Week 2 readings:

Bennet, C. (2015): "What is this thing called ethics", second edition, Routledge.

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Kantian ethics

HUMAN DIGNITY

Sometimes we aren't treated the way we think we should be. In these quotes the speakers show their frustration about the way in which someone thinks it all right to deal with them.

> The police rounded us up like animals and kept us in this corner of the street while the rest of the demonstration went past. In their eyes that's all we were: animals to be kept under control.

> You always speak to me in that patronising way as though I am a child, as though you know best. But I can make my own decisions. I'm not a child anymore – so don't treat me like one!

The implication is that, with animals it might be all right to round them up forcibly when it is necessary to do so; and with children it might be necessary to take decisions on the basis of what one thinks is best for them. But both speakers insist that they are more than animals/children and that they ought to be treated as such. In both cases the speaker wants to say something like: Look – I am a grown-up human being. You can't treat me like that!

The two complaints focus on slightly different concerns. In the first case the complaint is that the police did not ask the speaker to move, or to stay put: they simply forced her to do so. In the second, the issue is that the speaker thinks that she has been treated as someone who is not able to make up her own mind. But in both cases the underlying issue is the same. Both speakers want to be talked to in a straightforward, open and honest way; they want the issues explained to them and then they think they will be able to make up their own minds. What they don't want is someone else dictating what they are to do, ordering them around, or making decisions for them as though they can't be trusted to do the right thing by themselves. They are therefore implicitly contrasting how they have been treated with an ideal of good human relations: an ideal in which people give one another a certain kind of respect and independence, acting as though others can be expected to make the right decisions by themselves and to not need to be either forced or supervised. And presumably both speakers are claiming that those who treated them otherwise wrongly departed from

this ideal, treating them as though they couldn't be trusted to act rightly themselves. The issue in both cases is therefore a lack of respect. In both cases the speakers might equally well say "You need to respect the fact that I am a grown-up human being!" The idea is that respecting someone as a grown-up human being will rule out dealing with that person in ways that it might be perfectly all right to deal with an animal or a child, because it involves treating that person as though they were capable of and responsible for making an adequate decision themselves.

Kantian ethics makes this idea of respect central. In one of his most famous formulations of the categorical imperative – the name he gives to the fundamental principle of morality – Kant asserts that we must never treat a human being as a mere means, but only ever at the same time as an end. In plainer language: human beings cannot be just used for our own devices. They have a special value or status that must be respected. This is the source of their special *dignity*. The speakers in the quotes above claim that because they are grown-up human beings they ought to be treated as such. Kant would agree. He agrees that we have a duty to treat other adult humans with a certain respect because of what they are. He believes in *respect for persons*.

Now the idea of respect used here has to be distinguished from the idea of respect as admiration. When we say we respect someone and mean that we admire them, then that is usually because of some *excellence* that this person has achieved: I respect or admire her as a great writer or athlete or soldier or chef, or for her tenacity or her great imagination or her humanity. Admiration-respect is a something that marks some human beings out as special: it is earned by exceptional achievement. The kind of respect that Kant is interested in is different. It is based on the capacity for autonomy, the ability a human being has to make their own decisions independently, without intrusive supervision or guidance or coercion from others. Whereas admiration-respect has to be earned and marks out a hierarchy among human beings, Kantian respect is said to be unconditional and egalitarian. Basic dignity cannot be lost, unless one loses the capacity for autonomy on which it is based.

Kantian ethics takes the view that each autonomous individual is due the same basic respect, the same recognition of their ability to make decisions for themselves. This means that there is a limit to how we can intervene in the lives of others. We have to recognise *boundaries* between individuals, since each individual is sovereign over her actions and responsible for her own decisions. Each individual who is autonomous and has the ability to decide for herself how to act, thereby has a responsibility to do so. So the basic picture of Kantian ethics, the ideal of human relations that it presents, and which was invoked by our speakers at the start, is of a world of human agents who recognise one another as independent, and as each having a certain sphere of influence over which they are authoritative and into which others ought not to intrude. Individuals are not just free to do what they want, of course, since they cannot just intrude into the spheres of others. But the basic idea is that people should have freedom to act as they see fit – being left to decide for themselves, as autonomous beings, is part of their dignity – as long as they do so in ways that allow similar

liberty for others. They have that freedom because they are capable of making adequate decisions by themselves.

Kant's view stands in opposition to utilitarianism. The utilitarian thinks that actions are right or wrong in virtue of the amount of happiness or unhappiness that they bring about. An action that brings about the maximum balance of happiness over unhappiness is the right action. This leads the utilitarian to some questionable conclusions. For instance, if it were the case that enslaving a minority would lead to the greatest overall happiness, the utilitarian would have to say that that is the right action. However, Kant thinks (surely more intuitively) that slavery remains wrong even if you can bring about greater happiness through it. It is wrong on Kant's view because it involves sacrificing the slaves for the sake of the rest of society, using the slaves as a means to an end. It is incompatible with basic human dignity since the slave is treated as someone who cannot decide for themselves what to do: they become the mere property of another person. Because slavery involves a violation of autonomy it is wrong regardless of the consequences. Respecting human dignity sets a limit on what it is morally permissible to do in the pursuit of happiness.

• WHAT IS WRONG WITH TREATING A PERSON AS A MERE MEANS?

Kant's language of "means" and "ends" is a bit strange. What does it signify? As I have suggested above, the basic idea is a familiar one. People often say things that imply that what they are (e.g. a grown-up human being) requires that they be treated with a certain respect. In order to see what properly respecting human dignity involves we will have to see what Kant thinks gives us that dignity.

Kant thinks that human beings have to be respected because (unlike animals, plants, the insane, and very young children) we are rational agents. Saying that we are rational agents does not, of course, mean that we always behave rationally. But it does mean that, even at those times when we behave irrationally, we are *capable of* rational behaviour. Kant thinks that rational beings are fundamentally different from the non-rational, because rational beings are *free*. This freedom has two aspects to it: positive and negative. The *negative* aspect is that rational beings are not simply determined to act by influences that are independent of their own reasoning and decision. Non-rational beings like animals behave as they do because of instincts and impulses that they are incapable of questioning or evaluating. When a source of food is placed in front of a hungry animal, there is no question whether it will eat – the only thing that might interfere with this process is if there is a stronger impulse like fear that deters the animal from taking it. But the animal has no way of raising the question whether it should eat the food. Kant holds that human beings are fundamentally different because they are always capable of raising the question whether they should act in any given way. And because we are capable of raising such questions we must

recognise that we are free: we are not simply determined to act by the instincts and impulses that have been implanted in us by nature.

The *positive* aspect of freedom is that human beings are capable of acting rationally. Acting rationally means being able to appreciate and act on reasons for doing one thing rather than another. Whereas instinct impels the hungry dog towards the bowl of food, human beings are capable of *deliberation*. They can think about the various considerations that might speak in favour of or against that course of action. They can weigh up these considerations and come to some decision about what seems best. They are able to think about these reasons for and against their actions, and are capable of doing what they decide they have most reason to do.

Human beings are different from animals, on the Kantian view, because there is a different basis for the action. Rather than just being motivated by instinct or impulsion, human beings can also be motivated by reason, by thinking things through and giving the various pros and cons their proper weight. This is not to say that we always do act according to reason. When we do, however, Kant says we act *autonomously* (from the Greek *auto* and *nomos*, meaning self-rule: we make our own decisions). But often, Kant thinks, we let instinct motivate us, and in this case we act *heteronomously* (by contrast to autonomy we are ruled from outside, by mere instinct rather than considerations that we can understand as having authority; we are ruled by forces external to our own reasoning and understanding: nature acting through us rather than our making a free decision). Because human beings are capable of autonomous behaviour they are capable of being included in a different kind of interaction from that which animals are capable of. Human beings are capable of being included in *relationships* in which participants trust one another to act well without intervention or supervision. In short, autonomy makes possible the ideal of human relations that the speakers quoted at the start of this chapter invoke in making their complaints. Unlike animals or children, human beings are rational and can be left to make their own rational decisions.

• HOW DO WE KNOW THAT WE ARE FREE?

Kant gives this example that he thinks shows that we each do recognise our freedom.[1] Say you live in a kingdom ruled over by a cruel despot. One day this despot has you arrested and threatens you with death unless you sign a false statement that he will use to frame and destroy a brave and virtuous person who has dared to stand up against him. You are faced with a terrible choice between either accepting your own death or lying and becoming complicit in the despot's disposing of this innocent dissident. If you were merely an animal, Kant thinks, your instinct for self-preservation would simply cause you to lie. And perhaps in this case you would lie. However, surely, Kant thinks, you have to recognise that you didn't have to lie: nothing caused you to lie. Someone who claimed that there was no real choice open to them because of the strength of the self-preservation instinct would be deceiving

themselves. They would be guilty of what Sartre calls "bad faith": making things easier for yourself by pretending that you have no choice, when really there are always options open to you.

What this shows, Kant thinks, is that even when we do act irrationally, we must recognise that we are capable of acting rationally: to claim that we were caused to act thus by our instincts is only a bad excuse that we make in order to make ourselves feel better. The fact is that we are rational beings means that we are always capable of thinking things through for ourselves, weighing up the pros and cons of the various actions that confront us. That is what makes us fundamentally different from the rest of nature (see the discussion of "acting under the idea of freedom" in Chapter 10).

These considerations might make us think of our freedom (as Sartre did) as a burden. However, there are also benefits to rational agency, since it gives us a moral status and dignity that other parts of nature lack. The most obvious way to think of Kant's view is that rational agency is something almost sacred, something that we are required not to violate. When a person is a rational agent we have a duty to treat them differently from an animal or a child: we have to treat them as a rational agent. But what does this mean? How does one deal with a person in such a way as to do justice to the fact that they are capable of weighing up options and choosing for themselves in the way that animals and children are not? The answer is that we allow such persons to choose for themselves. In allowing each rational agent to make up their own mind how they are going to act we treat them in a way that is adequate to the importance of their capacity to choose for themselves.

