

morality in a way which, in its broadest outlines, many atheists have found appealing.

## Kantian ethics

### Motives

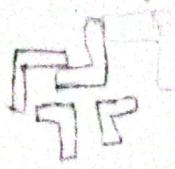
Immanuel Kant was interested in the question 'What is a moral action?' The answer he gave has been of tremendous importance in philosophy. Here I will outline the main features of it.

For Kant it was clear that a moral action was one performed out of a sense of duty, rather than simply out of inclination or feeling or the possibility of some kind of gain for the person performing it. So, for example, if I give money to charity because I have deep feelings of compassion for the needy, I am, in Kant's view, not necessarily acting morally: if I act purely from my feelings of compassion rather than from a sense of duty then my action is not a *moral* one. Or if I give money to charity because I think it will increase my popularity with my friends, then, again, I am not acting *morally*, but for gain in social status.

So for Kant the motive of an action was far more important than the action itself and its consequences. He thought that in order to know whether or not someone was acting morally you had to know what their intention was. It was not enough just to know whether or not the Good Samaritan helped the man in need. The Samaritan might have been acting out of self-interest, expecting a reward for his troubles. Or else he might have done it only because he felt a twinge of compassion: this would have been acting from an emotional motive rather than from a sense of duty.

Most other moral philosophers would agree with Kant that self-interest is not an appropriate motive for a moral action. But many would disagree with his claim that whether or not someone feels such an emotion as compassion is irrelevant to our moral assessment of their actions. For Kant, however, the only acceptable motive for moral action was a sense of duty.

One reason why Kant concentrated so much on the motives for actions rather than on their consequences was that he believed that all



people could be moral. Since we can only reasonably be held morally responsible for things over which we have some control – or as he put it, since ‘ought implies can’ – and because the consequences of actions are often outside our control, these consequences cannot be crucial to morality. For instance, if, acting from my sense of duty, I attempt to save a drowning child, but accidentally drown the child, my action can still be considered a moral one since my motives were of the right kind: the consequences of my action would have been, in this case, tragic, but irrelevant to the moral worth of what I did.

Similarly, as we don’t necessarily have complete control over our emotional reactions, these cannot be essential to morality either. If morality was to be available to all conscious human beings, then, Kant thought, it had to rely entirely upon the will, and in particular on our sense of duty.

### Maxims

Kant described the intentions which are behind any act as the *maxim*. The maxim is the general principle underlying the action. For instance, the Good Samaritan could have been acting on the maxim ‘Always help those in need if you expect you will be rewarded for your troubles.’ Or he could have been acting on the maxim ‘Always help those in need when you experience a feeling of compassion.’ However, if the Good Samaritan’s behaviour were moral, then he would probably have been acting on the maxim ‘Always help those in need because it is your duty to do so.’

### The Categorical Imperative

Kant believed that as rational human beings we have certain duties. These duties are *categorical*: in other words they are absolute and unconditional – duties such as ‘You ought always to tell the truth’ or ‘You ought never to kill anyone.’ They apply whatever consequences might follow from obeying them. Kant thought morality was a system of *categorical imperatives*: commands to act in certain ways. This is one of the most distinctive aspects of his ethics. He contrasted *categorical* duties with *hypothetical* ones. A hypothetical duty is one

such as 'If you want to be respected, then you ought to tell the truth' or 'If you want to avoid going to prison, then you ought not to murder anyone.' Hypothetical duties tell you what you ought or ought not to do if you want to achieve or avoid a certain goal. He thought there was only one basic Categorical Imperative: 'Act only on maxims which you can at the same time want to be universal laws.' In other words, only act on a maxim you would want to apply to everybody. This principle is known as the principle of universalizability.

Although he gave a number of different versions of the Categorical Imperative, this is the most important of them and it has been immensely influential. We will examine it in more detail.

### *Universalizability*

Kant thought that for an action to be moral, the underlying maxim had to be a universalizable one. It had to be a maxim which would hold for anyone else in similar circumstances. You should not make an exception out of yourself, but should be impartial. So, for example, if you stole a book, acting on the maxim 'Always steal when you are too poor to buy what you want', for this to have been a moral act, this maxim would have had to apply to anyone else in your position.

Of course this doesn't mean that any maxim whatsoever which can be universalized is for that reason a moral one. It is obvious that many trivial maxims, such as 'Always poke your tongue out at people who are taller than you', could quite easily be universalized, even though they have little or nothing to do with morality. Some other universalizable maxims, such as the one about stealing which I used in the previous paragraph, may still be considered immoral.

This notion of universalizability is a version of the so-called Golden Rule of Christianity, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Someone acting on the maxim 'Be a parasite, always live at other people's expense' would not be acting morally since it would be impossible to universalize the maxim. It would invite the question, 'What if everyone did that?' And if everyone were parasites, then there would be no one left for parasites to live on. The maxim fails to pass Kant's test, and so cannot be a moral one.

On the other hand, we can quite easily universalize the maxim 'Never torture babies.' It is certainly possible and desirable for everyone to obey this order, although they may not. Those who disobey it by torturing babies are acting immorally. With maxims such as this one, Kant's notion of universalizability quite clearly gives an answer which corresponds with most people's unquestioned intuitions about right and wrong.

### Means and ends

Another of Kant's versions of the Categorical Imperative was 'Treat other people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end.' This is another way of saying that we should not use other people, but should always recognise their humanity: the fact that they are individuals with wills and desires of their own. If someone is pleasant to you simply because they know that you can give them a job, then they are treating you as a means to getting that job, and not as a person, as an end in yourself. Of course, if someone is pleasant to you because they happen to like you that would not have anything to do with morality.

### Criticisms of Kantian ethics

#### It is empty

Kant's ethical theory, and in particular his notion of the universalizability of moral judgements, is sometimes criticised for being empty. This means that his theory only gives a framework showing the structure of moral judgements without giving any help to those faced with making actual moral decisions. It gives little aid to people trying to decide what they ought to do.

This neglects the version of the Categorical Imperative which instructs us to treat people as ends and never as means. In this formulation Kant certainly does give some content to his moral theory. But even with the combination of the universalizability thesis and the means/ends formulation, Kant's theory does not yield satisfactory solutions to many moral questions.

For instance, Kant's theory cannot easily cope with conflicts of duty. If, for example, I have a duty always to tell the truth, and also a duty to protect my friend, Kant's theory would not show me what I ought to do when these two duties conflict. If a madman carrying an axe asked me where my friend was, my first inclination would be to tell him a lie. To tell the truth would be to shirk the duty I have to protect my friend. But on the other hand, according to Kant, to tell a lie, even in such an extreme situation, would be an immoral act: I have an absolute duty never to lie.

