CHAPTER 13

# *What Would a Satisfactory Moral Theory Be Like?*

Some people believe that there cannot be progress in Ethics, since everything has already been said. . . . I believe the opposite. . . . Compared with the other sciences, Non-Religious Ethics is the youngest and least advanced.

DEREK PARFIT, *REASONS AND PERSONS* (1984)

## 13.1. Morality without Hubris

Moral philosophy has a rich and fascinating history. Scholars have approached the subject from many different perspectives, producing theories that both attract and repel the thoughtful reader. All of the classical theories contain plausible elements, which is hardly surprising, because they were devised by philosophers of undoubted genius. Yet the various theories conflict with each other, and most of them seem vulnerable to crippling objections. Thus, one is left wondering what to believe. What, in the final analysis, is the truth?

Naturally, different philosophers would answer this question in different ways. Some might refuse to give an answer, on the grounds that we do not know enough to offer a "final analysis." In this respect, moral philosophy is not much worse off than any other subject—we do not know the final truth about most things. But we do know a lot, and it might not be rash to say something about what a satisfactory moral theory might be like.

**A Modest Conception of Human Beings.** A satisfactory theory would be realistic about where human beings fit in the grand

scheme of things. The "big bang" occurred some 13.8 billion years ago, and the earth was formed around 4.5 billion years ago. Life on earth evolved slowly, mostly according to the principles of natural selection. When the dinosaurs went extinct 65 million years ago, this left more room for the evolution of mammals, and a few hundred thousand years ago, one line of that evolution produced us. In geological time, we arrived only yesterday.

But no sooner did our ancestors arrive than they began to think of themselves as the crown of creation. Some of them even imagined that the whole universe had been made for their benefit. Thus, when they began to develop theories of right and wrong, they held that their own interests had a kind of ultimate and objective value. The rest of creation, they reasoned, was intended for their use. But now we know better. We now know that we exist by evolutionary accident, as one species among millions, on one small speck of an unimaginably vast cosmos. The details of this picture are revised each year, as more is discovered, but the main outlines are well established. Some of the old story remains: human beings are still the smartest animals we know and the only ones that use language. Those facts, however, cannot justify an entire worldview that places us at the center.

**How Reason Gives Rise to Ethics.** Human beings have evolved as rational beings. Because we are rational, we are able to take some facts as reasons for behaving one way rather than another. We can articulate those reasons and think about them. Thus, if an action would help to satisfy our desires, needs, and so on—in short, if it would *promote our interests*—then we take that as a reason to do it.

The origin of our concept of "ought" may be found in these facts. If we were incapable of considering reasons, we would have no use for such a notion. Like the other animals, we would act from instinct, habit, or passing desire. But the examination of reasons introduces a new factor. Now we find ourselves driven to act in certain ways as a result of deliberation—as a result of thinking about our behavior and its consequences. We use the word "ought" to mark this new element of the situation: We ought to do what there are the strongest reasons for doing.

Once we see morality as a matter of acting on reason, another important point emerges. In reasoning about what to do, we can be consistent or inconsistent. One way of being inconsistent is to accept a fact as a reason on one occasion but to reject it as a reason on a similar occasion. This happens when one places the interests of one's own race above the interests of other races, despite the similarity of the races. Racism is an offense against morality because it is an offense against reason. Similar remarks apply to other doctrines that divide humanity into the morally favored and disfavored, such as nationalism, sexism, and classism. The upshot is that reason requires impartiality: We ought to promote the interests of everyone alike.

If Psychological Egoism were true—if we could care only about ourselves—this would mean that reason demands more of us than we can manage. But Psychological Egoism is not true; it presents a false picture of human nature and the human condition. We have evolved as social creatures, living together in groups, wanting one another's company, needing one another's cooperation, and caring about one another's welfare. So there is a pleasing "fit" between (a) what reason requires, namely, impartiality; (b) the requirements of social living, namely, adherence to rules that serve everyone's interests, if fairly applied; and (c) our natural inclination to care about others—although, admittedly, we should care about others even more than we naturally do. Thus, morality is not only *possible* for us; to a large extent, it is natural for us.

