that after one chimp, Puist, had supported another, Luit, in fending off an attack from a third, Nikkie, Nikkie subsequently attacked Puist. Puist beckoned to Luit for support, but Luit did nothing. When the attack from Nikkie was over, Puist furiously attacked Luit. De Waal comments: 'If her fury was in fact the result of Luit's failure to help her after she had helped him, this would suggest that reciprocity among chimpanzees is governed by the same sense of moral rightness and justice as it is among humans.'

From these intuitive responses, shared with other social mammals, morality has developed under the influence of our acquisition of language. It has taken distinct forms in different human cultures, but there is still a surprisingly large common ground which you, the reader, will most probably share. It is vital for everything that follows in this book that we should understand that these evolved intuitions do not necessarily give us the right answers to moral questions. What was good for our ancestors may not be good for human beings as a whole today, let alone for our planet and all the other beings living on it. No doubt small human communities on a lightly populated planet were more likely to survive if they had an ethic that said 'Be fruitful and multiply' and, consistently with this, favoured large families and condemned homosexuality. Today, we can and should critically examine any intuitive reactions we may have to such practices and take account of the consequences of having large families or of homosexuality, for the world in which we live.

Many people assume that anything natural is good. They are likely to think that if our moral intuitions are natural, we ought to follow them, but this would be a mistake. As John Stuart Mill pointed out in his essay *On Nature,* the word 'nature' either means everything that exists in the universe, including human beings and all that they create, or it

means the world as it would be, apart from human beings and what humans bring about. In the first sense, nothing that humans do can be 'unnatural.' In the second sense, the claim that something humans do is 'unnatural' is no objection at all to doing it, for everything that we do is an interference with nature, and obviously much of that interference – like treating disease – is highly desirable.

Understanding the origins of morality, therefore, frees us from two putative masters, God and nature. We have inherited a set of moral intuitions from our ancestors. Now we need to work out which of them should be changed.

Ethics is not Relative to the Society in which You Live

The most philosophically challenging view about ethics that I shall deny in this opening chapter is that ethics is relative or subjective. At least, I shall deny this view in some of the senses in which it is often asserted. This point requires a more extended discussion than the other three.

Let us take first the oft-asserted idea that ethics is relative to the society one happens to live in. This is true in one sense and false in another. It is true that, as we have already seen in discussing consequentialism, actions that are right in one situation because of their good consequences may be wrong in another situation because of their bad consequences. Thus, casual sexual intercourse may be wrong when it leads to the existence of children who cannot be adequately cared for and not wrong when, because of the existence of effective contraception, it does not lead to reproduction at all. This is only a superficial form of relativism. It suggests that a specific principle like 'Casual sex is wrong' may be relative to time and place, but it is compatible with such a principle being objectively false when it is stated to apply to all instances of casual sex, no matter what the circumstances. Nor does this form of relativism give us any reason to reject the universal applicability of a more general principle like 'Do what increases happiness and reduces suffering.'

A more fundamental form of relativism became popular in the nineteenth century when data on the moral beliefs and practices of far-flung societies began pouring in. The knowledge that there were places where sexual relations between unmarried people were regarded as perfectly wholesome brought the seeds of a revolution in sexual attitudes to the strict reign of Victorian prudery. It is not surprising that to some the new

knowledge suggested, not merely that the moral code of nineteenth-century Europe was not objectively valid, but that no moral judgment can do more than reflect the customs of the society in which it is made.

Marxists adapted this form of relativism to their own theories. The ruling ideas of each period, they said, are the ideas of its ruling class, and so the morality of a society is relative to its dominant economic class, and thus indirectly relative to its economic basis. This enabled them, they thought, to triumphantly refute the claims of feudal and bourgeois morality to objective, universal validity. Then some Marxists noticed that this raises a problem: if all morality is relative, what is so special about communism? Why side with the proletariat rather than the bourgeoisie?

Friedrich Engels, Marx's co-author, dealt with this problem in the only way possible: by abandoning relativism in favour of the more limited descriptive claim that the morality of a society divided into classes will always reflect the interests of the ruling class. In contrast, the morality of a society without class antagonisms would, Engels wrote, be a 'really human' morality. This is no longer normative relativism – that is, relativism about what we ought to do – at all, but Marxism still, in a confused sort of way, provides the impetus for a lot of woolly relativist ideas, often dressed up as 'postmodernism'.