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### *Universalizable immoral acts*

A further related weakness that some people see in Kant's theory is that it seems to permit some obviously immoral acts. For instance, it appears that a maxim such as 'Kill anyone who gets in your way' could quite consistently be universalized. And yet such a maxim is clearly immoral.

But this sort of criticism fails as a criticism of Kant: it ignores the means/ends version of the Categorical Imperative, which it obviously contradicts. To kill someone who gets in your way is hardly treating them as an end in themselves: it is a failure to take their interests into account.



### *Implausible aspects*

Though much of Kant's ethical theory is plausible – especially the idea of respecting other people's interests – it does have some implausible aspects. First, it seems to justify some absurd actions, such as telling a mad axeman where your friend is rather than putting him off the trail by telling him a lie.

Second, the role the theory gives to emotions such as compassion, sympathy, and pity seems inadequate. Kant dismisses such emotions as irrelevant to morality: the only appropriate motive for moral action is a sense of duty. Feeling compassion for someone in need, while it may be considered praiseworthy from some viewpoints, is not, for Kant, anything to do with morality. In contrast, many people think that there are distinctively moral emotions, such as compassion,

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sympathy, guilt, and remorse, and to separate these from morality, as Kant attempted to do, is to ignore a central aspect of moral behaviour.

Third, the theory takes no account of the consequences of actions. This means that well-intentioned idiots who unintentionally cause a number of deaths through incompetence might be morally blameless on Kant's theory. They would be judged primarily on their intentions. But in some cases consequences of actions do seem relevant to an assessment of their moral worth: think how you would feel about the well-intentioned babysitter who tried to dry your cat in a microwave oven. However, to be fair to Kant on this point, he does consider some kinds of incompetence culpable.

Those who find this last sort of criticism of deontological theories convincing will very likely see the appeal of the type of ethical theory known as consequentialism.

## Consequentialism

The term 'consequentialist' is used to describe ethical theories which judge whether an action is right or wrong not on the intentions of the person performing the action, but rather on the consequences of that action. Whereas Kant would say that telling a lie was always morally wrong, whatever the possible benefits which might result, a consequentialist would judge the lie-telling on the results it had, or could be expected to have.

## ✓ Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the best-known type of consequentialist ethical theory. Its most famous advocate was John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Utilitarianism is based on the assumption that the ultimate aim of all human activity is (in some sense) happiness. Such a view is known as hedonism.

A utilitarian defines 'good' as 'whatever brings about the greatest total happiness'. This is sometimes known as the Greatest Happiness Principle or the Principle of Utility. For a utilitarian the right action in any circumstances can be calculated by examining the probable consequences of the various possible courses of action.

Whichever is most likely to bring about the most happiness (or at least the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness) is the right action in those circumstances.

Utilitarianism has to deal in *probable* consequences because it is usually extremely difficult, if not impossible, to predict the precise results of any particular action: for example, insulting people usually makes them feel unhappy, but the person you are insulting may turn out to be a masochist who takes great pleasure from being insulted.

## Criticisms of utilitarianism

### *Difficulties of calculation*

Whilst utilitarianism may sound an attractive theory in principle, there are many difficulties which arise when you try to put it into practice.

It is extremely difficult to measure happiness and to compare the happiness of different people. Who is to decide whether or not the great pleasure experienced by a sadist outweighs the victim's suffering? Or how does the pleasure a football fan experiences watching his or her team score a brilliant goal compare with the tingles of delight experienced by an opera buff listening to a favourite aria? And how do these compare with the more physical sensations of pleasure such as those that come from sex and eating?

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), an early utilitarian, thought that in principle such comparisons could be made. For him, the source of happiness was irrelevant. Happiness was simply a blissful mental state: pleasure and the absence of pain. Although it occurred in different intensities, it was all of the same kind and so, however produced, should be given weight in utilitarian calculations. In what he called his 'felicific calculus' he set out guidelines for making comparisons between pleasures, taking into account such features as their intensity, duration, tendency to give rise to further pleasures, and so on.

However, John Stuart Mill found Bentham's approach crude: in place of it he suggested a distinction between so-called higher and lower pleasures. He argued that anyone who had truly experienced the higher pleasures, which were, in his view, mainly intellectual,

would automatically prefer them to the so-called lower ones, which were primarily physical. In Mill's scheme, higher pleasures counted for more in the calculation of happiness than did lower ones: in other words he assessed pleasures according to their quality as well as their quantity. He argued that it would certainly be preferable to be a sad but wise Socrates than to be a happy but ignorant fool, on the grounds that Socrates' pleasures would be of a higher kind than the fool's.

But this sounds elitist. It is an intellectual's justification for his own particular preferences and the interests and values of his social class. The fact remains that relative amounts of happiness are extremely difficult to calculate. And indeed this problem would still not be completely resolved even if we were to accept Mill's division between higher and lower pleasures.

A more basic difficulty of calculation occurs in deciding what are to count as the effects of any particular action. If someone hit a child because the child had misbehaved, the question of whether or not this was a moral action would depend entirely upon the consequences of the action. But are we to count only the immediate effects of hitting the child, or must we take into account the long-term effects? If the latter, then we may end up trying to balance such things as the child's emotional development, and possibly even the effects on the child's own children, against the child's happiness derived from avoidance of potentially dangerous situations as a result of the punishment training. With any action the effects can stretch far into the future, and there is rarely an obvious cut-off point.

### Problem cases

A further objection to utilitarianism is that it can justify many actions which are usually thought immoral. For instance, if it could be shown that publicly hanging someone who is innocent would have the direct beneficial effect of reducing violent crime by acting as a deterrent, and so, overall, cause more pleasure than pain, then a utilitarian would be obliged to say that hanging the innocent person was the morally right thing to do. But such a conclusion is repugnant to our sense of justice. Of course a feeling of repugnance towards some of its conclusions doesn't prove that there is something wrong with the theory of

utilitarianism. A hard-line utilitarian would presumably quite happily stomach the conclusion. However, such unpalatable consequences should make us wary about accepting utilitarianism as a completely satisfactory moral theory.

Utilitarians, like Bentham, who believe that happiness is simply a blissful state of mind leave themselves open to a further objection. Their theory suggests that the world would be a morally better place if a mood-altering drug such as Ecstasy were secretly added to the water supply, provided that it increased the total pleasure. Yet most of us would feel that a life with fewer blissful moments but the choice of how we achieve them would be preferable to this, and that the person who added the drug to the water supply would have done something immoral.

