3

Motivation: why be moral?

> "The challenge", said Glaucon, "is that even those whose way of life is just, only live that way against their will – because they are not strong enough to be unjust …
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> "Justice is plainly not a good to any *individual*; for whenever someone thinks they are going to be in a position to act unjustly, they *do* act unjustly. Every man holds that, as far as his individual interest goes, injustice is far more profitable than justice … For anyone who came by this sort of power [to act unjustly and get away with it], and then proved unwilling to act unjustly or get their hands on other people's goods, would be considered most pitifully stupid by those who perceived his behaviour. Nonetheless they would praise him in front of one another: each person's fear that someone might treat *him* unjustly would cause him to hide what he really thinks of the just man."
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> (Plato, *Republic* 359b5–360d9, my translation, following Chappell 1996: 121–3)

> Thou shalt not get found out.
>
> (The Eleventh Commandment [traditional])

3.1 Demandingness in different moral theories

In Chapter 1, I defined ethics as the use of reason to answer the question "How should life be lived?". Presumably the most basic answer is "Life

should be lived *well*". But this is not the interesting bit. The interesting – and difficult – bit is saying what *counts* as living well. When we try to do this, we soon run into the difficulty noted at the end of Chapter 2. Surely there are some ethical demands that, if we face up to them honestly, are so stringent that they will stop us living well – and possibly stop us living at all. Such demands give bite to a question that we should be asking anyway: why should we do what morality tells us to do?

Stringent ethical demands do not arise, as is sometimes thought, only in some moral theories. They arise on pretty well every plausible approach to ethics. We can demonstrate this by giving a preview of the four main moral theories that I shall consider in Chapters 8–10:

- *Virtue ethics*: An action is right if and only if (iff) it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances. Virtuous agents characteristically act in accordance with the virtues (courage, self-control, justice, wisdom, faith, hope and love), and not in accordance with the vices (pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth).
- *Utilitarianism*: An action is right iff it promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number.
- *Kantianism*: An action is right iff it is in accordance with a universalizable principle, and not contrary to any universalizable principle. That is, we should never do anything that we cannot rationally will could be done by anyone, and we should treat other people as ends in themselves, not merely as means to ends.
- *Contractarianism*: An action is right iff it is required by the code that all rational persons would agree to in a free negotiation. That is, we should never do anything to others unless they could reasonably agree to our doing it to them. Conversely, we should not let others do to us what we cannot reasonably agree to their doing to us.

All of these moral theories can and sometimes will make very stringent demands indeed on those who try to follow them. The demands of *virtue ethics* are particularly obvious with the virtues of justice and courage. If we live in an oppressive and unjust state, justice apparently demands that we should do what we can to oppose our unjust rulers. But defying unjust rulers in the name of justice can and often does cost people everything, including their lives. Or if we find ourselves in a bat-

tle, then courage may demand that we charge an enemy machine-gun nest, or rescue a wounded comrade under fire, or dismantle a landmine – or quite possibly, risk being shot for refusing to fight.

The *utilitarian* rule that we must always act so as to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number seems at least equally demanding. Apparently I would make more people happier this Christmas by giving my children no presents and donating the money to famine relief to save the lives of starving children in Africa instead. Why, come to that, am I sitting here writing philosophy, when I could bring about much more happiness by volunteering for a famine-relief project, or even just by going and donating some blood? Surely I *would* cause more happiness to more people by doing these alternative actions. It takes an improbably high estimation of the powers of moral philosophy to deny it! But then utilitarianism says that I *should* do (one or more of) these things rather than write philosophy. These too are very strong demands. They go way beyond what we might think morality demanded of us if we were just following everyday common sense.

Utilitarian demands have another notable feature. (This feature may be shared by some other moral theories, but is most obvious in utilitarianism.) This is that utilitarian demands do not just go *beyond* the apparent requirements of common-sense morality. Sometimes they actually go *against* common-sense morality. For instance, if I would contribute more to the overall good by murdering my grandmother than by doing anything else, then utilitarianism demands that I murder her.

Kantianism demands that we behave in a "universalizable" way – a way of acting that anyone else could adopt – and that we always treat other people as ends in themselves, and never merely as means. These are very demanding ethical rules too, considering the pressures that we are under to make a special case of ourselves, and considering how very richly some people can seem to *deserve* to be treated as mere means. What is more, Kant argues that his two basic rules imply a number of further rules, among them the rule that we should never lie, no matter what: a rule that arguably is even more demanding than the Bible's commandment not to "bear false witness", which sounds like it only forbids us to lie in court or other high-stakes contexts.

Finally, the *contractarian* rule about reasonable agreement implies all sorts of very strong ethical demands. It appears to imply, for instance, that the settlement of America, Australia and New Zealand

by Europeans was morally wrong, since in each case the Europeans did one or more of three very un-contractarian things: either they simply took the indigenous peoples' land from them; or they made agreements to share the land on terms that the indigenous peoples involved could not reasonably have accepted if they had fully understood them; or else they made agreements that the indigenous peoples might reasonably have accepted, and then just ignored them.