• HOW TO RESPECT PERSONS AS RATIONAL AGENTS

Allowing people to make up their minds for themselves does not mean that we are never allowed to influence them in any way. But there are two basic ways in which we might aim to change someone's behaviour: by means of rational argument or by non-rational means. If I try to persuade someone not to act as I think they are minded to, and I do so by presenting them with good and relevant reasons for doing so, then I am still treating them as a rational agent. Only rational agents would be capable of understanding such reasons, therefore there is nothing incompatible with their dignity as a rational agent in presenting these considerations to them in the expectation that they will grasp their force. However, that is very different from seeking to influence their behaviour by *underhand* means that seek to bypass their understanding altogether. As an illustration we might think about two ways of seeing the business of advertising in capitalist society. On one view what marketing does is to provide consumers with relevant information about products that they might not otherwise have heard about, and which they might want to buy. Of course, advertisers try to show their product in its most favourable light, but there need be nothing manipulative about what they do. However, one might think that this first view represents a rather rose-tinted view of advertising. On the second view advertisers simply seek to shift more commodities by

any means necessary, short of outright deception. If it is effective in increasing sales to associate the product with images of happy families, naked women, mountain scenery, etc., then that is what to do, even though it has nothing to do with the value of the product. A strict Kantian view would be that the second approach is manipulative and wrong, since it involves influencing people's behaviour – making them feel attracted to a certain product and good about buying it – for irrelevant reasons. To treat someone as a rational agent one must present them with relevant reasons for doing this or that and leave them to make their own mind up.

What this means in practice is that respecting persons as rational agents rules out two types of action as fundamentally wrong: *coercion* and *deception*. In both cases what is wrong is that it is the person practising the coercion or deception who *decides how the victim is going to act*. Rather than giving the person the free choice as to how to act, one changes the situation so as to get them to act the way one wants. For instance, in the case of coercing or forcing someone, say, in putting a gun against their head and asking them to sign a cheque you have made out to yourself, you do not allow them to respond to the situation freely, as they would without the gun. Forcing someone is different from requesting that they sign the cheque, since requesting them leaves them free to make their own decision. It might be argued that forcing someone does not actually make them act: the coercer does leave the victim free to refuse, although obviously there are terrible consequences if they do. However, even this meagre amount of freedom is removed by deception. If one person deceives another, say, in order to get them to hand over some money, then again that person is deciding how the other will act rather than allowing them to make their own decision. They are making sure that the situation the person believes they are responding to is false, and hence preventing them from making a free response as they would have had they known how things actually stand. However, in this case, because the person believes they are making such a free response no room is left for a free response to the true situation at all.

Kant's ideas fit our initial examples quite nicely. In both cases the speakers could be understood as complaining that they have not been treated in such a way as to let them make their own decisions: in one case where the police corral them into a corner for the sake of security (rather than requesting that they move into the corner, or at any rate explaining why it is necessary to corral them); and in the other where someone (e.g. a parent) continues, not just to offer advice for the other person to think about, but to act as though it is their place to make decisions for the other person. Kant can explain why it can feel wrong to make decisions for another person, or put them in a position (such as enslavement, to pick an extreme example) in which their ability to make decisions for themselves is rendered ineffective.

• DOES KANTIAN ETHICS LEAVE US DEFENCELESS?

Kantian ethics, as I have explained, is based in an attractive picture of human relations, according to which we ought to be treated as independent agents, given a

sphere of responsibility and sovereignty, and left to get on with making our own decisions. It is an ideal of mutual trust. This ideal is made possible by the fact that we are capable of autonomously behaving according to reason; we can be trusted to behave responsibly, and therefore should be left to get on with behaving responsibly without heavy-handed intrusion. Nevertheless, although Kant has clearly seized on something of importance, one problem with this view is that this ideal is not merely an ideal on Kant's view. Rather we are *required* to respect one another as autonomous agents. Treating rational agents with respect is one of the basic tenets of Kantian ethics. The problem arises when one of these erstwhile rational agents decides to act wrongly. Now if the agent were actually to go mad, and lose his capacity for rationality, then there would no longer be any obligation to treat him with respect. However, the problem case is one in which the agent is still autonomous, in the sense of having the capacity for rational behaviour, but acts wrongly or heteronomously. Suppose further that the agent is not just acting heteronomously but is doing so in a way that will harm others. Are we allowed to interfere? If not then it looks as though Kant's ethics leaves us defenceless in the face of those who would harm us.

It is worth briefly noting that Kantian principles would not leave us entirely defenceless. Kant allows that we are able to punish those who have done wrong. In his view, punishment can only be justified when it is deserved, and in punishing someone because they deserve it we are treating them as a responsible agent, holding them accountable for their decisions as only a responsible agent can be. But the possibility of punishment does not really address our problem of what happens when an autonomous agent seeks to cause harm, since deserved punishment comes only *after* the event. Kantian ethics doesn't have an account of rights of self-defence, defence of others, or just war, in the way that other deontologists such as Aquinas or Locke do, and therefore seems to say that we have to trust people to behave autonomously, and let them get on with it. It is only after the event that we can intervene to punish them.

We can crystallise this concern by considering a case that bothered Kant himself. This is the case of the murderer at the door. Consider a modernised version of this example. A man comes to your door asking for your friend. He clearly intends murder – perhaps he is a Gestapo officer and your friend a Jew who has been hiding in your house. Clearly the thing to do in this case, one might think, is to deny that your friend is there in order to give him time to make his escape. However, Kant argues that in this case you must tell the truth. This is because, on his understanding, your basic duty is to respect persons as rational agents. That means including them as members of an ideal of human relations, trusting them to make their own decisions, not making their decisions for them. It means not lying or manipulating or coercing them. If you lie to the murderer you will clearly be violating his autonomy. You will be preventing him from making up his own mind on the relevant facts. It might seem as though you have a very good reason for not letting him make up his own mind: namely, that he intends murder. But Kant's view seems to be that you must trust the murderer to make up his own mind correctly. You can attempt to reason with him to get him to

change his mind, but you cannot simply lie. Unlike the utilitarian Kant thinks that you cannot simply violate another person's autonomy for the sake of good consequences.

As well as being highly counter-intuitive, the Kantian view might be said to be in danger of being self-contradictory. After all, the Kantian view is founded on the importance of rational agency. Rational agency, Kantians think, is a thing of such great importance that we have to respect it in the way we act. But in this case it looks as though respecting the murderer's autonomy means that we will be powerless to prevent the destruction of our friend's rational agency (through his death). It might look as though, if we are really serious about the value of rational agency, we should be protecting it rather than just respecting it.

This shows something important about the structure of Kantian ethics. On the Kantian view, the importance of rational agency functions fundamentally as a *constraint* on our action. Kantians can allow that we ought to act positively to protect and encourage rational agency. But the fundamental duty, the strictest one, is a negative one: it tells us that we are not allowed to act in ways that intervene coercively or manipulatively in another's sphere of responsibility. It is then up to them whether they act rightly or wrongly. Therefore the pure Kantian view would imagine you telling the truth to the murderer, and then no doubt bitterly mourning your friend's death, but seeing that death as the murderer's responsibility and not your own. In telling the truth you would, by Kantian lights, have acted quite rightly. You fulfilled your responsibility, and you did not try to take responsibility for the murderer's decisions. Unfortunately, however, the murderer made a bad decision and your friend is dead. Therefore the crucial thing about the Kantian view is that it does not see you as having a responsibility to save your friend in this situation. It is not that Kantians think we have no duty to help others. You do have a duty to help. But you only have a duty to help in ways that are compatible with respecting others.

To many people this seems like a problem. Surely if you blithely told the truth to the Gestapo you would be partially responsible for your friend's death. Many people think that you have a right, and perhaps a duty, to take such steps as would be necessary and proportionate to protect your friend's life. In response, some Kantian ethicists have often moved away from the absolutism associated with Kant's ethics. Kant's view seems to be that even a wrong like lying (which some may view as often reasonably trivial) is absolutely wrong and never to be done. Non-absolutist Kantians have altered Kant's view by introducing the idea of a threshold. The idea is that moral rules such as "Do not coerce" and "Do not lie" hold up to a certain point. Such rules are not simply justified by their consequences; rather they might be responses, as Kant thought they were, to the value of rational agents and the importance of including rational agents in an ideal of human relations characterised by trust and independence. But once the consequences of keeping these rules get too bad (once the "threshold" is reached), it becomes permissible to break the rules. This would allow us to lie to the murderer. It would

therefore mean that Kantian ethics could retain its basic non-consequentialist spirit but not be left merely defenceless in the face of evil. After all, there are always some people who will not play the game of mutual trust, and trusting them might be idealistic but will be dangerous. However, although this revision of the Kantian view might seem to fit better with our own reactions to the case like the murderer, it destroys the purity of the Kantian view. And the idea of a threshold might strike some as rather vague. After all, at what point do the consequences become *too* bad? In an attempt to avoid some of the problems of the threshold deontology view, Christine Korsgaard has elaborated an account on which the injunction to treat others as ends in themselves is treated as an ideal from which we can depart in certain circumstances. Another alternative would be to develop a Kantian theory of self- and other-defence. While the problem that deontology leaves one defenceless against wrongdoers is far from resolved, the compelling nature of Kant's basic insight ensures that there will be no shortage of theorists trying to elaborate his basic account and overcome its problems.

CASE STUDY: KANTIANISM AND SUICIDE

If one is convinced by the basic thrust of Kantian ethics, and its strictures on respecting persons, what should one think about the ethics of suicide? There are two importantly different perspectives to consider on this question. First of all, there is the perspective of the agent herself, deliberating about whether to end her life. And secondly, there is the perspective of others who are considering whether to intervene to forcibly prevent the suicide from taking place. This is an interesting case to think about in asking whether the Kantian approach sheds any useful light on how we ought to decide such questions. One thing that the Kantian approach will presumably insist on, and which is relevant to the question whether to intervene, is that sane adults have some fairly extensive rights to make up their minds how to act: for better or worse, individuals have to make their own decisions and face the consequences. To allow someone else to make your decisions for you is to renounce autonomy for heteronomy. So it seems that the Kantian view will tend to conclude that we ought not to intervene, at least as long as the agent is sane and rational. Now this might not always be the case: perhaps quite often people who fix upon suicide as a solution are emotionally unhinged and unable to deliberate with any sort of perspective on their lives. For people who are genuinely no longer rational, Kantians can say that intervention is legitimate. However, a more troubling possibility is that someone might attempt suicide, not out of actual insanity, but rather impetuously, under an impulse of bravado or "this will show them", and without a full grasp of the likely consequences. On the Kantian view, each person is responsible for her own decisions: we ought not to make people's decisions for them. But this is a hard rule to abide by when what is at stake for the person is so

terrible. Is it really unjustifiable paternalism to intervene in such a case? Kant himself may have thought that it was permissible to intervene. However, if so, this would be because he thinks that the person who has decided upon suicide has done something impermissible – that is, if we revert to the perspective of the person deciding, Kant thinks that it is never permissible to choose to put an end to one's own life. His reasons for this are slightly obscure, but involve the thought that committing suicide in order to get out of a miserable life is to treat oneself as a mere means. The idea here might be that rational agency is valuable in such a way that it cannot simply be done away with when it suits us – and that the same goes for the person whose rational agency it is as for any other third party who might be able to profit in some way from the person's death.