Consider another difficult case for the utilitarian. Whereas Kant says that we ought to keep our promises whatever the consequences of doing so, utilitarians would calculate the probable happiness that would arise from keeping or breaking promises in each case, and act accordingly. Utilitarians might well conclude that, in cases where they knew that their creditors had forgotten about a debt and wouldn't be likely ever to remember it, it would be morally right not to pay back money which they had borrowed. The borrowers' increased happiness due to increased wealth might well outweigh any unhappiness they felt about deceiving others. And the creditors would, presumably, experience little or no unhappiness as they would have forgotten about the debt.

But in such cases personal integrity seems to be an important aspect of human interaction. Indeed, many would see telling the truth, repaying debts, being honest in our dealings with other people, and so on, as central examples of moral behaviour. For such people, utilitarianism, with its rejection of the concept of absolute duties, is inadequate as a moral theory.

### Negative utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is based on the assumption that the right action in any circumstances is the one which produces the greatest overall happiness. But perhaps this puts too much stress on happiness. The

avoidance of pain and suffering is a far more important goal than the achievement of a balance of happiness over unhappiness. Surely a world in which no one was particularly happy, but no one suffered extreme pain, would be more appealing than one in which some people suffered extremes of unhappiness, but these were balanced out by many people experiencing great contentment and happiness?

One way of meeting this objection is to modify utilitarianism into what is usually known as negative utilitarianism. The basic principle of negative utilitarianism is that the best action in any circumstances is not the one which produces the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness for the greatest number of people, but the one which produces the least overall amount of unhappiness. For instance, a rich negative utilitarian might wonder whether to leave all his or her money to one poor and severely ill person who was in great pain and whose suffering would be relieved considerably by this gift, or else to divide it between a thousand moderately happy people, who would each increase their happiness a little because of this gift. An ordinary utilitarian would calculate which action would produce the greater balance of pleasure over pain for the greatest number of people; a negative utilitarian would only be concerned to minimise suffering. So, whilst an ordinary utilitarian would probably divide the money between the thousand moderately happy people, because that would maximise happiness, the negative utilitarian would leave the money to the severely ill person, thereby minimising suffering.

Such negative utilitarianism is, however, still open to many of the difficulties of calculation that arise for ordinary ultitarianism. It is also open to a criticism of its own.

### Criticism of negative utilitarianism

#### Destruction of all life

The best way to eliminate all suffering in the world would be to eliminate all sentient life. If there were no living things capable of feeling pain, then there would be no pain. If it were possible to do this in a painless way, perhaps by means of a huge atomic explosion,

then, by the principle of negative utilitarianism, this would be the morally right action. Even if a certain amount of pain were involved in the process, the long term benefits in pain elimination would probably outweigh it. Yet this conclusion is hardly acceptable. At the very least negative utilitarianism needs to be reformulated so as to avoid it.

### Rule utilitarianism

As a way of getting round the objection that ordinary utilitarianism (also known as act utilitarianism) has many unpalatable consequences, some philosophers have suggested another modified version of the theory, known as rule utilitarianism. This is supposed to combine the best aspects of act utilitarianism with the best of deontological ethics.

Rule utilitarians, rather than assessing the consequences of each action separately, adopt general rules about the kinds of action which tend to produce greater happiness for the greatest number of people. For instance, because in general punishing innocent people produces more unhappiness than happiness, rule utilitarians would adopt the rule 'never punish the innocent', even though there may be particular instances in which punishing the innocent would produce more happiness than unhappiness – such as when it acts as an effective deterrent against violent crime. Similarly, a rule utilitarian would advocate keeping promises because in general this produces a balance of happiness over unhappiness.

Rule utilitarianism has the great practical benefit that it makes it unnecessary to perform a complicated calculation every time you are faced with having to make a moral decision. However, in a situation in which you know that greater happiness will result from breaking a promise than from keeping it, and, given that your basic moral sympathies lie with a utilitarian outlook, it seems perverse to stick to the rule rather than to treat the individual case on its merits.

### Virtue theory

Virtue theory is largely based on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and as a result is sometimes known as neo-Aristotelianism ('neo' meaning

a question: the answer would be obvious. As it is, the anti-naturalists argue, it remains an open question.

An anti-naturalist would claim that the same sort of question could be asked about any situation in which a description of natural qualities is supposed to give rise automatically to an ethical conclusion. The Open Question Argument is one way in which anti-naturalists give support to their slogan 'No "ought" from "is"' .

### No human nature

Other philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) in his lecture *Existentialism and Humanism*, have attacked naturalistic ethics (at least the kind that says that morality is determined by facts about human nature) from a different angle. They have argued that it is a mistake to assume that there is such a thing as human nature. This, they say, is a form of self-deception, a denial of the great responsibility each of us has. We all have to choose our values for ourselves, and there is no simple answer to ethical questions. We cannot work out what we should do from a scientific description of the way the world is; but nevertheless we are all forced to make ethical decisions. It is an aspect of the human condition that we have to make these value judgements, but without any firm guidelines from outside ourselves. Naturalism in ethics is a self-deceptive denial of this freedom to choose for ourselves.

### Relativism

It is uncontroversially true that people in different societies have different customs and different ideas about right and wrong. There is no world consensus on which actions are right and wrong, even though there is a considerable overlap between views on this. If we consider how much moral views have changed both from place to place and from age to age it can be tempting to think that there are no absolute moral facts, but rather that morality is always relative to the society in which you have been brought up. On such a view since slavery was morally acceptable to most Ancient Greeks, but is not to most Europeans today, slavery was right for the Ancient Greeks but

would be wrong for today's Europeans. This view, known as moral relativism, makes morality simply a description of the values held by a particular society at a particular time. This is a meta-ethical view about the nature of moral judgements. Moral judgements can only be judged true or false relative to a particular society. There are no absolute moral judgements; they are all relative. Moral relativism contrasts starkly with the view that some actions are absolutely right or wrong, a view held, for instance, by many who believe that morality consists of God's commands to humanity.

Relativists often couple this account of morality with the belief that, because morality is relative, we should never interfere with the customs of other societies on the grounds that there is no neutral standpoint from which to judge. This view has been especially popular with anthropologists, perhaps partly because they have often seen at first hand the destruction wreaked on other societies by a crude importation of Western values. When moral relativism has this added component, indicating how we should behave towards other societies, it is usually known as normative relativism.

## Criticisms of moral relativism

### Are relativists inconsistent?

Moral relativists are sometimes accused of inconsistency since they claim that all moral judgements are relative but at the same time want us to believe that the theory of moral relativism is itself *absolutely true*. This is only a serious problem for a moral relativist who is also a relativist about truth, that is, someone who believes that there is no such thing as absolute truth, only truths relative to particular societies. That sort of relativist can't hold that any theory at all is *absolutely true*.