The problem that led Engels to abandon relativism defeats ordinary ethical relativism as well. Anyone who has thought about a difficult ethical decision knows that being told what our society thinks we ought to do does not settle the quandary. We have to reach our own decision. The beliefs and customs we were brought up with may exercise great influence on us, but once we start to reflect on them, we can decide whether to act in accordance with them or go against them.

The opposite view – that ethics is and can only be relative to a particular society – has most implausible consequences. If our society disapproves of slavery while another society approves of it, this kind of relativism gives us no basis for choosing between these conflicting views. Indeed, on a relativist analysis, there is no conflict – when I say slavery is wrong, I am really only saying that my society disapproves of slavery, and when the slave owners from the other society say that slavery is right, they are only saying that their society approves of it. Why argue? Most likely, we are both speaking the truth.

Worse still, the relativist cannot satisfactorily account for the non-conformist. If 'slavery is wrong' means 'my society disapproves of slavery', then someone who lives in a society that does not disapprove of slavery is, in claiming that slavery is wrong, making a simple factual error. An

opinion poll could demonstrate the error of an ethical judgment. Would-be reformers are therefore in a parlous situation: when they set out to change the ethical views of their fellow citizens, they are *necessarily* mistaken; it is only when they succeed in winning most of the society over to their own views that those views become right.

Ethics is not Merely a Matter of Subjective Taste or Opinion

These difficulties are enough to sink ethical relativism; ethical subjectivism at least avoids making nonsense of the valiant efforts of would-be moral reformers, for it makes ethical judgments depend on the approval or disapproval of the individual making the judgment, rather than that person's society. There are other difficulties, though, that at least some forms of ethical subjectivism cannot overcome.

If those who say that ethics is subjective mean by this that when I say that cruelty to animals is wrong I am really only saying that I disapprove of cruelty to animals, they are faced with an aggravated form of one of the difficulties of relativism: the inability to account for ethical disagreement. What was true for the relativist in the case of disagreement between people from different societies is for the subjectivist true of all ethical disagreement. I say cruelty to animals is wrong; you say it is not wrong. If this means that I disapprove of cruelty to animals and you do not, both statements may be true and there is nothing to argue about.

Other theories that can be regarded as falling under the broad label of 'subjectivism' are not open to this objection. Suppose someone maintains that ethical judgments are neither true nor false because they do not describe anything – neither objective moral facts nor one's own subjective states of mind. This theory might hold that ethical judgments express emotional attitudes rather than describe them, and we disagree about ethics because we try, by expressing our own attitude, to bring our listeners to a similar attitude. This view, first developed by C. L. Stevenson, is known as emotivism. Or it might be, as R. M. Hare has urged, that ethical judgments are prescriptions and therefore more closely related to commands than to statements of fact. On this view – Hare calls it universal prescriptivism, and we shall look at it more closely later in this chapter – we disagree because we care about what people do. A third view, defended by J. L. Mackie, grants that many aspects of the way we think and talk about ethics imply the existence of objective moral standards, but asserts that these features of our thought and talk involve us in some kind of error – perhaps the legacy of the belief that ethics is a God-given system

of law, or perhaps just another example of our tendency to objectify our personal wants and preferences.

These are plausible accounts of ethics, as long as they are carefully distinguished from the crude form of subjectivism that sees ethical judgments as descriptions of the speaker's attitudes. In their denial of a realm of ethical facts that is part of the real world, existing quite independently of us, they may be correct. Suppose that they are correct: does it follow from this that ethical judgments are immune from criticism, that there is no role for reason or argument in ethics and that, from the standpoint of reason, any ethical judgment is as good as any other? I do not think it does, and advocates of the three positions referred to in the previous paragraph do not deny reason and argument a role in ethics, though they disagree as to the significance of this role.

This issue of the role that reason can play in ethics is the crucial point raised by the claim that ethics is subjective. To put practical ethics on a sound basis, it has to be shown that ethical reasoning is possible. The denial of objective ethical facts does not imply the rejection of ethical reasoning. Here the temptation is to say simply that the proof of the pudding lies in the eating, and the proof that reasoning is possible in ethics is to be found in the remaining chapters of this book; but this is not entirely satisfactory. From a theoretical point of view, it is unsatisfactory because we might find ourselves reasoning about ethics without really understanding how this can happen; and from a practical point of view, it is unsatisfactory because our reasoning is more likely to go astray if we lack a grasp of its foundations. I shall therefore attempt to say something about how we can reason in ethics.