• MORAL REQUIREMENTS AS REQUIREMENTS OF RATIONALITY

What we have looked at so far is one side of Kantian ethics. This is the aspect according to which we have a duty to respect others (and indeed ourselves) as rational agents. However, there is another side to Kant's view that we need to mention here. This is again to do with rationality. It is his idea that moral duties or requirements are themselves requirements of rationality. Kant believes that someone who violates moral requirements is being irrational. The flip side of this is that the authority of moral requirements over us is the same as the authority of the requirements of rationality.

To explain Kant's view we need to know what the requirements of rationality are, and which problems he is seeking to solve in arguing that moral requirements are requirements of rationality. Then we will look at how this commitment affects the structure of Kant's view, particularly in leading to his claim that a second way to formulate the fundamental principle of morality is that we should only act in ways that we could choose to become *universal law*.

What are requirements of rationality? A simple example is a case of having two contradictory beliefs. It is not strictly impossible e.g. to believe (1) that today is Tuesday; to believe (2) that I have an arrangement to meet a friend on Tuesday evening; and yet to answer when asked if I am free this evening that I am. In this case I believe (3) that I am doing nothing this evening, even though I believe that I am busy on Tuesday evening and believe that today is Tuesday. This looks irrational. Not all of these beliefs can be true. Something has gone wrong. In some sense I can't believe all of these things – although as it happens I *do* believe all of these things. But when we say that I can't believe all of these things we mean something like: although it is possible to believe inconsistent or incompatible things, if you thought it through you would realise that you do have to give up either belief (2) or (3). In some sense,

when you think it through, you have to be rational. You can't just believe anything you want.

It looks irrational to have contradictory beliefs. This suggests that there are a couple of requirements of rationality in operation here. We might state them as follows: "Form beliefs according to the evidence" and "Do not hold contradictory beliefs." These requirements have a kind of undeniable authority for us. In some sense you can't go against them. In some sense we have to abide by these requirements, even though we do not always do so.

Kant's gambit is that we can say the same thing about requirements of morality. We can say the same about morality because moral requirements just are rational requirements. It is irrational to be immoral. On the face of it this sounds wrong: someone who fiddles their taxes in order to get the benefits of public services while paying nothing for them is mean and selfish. But are they irrational? On some conceptions of rationality (for instance, the view that rationality requires maximising **expected personal utility**) it might look as though it is the *most* rational thing to do to fiddle your taxes if you can get away with it. Why does Kant claim that there is irrationality here?

• THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The answer to this question lies in Kant's explanation of the apparent authority of morality, which he thinks of as having a kind of inescapability. Rational requirements also have this kind of inescapability: hence the logic of his attempt to argue that the former are examples of the latter. Let me illustrate. Moral requirements, Kant thinks, can be stated as rules or imperatives that tell us what we are required to do, e.g. "Keep your promises"; "Help others when they are in need and to do so would cost you little"; "Do not lie"; "Do not steal"; "Do not commit murder" – etc. However, Kant recognises two different sorts of imperatives, which he calls *hypothetical* and *categorical*. Hypothetical imperatives make the authority of the rule depend on the fact that the agent to whom it is addressed has a certain further desire or end. This sounds a bit technical but hopefully some examples will make the idea clear. Take for instance "Take your umbrella if you want to stay dry" or "Leave the house at midday if you want to get the 12.45 train" or "Treat others nicely if you want them to treat you nicely." In each of these imperatives there is something you are instructed to do (to take your umbrella, leave the house at midday, or treat others nicely) but the instruction only applies to you if you want to stay dry, to get the 12.45 train, or that others treat you nicely. In each of these cases someone given the instruction can deny that it applies to them by saying that they don't actually want to stay dry, etc. Kant reasons that moral requirements cannot be hypothetical imperatives. It cannot be possible for someone to deny that moral requirements apply to them because they lack the appropriate desires. Moral requirements apply to everyone, inescapably. Moral requirements must be categorical imperatives.

In asserting this insight about morality, Kant is taking a stand against those philosophers, such as the British empiricists, who had sought to explain morality through the emotions or sentiments that human beings typically have. These attempts are of two sorts. On the one hand it might be said that human beings typically have feelings of sympathy or solidarity towards their fellow human beings, and that this is the basis of moral ideas. Or else, more cynically, it is sometimes suggested that human beings are moral because of their desire for a good reputation. Either way, however, Kant will worry about what happens to the authority or inescapability of moral rules. It may be that many or even most human beings share some desire for the well-being of others, or if not that then at least for their own reputation. For such people, hypothetical imperatives like "Do not kill if you want to avoid causing unnecessary suffering" or "Do not lie if you want to gain a reputation as a trustworthy person" will have some weight. However, it seems quite possible that there could be someone who lacked the kinds of desires that would get them to be moral in the first place (the kind of person called an *amoralist* in philosophical discussion). On the empiricist view, couldn't such a person simply argue that moral rules didn't apply to them since they had no desire either to prevent suffering or to maintain a good reputation? Surely, Kantians think, the correct view is that moral requirements apply just as much to these people as to anyone else? Therefore moral requirements must be categorical imperatives. They must have their basis in something other than a set of sentiments to which we may or may not be susceptible.

It is in order to justify this strong intuition about the inescapability of morality that Kant claims that moral requirements must be requirements of rationality. Requirements of rationality have just the sort of inescapability that he thinks marks out morality: you cannot argue that they don't apply to you just because you don't want them to.

• UNIVERSAL LAW

We have now explained why Kant commits himself to the claim that moral requirements are requirements of rationality. How does he back this claim up? Why should we believe it? Kant's reasons for thinking that morality is a part of rationality are crucial to understanding another key aspect of his moral outlook: the rather forbidding idea that we should only act in ways that we could choose to be universal laws. The key justification for the idea of universal law is that, whatever rational requirements are, they must be universal: they must apply to all rational beings equally. Therefore, even if we do not know anything else about what moral requirements are, what we do know is this: if moral requirements are to be categorical imperatives, applying to all rational agents equally, they must be universal. They must take the form of universal laws applying to all rational agents regardless of their desires. But that is all that the idea of universal law says. Thus Kant has some reason for claiming that the idea of universal law gives the form of any possible categorical imperative.

One common criticism of the idea of universal law, however, is that it doesn't actually give us any guidance. Philosophers from Hegel to Mill down to the present day have attacked the idea of universal law as an empty formalism. The criticism is that a requirement saying that one should only act as one can choose to become a universal law does not yet tell us anything about how we should act. To see whether this criticism is justified we have to see how Kantians think the universal law procedure should work.

First of all we should distinguish Kant's universal law procedure from two alternatives that superficially resemble it: the so-called golden rule and rule-utilitarianism. The golden rule says that one should treat others as you would have them treat you. This sounds a bit like the idea that you should act as you would have everyone else act. But put like this the golden rule might really be a merely hypothetical imperative. For instance, say that I am a brutal, nasty person who is happy to take on all-comers, since I think I can beat them in a fight, and even if I can't I'm happy to die trying. I live by the sword, and would be content to die by the sword too: perhaps it is my idea of masculine honour to do so. What does the golden rule tell me to do? It tells me to treat others as I would have them treat me. For me, this means that I would have them treat me brutally, if they can: I am happy that they try to treat me as badly as I am going to try to treat them. Therefore it looks as though I can claim that the golden rule shows why the ordinary rules of morality don't apply to me. The problem here is that the golden rule assumes that we want others to treat us well. It doesn't explain why even someone who is happy for others to be (or try to be) as brutal towards him as he is towards them is still under a requirement to treat others with respect. Such a person cannot argue that morality doesn't apply to him.

Let's look on the other hand at rule-utilitarianism. Rule-utilitarianism says that it is wrong to do some action if, were everyone to act in the same way (and the act to exemplify a rule adopted in that society), it would lead to bad consequences. For instance, if lying is wrong it is because, were everyone to do it, there would be bad consequences, such as the breakdown of trust and cooperation in society, the loosing of mere anarchy on the world, etc. On the rule-utilitarian view, we need to specify some effects that are either good or bad in order to be able to assess the value of the rule. However, on Kant's deontological view, the rules are valid independently of their results. As we saw above, an apparent strength of Kant's view is that it preserves the intuition that what makes something like slavery wrong is not simply that it leads to greater unhappiness than happiness. Even were slavery to increase aggregate happiness it would still be wrong, because it involves the sacrifice of the dignity and freedom of some individuals. Therefore Kant's view about universal law cannot appeal to consequences in order to argue that it would be bad to universalise certain conduct. But if it doesn't do that, how could it give us any results?

The Kantian view about how the universal law procedure works is in a way simpler and more rationalistic than the utilitarian view. The idea is simply that one cannot rationally act in a way that one cannot universalise. This is because Kant takes it that

when we choose any action, we are at the same time implicitly claiming that it would be all right for anyone to perform such an action. After all, when I act, as a free being, I am not merely caused to act. I act for a reason, taking something about the situation to count in favour of my acting in that way. For instance, when I fiddle my taxes I take the fact that this fiddle will save me money to count in favour of my defrauding the authorities. Indeed, I take this fact to outweigh any other competing considerations that might count against the fraud. However, surely I have to admit that, if this consideration counts in favour of *me* committing the fraud it would also count in favour of *anyone* in my situation committing the fraud. If saving money is a good reason for me to evade my taxes then it is a reason for anyone to evade their taxes. After all, there is nothing special about me that would make my reason stronger than the reason of anyone else in my situation. But in that case, doesn't it follow that in acting as I do I imply that it would be all right for anyone to act in that way? And if it does follow, aren't I in trouble? For actually I *can't* allow everyone to act in that way: if everyone acted in that way then we wouldn't have any public services paid for by taxation. My original idea was just that I would evade paying my taxes while everyone else paid to make up the difference. But now it seems that I cannot coherently act in that way, because it is implicit in my action that I am saying that it is all right for everyone else to act as I do. It seems that I am saying both that it is and that it isn't all right for them to act like that. I am in a contradiction. I am being irrational. And that, according to Kant, is why there is a requirement that I not act in that way. I can only act in ways that I could will to become a universal law because only then will I be acting fully rationally. Otherwise I am in the incoherent position of trying to say that I have reason to evade my taxes but that not everyone in my situation would have such a reason, as though I am some sort of weird exception.