Nevertheless normative relativists are certainly open to the charge of inconsistency. They believe both that all moral judgements are *relative to your society* and that societies shouldn't interfere with each other. Yet this second belief is surely an example of an *absolute moral judgement*, one that is completely incompatible with

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### *What counts as a society?*

Moral relativists are usually vague about what is to count as a society. For instance, within contemporary Britain there are certainly members of subcultures who believe that it is morally acceptable to use banned drugs for recreational purposes. At what point will a relativist be prepared to say that the members of these subcultures form a separate society, and so can be said to have their own morality which is immune to criticism from other cultures? There is no obvious answer to this question.

### *No moral criticism of a society's values*

Even if the previous criticism can be met, a further difficulty with moral relativism arises. It doesn't seem to leave open the possibility of moral criticism of the central values of a society. If moral judgements are defined in terms of that society's central values, no critic of these central values can use *moral* arguments against them. In a society in which the dominant view is that women shouldn't be allowed to vote, anyone advocating enfranchisement for women would be suggesting something immoral relative to the values of that society.

### *Emotivism*

Another important meta-ethical theory is known as emotivism or non-cognitivism. Emotivists, such as A. J. Ayer (1910–1988) in Chapter 6 of his *Language, Truth and Logic*, claim that all ethical statements are literally meaningless. They do not express any facts at all; what they express is the speaker's emotion. Moral judgements have no literal meaning at all: they are just expressions of emotion, like grunts, sighs, or laughter.

'So when someone says 'Torture is wrong' or 'You ought to tell the truth', they are doing little more than showing how they feel

## ✓ Politics

What is equality? What is freedom? Are these worthwhile goals? How can they be achieved? What justification can be given for the state restricting the freedom of law-breakers? Are there any circumstances in which you should break the law? These are important questions for anyone. Political philosophers have attempted to clarify and answer them. Political philosophy is an immense subject, overlapping with ethics, economics, political science and the history of ideas. Political philosophers usually write in response to the political situations in which they find themselves. In this area more than most, knowledge of the historical background is important for understanding a philosopher's arguments. Clearly there is no room for historical stage-setting in this short book. For those interested in the history of ideas the further reading at the end of the chapter should be useful.

In this chapter I focus on the central political concepts of equality, democracy, freedom, punishment,

and civil disobedience, examining the philosophical questions to which they give rise.

## Equality

Equality is often presented as a political goal, an ideal worth aiming at. Those who argue for some form of equality are known as egalitarians. The motivation for achieving this equality is usually a moral one; it may be grounded on the Christian belief that we are all equal in the eyes of God, a Kantian belief in the rationality of equality of respect for all persons, or perhaps from a utilitarian belief that treating people equally is the best way to maximise happiness. Egalitarians argue that governments should be striving to make the move from recognising moral equality to providing some kind of equality in the lives of those they govern.

But how are we to understand 'equality'? Obviously human beings could never be equal in every respect. Individuals differ in intelligence, beauty, athletic prowess, height, hair colour, place of birth, dress sense, and many other ways. It would be ridiculous to argue that people should be absolutely equal in every respect. Complete uniformity has little appeal. Egalitarians can't be proposing a world populated by clones. Yet, despite the obvious absurdity of interpreting equality as complete uniformity, some opponents of egalitarianism persist in portraying it in this way. This is an example of setting up a straw man: creating an easy target simply to knock it down. They think that they have refuted egalitarianism by pointing out the important ways in which people differ, or by making the point that even if near uniformity could be achieved, people would very quickly revert to something like their previous condition. However, such an attack is only successful against a caricature of the theory and leaves most versions of egalitarianism unscathed.

Equality is, then, always equality in certain respects, not in every respect. So when someone declares him or herself to be an egalitarian it is important to discover in what sense they mean this. In other words, 'equality' used in the political context is more or less meaningless unless there is some explanation of what it is that should be more equally shared and by whom. Some of the things which

Egalitarians often argue should be equally or more equally distributed are money, access to employment, and political power. Even though people's tastes differ considerably all of these things can contribute significantly to a worthwhile and enjoyable life. Distributing these goods more equally is a way of according all human beings an equality of respect.

\* Equality for freely framing & reframing one's conception of Good  
Equal distribution of money

An extreme egalitarian might argue that money should be equally distributed between all adult human beings, everyone receiving precisely the same income. In most societies money is necessary for people to live; without it they cannot get food, shelter or clothing. Redistribution might be justified, for instance, on utilitarian grounds as the most likely way of maximising happiness and minimising suffering.

### Criticisms of equal distribution of money

#### *Impractical and short-lived*

It is fairly obvious that equal distribution of money is an unattainable goal. The practical difficulties of equal distribution of money within one city would be immense; to distribute money equally amongst every adult human being would be a logistical nightmare. So, realistically, the best that this sort of egalitarian could hope for would be a more equal distribution of money, perhaps through fixing a set wage given to all adults.

But even if we could get very close to an equal distribution of wealth, it would be short-lived. Different people would use their money in different ways; the clever, the deceitful and the strong would quickly acquire the wealth of the weak, the foolish and the ignorant. Some people would squander their money; others would save it. Some might gamble theirs away as soon as they got it; others might steal to increase their share. The only way of maintaining anything like an equal distribution of wealth would be by forceful intervention from on high. This would no doubt involve unpleasant intrusion into

people's lives, and would limit their freedom to do what they want to do.

### ***Different people deserve different amounts***

Another objection to any attempt to achieve an equal distribution of money is that different people deserve different financial rewards for the jobs that they do, and the contribution that they make to society. So, for example, it is sometimes claimed that rich heads of industry deserve the vast salaries which they pay themselves because of their relatively greater contribution to the nation: they make it possible for other people to work and increase the general economic well-being of the whole country in which they operate.

Even if they don't deserve the higher wages, perhaps higher wages are needed as an incentive for getting the job done efficiently, the overall benefits to society outweighing the costs: without them there might be much less to go round for everyone. Without the incentive of high pay, no one capable of doing the job would take it on.

Here we encounter a fundamental difference between egalitarians and those who believe that gross inequalities in wealth between individuals are acceptable. It is a basic belief of most egalitarians that only moderate differences in wealth between individuals are acceptable, and that ideally those differences should correspond to differences in need. This suggests a further criticism of the principle of equal distribution of money.