WHAT ETHICS IS: ONE VIEW

What follows is a sketch of a view of ethics that allows reason to play an important role in ethical decisions. It is not the only possible view of ethics, but it is a plausible view. Once again, however, I shall have to pass over qualifications and objections worth a chapter to themselves. To those who think there are objections that defeat the position I am advancing, I can only say, again, that this entire chapter may be treated as no more than a statement of the assumptions on which this book is based. In that way, it will at least assist in giving a clear view of what I take ethics to be.

What is it to make a moral judgment, or to argue about an ethical issue, or to live according to ethical standards? How do moral judgments

differ from other practical judgments? What is the difference between a person who lives by ethical standards and one who doesn't?

All these questions are related, so we only need to consider one of them; but to do this, we need to say something about the nature of ethics. Suppose that we have studied the lives of several people, and we know a lot about what they do, what they believe and so on. Can we then decide which of them are living by ethical standards and which are not?

We might think that the way to proceed here is to find out who believes it wrong to lie, cheat, steal and so on, and does not do any of these things, and who has no such beliefs, and shows no such restraint in their actions. Then those in the first group would be living according to ethical standards, and those in the second group would not be. But this procedure runs together two distinctions: the first is the distinction between living according to (what we judge to be) the right ethical standards and living according to (what we judge to be) mistaken ethical standards; the second is the distinction between living according to some ethical standards and living according to no ethical standards at all. Those who lie and cheat, but do not believe what they are doing to be wrong, may be living according to ethical standards. They may believe, for any of a number of possible reasons, that it is right to lie, cheat, steal and so on. They are not living according to conventional ethical standards, but they may be living according to some other ethical standards.

This first attempt to distinguish the ethical from the non-ethical was mistaken, but we can learn from our mistakes. We found that we must concede that those who hold unconventional ethical beliefs are still living according to ethical standards *if they believe, for some reason, that it is right to do as they are doing*. The italicized condition gives us a clue to the answer we are seeking. The notion of living according to ethical standards is tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it. Thus, people may do all kinds of things we regard as wrong, yet still be living according to ethical standards if they are prepared to defend and justify what they do. We may find the justification inadequate and may hold that the actions are wrong, but the attempt at justification, whether successful or not, is sufficient to bring the person's conduct within the domain of the ethical as opposed to the non-ethical. When, on the other hand, people cannot put forward any justification for what they do, we may reject their claim to be living according to ethical standards, even if what they do is in accordance with conventional moral principles.

We can go further. If we are to accept that a person is living according to ethical standards, the justification must be of a certain kind. For instance, a justification in terms of self-interest alone will not do. When Macbeth, contemplating the murder of Duncan, admits that only 'vaulting ambition' drives him to do it, he is admitting that the act cannot be justified ethically. 'So that I can be king in his place' is not a weak attempt at an ethical justification for assassination; it is not the sort of reason that counts as an ethical justification at all. Self-interested acts must be shown to be compatible with more broadly based ethical principles if they are to be ethically defensible, for the notion of ethics carries with it the idea of something bigger than the individual. If I am to defend my conduct on ethical grounds, I cannot point only to the benefits it brings me. I must address myself to a larger audience. 'So that I can end the reign of a cruel tyrant' would at least have been an attempt at an ethical justification of murdering the king, although as Shakespeare portrays the 'gentle Duncan', it would have been false.

From ancient times, philosophers and moralists have expressed the idea that ethical conduct is acceptable from a point of view that is somehow *universal*. The 'Golden Rule' attributed to Moses, to be found in the book of Leviticus and subsequently reiterated by Jesus, tells us to go beyond our own personal interests and 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' – in other words, give the same weight to the interests of others as you give to your own interests. The same idea of putting oneself in the position of another is involved in the other Christian formulation, that we love our neighbours as ourselves (at least, if we interpret 'neighbour' sufficiently broadly). It was commonly expressed by ancient Greek philosophers and by the Stoics in the Roman era. The Stoics held that ethics derives from a universal natural law, an idea that Kant developed into his famous formula: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.' Kant's theory received further development in the work of R. M. Hare, who saw 'universalizability' as a logical feature of moral judgments. The eighteenth-century British philosophers Hutcheson, Hume and Adam Smith appealed to an imaginary 'impartial spectator' as the test of a moral judgment. Utilitarians, from Jeremy Bentham to the present, take it as axiomatic that in deciding moral issues, 'each counts for one and none for more than one'; and John Rawls incorporated essentially the same axiom into his own theory by deriving basic ethical principles from an imaginary choice behind a 'veil of ignorance' that prevents those choosing from knowing whether they will be the ones

who gain or lose by the principles they select. Even Continental philosophers like the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and the critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, who differ in many ways from their English-speaking colleagues – and from one another – agree that ethics is in some sense universal.