• CRITICISMS OF THE UNIVERSAL LAW PROCEDURE

Although I have tried to put the thinking behind the universal law procedure in its strongest light – since there clearly are understandable reasons why Kant comes up with the ideas he does – there are many problems with it. Some of the problems have to do with actions that it seems one cannot universalise even though there is nothing whatsoever immoral about them. For instance, say I make a resolution to sit on the same seat in the lecture hall every Tuesday for my lecture at 1 o'clock. Can I accept that everyone should act in the same way? If they did that seat would certainly be pretty crowded. So does that mean that that action is impermissible? Or take a maxim of gentlemanly chivalry: letting others pass through a door before you when you approach it together. If everyone acted in this way no one would ever get through a door. So again that seems to be impermissible according to Kant's criterion. These won't seem like big problems for Kant's view as long as his basic view about universalisability is correct. But they do seem odd results.

Perhaps more worrying are clearly immoral actions that do seem to be universalisable. Say I am on my way to my lecture and I see a child drowning in a pond. I

walk on by without stopping to help. Now Kant has an argument to the effect that we cannot accept that refusing to help others in distress should be universalised. This is because Kant recognises that we are vulnerable finite beings, who need the assistance of others in order for any of our projects to stand a chance of success. Accepting that no one should ever help anyone else would be tantamount to accepting that none of our ambitions and projects should ever stand a chance of success. And this, Kant points out, is self-defeating and irrational. Surely to have a project or an ambition just is to want it to succeed. Therefore it would be bizarre to accept that no project ever should succeed. Therefore we cannot universalise not helping. Therefore we have a duty to help. So it seems as though I ought to help the child in the pond. However, although if my action is described as "letting the child drown when I could have saved it", Kant will say it is *impermissible*, it seems that my action could be described in many other ways: for instance, "making sure that I get to my lecture on time", which is presumably universalisable and *permissible*. The question for Kant is which description of my action is the true one. Although it seems clear *to us* – to our moral common sense – that it is the first description that is the morally relevant one, Kant's theory is meant to be a formal one that does not rely on common sense. Thus he needs some theoretical account of how to decide which descriptions of our actions are the valid ones. Until his theory contains some explanation of how to describe our actions in order to test their universalisability, the universal law procedure really will be empty: any action could be made to pass it simply by being re-described.

Aside from these concerns, we should also note the controversial nature of the Kantian claims about rationality. On Kant's view, when one chooses to perform any action, it is part of that action, as the choice of a rational being, that one is saying that everyone may do the same action. To put it in more technical language, Kantians think that with every action, we are legislating universally: we are laying down laws for all humanity, or for all rational agents. Therefore the Kantian claim is that it is part and parcel of taking ourselves to be rational that we take ourselves to be trying to act in ways that could become laws for everyone, or ways in which everyone could act. Although there is not space to go into this debate in detail, we do need to note that this conception of rationality is a highly ambitious one. It stands in marked contrast to another popular conception. For instance, as I mentioned briefly above, the conception of rationality beloved of economists is that it is rational to maximise one's expected personal utility: that is, to maximise the satisfaction of one's preferences or desires. This view is based on David Hume's idea that rationality in action has a merely *instrumental* role. Reason, according to Hume, is concerned with how to satisfy our desires, or how to maximise the satisfaction of our desires, nothing more. For Hume, reason is the "slave of the passions." The Humean view looks like a far simpler view of rationality than that put forward by Kant – indeed, the critics of Hume's view will claim that it is too simple for some of the acknowledged facts about human beings, and that it is based in a reductive view of how human beings act. On the other hand, it seems clear that failing to take the necessary means to one's ends is

indeed irrational, so there is some intuitive basis for claiming that the Humean view captures at least a part of what we think of as rationality. By contrast, defenders of Kant have to make compelling the far more ambitious claim that it is irrational to fiddle one's taxes, even if one can get away with it.

The final criticism of Kant that I want to look at concerns, not just the universal law, but his ethics as a whole. It is a concern that there are many wrong actions that Kantian ethics doesn't rule out as wrong, or, if it does, it doesn't rule them out for the right reasons. Take for instance crimes of violence. It seems particularly wrong to inflict suffering on a person through violence. It seems to miss out an important aspect of its wrongness to say that what is wrong with it is that it could not be universalised. Although this may or may not be true, that will not be why I feel aggrieved over the assault. Alternatively Kant might argue that it is wrong because it fails to treat me as an end. Perhaps the assault is like a kind of coercive imposition into my personal space. However, although the invasiveness of the assault may be part of what makes it wrong, it is surely also the fact that it causes me pain. But pain and suffering – hallmarks of the utilitarian approach to morality – do not make an appearance as relevant moral features on the Kantian view. This might lead to the criticism that the way Kant sees human beings is really as purely rational agents, only accidentally related to our suffering bodies. Whether or not this is true, it certainly seems a large gap in a moral theory that it has nothing to say about how pain and suffering make acts wrong. A fair verdict on Kant's ethics might therefore be that, although it gives a good explanation of the wrongness of some sorts of actions (deception and coercion), it is wrong to claim that this is the whole of morality. As a result Kantian ethics might fairly be charged with not amounting to a comprehensive moral theory.

• CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have looked at Kantian ethics. Kantian ethics figures in this book as the main representative of deontological ethics. What marks out a deontological moral theory is the central place it gives to ideas like the moral wrongness of actions, the sovereignty of persons, moral boundaries between persons, rights or ownership, and so on. Other moral theories may attempt to account for these notions, but they do so by explaining them through some more fundamental ideas. For instance, for a utilitarian, these ideas are important and justifiable if, when we act on them, we are likely to make a greater contribution to overall happiness than if we act in some alternative way. By contrast, the Kantian deontologist, for instance, thinks that the existence of spheres of authority in which one rational person has the right to a certain kind of rational control over her thoughts and actions is a *basic* feature of morality, one which is not to be explained in further terms. In a way, one could explain it further by referring to the nature of human beings as rational agents having minds of their own, as I express it above (p. 76). But the description of the nature of human beings in this case is not ethically neutral. Our "description" already builds in

the features about authority and sovereignty, and so it does not count as a deeper level of explanation in the way the utilitarian account does. The Kantian view thinks that notions of right and authority cannot be *reduced* to other ideas in the way the utilitarian does. And for many this is the thing that makes Kant's ethics attractive and worth exploring. We have looked at some problems that arise with the Kantian view, some having to do with the deontological approach, which prevents us from acting in certain ways that would bring about good, and some having to do with Kant's attempt to cast moral requirements as rational requirements. These problems may seem to be insurmountable. On the other hand, one might find that the basic motivations of the Kantian theory make it worth investigating further whether it can overcome these objections. Readers should also bear in mind that Kant's is not the only deontology in modern moral philosophy. To find out about another version, you should turn to Chapter 8, where we look at contract theories of morality. However, even there we will find the influence of Kant in evidence in some of the accounts. One interesting question to pose of these latter theories is whether they avoid the problems raised for Kant in this chapter.

• QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 Kant's formula of universal law states: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Consider the following situation. Imagine a government imposes a tax that is perceived by many to be unfair. As a result, there is a widespread campaign of non-payment. The point of not paying is to draw attention to the perceived injustice of the tax. The tax rebels could be said to be reasoning as follows. "Most people are politically conservative and will continue to pay their tax. So government-funded services will continue to run and there will be no crisis as a result of the non-payment campaign. But if about a quarter of those who should be paying don't pay, then enough of a signal will be sent to make the government withdraw the tax." Is this permissible even though (or because) it cannot be universalised?
2 Consider the following actions that are widely held to be morally wrong: murder, rape, assault, theft. Assuming that these actions *are* morally impermissible, is it because the agent cannot will that it should become a universal law?
3 Do you agree with Kant that it can be wrong to lie even when to do so would bring about some good? If so, does the Kantian explanation of why this is seem a good one? Does it follow that one ought to regret lying to the murderer at the door even if one acknowledges its necessity?

• FURTHER READING

As well as the forbiddingly titled *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* or *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (various editions), Kant's moral philosophy is also laid out in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Further developments come in the

Metaphysics of Morals, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), which contains a doctrine of justice (basically a political philosophy) and a doctrine of virtue.

For good accounts of Kantian ethics, sometimes bearing explicitly on the problems raised in this chapter, see C. Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil", in her collection C*reating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Onora O'Neill, "Consistency in Action" and "Universal Laws and Ends-in-Themselves", in her collection C*onstructions of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). More detailed discussion can be found in Korsgaard's essay "Kant's Formula of Universal Law", in C*reating the Kingdom of Ends*.

For a discussion of the kind of respect that Kant has in mind, see Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect", *Ethics* 88 (1977): 36–49.

For a classic criticism of the idea that morality can be a categorical imperative, and that immorality can be irrational, see Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives", in her *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

• NOTE

1 Immanuel Kant, C*ritique of Practical Reason* (various editions), §6, Remarks to Problem II.

6

Aristotelian virtue ethics

MOTIVATIONS FOR VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics, though it claims a heritage stretching back to classical writers like Plato and especially Aristotle, is often described as a new addition to the field of moral theory. The story often told is that mainstream nineteenth- and twentieth-century moral philosophy in the English-speaking world (and perhaps stretching further back) was dominated by the debate between utilitarianism and its deontological opponent, either Christian ethics or Kantianism. In the second half of the twentieth century, some philosophers grew dissatisfied with this debate, which they thought missed out large areas of moral concern. This led to a revival of the tradition of moral inquiry stretching back through St Thomas Aquinas to Aristotle. The reader of this book is probably not particularly interested in the details of this movement as it concerns the development of moral philosophy. What we are interested in, here, is whether virtue ethics can shed any interesting light today on our ethical concerns. However, the story of the revival of virtue ethics is worth mentioning, if only because it is much easier to say what virtue ethics stands *against* than it is to say what it stands *for*. To a greater extent than with utilitarianism and Kantianism, virtue ethics is a broad church, and it is not clear that there is yet a settled consensus on how to understand the remarks of the founding figures of this tradition, who were after all working with very different basic assumptions (about human nature, science, the nature of the universe, the rational status of belief in God, relations between individual and community) from those we have inherited. This chapter plots a course through some of the key features of any virtue theory, and looks at some of the criticisms that might be made of this broad tradition. We start, however, with a look at the sorts of dissatisfaction with other moral theories that have led some to virtue ethics.