### ***Different people have different needs***

Some people need more money to live than others. Someone who can only survive if given daily expensive medical care would be very unlikely to live very long in a society in which each individual is restricted to an equal share of the total wealth of that society, unless of course the society was a particularly rich one. A method of distribution based on individual need would go further towards the goal of respect for common humanity than would one of equal distribution of money.

**No right to redistribute**

Some philosophers argue that no matter how attractive a goal redistribution of money might seem it would violate the rights of individuals to hold on to their property, and that that violation is always morally wrong. These philosophers claim that rights always trump any other considerations, such as utilitarian ones. Robert Nozick (1938–), in his *Anarchy, State and Utopia* takes this position, emphasising a basic right to keep property that has been legally acquired.

Such philosophers are left with the problem of saying precisely what these rights are and where they come from. By 'rights' they do not mean legal rights, though such rights may coincide with legal rights in a just society: legal rights are those laid down by government or the appropriate authority. The rights in question are natural rights which should ideally guide the formation of laws. Some philosophers have taken issue with the idea that there could be such natural rights: Bentham famously dismissed the notion as 'nonsense on stilts'. At the very least a defender of the view that the state has no right to redistribute wealth should be able to explain the source of the supposed natural property rights, rather than simply assert their existence. Advocates of natural rights have conspicuously failed to do this.

**Equal opportunity in employment**

Many egalitarians believe that everyone should have equal opportunities even if there can be no equality of distribution of wealth. One important area in which there is a great deal of inequality of treatment is that of employment. Equality of opportunity in employment does not mean that everyone should be allowed to do whatever job they want to do, regardless of their ability: the idea that anyone who wants to become a dentist or a surgeon should be allowed to do so, no matter how bad their eye/hand co-ordination, is clearly absurd. What equality of opportunity means is equal opportunity for all those with relevant skills and abilities to do the job in question. This could still be seen as a form of unequal treatment, since some people are lucky enough to be born with greater genetic potential than others, or have

received a better education, and so have a head start in an apparently equal contest in the job market. However, equality of opportunity in employment is usually advocated as just one aspect of a move towards greater equality of various kinds, such as equality of access to education.

The demand for equality of opportunity in employment is largely motivated by widespread racial and sexual discrimination in some professions. Egalitarians argue that anyone with relevant qualifications should be given equal consideration when seeking employment. No one should be discriminated against on racial or sexual grounds, except in those very rare cases where race or sex can be considered a relevant qualification for doing the job in question: for instance, it would be impossible for a woman to be a sperm donor, so it would not transgress any principle of equality of opportunity to rule out any female applicants for the job..

Some egalitarians go even further than demanding equality of treatment when applying for jobs: they argue that it is important to get rid of existing imbalances in particular professions, for instance the predominance of male over female judges. Their method of redressing existing imbalances is known as reverse discrimination.

### Reverse discrimination

Reverse discrimination means actively recruiting people from previously underprivileged groups. In other words, reverse discriminators deliberately treat job applicants unequally in that they are biased towards people from groups against which discrimination has usually been directed. The point of treating people unequally in this way is that it is intended to speed up the process of society becoming more equal, not only by getting rid of existing imbalances within certain professions, but also by providing role models for young people from the traditionally less privileged groups to imitate and look up to.

So, for instance, there are more male university philosophy lecturers than female in Britain, despite the fact that many women study the subject as undergraduates. An advocate of reverse discrimination would argue that, rather than waiting for this situation to change gradually, we should act positively, and discriminate in favour of



women applicants for university lectureships. This means that if a man and a woman both applied for the same post and were of roughly equal ability, we should choose the woman. But most defenders of reverse discrimination would go further than this, and argue that even if the woman were a weaker candidate than the man, provided she was competent to perform the duties associated with the job, we should employ her in preference to him. Reverse discrimination is only a temporary measure used until the percentage of members of the traditionally excluded group roughly reflect the percentage of members of this group in the population as a whole. In some countries it is illegal; in others it is required by law.

### Criticisms of reverse discrimination

#### *Anti-egalitarian*

The aims of reverse discrimination may be egalitarian, but some people feel that the way it achieves them is unfair. For a staunch egalitarian a principle of equality of opportunity in employment means that any form of discrimination on non-relevant grounds must be avoided. The only grounds for treating applicants differently is that they have relevantly different attributes. Yet the whole justification of reverse discrimination rests on the assumption that in most jobs such things as the sex, sexual preferences, or racial origin of the applicant are not relevant. So no matter how attractive the end result of reverse discrimination may be it should be unacceptable to someone committed to equality of opportunity as a fundamental principle.

A supporter of reverse discrimination might reply that the current state of affairs is much more unfair to members of disadvantaged groups than a situation in which reverse discrimination is widely practised. Alternatively, in cases where such an extreme policy is appropriate, the racial origins or sex of the applicant can actually become relevant qualifications for doing the job, since part of the job of anyone selected in this way would be to act as a role model to show that the job could be done by members of this group. However, it is debatable whether this latter situation is one of reverse discrimination at all: if these attributes are relevant ones, then taking them

into account when selecting personnel is not really a form of discrimination but rather an adjustment of what we take to be the most important qualities needed for doing a particular job.

### **May lead to resentment**

Although the aim of reverse discrimination is to create a society in which access to certain professions is more equally distributed, in practice it may be the cause of further discrimination against disadvantaged groups. Those who fail to get a particular job because they happen not to come from a disadvantaged group may feel resentment against those who get jobs largely because of their sex or racial origin. This is a particular problem when employers take on candidates who are visibly incapable of carrying out their duties well. Not only does this confirm the worst prejudices of their employers and colleagues, but also results in them being poor role models for other members of their group. In the long term this may undermine the general move towards equality of access to jobs that reverse discrimination is supposed to achieve. However, this criticism can be met by making sure that the minimum standard of ability of a candidate who gets a job because of reverse discrimination is relatively high.

### **Political equality: democracy**

Another area in which equality is pursued is that of political participation. Democracy is often celebrated as a method of giving all citizens a share in political decision-making. However, the word 'democracy' is used in a number of different ways. Two potentially conflicting views of democracy stand out. The first emphasises the need for members of the population to have an opportunity to participate in the government of the state, usually through voting. The second emphasises the need for a democratic state to reflect the true interests of the people, even though the people may themselves be ignorant of where their true interests lie. Here I shall concentrate on the first type of democracy.

In Ancient Greece a democracy was a city-state ruled by the people rather than by the few (an oligarchy), or by one person (a

monarchy). Ancient Athens is usually considered a model of democracy, though it would be wrong to think of it as run by the people as a whole, since women, slaves, and many other non-citizens who dwelt in the city-state were not allowed to participate. No democratic state allows *all* those who live within its control to vote; that would include numerous people who would be incapable of understanding what they were doing, such as young children and the severely mentally ill. However, a state which denied a large proportion of its people political participation would not today merit the name democracy.