So all four of these moral theories imply very strong moral demands. This give additional force to the why-be-moral question: the question how doing what ethics demands could help us to live well, or indeed to live at all.

Notice that it is not just what ethics says we *must* do that seems to conflict with our prospects for living well. It is also what ethics says we *must not* do. Suppose you have an opportunity to pull off an undetectable fraud. You will make millions, and there is absolutely no chance that you will get caught. You could use the millions to help yourself live well in all sorts of wonderful ways: sail the oceans in a private liner, put on a concert for African famine relief, buy yourself a castle in the Scottish Highlands, and so on. Given that the fraud is undetectable, there is only one serious obstacle in the way of your doing it. This is your commitment to some moral theory like those listed above, all of which, as typically understood, imply very directly and very clearly that you must not commit the fraud. Here too, apparently, doing what ethics demands is not the same as living well; it is the opposite.

3.2 Can we harmonize being good and living well?

How should we react to this apparent conflict between moral demands and prudential demands (the demands of living well)? Here are five possible responses:

- *Forget about living morally*: If there is a conflict between the moral and the prudential, then forget about trying to do the right thing; just have a ball and enjoy yourself.
- *Forget about living well:* What the apparent moral–prudential conflict shows is that I was wrong in the way I began in Chapter 1 of this book. Ethics *is not* really about the question "How should life be

lived?". For the natural answer to that question is "It should be lived well", that is, by having a good time. And living well is not necessarily the same thing as living morally. But our duty is to live morally even when this means that we will not live well.

- *A compromise is possible:* The apparent moral–prudential conflict is real, but it does not always come up. It is good to do what morality demands. It is also good to "live well". Most of the time we can manage both. Occasionally, in tragic circumstances or when we are in the power of evil people (when we live in a corrupt dictatorship, for instance), living well and living ethically do come starkly into conflict, because there are forces at work around us that will try to make us act immorally. But most of the time the good life and the moral life are not in conflict at all.
- *Pull living well up into living morally:* What the apparent moral–prudential conflict shows is that we need to redefine our understanding of "living well". We are not *really* living well if we are not living morally. Only the brave and just and otherwise moral person, who (for instance) will not engage even in undetectable fraud, and who will die in battle for his comrades rather than act like a coward, can truly be said to be living well. So in the end, the moral–prudential conflict is *only* apparent. There is not really a gap between living morally and living well, because ultimately living well *is* living morally.
- *Pull living morally down into living well:* What the apparent moral–prudential conflict shows is that we need to redefine our understanding of "living morally". We are not *really* living morally if we are not living well. If we end up so inhibited by moral rules that we are unable to have a good life or a good time, then we should get rid of those rules. We should only follow the rules that *do* enable us to live well, for only those are *really* the rules of morality. If following *those* rules means enjoying the benefits of fraud and injustice and cowardice and so on, then so be it. So in the end, the moral–prudential conflict is *only* apparent. There is not really a gap between living morally and living well, because ultimately living morally *is* living well.

The first response ("forget about living morally") is possible (it is sometimes called immoralism), but it seems indefensible. Our concern to do the right thing is not something that we can, rationally speaking,

just *ignore*. Hardly any serious philosophers have taken this immoralist line. Some who seem to, such as the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, do not really, when you examine them more closely: Nietzsche may reject *certain conceptions* of ethical life, but on what he takes to be a true conception he is as concerned with the struggle to live in an ethically adequate way as anyone. Like some other philosophers who at first sight seem to make the first response, such as Plato's characters Polus and Callicles, Nietzsche is really better understood as making the fifth response (see below).

The second response ("forget about living well") is most famously defended by Immanuel Kant, who argues forcefully that living morally has nothing whatever to do with living well. Morality, for Kant, is about doing what is reasonable (in a special Kantian sense of "reasonable" that we shall come to in Ch. 10), whereas living well is about doing what gives you pleasure or satisfies your desires.

Under Kant's influence many other philosophers, such as the Victorian utilitarian Henry Sidgwick, have seen a complete dualism in "practical reason" (in our thinking about what we have reason to do). According to Sidgwick (1874), our reasons for living well (our prudential reasons) and our reasons for doing what is moral (our moral reasons) are two different complete systems of practical reasons (reasons to act), and they are barely in touch with each other at all. Following Kant and Sidgwick, twentieth-century ethicists such as H. H. Prichard found it natural to think that any system of ethics that tried to base our moral reasons on our prudential reasons was simply guilty of a misunderstanding. Hence Prichard's famous question "Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake?", to which his answer was "Yes, if it is about trying to explain our moral reasons by basing them on our prudential reasons" (1949: 1–20; cf. McDowell 1998: 90).

The third response ("a compromise is possible") sees living well and living morally as different things, as the first does. But it points out that they do not always need to conflict.