One criticism that is sometimes made of theories like utilitarianism and Kantianism is that they give no special place to valuable personal relationships such as friendship and love. Utilitarianism and Kantianism, it is sometimes said, are impartial theories, according to which all are held to be equal. However, in everyday life we clearly do

not act impartially. We have friends and families, and it is an essential part of these relationships that we focus our time and resources on our friends/children/parents, etc., at the expense of others. Of course, we recognise limits on the extent to which we can favour our friends, and do not regard those outside our social circle as entirely unworthy of consideration: not all personal relationships imply a Mafioso-style dedication to "us." But we do favour our friends and families, and take the building of relationships of love and intimate trust to be one of life's great achievements. In other words, we seem to place a great value on loyalty to individuals. From this point of view it seems strange that utilitarianism and Kantianism are at best indifferent to, and at worst inimical to, one of the things that makes life worth living.

This issue is part of a wider problem. It is claimed that impartial moral theories neglect the agents who would follow that theory, and that following the theory would lead to one leading a life that was in some way impoverished. For any moral theory, we can imagine some ideal agent who follows that theory perfectly. Because of their concern with impartiality, it is charged, the ideal utilitarian or the ideal Kantian cannot give the appropriate weight to those projects that might give their life a distinctive meaning, and will instead become self-sacrificing slaves of Duty. Utilitarianism is charged with being too demanding and leaving the ideal agent no time to develop any projects other than that of maximising welfare. The Kantian, on the other hand, is said always to be under the control of duty, constantly monitoring and disciplining her projects to ensure that they conform with moral principle. In neither case do we get an ideal agent who can be spontaneous, vivacious, fun-loving, cool: in short, who will be the kind of person we would want to be, or want our children to be. Because these impartial moral theories cannot provide an attractive ideal of how to live, it is argued, they will only ever be able to exert a weak hold over our imaginations, and by extension our conduct.

Another side of this is that Kantianism in particular is criticised for its narrowness. Kantian moral theory concentrates on defining the permissible. It aims to set limits on how we can act. But it might be said that even if we sorted out the question of how it is permissible to act, there are many interesting and important ethical issues yet to be addressed about which ways of life are most valuable. Should I try to be "cool"? Should I aim to make as much money as I can? Should I be monogamous? These options and their alternatives are all permissible; but there are surely pros and cons of each. A moral theory like Kantianism that deals only with the limits of permissible conduct will have nothing to say about these questions. Therefore the lesson virtue theorists draw from the criticisms we have looked at so far is that a good moral theory will make the question of how to live central to its concerns.

The above criticisms take aim at what they see as the unworldliness of impartial moral theories – their apparently ignoring some of the basic realities of human existence (namely, our concern with the meaningfulness of our own lives rather than just an impartial view of humankind). A similar point can be made about the methods of moral thinking that utilitarianism and Kantianism recommend. You, as the reader of

this book, may be acquainted with the way moral debate works: you may have engaged in debates about politics, about vegetarianism, about abortion, etc., without ever having done any formal moral philosophy or "ethics." On starting to read this book, you may have recognised some of the arguments and principles of Chapters 2 and 3 (on the value of life and the extent to which we ought to help others in need) as in some way related to the terms of ordinary moral argument. However, if you read the chapter on Kantianism and utilitarianism, you may have found basic moral principles and methods that you find quite technical and alien. You may have drawn the conclusion that academic moral philosophy is quite out of touch with ordinary moral thought. Of course, Kantians and utilitarians regard this as a virtue, since they want to criticise ordinary thinking. But others may disagree: can we be sure that moral principles are meaningful if they do not connect with the touchstones of our moral life outside the seminar room? Can we have greater faith in the principle of utility or Kant's formula of universal law than we do in our intuitive, non-academic grasp on morality?

An example of this is the way in which theories like Kantianism and utilitarianism neglect the emotions. These theories seem to be constructed on the assumption that the emotions are a source of irrationality and can only hinder clear moral thinking. However, some theorists sympathetic to Aristotle have pointed out that sometimes having the right emotional motivation is essential to one's actions being the right actions. For instance, when one goes to see one's friend in hospital, they will be pleased to see you in part because they think that your visit shows you care. If it turned out that you were visiting out of a sense of duty rather than genuine caring they would be less impressed. Visiting your friend in the hospital seems like the right thing to do. But it is the right thing to do because and insofar as it shows genuine caring: it requires a certain emotional motivation to make it right. This idea is hard to incorporate into Kantianism or utilitarianism: for those theories, what makes the act right is that it would produce the best consequences, or that it would conform to moral principle. This suggests that at the very heart of their theories, Kantianism and utilitarianism leave out something intuitively important to the moral evaluation of our actions.

We can enlarge on this to pinpoint the sense of unreality some have felt with Kantian and utilitarian approaches. This is that each approach one-sidedly seizes on one important aspect of morality and claims that that aspect is the whole of morality. Thus for instance the utilitarian takes happiness to be all important. And clearly it is important. But is it the only thing that is important? Kant takes respect for rational agency to be important. And again, perhaps we should just admit that it is. But is it the *only* thing that is relevant to moral decision-making? Thinkers sympathetic to Aristotle have charged that Kantians and utilitarians have, in their haste to give clear answers to moral questions, illegitimately simplified moral decision-making by simply ignoring some of the important issues. The Aristotelians might remind us that there can be situations in which there is one course of action that would lead to greatest utility, but we can only bring about greatest utility by doing something that would be disrespectful of rational agency. The Kantians make the decision an easy one by

asserting that one's only real duty is to respect rational agency. The utilitarians make it easy by asserting that all one has reason to do is to promote utility. The Aristotelian might insist that these answers have a touch of unreality about them, that they make things *too* easy. In reality isn't it precisely the fact that there are competing considerations pulling us in different directions that makes these situations so complex and difficult? Simply defining one side of the argument out of existence may be a way of winning; but it is a hollow victory if gained at the expense of making ethics simplistic.

In this section I have looked at the sources of dissatisfaction with standard moral theories that motivated the revival of virtue ethics. If we agree with these criticisms we might conclude that a better moral theory will (a) make the question of how to live a good and meaningful life central, (b) employ a method that has more in common with ordinary moral thinking, and does not exclude the emotions from moral reasoning, and (c) does justice to the diversity of moral considerations, and the many-sided nature of moral problems, rather than seeking to reduce them to one fundamental category or principle. We will see how virtue ethics attempts to meet these criteria.

• VIRTUE ETHICS: BASIC IDEAS

Although I have portrayed Aristotelian virtue ethics as an attempt to make moral theory more "real", it is nevertheless in some respects an unfamiliar beast. This is no doubt because its basic shape was first formulated on the basis of assumptions that we might now reject, or at any rate find puzzling. I will explain what I mean by this as I go on. However, one immediate issue has to do with the fact that Aristotle simply assumes that ethics should begin with the question of the agent's own happiness – living well, flourishing. To modern ears, that might sound egoistic: isn't morality concerned fundamentally with the interests of others rather than with how we make ourselves happy? We will have to see as we go on whether the Aristotelian tradition has a good way to deal with such apparent problems. But the question to bear in mind is not whether we should believe what Aristotle himself said, but rather whether there is anything of value in the tradition that he represents, a tradition that is quite distinct from the others we are looking at in this part of the book.

Clearly one of the fundamental ideas behind virtue ethics is that of virtue. Virtues are traditionally thought of as personal qualities like courage, temperance, justice, honesty, benevolence and so on. A person has these qualities if they behave in certain ways regularly and reliably; they are part of his or her character. Virtues are also aspects of what that person cares most about. The courageous person is prepared, in certain situations, to put the welfare of others before his own, or to put himself at risk for the sake of something or someone else. The honest person sets a high value on truthfulness, and on dealing with people (and perhaps herself) transparently and openly. The just person cares that each person is dealt with fairly and that none are

disadvantaged arbitrarily. And so on. Virtue ethics says that actions are right when they are done from virtue. This is not such an unfamiliar idea: we often say that the situations that life throws up can sometimes call for courage, or honesty, or fair-mindedness, etc. What we presumably mean by this is that, in order to deal with these situations properly, we will have to act courageously or honestly or justly. So to work out what to do in any situation we have to identify the virtue or virtues that are relevant to that situation. What right action consists in is action that demonstrates the appropriate virtue. So whereas utilitarianism says that an action is right if it produces the best *outcome*, and Kantian deontology says that an action is right if it conforms to an a priori moral *principle*, virtue ethics claims that what makes an action right is that it would demonstrate the best *character*. An act is right, on this view, if it exemplifies virtue, or if the virtuous person, the person who has all the virtues, would do it. This means that an important difference between virtue ethics and the other theories is that virtue ethics takes it that motive is essential to right action: a person acts virtuously, not just when they act as a virtuous person would, but when they act because they care about the same things in the situation as the virtuous person would. It is this that makes the action right.

What is a virtue? A virtue is in part a disposition to react reliably to certain features of situations. For instance, the kind person reliably reacts to situations in which someone is in need of help. Furthermore, to have the virtue of kindness, the kind person must react in this way for the right reasons: because they care about the person's need. It would not be true kindness if they were doing it simply so that they could ask the other person to help them in return. In addition to this, however, it is a characteristic of virtue ethics that it holds that a virtue is any quality or characteristic that a person needs in order to live well. As we will see below (in "The Doctrine of the Mean and the Rationality of the Passions"), in order to deal properly with the situations that life throws up, we need to have certain qualities: not enough courage will mean that we duck some of the challenges that we ought to face up to; insufficient honesty and we will not be able to gain the trust of others that underpins meaningful human relationships and interactions. But there is a deeper theme here also, that relates to an important difference between virtue ethics and the other ethical theories that we have looked at. Whereas the other theories are concerned to find an impartial system of rules or values that can hold for everyone, virtue ethics is more concerned with the agent's own happiness, or, as we might say, the craft of living well. Aristotle held that the basic point of morality, and the highest good for human beings, is *eudaemonia*, sometimes translated as "happiness" but perhaps better thought of as "flourishing." On this view, human lives can be thought of as in some crucial respects analogous to the lives of other living organisms such as plants or animals: in both cases those lives can go better or worse, the being can wither or flourish; and in both cases whether they wither or flourish depends on how closely they conform to some pre-established pattern. In other words, my roses do well when they develop as roses ought to, with strong stems, thorns, sweet-smelling petals arranged in a particular nested pattern. And similarly, Aristotle thinks, a human being will flourish when she develops as

human beings ought to. However, by flourishing Aristotle does not simply mean bodily health; we are also to think of it as involving having the right priorities, tastes, desires, projects. We flourish when we are leading the life proper to human beings, that is, when we care for, pursue and enjoy the things that a human being *ought to* value. So the Aristotelian tradition is associated with a strong idea of human nature or human potential as something that we ought to aim to fulfil: it takes seriously the idea that there is such a thing as a "higher" life to which we should aspire. Therefore if kindness, for instance, really is a virtue, it must be because it is a quality that is necessary for a person to live such a "higher" life.