### **Direct democracy**

Early democratic states were direct democracies; that is, those who were eligible to vote discussed and voted on each issue rather than electing representatives. Direct democracies are only feasible with a small number of participants or when relatively few decisions have to be made. The practical difficulties of a large number of people voting on a wide variety of issues are immense, though it is possible that electronic communication will eventually permit this. But even if this were achieved, for such a democracy to arrive at reasonable decisions, voters would have to have a good grasp of the issues on which they were voting, something which would require time and a programme of political education. It would probably be expecting too much for all citizens to keep abreast of the relevant issues. Today's democracies are representative democracies.

### **Representative democracy**

In a representative democracy elections are held in which voters select their favoured representatives. These representatives then take part in the day to day decision-making process which may itself be organised on some sort of democratic principles. There are several different ways in which such elections are conducted, some demand a majority decision; others, such as the one used in Britain, operate a first past the post system which allows representatives to be elected even if a majority of the electorate do not vote for them, provided that no one else receives more votes than them.

Representative democracies achieve government by the people in some ways but not in others. They achieve government by the people in so far as those elected have been chosen by the people. Once elected, however, the representatives are not usually bound on particular issues by the wishes of the people. Having frequent elections is a safeguard against abuse of office: those representatives who do not respect the wishes of the electorate are unlikely to be re-elected.

## Criticisms of democracy

### An illusion

Some theorists, particularly those influenced by Karl Marx (1818–1883), have attacked the forms of democracy sketched above as providing a merely illusory sense of participation in political decision-making. They claim that voting procedures won't guarantee rule by the people. Some voters may not understand where their best interests lie, or may be duped by skilful speech-makers. And besides, the range of candidates offered in most elections doesn't offer voters a genuine choice. It is hard to see why this sort of democracy is so praised when it typically amounts to choosing between two or three candidates with virtually indistinguishable political policies. This, say the marxists, is mere 'bourgeois democracy', which simply reflects existing power relations which are themselves the result of economic relations. Until these power-relations have been redressed, giving the population a chance to vote in elections is a waste of time.

### Voters aren't experts

Other critics of democracy, most notably Plato, have pointed out that sound political decision-making requires a great deal of expertise, expertise which many voters do not have. Thus direct democracy would very likely result in a very poor political system, since the state would be in the hands of people who had little skill or knowledge of what they were doing.

A similar argument can be used to attack representative democracy. Many voters aren't in a position to assess the suitability of a particular candidate. Since they aren't in a position to assess political attributes such as how good-looking they are, or whether they have a nice smile. Or else their voting is determined by unexamined prejudices about political parties. As a result, many excellent potential representatives remain unelected, and many unsuitable ones get chosen on the basis of inappropriate qualities they happen to have.

However, this evidence could be turned around and used as an argument for educating citizens for participation in democracy, rather than abandoning democracy altogether. And even if this is not possible, it may still be true that representative democracy is, of all available alternatives, the most likely to promote the interests of the people.

### *The paradox of democracy*

I believe that capital punishment is barbaric and should never occur in a civilised state. If in a referendum on the topic I vote against instating capital punishment, and yet the majority decision is that it should be instated, I am faced with a paradox. As someone committed to democratic principles I believe that the majority decision should be enacted. As an individual with strongly held beliefs about the wrongness of capital punishment I believe that capital punishment should never be permitted. So it seems that in this case I both believe that capital punishment should occur (as the result of the majority decision); and that it shouldn't occur (because of my personal beliefs). But these two beliefs are incompatible. Anyone committed to democratic principles is likely to be faced with a similar paradox when they find themselves in a minority.

This does not completely undermine the notion of democracy, but it does draw attention to the possibility of conflicts of conscience and majority decision, something which I discuss below in the section on civil disobedience. Anyone committed to democratic principles will have to decide the relative weight given to individual beliefs and collective decisions. They will also have to spell out what 'commitment to democratic principles' means.

## Freedom

Like 'democracy', 'freedom' is a word which has been used in many different ways. There are two main senses of freedom in the political context: the negative and the positive. These were identified and analysed by Isaiah Berlin (1909–) in a famous article, 'Two Concepts of Liberty'.

### Negative freedom

One definition of freedom is the absence of coercion. Coercion is when other people force you to behave in a particular way, or force you to stop behaving in a particular way. If no one is coercing you then you are free in this negative sense of freedom.

If someone has put you in prison and is holding you there, then you are not free. Nor are you free if you want to leave the country but have had your passport confiscated; nor if you want to live openly in a homosexual relationship but will be prosecuted if you do so. Negative freedom is freedom from obstacle or restraint. If no one is actively preventing you from doing something, then in that respect you are free.

Most governments restrict the freedom of individuals to some extent. Their justification for doing so is usually the need to protect all members of society. If everyone were completely at liberty to do whatever they wanted to do, then the strongest and most ruthless would probably thrive at the expense of the weak. However, many liberal political philosophers believe that there ought to be an area of individual liberty which is sacrosanct, which, provided that you are not harming anyone else, is not the government's business. In his *On Liberty*, for instance, John Stuart Mill argued forcefully that individuals should be allowed to conduct their own 'experiments in living' free from state interference, just so long as nobody was harmed in the process.

### Criticisms of negative freedom

#### What counts as harm?

In practice it may be difficult to decide what is to count as harm to other people. Does it, for instance, include harming others' feelings?

If it does, then all sorts of 'experiments in living' will have to be ruled out since they offend a great number of people. For instance, a prudish neighbour may be offended by the knowledge that a naturist couple next door never wear clothes. Or, for that matter, the naturist couple may be offended by the knowledge that so many people do wear clothes. Both the naturists and their neighbours may feel harmed by other people's lifestyles. Mill did not believe that taking offence should count as a serious harm, but drawing the line between being offended and being harmed is not always easy; for instance, many people would consider blasphemy against their religion far more harmful to them than physical injury. On what grounds can we say that they are wrong?

### ***Positive freedom***

Some philosophers have attacked the idea that negative freedom is the sort of freedom we should strive to increase. They argue that positive freedom is a far more important political goal. Positive freedom is freedom to exercise control over your own life. You are free in the positive sense if you actually exercise control, and not free if you don't, even if you are not actually constrained in any way. Most defenders of the positive concept of freedom believe that true freedom lies in some kind of self-realisation through individuals making their own life choices.