One could argue endlessly about the merits of each of these characterizations of the ethical, but what they have in common is more important than their differences. They agree that the justification of an ethical principle cannot be in terms of any partial or sectional group. Ethics takes a universal point of view. This does not mean that a particular ethical judgment must be universally applicable. Circumstances alter cases, as we have seen. What it does mean is that in making ethical judgments, we go beyond our own likes and dislikes. From an ethical perspective, it is irrelevant that it is I who benefit from cheating you and you who lose by it. Ethics goes beyond 'I' and 'you' to the universal law, the universalizable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever we choose to call it.

Can we use this universal aspect of ethics to derive an ethical theory that will give us guidance about right and wrong? Philosophers from the Stoics to Hare and Rawls have attempted this. No attempt has met with general acceptance. The problem is that if we describe the universal aspect of ethics in bare, formal terms, a wide range of ethical theories, including quite irreconcilable ones, are compatible with this notion of universality; if, on the other hand, we build up our description of the universal aspect of ethics so that it leads us ineluctably to one particular ethical theory, we shall be accused of smuggling our own ethical beliefs into our definition of the ethical – and this definition was supposed to be broad enough, and neutral enough, to encompass all serious candidates for the status of 'ethical theory'. Because so many others have failed to overcome this obstacle to deducing an ethical theory from the universal aspect of ethics, it would be foolish to attempt to do so in a brief introduction to a work with a quite different aim. Instead, I shall propose something less ambitious. The universal aspect of ethics, I suggest, does provide a ground for at least starting with a broadly utilitarian position. If we are going to move beyond utilitarianism, we need to be given good reasons why we should do so.

My reason for suggesting this is as follows. In accepting that ethical judgments must be made from a universal point of view, I am accepting that my own needs, wants and desires cannot, simply because they are my preferences, count more than the wants, needs and desires of anyone else.

Thus, my very natural concern that my own wants, needs and desires – henceforth I shall refer to them as 'preferences' – be looked after must, when I think ethically, be extended to the preferences of others. Now, imagine that I am one of a group of people who live by gathering food from the forest in which we live. When I am alone, I find a particularly good fruit tree and face the choice of whether to eat all the fruit myself or to share it with others. Imagine, too, that I am deciding in a complete ethical vacuum and that I know nothing of any ethical considerations – I am, we might say, in a pre-ethical stage of thinking. How would I make up my mind? One thing – perhaps at this pre-ethical stage, the *only* thing – that would be relevant would be how the choice I make will affect my preferences.

Suppose I then begin to think ethically, to the extent of putting myself in the position of others affected by my decision. To know what it is like to be in their position, I must take on their preferences – I must imagine how hungry they are, how much they will enjoy the fruit and so on. Once I have done that, I must recognize that as I am thinking ethically, I cannot give my own preferences greater weight, simply because they are my own, than I give to the preferences of others. Hence, in place of my own preferences, I now have to take account of the preferences of all those affected by my decision. Unless there are some other ethically relevant considerations, this will lead me to weigh all these preferences and adopt the course of action most likely to maximize the preferences of those affected. Thus, at least at some level in my moral reasoning, ethics points towards the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected.

In the previous paragraph, I wrote 'points towards' because, as we shall see in a moment, there could be other considerations that point in a different direction. I wrote 'at some level in my moral reasoning' because, as we shall see later, there are utilitarian reasons for believing that we ought not to try to calculate these consequences for every ethical decision we make in our daily lives, but only in very unusual circumstances or when we are reflecting on our choice of general principles to guide us in the future. In other words, in the specific example given, one might at first think it obvious that sharing the fruits that I have gathered has better consequences for all affected than not sharing them. This may in the end also be the best general principle for us all to adopt, but before we can have grounds for believing this to be the case, we must also consider whether the effect of a general practice of sharing gathered fruits will benefit all those affected or will harm them by reducing the

amount of food gathered, because some will cease to gather anything if they know that they will get sufficient food from their share of what others gather.