## 13.2. Treating People as They Deserve

The idea that we should "promote the interests of everyone alike" is appealing when it is used to refute bigotry. However, sometimes there is good reason to treat people differently—sometimes people *deserve* to be treated better or worse than others. Human beings are rational agents who can make free choices. Those who choose to treat others well deserve good treatment; those who choose to treat others badly deserve ill treatment.

This sounds harsh until we consider some examples. Suppose Smith has always been generous, helping you whenever she could, and now she is in trouble and needs your help. You now have a special

reason to help her, beyond the general obligation you have to be helpful to everyone. She is not just a member of the great crowd of humanity; she has earned your respect and gratitude through her conduct.

By contrast, consider someone with the opposite history. Your neighbor Jones has always refused to be helpful. One day, for example, your car wouldn't start, and he wouldn't give you a ride to work—he just couldn't be bothered. Some time later, though, *he* has car trouble and asks *you* for a ride. Now Jones deserves to have to fend for himself. If you gave him a ride despite his past behavior, you would be choosing to treat him better than he deserves.

Treating people as they have chosen to treat others is not just a matter of rewarding friends and holding grudges against enemies. It is a matter of treating people as responsible agents who merit particular responses, based on their past conduct. There is an important difference between Smith and Jones: One of them deserves our gratitude; the other deserves our resentment. What would it be like if we did not care about such things?

For one thing, we would be denying people the ability to earn good treatment at the hands of others. This is important. Because we live in communities, how each of us fares depends not only on what we do but on what others do as well. If we are to flourish, then we need others to treat us well. A social system in which deserts are acknowledged gives us a way of doing that; it gives us the power to determine our own fates.

Absent this, what could we do? We might imagine a system in which a person can get good treatment only by force, or by luck, or as a matter of charity. But the practice of acknowledging deserts is different. It not only gives people an incentive to treat others well but also gives them control over how they themselves will be treated. It says to them, "If you behave well, you will be *entitled* to good treatment from others. You will have earned it." Acknowledging deserts is ultimately about treating other people with respect.

## 13.3. A Variety of Motives

There are other ways in which the idea of "promoting the interests of everyone alike" apparently fails to capture the whole of moral life. (I say "apparently" because I will ask later whether it really does.)

Certainly, people should sometimes be moved by an impartial concern for others. But there are other morally praiseworthy motives:

- A mother loves and cares for her children. She does not want to "promote their interests" simply because they are people she can help. Her attitude toward them is entirely different from her attitude toward other children.
- A man is loyal to his friends. Again, he is not concerned with their interests only as part of his general concern for people. They are his friends, and so they matter more to him.

Only a philosophical fool would want to eliminate love, loyalty, and the like from our understanding of the moral life. If such motives were eliminated, and instead people simply calculated what was best, we would all be much worse off. Anyway, who would want to live in a world without love and friendship?

Of course, people may have other good motives:

- A composer is concerned, above all else, to finish her symphony. She pursues this even though she might do "more good" by doing something else.
- A teacher devotes great effort to preparing his classes, even though he might do more good by directing his energy elsewhere.

While these motives are not usually considered "moral," we should not want to eliminate them from human life. Taking pride in one's job, wanting to create something of value, and many other noble intentions contribute to both personal happiness and the general welfare. We should no more want to eliminate them than to eliminate love and friendship.

## 13.4. Multiple-Strategies Utilitarianism

Above, I tried to justify the principle that "we ought to act so as to promote the interests of everyone alike." But then I noted that this cannot be the whole story of our moral obligations because, sometimes, we should treat different people differently, according to their individual deserts. And then I discussed some morally important motives that seem unrelated to the impartial promotion of interests.

Yet these concerns may be interrelated. At first blush, it seems that treating people according to their individual deserts is quite different from seeking to promote the interests of everyone alike. But when we asked why deserts are important, the answer was that *we would all be much worse off* if acknowledging deserts was not part of our social scheme. And when we ask why love, friendship, artistic creativity, and pride in one's work are important, the answer is that *our lives would be so much poorer* without them. This suggests that a single standard might be at work in our assessments.