So the virtue ethical view says that right action is action done from the correct motive; that the correct motive is the virtue or virtues appropriate to the situation; and that the virtues are those personal qualities that are necessary to live the life proper to human beings. It is this idea of there being a life that is proper or natural to human beings that has attracted the greatest criticism. Before we go on to look at Aristotle's view in a bit more depth, let us spell out some of these problems. One is the claim that Aristotle's view is elitist, since it implies that some people's lives are better or more worthwhile or meaningful than others. Another is the claim that there is no such thing as a pre-established pattern that dictates how human beings should live and what they should value. Human beings, the existentialists claim, are essentially free: they must set their own goals and aims; and do not just "find" what they ought to do written in the stars. Finally, there is a concern about whether one can really say that what is "natural" for human beings is thereby right and that what is "unnatural" is wrong. For instance, it has been argued that homosexual sex is unnatural, since it cannot serve the purpose of reproduction, and it is for the purpose of reproduction that we have the sexual organs that we do. But contrary to this argument, the opponents of Aristotle might argue that the natural function of something does not dictate how it is right or wrong to use it: our teeth may have developed so that we can chew our food and make it more easily digestible; but that does not mean that it is "unnatural" or wrong to use our teeth for other purposes, say, to emphasise a smile. So we might doubt whether we can say anything about morals from facts about "nature."

In response to these claims, we should note that when Aristotelians talk about human nature or the life proper to human beings they need not be interpreted as talking about a life that conforms to the purposes of evolution. The life proper to human nature is already an ethical ideal; what characterises the Aristotelian tradition is not a commitment to a reductive notion of human nature but rather the claim that there is a truth about what the ethically ideal life for a human being is. Furthermore, we might think that this is not such a dubious idea: does it not make sense to wonder (perhaps in old age when looking back at what one has done with one's life) whether one has spent one's time doing things that were really worth doing, whether one missed out on some things that were of value and that would have made one's life go better if one could have had them, or whether one wasted one's life. In asking these questions we seem to assume that the answers we previously gave to these questions could be wrong, and hence that there are some truths about what makes for a mean-

ingful, worthwhile life. This does not necessarily mean that it is all right to criticise others for the choices they make, or to treat people differently depending on one's judgement of the worth of their life projects. But it does suggest that (a) we all make judgements about the things that it is worth doing in life; and (b) these judgements can be correct or incorrect.

• THE HUMAN FUNCTION AND THE GOOD HUMAN BEING

Aristotle displays what some might think is an unwarranted degree of confidence in the assumption that there are facts about what sort of life is meaningful for human beings. In this section we will have a look at why he thinks this. We can start by pointing out that for Aristotle, unlike Kantian and utilitarian theories, ethics is not a system of principles or rules that could be drawn up from an impartial perspective. Rather ethics is about personal development: it concerns the craft or skill of how to live. Assuming that all human beings seek to live in a meaningful way, ethics is the study of how to do so. It assumes that the skill of living well is a coherent subject for inquiry, just as physics or mathematics or architecture is.

We can begin our explanation of this aspect of Aristotelian ethics by looking at some mundane objects like knives or chairs. These are objects with specific functions. When we come to evaluate these objects – saying which are good and which bad – we do so by looking at how well they fulfil their functions. Thus a good knife is one that cuts well, has a sharp blade and a comfortable handle, and is weighted nicely between handle and blade. These, we might say, are the virtues of the good knife. Similar things can be said about chairs. Furthermore these standards of evaluation mean that judgements about whether a chair or knife is good are not merely subjective: anyone who knows what a chair is *for* will realise that that broken thing in the corner with only three legs cannot be a good chair. The basic idea is that, once we have some idea of what it is for something to perform its function well, we can say what features the thing needs in order to do so. Having these features will make the thing a good instance of its type.

This might not yet be an earth-shattering ethical theory. However, we can say similar things about people too, at least insofar as they occupy certain roles or become expert at particular crafts. Indeed the analogy between the virtuous person and the expert craftsman is an important one for Aristotle, and we will return to it below. So, for instance, we know something about what teachers are meant to do; so we can say what features a person would need to have in order to be a good teacher. (Perhaps she needs to be able to explain things well, to be enthusiastic and engaging, to keep students' attention, to be a good listener, etc., etc.) Or a good doctor. Or a good musician. Or a good parent. For each of these roles we can give a list of virtues that a person would need to have in order to be a good instance of their type. If we can say this about objects and about people in roles, Aristotle reasons, shouldn't we be able

to say the same thing about human beings as such? If we can then we get a striking conclusion: the good human being is simply one who does what human beings are meant to do well.

This is an aspect of Aristotle's theory that has attracted a lot of criticism, since he apparently makes the unjustified assumption (quite alien to the modern way of understanding the universe) that everything must have a function or *telos*. The way Aristotle asks rhetorically how likely it is that nature should have left humans as functionless beings suggests that he expected his audience to find this quite implausible. However, today the idea that human beings might simply be a biological accident in a hostile and empty universe is, if not universally accepted, then at least quite familiar: why assume, with Aristotle, that we must have some place in the overall scheme of things, rather than being the product of an unlikely coincidence of conditions that led to the development of organic life, and the again vanishingly unlikely coincidence of some creatures developing the capacity for reflective thought?

In response to this problem, some commentators on Aristotle have denied that he has any theory of the human function.[1] They agree that he is committed to the idea that there are some ways of living that are better or more satisfying than others. But they deny that this needs to be backed up by any metaphysical claim about our function. They therefore deny that there is any way of specifying what the human good is that is independent of our best understanding of the virtues. On this view, it is wrong to think that the virtues are virtues only because they enable us to flourish in some independently specifiable way. Rather virtues are virtues because they are aspects of our best understanding of the most adequate attitude to the various challenges that life confronts us with (we will see more about what this means when we come to the next section). Nevertheless, there is also a tradition of interpretation that takes it that Aristotle does have a substantive metaphysical theory of the human function. We won't attempt to arbitrate between these interpretations here, and as far as possible we will be neutral between them – the reader should just bear in mind that there is this disagreement among interpreters. However, both interpretations have to account for Aristotle's *apparent* line of thought that human beings must have some flourishing since everything else in the cosmos has such a function. On the face of it, it is because he believes that human beings must have some characteristic role to play in the overall scheme of things that he sets out to find out what that could be. And it is because he believes that each species has an individually distinct function that it makes sense for him to think that we should find the human function by looking for some activity that human beings can do that no other creatures can do. Thus on the most straightforward interpretation, it is because of his strong assumptions about teleology that he concludes that it is the exercise of *rationality* that is the distinctive function of human beings. We flourish when we lead the life of reason. The virtues are therefore the qualities necessary to help us live rationally.

Now the reader might be excused for being underwhelmed by this conclusion. After all, we might think that until we know what it means to live rationally, this conclusion

is quite empty. But furthermore, it might look as though virtue ethics is a long way from making good on its promise, set out in the first section, to provide a moral theory that (a) sets out some attractive ideal of how to live; (b) is more in touch with intuitive modes of moral reasoning; and (c) does justice to the many-sided nature of moral situations. In the next section we will see how the distinctive Aristotelian conception of rationality might begin to answer some of these questions.

• THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN AND THE RATIONALITY OF THE PASSIONS

The distinctive thing about Aristotle's conception of rationality is that he thinks that reason can inform and educate our passions and emotions. Much of the philosophical tradition has regarded emotions as dangerous irrational forces that have a tendency to sweep over us, diverting us from rational courses of action, and against which we need to be on our guard. In contrast, Aristotle thinks that truly rational, virtuous conduct involves "having the right feelings, towards the right things, in the right situations, to the right degree." In other words, he thinks that reason can tell us what emotions are appropriate and inappropriate, or reasonable and unreasonable. And more than that, it is a necessary part of full human rationality that we have emotional responses of the right proportions to the right sorts of things. This is the focus of the celebrated doctrine of the mean.

Before we go on to look at the way in which the doctrine of the mean is meant to work, we might wonder how emotions can be informed by rationality, to the extent that full rationality has to involve the emotions. There are two crucial components of this view. One is a *cognitive* account of the emotions, which views emotions not as blind psychological forces but rather as judgements or perceptions of value; and the other is the idea that we can learn how to have appropriate emotions in the way that we learn any other craft. The cognitive account of the emotions involves the view that to have an emotion is for something to strike you as *mattering* in some way. Emotions, on this view, are the distinctively human way of registering the importance of things. Someone who had no emotions would therefore be lacking in a certain kind of understanding: there would be some aspect of the world (as we construe it) about which they would be unaware. So the person who has the appropriate emotions has a certain grasp on or understanding of the world that the emotionless person would lack. That is the first point. Further, because emotions involve a cognitively complex state, they do not merely occur by nature in human beings, but are rather culturally transmitted ways of seeing the world. To acquire certain emotional dispositions (the disposition to react to certain kinds of situations with certain kinds of emotions), we cannot rely on mere instinct, but rather have to have had the sort of upbringing that will lead us to see those situations as the sorts of things that call for those kinds of responses. Emotions appear natural and spontaneous, but on the Aristotelian view, that is because they are *second* nature to us: we

shouldn't think that they are *first* nature, that is, *merely* natural. Just as in the way that a craftsman acquires a distinctive kind of intelligence that becomes almost instinctive, so the person who learns the craft of appropriate emotional response is learning a distinctive kind of intelligence to do with how to react that will come to appear spontaneous. The lesson from all of this is that emotions on this view are imbued with rationality in the way that a craftsman's instinctive reactions are so imbued.