The way of thinking I have outlined is a form of utilitarianism, but not the version of utilitarianism defended by classical utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick. They held that we should always do what will maximize pleasure, or happiness, and minimize pain, or unhappiness. This is 'hedonistic utilitarianism' – the term 'hedonist' comes from the Greek word for pleasure. In contrast, the view we have reached is known as 'preference utilitarianism' because it holds that we should do what, on balance, furthers the preferences of those affected. Some scholars think that Bentham and Mill may have used 'pleasure' and 'pain' in a broad sense that allowed them to include achieving what one desires as a 'pleasure' and the reverse as a 'pain'. If this interpretation is correct, the difference between preference utilitarianism and the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill disappears. (Sidgwick, as always, was more precise: in *The Methods of Ethics,* he carefully distinguishes the preference view from the hedonistic one and opts for the latter.)

I am not claiming that preference utilitarianism can be deduced from the universal aspect of ethics. Instead of universalizing my preferences, I could base my ethical views on something completely distinct from preferences. Hedonistic utilitarianism, like preference utilitarianism, is fully impartial between individuals and satisfies the requirement of universalizability; so too are other ethical ideals, like individual rights, fairness, the sanctity of life, justice, purity and so on. They are, at least in some versions, incompatible with any form of utilitarianism. So – to return to the situation of the finder of abundant fruit, who is deciding whether to share it with others – I might hold that I have a right to the fruit, because I found it. Or I might claim that it is fair that I should get the fruit, because I did the hard work of finding the tree. Alternatively, I could hold that everyone has an equal right to the abundance nature provides, and so I am required to share the fruit equally.

If I take one of these views but can offer no reason for holding it, other than the fact that *I* prefer it – I prefer a society in which those who find natural objects have a right to them, or I prefer a society with a sense of fairness that rewards effort, or I prefer a society in which everything is shared equally – then my preference must be weighed against the contrary preferences of others. Perhaps, though, I want to maintain that this view is not just my preference, but I *really* have a right to the fruit I found, or everyone *really* is entitled to an equal share

of nature's abundance. If so, then that claim needs to be defended by some kind of ethical theory. Where are we to get such a theory? Some substantial moral argument is needed.

What this shows is that we very swiftly arrive at an initially preference utilitarian position once we apply the universal aspect of ethics to simple, pre-ethical decision making. The preference utilitarian position is a minimal one, a first base that we reach by universalizing self-interested decision making. We cannot, if we are to think ethically, refuse to take this step. To go beyond preference utilitarianism we need to produce something more. We cannot just rely on our intuitions, even those that are very widely shared, since these could, as we have seen, be the result of our evolutionary heritage and therefore an unreliable guide to what is right.

One way of arguing would be to hold up to critical reflection and scrutiny the claim that the satisfaction of preferences should be our ultimate end. People have very strong preferences for winning lotteries, although researchers have shown that those who win major lotteries are not, once the initial elation has passed, significantly happier than they were before. Is it nevertheless good that they got what they wanted? Faced with such reports, preference utilitarians are likely to grant that people often form preferences on the basis of misinformation about what it would be like to have their preference satisfied. The preferences that should be counted, the preference utilitarians may say, are those that we would have if we were fully informed, in a calm frame of mind and thinking clearly. On the other hand, hedonistic utilitarians would say that the fact that we would abandon many of our preferences, if we knew that their satisfaction would not bring us happiness, shows that it is happiness we really care about, not the satisfaction of our preferences. To this the preference utilitarians may reply that a would-be poet may choose a life with less happiness, if she thinks it will enable her to write great poetry. These are the kinds of argument we need to sort through in order to decide which is the more defensible form of utilitarianism. Then we also have to consider arguments against any kind of utilitarianism and in favor of quite different moral theories. That, however, is a topic for a different book.

This book can be read as an attempt to indicate how a consistent preference utilitarian would deal with a number of controversial problems. Despite the difficulties just mentioned, preference utilitarianism is a straightforward ethical theory that requires minimal metaphysical presuppositions. We all know what preferences are, whereas claims that

something is intrinsically morally wrong, or violates a natural right, or is contrary to human dignity invoke less tangible concepts that make their truth more difficult to assess. But because preference utilitarianism may, in the end, prove not to be the best approach to ethical issues, I'll also consider, at various points, how hedonistic utilitarianism, theories of rights, of justice, of absolute moral rules and so on, bear on the problems discussed. In this way, you will be able to come to your own conclusions about the possibility of reason and argument in ethics and about the merits of utilitarian and non-utilitarian approaches to ethics.