Perhaps, then, the single moral standard is human welfare. What is important is that people be as happy as possible. This standard can be used to assess a wide variety of things, including actions, policies, social customs, laws, rules, motives, and character traits. But this does not mean that we should always think in terms of making people as happy as possible. Our day-to-day lives will go better if we simply love our children, enjoy our friends, take pride in our work, keep our promises, and so on. An ethic that values "the interests of everyone alike" will endorse this conclusion.

This is an old idea. The great utilitarian theorist Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) made the same point:

> The doctrine that Universal Happiness is the ultimate *standard* must not be understood to imply that Universal Benevolence is the only right or always best *motive* of action . . . if experience shows that the general happiness will be more satisfactorily attained if men frequently act from other motives than pure universal philanthropy, it is obvious that these other motives are reasonably to be preferred on Utilitarian principles.

This passage has been cited in support of a view called "Motive Utilitarianism." According to that view, we should act from the motives that best promote the general welfare.

Yet the most plausible view of this type does not focus exclusively on motives; nor does it focus entirely on acts or rules, as other theories have done. The most plausible theory might be called *Multiple-Strategies Utilitarianism.* This theory is utilitarian, because the ultimate goal is to maximize the general welfare. However, it recognizes that we may use diverse strategies to pursue that goal. Sometimes we may aim directly at it. For example, a senator may

support a bill because she believes that it would raise the standard of living for everyone. Or an individual may send money to the International Red Cross because he believes that this would do more good than anything else he could do. But usually we don't (and needn't) think of the general welfare at all; instead, we simply care for our children, work at our jobs, obey the law, keep our promises, and so on.

**Right Action as Living According to the Best Plan.** We can make the idea behind Multiple-Strategies Utilitarianism a little more specific.

Suppose we had a fully specified list of the virtues, motives, and methods of decision-making that would enable a person to be happy and to contribute to the welfare of others. And suppose, further, that this list is *optimal* for that person; no other combination of features would work better. Such a list would include at least the following:

- The virtues that are needed to make one's life go well
- The motives on which to act
- The commitments that one will have to friends, family, and others
- The social roles that one will occupy, with the responsibilities and demands that go with them
- The duties and concerns associated with one's projects and one's choice of career
- The everyday rules that one will usually follow without even thinking
- A strategy, or group of strategies, about when to consider making exceptions to the rules, and the grounds on which those exceptions can be made

The list would also specify the relations between the different items on the list—what takes priority over what, how to adjudicate conflicts, and so on. It would be very hard to construct such a list. As a practical matter, it might even be impossible. But we can be fairly sure that it would include endorsements of friendship, honesty, and other familiar virtues. It would tell us to keep our promises, but not always, and to refrain from harming people, but not always, and so on. And it would probably tell us to stop living in luxury while millions of children die of preventable diseases.

At any rate, there is some combination of virtues, motives, and methods of decision-making that is best *for me*, given my circumstances, personality, and talents—"best" in the sense that it will optimize my chances of having a good life, while optimizing the chances of other people having good lives, too. Call this optimum combination *my best plan.* The right thing for me to do is to act in accordance with my best plan.

My best plan may have a lot in common with yours. Presumably, they will both include rules against lying, stealing, and killing, together with an understanding about when to make exceptions to those rules. They will each include virtues such as patience, kindness, and self-control. They may both contain instructions for raising children, including a specification of the virtues to foster in them.

But our best plans need not be identical. People have different personalities and talents. One person may find fulfillment as a rabbi while someone else could never live like that. Thus, our lives might include different sorts of personal relationships, and we might need to cultivate different virtues. People also live in different circumstances and have access to different resources—some are rich; some are poor; some are privileged; some are persecuted. Thus, the optimum strategies for living will differ.

In each case, however, the identification of a plan as the best plan will be a matter of assessing how well it promotes the interests of everyone alike. So the overall theory is utilitarian, even though it may frequently endorse motives that do not sound utilitarian at all.

## 13.5. The Moral Community

As moral agents, we should be concerned with everyone whose welfare we might affect. This may seem like a pious platitude, but in reality it can be a hard doctrine. Around the world, many children fail to get essential vaccinations, resulting in hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths each year. Citizens in the richer countries could easily cut these numbers in half, but they don't. People would no doubt do more if children in their own neighborhoods were dying, but the children's location shouldn't matter: Everyone is included in the community of moral concern. If we cared about all children, then we'd have to change our ways.