Return now to the doctrine of the mean. The doctrine of the mean states that each virtue lies at a middle point between two vices, one a vice of excess and one a vice of deficiency. But an excess or deficiency of what? The answer is: of the relevant emotion. The idea is that, while the virtuous person experiences the emotion to the right degree only in those situations that call for that emotion, there are two possibilities for experiencing the emotion inappropriately or viciously: one of these is where one experiences the emotion too much or in situations that do not call for it; the other is where one experiences the emotion too little, or fails to experience it even in those situations that do call for it. A good illustration of this idea involves the emotion of fear. Situations that call for fear are those in which there is genuine danger. The virtue with respect to fear is courage; this is having the right attitude to danger. And there are two vices: cowardice is an excess of fear; whereas recklessness is its deficiency. The coward is too sensitive to danger; the reckless person not sensitive enough. Therefore the coward experiences fear in situations that are not really dangerous, or feels disproportionate fear in situations that are only mildly dangerous. The reckless person feels no fear, or too little, in situations that are genuinely dangerous. Both of these vices can be a hindrance, or even crippling: the coward misses out on many valuable opportunities because he overestimates the risks involved; whereas the reckless person continually exposes himself to too much risk and therefore puts himself in danger. The courageous person, on the other hand, feels fear, but in the right situations and to the right degree. They feel enough fear to keep them safe; but not so much that their fear overmasters them in situations that are not really dangerous.

The Aristotelian view suggests that we have an emotion of fear because human life inevitably involves coming into contact with danger. According to the cognitive account of the emotions, appropriate fear involves the right kind of *evaluation* of the danger, particularly given the importance of what else is at stake in the situation. Of course, there are many other aspects of the human condition, and each will have its attendant emotions. We are social creatures, therefore we have emotions that have to do with caring for others (benevolence, compassion, emotions of friendship); we also have emotions that have to do with our status with respect to others (pride, envy, modesty). We have virtues and vices that are to do with possessions, such as generosity or meanness or profligacy. For each sphere of life or aspect of the human condition, there is a corresponding emotional attitude towards it, and the crucial ethical question concerns the proper evaluation of that thing in a particular situation (and, as with our case of fear, given what else is at stake in the situation).

In one way the doctrine of the mean seems to provide a striking explanation of how we might structure our thinking about how to live. It gives an explanation that is realistic to the extent that it involves our emotions rather than leaving them behind at the seminar door. But on the other hand it seems to be quite empty of actual guidance. How do we know in any case where the mean actually lies? How do I know when I am being cowardly rather than courageous? Or miserly rather than generous? If I accept what the Aristotelians say then I might think that I know that the mean is that emotional attitude that involves the correct evaluation of the situation. But how do I know what that is? Furthermore, there seems to be a related problem that any particular virtue can sometimes be used as a vice. For instance, courage can be used by the thief for bad purposes: therefore having courage is not enough to make someone good. Similarly honesty is often a virtue, but someone who unguardedly revealed their every thought, and was entirely transparent, might soon find that she was losing friends and, indeed, acting insensitively ("Oh no! you shouldn't have worn that!" "You got *what* for your essay?!").

The answer to these problems that has traditionally been advanced by the Aristotelian tradition appeals to the idea of the unity of virtue. This is the idea that one cannot have one virtue until one has them all. The rationale for this claim is that, in order to know what honesty requires, or when courage will operate as a virtue, one cannot look at that particular virtue in isolation. Courage and honesty stop operating as virtues when they prevent one from exercising other virtues. Honesty is a vice if it interferes with proper compassion or humility or respect. Courage is a vice if it violates the demands of other virtues. The Aristotelian therefore claims that the virtues are compatible with one another, and that one cannot really know what one virtue requires until one knows what all the other virtues would require, and hence does not exercise any virtue in such a way as to impede the exercise of the others. This solves the problem of how one virtue can appear as a vice (it might be said that courage is only truly a virtue when it manifests Virtue – that is, the unity of all of the virtues). But it might also help the doctrine of the mean to give us more guidance about how to find out what we should do. What the mean now seems to require is a many-sided evaluation of a situation that involves seeing it from the perspective required by the full range of virtues and understanding the way in which one informs, constrains and influences the others, e.g. as the proper demands of honesty can be informed, constrained or influenced by the proper demands of compassion, and so on.

Having this knowledge of what each virtue demands sounds like a daunting ideal. But this is not the end of the matter: one also needs the ability to correctly determine how the different virtues should inform and constrain one another. The ability to understand how different virtues fit together is an extremely important one on an Aristotelian view. Indeed this ability is a virtue in itself, a so-called executive virtue, perhaps the most fundamental of them all. It is given the name of *phronesis*, a term sometimes translated as "practical wisdom" and sometimes as "judgement." Aristotle claims that experience of life is required for one to acquire judgement: it is not the kind of thing

that one can get from simply following a rule book. The situations in life are too varied and multifaceted for anyone to be able to specify in advance which virtue should take priority in which situation, given precisely this or that combination of circumstances. The precise way in which circumstances are configured can make a big difference to how one ought to respond and hence to which virtue or combination of virtues one ought to display. Say my dying friend is an art collector, who has sacrificed all other comforts in order to be able to spend his every spare penny on acquiring some works of great beauty and value. He takes great pride in his collection and regards it as one of the great achievements of his life to have assembled it and to be able to pass it on to his children after his death. As it happens, however, his family have suffered such difficult circumstances that, during his illness, and unknown to him, they have had to sell the collection off in order to get by. He has nothing left to pass on to them. Effectively his life's achievement has been reduced to nothing. The

CASE STUDY: VIRTUE ETHICS AND RIGHTS

A fundamental moral concept seemingly missing from virtue ethical approaches to ethics is that of rights. It may be that this is no coincidence, given the intellectual heritage of virtue ethics. The language of rights has dominated political life since the eighteenth century, and was central to the thought of Hobbes, Locke, Pufendorf and Grotius earlier on. But the origins of virtue ethics reach much further back to an Aristotelian tradition that seems to have had no discussion about rights as such. And this origin, it might be argued, has dictated the structure of modern virtue ethics, and made it incapable of giving rights a fundamental place. This might lead on to a criticism of virtue ethics: that it cannot be a comprehensive moral theory because it cannot provide us with proper answers to the many moral questions in which rights play an important role. In the face of this challenge, it seems to me that virtue ethics has to seize the bull by the horns and deny that rights are a fundamental moral notion: virtue ethics has to attempt to explain everything that we do with the language of rights through its own ideas of virtue, flourishing, practice, etc. It is an interesting question whether this response could be successful, and obviously it is not one that we can pursue in any detail here. However, it might be worth noting briefly that this defence of virtue ethics would tie in with a widespread criticism that we overuse the language of rights, and often talk about rights when the moral structure of our thinking would be clearer if we used other terms (for instance, talking about the importance of people's fundamental interests and the duties they place us under rather than the "rights" people have to health, nourishment, freedom from torture, etc.). Another thing to think about would be to go through examples in which rights seem to play an important role, and see whether virtue ethics could explain our moral thinking without reference to rights. A test case might be thinking about self-defence.

When someone attacks me in cold blood, clearly aiming to kill me, and the only way I can stop him killing me is by killing him, it becomes permissible for me to kill that person. However, prior to his attacking me, it was not permissible for me to kill him. Thus one thing that theorists of self-defence want to say is that I have a right to use reasonable means to defend myself in this situation: I have a right to kill him that I didn't have before he attacked me. Furthermore, the person involved had a right not to be killed by me, a right that they forfeit or lose by virtue of attacking me. So in this situation the rights of the parties change as a result of the attack being launched: the aggressor loses his rights and I gain certain rights. Here, it might be said, the language of rights is indispensable to capture the morality of the situation. I'm not going to attempt to answer this question here – but it is an interesting question whether the virtue theorist can explain the morality of what is going on here by means of the notion of virtue, and without giving the language of rights a fundamental place.

family are desperate to keep this from my friend so that he can die happy. Should I tell him?[2] Which virtue should win out, honesty or compassion? Aristotle's answer is indirect and twofold: firstly, everything will depend on the details of the case (e.g. would my friend have wanted to know? is there anything that he could do about it? is there a history of transparency and openness in the family that would be spoiled by this last deception?); and secondly, only an experienced and sensitive human being who has developed the craft of living well will be able to make an informed judgement on the matter.

Nevertheless, the reader may still be unsatisfied with this response, since it falls well short of giving us a clear method by which to generate answers to moral questions. Indeed, the claim that virtue ethics is incapable of giving us answers to moral questions is what Rosalind Hursthouse has called the "stock objection" to virtue ethics.[3] Her response is that virtue ethics *can* give answers, but that they will be complex and context-dependent. She thinks that this will represent an objection to virtue ethics only if we think that a moral theory has to give answers that "a clever twelve-year-old" can appreciate if it is to be judged successful. This refusal to deny the complexity and difficulty of moral situations explains why some virtue ethicists think that it is in the detailed attention to situations that is found in imaginative literature such as works of fiction that some of the best moral philosophy is done.

• VIRTUE ETHICS AND EGOISM

In this section I would like to look at the claim that virtue ethics is flawed as a moral theory because it is egoistic rather than impartial. It is said that it is egoistic on the grounds that it starts with a concern for the individual's own flourishing. After all,

look at how the virtue ethicist might attempt to explain why you should do some morally good action, for instance, why you should help a child who has fallen over. The child is in need, and in this situation (especially if no one else is around to help) it would be a *kind* thing to do to help them and comfort them. However, according to the Aristotelian tradition, the reason that kindness is a virtue is that it *benefits* the person who is kind in some way. It is a quality that this person needs in order to live well. Therefore when we ask why we have a reason to help, the Aristotelian answer has to involve some reference to the fact that your being disposed to help in such situations is a trait that will serve you well.

Now this certainly looks puzzling. On the one hand, when helping behaviour shows genuine kindness, it is *altruistic*: it is something that one does for the sake of the other person one is helping. If one does it for some benefit to *oneself*, one is not really acting out of kindness. But for that reason it looks as though the Aristotelian cannot really argue that kindness is a virtue. However, it seems clear on the contrary that Aristotelians do think of kindness as a virtue. Therefore there is the appearance of paradox. It looks on the one hand as though, to be genuinely kind, one would have to act, not for one's own sake but for the sake of another person; but that on the other hand the reason that kindness is a virtue is that it benefits its possessor and helps them to lead a good life.

We might be able to begin to dissolve this paradox if we remember that the idea of living a good life, according to the Aristotelian view, is not a narrowly self-interested one. The Aristotelian good life is the meaningful life, the life in which one participates in worthwhile and fulfilling enterprises and relationships. One has to be able to form and sustain meaningful friendships, engage in family relationships, cooperate with others in work projects, political projects, leisure activities – none of which one can make successful on one's own. There is no doubt that, unless you have a reasonable degree of kindness in your character, you will not be able to engage successfully in such projects, since you will not be able to attract the cooperation and trust of others unless you show at least some degree of kindness towards them.