The third response is quite consistent with the second. Indeed, most of the greatest proponents of the second response to the conflict are also proponents of the third. This is certainly true of Kant, for instance. He thinks that, while living well and living ethically are fundamentally distinct, and it is living ethically that should motivate us, not living well, still God's providence will ensure that those who live ethically will live well in

the long run. Rather similarly, Linda Zagzebski (2006) argues that living a "flourishing" life is one objective, and living an ethically admirable life is another, and neither objective reduces to the other. Whether the two objectives prove compatible in my life is a matter of luck, just as, if I had the two objectives to be a champion golfer and to keep my marriage together, it could be a matter of luck whether I managed both.

We can take this third line without trying to define the moral life in terms of the good life, or the good life in terms of the moral life. That is part of the third response's appeal to Kant, Sidgwick, Prichard and the many others who think it is impossible to define either in terms of the other.

By contrast, the fourth and fifth responses that I have listed are precisely about inter-defining the good life and the moral life. As I put it above, the fourth response pulls our notion of living well up into our notion of living morally, whereas the fifth response pulls our notion of living morally down into our notion of living well. For either the fourth or the fifth response, there can be no conflict between the demands of morality and the demands of the good life. But for opposite reasons: in the case of the fourth response, because the demands of the good life *just are* the demands of morality; in the case of the fifth response, because the demands of morality *just are* the demands of the good life.

Classic versions of the fourth response (which you might call the *moralistic* response) are given by Plato and Aristotle. The fifth response (which we can call the *eudaimonistic* response, from the Greek *eudaimonia*, happiness or well-being) is also articulated in Plato. Plato puts it in the mouths of the crude and brutish egoists Callicles and Polus, whom Socrates argues against in Plato's *Gorgias*. According to Callicles and Polus, there are no rules that are worth living by that can seriously threaten our pursuit of good living and pleasure. The rules of conventional morality are all hot air: no one brave and independent-minded will ever follow those rules, unless he allows himself to be conned into it by weaker and more cowardly spirits. Something similar is the view of the egoist Thrasymachus, whose position Glaucon is re-presenting in the first epigraph to this chapter. The rules of ethics, according to Thrasymachus, are a systematic con, imposed on populations by their rulers as a way of controlling them.

In a subtler form, Nietzsche also suggests something very like the fifth response. Nietzsche is no crude egoist like Polus or Callicles or

Thrasymachus. But he does warn us that there is always the *danger* that moral rules will become enslaving and life-denying, not ways of achieving human liberation, unless we test every supposed rule by asking whether keeping it contributes to living well. If it does not, then we should ask whether we really want to recognize such a rule at all. (There are hints, and more than hints, of this thought of Nietzsche's in two other great ethicists about whom Nietzsche had, to put it mildly, mixed feelings: John Stuart Mill, and Jesus.)

So there are five possible responses to the apparent clash between the moral and the prudential, between "doing the right thing" and "living well". How should we choose between them?

I think there is something right in all of them except the first. What the second response is right about is this. Despite what some high-minded philosophers have argued – for example Socrates, who notoriously claims at *Gorgias* 470e that a just man on the rack is happier than an unjust millionaire – we can see very easily what it means to say that there is a difference between living well and living ethically. Sadly enough, human history has produced enough starved and wretched martyrs, and enough fat and contented criminals, to make it obvious that there are forms of living well that we will sacrifice if we insist on "doing the right thing". In unfavourable circumstances, living well and living morally can easily come apart; but that is not to say that our moral reasons and our prudential reasons are completely unrelated. On the contrary – this is one lesson we might draw from the third response – it ought to be a key part of our political programme to make sure that our moral and prudential reasons are normally closely correlated with each other. We need to ensure that it is not too hard for the citizens to live well *and* live morally, without conflict. (Kant and Mill agree.)

Moreover – and here I am agreeing with the fourth and fifth responses – it is crucial to keep testing against each other our conceptions of what it is to live well and what it is to live morally. We should keep asking whether recognizing the demands of ethics *makes for a happy life*. Conversely, we should also keep asking whether the different ways in which we might pursue happiness *are morally defensible*. On the eudaimonistic side, it is a good idea to keep asking what *use* are the various ethical rules and ideals that we recognize. On the moralistic side, we must take seriously the thought that there is a *kind* of happiness or living well that the good man has, even when he is being tortured, and which

the wicked tyrant cannot have, however materially well-off he may be. When a human life involves deep injustice, cruelty or cowardice, or a complete lack of self-control or good sense, there is something deeply wrong with that life, no matter what glittering prizes the person living that life may have scooped. Certainly we should see that as a reason to baulk at calling it a *good* life – or at the idea of living that way.

What we call living morally can, in adverse circumstances, come adrift from what we call living well. That's what "adverse circumstances" are: situations where living well and being good are difficult to keep together. A key question for ethics is to see whether, and how, living well and being good might become convergent. And that is a key question for this book, too.

An important part of any good answer to this question is bound to involve us in thinking about what we have *reason* to do: whether, for instance, we have more reason to live like the bloated tyrant, or like the wretched martyr. This brings us back to another question raised at the end of Chapter 1: the question of the place of reason and reasoning in the good life for human beings. I turn to this in Chapter 4.