For instance, if someone is an alcoholic and is driven against their better judgement to spend all their money on wild drinking sprees, then does this amount to exercising freedom? It seems intuitively implausible, particularly if in sober moments the alcoholic regrets these binges. Rather we would tend to think of the alcoholic as controlled by drink: a slave to impulse. Despite the lack of constraint, on the positive account the alcoholic is not genuinely free.

Even an advocate of negative freedom might argue that alcoholics, like children, should be coerced in some ways, on the ground that they are not fully responsible for their actions. But if someone consistently makes foolish life decisions, squanders all their talents, and so on, then according to Mill's principles we are entitled to reason with them, but never to coerce them into a better way of

treatment. However, in general, according to a retributivist theory, punishment is justified as the appropriate response to wrongdoing. What's more, the severity of the punishment should reflect the severity of the crime. In its simplest form of 'an eye for an eye' (sometimes known as *lex talionis*), retributivism demands an exactly proportional response to the crime committed. For some crimes such as blackmail it is difficult to see what this response could amount to: presumably the judge wouldn't be expected to sentence the blackmailer to six months' blackmail. Similarly it is hard to understand how a poverty-stricken thief who steals a gold watch could be punished in exact proportion to the crime. This is only a problem for the principle of an eye for an eye; with more sophisticated forms of retributivism the punishment need not mirror the crime.

### Criticisms of retributivism

#### *It appeals to baser feelings*

Retributivism gets much of its force from feelings of revenge. Getting one's own back is a very basic human response to being harmed. Opponents of retributivism recognise how widespread this feeling is, but argue that state punishment should be founded on a sounder principle than 'tit for tat'. However, those who defend hybrid justifications of punishment often include it as an element in their theory.

#### *It ignores effects*

The main criticism of retributivism is that it pays no attention to the effects of the punishment on the criminal or on society. Questions of deterrence, reform, and protection are irrelevant. According to retributivists, criminals deserve to be punished whether this has a beneficial effect on them or not. Consequentialists object to this on the grounds that no action can be morally right unless it has beneficial consequences, to which deontologists might reply that, if an action is morally justified, it is so whatever the consequences.

## Definition of Art:

It is a creative skill and imagination of a human being such as Painting, writing etc.

Most people who visit art galleries, read novels and poetry, watch plays or ballet, go to see films, or listen to music, have at some time wondered what art is. This is the basic question underlying all philosophy of art. This chapter considers several answers which have been given to it. It also examines a number of philosophical questions about the nature of art criticism.

The fact that new art forms such as film and photography have emerged and that art galleries have exhibited such things as a pile of bricks or a stack of cardboard boxes has forced us to think about the limits of what we are prepared to call art. Obviously art has meant different things to different cultures at different times: it has served ritualistic, religious, and entertainment purposes as well as embodying the beliefs, fears, and desires most central to the culture in which it was produced. In earlier times what counted as art seemed to be more clearly defined. Yet in the late twentieth century it seems that we have now

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reached a stage when anything whatsoever can be a work of art. If this is so, what is it that makes one object or piece of writing or music rather than another worthy of being called art?

### Can art be defined?

There is an immense variety among works of art: paintings, plays, films, novels, pieces of music, and dance may seem to have very little in common. This has led some philosophers to argue that art cannot be defined at all. They claim that it is a complete mistake to look for a common denominator since there is just too much variety among works of art for a definition which applies to them all to be satisfactory. To back this up they use the idea of a family resemblance, a notion used by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

### The family resemblance view :

You may look a little like your father, and your father may resemble his sister. However, it is possible that you look nothing like your father's sister. In other words there may be overlapping resemblances between different members of a family without there being any one observable feature which they all share. Similarly, many games resemble each other, but it is difficult to see what solitaire, chess, rugby and tiddlywinks have in common.

The resemblances between different sorts of art may be of this type: despite the obvious similarities between some works of art, there may be no observable features which they all share, no common denominators. If this is so, it is a mistake to look for any general definition of art. The best that we can hope for is a definition of an art for n, such as the novel; the fiction film, or the symphony.

### Criticisms of the family resemblance view

One way of proving this view false would be to produce a satisfactory definition of art. We will look at a number of attempts to do this below. However, it is worth noting that even in the case of family



resemblances there is something which all members of a family do have in common: the fact that they are genetically related. And all games resemble each other in that they have the potential to be of absorbing non-practical interest to players or spectators. Now, whilst this definition of games is rather vague, and not entirely satisfactory – it doesn't, for example, help us to distinguish games from such activities as kissing or listening to music – it suggests that a more detailed and plausible definition could be found. If this can be done for games, there is no reason to rule out in advance the possibility of doing it for works of art. Of course, the common denominator of all works of art may not turn out to be particularly interesting or important, but it is clearly possible to find one. Let us, then, consider, some of the attempted definitions of art. We will examine the significant form, the idealist, and the institutional theories of art.

### The significant form theory

The significant form theory, popular in the early part of the twentieth century and particularly linked with the art critic Clive Bell (1881–1964) and his book *Art*, begins with the assumption that all genuine works of art produce an aesthetic emotion in the spectator, listener, or reader. This emotion is different from the emotions of everyday life: it is distinctive in having nothing to do with practical concerns.

What is it about works of art that causes people to respond to them in this way? Why do works of art evoke this aesthetic emotion? The answer Bell gave is that all genuine works of art share a quality known as 'significant form' a term he coined. Significant form is a certain relation between parts – the distinctive features of a work of art's structure rather than of its subject matter. Although this theory is usually only applied to the visual arts it can equally well be taken as a definition of all of the arts.

So, for example, a significant form theorist considering what it is that makes Van Gogh's painting of a pair of old boots a work of art would point to the combination of colours and textures that possess significant form and therefore produce the aesthetic emotion in sensitive critics.

Significant form is an indefinable property that sensitive critics can intuitively recognise in a work of art. Unfortunately, insensitive critics are unable to appreciate significant form. Bell, unlike for instance the institutional theorists discussed below, believed art to be an evaluative concept; this means that to call something a work of art is not just to classify it, but also to say that it has a certain status. All genuine works of art, of all ages and of all cultures, possess significant form.

## Criticisms of the significant form theory

### Circularity

The argument for the significant form theory appears to be circular. It seems only to be saying that the aesthetic emotion is produced by an aesthetic-emotion-producing property about which nothing more can be said. This is like explaining how a sleeping tablet works by referring to its sleep-inducing property. It is a circular argument because that which is supposed to be explained is used in the explanation. However, some circular arguments can be informative; those which cannot are known as viciously circular. Defenders of the theory would argue that it is not viciously circular as it sheds light on why some people are better critics than others, namely because they have a better ability to detect significant form. It also justifies treating works of art from different cultures and ages as similar in many ways to present-day works of art.

why significant form theory is not viciously circular?

because

### Irrefutability

A further objection to the theory is that it cannot be refuted. An assumption of the significant form theory is that there is just one emotion which all genuine experiencers of art feel when appreciating true works of art. However, this is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prove.