Nevertheless, this explanation still makes our reason for showing kindness too self-interested. It looks as though the importance of kindness to the good life is only instrumental – a means to an end. According to the line of argument that we have been tracing so far, the only reason to be kind is that kindness engenders trust, and trust allows you to enter into those activities and relationships that will make your life meaningful. It may be that in order to really get people to trust you, you have to be genuinely kind, and not just kind when it suits you. So it looks as though you might have to forget that the ultimate reason for being kind is that it allows you to lead the meaningful life.

To get over this problem, some virtue theorists have argued that we can draw an important distinction between ways in which virtues can benefit their possessor. On the one hand it looks as though some virtues can enable their possessor to enjoy things that are independently beneficial. For instance, a healthy dose of courage or

perseverance can make it possible for a person to overcome challenges that would make a coward fail. And an ability to overcome such challenges is necessary if a person is to make some key aspects of their life successful – for instance, if they are going to become good at any complex activity. But another way in which virtues can benefit their possessor is more constitutive. By this I mean that the virtue does not lead to an independent benefit but rather is in some way its own benefit. This is what one might say about kindness. Kindness involves a certain kind of sensitivity and openness to the weal and woe of other people. A person who had no capacity for kindness would be closed off to other people to a large degree. And this, we might say, would mean that they were missing out on something important. It is not that kindness and the sensitivity to the needs of others are useful to a person for furthering other, independent ends that they may have. Rather it is just that being open to others in the way that kindness demands is a crucial part of having the right relation to the world around you. It is part of the good life.

The viability of this response returns us to the debate we looked at in the third section, "The Human Function and the Good Human Being", between those who think of Aristotle as having a full theory of the human function and those who think of the human function as nothing more than our best understanding of the demands of the virtues. If we think that humans have a function that can be specified independently of the virtues then it will look as though the right way to think of the virtues is as qualities that enable us to fulfil this function. However, this means taking what above I have called the instrumental conception of the virtues. On the other hand, there are some theorists, such as John McDowell, who think that virtues have rather to be thought of as constituting flourishing, and who deny that we have any grasp on flourishing independently of the virtues. On McDowell's view, "flourishing" is not itself a substantive idea; it is simply what we call responding to the world in such a way that manifests our best understanding of what the virtues require and how they should be combined in a single life. Thus on McDowell's view, kindness can be a virtue if it would form part of our best understanding of the most adequate mode of human response to the sorts of situation with which we have to deal. If McDowell can give an adequate account of how kindness can be a virtue, it might be that the charge of egoism is much harder to escape if one takes the view that Aristotle has an independent conception of flourishing.

In the last two paragraphs we have distinguished an *instrumental* relation between virtues and the good life from a *constitutive* relation. What we mean by the latter is that we cannot specify what the good life is except by referring to the virtues. However, it might look as though this second way of thinking about the virtues is unhelpful, and perhaps even circular. That is, it might look as though explaining how virtues benefit their possessor by explaining that they are their own reward is no explanation at all. It simply assumes that qualities like kindness are virtues rather than doing anything to explain *why* they are virtues. However, it is not true that the virtue theorist can give us *no* explanation of why qualities like courage, justice and kindness are virtues: it is simply that there is not an explanation that

shows how virtues are a means to some further benefit, narrowly construed. We can give a brief explanation of this by looking at Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of the virtues.[4]

MacIntyre begins by considering forms of social activity that he calls practices. Practices are social activities that, he says, have "goods internal to them." In other words, practices are activities that people engage in for non-instrumental reasons. Any society will have many practices in which its members can engage and participating in which they can spend their lives. For instance, while I *might* simply engage in philosophy for the money, or status, or power that a university post brings, this would not explain why I chose to do philosophy rather than taking some other career path that would have brought the same benefits. There are other reasons that draw me to philosophy, reasons to do with the particular kind of satisfaction that can be found in pursuing that form of inquiry and in widening one's perspectives in the way that philosophy allows. Doing philosophy brings me certain benefits, but they are benefits that I gain specifically from that practice, and they are benefits that are not to be identified with my narrow self-interest. So the internal goods of a practice are those goods that would be appreciated by someone who is fully engaging with the practice and has invested herself in it. MacIntyre thinks of practices as pervasive in social life: for instance, *friendship* can be thought of as a practice that brings its participants certain benefits. However, again, we can think of these benefits in two ways: on the one hand they can be thought of as narrowly self-interested benefits, and on the other, they can be thought of as the goods that a person who is fully engaged with their friends would appreciate. For instance, someone who is fully engaged with their friends might well find that the friendships add meaning to her life. But they do so precisely because she approaches the friendship in such a way as to be open to her friends rather than thinking of what she can get out of it.

Engaging in practices is beneficial. But the most important benefit is that practices allow their participants to grasp and participate in something valuable, something that adds to the meaningfulness of their lives. In order to gain that benefit, however, we have to be able to engage with the practice in such a way that we come to care about participating in it for non-instrumental reasons. MacIntyre thinks of the virtues as those qualities that enable us to have a full engagement with the practices we are involved in. He thinks that qualities like justice, courage, patience, determination, and so on, will be necessary no matter which practices we adopt as our own. MacIntyre's version of virtue theory can explain how its participants benefit from having the virtues. But the virtues benefit them by enabling them to enlarge their conception of their own flourishing, and to find meaning and fulfilment in activities that they share with others. Therefore the benefits that come from having the virtues are ones that only the person who fully engages in practices (that is to say, a person who already has the virtues) will appreciate. MacIntyre's account explains how the virtues benefit their possessor but also holds that virtues constitute flourishing rather than being merely a means to it.

The MacIntyre/McDowell interpretation of Aristotle is controversial, and needs much more working out than I can give it here. If their response can be made to work, we might conclude that virtue ethics need not be thought of as egoistic. However, even on their interpretation virtue ethics is far from an impartial moral theory. The virtue theorist is much more sympathetic than the Kantian or the utilitarian to the thought that what any individual ought to do starts from her friendships, projects, relationships, community. Unlike the other theories, virtue ethics does not hold that we start with the realm of impartiality and work our way down to particular relationships and particular projects. Rather we start with the individual trying to work out how to live a meaningful life. Although virtue ethics may agree that such an individual should give room to *some* impartial concerns – such as the needs of strangers less well off than himself – it will aim to fit these concerns into the overall schema of a life well lived, and in which no one set of concerns totally overrides the others.

There is another problem on the horizon that we should mention before closing this chapter. This is the problem for a theory like the Aristotelian one that puts the question, "How are we to live?" at its foundation. For it seems highly unlikely that there will be only one answer to this question. Should I be a philosopher or a journalist? Should I have children? Should I go to university? No matter how long one spent arguing about these questions, it is unlikely that we will ever come to the view that one side is right and the other wrong. Surely one can live a good life both as a philosopher and as a journalist, both with and without having children or going to university. But if the question of how to live has no single answer then it will mean that there can be questions about what to do in particular situations that, according to the virtue ethics method, won't have a single answer either. Say I have been deeply offended by something my friend has said, although she hasn't realised the effect it has had on me, and I am worrying about whether to confront her with it or let it pass. I might consider the issue in virtue ethical terms, asking whether on the one hand not saying something would be dishonest, or whether on the other confronting her would risk destroying our friendship. What I decide, the virtue theorist might say, will depend on what I care about, my values, sense of how to live and what is important. But if there are various ways to live and have a good life, there will be various ways to deal with this difficult situation. And it might be impossible to say that one of them is right and one wrong.

Depending on what one thinks moral theory ought to be doing, this might sound like perfect good sense, or it may sound dangerously relativistic or subjectivist. One thing to make clear, however, is that saying that there may be various right answers does not rule out there being wrong or inadequate answers. Even if there are lots of good reasons for deciding to become a journalist rather than a philosopher (and, by this hypothesis, vice versa) there are also plenty of bad reasons. Although there may be good reasons for confronting one's friend and good reasons for letting it pass, there are also reasons for letting it pass that would be cowardly, and reasons for having the confrontation that would be aggressive or antagonistic. So virtue ethics is clearly not in the position of saying that whatever anyone decides is "right for them"; it will allow

that in many situations, the best we can do is to consider the various pros and cons, and then do our best to weigh them up correctly. The fact that someone else does so differently will not necessarily show that they are wrong: there may be simply nothing more that can be said. As I have said, whether one regards this as the genius of virtue ethics or its downfall depends on what one thinks the proper ambitions of moral theory ought to be.

• CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have looked at the Aristotelian tradition in moral theory. The Aristotelian tradition claims that, although there may be no single answer to the question of how one should live, nevertheless we can learn more about how we ought to live by seeking to answer this question. The Aristotelian thinks that the basic materials for this inquiry are our thinking about the emotions, and how and when they are appropriate, and our understanding of virtues and vices. Whether this theory is frustratingly empty, or realistically diverse, depends on how important one thinks it is that moral theory is able to resolve our difficult moral problems rather than simply illuminating their complexity.

• QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 Can the doctrine of the mean provide us with an informative and action-guiding ethical theory?
2 Do virtues benefit their possessor?
3 Is the refusal of the virtue theorist to simplify the complexity of moral situations a strong point of their approach or a failure?
4 Does Aristotle's ethics require an independent metaphysical conception of the human function? If it does, would that make his ethics implausible?
5 Can emotions be appropriate and inappropriate? Is it correct to say that full rationality involves appropriate emotional response?

• FURTHER READING

The work of Aristotle that has been most influential to those seeking to develop virtue theory is the *Nicomachean Ethics* (various editions).

For a more detailed introduction to these issues than can be given here, see G. Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2001), and D. Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

For some of the criticisms that have motivated the search for a modern version of virtue ethics, see G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", and Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories", in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Stuart

Hampshire, "Morality and Pessimism", in Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

On the doctrine of the mean, see J. Urmson, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean", in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For a defence of this method of ethics, see Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach", in Peter French, Theodore E. Uehling and Howard K. Wettstein (eds), *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue*, Midwest Studies in Philosophy 13 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

For an attempt to think through in detail what a modern virtue ethics would look like, see R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Readers who are interested in exploring the use of imaginative literature in moral philosopy could start with Martha Nussbaum's essay, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality", in her *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

• NOTES

1 See J. McDowell, "The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics", and D. Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason", in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

2 This example is drawn from a story by Stefan Zweig. Zweig sets the story in Germany in the 1920s. The reason the family are in such terrible straits is that hyperinflation has reduced the value of all they have. Indeed the amount of money for which they sold off the prized collection was itself shortly afterwards worth very little.

3 In Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion", in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

4 This account is given in A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), Ch. 15.