Just as the moral community is not limited to people in one *place*, so it is not limited to people at any one *time*. Whether people will be affected by our actions now or in the future is irrelevant. Our obligation is to consider everyone's interests equally. One consequence of this pertains to nuclear weapons. Such weapons not only have the power to maim and kill innocent people, but they can also poison the environment for thousands of years. If the welfare of future generations is given proper weight, it is difficult to imagine any circumstance in which such weapons should be used. Climate change is another issue that affects the interests of our descendants. If we fail to reverse the effects of global warming, our children will suffer even more than we will.

There is one other way in which our conception of the moral community must be expanded. Humans are not alone on this planet. Other sentient animals—that is, animals capable of feeling pleasure and pain—also have interests. When we abuse or kill them, they are harmed, just as such actions can harm humans. We must, therefore, include the interests of nonhuman animals in our calculations. As Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) pointed out, excluding creatures from moral consideration because of their species is no more justified than excluding them because of their race, nationality, or income level. The single moral standard is not human welfare, but all welfare.

## 13.6. Justice and Fairness

Utilitarianism has been criticized as unfair and unjust. Can the complications we have introduced help?

One criticism concerns punishment. We can imagine cases in which it would promote the general welfare to frame an innocent person. Such an act would be blatantly unjust, yet Utilitarianism seems to require it. More generally, as Kant pointed out, utilitarians are happy to "use" criminals to achieve the goals of society. Even if those goals are worthwhile—such as the reduction of crime—we might be uncomfortable with a theory that endorses manipulation as a legitimate moral strategy.

However, our theory takes a different view of punishment than most utilitarians have taken. In fact, our view is closer to Kant's.

In punishing someone, we are treating him worse than we treat others. But this is justified by the person's own past deeds: It is a response to what he has done. That is why it is not right to frame an innocent person; the innocent person has done nothing to deserve such treatment.

The theory of punishment, however, is only one aspect of justice. Questions of justice arise whenever someone is treated better or worse than someone else. Suppose an employer must choose which of two employees to promote. The first candidate has worked hard, taking on extra work, giving up vacation time, and so on. The second candidate, on the other hand, has never done more than he had to. Obviously, the two employees will be treated very differently: One will get promoted; one will not. But this is all right, according to our theory. The first employee has earned the promotion; the second has not.

Often, people think it is right for individuals to be rewarded for physical beauty, superior intelligence, and other qualities that are due, in large part, to having the right DNA and being raised by the right parents. The real world reflects this: Individuals often have better jobs and more money just because they were born with greater natural gifts or into a wealthier family. But, on reflection, this does not seem right. People do not deserve their native endowments; they have them only as a result of what John Rawls (1921–2002) calls "the natural lottery." Suppose the first employee in our example was passed over for the promotion, despite her hard work, because the second employee had some natural ability that was more useful in the new position. Even if the employer could justify this decision in terms of the company's needs, the first employee would rightly feel cheated. She has worked harder, yet he is getting the promotion and the benefits that go with it because of something he did nothing to earn. That is not fair. In a just society, people could improve their circumstances through hard work, but they would not benefit from a lucky birth.

## 13.7. Conclusion

What would a satisfactory moral theory look like? I have outlined the possibility that seems most plausible to me: According to Multiple-Strategies Utilitarianism, we should maximize the interests

of all sentient beings by living according to our best plan. One must be modest, however, in making such a proposal. Over the centuries, ethicists have articulated and defended a wide variety of theories, and history has always found flaws in their conceptions. Still, there is hope, if not for my suggestion, then for some other proposal down the road. Civilization is only a few thousand years old. If we do not destroy it, then the study of moral philosophy has a bright future.

## Notes on Sources

The age of the universe was estimated by scientists from data gathered by the European Space Agency's "Planck" observatory from 2009 to 2013.

Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), p. 413.

John Rawls discusses the "natural lottery" in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 74 (and on p. 64 of the revised edition from 1999).