If someone claims fully to have experienced a work of art but hasn't experienced this aesthetic emotion, then Bell would say that that person was mistaken; they either hadn't fully experienced it, or

else were not a sensitive critic. But this is to assume what the theory is supposed to be proving: that there is indeed one aesthetic emotion and that it is produced by genuine works of art. The theory, then, appears irrefutable. And many philosophers believe that if a theory is logically impossible to refute because every possible observation would confirm it, then it is a meaningless theory.

Similarly, if we point to something which we consider to be a work of art and yet which doesn't evoke the aesthetic emotion in a sensitive critic, then a significant form theorist will claim that it is not a genuine work of art. Again, there is no possible observation which could prove such a person wrong in this.

### The idealist theory

The idealist theory of art, given its most persuasive formulation by R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) in his *Principles of Art*, differs from other theories of art in that it holds that the actual work of art is non-physical: it is an idea or emotion in the artist's mind. This idea is given physical imaginative expression, and is modified through the artist's involvement with a particular artistic medium, but the artwork itself remains in the artist's mind. In some versions of the idealist theory great stress is put on the emotion expressed being a sincere one. This builds a strong evaluative element into the theory.

The idealist theory distinguishes art from craft. Works of art serve no particular purpose. They are created through the artist's involvement with a particular medium, such as oil paint or words. In contrast, craft objects are created for a particular purpose, and the craftsman begins with a plan rather than designing the object in the process of making it. So, for example, a painting by Picasso serves no particular purpose, and was, presumably, not fully planned in advance, whereas the table at which I am sitting serves a very obvious function and was made according to a pre-existing design, a blueprint. The painting is a work of art; the table a work of craft. This is not to say that works of art cannot contain elements of craft: clearly many great works of art do contain such craft elements of craft. Collingwood explicitly states that the two categories art and craft are not mutually exclusive. Rather, no work of art is solely a means to an end.

The idealist theory contrasts genuine works of art with mere entertainment art (art made with the purpose simply of entertaining people, or of arousing particular emotions). Genuine art has no purpose: it is an end in itself. Entertainment art is a craft, and therefore inferior to art proper. Similarly, purely religious art, so-called, is considered to be craft because it was made for a specific purpose.

## Criticisms of the idealist theory

### Strangeness

The main objection to the idealist theory is the strangeness of considering art works to be ideas in the mind rather than physical objects. This means that when we go to an art gallery, all we are seeing is traces of the artists' actual creations. This is a difficult view to accept, though it is more plausible in the cases of literary and musical works of art, where there is no single physical object that we can call the work of art.

### Too narrow

A second objection to this theory is that it is too narrow: it seems to categorise many established works of art as only works of craft, not of art proper. Many great portrait paintings were painted in order to have a record of their sitter's appearance; many great plays written in order to entertain. Does this mean that because they were created with a specific purpose in mind they cannot be works of art? And what about architecture, which is traditionally one of the Fine Arts: most buildings are created for a specific purpose, so cannot be considered works of art on this theory.

## The institutional theory

The so-called institutional theory of art is a recent attempt by such writers as the contemporary philosopher George Dickie to explain how such varied things as the play *Macbeth*, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a pile of bricks, a urinal labelled 'Fountain', T. S. Eliot's

poem *The Waste Land*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and William Klein's photographs can all be considered works of art. The theory states that there are two things that all these have in common.

First, they are all artifacts: that is, they have all been worked on to some extent by human beings. 'Artifact' is used in quite a loose way – even a piece of driftwood picked up on the seashore could be considered an artifact if someone displayed it in an art gallery. Placing it in a gallery in order to get people to look at it in a certain way would count as working on it. In fact this definition of an artifact is so loose as to add nothing important to the concept of art.

Second, and more importantly, they have all been given the status of a work of art by some member or members of the art world, such as a gallery owner, a publisher, a producer, a conductor, or an artist. In every case someone with the appropriate authority has done the equivalent of christening them as works of art.

This may sound as if it means that works of art are simply those things which certain people call works of art, an apparently circular claim. In fact it is not very far from this. However, the members of the art world need not actually go through any sort of ceremony of naming something a work of art, they need not even actually call it a work of art: it is enough that they treat the work as art. The institutional theory, then, says that some individuals and groups in our society have an ability to change any artifact into a work of art by a simple action of 'christening', which may take the form of calling something 'art', but more often amounts to publishing, exhibiting, or performing the work. Artists themselves can be members of this art world. All members of this elite have the equivalent of King Midas' ability to turn everything he touched to gold.

### Criticisms of the institutional theory

*Doesn't distinguish good from bad art*

It is sometimes argued that the institutional theory is a poor theory of art because it seems to justify the most pretentious and the most superficial objects being considered works of art. If I were a member

of the art world I could, by exhibiting it in a gallery, make my left shoe into a work of art.

It is certainly true that the institutional theory does allow that almost anything could become a work of art. Christening something a work of art does not mean that it is a good work of art, nor for that matter a bad one. It only makes the object a work of art in the classificatory sense: in other words it puts it into the class of things we call works of art. This differs from the way we often use the word 'art' not just to classify something, but often also to suggest that it is good of its kind. Sometimes too we use the term metaphorically to talk about things which are not literally works of art at all, for instance when we say such things as 'that omelette is a work of art'. The institutional theory has nothing to tell us about either of these evaluative uses of the word 'art'. It is a theory about what all works of art – good, bad, and indifferent – have in common. It is only about the classificatory sense of 'art'.

However, most people who ask the question 'What is art?' are not just interested in what we call art, but want to know why we value some objects above others. Both the significant form and idealist theories are partly evaluative: according to them, to call something a work of art is to say that it is good in some sense, either because it has significant form or because it is a sincere artistic expression of an emotion. The institutional theory, however, does not attempt to give an answer to evaluative questions about art. It is extremely open about what can be counted as art. Some see this as its greatest virtue; others as its most serious defect.

### Circularity

The institutional theory is circular. What it says is that art is whatever a certain group of privileged people choose to call art. This sounds like a game with words, a game which could have disturbing political implications if only people from a particular social class are endowed with the Midas touch.

A defender of the institutional theory might argue against this that the requirement that the work of art be an artifact, and the restriction of who is able to confer the status of work of art on an object,